good on my own accord

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by impetuous

Summary

No serious hockey fan or sports commentator worth their salt would have considered record-breaking Boston superstar Ilya Rozanov to be Shane Hollander's *rival* exactly, but sleeping with a man who had a specific offense-related vendetta against him and a wrist shot like a jet engine to back it up was probably ill-advised just the same.

Or, Shane is a goalie. Ilya can't score.

Notes

Well, howdy, I'm back. And so soon!

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes out to Surya (thathastu on ao3, @narivaaaal on twt) for first putting the goalie!Shane prompt into the fandom zeitgeist and personally tilting my own little world on its axis as a result. Tons of plot points and hockey easter eggs in this fic come directly from our unhinged DM conversations. Thank you for trusting me with goalie!Shane, our perfect precious boy, and with an Ilya who loves him deeply in any and every universe as always.

As the tags warn, there will be *a lot* of hockey in this. Enough so that I've decided to break my own no-A/N info dumping rules to add some notes and resources at the end of certain chapters. Existing and potential puck enjoyers, you've hopefully come to the right place!

Lastly, I am a goalie stan until I die. I love a weird little guy between the pipes with my whole heart. However, what I am *not* is a professional NHL goaltender (surprise!), so there very well may be inaccuracies despite the niche research into goalie history, psychology, and sports performance I did for this. If you're one of like two hockey fans besides myself with a formed opinion on which brand of leg pads work best for each goaltending style and you think I've got it wrong, I fear we're both a little too autistic for our own good. If you're an actual NHL goalie on the other hand, well, enjoy the yaoi I guess ❤️

Title is from a lovely little song called "God's A Different Sword" by Folk Bitch Trio.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Prologue

November 2000 – Ottawa

“Hollander, shoot, god dammit!”

From her place on the bleachers, Yuna winced, watching with dismay as her perfect, wonderful, talented athlete of a son seemed to full-body shudder at his coach’s shouted instructions. All momentum gone, Shane swung his stick in an awkward wobbly arc, letting off a shot that Yuna could immediately tell was going to miss… *badly.* The ‘unusually tall for his age’ nine year old they had in goal for practice didn’t even flinch, merely watching the puck sail by, a meter or so wide of the left post. Shane visibly deflated, skating back to the neutral zone with his linemen to reset the play as the coach continued to berate him for his hesitation. It was not the first time.

“Poor thing,” Ethan’s mom faux-whispered from her spot a few rows down. Her coven of blonde hockey moms tittered at the aside.

Yuna almost scoffed. Ethan was also being evaluated as a center on their competitive U10 team, but in her expert hockey opinion, he was hardly a better fit. Shane had the edge in terms of speed and agility on the ice *and* he was showing signs of being a high-IQ playmaker to boot, even at his young age. He just… needed to score a little more consistently.

Or at all, she thought, frown deepening.

The whistle blew.

“Hollander, eyes up! Let’s run that again!”

For the briefest of moments, Shane glanced over to the stands and met her eyes. The sheer determination in his gaze — even as his lips wobbled with nerves — warmed her heart as much as it broke it.

Her son loved hockey. Yuna would make sure it loved him back.

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Later that night, as she helped Shane with his homework at the kitchen table, she dared to ask him about it.

"Shane, honey, I was just wondering, what exactly happens when you—"

"Freeze?" he cut in, looking miserable, "Overshoot so bad the other boys chirp me for sucking at math for an Asian?"

Yuna inhaled sharply. She knew, of course, what it could be like. What *Ottawa* was like, in

general, even. Still, it hurt to be reminded that she could not always keep Shane safe, visibly different as he was, even amongst a group of otherwise well-meaning children parroting stereotypes. The Western last name offered protection, but he still had her eyes.

"It's like I see everything at the same time," Shane was explaining, always so logical and articulate beyond his years. "I could shoot or pass. But if I think about shooting, then another option comes up in my brain. Like which corner? And when? And that makes even more options appear. A spider web." He sighed, world-weary in a way that endeared her as often as it scared her a little. "And then... of course, I want to choose the best one. But there's no time. So I freak out."

She regarded him fondly. Her too-smart boy. "Do you know what instinct is, Shane?"

"I know the word," he replied, wrinkling his nose, "I don't think I have it."

"You do," she argued gently, "I'm sure there are things that come naturally to you. Automatically, even. Like skating?"

Shane just stared back at her, eye contact a little unnerving, like he was trying to make sense of the sensation through her own physical response instead.

"What makes your brain go quiet?" she continued, trying a different approach, "Something you don't even have to think about, it's that calming and easy."

Shane's frown only deepened as he considered the concept. "I don't think my brain has ever been quiet," he said, head tilting, "Does *yours* do that?"

Yuna blinked. "Well, yes. When I'm really focused on one thing or else nice and relaxed."

Her nine-and-a-half year old wunderkind shrugged his shoulders, almost sitcom-style. "I don't think I've been that either."

She snorted out a laugh. "Sure, my little drama king. But listen, I asked because I want to help you figure out how to overcome this barrier to your play. How to start thinking instinctually, rather than so analytically all the time."

Shane sighed again. "Can we finish these practice problems first, please? If you want me to relax, hockey stuff won't help."

Yuna bit the inside of her cheek, deciding to back off for now.

She would work with Shane though. To play the hockey he deserved.

They both loved it, after all.

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May 2003 – Ottawa

It wasn't a surprise, really, when Coach Smythe requested to meet with them in a spare office at the community sports complex.

"I want to talk about Shane," he said, arms folded atop the desk.

Yuna blinked, feigning ignorance, though she could feel her stomach begin to churn in ugly anticipation. David remained a silent but comforting presence beside her, as he often did when it came to difficult moments like this. He knew she preferred to be the one to handle the Shane Things between them, even if it tore her apart in the process.

She smiled, arranging her features into something perfectly pleasant, and then asked, "What about him, Coach?"

The man leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply. His jaw worked as he seemed to mull over his subsequent choice of words. "Look, we all saw him in the tournament. He's damn fast, crazy smart, and unselfish with the puck — the whole package on paper really — but Yuna… you and I both know he's not a center. He can't be. Not if he's going to freeze up when it matters."

A flash of memory, then. *Shane with the puck, moving fast. Shane hesitating just a moment too long, eyes unfocused, absorbing the check with his entire body. Shane on the ice, unmoving.*

Yuna found herself reaching over to grab her husband's hand, squeezing tightly to dispel the mix of fear and anger that boiled up just below the surface of her composed exterior. Blowing out a shaky breath, she replied, "Then put him somewhere else."

Coach Smythe shook his head. "We've tried that. But we already have strong wingers and this is a competitive roster, as you well know. Shane has the drive, there's no doubt, but I need leadership and execution just as much as skill here. He's talented, Yuna, but mentally this sport isn't doing him any favors. I think…" he trailed off, suddenly avoiding direct eye contact. "I think it's time we consider that elite travel hockey isn't what's best for him."

Yuna bristled. "What's best for him?" she hissed, feeling David's hand squeeze back harder in warning. "What's *best* for him is letting him do what he loves. This is a league for children. Isn't this meant to be fun?"

Coach Smythe swallowed, the discomfort clear on his face. "I don't disagree with you, Yuna, at least in principle. But the reality is that *fun* at this level means winning. It means turning the heads of academy scouts and getting these boys into the pipeline to professional level play. Shane is twelve now. He's had his chances. I just don't think this team can give him any more."

The rejection stung like a physical slap to the face. The money they'd invested, the loyalty they'd shown, all rendered meaningless just because her burgeoning hockey prodigy of a son was a little… anxious? Her visceral anger morphed rapidly into cold indifference as Coach Smythe started suggesting some nearby community leagues with lower stakes play that Shane might try instead. *The nerve.* Blessedly, David carried the rest of the tense discussion until they finally escaped out to their car.

Later, if Yuna had been asked to recall anything at all from that conversation, she would not have been able, every sensation around her numbed and distant as David pulled out of the lot.

Halfway home, however, she found herself switching into action-oriented mode, as was her nature. There had to be another way forward. Shane was ridiculously talented, everyone said so. The best skater on that god forsaken ice. He was just… under a lot of pressure. Maybe she could get him into private coaching lessons? Or booked in with a sports psychologist? Or they could move, even… let Shane start anew in a different city. The youth hockey world in Canada was big enough to give him a little anonymity and Vancouver really was nice in the—

"Yuna," David said firmly, interrupting her spiral just as she'd begun to vocalize all her plans aloud. "Stop plotting."

She scoffed from the passenger seat, hot tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. "I'm trying to help our son."

He nodded, voice softening as he replied, "I know, dear. But why don't we start with asking Shane what he wants first?"

Yuna bit her lip, already picturing Shane's wide, devastated eyes upon learning that he would not be invited back to tryouts in the fall. She sniffed, even as David reached over to place a gentle hand on her thigh.

"Listen, I know it's… harder… for you, and for him, in a sport like this, that looks the way it does," he said, gaze locked on the road ahead. "And I want to fight alongside you, I do. But maybe there are just too many sacrifices to make right now? Dreams shouldn't have to hurt like this, Yuna. He's so young."

Though she knew deep down that David might be right — that some of this could be… *personal* for her in ways that had very little to do with Shane at all — Yuna simply could not accept the idea of giving up. Of quitting entirely. Not now when they— when *Shane* had invested so much in a sport that still hesitated to accept him.

Her son still loved hockey, didn't he? So, she would make new plans.

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September 2003 – Montreal

Pulling into the arena's circular drive for pickup, Yuna was shocked to see Shane walk through the sliding doors carrying a much larger equipment bag than what he'd arrived with.

She popped the trunk, confusion mounting as her son stowed his unfamiliar items and climbed into the second row of seats, smile wide in the rearview mirror.

"Hi, mom," he greeted… happily?

She peered at him more closely: a healthy preteen with bright, alert eyes and rosy cheeks stared back, not at all resembling the sullen and withdrawn boy she'd dropped off seven weeks ago.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she replied slowly, keeping her voice neutral despite the growing suspicion that something had changed. “How was camp?”

(The elite summer hockey academy outside the city had cost them a small fortune, but Shane had seemed agreeable enough when she’d presented the idea back in the spring. ‘*You’ll get the one-on-one attention you need,’* she assured him. *‘Build up your confidence, so you can get over your… challenges… on the ice.’* Hesitating, she added, *‘Make some friends, even’* and watched her sweet, sensitive son’s face darken with a quiet hurt she felt out of her depth to soothe. They were both trying in their own ways. It never felt like enough.)

“Really good,” Shane said, still grinning, “I’m a goalie now.”

Yuna flinched so hard her foot nearly slipped off the pedal. “You… are?”

“Yep,” he replied easily, “and Coach Roy said I’m *really* good at it.”

She hesitated. “Well, that was… a nice summer experiment, wasn’t it?”

Shane’s expression lost some of its hopeful luster. “I’m not leaving the crease, mom,” he said sharply, adding, “Hayden Pike, number sixty-four, right-handed—”

“Shane, I told you not to do that, baby,” she cut in, trying to be gentle.

While Yuna was admittedly a hockey fiend herself, her son’s encyclopedic interest in the sport bordered on unsettling. She hated when she noticed how a stranger’s eyes would shift to something pitying when they realized he wasn’t doing a bit — that he didn’t know, honestly, how he came across. She was optimistic it would be corrected naturally as he got older. Shane, for all his differences, deserved… normalcy. She would help him construct a pathway to it.

“*Hayden*,” Shane amended, though his frustration with her correction was evident in the way his eyebrows furrowed. "He scored twelve goals combined on the other teams during our mini tournament last week. But I didn’t let a single shot of his in.”

“And that’s wonderful, Shane,” she assured him, even as her fingers tightened minutely around the steering wheel, “But… it’s not what we— *you’ve* worked for. You’ve been skating since you could walk, my love, and your skills have always been focused offensively.”

An eternity of silence stretched between them, and then: “If you don’t like me in goal, I’d rather quit.”

Yuna briefly disregarded road safety rules, whipping her head around to look her son dead in the eyes. “Shane Hollander.”

“What?” he spat, tone furious as she turned back. “I love hockey, mom, but I hate being a forward. It makes me feel *sick.* All I do is overthink and ruin it for everyone else. I don’t care how good anyone says I am, or should be, or... or my stupid *potential*." He hissed out the word like it was acid on his tongue. "I’m not happy out there.”

In the rearview mirror, she watched his shoulders deflate in a familiar way, a horrible full-bodied sag of resignation like when he sent yet another shot wide of the net.

“You’re my mom,” he said, softer, eyes shining wetly, “You’re supposed to want me to be happy.”

Yuna took a sharp breath, heart shattering in her ribcage at the doubt in his voice.

“I do, Shane,” she replied, any lingering exasperation in her tone dissolving into pure concern. “Of course I do. This is just very sudden. You’ll need new equipment and—”

“Coach Roy let me keep the basics,” Shane cut in, gesturing to the bag behind him, “And he already recommended me for a goaltending clinic in November in Kingston. Plus, there’s a U14 team in Stittsville that might have an opening next season, if I can get my skills up by then.”

Yuna blinked. It was the most words in a row that she’d heard from her son in… well, a very long time. And certainly never with such unbridled enthusiasm shining through his typically flat affect.

“You’re… really serious about this?” she ventured.

Shane nodded, rubbing his fingers together in rhythmic circles like he was savoring the feeling.

“I can’t explain it. The way that everything goes quiet when I’m in the crease. Like it’s my space, for me to control.” He shifted in his seat, shrugging. “Like I finally belong on the ice. Even if it’s sort of by myself.”

Yuna swallowed and nodded back.

Although she rarely understood Shane's emotions, she still knew him well enough to see just how much this meant to him, that this summer had changed him irrevocably somehow. Sighing, she let the tension seep from her shoulders and pulled at a mental thread until it unknotted; the fifty-step plan in her brain to have Shane drafted as a star center at eighteen rearranged itself into something a little more modest. She could work with this. It might be good, even. Her wonderful, strange boy behind a mask, tucked away from the other boys who might hate him or harm him, in an actual delineated bubble of his own… *safe*. Or, well, as safe as facing down a firing squad on ice could be.

“Okay, baby,” she said finally, watching the sunlight return to his face in an instant. “We’ll figure this out together.”

“Thank you,” Shane breathed, euphoric, his smile blooming so big it scrunched up the freckles on his cheeks.

Yuna let out a breath of her own, so full of adoration for her first and only son that it threatened to spill over into mushy words she knew he would hate.

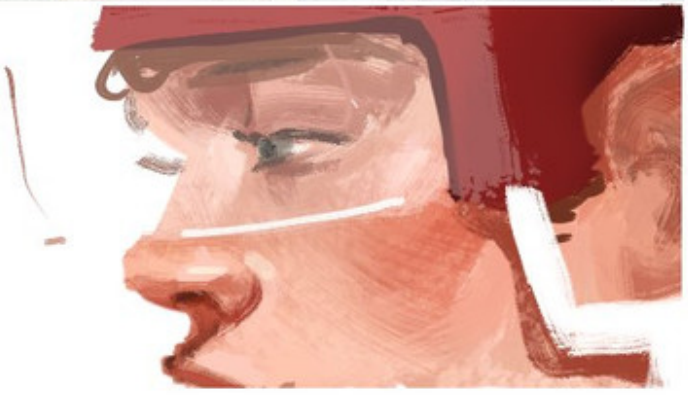
So, her son loved hockey. Not in the way she’d hoped, exactly.

But maybe in a way that could be *his*.

Chapter 2: Juniors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



December 2008 – Regina

The post-game locker room was a disaster of sweat and bitter emotion.

Struggling to eke out a 2-1 win against Slovakia in the quarterfinals? With what was indisputably the roster with the most depth at this tournament? A humiliating start.

This type of performance from Russia was not going to be good enough. Not when the Canadians and the Swedes and the Czechs were still here and more irritating than ever.

Addressing the room as he shrugged out of his pads, Ilya told them as much.

Immediately, one half of their weakest d-pair was in his face. “Right, but you’re so perfect, huh? Smug little bitch.”

“Oh, sorry! Is it news that making the final requires actually playing hockey?” Ilya retorted, tone even but scathing, “Or did you think you could just whine your way to a medal?”

The defenseman, Vasiliev, scoffed, feigning nonchalance even as his face grew redder. “I don’t know why the coaches let you act like you’re in charge here, Rozanov. Focus on your own shit!”

Ilya rolled his eyes as he lazily tugged on his team sweatsuit, keeping an expectant Vasiliev on his toes. They really made it too easy for him.

“I’d love to focus on my own shit,” he said eventually, shoving the bigger, older boy out of his space with a disgusted sound. “But the gaping hole in my defense that appears every time *your* shift comes around is making that difficult.”

He cast a glance at their slightly shell-shocked goaltender in the corner, who’d been stuck in a loop for the past five minutes just rocking one leg pad in his arms like a large foam baby.

“See what you’ve done to Popov, hmm?” he half-joked, though it quickly morphed into a full-on sneer as he added, “And don’t think I didn’t notice you nearly scoring one on yourself in the second. I may be a smug bitch, but at least I’m not a sloppy one.”

A hand came up, the fabric of his compression layer pulled tight from his neck. Ilya smiled viciously, blood singing.

“Go ahead, hit me,” he goaded, face contorted into something mocking and cruel, “It’s the last tournament Daddy can pay for anyway.”

It was a precise jab, and they both knew it. Almost twenty-one and generating little international buzz, Vasiliev would be stuck in the KHL for the rest of his career. Maybe a spot on the next Olympic team if his now notoriously fraudulent business mogul father could manage to pull any strings from prison. Ilya, on the other hand, was being labeled a generational talent at seventeen and had NHL scouts practically banging down his door. They were not the same, not remotely comparable on any level, and he could see the bitter hate in Vasiliev’s eyes at the knowledge of the fact. Ilya had freedom so close he could taste it, but still… a little scuffle with a big, stupid man in the meantime would be a delight.

“Rozanov, take a fucking walk!” an assistant coach snapped, entering the room just as he’d been sure his irritating teammate was going to rise to the bait. Pity. There was no better way to decompress than trading a few punches. Well, except for—

The assistant coach grabbed his arm, expression cold and deadly serious. “I mean it, Rozanov.”

“Ugh, gladly,” Ilya spat, shrugging him off and stalking out of the room.

He slipped a hand into his pocket, rolling his single contraband cigarette between his fingers in irritation.

God, everyone here was so fucking boring and uptight.

Yes, he wanted to win. *Obviously.* But the way these boys were worked up… it was like they were incapable of even momentarily burying their insecurities. No one seemed to be tapped into that competitive headspace, where you simply believed in your own pure, instinctual skill above all else. And look, it wasn’t that Ilya didn’t have pressures and expectations of his own to deal with, but they were kept largely off the ice. If you were good at hockey, you played good hockey. Simple. All this mental bullshit was getting them nowhere, except nearly going into overtime with fucking Slovakia, apparently.

When Ilya shouldered open the door to the hidden back alley of the arena he’d adopted as his temporary smoking lounge, he was startled to find it already occupied.

Perched atop the waist-high section of concrete blocks to his right was a player from Team Canada. A goaltender, in fact, made obvious by the way he was half-dressed in almost everything but the leg pads, glove, and blocker. A leaf-printed jersey was pulled snuggly over his chest protector, matching the same bright red as the shell of his goalie pants. For no discernible reason, he had already donned his mask, one carbon fiber side emblazoned with the number ‘30’ encircled by a white maple leaf.

Face obscured, the boy had his head down, muttering to himself — an action which would have read as stranger to Ilya if not for the fact that goalies were just kind of… like that. Popov, their own starting goalie, had an elaborate locker room ritual involving ‘The Song of the Volga Boatmen’ that they were happy to indulge him in if it meant he’d save their asses when it counted. Like today, for example. Forty-four fucking shots on goal. *Jesus.*

“Nilsson, number fifty-two, right-handed, six goals, four assists, favors Sjöberg on his left wing seventy-one percent of the time, and tilts his head slightly left when—”

Ilya paused to listen for a moment, snorting as he realized the goalie was reciting the tournament stats for each forward on Sweden’s offensive lines, plugging numbers into some mental template he’d put together, with an occasional extra bit of commentary on shooting style.

The sound of Ilya’s amusement startled the Canadian and he looked up, eyes widening in recognition.

“Ilya Rozanov, number fifty-six, eleven goals, seven assists,” he greeted, “You’re a great player to watch.”

Ilya blinked.

The sentient bundle of red-and-white pads thrust out a hand. “I’m Shane Hollander. Number thirty. Goaltender for Canada. Or, well, one of them anyway.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, fighting the ‘obviously’ that lingered on his tongue. The other boy’s sheer earnestness was having a strange effect on his previously petulant mood.

“I’m surprised you smoke,” Hollander said next, his dark eyes regarding Ilya with curiosity from behind the steel cage of his mask.

Ilya looked at him, unlit cigarette hanging between his lips. “And?”

He could see very little of the goalie’s own mouth behind the mask, of course, but from the way Hollander’s eyebrows furrowed, he was certain he was frowning.

“Cigarette smoke contains more than seven thousand chemicals,” Hollander stated, in an oddly monotonous cadence that sounded like he was reading from a brochure. “At least sixty-nine of those are known to cause cancer.”

An amused little smirk started to creep onto Ilya’s face and he shook his head to physically clear it away, momentarily disgusted by the thought that he might be *endeared* by this total weirdo chastising him in a back alley in Saskatchewan. Staring back almost defiantly, he fished his lighter from his pocket and lit up, letting out a long, shuddering exhale of smoke. Sweet relief.

Hollander shifted on his concrete perch, pads rustling. He wrinkled his nose. “Do you have a death wish?”

Ilya tried not to wince. Obviously Hollander had no way of knowing just how incisive of an observation that actually was.

“Do you?” he retorted, gesturing with his cigarette at the goalie’s attire. “Most people do not, ah, *volunteer* for this, you know?”

Ilya frowned when his attempt at a joke was not met with a laugh or a casual chirp in return. Hollander simply hunched his shoulders, seeming to curl in on himself in a way that looked uncomfortable.

“I didn’t volunteer,” he replied quietly. Ilya waited for an explanation but it did not come.

The now discomfiting silence between them lingered. Strangely, he felt something like regret begin to crawl under his skin. He hadn’t meant to shame Hollander for his position. Goalies were essential, of course, just… it took a certain kind of person to pursue a career as living target practice for 150 kph, skull-shattering projectiles.

Cigarette nearly finished, he shifted his weight between his feet. It was not often that Ilya felt awkward — at least where language barriers weren’t involved — and it was even less often that he felt compelled to do anything about it. He took one step closer, then, reaching out to clasp a hand on Hollander’s shoulder for reasons he could not explain.

“Good luck, later, at game,” Ilya said, sounding lamer than he ever had in his life, maybe.

Hollander's head, comically huge with the addition of the mask, tilted to one side. "You're a lot nicer than they say you are, Rozanov."

If Ilya squinted, he could almost make out a light dusting of freckles across the goalie's pinked cheeks. *Christ.* He needed to get out of here, fast.

Unable to help himself, he added, "I will not be so nice when I score on you."

Hollander looked up then, eyes twinkling, voice bolder as he said, "Not gonna happen."

Ilya raised an eyebrow at how quickly Hollander's confidence had seemed to shift at the provocation. What a pleasant surprise.

"Oh, really?" Ilya countered, pivoting away from the door he'd been eyeing for his escape. "You seemed to know very well that I am tournament lead scorer."

"For now," Hollander agreed, shrugging, "but you aren't that hard to figure out."

Ilya immediately made a fist at his side, narrowly avoiding raising a hand to his chest like a scandalized soap actress at the insinuation that he might be… readable.

"No one has ever said this to me," he replied, fighting hard against the way his mouth wanted to pout at the words.

Hollander's eyes crinkled, bringing his freckles into better view. Ilya dropped his gaze to the goofy leaf on his chest instead.

"Other teams don't bother trying to dissect your game in any real depth," Hollander said lightly, "since they all think you're a little bit invincible once you've got the puck. But I just don't think that's true. From my job's perspective, at least."

Several of Hollander's multi-syllabic words were slightly too complex for Ilya's exhausted multilingual brain, but he wasn't about to admit that in the middle of being chirped by a walking Intro to Hockey Statistics webpage in a maple syrup helmet.

"Of course I am," he argued, hoping the self-assurance sounded convincing.

He stubbed out his cigarette and — before he could think too hard about it — hopped onto a concrete block a few down from Hollander's own. Hollander's body shifted slightly, angling toward him. For a fleeting moment, Ilya wished he could see the other boy's face in full.

"It's not a bad thing, Rozanov. Everyone has their tells and yours are pretty subtle." Hollander shrugged again, a habit of his it seemed, when he wasn't sure how his words would be received.

With a little chuckle, he added, "I'm just… intense and weird about that stuff, anyhow. Analytical to a fault, they tell me. Though I've been reading Mike Valley's The Power Within to try to better internalize the psychological side of goaltending, you know?"

Ilya all but gaped at the long string of words, starting to doubt his hard-earned conversational English fluency. And also that Shane Hollander was actually eligible for this tournament of

fifteen to twenty year olds and not like… a grown man who'd snuck onto the Canadian roster. That would explain the mask, maybe.

In the end, Ilya picked up on a thread he'd understood and said, "All goalies are weird. Would be… more weird, if you were not."

Hollander laughed at that, a bright giggling sound that had Ilya preening for a moment. He cringed, realizing he'd been dangerously close to doing something ridiculous like *smiling.*

"I like yours a lot. Popov, number thirty-fi—" Hollander started to say, then shook his head. His shoulders began to hunch in the same childlike way they had at Ilya's flubbed comment earlier. "Sorry, I'm not really supposed to do that."

Ilya blinked, uncomfortable with the way that Hollander seemed to censor himself according to some invisible rule. He widened his eyes naively, hamming it up a little bit. "Do what?"

Hollander met his eyes again and stared. And stared. Like he wasn't sure what to make of Ilya's easy acceptance of his quirks.

"Popov, number thirty-five, 2.3 GAA, 0.905 SV," he began again, sounding almost relieved.

It was unfortunate how instantly Ilya knew Hollander was smiling, even with his mouth obscured, if only by the way his freckles were visible through the holes in the cage again.

"I met him at the opening reception. He hugged me, even though we'd never met. Spun me in a circle even." Hollander's brows furrowed. "And then spent like ten minutes making me write down a recipe on my Blackberry for something called, uh, *shee*?"

Ilya nodded, fighting another smile. Bear hugs and cabbage soup? That sounded like his goalie alright.

It was disappointing then that he'd missed the reception himself — stuck on an interminable phone call with his father and a Minister of something or other about the importance of Russian legacy. He'd have liked to see the towering 200cm Popov scoop up Hollander who, if he eyeballed it, had to be Ilya's height at best.

"Anyway," Hollander said after a moment, stretching a bit before getting to his feet. "I've got to go listen to forty-five minutes of orca songs before warmup."

At Ilya's easy nod, his eyes widened. "Oh god, I promise that was a joke."

"Ah, Shane Hollander, number thirty, terrible comedian," Ilya replied, a little embarrassed at being called out as gullible. Still, goalies were *weird.* They'd covered this. If Hollander actually listened to pre-game whale sounds, it would not be the strangest thing.

There was a moment of silence where he wondered if he'd gone too far with his teasing, parroting Hollander's template back at him like that. But thankfully, the goalie was laughing again as he brushed past him.

"See you in the final!" Hollander called back cheerfully. "Pro tip: you'll probably want to shoot more times against us than you did today. If you want one to go in."

The arena door clicked shut before Ilya had even begun to formulate a witty reply.

What the fuck.

Itching for another cigarette, he lingered in the alley for a bit longer, letting the near-painful cold of a Saskatchewan winter take the edge off.

Canada's Shane Hollander, huh?

He was going to destroy him.

- 🥅 -

"Look, guys, we know that this is a very beatable American team, alright?"

Shane sat in the locker room, listening to their coach's pre-game talk as he put on his leg pads, weaving the toe laces under his skates in a looping, criss-cross fashion before tying them in three secure knots. Always three; that was important. The one time he'd done two had been a disaster.

"Hollander, you're starting today," Coach said, nodding over at him, "Show us what you can do out there. Should be no reason to pull you, but we'll keep Fortin dressed and warm just in case."

Shane frowned as he tightened the leather straps behind his calves. Alex Fortin was a Quebecois nightmare with an ego the size of the moon who had spent part of their first team practice chatting shit about Shane's technique in French, assuming he didn't speak the language for what he could only imagine were racist reasons. Shane had taken great pleasure in swearing at him under his breath in slangy French the next time they'd alternated in the net for a drill. Fortin had looked surprised at being caught out, sure, though not particularly ashamed by it.

Unfortunately for Shane, Forty, as the team called him, was also a fucking good goalie, the son of a legendary former Voyageurs player, and clearly favored by their French Canadian head coach — a fact epitomized by the bright red number '1' on his jersey. Technically, between Forty, Shane, and their third goaltender, Bossy, there wasn't actually a designated starter. But it was hard not to see the tournament dynamic that had been built as one that was… purposeful, with a traditional backup goalie number emblazoned on his own sweater and on number thirty-one Bossy's too.

Suddenly back in the smoky alley from days before, Shane wondered if Ilya Rozanov had noticed his number and assumed that he was talking to a sad second-stringer with a single start across the qualifying pool play games. That was probably why he'd been… kind of nice. Not even remotely intimidated by Shane's pathetic attempt at chirping.

He rolled his eyes, clearing away the thoughts. As one of the assistant coaches started reading off some game time information, Shane pushed himself to standing and hit a quick butterfly to check the flexibility of his pads. No shot he'd let himself be replaced by Fortin tonight, that asshole. The crease was his today. And it would be his again in the final, if he could really put on a show.

He heard his mom's voice in the back of his mind, telling him that hockey was always going to be a little unfair to him, that the only way through was to play three times as well and smile twice as big. Shane had been a center then, visible. He wondered if she'd give the same advice now, with the way his whole person was being comically obscured by something akin to if a crab were a Transformer.

In a deeper sense, sometimes the methodical process of putting on his layers and layers of equipment felt like a disappearing act. People tended to like him better, respect him even, when he was more composite foam and carbon fiber than man. His teammates back in Kingston loved to joke that the mask changed him, that he went from awkward and shy to a robot programmed to deny all pucks entry. Robo-Hollzy they called him. Which was… funny. In that kind of incisive, hurtful way that always left Shane wondering whether he was actually in on the joke.

As complicated as the feeling was, there were pros, of course. Shane liked not having to explain his quirks, assumed to be a weirdo by the very nature of his position, and to largely be left to his own devices as a result. He could say whatever he wanted in the locker room too, instead of having to participate in any noxious hockey bro culture. His teammates would laugh regardless. He'd heard 'Nice one, Hollzy!' so many times in response to his deadpan, truthful observations that he'd started to think maybe a career in standup was in his future. Except, of course, that he wasn't usually being funny on purpose.

Anyway, he tried not to dwell on the fact that — in this sport, and in his life, sort of generally — being *seen* as more meant *being* less.

Minutes later, when he was finally out on the ice, he took a moment to greet his posts, doing a tiny bow to each one and whispering a polite hello. The guys in Juniors had teased him about this too, of course, until one day he'd threatened, "The vindictive spirits of my Japanese ancestors will haunt every goal you shoot at until the end of time if you don't let me do my fucking rituals in peace." Which, for superstitious hockey players, had been enough to shut them up.

Hayden Pike, the second line left winger, skated up to him until they were eye to eye, leaning forward to bonk Shane's helmet with his own. "Alright, Hollzy, let's give 'em hell, eh?"

Shane flushed beneath his mask, nodding. He knew Hayden well, from camps and competitions over the years, had played alongside him even… but still, the casual touches left Shane flustered. This was the one part of goaltending he feared he would never get used to: the easy shows of appreciation from his teammates, through little taps and bumps throughout and often full on hugs when the game ended. For someone deeply unused to outward expressions of affection of any kind, it felt overwhelmingly tender — even if the platonic physical thanks were for the work done on the ice, of course, and not because they cared that *Shane* was the one doing it. Touch-starved as he was, after Jessica had broken up with him… again… he would take what he could get.

Dropping to his knees, he slid post to post a few times, before signaling to his awaiting players that they were free to chip a few shots his way. He gloved a handful easily, and batted the rest down, careful not to let his very responsive Bauer blocker send any errant pucks to the stratosphere. He tried not to glance over at the Canada bench, where he knew Forty would be looking on with disapproval. Shane was *good* at this, dammit. He would show them just how good tonight.

Not long after, the non-starting players departed the ice from warmups, and the refs called for the opening face-off. Canada's captain and first line center, a 6'5" wall from B.C. who'd been drafted by Detroit last season, won the face-off easily. And from there, they were off.

'Give 'em hell' ended up being just that, as Shane left the first and second periods with a shutout. Mostly standard saves, but also one particularly nice butterfly to knock back a rebound that he thought might make the highlight reel.

By the time the third period had started, score still sitting 0-0, he was both ecstatic at his own confident performance and also ready to wring his forwards by their necks if someone didn't put a puck in their opponent's net in regulation.

He watched, alone in his crease, as a tripping penalty gave Canada the numerical advantage. The power play lasted just thirty seconds before Hayden Pike converted on a gorgeous pass from their center. The kind of pass that Shane had never struggled to envision, but could not actually execute under pressure just the same.

He watched his teammates celebrate briefly, the hometown crowd roaring around them. Shane's nerves kicked into overdrive, glancing up at the jumbotron to see he had just three minutes left to defend that 1-0 score with his life.

The Americans began throwing everything and the kitchen sink at him — pulling their own goaltender in exchange for another forward and launching a barrage of aggressive plays, one of them leading to some pretty egregious contact with Shane in the crease. He stood up, pissed as hell and still in possession of the puck, but almost laughed seeing that his biggest defenseman had already knocked the American player to the ice in the scrum that followed.

In the end, Shane knew the American players just a little too well, especially now that their shot accuracy was suffering from some serious fatigue, and he made a few more practiced saves until the clock finally, blessedly ran out.

1-0.

They'd done it.

As his team finished their celebrations on the far end, players slowly migrating his way, Shane let his eyes scan the crowd.

He spotted his parents, loyal attendees of every domestic game, applauding on the right side, and a couple of younger guys he knew from Major Juniors too.

To his surprise, as he swiveled to look left, he made immediate, full-on eye contact with Russian center Ilya Rozanov, sat in a block of seats with members of his team and coaching staff.

Rozanov's expression was neutral, but his eyes were blazing with intensity, not at all the softer version of the boy Shane had met in the alleyway.

Shane supposed they really were competitors now, with a Canada–Russia championship locked in. Maybe tonight's shutout would convince Rozanov that Shane was an actual threat. Regardless, he hungered to go up against the best, to take the theories he'd built from hours and

hours of obsessively watching Rozanov's tape and test them in the only real way he could — live, on the ice.

As his teammates tapped him in thanks, Shane hoped it had read as a decisive performance. He *needed* to know how it would feel to have Rozanov's eyes on him… er, on the *net* behind him… and to feel the full force of the center's speed, puck handling, and raw playmaking intellect directed at the one place that Shane controlled.

Departing the ice, Shane Hollander invoked every possible hockey god including the faux-spirits in his posts, praying that the coaches would give him a chance to find out.

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Ilya was irritated.

Here he was at the IIHF World Junior Championship, playing in the most hyped finals matchup there'd been in years between two undefeated teams and…

He was wiping the floor with these fucking Canadians on home ice.

3-0 in the second, two from Ilya himself. An embarrassment.

Their goalie especially… *ugh*. What a dickhead. He was flashy and aggressive, but frequently badly positioned for even the simplest of shots and way too willing to venture from the crease without a backup plan. Without the Canadian defense putting up a modest fight at least, it would have been almost offensive how easy it was to score.

Whoever this guy was, he was *not* the goalie that Ilya had met in the alley last week, and certainly not the Shane Hollander he'd seen knocking away American shots like they were fruit flies, a mere annoyance to him.

The Canadian coach is an idiot not to have Hollander out here, Ilya thought, then laughed at the fact that he even had time to think about anything while he was actively dodging Canadian players on his way to score again.

Finding himself at the welcome mat unchallenged, he flicked a nasty little forehand shovel shot over the goalie's weaker shoulder.

4-0.

Ilya sighed.

Hollander would have stopped that.

- 🥅 -

“Fuck it, I’m pulling him,” their head coach said, as they watched Ilya Rozanov earn a hat trick like the net might as well have been empty.

Shane sat up, shocked when Forty was suddenly at the boards, raging in angry French that he deserved to finish what he started and that it was a terrible idea to have Shane go in cold.

“It can’t be more terrible than whatever the hell you were doing out there,” one of the assistant coaches chimed in, “Hollander, get in the net.”

Shane skated out, not doing much for the final four minutes of the second period, with the offensive line finally maintaining some decent possession of the puck at least.

A moment later, as the refs cleared out a brief scuffle in front of his net, Rozanov ended up within ear shot. He winked at Shane, a strange little grin on his face, and said, “Shane Hollander, I hope you will not disappoint me.”

Shane’s face burned. Ah, there was the Rozanov he'd heard about. *Asshole.*

As the third period began, Shane could feel some nerves creeping in. The Russians had decent offensive depth, but he found the lines without Rozanov to be fairly easy to handle. He was making the saves that Forty hadn’t at least.

The first time he saw Rozanov wind up for a shot at distance, he used the millisecond of prep time to take a deep breath.

Ilya Rozanov, number fifty-six, right-handed, favors the top left corner by a two-to-one margin, especially if Sokolov is—

In an instant, Shane raised his left hand and snapped his glove closed. Caught.

“Good shit, Hollander!” the defenseman closest to him said, as the fans shouted their appreciation. “Keep doing that, *Jesus*."

While it might have been more crowd pleasing to execute a wrist-twisting, windmill type of save, it went against Shane’s technical nature and his stubborn refusal to use the bulkier, softer practice glove that most guys had started switching to. Snagging the puck from the air with enough control to release it on his own terms? His instincts were always going to lean that way. Boring, controlled, but effective.

With eight minutes remaining, Canada finally found the back of the net, making the 4-1 deficit look less mortifying than a total shutout at least.

Shane knew it was unlikely they were going to win this game, and that anything he did now would pale in comparison to Fortin’s prior failures, so it was with some degree of guilt that he realized he was... having fun.

The Russian squad was a beautiful, precise machine in general, yes, a *real* challenge. But Ilya Rozanov… god, he was spectacular — the kind of player that was going to make waves in the

NHL for whatever team was lucky enough to draft him — but who, for right now, was happy to skate circles around Shane's teammates.

Despite a hat trick already secured for the evening, Rozanov seemed doggedly determined to score on Shane, with the way he was employing every trick in the bag, or at least all the moves Shane had seen him pull on tape. Shane was keeping up, barely, his heart pounding through his chest protector. This was *electric.*

Rozanov wasn't close enough after every save for Shane to observe his reactions in detail, but after the fifth, he finally saw traces of frustration begin to show on the center's face. A deflected shot over Shane's far shoulder serendipitously delivered the puck almost directly to Rozanov's stick. It should have been an easy tap into the net. Except for the fact that Shane had plopped down in a stubborn full split and sent the shot off the very edge of his leg pad instead.

Rozanov had looked… astounded. And then very, very red.

"You will lose this game, Hollander," he hissed, skating quickly backward once the nearby official threatened a penalty for how long he'd spent in Shane's crease.

Shane shrugged. That was a little bit out of his control at this point. "Probably."

In the end, Rozanov's prediction came true.

4-1 Russia.

On Canadian soil, even.

Ouch.

They let the Russians celebrate for a while, Shane's teammates huddled near the boards on their side.

"It should have been you the whole fucking time," Hayden whispered, wrapping Shane up in a hug. "I hope you know that, dude."

Number-one Alex Fortin, although back on the ice, did not acknowledge him at all.

Which made it all the more surprising when Ilya Rozanov did.

Passing each other in the post-game handshake line, Rozanov echoed Shane's 'good game' before adding a lofty "You are good goalie. But also lucky I went easy on you."

"Oh right, thanks," Shane deadpanned, a smile tugging at his lips.

Strangely, he felt his mind zero in on every inch of Rozanov's fingers as they unclasped from his own, pads dragging along his palm in a way that made him shiver.

He looked up to find Rozanov's hazel eyes on him, the same intensity in his gaze as when he'd watched Shane against the American team the day prior. As the line began to shuffle forward again, Rozanov smiled at him crookedly, his deep, accented voice making Shane shiver once more as he said:

“See you at the draft.”

Chapter End Notes

Gorgeous, gorgeous chapter art by @nathengyn!

Today's notes, since we're firmly in hockey!fic territory now:

- An introduction to some of the statistics you'll see Shane list about other players.
- A primer on hockey jersey numbers and their traditional meanings.
- A tour through all the equipment that Shane would be wearing as a goaltender.
- Some hockey goalies have been known to speak to their goalposts. Marc-Andre Fleury would tap his posts to thank them after a shot ricocheted off. And Patrick Roy (a not very subtle cameo that some of you spotted in Ch. 1 lol) historically talked to his posts in different languages to start each period.
- Many teams will line up specifically to thank their goalie after a game with cute little taps and head bonks.
- Why catching the puck has become less common, so it's unique that Shane favors it.
- It's uncommon for goalies to get pulled partway through a game, unless things are going very, very badly.
- Goalies can in fact do the full middle splits, even in those bulky pads. File away Flexible Shane for later ;)
- Contact with another team's goalie is extremely frowned upon and it's almost guaranteed his teammates will retaliate.

Still not sure if I'm committing to a regular posting schedule or just doing something vibes based haha, but rest assured that this fic is fully plotted out and will be completed! And folks, I gotta be real, I think we're in for a long one 😅

Chapter 3: Rematch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 2009 – Los Angeles

The twenty-four hour hotel gym was thankfully empty when he arrived, the muted televisions around the room showing a mix of American news broadcasts and that day's sports highlights.

On ESPN, the ticker at the bottom outlined the upcoming discussion topics: a baseball pitcher was getting surgery, an NFL team had fired their offensive coordinator, and men's singles at Wimbledon was heating up. No mention of the 2009 NHL Entry Draft. Good. That was good. Shane wasn't sure he could handle seeing Ilya Rozanov's smug expression smirking back at him from every promotional asset again without feeling a little sick.

Shane might have bested him on the ice, once, but here? This was Rozanov's domain.

The WJC had been a fun competition, sure, and he still felt a deep pride at his tournament performance. But ultimately it hadn't done much to boost his overall draft prospects. Shane was a solid goaltender with all the right stats. He performed well for his OHL team in Kingston when it counted. But he wasn't the best. His name wasn't the one on everyone's lips, the way it would have been if he'd lived up to his actual potential as a center… if he'd been able to rewire his near painfully analytical brain to find as much peace at the face-off dot as he did in the crease.

And so, it was hard not to feel a little jealous of *Him*, Ilya Rozanov, projected as the number one pick all year, no question. A superstar in the making, even if he'd ended up at Boston after they won the lottery pick — the only thing they'd won in roughly six seasons — and would have his work cut out for him there.

Enough comparisons, Shane. You just wanted to play hockey. And now, you will.

Rolling out one of the yoga mats, Shane arranged himself into a wide child's pose, inhaling deeply as his forehead touched the soft rubber. He let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding since stepping onto that megawatt stage, tugging a red and blue Montreal Voyageurs jersey over his uncomfortable suit jacket as several aging white men in designer suits and diamond-encrusted watches stood at his side. The men were smiling and smiling, pleased with their new purchase, and shaking his shoulders in that bro-y way that male former athletes never seemed to grow out of. Shane had tried to match their enthusiasm, but feared he only looked as awkward as he'd felt.

The announcement played again in his head: *'With the forty-eighth selection in the 2009 NHL Draft, the Montreal Voyageurs are proud to select, from the Kingston Monarchs, Shane Hollander.'*

There was nothing inherently wrong with being drafted in the second round. All the professional hockey people Yuna Hollander had hired to manage his elite career had predicted this, with their fancy algorithms and connections to the network of scouts across North America. Still, it was unlikely he would play immediately, on contract with Montreal until they called him up. Until he

was *needed.* And maybe never, if he didn't maintain his skill and stay on their radar these next two years or so.

("A contract is a great start, Shane," his mom had said, looking pleased by the outcome at the reception earlier. She'd, of course, immediately informed the GM that she was a born and raised Voyageurs fan and *more than delighted* to see Shane represent her home team.

The GM had been complimentary, if a little backhanded with it, chatting with Yuna about Shane as if he wasn't standing between them in his stupid little suit, too young to even have champagne in his glass like the rest of them. "We have plenty of flashy players already. Franchise stars. But Shane, here? He's so clinical, it's a little boring. We need more of that in our younger prospects. Just a good, reliable guy between the pipes. And the diversity angle is of course a major benefit for us too."

Yuna had smiled beatifically, and so Shane had done the same. He supposed that was all this event was meant to be, for a just-okay Japanese Canadian player without a familial hockey dynasty behind him: a whole interminable evening of grinning so wide his cheeks hurt and thanking important wealthy people who would forget his name before the night was over.)

Shane shook his head to clear away the memory, unfolding his limbs on the yoga mat and moving to stand. He assessed the hotel's workout equipment offerings again, immediately spotting a blue BOSU ball leaning against the weight rack. Perfect.

He arranged the half-sphere in front of the mirrors and stepped on, testing his balance before assuming an easy tree pose. Regulating his breathing, core muscles tightly engaged, he considered his professional future with the Voyageurs.

In truth, Montreal's 2008 season had been middling, and included a first round elimination in the playoffs, but the bigger story had been their long-time starting goaltender announcing his retirement after eighteen seasons. They'd traded a more experienced backup to Washington two years ago and it was sort of an unspoken agreement that their remaining goalie — a twenty-three year old fresh out of the NCAA — was not yet ready to step into the premier starter position. It would make even less sense to put Shane, just eighteen, into a tandem with him.

So, Shane would wait it out with the Monarchs in Kingston, maybe move to the AHL once eligible at twenty, and hope and hope and hope.

He knew he'd chosen to play the long game when he switched positions, given that even the youngest starting goalies in the league were several years his senior. Although, on the brighter side, he was likely to have a much longer career than all the teenagers who *would* start this upcoming season and face the constant barrage of brutal hits and skating-based injuries that Shane was largely protected from. He could play into his forties if he was lucky and still mobile; most forwards would burn out by their early thirties at best.

In the end, it was a simple hockey equation, really: Ilya Rozanov would be a blazing star and Shane Hollander would be a steady team presence. And maybe one day they'd meet on the ice again.

'Or maybe even right now?' the universe suggested, laughing in Shane's stupid face as, deep into a pistol squat on the BOSU, he made eye contact in the mirror with what he could only hope

was an extremely realistic hallucination.

“Sorry,” the hallucination said, deeply Russian. And yeah okay, that was very much, in the literal flesh, the one hockey player out of hundreds here that Shane had been hoping to avoid. Tonight, and for the rest of his professional sports career maybe.

Notorious hot-tempered asshole Ilya Rozanov had been sort of kind to him once, yes, and he was brilliant to play against, of course. But, at the same time, he represented a sort of perfect hockey archetype — one that would always elude Shane regardless of skill — and the personal failures that haunted him too.

Now, here, Rozanov was also…

Well. He was nice to look at. In the appraising, athletic kind of way that Shane always looked at men, of course. Especially out of the uniform and pads, standing in just a fitted tank top and running shorts with so much toned, golden skin on display…

Shane wobbled on the balance ball hard enough that he started to tip backwards, midway out of his squat, one leg flailing awkwardly to the side.

Oh god, he was going to fall flat on his ass in front of—

A large, strong hand encircled his bicep, the electricity of an unexpected touch sending Shane’s brain into panicked overdrive. A second, steadying hand made contact with his lower back, standing him upright. And, for the briefest of moments, his stumbling bare legs brushed against Rozanov’s own. Shane *burned.*

“Are you okay?” Rozanov asked, something in his eyes shifting as he met Shane’s in the mirror.

His pretty curls had grown a little longer, and he must have gotten taller too, or maybe just filled out more thoroughly with muscle. He made Shane feel *small,* in a way that should have irritated him but instead—

“Ha, yeah!” Shane blurted, practically spinning into Rozanov’s arms as he tried to right himself. His chest heaved with embarrassment and… and… something else he wasn’t allowed to name. “Thanks… for that.”

Rozanov released his grip and looked ready to say more, but Shane couldn’t, *wouldn’t* give him the chance.

Mortified beyond belief, he took one completely casual slow step to the side, out of Rozanov’s orbit, before he all but ran out the door.

What happened in his hotel room shower a little later could never, ever be repeated. He felt anxious and dirty and… *god dammit*, so, so fucking good. He was just that pent up, he rationalized, that anyone’s touch would have done it. It didn’t have to mean anything, right? Shane couldn’t possibly add another *difference* to the long list of things already marking him as somewhat of a social pariah. Things the mask could not protect him from.

Forehead pressed to the cold tile wall, he let the shame wash over him once more, with the pathetic realization that Ilya Rozanov probably hadn’t even recognized him.

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December 2009 – Ottawa

"And in goal, number thirty, Shaaaane Hollander!"

Shane smiled from the corner where he was stretching, awaiting the start of the matchup that had seemed almost predestined from the time that the rosters were announced: Russia vs. Canada, back again, with a chance for the hometown boys to reclaim the title.

As the undisputed starting goalie, Shane would have been well within his right to claim the '1' and yet he'd felt a nostalgic attachment to the number that had earned him a shutout at last year's tournament. Plus, with new coaching staff in and Alex Fortin aged out of Juniors eligibility, Shane had played freer, more spectacular hockey than he had in years.

One shutout was nothing now, not when he'd had three of them across the round robin games, and only allowed in two goals through quarter- and semi-finals besides.

Shane hoped to do the same tonight, playing his part in ensuring a Canadian win this time around. Though there were challenges ahead, as expected.

His offense was up against Mikhail Popov, for one, who had waved happily at Shane from the other side of the ice during warm ups, sweetly enough that Shane had almost forgotten Popov's ungodly save percentage was a tenth higher than his own. Still, he meant to thank him for the soup recipe when he had the chance.

And then there was Ilya Rozanov, of course, who'd been fearsomely leading the Boston Bears' second line, and had now scored goals on actual NHL ice against the guys that Shane looked up to. No one was really sure why Rozanov had deigned to appear in the tournament at all, given how active he was for his professional team. Someone on the Russian side must have been very persuasive about national pride.

Anyhow, Rozanov had arrived with vengeful purpose, leading the scoring in the tournament through pool play and then beating the all-time tournament record entirely, with one game still left to go. He was going to be a nightmare tonight, Shane knew, and could only hope that the time he'd spent preparing for a better, smarter, stronger NHL Rozanov would pay off in the end.

Watching tape of him for months had been… *enlightening* in ways that Shane loathed to admit, especially after that brief run-in at the hotel gym, which had served to permanently alter his brain chemistry. He'd maybe spent just as much time analyzing on film the way Rozanov moved his body across the ice to pass and score as he had… um, admiring the body itself. And if all that had led to a YouTube rabbit hole of 'Ilya Rozanov game day interviews', too many of which he conducted shirtless, well… Shane's internet history was between him and God at this point.

Probably sensing that Shane's head was in the hockey clouds worse than ever, Jessica had broken up with him again. A third time. *The final time*, he thought, thoroughly uninterested in

another round of back and forth with her, even if the few times they'd managed to meet up when he was back home in Ottawa had involved some… stuff. It was admittedly nice, feeling a body against his own, even if she often wanted things from him that didn't really turn him on in the ways it mostly seemed to work for her. Still, she was pretty and had soft hair and her lips were always nicely moisturized, so he could have done a lot worse for a first girlfriend, really.

"Hollzy, you in there?" Hayden Pike asked, a gloved hand waving across Shane's vision and startling him from his daydreaming.

Back for another round of the WJC himself, Hayden was technically Shane's teammate on the Voyageurs now, though unlike Shane, the nineteen year old had actually made the roster cut in training camp and was playing left wing on Montreal's fourth line.

"Yeah, sorry," Shane replied, shaking his head and allowing himself the tiniest of smiles. "You ready to do this?"

Hayden skated closer to give him a gentle helmet bonk, as had become their pre-game tradition. It was a grounding sensation, and Shane felt his heartbeat slow in his chest. Centered.

"With you in goal this time, bud? Absolutely." He winked. "Let's give 'em hell."

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"Shane Hollander, we meet again," Ilya said lazily, grinning as the goalie shoved him out of the crease in order to block a pretty wrist shot from his right winger.

Damn it, Ilya would have liked that assist to count.

Another deflection had sent the puck over the nets and into the crowd, so there was a brief pause of action on the ice as the officials went to set up the face-off from the last play.

"Get out of here, Rozanov," Hollander hissed back, "Unless you want a stick to the kneecaps the next time the refs look the other way."

"Giving me your stick already?" Ilya teased, thrilled with a chance to poke at the goalie again, "Take me to dinner first, at least."

Hollander's eyes were murderous behind his mask as he scoffed. A reaction almost as rewarding as actually scoring on him would be. *Ugh.*

This tied 1-1 game could not be allowed to continue into the third period, and especially not without his own contribution. A chaotic rebound of their defenseman's brutal slap shot early in the period had put the puck in easy scoring range for a second line forward near the net. That goal felt like pure luck at this point, with the way Hollander had shut down everything else the Russian team had tried.

Ilya rolled his eyes when the ref insistently called him over to the circle, winning the face-off easily and setting up another play. A few months on NHL ice had sharpened his awareness beyond what he thought possible and he executed a slick pass to the right side, signaling quickly that he wanted the puck back as he danced past the Canadian defense.

There.

The tiniest error in Hollander's positioning had created an opening for Ilya to capitalize on. The puck connected back with his stick and he deked left, ready to scoop a shot easily up behind the crossbar. But fuck, Hollander was fast. Too fast. And he'd made himself even bigger in the net than Ilya thought possible.

He watched in abject horror as the puck clipped off the edge of Hollander's dangler — the idiot had put his literal fucking neck on the line for the save — and dropped to the ice, right in time for Hollander to cover it with his glove, freezing the play.

"Oh, fuck you very much," Ilya cursed out loud, another scoring chance dissolving into thin air.

He was loud enough, unfortunately, that a Canadian player within earshot was not at all amused and Ilya was getting tossed on his ass before he could blink. Incensed, he leapt up, fully intent on receiving a penalty of his own, but both his teammates *and* the refs knew him too well for that. He was dragged away from another fight by no less than four people, still glaring daggers at the 'BOIZIAU' emblazoned on the back of his aggressor's red jersey.

Back at the crease, Hollander, the little shit, was busy receiving grateful pats from his teammates like a human golden retriever. Ilya could practically see his praise-happy tail wagging. *Fuck's sake.*

Collapsing onto the bench as his shift ended, Ilya seethed. His own teammates knew better than to try to comfort him when he was in a mood like this, instead leaving him to stew in peace. They'd probably heard enough ranting from him about Hollander already anyhow.

It was just… absurd. How could he go from averaging two a game, with a hat trick against Finland in semis to boot, to being completely shutout by Shane fucking Hollander? *Again.*

Last he'd heard, Montreal had drafted Hollander in a later round and then immediately brought in a veteran starter for cheap on PTO, sending Hollander down to whatever weird Canadian junior league he belonged to. That made sense. Hollander was young and goaltending spots on the roster were few, and yet…

Ilya had watched his tape. Obsessively. He was good but not so good that Ilya couldn't figure him out this time around, or so he thought. He'd come into this matchup intimately knowing where the goalie's weaknesses were in the net, the holes he left (not many, admittedly), how he was ever so slightly more reactive on his right side… But maybe Hollander had studied him just as closely, memorizing his habits in that goofy templated way he had a year ago.

Regardless, Ilya was playing *real* NHL hockey now, scoring on goaltenders with often a decade of professional experience or more. There was no reason one weird Canadian teenager with… with pretty eyes and *freckles* should be an obstacle.

To add insult to injury, Canada chose that moment to score, clock running out just twenty seconds later to end the period.

Watching the ‘2’ flicker to life on the jumbotron made Ilya’s stomach churn, the first real nerves he’d felt playing hockey since his competitive Russian debut as a literal child. He could hear the weight of his father’s disapproval — uncaring for any hockey achievement that wasn’t for the motherland — and how his stupid, deadbeat brother would have the audacity to sneer at the loss while still begging for handouts.

Ilya had one more period to crack Hollander’s 'impenetrable' armor.

Bring it the fuck on.

- 🥅 -

Ilya Rozanov was going to kill him.

The Russian center had been on the warpath for the entirety of the third period, Shane dreading each time his line was back out on the ice. He refused to look up at the jumbotron, preferring to stay ignorant of just how many shots Russia had managed in their final push to tie the game in regulation — and how many of those had come from Rozanov’s hands alone.

Exhausted beyond belief, with just seconds remaining on the clock, Shane found himself risking a defensive play behind the net, swinging hard to eliminate the danger from their side.

He swiveled quickly back around his left post and watched, satisfied, as the puck he’d cleared flew across the ice and over the blue line, the final second ticking down overhead.

The reaction was immediate. The roar of the crowd and a swarm of red jerseys crashing onto the ice.

2-1 Canada.

Redemption.

Shane skated over to the huddle, throwing himself full bodied into the pile. For the first time in a long time, there were arms welcoming him in.

The handshake line formed not long after, a series of defeated Russian faces passing Shane by, and then…

Rozanov.

His eyes were more intense than Shane had ever seen them, boring into his own like he was trying to infiltrate Shane’s brain telepathically. Or explode it, more like.

“Now we’re even,” Shane said boldly as they shook hands, surprising himself with the confidence of his chirp.

Rozanov stared and stared, but didn't say a word.

- 🥅 -

September 2010 – Boston

Ilya collapsed atop the comforter, pressing a light kiss to Svetlana's cheek.

She was wearing an oversized Boston Bears t-shirt and little else, looking as effortlessly attractive as she always did. They'd messed around a bit after a boozy dinner downtown at a restaurant Svetlana and her father loved but that Ilya found a little offensive in terms of portion size to cost ratio. It was nice, a bit of convenient sex while Ilya was Boston-based, training camp in full swing and the preseason still a few weeks away.

His heart hadn't really been in it though, distracted, and she'd pulled him up by the hair after a valiant attempt to get her off a second time, asking in gentle Russian, "Alright, what's wrong?"

Which brought them here, to a soft, platonic cuddle in the master bedroom of his newly purchased condo, part of the luxe high rise complex his fellow single, city-dwelling teammates preferred. He was lucky she put up with him like this, all the emotional complexity he tried to hide behind casual pleasure seeking. Though admittedly she'd been a close friend and confidante long before they'd explored anything further, and so maybe she just knew him best and cared for his messiness anyway.

Ilya sighed, leaning over to tuck his face against her chest. "I have this thing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Sexually?"

"No," he all but whined, "I just… I think I have an enemy."

"*An* enemy?" she gasped, laughing loudly, "Ilyusha, I fear you made enemies of the entire NHL last season. Impressive work as a rookie, really."

He scoffed. "Yes, but this is… personal, okay?"

She frowned. "Has someone found out about your… other interests?"

She made a gesture then that was hilariously obscene.

"Who do I need to get Papa to blackmail?"

He shoved at her, laughing. "No, it's not that. I'm being careful. Discreet."

Tucking a copper curl behind her ear, she tilted her head in interest. "Then what? A hockey rival?"

He turned away from her, shoving his face into the other pillow as he mumbled an embarrassed 'yes' into the silk sham.

“Oh, but this is fun!” Svetlana said excitedly, “Hmm, let me guess.” He turned his head to watch as she tapped her chin in thought. “Connor Masterson?”

Ilya wrinkled his nose, rolling back over and propping himself up on his elbows. “How dare you.”

“What?” she protested, “He’s the only rookie who came even close to your record point total last season.”

Ilya scoffed. “Masterson has the puck handling skills of a toddler and even worse aim. He is not a threat to anyone but the boards behind the net.”

Svetlana hummed. “Okay, so not a fellow center then. Since none compare to you, oh great one.”

Ilya smiled. “Exactly, thank you.”

“But can you give me a division at least?” she asked. “To narrow it down?”

Ah, well. She had him there. Ilya could either come up with a lie on the spot or else admit to the pathetic truth. And his darling childhood friend Sveta, the meanest, cleverest girl in their Moscow district, was liable to catch him out regardless.

He sighed. “The OHL.”

Svetlana blinked. “Ontario? CHL Ontario?” At his nod, she raised an eyebrow and added, “You’re telling me that your rival — *you,* Ilya Rozanov, the NHL’s next generational talent — is in a *development league*?”

Well, when she put it like that, it did seem kind of… mismatched.

“He *was* drafted,” Ilya argued, “He’s just… in a competitive position. Not everyone plays right away, you know?”

“Yes, obviously,” she replied, rolling her eyes, the daughter of a generational hockey dynasty herself. “But I’m trying to figure out who could’ve possibly gotten under your skin enough in such a short time to—”

His cheeks reddening, he watched the realization dawn on her face.

“Oh, Ilyusha,” she said, voice dripping with pity, “It’s been almost a year. You can’t possibly still be hung up on silver at the WJC.”

Ilya pouted. “I’m not *hung up* on it, I just… he blocked every one of my shots, for *two years,* Sveta.”

She poked at his chest, a chastising sound leaving her lips. “And now you’re what? Obsessed with figuring out what his deal is?”

He shrugged, a little hopelessly. “It’s frustrating, that’s all. I studied Hollander intently for months last time, and still he was…”

“Better?” she supplied.

The embarrassed heat of his blush was morphing into a simmering irritation instead.

“Look, yes, he’s in the OHL now,” Ilya acknowledged, “But someday, sooner than later if their coach isn’t a complete idiot, Hollander will be called up to Montreal and I will face him. I cannot lose again.”

He blew out a long breath, a little vulnerable. “After the last championship, in the tunnel, I broke my stick. I was so angry. I had never done that before, and not since.”

“Jesus, Ilya,” Svetlana said, eyebrows at her hairline, “He’s not worth all that, I don’t think. You are the one with the NHL career. You’re going to win a Stanley Cup. He’ll be lucky to play up next season at all.”

Ilya felt his frustration mounting. “But that’s just it, Sveta. It doesn’t matter if he’s not a starting goaltender. The moment he’s in that net, I *cannot* score.”

She sniffed. “I think you are being a drama queen, for one, and also maybe harboring a little crush? Competency has always been attractive to you, as much as you like to chase a thrill.”

Ilya winced, shaking his head in denial, even as a flash of pretty Bambi eyes and a dusting of freckles across the bridge of a strong nose appeared in his memory.

“He’s always wearing that stupid mask,” he complained. *No.* Not complained— *observed* neutrally. Hollander’s face and… pad-less body… was none of his business. “I don’t even really know him without it.”

“Well, *I* remember him being really handsome, at the draft,” she mused. “Pouty lips, strong jaw. A little intense looking but cute somehow too. Like a baby bat.”

It was unfortunate, for Ilya and the vague mental image of Shane Hollander he'd carried so far, to know she was likely telling the truth. Svetlana, with a dozen different bets on the line and an obsessive interest in the sport in general, had actually sat through the never ending televised draft in its entirety. Unlike Ilya, who’d invented a reason to escape back to his hotel room — ‘family in Russia, emergency, so sorry’ — after the first round rather than being forced to languish at a banquet table for hours longer still.

“But anyway, you shouldn’t dwell on this … imaginary enemy of yours,” she said decisively, “You are a star, Ilya Rozanov. And Shane Hollander is nothing. He’ll probably consider it the highlight of his career, beating you once in a tournament for *children*. Meanwhile, you nearly led Boston all the way to the Cup in your rookie season. Hollander would be laughed off the rink for daring to compare you. I bet he’s secretly a fan.”

Ilya remembered Hollander threatening to break his kneecaps for occupying his crease and wasn’t quite so sure.

He shook his head, tucking himself back under her arm. “There’s just something about him, about his hockey, Sveta. It’s driving me insane.”

“Ilyusha, sunshine,” she replied sweetly, if a little condescending too, fingers kneading his scalp through his curls, “You’re going to meet a lot of good players in your career. You already have. And some of them will best you occasionally. Are you going to become obsessed with all those men for years too?”

At Ilya’s pursed lips, she let out an exasperated sigh. “What am I saying? Of course, you will.”

He snorted, snuggling closer. “I’m just competitive, that’s all,” he said after a moment, “and Hollander called us even after that match, which is true. If I could have just one more chance against him—”

“You would what?” she asked, expression shifting to something teasing, “Let him deny you a third time?”

Ilya cast her an affronted look, before shifting to press his full weight on top of her as she laughed and gasped for mercy.

Svetlana was right. As usual.

Shane Hollander wasn’t here, in a Boston penthouse. He wouldn’t be dressed in that ugly blue jersey out on the ice in a few weeks either.

(There was nothing to fear.)

“Should we look him up?” Svetlana asked, smile curling into a lazy smirk, “We could go through his Juniors stats and— oh! I bet there's a more recent picture on his player profile.”

(There was maybe something to fear.)

“No!” Ilya blurted, then tried to nonchalantly cough away the outburst. “No, let’s just… watch a movie or something, hmm? Before your flight out in the morning?”

She nodded, though her bright eyes appraised him knowingly, in a way that left him feeling stripped bare. Impressive given he was still mostly undressed already.

“Goalies are weird anyway,” she joked, clearly trying to break through Ilya’s off-color mood, “I bet he has some strange quirks, some freaky hobbies, you know? Super out there for you.”

Ilya looked away for a moment. It was probably a bad idea to mention that sometimes, when they announced him during a pre-game hype track on home ice, he heard ‘Ilya Rozanov, number eighty-one’ in a different voice instead. *Pathetic.*

Yeah no, he would not be giving his dear friend that ammunition, unless he wanted to be chirped for all eternity.

And anyway, he would get over this professional obsession soon, he was sure. Ilya wanted to be the best, and twice now Shane Hollander had stood in the way of that. It was only natural he’d want to understand how and why.

And, with the ephemeral nature of NHL rosters, it was unlikely he’d meet Hollander out there any time soon. That afforded him plenty of extra years honing his offensive skill to go up against

the goaltender when the time came.

He would score, just once, and then the spell would be broken.

Shane Hollander, no longer invincible, cleansed from his system.

Easy.

Chapter End Notes

There's nothing I want to do less than explain the many complicated mechanisms behind the NHL Draft, but your hockey tl;dr is that basically losers get to pick first (the 15 teams who didn't make the playoffs get picks 1-15, and the lottery system for the top three picks is weighted, so if you were a Super Loser last season like Boston in this universe, you're much more likely to win a top pick, though it's not guaranteed.) More on understanding the draft here.

Now for the goalie stuff!

- It really does take time to play, unfortunately, even after you're on an NHL contract. Goalies are competing for fewer spots than are available to forwards and defenders (typically just two, on a max NHL roster of 23 players, with maybe a third goalie added for depth/injury risk during playoffs). While elite goalies may get drafted at 18 or 19 (Shane *is* downplaying just how good he is, given his high standards for himself), goalies often develop their skills more slowly and it's realistic to reach the NHL in your early-to-mid 20s.
- "Calling up" refers to a team's ability to bring in players for a game, or multiple games, usually from their minor league affiliates (the AHL or the ECHL). NHL teams are constantly rotating guys in and out of their 23-man rosters due to injury, specific game needs, and just to test out their prospective talent. Montreal would technically have the option to call Shane up from the OHL (one league in Canadian Major Juniors) but there are a ton of restrictions with the Canadian leagues that y'all do *not* need to worry about lmao, so just know it's much more likely he'd get moved to an AHL team at twenty (the minimum age for a player from the Canadian league in the AU's timeline, though the rules have since changed) and then start to occasionally see some ice time.
- Goalie tandems! While it used to be common that you'd have one starting goalie play basically every regular season game, most teams now operate in a tandem with two elite goaltenders splitting regular season games between them. Also they hug.
- While goalies are unlikely to see purposeful physical contact, pucks are hard and skate blades are sharp, so many opt to wear additional protection over exposed parts, like cut-proof socks and wristbands and throat/neck guards, like the dangler that Shane wears which keeps Ilya's shot from hitting his windpipe. Some NHL goalies still prefer less throat/neck protection because they feel like it impacts their movement/visibility, but there have been enough genuinely horrific injuries that most will opt for some form of it!

Y'all, I am so delightfully overwhelmed by the response to this fic so far, and while I do want to reply to every single comment, you left over three hundred of them in a couple of days, what the hell 😭 Please give me grace as I attempt to respond to those at some point while actively writing this WIP. Thank you for loving Goalie Shane as much as I do though. It's been a joy so far!

Stay tuned for the next installment, where Shane makes his NHL debut and we [Ilya voice] 'maybe, *maybe*' earn that E fic rating.

Chapter 4: Professional

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September 2012 – Montreal

The early morning ice at Bell Sports Complex was pristine, as Shane and the rest of the players on training camp Team B skated out for their first supervised practice.

After clearing his medical eval and fitness tests, Shane was nearly buoyant with anticipation, the blue Voyageurs' practice jersey pulled over his pads feeling so very close to the real thing. Luckily, the competitive jitters had yet to kick in and he found himself calmly looking forward to the weeks of practices, scrimmages, and on-ice evaluations that would start to shape the Voyageurs' roster through the preseason. He knew he had his work cut out for him, with sixty players invited and seven of them goaltenders. Plus, at twenty-one, Shane was the youngest goalie by several years, and one of only two among them without any NHL experience.

Still, he was a starting goalie for real now, with a full season's worth of playing time in the AHL with the Laval Jets and a 0.914 SV% that looked pretty damn impressive against the other guys on paper. And, even if there wasn't a roster spot on the Voyageurs for him just yet, he still needed to dazzle the coaching staff, liable as he was to be called up at any time from the minors.

A happy bonus of the training camp invite had been reuniting with his World Juniors teammates: Hayden Pike, now on the Montreal second line, and JJ Boiziau, a defenseman who was also, as of last season, wearing the 'A' too.

Shane had always admired the pair of them, both a year or so older and confidently successful in their hockey careers in different ways. Hayden was a serious competitor but had the most fun playing the game of any professional athlete Shane knew, just genuinely thrilled to skate and score. He demonstrated such loyalty to current and former teammates as well, both on and off the ice; as soon as he'd found out Shane had moved to the AHL affiliate, he'd made a consistent effort to invite him to dinner and casual outings in Montreal, and had even been in the stands for a few of the Jets' home games to cheer Shane on.

A total clown at the best of times, Hayden had also somehow bagged himself a beautiful, smart, and patient wife who never seemed to mind when Shane stole her husband's time for their hangouts and video gaming sessions. Shane thought they might all be friends even, though he'd been burnt by that assumption often enough in his younger years that he would never risk the embarrassment of asking. If Hayden texted, Shane showed up, and that was that.

And then there was JJ, a formidable 6'7" defensive force, who just *understood* Shane on a deeper level. As two non-white players in a sport with a noticeable diversity issue, they had stayed in touch after the WJC and often commiserated about the micro- and not so micro-aggressions they experienced, trading tips and advice for balancing a high-profile athletic career with personal dignity. JJ was never shy about the fact that Montreal liked the *optics* of him as a team leader but did relatively little to protect him from backlash — from across the league and their own Voyageurs fans alike — to the point he had a team of moderators for his social media

accounts and rarely checked any news online himself. In spite of it all, JJ was kind and hilariously goofy and bore the weight of the 'A' with a grace that his franchise rarely deserved.

(Of course, the three of them — together in the locker room for the camp's day one opening remarks — had reminisced about their time with Team Canada, both Hayden and JJ embarrassing Shane thoroughly by talking up his vengeful performance in the final to anyone who would listen.

"Hey, you know this fucking guy has twice shut out Ilya fucking Rozanov?" JJ had told one of the local Quebecois prospects, the Creole lilt to his French and gratuitous profanity making the statement sound even more teasing.

Shane had almost felt bad at the way the news seemed to crush the kid's spirits. He was a Team C forward with a scrimmage against Shane's Team B squad later that day after all. But training camp was just kind of like that, dozens of guys who you could vibe with easily in the locker room transforming into your biggest competition the minute you hit the ice together. Sixty players down to twenty-three. And the coaches could subtract any time they felt like it, which occurred randomly and often enough to feel like a specific form of psychological torture.

"I wonder if Rozanov still thinks about that game?" Hayden had mused, from where he sat taping his stick, "God knows we need *something* to humble that menace."

Shane had rolled his eyes. "It's been years, Hayd. I'm sure he's forgotten completely. He was a little busy breaking most of the decades' old rookie records in existence that season."

JJ had shrugged, throwing an arm around his shoulder. "Still, it was legendary. And knocking him on his fucking ass for messing with you was my absolute pleasure."

Snorting, Shane had then shrugged in return and added, a little self-deprecatingly, "And look where we are now. Rozanov hunting for a Cup, and me just hoping Theriault remembers my name so he might think about giving me a call in the next five years."

Hayden had booed him for this, which was sweet actually given that they all knew the Voyageurs' veteran starter, Finnish terror Olli Laine, was a shoo-in despite his… attitude problems, and his current backup goalie — twenty-five year old Mitch Asher, a Quinnipiac alum — was unlikely to be on the chopping block either.

"Who cares if you're young?" Hayden had argued, "You're a better fucking goalie than half the guys in the league right now. Once management sees some sense, you'll be up here with us and able to prove yourself for real."

"Thanks, Hayden," Shane had replied, meaning it, though he knew in his heart that no matter how hard he worked during this camp, he was unlikely to earn a roster spot. At least until a major injury or a trade came through.)

Focus, Shane.

Now, assuming his place in the net for their first set of drills, Shane's brain left the memory of the locker room and settled into the moment. Bowing to each goal post, he whispered his gratitude, and then turned to signal to the assistant coach that he was ready to begin.

As the first puck flew, he could swear he felt the universe tilt in his favor a bit.

He could do this.

He'd been patiently waiting, years and years, for this exact chance at *becoming.*

It was poetic, almost, given that he'd once humiliated himself at an elite youth hockey camp by freezing up on this very same ice nine years ago. Back when the coaches hadn't known what to do with his crippling neuroses, watching his panic attack play out so violently after a missed shot that they'd nearly called his parents to pick him up week one. That was, until the goaltending coach had quietly stepped in, offering Shane his personal office space to decompress. He was the first adult in Shane's life to ask him if he actually still liked hockey, if he was having any fun, and if not, was there something else he wanted to do instead?

'Instead' was a word he'd heard sparingly, if ever, in his childhood, where things that were determined to be good for him were not presented as optional.

Shane had been honest with Coach Roy then that he loved the sport but wasn't sure he had the brain for it, with the way he couldn't mentally overcome the paralyzing block he had around shooting. That the pressure to be *better,* to just… *get over it* had him agreeing to this camp in the first place.

"Well, what if *I* shot at you?" Coach Roy had offered.

Shane had blinked and scrubbed at his face, eyes still puffy from his tears. "What?"

"What if you were able to analyze all those options you say you see in your head in a split second and react to the shot on goal, rather than being the one doing the shooting?"

"I…" Shane had started, sensing Yuna Hollander's piercing look of disappointment from a hundred kilometers away. "Like a goaltender?"

Coach Roy had nodded, a patient smile on his face. "Yeah, Shane. Like a goaltender."

And suddenly, here he was, closing in on a decade of dedication to the position, a whole career path reshaped by the idea of making hockey work for him instead of reinventing himself for the sport in a way that would have broken down long term.

Executing a series of well-timed saves that had the assistant staff scribbling onto their clipboards, Shane felt himself sink into the near-calm of the crease, as close to a meditation as one could arrive at while hard rubber projectiles were fired at your face. He would make sure they couldn't ignore him, or write him off as boring and safe as always. He would be his own star, at least for the next two hours. And then for three more weeks after that.

In a life already full of pretending, this was the kind of show he didn't mind putting on.

October 2012 – Detroit

It was the call that Shane had hoped for.

Less than a month into the regular season, Olli Laine — or Wavey, as they called him, in a nod to the Finnish meaning — received a four-game suspension for roughing and unsportsmanlike conduct after a particularly brutal on-ice confrontation in Toronto. Mitch Asher would now start and Shane would dress for the games, just in case, as the newest backup goalie for the Montreal Voyageurs. He could hardly believe it. His actual NHL debut, off the ice as it were.

Shane hadn't been expecting to play, at least not in any higher-stakes matchups, but the chance to wear the real jersey and start practicing with the team again had felt like reward enough. One familiar head bonk from Hayden had kept him smiling for days.

The first two away games, Shane had sat in the strange distant spots that host teams always seemed to arrange for the visiting backup goalie, sometimes not even remotely near the same bench and more integrated with the spectators than his own squad. It was an apt sort of metaphor for the way that he was simultaneously part of the team and yet completely on an island of his own, though he tried not to internalize the physical distance too deeply. He'd smiled and played along with nearby fans anyhow, just grateful to be there in the moment, and especially grateful to the toddler in adorable ear protection in Carolina who'd insistently passed him a handful of M&M's through a gap in the glass.

But as it turned out, Asher was nursing a now-obvious groin injury and had been pulled by medical staff during a morning skate a few days ago, meaning that the Laval Jets' Shane Hollander, number forty-two, would be the starter against Detroit that night.

Making his NHL debut on enemy ice? *Sure, no pressure.*

His teammates had been cheerful and supportive at least, with the exception of their captain— a stoic 37-year-old career-long Voyageur from Saguenay who had barely concealed his distaste for Shane during training camp and didn't appear to be changing that opinion now.

"Don't fuck this up, Hollander," he'd offered unhelpfully in clipped French as he skated by during their warmup.

Shane tried not to take it personally. By virtue of his innate strangeness and tendency to accidentally rub people the wrong way, he'd encountered plenty of situations where he found himself inexplicably disliked. It would have been nice to feel like he had his captain's support as a complete rookie, but then again, it was unlikely he'd have to play under the man for long with Wavey's return on the horizon.

Even so, all Shane needed to do tonight was survive, really. Play his game, keep pucks out of the net, and let the well-oiled Voyageurs machine around him do its thing. Easier said than done, maybe, given they were on a three-game losing streak and looked a bit of a mess defensively. But anyway.

Shane shook his head, clearing the thoughts. He would control only what he could.

He completed his warmup stretches and exercises in their exact, ritualistic order, bowed to the foreign goal posts he hoped would still treat him well tonight, and began to go over the opposing team's scoring lines' stats in a metered, repetitive loop under his breath.

The other half of JJ's D-pair skated close enough to hear his mumbling and Shane winced, expecting a weird look or a probing question. But nothing of the sort happened. The 6'6" Swede merely flashed him a thumbs up and continued on his wide loop around their side.

Huh. Maybe Wavey's fearsome reputation had engendered an even deeper respect for goalie idiosyncrasies on this team than most, or maybe the Weirdness Tolerance was tiered in general and making it to the NHL afforded you the highest possible pass. Shane was happy to coast by on whatever rationale regardless. The AHL was fun and scrappy and full of brilliant players, but it was also extremely cutthroat in its own way, everyone a little desperate to be taken seriously as a professional hockey player while they awaited the call-up that *must* be coming. Shane hadn't felt stifled at Laval, really, just… a little more cautious and subdued. Himself but quieter, palatable.

Here now, on NHL ice, Shane watched diligently from the crease as the game spun out in circles and lines all around him. The pace was slower, Detroit looking a bit tired after returning last night from a long streak of away games, and so Shane remained largely unchallenged through the first period.

A Montreal goal put them up 1-0 to start the second and Detroit got a little hungrier then. Given a two-minute power play opportunity, they played the Voyageurs' defense like a fiddle, Shane fighting for both good positioning and visibility as his teammates scrambled erratically in front of the crease. The goal that eventually made its way in could hardly be considered his fault alone, but he mourned the impact to his stats just the same.

A little frustrated, he hissed in JJ's direction, "If you want me to make saves, I have to be able to see the puck. X-ray vision isn't working today unfortunately!"

JJ laughed a little, though he nodded, and Shane trusted him to spread the word. Whether or not this group of experienced players would take their untested, rookie goalie seriously would remain to be seen.

By the third, it was 2-1 Montreal, which was good but not enough insurance for Shane's liking. He continued to make his practiced saves, knees and hips beginning to ache as he felt the full brunt of four NHL offensive lines. He hadn't been tracking the number of shots on goal, but knew it had to be in the thirties by now.

With under two minutes left, one of Detroit's most productive forwards — Dylan Rhone, number fifty-five, left-handed — intercepted a sloppy pass and tore down the ice. Shane had about half a second to wince internally before positioning himself for what was essentially a 1 v. 1 shootout situation. He couldn't say exactly what happened, his movements too rapid to actively process, but he was briefly in a butterfly, leg pads blocking the initial shot and controlling the rebound. A moment later, as Rhone's teammates had caught up, someone's stick was angling toward the goal from close range and Shane just fucking sent it. A full belly slide toward the opposite post in a show of acrobatic prowess he'd not often had to tap into.

“Fucking hell, Hollzy,” one of his defensemen shouted, scooping up the puck as it spun from Shane’s reach before clearing it efficiently. “We owe you, man, huge!”

Snaking his way back to the net and finding his feet, Shane let out a shaky laugh, relieved beyond belief. “Sixty seconds, Burger. Don’t let me see that fucking puck down here again!”

Jason Carlsberg saluted as he skated off to support the third liners. “Aye, aye!”

Moments later, there was a scramble near the far net and suddenly the lamp was lit. Montreal 3-1, just to seal it. *Thank fuck.*

They’d actually won.

Alone on his end, Shane turned to grab his water bottle, surprised when Hayden Pike was suddenly in his field of vision.

“Hey, good game, Hayd,” Shane greeted, his voice shaking a bit still as the adrenaline wore off.

“Shane Hollander,” Hayden said, low and serious, though his eyes were lit up like a Christmas tree, “Hug me. Right now.”

A laugh burst out of Shane unlike any sound he’d ever made. Pure, unfiltered joy, probably.

He beamed, wrapping his arms around his teammate (and friend?), squeezing tightly and exhaling out the last of his nerves and frustration.

“Hollzy, you fucking did it, dude,” Hayden sniffed into his shoulder, sounding a little emotional about it even. “You’re one of us, man, I told you!”

Soon enough, a long line had formed, almost the entire Montreal roster paying their tributes to Shane’s penguin slide with gentle taps and light embraces.

In the locker room after, their captain floated by, nodding at Shane stiffly. “Good work, Hollander.”

Shane hated the way the begrudging compliment still felt like validation.

He hated *most* that he wouldn’t be allowed to see Montreal ice again, for however long that might be. Back down to the AHL to do his time until he got another chance.

As he shrugged out of his many layers of equipment, Shane found himself both saddened and deeply motivated. To have even a taste of this had changed things for him irrevocably.

Now that he knew exactly what he was working toward, he also knew he couldn’t live without it.

November 2012 – Montreal

The news of Mitch Asher's trade to Colorado hit Shane's inbox long before the official press release.

One Hayden Pike, notorious gossip, blew up his phone with the announcement immediately after Theriault had informed the team in the locker room, about a dozen exclamation points included.

The Blizzard were in need of an experienced goaltender and Montreal had happily accepted a 4th round pick in the 2013 draft in exchange. Cap space freed, this also meant they needed a new backup goalie, and the choice, Hayden assured him, had been obvious and nearly unanimous too. Shane didn't bother to point out that his contract being dirt cheap probably factored in just as much as his 'acclaimed' skill down at Laval.

But anyhow, Shane suddenly found himself launched back onto the Voyageurs roster at the end of November to a mostly thrilled reception from his new/old teammates. Wavey, an infamous grouch regardless of the team he was on, had been professional but frigid toward Shane, only answering in nods or gruff sounds of disagreement as they practiced together. Both Theriault and their goaltending coach had agreed that the starting goalie's regular season inconsistency could be improved by a real tandem relationship. 70-30, they told Shane to start, and no matches against top-ranked teams until they gained some confidence in him. Wavey, long used to ample, near-uninterrupted playing time, had predictably not been a fan of this.

The ratio mattered little to Shane, who treated every game he started as something to treasure. His play reflected it, and soon his name was occasionally being dropped by NHL commentators and smaller-scale hockey podcasts as One to Watch. A lot of the old school purists appreciated Shane's controlled and deeply analytical approach to goaltending, which he'd now discussed in a handful of uncomfortable, nerve-wracking post-game interviews. He occasionally awoke from nightmares now where a hundred microphones pressed closer and closer, suffocating him slowly to death.

The strangest viral response had been on social media, though, where Hayden had gleefully showed him a whole series of gifs depicting the hockey fandom's worship of *#Shayden*. "They love our childhood hockey friends to on-ice bromance story, dude," he'd said, looking absolutely thrilled by a video of their hug in Detroit depicted from about six different angles, all in slow motion, and set to a Justin Bieber track. If Hayden had evolved to sloppy post-game cheek kisses after that, Shane could only roll his eyes. The zoomed-in close-ups of Shane attempting to look disgusted while fighting a smile were kind of cute, he supposed.

Still, it was JJ who actually sent him the best fan posts, knowing Shane preferred thoughtful analyses of his playing style over pulpy discussion, like whatever the hell people on Twitter meant by 'boba eyes.' One Reddit thread in particular had remained in Shane's desktop bookmarks, and he came back to it from time to time just to manifest.

'Five facts to know about new Voyageurs goaltender Shane Hollander!' exclaimed the title, and then:

#4. Hollander was the goalie for Canada at the 2009 IIHF World Junior Championship. He helped the team to a 2-1 victory, famously shutting out Russia's Ilya Rozanov (now starting

center for the Boston Bears). The two have not faced each other since.

A reply lower down in the thread, with several hundred upvotes, had quoted this particular fact, adding:

> *holy shit, just looked up the wjc clips y'all and fingers crossed hollander starts against boston in a couple weeks. i'd like to see rozanov look like he's actually trying for once XD*

Maybe it wasn't healthy for Shane to dwell in the past like that — it had been years now since he'd even seen Ilya Rozanov in the flesh, much less played against him — but there was always something inexplicable drawing Shane toward the center. Pure competitive drive, maybe… a desire to be the best and go up against an equal match on the ice. Or, that other thing, where Shane had stopped allowing himself to watch Rozanov's interviews, limited to completely educational gametime film of Boston with his video coach present, given the mortifying way that a shirtless and grinning Locker Room Rozanov still sometimes showed up in his dreams.

Either way, Shane was playing real hockey now, on the same ice as stars like Rozanov did, and he could feel himself getting stronger rep by rep, game by game.

Yuna had called him crying the night before even, after she'd watched a particularly gnarly save of his make one of ESPN's daily highlight reels.

Playing for an NHL team was everything Shane had ever wanted… really.

And if he sometimes still felt a deep yearning for something unnameable, to be understood and held through the loneliness that threatened to consume him some nights? Well… he chalked it up to not practicing enough gratitude.

Goalies were meant to be lonely. It was a tongue-in-cheek joke that often rang true for many of them, Shane included. Though maybe it was meant to refer only to that feeling of distance on the ice, rather than to an isolated life in general. Shane hadn't spoken to other pro goalies enough yet to be sure.

Still, these days, he was basically having his dreams served to him on a silver platter.

Who was he to ask for more?

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December 2012 – Boston

Tugging on the last of his gear, Ilya ignored the texts from Sveta that kept his phone buzzing steadily on the bench.

He knew exactly what she'd be teasing him about — the ridiculous concept of a teenage rivalry he'd *hardly* thought about over the years — and he was not going to pay her any pre-game attention. He was distracted enough by his own melodramatic thoughts, thank you very much.

“Got a girl for after already?” Cliff Marlow joked from the next locker over, raising an eyebrow, “You’re a dog, Roz.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes. “Mind your business, Marlow,” he replied gruffly, “And maybe think about scoring goal today. You seem to forget this part of hockey, hmm?”

The winger rolled his eyes in return. “What’s got you all twisted up, huh? Montreal are like 9 and 16 so far this season. Should be an easy one.”

The Voyageurs’ current losing record did not bring Ilya much peace, unfortunately. Not when they had a burgeoning star of a goalie set to start tonight. *Shane Hollander.* The name haunted him still, had him quickly changing channels anytime he was about to catch more than a glimpse of Hollander’s face without the mask. It was almost its own superstition at this point. If Ilya didn’t *see* the boy who’d denied him goal after goal as teens, maybe the man who was hungry to do the same didn’t actually exist. That had worked for a while, at least, before Shane Hollander had decided to become an NHL backup goalie worth paying attention to.

After a cursory pre-game Captain’s speech, which was noticeably not as inspiring or energetic as the ones he normally gave (if his fellow Bears exchanging confused glances was any indication), Ilya lined up with his teammates in the tunnel and they made their way onto the ice.

With the pre-game lights shining down and music blaring overhead, he found his eyes, of course, immediately drawn to where Montreal was warming up on the other side, and maybe to the net specifically where a familiar but unfamiliar man in all blue was… Ilya’s eyebrows furrowed… bowing to his goal posts.

The image was almost enough to make him laugh. His avoidance of anything Shane Hollander related all these years had been silly, hadn’t it? It wasn’t as if they were teenagers anymore, both grown up as they were in size and skill. And Ilya had been desperate for the chance to prove to Hollander that the WJC had been a fluke. To break the curse against the one goalie that had plagued him all this time.

Maybe if he just… did a little exposure therapy… he would get these ridiculous nerves out of his system.

Before he could second guess it, he made his way over to the red line, skates toeing the half, and called out, “Hey, Hollander!”

Almost immediately a body big enough to loom like a shadow over him slid into view. “Rozanov, I don’t know what game you think you’re playing,” the man warned, the ‘A’ on his chest right at Ilya’s line of sight. His expression darkened as he continued, “But I’ll give you the chance to back away now. Once this game starts, we won’t take kindly to you messing with Hollzy. That’s a threat, to be clear.”

“JJ, hey,” a more recognizable voice cut in, Hollander skating into view. “It’s cool. I’m sure Rozanov just wants to say hello. It’s… been a while.”

“Yes,” Ilya echoed, frowning at the way his pulse had started to race. “Hello.”

“Hey,” Hollander replied, eyes crinkling. The sight of his freckles made Ilya’s stomach turn. “Nice of you to greet me before I block all your shots again.”

Ilya's eyes widened, admittedly a little taken aback by the immediate chirp. This new Shane Hollander was somehow more obnoxious than before, with a self-assuredness that unfortunately looked good on him.

"Oh, very confident," Ilya recovered, waving his stick-free hand flippantly, "But go ahead. Do your thing."

Hollander blinked. "My thing?"

"Yes," Ilya replied slowly, "I will start. Ilya Rozanov, number eighty-one…" He watched as Hollander's eyes narrowed in realization. "And now *you* tell me just how many goals I have scored. It is a lot. Record number, I think?"

Hollander scoffed, looking astounded by the set up. "Still an asshole, I see."

Ilya pretended to pout. "That is not on my stats sheet."

"Anyway, hi, again," Hollander said, glancing over to where this 'JJ' was still hovering nearby, looking at Ilya with literal daggers in his eyes. "Good luck today. You'll need it."

"No, you w—" Ilya started to say, but Hollander had already skated off before he could finish.

Fuck, why did he feel like he was already losing?

Shaking his head, he swiveled around and returned back to one of the puck piles. As he started to warm up his hands, Marlow came gliding by, looking for all the world like he was not planning on minding his business.

"What was that about?" he asked, gesturing toward the Voyageurs' side.

Ilya shrugged, trying to force some nonchalance into his voice. "Nothing. Just said hello. Hollander and I… we had sort of rivalry in Juniors, you know."

"Oh, shit, yeah," Marlow replied, tilting his head, "Saw a preview segment about this game while I was at the gym earlier this week. Their stats guy had a whole niche part about Hollander shutting you out."

Ilya winced. "Well, we were children," he said, turning up his nose, "Now it is different."

Marlow laughed, gloved hand clasping him on the shoulder. "Never seen you this red before, Roz. No need to be embarrassed though. We all have guys we can't seem to crack."

"I am *not* blushing," Ilya argued, feeling his cheeks heat up at the insistent lie anyhow, "And I *will* crack Hollander. Tonight."

Marlow just laughed again and skated off, leaving Ilya to complete his warmup in [somewhat tortured] peace. He valiantly kept his gaze from drifting to the other end of the rink. Mostly.

By the time the actual game had kicked off, it was clear that the hatred between the two teams continued to run deep, even when Boston was currently second in the Atlantic Division and

Montreal was… decidedly not. The fans were out for blood tonight, loud as hell and demanding violence with every check.

Each team was responding to that energy in kind, the penalties stacking up through the first period as the score remained a stubborn 0-0.

Ilya stalked the ice in ravenous circles each time his shift came up, looking for windows of opportunity. But the Montreal defense had actually decided to show up for work today and Hollander—

God, Hollander was fucking electric.

Despite being on the smaller end of NHL goalies, his commanding energy in the crease made him look and feel massive. Boston's offense had not been unproductive so far, with a respectable number of shots on goal, but Hollander had been *everywhere.* His saves were made so nonchalantly, with such practiced control, that it was almost offensive. For a brief, strange moment, Ilya wondered if this was how people saw *him* at center, skating circles around his competition and looking almost… bored by it.

He was frustrated to still be goal-less in the second, yes, but facing a real challenge like this was *delicious.* He realized he'd been playing with a smile on his face, vicious but real somehow, when Hollander rose inhumanly quick from his butterfly to reach up and block the shovel shot Ilya had tried so hard not to telegraph. *Unbelievable.*

By the third, both teams had managed to score: Pike for Montreal, who always celebrated so enthusiastically it made irrational hatred flare beneath Ilya's skin, and Marlow for Boston, who'd decided to heed his words from the locker room apparently and end a multi-game drought.

Still 1-1, the end of regulation was drawing near when Ilya fired off a pass to his right winger at the edge of the crease. Deflected by a Montreal player, it created a messy scramble in front of their net and suddenly one black-and-yellow body was careening across the crease and forcing Hollander to jerk left to avoid the full brunt of the hit. The clipped contact was still solid enough to knock the goalie off balance though, and in the blink of an eye, Hollander's head hit the ice with an audible crack, mask popping clean off.

It had been an accident, surely, but Ilya was already skating closer, knowing that the impending brawl was inevitable. Sure enough, Boiziau — that 'JJ' from earlier — was quick to drop his gloves and start the pile-on, as the refs half-heartedly attempted to disentangle the blob of angry men ready to avenge their precious goaltender.

From the edge of the fray, what Ilya *wasn't* expecting was a bright red face suddenly occupying his entire field of vision. Nose-to-nose, nearly, with an incensed, helmet-less player in Voyageur blue.

Hollander had left the crease.

"The hell, Rozanov?" Hollander was saying angrily, his gloved hand shoving at the 'C' on Ilya's jersey, "Tell your asshole forwards to stay the fuck *out of my net.*"

Ilya, with his normal mental capacity fully intact, would've fought back at least a little bit. Maybe risked a light shove just to show he wasn't weak. But here, now, with the full force of the goalie's attention directed toward him, and the world-altering, soul-destroying realization that Shane Hollander was *hot*… like really, really ridiculously hot… Ilya could neither move nor speak. Entranced, he allowed himself to be manhandled, Hollander spitting out a few more creative curses, before the refs had reached them to force a separation as well.

The game paused for a few minutes, Ilya returning to the boards by the Bears' bench with his other teammates and watching from afar as they checked Hollander for signs of a concussion before bringing out a new mask, the original one surely cracked from the impact. Hollander was eventually cleared, though one Boston player with a heavily bleeding cut above his eyebrow impacting his vision was not, and the two teams finished out the last few minutes of the third period, still stuck in a tie.

The overtime that followed was a fucking mess and Ilya could feel his team's composure slipping. The scrum had fired up Montreal beyond belief and Hollander specifically was a nightmare in the net now, shifting to a more aggressive defensive style that was intimidating Ilya's men out of easy goals. Boston was playing frustrated and sloppy hockey and Ilya knew it, but he had little control left as his other two players in their 3-on-3 configuration started making rookie mistakes, fatigue setting in.

In the end, all it took was one last ugly turnover for Montreal to capitalize.

The lamp lit up and the jumbotron flashed a humiliating '2-1' for every set of Boston eyes in the arena to blink at in disbelief. A loss at home to their loser rivals. In overtime.

And Ilya still hadn't scored.

He stood frozen on the ice, watching as Hollander's teammates celebrated around him, all seeming to wait their turn for a chance at a goalie hug. Stupid fucking Hayden Pike even spun Hollander in a circle and then pressed a fat kiss to the goalie's now mask-less cheek. *Show off.*

Ilya's eyes narrowed, feeling hot enough that he was surprised the ice wasn't starting to steam below his skates.

He'd once described Shane Hollander as his enemy, a little jokingly, but still deeply aggrieved by the goaltender's ability to read him and react in kind. They had been even at least, after the two WJC finals, but now Hollander was +1 in their record and Ilya found he could not let this stand.

He would recommit himself to learning the goalie's abilities and weaknesses, to understanding him inside and out; clearly, Ilya just hadn't been studying hard enough, if fucking Marlow could find his way to the back of the net.

Nearly growling, Ilya skated over to the boards and was set to climb through the gate, when he heard a voice behind him.

"Hey, Rozanov!" Hollander called over, just behind the red line. He was fucking beaming, like exchanging final post-game words with Ilya was the highlight of his day. It probably was. *Smug bastard.*

Ilya took a step back, turning to face his new *nemesis*. The sigh that left him was full-bodied in its exhaustion. “What?” he snapped, expecting some ridiculous chirp again.

Hollander just grinned, that irritatingly pretty face now scarred in Ilya’s brain forever. His subconscious had found *plenty* to work with via dreams with just the vague impression of wide brown eyes and freckles. Now that he could see the details in full — ink black glossy waves, thick eyebrows, and full lips with a pronounced v-shaped cupid’s bow — there was simply no going back.

It was only fair that his new arch-enemy was nearly as hot as himself, maybe. The balance was important to the narrative, or something. Poetic justice.

“Woo, great game! That was brutal, huh?” Hollander said, and Ilya braced himself, awaiting whatever pithy comment was sure to follow. Instead, Hollander just reached out his glove, closed tightly in an approximation of a fist. Ilya was bumping knuckles with the goalie before he could even interrogate what the actual fuck was mentally wrong with him tonight.

“See you in the spring!” Hollander added with a cheery wink, executing an unfortunately *cute* little spin and gliding back over to the Voyageurs’ bench.

Ilya blinked, heart pounding and skates rooted pathetically in place.

If he didn't score on Shane *fucking* Hollander the next time they met, he was going to set the arena on fire.

And probably himself with it.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all wanted more Goalie Shane perspective and, oh boy, this chapter was full of it, huh?

This section easily surpassed my anticipated word count haha and so I'm afraid the steamy stuff — steamier than Ilya got on that ice anyway — was given to Ch. 5 in the divorce. It's already written and getting a good edit today, so expect that very soon (Monday at the latest, I'd think, though hoping to have it out earlier).

For this chapter's goalie notes:

- I'm thrilled to link one of my favorite articles on the bizarre and often thankless work of backup goalies. Seriously, if you click no other link in my end notes ever, *this* is the one.
- Also, some of the less intense versions of goalie contact here are what I imagine happened to knock Shane's helmet off, but this is a much more dramatic occurrence that happened recently and Swayman's reaction is just hilarious to watch.
- And, finally, not to dunk on my own terrible, terrible team, but this viral moment that appeared to show the Blues backup goalie literally hiding to avoid going in during a 7-3 game had hockeytwt aflame.

Chapter 5: Overtime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 2013 – Raleigh

If you'd have asked NHL backup goalie Shane Hollander if he thought a playoffs start was possible in his first whirlwind season on the Voyageurs' roster, he would have laughed you off the ice.

(Though, to be honest, he probably would have laughed first at the idea of Montreal turning around their dumpster fire start of a 2012 season and managing a respectable wildcard playoff run in the first place.)

But Wavey was playing hurt, *had been* playing hurt, since they'd eliminated Washington in the first round and through five brutal games (three into overtime) of this second round against Carolina. Everyone knew it — just like they knew that at 39, this could very well be Olli Laine's final season — and so they'd all been politely ignoring the way he'd left the ice after Game 5 in Montreal with a visible limp.

With Carolina leading the series 3-2, tonight's clash in Raleigh was do or die for the Voyageurs. Few fans would have blamed Montreal's combative, stubborn starting goalie for wanting to stick it out until the end, so it was a surprise to Theriault, the rest of the team, and *Shane* in particular when Wavey took one wincing step in the locker room, shook his head, and said, "I'm done."

Glancing around, their head coach had shrugged. "Alright, Hollander, you're in net then. Do us proud."

And that was that.

Which left Shane here, now, in the *third* round of sudden death overtime, fighting for his life and practically shooting lasers out of his eyeballs at Montreal's forwards, all of them collectively refusing to score the single goal that would keep their season alive.

To be fair to his offense, at the other end of the rink, his masked head towering above the crossbar, was Mikhail Popov, 23 years old and already a Stanley Cup Champion, after the Carolina Crawfish had won the year prior. Popov was playing brilliantly, of course, the same *massive,* steady presence he'd been in goal when they were teenagers, but even more experienced and refined. He'd given Shane such an enthusiastic double-armed wave during warmups, however, that it was kind of hard to stay frustrated with him for his dominant performance tonight.

As the clock ticked down, Carolina's star center — a much talked-about forward with a point total bested only by, *ugh, Ilya Rozanov*, Shane's brain helpfully supplied — tore across the ice and toward the Montreal goal. Later, in the replay, Shane would watch the truly brilliant passing exchange that followed, knowing that his positioning was accurate but that his reaction time was dulled just enough by fatigue that the puck finding the back of the net felt like an inevitability.

Shane let the wave of guilt wash over him at the way the sound of the goal horn almost felt like relief.

“Dude, we had an offense too, allegedly,” Hayden said, in Shane’s orbit immediately to comfort him as the Crawfish celebrated the win. “Don’t you dare blame yourself, Hollzy. It’s a team sport. We let *you* down.”

Shane nodded dejectedly, head pressed into Hayden’s padded shoulder, knowing he would continue to feel the crushing weight of the loss for a while despite the reassurance. But at least it was over for real now.

Given the brief warmup interaction, perhaps he should’ve anticipated what came next: a booming Russian voice exclaiming “Shane Hollander!” as all 6 feet 7 inches of Mikhail Popov came rushing at him across the ice like a speed-skating Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

Popov launched himself at Shane full force, Hayden dodging out of the way just in time to avoid becoming the sandwich in a goaltender panini press.

“Hollander!” Popov said again, smile huge as he enthused, “Was honor to play you tonight. Your talent is… wow. I am so happy you are in NHL all the time now.”

“Thanks, Popov,” Shane replied warmly, wrapping his arms around his fellow goaltender in a tight hug. He knew the aching, bitter disappointment would return soon — alone in his hotel room later, most likely, while the rest of the team went out — but it was difficult to be sad in the moment when a literal teddy bear of a man, one step closer to another championship, was acting like you were the highlight of his day.

“Montreal will start you,” Popov said sagely, pulling back from the embrace to meet Shane’s eyes. “Next season. If they are not stupid.”

He cupped Shane’s cheek with one huge hand, patting it softly a few times. “Then they will win.”

Flushed red enough it was surely visible on the televised broadcast, Shane snorted. “I appreciate the optimism,” he said as they skated slowly apart.

“No optimism,” Popov argued, drifting back toward his still-celebrating team, “Just fact. I will see you next season, *often*, Shane Hollander. Text me!”

The endeared smile that tugged at Shane’s lips felt a little ridiculous, though interactions with Popov were sort of always characterized by the gentle giant’s almost contagious zest for life. After the 2009 Canada–Russia final, Popov had apparently gone on a hunt for Shane’s number, declaring via text once he’d gotten it that they were going to be friends *or else*, and had spent all the years since periodically sending Shane a chaotic mix of hockey highlights and goalie memes and pictures of his giant white Persian cat, Pushinka, who had 30,000 Instagram followers.

(If later, Hayden sent him a screenshot of the #*Hollapop* hug — complete with Popov’s dramatic skate across the rink — with thousands of likes and comments on the post, Shane wasn’t all that surprised. Carolina fan or not, the hockey world had a near rabid obsession with the Russian goaltender. While Shane mostly hid from the spotlight, kept his head down, and relied on fickle hockey bros to report analytically on his games for good press, Mikhail was bold and brash and

thoroughly unapologetic about the fun he was having as a celebrity athlete. It helped that he was one of the most skilled young goaltenders that the NHL had seen in a decade, but Shane imagined he would have been just as wonderfully eccentric regardless of success.)

As the team shuttles departed the arena, Shane considered the conference finals, now set in stone: Boston vs. Carolina on one side and Dallas vs. Los Angeles on the other. How thrilling it would have been to have Montreal vs. Boston instead, with him facing Rozanov again in the playoffs, disappointed as he was at not being sent back out against Boston during their teams' second February matchup.

And that first December game… god, what a mind fuck. The internet had been *interested,* to put it lightly, in the way that Rozanov had first uncharacteristically approached Shane during warmups, but even more so at the fact that he hadn't immediately beaten Shane to a pulp for getting in his face after that collision. Other players had faced much worse fates for less.

Shane's cheeks warmed at the memory, still unsure what had come over him, and as confused as everyone else as to why one of the league's roughest players hadn't delivered even a shove in return, or some cutting words at least. He would have deserved it.

Some commentators and fans argued that Rozanov had been abiding by the general moral code that dissuaded roughing goalies, though many also thought that as Captain he had weighed the risks of worsening the brawl and smartly decided against it. Shane had no clue; his clearest memory was still the way that Rozanov's eyes had darted down to his lips, hungrily almost, which was obviously a ridiculous projection.

Maybe not even a projection, really, given that Shane still wasn't sure what *he* himself was into (even if he had a pretty strong theory his tastes were… broader in comparison to most of the men around him, not that he'd been remotely brave enough in the midst of his blossoming NHL career to risk experimenting to find out). So being a little stupid about Ilya fucking Rozanov — whose public reputation involved many, many models and actresses and every other variety of hot woman under the sun — had to be some kind of weird psychological phenomenon between intense sports rivals. And they *were* rivals, of sorts, though Shane was certain Rozanov still considered him more of a polite nuisance than anything. Maybe he'd been looking at Shane's chin and not his lips, even, performing a cost-benefit analysis of executing a hard uppercut to the lower jaw. Still, it was a little funny how violence in their sport, in men's contact sports in general, looked and felt kind of like—

"Hollzy, everything okay?" JJ asked from across the aisle, voice pitched softer than usual. He switched to French, adding, "You can tell me if not."

"I'm fine," Shane replied, the French vowels on his tongue feeling comfortably distant from his actual emotions. "Just thinking about what the rest of playoffs might have looked like. Boston would have been a hell of a fight."

JJ grinned. "A pity. We could have used the Hollander Hex on them."

Shane blinked. "The what?"

"The Hollander Hex," JJ repeated in English with a laugh, the dropped 'h' making the term sound even sillier to Shane's anglophone ear. "This big hockey podcast had a segment on Ilya

Rozanov recently and they pointed out that you're still the only NHL goaltender he's gone up against and never scored on. You know we are a superstitious bunch in the league, so they're calling it a curse of sorts."

Shane snorted, shaking his head. "I haven't done anything special against him besides play the game I always do."

"Yes, *we* know that, of course," JJ replied, reaching across the aisle to slug Shane on the shoulder, "But other teams do not. I have heard they're all becoming a little afraid of you."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Alright, JJ. Now you're just making things up."

"It's true," JJ said, eyes wide and innocent, "And if I have maybe been planting the seed and, ah, watering it a bit, well… it's only because you deserve a reputation in this league just as fearsome as any of the other goaltenders."

Shane flashed him an amused smile. "I always appreciate your support," he said, then deadpanned, "Even when it involves starting league-wide rumors about witchcraft."

"But for real, we've got your back here," JJ emphasized, suddenly more serious, "The Olli Laine evangelists on the team might hate change, but even they can admit we need *you* in that crease."

Shane shrugged, his usual mix of humility and insecurity, but JJ just shook his head and leaned farther forward, poking at Shane's chest for emphasis.

"Your time is coming, Shane Hollander," he said, adamantly, "It's practically here."

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May 2013 – Boston

The post-game silence of the locker room was sobering, the series now 3-1 Carolina.

"We know it's not over yet," their coach was saying, describing a plan for how the Bears could claw their way back to winning the series.

Ilya was exhausted. A bone deep fatigue that made it difficult to envision three more games with this level of intensity. The Crawfish should have been tired too, given their lengthy series against Montreal, but their on-ice performance had yet to noticeably suffer.

Mikhail Popov in goal especially was an impenetrable terror. He'd held Montreal to just a handful of goals across their six games and looked to be executing a similar chokehold on Boston too. Ilya had scored twice tonight actually, through pure brute force, though it had hardly made a dent given the 4-2 finish.

Popov — who had greeted Ilya cheerfully during the warmup — was hard to be mad at too, with the way he treated hockey like the fun little game it was and paid no attention to the narratives

pushed by any franchise or the league. He was very determined to be friends with other players across divisions and was not at all worried about the fans' opinions on anything but his actual hockey, and probably not even that, now that he was indisputably one of the league's top talents. Ilya on the other hand felt stifled by the public sometimes, trapped in a box labeled 'playboy manwhore' and generally considered arrogant and unfriendly. He was a perfect celebrity too in the 'love to hate' opposite of Popov's easy openness and likeability; in some ways, it was easier to just lean into what people were going to think about him regardless. He just wished his hockey player persona actually reflected much of the truth…

But then again, it was safer sometimes, wasn't it? To tuck away the extra precious pieces of yourself? To hide certain things from view? It must be; it had kept much of Ilya's darker past obscured from prying eyes so far anyway.

And surely even Mikhail Popov had his secrets. A particular subset of fans online certainly seemed to think so, given the number of edits that now existed for whatever the hell '*Hollapop*' was meant to be. After semi-finals, Svetlana had texted him about a dozen versions of Popov's ridiculous run into the arms of none other than Shane Hollander, the part where he cupped the other goalie's cheek and whispered something sweet always clipped in extra slow motion to highlight Hollander's visible blush. Casual in-game affection between players rarely had any sort of homoerotic underpinnings, but the showy interactions excited many fans regardless, Ilya's best friend and irregular hookup apparently not immune.

Hollander in particular seemed to be a new fandom favorite, 'shipped' as Sveta called it with a handful of guys across the league and even players on his own team. Ilya had only *just* refrained from asking her if anyone thought that—

Anyway. He shook his head, cutting off the thoughts before they led him somewhere ridiculous again. Like asking Mikhail Popov for Shane Hollander's number.

Which he had. Earlier. Like a transparent idiot.

Ilya: do you have hollander's #?

Popov: like phone number?

Ilya: yes

Popov: ?????

Popov: yes... but if i give it to you, can you promise that whatever you send won't implicate me in any crimes?))00))0)

Ilya had sniffed at the mocking Russian symbols of amusement added to the end.

Ilya: what? no? i just want to ask him a hockey question

Popov: that's what i'm worried about)))

Popov: ###-###-#### ❤️

Now, with the reality of Shane Hollander saved as a contact, Ilya felt unsure about his next move. He couldn't say why he'd even felt compelled to seek it out in the first place, besides seeing Popov's easy friendship with the goalie and some weird mental thread of an excuse like 'keep your enemies closer.'

But whatever, it wasn't the time to start up a cold conversation with Shane Hollander just to inevitably get left on read. He wasn't sure what he'd even say.

"Hi, I'm a little obsessed with you, can you explain what the hell the Hollander Hex is and then get it off of me, please?"

No, he couldn't possibly give the man the satisfaction of knowing just how bothered he was.

Ilya had a semifinal round to captain his team through, and then an actual Stanley Cup to win after that. Hollander and Montreal were out of the tournament and no longer a distraction.

The curse was dormant for now.

- 🥅 -

June 2013 – Las Vegas

It was sort of a meaningless award to lose in the grand scheme of things, the Hart trophy, given that Ilya had previously won a Calder as a rookie and several scoring record awards since then, besides.

But still, it was a little… sad… to suffer through the big splashy end of season awards show, alone and watching Carolina players sweep a good chunk of the trophies, just as they'd swept through the competition straight to a second consecutive Stanley Cup victory. Many of the nominated players across teams had their partners or their family members here, turning it into a little vacation; Ilya hadn't bothered to invite his father and brother, of course, disinterested as they were in any part of his hockey career that wasn't related to Russian prestige or his lucrative professional contract. Svetlana had politely declined his actual invitation too, busy building her own career in sports marketing outside of her father's influence and disinclined to make public appearances with Ilya that might result in vitriolic speculation by way of his… reputation.

And so, Ilya had floated ghost-like through the ceremony and the after party, never really alone with the number of fellow athletes and sponsors and other stakeholders in search of his time and surface-level conversation, but still feeling distant nonetheless. He'd spoken to Mikhail Popov for a while to congratulate him on winning the Vezina, at least. That had been nice.

The champagne at the afters had *also* been nice, and Ilya had consumed more than his fair share, enough to find himself up on the hotel rooftop, tucked in a quiet corner away from the still-bustling pool club and its attached bar area.

Later, if you'd asked him why one particular player had been on his mind, lonely and moping as he was at a party in Vegas, he would not have been able to explain it. Still, now, he was tipsily

typing out the message he'd long been too afraid to send, inhibitions dulled just enough to turn his spectacularly bad idea into reality.

Ilya: hi

The reply came almost immediately.

Hollander: Who is this? Sorry, I don't have the number saved.

Ilya: ilya rozanov

Hollander: Hilarious. But really. I'll block otherwise.

Ilya frowned. Then flipped his phone camera to snap a pouting selfie in his tux, sending it back to Hollander with 'not joke' as the caption. The typing bubble appeared and disappeared several times.

Hollander: The hell? How did you get my number?

Ilya: popov

Hollander: Ugh, that menace. I'll yell at him later.

Hollander: Aren't you in Vegas?

Ilya sighed, snapping a picture of the rooftop's view of the obnoxiously neon skyline, his other hand in frame holding his champagne glass aloft.

Ilya: yes but i am a loser 🙁

Hollander: Well, it's not worth jumping over.

Ilya laughed, immediately embarrassed at finding analytical, boring, perfectionist Shane Hollander funny.

Hollander: You've been drinking. Did you even mean to text me?

Quicker than Ilya could begin to type back, he was adding:

Hollander: Were you planning some kind of prank or something?

Ilya frowned, knowing that even in his inebriated state it made very little sense for him to be texting a random backup goalie at Montreal who he had a pretty one-sided vendetta against. Still, he probably owed Hollander some sort of explanation. He didn't actually want to bother the man or make him think he was… being mean to him. He wasn't that much of an asshole, usually.

Ilya: popov gave me your number in may. no pranks. was nervous to text before

Ilya: i just cannot figure you out. why you cursed me 🙁

Hollander: Oh my god, not you too.

Hollander: There is no curse, Rozanov. I told you before. You're just… kind of predictable to me.

The bubble appeared again.

Hollander: Although drunk texting me from Vegas is a surprise, I'll admit.

Ilya: i do not lose often… made me think of you i guess

Hollander: Haha well, you get used to it, trust me. And some of us have never even been nominated for anything so :P Nice to know even the NHL's biggest star can't win it all.

More so than the light chirping, it was the easy self-deprecation that made Ilya frown, inexplicably bothered by the way that his limited interactions off the ice with Hollander always seemed to involve the man shrinking himself in some way.

Ilya: you are a good player, hollander

Hollander: Wow, brb printing that out to display on my fridge!

Fuck, too nice, maybe. He was losing the plot a little bit.

Ilya: wait no. we are enemies

Hollander: Lol if you say so. I might be your enemy. But so far, you're just a nice shooting drill to keep my reflexes sharp 😉

Ilya laughed again, in spite of himself, and took another long sip of his champagne. The garish Vegas lights around him seemed to soften into something a little more whimsical, sparkling almost instead of blinding.

Ilya: wow so you are the asshole 😠

Hollander: That's not on my stats sheet. Though I'm pretty sure they added it to yours officially this season.

A second text arrived just as quickly.

Hollander: Anyway, it's getting late. Did you actually need anything, Rozanov? Besides reassurance that I haven't legitimately hexed your stick or something?

Ilya considered the question. What *did* he need from Shane Hollander? Besides a desire for his attention, maybe, that was becoming a little pathological at this point.

And a goal, of course.

Ilya: nothing really, sorry

Ilya: i think i just needed to talk to someone with outside perspective on all this

Hollander: Oh sure, a fellow loser like me.

Hollander: Sorry, kidding, by the way.

Hollander: This sport can be kind of… weird and isolating. I get it.

The sentiment was a surprise to Ilya, who had only ever seen Shane Hollander lavished with kisses and hugs and surrounded by his hoards of admirers after every game. He seemed like the least lonely player in the league, besides Popov maybe. And the two of them were the very best of friends, and maybe a little in love with each other too if the internet was to be believed. Ilya scoffed at the idea as he drained the remaining alcohol in his glass, certain that his well-attuned gaydar would have picked up on that at least.

A bit lost for words at Hollander's vulnerability, Ilya eventually texted back a simple 'yes' and then added a somewhat cowardly:

Ilya: anyway, have to go now

Hollander: Enjoy the rest of your night. This has been really strange but not… unwelcome?

Ilya felt his cheeks warm. A completely unrelated reaction from all the champagne surely.

Ilya: goodnight hollander

Hollander: See you next season 🙂

As he started to make his way back downstairs, Ilya's phone buzzed one last time.

Hollander: And for what it's worth, I still think you're a lot nicer than people say. Off the ice, at least.

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, pocketing his phone and taking a long, grounding breath, trying very hard not to let Hollander's words mean as much as his pathetic little heart wanted them to.

- 🥅 -

July 2013 – Toronto

Shane stepped out onto the ice of the local rink that they'd rented for the photoshoot, clothed in a set of unfamiliar pads and feeling so nervous he was almost sick with it.

After all the good press from his 2012 season — and Yuna Hollander's unrelenting tenacity and business acumen — Shane had found himself with a modest CCM sponsorship and an invitation to appear in a campaign for the company's next-gen tech gear.

The source of his nerves was primarily the photoshoot itself, of course; the idea of following directions on how to pose when he had very little concept of what his limbs and face were doing at any given moment was disgustingly daunting. But also, because the universe continued to

humble Shane at every turn, there were six other prominent NHL players here to shoot their own campaigns and watch him flail about during his turn, CCM's golden moneymaker Ilya Rozanov obviously among them.

The same Ilya Rozanov who had inexplicably texted him a month ago, drunk on a Vegas rooftop, and then never again.

Posed in the crease as he was now, feeling painfully awkward and also stubbornly refusing to take off his mask despite the photographer's gentle suggestion, Shane could only hope there was at least one shot worth keeping. He could feel the specter of his mother's disappointment all the way from Ottawa, the patient but exasperated look in her eyes if he flubbed the shoot and let all her hard work on this and his other upcoming brand deals be for naught.

"That's it, Shane," the photographer was coaxing, "Could you turn this way slightly, maybe move that leg out—"

"This isn't a very realistic goaltending position," Shane muttered back before he could help himself, understanding he was modeling more than *playing* at the moment but still bothered by the lack of accuracy.

With a sigh and a few more camera flashes, the photographer said, "Alright, I'm sure we got something. Rhone, you're up."

Shane headed over to the bench where some of the other contracted players were waiting, seating himself a healthy distance away from their casual chatter as he felt his shoulders begin to hunch in physical discomfort. He hated these kinds of obligations — promotions and interviews and the whole public-facing side of the sport — and how terrible and unnatural he was at them too. He just wanted to play hockey, not understanding as a child with a simple dream that the hockey itself was just one small part of what made a professional sports career possible. This would be worth it, only barely, if it might raise his profile enough to let him start for Montreal come October.

"Do you hate this like I do?" a familiar voice asked.

He glanced up to see Ilya Rozanov in front of him, surprised to be acknowledged and even more surprised when the man scooted along the narrow space between the boards and the bench to seat himself at Shane's side instead of with the larger group.

"Obviously," Shane replied, more miserably than he meant to. "You saw me out there."

"You were right though," Rozanov said, shrugging, "Would be silly to sell goalie things when the goalie is not, ah, realistic."

Shane glanced over at him, still expecting a teasing follow-up despite Rozanov's seemingly genuine tone.

"Oh, well, thanks," he said eventually, adding a lame, "You, um, looked good. In yours."

Rozanov had looked more than good, obviously, in a series of perfect, powerful poses at the face-off circle, helmet off with his dirty-blonde curls glistening and the light application of makeup around his eyes making the greens in them pop beautifully. He was unfairly, effortlessly

handsome now at 22. Having also known a slightly more awkward looking, teenaged-version of the man, Shane found it more than a little irritating that Rozanov's attractiveness had only scaled up proportionally with his hockey skills, and that he clearly knew how to use both to his advantage.

"Thank you," Rozanov replied, sounding legitimately pleased by the compliment anyhow.

Just as he started to say more, one of the CCM marketing managers on site appeared in front of them.

"Shane and Ilya, hi," she said, "Thanks for being here today. The campaign looks great."

Shane nodded slowly, seeing Rozanov do the same in his periphery.

"Listen, we're just wrapping up with the individual shots," she continued, a big smile pasted on her face, "But we were wondering… if you both might be able to stay a little later? We really think a goalie versus forward concept, like a shootout, would be a valuable addition to the ads."

Shane tried not to cringe, opening his mouth to politely decline, but Rozanov was answering for the both of them before he could even get a word out.

"I like that. We will stay."

Shane shot him a withering side-eyed look from behind his mask, wondering where Rozanov's 'hatred for photoshoots' allyship had disappeared to. Anything for a buck, maybe.

He was further annoyed by the way the dual photoshoot immediately progressed in a way that was infinitely more natural than his solo work had been, Rozanov dialing up the charm and making little quips throughout that had Shane laughing and relaxing into the faux-shootout scenario.

"Really good, guys," the photographer was calling out, sounding like he actually meant it this time. "Maybe a couple with helmets off and then we're all set."

Shane frowned, immediately voicing his protests, though he could admit that this time it was more out of personal insecurity than a concern for athletic realism. His face and Ilya Rozanov's in the same shot? How could that possibly fulfill anyone's commercial vision?

"It would be very dangerous for a goaltender to be mask-less in this situation, given that—"

"Hollander," Rozanov cut in, not unkindly though, with Shane's name on his lips gentler than he'd ever heard it. He lowered his voice, out of earshot of the marketing team, as he said, "You do not have to do this but… you *are* very pretty, you know. I have seen you."

Shane went so instantaneously red — mortified both by the compliment itself and that Rozanov had somehow known he *needed* it — that he was surprised his head hadn't come clean off like a bottle rocket. He'd been called 'pretty boy' by other hockey players before, but always in a derogatory way meant to poke at his softness. Rozanov by contrast had sounded… very sincere.

He watched as Rozanov leaned in closer, eyes searching, and inexplicably felt himself nod in agreement. With the help of the set assistants, they both removed their helmets and repositioned

themselves at the crease, the photographer immediately snapping away.

“There you are,” Rozanov whispered, almost approvingly.

Shane fought an actual shiver.

“Stop messing with me and focus,” he hissed, the embarrassment of it all making him a little mean. “I’m trying to get out of here before sundown.”

The way Rozanov grinned at Shane’s bristling only made things worse.

“I am very happy right here actually,” he replied in a low voice, laying it on thick and laughing at the way Shane recoiled when he inched dangerously forward, close enough to nearly brush their noses together.

“Oh, incredible, boys,” the photographer shouted over to them, “We definitely got it.”

At the marketing team’s thanks and final dismissal, Shane was hurriedly skating over to the boards with all the self-preservation left in his body. Gazing into Rozanov’s eyes in a competitive way had been one thing, but being teased and… and *flirted* with… was another. It was cruel, even, how Rozanov must have read his body language and reactions somehow and intuited just how to mess with him.

Asshole.

He gathered his things and hurried into the locker room, tearing at his jersey and pads with hot tears threatening at the corners of his eyes. CCM’s team had instructed them to leave the pads there for pick up later; they’d be shipping all of the featured players the full sets of equipment as a gift for participating in the promotion. Shane was nearly finished arranging it all into a neat pile when Rozanov wandered in, a smug smile still on his face.

“That was fun,” he said, peeling off his own jersey and working at the clasps of his chest protector.

Shane glowered. “What happened to not liking photoshoots?”

Rozanov faltered, looking surprised at the bite in Shane’s tone. He tugged off his chesty and took a step forward, peering closer and frowning as he obviously noted the shiny eyes and sniffle that Shane couldn’t suppress.

“Is something wrong?”

Shane huffed, scrubbing at his eyes. “You can’t tell anyone,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Rozanov blinked, stalking closer until he was once again sitting on a bench at Shane’s side. “Tell them what?”

“God, can you just—” Shane blurted angrily, looking away, “You were making fun of me. Flirting like that.”

The silence lingered.

“Hollander, look at me,” Rozanov said eventually, soft but firm in a way that had goosebumps blossoming across Shane’s skin. A large hand grasped his bicep, turning him back the other way with gentle pressure.

Meeting Rozanov’s eyes again was an exercise in humiliation, the other man gazing back with what had to be pity. “What do you mean making fun?”

Shane knew he had to be nearly purple with how incensed he felt at the man’s feigned ignorance. “You… I *know* you saw how I reacted.”

Rozanov raised an eyebrow, his expression shifting into one of understanding. He was quiet for another long moment before he said, “Ah, so you think you are alone in this, hmm?”

“I—” Shane started, ready to argue more, when Rozanov’s words settled in the air between them. “What?”

Rozanov leaned forward, mimicking the pose they’d been in earlier, nearly nose to nose, though this time he placed one hand on Shane’s thigh. “You were making many assumptions,” he whispered, gaze morphing into something so darkly sensual that Shane felt like he was being hunted for sport, “Why not ask?”

Shane gaped, his entire world tilting on its axis. “You’re not…” he spluttered, “You don’t…”

He was close enough now that Shane felt the puff of air from Rozanov’s little exhale of amusement against his own lips.

“I don’t what?” Rozanov questioned, smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, “Kiss boys?”

Shane exhaled sharply, frozen to the spot.

Unbothered by the lack of verbal response, Rozanov continued, “I think you will find that I do. Often.”

It was the ‘often’ that snapped Shane out of his pathetic trance. He jerked back like he’d been burned, Rozanov almost careening forward with the sudden space between them.

Okay, so Ilya Rozanov also liked men. That was… very informative. And not at all applicable to Shane’s own circumstances. He wanted someone to maybe just… kiss him sweetly to start… without becoming another notch on the bedpost of the biggest playboy in the NHL.

He met Rozanov’s eyes again, ready to deny everything somehow, but he was met with a calculating expression instead. “Ah, you have not done this,” Rozanov concluded somehow.

Shane winced, beginning to worry that as well as *he* could read Rozanov on the ice, the opposite was proving to be true off of it.

“I’ve… kissed,” he argued, the immediate rejection plan momentarily abandoned as he felt the need to preserve at least *some* of his dignity. “And done all the other stuff too. Just not with…”

“A man?” Rozanov supplied, with an ease that Shane could not help but find shocking, “I was not implying you were blushing virgin, Hollander. Just that you are very scared right now. Like baby rabbit.”

As if to prove it, he pressed a palm to Shane’s chest where his heart was pounding rapidly beneath and raised that damn eyebrow again.

Shane leaned back farther, trying to ignore how desperately he wanted that hand back on him, both hands even, everywhere. He had a plan. Right. Telling Ilya Rozanov no.

“Not here,” his traitorous mouth said instead.

Rozanov’s terrible, perfect lips curled into a devilish smile.

“What is your room number?”

- 🥅 -

His knuckles had barely made contact with the door when Ilya found himself being dragged inside by the shirt collar.

“Easy, Hollander,” he said, wrapping both hands around the goalie’s trim waist as he kicked his shoes off in the entryway, “We have all night.”

Hollander, now dressed in a simple t-shirt and basketball shorts, sucked in a breath. “No, we don’t,” he protested, as argumentative as ever, “I have an early flight. And this is a very bad idea, by the way.”

Ilya didn’t give him the satisfaction of a reply, just placed one hand over Hollander’s crotch where his half-hard cock was very obviously betraying his words.

Hollander moaned and sagged forward, already deliciously pliant in a way that Ilya knew he would savor, with whatever limited time Hollander decided they had together.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, leaning in to trace his lips along the side of Hollander’s neck, then his jawline, and up to one ear. “I do not mind being someone’s experiment. But it would be good to know how much I can… play.”

Hollander shuddered. “I… I know that I’ll like this. I’ve looked. Sometimes. Wanted it.”

God, he was sweet. Ilya was going to eat him alive.

“Oh, you have *looked* at men, hmm?” he teased, “Maybe you can get me off with your mind then?”

Hollander wriggled out of his grasp and shoved at him, clearly fighting a laugh. His expression quickly sobered though, that familiar shoulder hunch creeping up as he asked, “But seriously,

why would you want to do… this… with me? To risk it? I'm a nobody, a backup goalie, and you're—"

Ilya kissed him.

He should have known that Hollander, for all his chirping and arguing and embarrassed stammering, would have a beautifully responsive mouth. The room filled with the sound of his decadent little moans, lips moving seamlessly against Ilya's own as Ilya guided him through the kiss with a light hand against his cheek. Hollander accepted the introduction of tongue with a grateful gasp, hands coming up to paw helplessly at Ilya's arms and chest. Ilya had kissed many willing partners of varying degrees of… assertiveness… but the way that Hollander clearly wanted to be led through it, to *let go* completely, was ticking all of his favorite boxes.

"Who said you are nobody?" Ilya protested, in between lingering kisses to Hollander's mouth and freckled cheeks. "You are a good goalie on shitty team, Hollander. They have not given you chance to be great."

Ilya bit his lip, glancing away for a brief moment. "And we both know I cannot seem to score on you. It is very…" he searched for a word in English that could possibly encapsulate his vicious obsession, but then settled for, "I am angry about it."

Something in Hollander's eyes darkened at that, his hands twisting more firmly into the fabric of Ilya's t-shirt.

"Angry enough to… take it out on me?" Hollander ventured, in a pleading tone of voice that went straight to Ilya's already *very* interested dick.

"Oh, sweetheart," he replied, voice dripping with condescension, "I do not think you know what you are asking for."

Hollander, always very fucking eager to prove him wrong it seemed, was on his knees in an instant. "Take off your shirt, please," he instructed, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he deftly untied the strings of Ilya's track pants and tugged them down.

Equal parts amused and turned on beyond belief, Ilya yanked his shirt off in easy compliance, sighing pleasurably as Hollander reached one hand up to thumb at a now exposed nipple before dragging that curious hand down over the ridges of Ilya's abs and settling his fingers around his left thigh. Hollander's other hand tugged his cock from the confines of his briefs, lining it up with his mouth as a wet tongue darted out to lick at the tip. The unbelievable sight of the face he'd long dreamt about gazing up at him as Hollander took him fully into his mouth, dark eyes intense with concentrated effort and freckled cheeks beautifully hollowed, was almost too much to bear.

Ilya cast his eyes up at the ceiling, willing himself to last as long as he was normally capable. Hollander's mouth was a little sloppy and clearly unpracticed, yes, but so, so fucking eager it had him barreling toward the cliff's edge of his orgasm with every enthusiastic pass along his shaft.

He looked down again just as Hollander, stupidly competitive and perfectionistic as always, inhaled deeply and then attempted to take all of him, choking almost immediately as the head pressed against the soft tissue of his throat.

Ilya threaded a hand into his hair, pulling him off, with a soft, “Hey, hey. Easy.”

Hollander’s eyes met his again, so wide and shiny and desperate he could have finished then and there. “Not good?” Hollander questioned, looking painfully uncertain in a way that made his chest ache.

Ilya quickly shook his head, hauling him to his feet.

“No, fuck. You are incredible,” he enthused, pausing to kiss Hollander again thoroughly.

“That has to be an exaggeration,” Hollander managed breathily when they broke apart once more, “You have to tell me what to do better. I want to learn.”

“I am not going to give you a blowjob rating number,” Ilya said with a laugh, guiding Hollander over to the bed, “though I know you would like that.”

Hollander let out a comically timed moan as Ilya peeled off his shirt and laid him back against the pillows, fitting his mouth around one pretty brown nipple before giving the other equal treatment. Kissing his way down Hollander’s torso and abdomen, he nuzzled his face happily into the puckered mesh of those basketball shorts, eliciting another perfect moan from above, before tugging them off completely.

The revelation that Hollander wasn’t wearing any underwear had him groaning. *Christ.*

Glancing upward to where Hollander was almost gasping with his own arousal, he made eye contact again and said lowly, “Here is what is going to happen. I am going to suck your dick, so good that I hope you will relax and stop taking notes in your pretty head.” At Hollander’s enthusiastic nod, he continued, “And then, I am going to come somewhere on this very sexy body. You pick.”

“Chest,” Hollander gasped out immediately, “My chest, please.”

Ilya huffed out a quiet sound of amusement, not sure why Hollander’s eagerness and natural submission was still surprising to him at this point. All the signs had been there, really.

“Very good answer,” he said, watching the way Hollander’s cheeks flushed at the simple praise.

Noted.

Then, taking Hollander in hand, he got to work.

Ilya was good at this. He *knew* he was good at this, had been told many, many times in all his clandestine hookups over the years. But the way Hollander was reacting, loud and uninhibited and so physically overwhelmed by the act that Ilya had to use one hand to hold him down was… well, it was going to ruin a lot of future encounters for him, probably, plagued with this perfect fucking image instead.

He intensified his efforts, thrilled with the way Hollander was practically writhing against the sheets at this point, and only sucking harder when he started to warn Ilya of his impending release.

“Oh god, sorry, sorry,” Hollander was saying, panicked, as his hips kicked up and Ilya swallowed easily around him.

Pulling off, Ilya just crawled back up the bed with a quiet shushing sound, pleased when Hollander accepted a kiss without protest and tasted himself on Ilya’s tongue.

I know that I’ll like this, he’d said. And yeah, that had certainly proven true. This was turning out to be a lot more than the simple curiosity Ilya had expected.

Sitting back on Hollander’s still trembling thighs, Ilya took himself in hand, knowing he would not last long at all with the way Hollander gazed back at him with a teary, dazed expression, panting out soft ‘yeses’ and ‘pleases’ of encouragement. Moments later, he came with a jolt, all over that gorgeous, smooth chest, ignoring Hollander’s playful gasps of protest as he collapsed on top of him, filthily smearing his cum between them as he connected their lips once more like he was starved for it.

“You’re disgusting,” Hollander said against his mouth, though he parted his lips again for Ilya’s tongue just the same.

“I will clean us up,” he replied eventually, pressing wet kisses to Hollander’s cheeks, “Just… one more minute.”

“Mmm, I’m counting,” Hollander said back, biting at Ilya’s bottom lip.

Ilya snorted, knowing that he meant it literally too.

Eventually, their kisses slowed, and Ilya got up, a little shaky as the adrenaline of the hookup — and the whole tension-filled afternoon really — started to crash through him. He returned from the bathroom with a warm washcloth, cleaning them both with gentle swipes. Hollander, smiling sleepily from where he’d collapsed unmoving into the pillows, practically purred.

Leaving the soiled cloth in the bathroom with a quiet apology to the cleaning staff, Ilya walked slowly around the rest of the hotel room, picking up his discarded articles of clothing, surprised at the way Hollander had sat himself up against the headboard and was watching with a deep frown.

“When is your flight?” he asked, relieved when the question seemed to clear away whatever had been causing the consternation on Hollander’s face.

Hollander glanced over at the bedside table, groaning at the time. “In four hours.”

“Ouch,” Ilya replied, pulling his t-shirt over his head. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s…” Hollander trailed off, eyes trained on Ilya’s abdominal muscles as the fabric of the shirt fluttered down again to cover them. “It’s fine. Just…” he hesitated, looking suddenly as afraid as he had in the locker room hours before, “You’re not going to tell anyone about this, right?”

Ilya paused near the door, one shoe on. “Obviously not.”

“And we’ll still play each other like normal in the fall?”

“Yes, Hollander,” Ilya replied, a little exasperated now, “Was just sex. Let yourself feel good for a bit before you overthink maybe.”

From where he was posed loose-limbed on the bed, still completely nude, Hollander’s face turned a little dreamy.

“I did feel good,” he sighed out, “I do.”

“Good,” Ilya echoed, voice softening. He lingered at the door now, fully dressed and fighting a very uncharacteristic urge to get back into bed and kiss Hollander again until sunrise.

“You can… text me,” Hollander offered, looking nervous again, “When you’re next in Montreal. If you wanted to…”

“Will you let me score in exchange?” Ilya joked, cringing almost immediately at the softball he’d inadvertently tossed Hollander’s way.

As predicted, Hollander’s expression shifted into something full of delight as he replied in the most obnoxiously smug voice possible. “I thought you just did.”

“Bye!” Ilya said forcefully, fighting a smile as Hollander’s own laughter floated between them.

He slipped out the door, heart pounding erratically in his chest.

Ilya didn’t have much experience with nemeses, to be fair, but he was pretty sure you weren’t supposed to sleep with them. And feel sort of spectacularly dazzled and destroyed by the experience to boot.

Oops.

But to be fair, he *had* been searching for ways to get Shane Hollander out of his system or else find a weak spot to finally throw off the goaltender’s game, to break through his tightly-controlled defenses.

Maybe sleeping with the enemy was the perfect recipe for all that and more?

Yes, exactly.

Ilya had a new plan.

Chapter End Notes

taps the E rating on the sign

I have no real goalie notes for this chapter, ha.

Feel free to tell Ilya how good his plan is in the comments though <3

Chapter 6: Olympians

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September 2013 – Montreal

He wasn't expecting a text.

Not after they'd… well, after *Shane* had briefly lost his mind and all sense of propriety, and Ilya Rozanov had behaved in exact accordance with the reputation that preceded him.

Maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise that one of hockey's most notorious playboys would be equal opportunity when it came to gender, but the locker room revelation had shaken Shane to his core nonetheless. Just… not enough to avoid falling into the same trap as the allegedly many, *many* people before him. After that night though, *god*, he sort of understood why there was a line out the door and a number of desperate-to-repeat customers besides. And they'd only done the basic stuff, really. The way even *that* had been better than with any girl Shane had been with so far was the one mental thread of shame he still refused to tug on.

Rozanov had positioned their hookup as a casual experiment, to kindly give him an out, and though it would have been a simpler narrative ('just guys giving each other a hand'), it was hard for Shane to see it that way still. He'd enjoyed himself, undeniably and *very* thoroughly, even if he could never say it out loud. To another living person. Ever. But if he *could*… he was sure that anyone with a working pair of eyeballs would be cheering him on for bagging a probably one-time VIP experience with a Russian sex god. Even if that particular Russian was arguably the NHL's most hated player, captain of Montreal's divisional rival, and personally invested in besting Shane on the ice at all costs.

Still, truly, Shane could have done a lot worse for his first time dabbling in, well, the kind of intimacy that had felt impossibly out of reach since he was a teenager with wandering eyes. Rozanov had been… shockingly kind… and infinitely patient, and had made him feel *desired* without feeling objectified or belittled in turn (Shane had read enough Reddit threads about Asian men's experiences on hookup apps in his deleted internet history to know that wasn't often the case). And being guided so confidently, by an experienced man's hands, had turned off Shane's brain in a way that only being in the crease could replicate. Pure, out-of-body quietude, a filthy meditation of heat and sweat and skin against skin. *Bliss.* The encounter had unfortunately also left him with the same single-minded drive that goaltending did — to understand a task and perfect it, to gather all the inputs and catalogue every reaction, and thread the data together into the perfect performance.

Which was a long-winded way of saying that he desperately wanted to suck Ilya Rozanov's dick again. Better, this time.

The same Ilya Rozanov — name now shortened to a hopefully inconspicuous 'I' in his contacts — who had been messaging him sporadically since Toronto like it was suddenly a Thing they did. Like Vegas wasn't just a drunken anomaly, but a legitimate attempt at striking up conversation, even if their texts now mostly devolved into chirping one another with Shane's

stubborn refusal to be charmed by anything Rozanov said. It would be smarter, of course, to just not reply at all, but the ship where Shane Hollander never gave Ilya Rozanov the time of day again had unfortunately sailed the instant the other man's mouth had been on his own.

Rozanov never opened with a 'hello' or any sort of small talk, just launched right into a topic or concept, which was sometimes nothing more than a blurry photo of what was presumably Moscow's cityscape in summer (not that Shane had spent time on a certain personal Wikipedia page or anything) and other times just fishing for a bit of hockey gossip, like:

I: Laine is done?

Shane: At least at Montreal, yeah. No contract extension.

Shane: Though he's probably stubborn enough to get on someone's training camp roster on a PTO and squeeze out another season or two.

I: you will start?

Shane: I should. Unless there's another last minute trade or something to fuck me over.

I: good. you belong in goal.

Shane: Yeah.

Shane: That's what they tell me.

I: you were always a goalie?

Shane: No.

Shane: Did you always play centre?

I: from moment my skates touched ice

And sometimes, like now, as Shane was sliding into bed in the two-unit Montreal walk-up his parents had helped him invest in with his middling professional salary, it was more like:

I: would you want to be fucked?

Shane: Jesus, warn a guy??

I: sorry. but would you?

It seemed a little pointless to lie, with how Shane could feel his stomach twisting into anxious but eager knots at the thought of being *full,* of his face pressed into the pillows and a body draped over his own, smothering him completely.

Shane: … yes. Probably. Eventually.

I: have you ever 👉👌

He nearly tossed his phone across the room. Forget the ‘Hollander Hex,’ he must be suffering from a severe case of Rozanov-induced brain worms to still be entertaining this menace.

Shane: There is no way you actually seduce other people like this.

I: i save my best for you

Shane: Lucky me 😒

Shane glanced at his bedside drawer then, mentally cataloguing exactly what was inside. Probably more than Rozanov would expect of him, which sent a pleasant shiver dancing across his skin at the thought of having the upper hand.

Shane: But yes, to answer your “question”. I have fingers and… things.

I: !!!

I: boston at montreal. 10 oct.

Shane: Oh you wish.

I: yes. i do

Shane rolled his eyes, sure that Rozanov’s emboldened confidence probably worked a charm on his other conquests.

Shane: Guess you’ll actually have to score. To earn it.

I: 😦

I: hollander you are very mean

Shane: I’m not just at your beck and call, Rozanov.

Shane: And this is still a terrible idea.

I: i think you like my ideas

I: if boston wins, i get to come over

Shane swallowed. There was no way that a pre-game bet against Boston’s captain was a kosher move. Still, he found himself typing a reply before he could think much harder about it, which seemed to be a theme for him in communicating with Rozanov in general.

Shane: And if Montreal wins?

I: i will promise not to make fun when you invite me over anyway 😉

October 2013 – Montreal

Ilya was nervous.

Embarrassingly so, and in an irritating, illogical way that was making him a little bit mean. To the point that even otherwise mellow-tempered Marlow had snapped at him in the locker room to chill the fuck out and keep his personal shit off the ice.

Ilya hadn't been thinking about Shane Hollander *that* much, really.

Until, of course, the pre-game interview questions had taken an immediately drastic turn, all too happy to focus on the 'Hollander Hex' and the pressure Ilya must feel now to prove it wrong.

"You seem to know each other pretty well on the ice," a reporter had said, "But is there a sense of frustration there? That Hollander's been able to figure you out so decisively so far?"

I know what Shane Hollander looks like when he comes, Ilya wanted to snap back, *What he looks like begging for it. You think I don't have the upper hand now?*

But instead, he'd played relatively nice and media-trained (despite what had surely been a visible grimace), and responded with a measured:

"I think Hollander has good defense in front of him." *Lie.*

"Who are very focused on stopping me." *Not focused enough.*

"And as captain, as long as *someone* on Boston scores, I am happy with what gets us win." *I need it to be me though. Desperately.*

Here, now, easily conquering the opening face-off (god, was Montreal's starting center really the best they could find?), Ilya took a steadying breath and worked to channel his ridiculous nerves into what he did best: aggressive, skilled, no limits hockey dominance.

As the minutes ticked by and his shifts cycled through, Ilya found that his playmaking was as high IQ as ever, that his forwards were open more often than not, and that there was no reason that Montreal should be up 1-0, even with a little preseason dust to shake off.

Hollander couldn't be the only obstacle; it wasn't like *he* was scoring goals. But it irritated Ilya just the same, how he looked more relaxed and genuinely happy to be in the net than ever, his defensemen *all* doting on him this time — not just that hostile giant, Boiziau — and the Voyageurs fans cheering on their new starting goalie with deafening enthusiasm. There were number '42' jerseys in the home crowd now even and posters with Hollander's grinning freckled face surrounded by hearts and whimsical slogans, seeming to haunt Ilya at every turn. From the press conference to the current state of this match, it was sobering to realize that he was no longer going up against a backup goalie the hockey world had long underestimated; this was Shane Hollander, a *real* competitor, just getting started.

Hollander was making the most unlikely of saves, balancing his deep, reactionary coverage almost perfectly with more aggressive plays at the edge of the crease, able to cut off the Bears'

shooting from both close range *and* distance with devastating efficacy and ease. His stick was more active than Ilya had ever seen it, poke-checking and being a general nuisance to any forward who dared to fumble the puck nearby. And, in perhaps the most significant development, Hollander was *loud* now, directing his defensemen around Boston's usually foolproof screens and complex power plays with commanding force.

Tonight, the 'Hollander Hex' wasn't just stopping Ilya's shots; it was stopping them all.

It *would* be that irritating little twerp Hayden Pike who would score next for Montreal, another man the internet liked to claim as the object of Hollander's affections, though perhaps a distant second now to Mikhail Popov who treated the comment section of @Hollzy42's instagram posts like an elaborate mating ritual. Not that Ilya had spent any time on Shane Hollander's socials, of course. And he'd most definitely never considered the degree of apocalyptic internet meltdown hitting the 'Follow' button himself might cause.

But anyway, he needed to focus and find his way back into that elusive net, damn it. A shutout from Montreal in Boston's second game of the season would be excruciating. Great press for Shane fucking Hollander and his stupid little curse though.

Ilya shook his head, rapidly clearing the boards for his next shift after a forced turnover, and gripping his stick so hard in simmering frustration it could have melted into his glove. He managed the counterattack with a speed most teams' defensemen found insurmountable, and indeed, in seconds he had cleared easy space for a vicious wrist shot from distance. Hollander's view was partially obscured by the rush of Boston players and his own floundering defense.

Now was the time.

Ilya shifted his weight to his front leg, rolling the puck along the blade, in the practiced way he had done thousands of times. Eyes on the unguarded top right corner, momentum poised for release, he hesitated uncharacteristically for a split second at the sight of Hollander shifting to track the movement and—

—found himself airborne instead, puck long gone as a heavy shoulder connected with his chest hard enough to knock him off balance and flat on his back onto the ice.

Dirty hit aside, Ilya was up on his feet in an instant (though a little winded) and watching as their resident enforcer had already instigated a fight with the offending player, eventually leveling the Voyageur to the ice as well. As the home crowd roared for blood, both players were sent off to serve their respective penalties. Play continued, though Ilya had to fight a wince at the sharp stabbing pain that radiated through his chest. Bruised rib, probably. Maybe more than one. *God dammit.*

With artificially shallow breaths, he managed to mask the injury well enough to play through the third period without his coaches catching on, though his own first line was of little use. The mocking 2-0 overhead did not change, the neon numbers haunting him as the final seconds ticked down. A disappointing defeat at the hands of Montreal once more, Shane Hollander's hands specifically.

The curse was back with a vengeance it seemed.

Hunched over in the locker room post-game, one hand cradling an ice pack to his ribs as he fought off the concern of one of their overzealous athletic trainers, Ilya noticed his phone vibrating on the seat. Reaching down with his free hand to check the message, he felt his stomach twist with sick temptation.

Hollander: Come over.

Ilya grimaced. His admittedly feeble plan to distract Hollander's preseason preparations with flirtatious texts, to throw off his game tonight with a silly bet for *more*... it was all spinning messily right back at him instead. His nemesis was playing him like a fiddle, seducing him just to rub the loss in his face, surely. But Ilya had enough remaining self respect not to—

Ilya: ok

- 🥅 -

Shane was on Rozanov the minute he stepped into the entryway stairwell near midnight, still keyed up from a winning performance on home ice and from whatever continued lapse in judgment had led him to summon Boston's star player to his fucking doorstep.

But Rozanov was clearly equally insane and a masochist to boot, given he'd shown up without complaint — post-loss and with an early morning team flight on the books — lips connecting with Shane's own like he'd been just as hungry for it.

"Fuck, Hollander," Rozanov was muttering, rotating them handily until Shane's back was banging up against the wall, the physicality almost check-like and already teetering him dangerously close to that brainless state of easy pleasure.

"This is not fair." The gruffness in Rozanov's voice was delicious enough to make Shane shiver. "I am a loser and I still want to fuck you."

Shane kissed him again, almost frenzied. It was suddenly hard to believe he'd gone months without this. *Fuck.*

"Upstairs," he managed after a long moment, detaching their lips once more and yanking Rozanov up to his personal first floor unit with unconcealed desperation. The climb took infinitely longer than it should have with Rozanov's greedy hands groping some part of him on each and every step.

Their urgency cooled a bit as Shane led them inside, Rozanov clearly taking a moment to appreciate the interior design choices that Shane (and Yuna) had hired a consultant to make. It was a little surreal, NHL star Ilya Rozanov standing in his home, in cozy athletic wear, and looking almost nervous to be there.

Shifting his weight, Rozanov asked in a low voice, "Where should we—?"

“Bedroom,” Shane interrupted easily, feeling surprisingly confident about a repeat encounter as he said, “At least this time.”

He walked in the direction of his room, glancing back to see Rozanov’s eyes on him as he followed, irises an almost preternatural green in the low light.

He reached the edge of the bed, spinning so that the backs of his legs were pressed against the foot of it, and waited. Rozanov stalked toward him, wrapping a pair of large hands around his waist and pressing in for one more knee-buckling kiss before saying, “Take off your clothes.”

Shane gulped, twisting to remove his Voyageurs team t-shirt (which he would never admit to having left on, *on purpose,* as a little provocation) and then kicking off his sweats too. Left in nothing but his least practical pair of black briefs (okay, maybe he *was* showing off a bit), Shane watched as Rozanov’s eyes traced the length of his body in silent assessment.

Nodding in approval, Rozanov instructed him to get on the bed, reaching down to grab at the hem of his own t-shirt. Shane’s back had only just hit the pillows when he saw the clear wince of pain on Rozanov’s face and the upper body shudder that followed.

Quickly sitting back up with concern, he asked, “Are you alright? Was it that hit from earlier?”

Rozanov let out a shaky breath, rubbing at his chest, as Shane continued, “Our captain chewed Miller out for that after by the way. He wanted to rough you up, the idiot, but making a habit of shit like that will cost us more in penalties than we can afford.”

“My ribs,” Rozanov explained with a wince, “Roughing me up was success, if that was the goal.”

Frowning, Shane sat up fully and scooted to the edge of the bed, letting his legs dangle. He reached out to grasp Rozanov’s free hand, pulling him forward until he was standing between his spread thighs. Feeling almost horrendously soft, he rucked Rozanov’s t-shirt up with one hand and wrapped the other hand around his waist, before nuzzling into the space just below those ample pecs. He pressed a series of kisses there, over each rib, feeling Rozanov inhale sharply in response.

“Hollander,” he groaned, hand carding through Shane’s hair as he started to incorporate little licks of his tongue in his exploration.

Leaning back after a moment, Shane said gently, “We don’t have to do anything. Since you’re —“

Rozanov sighed above him as he cut in, “I want to, really. Was thinking I could tough it out.”

“I’m sure you could,” Shane nodded, looking up to meet his eyes, “But what if I take care of you tonight? And you can make it up to me later?”

Rozanov looked almost tortured at the thought, though he shivered as Shane reached a hand out to cup him through his joggers. “Hollander, you do not have to—“

“Shh,” Shane whispered, fingers stroking around the growing bulge, “I’ve been thinking about this since last time.” Widening his eyes in a way he knew Rozanov appreciated, he pitched his

voice a little higher and added a breathy, “Let me. Please?”

“I hate you,” Rozanov said, so deadpan it made Shane snort, nudging him briefly away from that thin line between hazy awareness and the deep mindlessness he craved.

“Can you lay down comfortably?” Shane asked, and slid aside at Rozanov’s hesitant nod. Taking his place amongst the pillows in the way Shane had before, Rozanov let out a full-bodied groan, one arm coming up to cover his eyes.

Shane rolled onto his stomach and crawled forward, reaching for the waistband of those joggers again and rolling them down as Rozanov lifted his hips to help. Knowing their time was limited, Shane decided not to tease and made quick work of his underwear as well, Rozanov’s gorgeous uncut cock now exposed and half-hard between them.

Diving into a mental catalogue of videos and articles from the last few months that he knew Rozanov would have poked fun at him for, Shane let his mouth fall open enticingly, taking Rozanov’s cock in hand and sliding back the foreskin to tap the flushed head against his lolled-out tongue. Smiling at the murmured curses that resulted, he took a deep breath and then let that perfect dick glide easily to the back of his throat and a little further still, just like he’d practiced.

“Hollander, what,” Rozanov choked out, clearly noting the difference in technique. “When did you…?”

Shane flicked his eyes up, humming as he took in Rozanov’s already devastated expression, face now uncovered and those wide hazel eyes trained on his hollowed cheeks. With a few more bobs of his head, he pulled off for a moment and asked, “Better?”

“Asshole,” Rozanov gasped, “You will not become good at *everything*. I cannot allow it.”

Shane laughed, a proud smile blooming on his face.

As he swallowed Rozanov down again, he let his grounded thoughts float away, only pure sensation remaining: the taste of clean, soapy skin from the blissful weight on his tongue, the sound of their moans intermingling, and a hand in his hair tugging hard enough at the roots to have his eyes watering with the pain-pleasure he craved.

Shane sucked even harder as he felt Rozanov’s thighs tense under his hands, determined to swallow his release as he’d done for Shane in that hotel room months ago. He didn’t have to wait long, the air filling with a series of unintelligible Russian syllables as Rozanov came in his mouth, hips kicking off the bed and making Shane splutter, ending a little messier than he’d intended. As he pulled off again with a gasp, drops of cum leaking at the corners of his mouth, he considered the way his own cock had throbbed almost painfully at the choking sensation. He very carefully filed that away for later.

Rozanov, looking as appropriately wrecked as Shane had hoped, reached down and traced along his lips and chin, collecting his own release on the pad of his thumb. He huffed out a laugh as Shane, unthinking, ducked his head forward to suck that finger clean.

“Shane Hollander,” Rozanov murmured appreciatively, “You are… never what I expect.”

“Good thing?” Shane asked, crawling up to gingerly tuck himself under Rozanov’s arm, mindful to choose the opposite side from his injured ribs.

Rozanov turned his head to press a light kiss to Shane’s forehead. “Very good thing,” he said softly, “You have been studying, hmm?”

Shane stuck his tongue out. “Maybe I’m just a natural.”

He felt Rozanov laugh, sorry when the movement made him wince in pain again. “I wish we could do more.”

“And I wish I could be angrier at Miller without giving anything away,” Shane said lightly.

Rozanov snorted, shifting to pull him a little closer. “I will be mad at him for both of us. Next meeting on the ice, he will not have a nice time.”

“I feel like I should take threats against my teammates more seriously,” Shane replied, head settling on Rozanov’s chest, one cheek pressed into the dusting of dirty blond curls that grew there. He yawned. “But I’m too tired to care right now.”

Rozanov shifted, a hand reaching down to where Shane was still hard against him, his hips circling minutely against one muscular thigh. “Not too tired to get off on me though, hmm?”

At Shane’s blissed out sigh, he moved that hand to cup one ass cheek instead, pulling him even closer and letting Shane ride his thigh with purpose. Unlike their harried intensity at the start, the movement was slower, softer. Marked only by the tiny moans and huffs of breath Shane couldn’t help but let out as he neared his climax.

“There you go,” Rozanov whispered, that deep voice wrapping around him in its own sort of embrace.

Shane’s orgasm washed over him in gentle waves, his hips stilling as his body went completely boneless in relief. He tucked his face into the space between Rozanov’s chin and collarbone and just breathed.

“I have to leave soon,” Rozanov whispered after a moment, starting to sit up.

Shane grumbled a few sounds of protest, but didn’t fight too hard, already on the verge of real sleepiness.

Rozanov slid off the bed and up to standing, shoving at Shane’s prone form. “Up up, Hollander, come help me work your shower,” he said, “You will be upset if later you are dirty.”

Shane allowed himself to be manhandled to his feet, rolling his eyes but secretly a little pleased at how well Rozanov took note of his post-coital preferences. He led Rozanov toward the en-suite bathroom, wearing what he was sure was a ridiculously smug smile on his face, after a night of getting everything he’d wanted.

Well, almost everything. *Stupid Miller.*

Later, alone in his apartment again after Rozanov's departure, Shane let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. It was unsettling to have the universe spoil him all at once like this: a starting goalie position with the Voyageurs, a decisive win against their rivals, and the conveniently clandestine attention of a smoking hot guy who was actually mostly nice to him?

Shane fell back against his pillows with a loud sigh, wondering with real trepidation when the other shoe was going to drop.

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December 2013 – Boston

It was late when, from his spot on the open plan living room couch, Ilya heard the beep of his penthouse door unlocking.

"Nice interview, asshole," Shane Hollander said the moment he entered, pouting a bit even as he was immediately climbing into Ilya's lap and settling himself there.

Ilya laughed, a little meanly even, pleased to finally have a Boston win against Montreal to celebrate. He still hadn't scored, but he'd take the three assists anyway; someone in this league had to chip away at Hollander's ridiculous, inhuman GAA, even if it required a team effort. Buoyant from the Boston win, he'd given a slightly snotty post-game interview that had maybe involved rating a handful of other goalies above Hollander in skill and poise.

Hollander was grinding down on him, lips at his neck as he hissed, "Popov might be real competition, but I'm a better goalie than Dixon and you know it. And there's no way he's fucking you like this."

Smirking, Ilya teased, "How do you know he hasn't?"

Hollander froze, eyes briefly narrowing before he rolled them instead. "You're such a dick."

Ilya fished a hand into the front of Hollander's sweatpants, wrapping his fingers around his already hard cock and chuckling again at the wanton moan he let out in response. "A dick who knows how bad you want to tell Dixon's stats to me right now. Go on."

Hollander huffed, fucking up into his fist. "His save percentage is 0.903, Rozanov. Like we're not even remotely in the same league! And Detroit sucks in general."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, secretly pleased by how much Hollander's self confidence had grown from when they'd first met as teenagers, and found himself fighting the urge to do something ridiculous like compliment him aloud for it. He shook his head, refocusing, given he had a very specific assignment tonight with not much time to complete it before Hollander's early flight out.

He reached into the crease between the couch cushions, producing a condom and a mini packet of lube he stored there for such occasions. Hollander had cheekily admitted over text to

fingering himself before he'd left the hotel, so it wasn't long before Ilya had his sweatpants pulled down over his ass and one finger, then two curling into him with ease.

"Olympics selection rumors have started," Hollander was saying, riding Ilya's hand with desperate little gasps, "I'm hoping to get a backup goalie spot for Canada if I can."

Ilya reached up with his free hand to teasingly smack Hollander's cheek. The intensity of the moan that resulted even from that lightest of slaps gave him pause. *Noted.*

"I know you are not still talking about hockey, with fingers up your ass," he remarked dryly, "But you are Shane Hollander, so actually I am not surprised."

Petulant, Hollander stuck his tongue out, though he tilted his head down immediately to connect their lips again when Ilya prompted a thorough kiss. More obedient than bratty as usual.

"Do you want, like this?" Ilya asked, motioning to the way Hollander was riding him. "Not the easiest position, but… deeper."

Hollander nodded, groaning again as Ilya slipped his fingers out. "Like this, to start, yeah. Not sure how much I have left in my hips after tonight though."

"We will find out," Ilya said lightly, tugging his own pants down and prepping himself before lining up the head with Hollander's dripping hole.

Fucking his stupidly hot, increasingly famous rival for real now. He must be insane.

They groaned simultaneously as Hollander sank down, a choked 'oh, fuck' floating between them. As he seated himself fully, Ilya searched his face for discomfort, prompting, "Still okay?"

Hollander rolled his hips experimentally and then nodded, mouth searching for Ilya's own. "Very okay," he gasped against his lips, already shuddering at the contact with his prostate, "Jesus *Christ*, Rozanov."

And then they were off, a blur of skin connecting rhythmically, Hollander with one hoodie string of the Voyageurs sweatshirt he still wore pinched between his teeth and the other bouncing in time against his chest. Eventually, Hollander's pace slowed and Ilya rearranged them until Hollander was on his back lengthwise across the cushions. He peeled off their remaining clothes, slid a throw pillow under Hollander's sore hips, and pressed back in to fuck him with effort this time.

The noises Hollander made were unreal as Ilya jackhammered his hips into that tight heat, the only clear instruction being 'harder, please' as Hollander's hands reached up to claw at his back, frenzied. Ilya grabbed each leg, bending Hollander's knees up to his chest for an even deadlier angle. He blinked for a moment at how easily Hollander accommodated the position, then realized with a hot flash of memory that full splits were *very* much in the goalie's wheelhouse. Another thing to file away for a future encounter, *Jesus.*

Minutes later, as Hollander's hole fluttered around him as he came, careening over the edge impossibly untouched, he heard him beg, "— in me, please. Want to feel it." The wrecked expression on that pretty, flushed face was enough to have Ilya coming almost instantly at the instruction, pumping his load into the condom with a low moan. Hollander, once he had returned

to the land of the living from his fuck-drunk state, announced that they had exactly ten minutes of cuddle time remaining. Ilya would take what he could get.

Their clean up was as perfunctory as ever, never enough time left between a visiting game and the next flight for much more.

“Sochi,” Hollander said, like it was a promise, kissing Ilya softly as they hovered by the front door.

Ilya bit his lip. “It will not be safe to—”

“No, I know,” Hollander quickly agreed, “But I meant… I mean, as much as I like our, um, arrangement, I do just like playing hockey against you too.”

His eyes flicked down to his watch, frowning. “I, um—”

“Goodbye, Hollander,” Ilya said lazily, trying to mask the way his heart felt inexplicably warmer in his chest.

“Bye, Rozanov,” he replied, leaning in to press a suddenly shy kiss to Ilya’s cheek.

As the door clicked shut, Ilya felt his whole body sag with a mix of relief and sharp disappointment. He’d been very close to proposing impossible things to his… rival with benefits, just then.

Like asking him to stay the night.

- 🥅 -

February 2014 – Sochi

If you’d asked Shane to describe the Olympics as a hopeful teenager, he would have likely parroted something patriotic about representing one’s country and competing at the highest international level in your discipline.

Now, having been personally immersed in the experience as Team Canada’s backup goalie, all he could come up with was ‘one big colorful blur’ with how chaotically the hundreds of events across myriad sports were playing out in this whirlwind handful of weeks.

There were people everywhere, constantly — athletes and their coaches, plus media correspondents and event personnel and thousands of fans — and even the rooms were shared, dormitory style, which was a change that many of the NHL’s millionaire players were not shy to complain about. Though not completely antisocial, Shane had begged off most of his team’s invitations to group activities, just too ridiculously overwhelmed by the constant stimulation to want even more people time. At least he already had a reputation as being serious and analytical and a little boring anyway, so they didn’t really question it.

In a poetic twist of fate, given Shane's recent… er, *hobbies*, Canada was set to play Russia in the quarterfinal tomorrow morning. There was a last-minute team strategy meeting scheduled for this evening that already had him on edge, knowing that their starting goalie had been nursing a weak ankle all tournament after an injury in a matchup against Colorado the day before their flight departed. While Canada had generously given Shane a start during the preliminary round, he was getting increasingly worried about being called up for the playoff portion. Losing for your country when the stakes were lower was one thing, but being in the crosshairs for blame if your team flubbed a chance at an actual medal was another beast entirely. Shane had been playing confident hockey lately, obviously making a big enough splash in this NHL season to make the national team, but he was still a little terrified at the thought of disappointing thirty million plus Canadians on the international stage.

Earlier, he'd run into some of the American players in the Olympic Village cafeteria, veteran Admirals' captain Scott Hunter wearing the 'C' here as well, and looking rather hot and blond and effortless about it. The USA was on the other side of the quarterfinal bracket with a matchup against Sweden in the afternoon, and Hunter and one of his alternate captains, Carter Vaughan, happily chatted strategy with Shane for a while.

"How about that Hollander Hex, huh?" Vaughan had teased, "Rozanov must be shitting himself having to play you on Russian ice."

"And thank god for that," Hunter had added, grinning as he clasped Shane's shoulder, "I would personally love to see him humbled tomorrow, if I can't do it myself in a medal round."

Shane had let out an awkward laugh, managing a smile and a nod in reply. In silent mutual agreement, he and Rozanov hadn't texted since the tournament had started, the risks for Rozanov back home in Russia much too high and the both of them wanting to focus on the competition besides.

"You'll get your medal when we meet in a few days, don't worry," Shane had chirped, actually a bit excited at the thought of a classic USA–Canada gold medal match, if they could both make it there. "I hope you prefer silver over gold though."

"Oh shit," Vaughan had gasped, shoving at Hunter playfully, "He's hexed you now too."

Hunter, who Shane knew to be particularly superstitious (some weird double sock thing his team loved to openly tease him about), had legitimately looked a little shaken at the thought.

They'd joked around a bit more as they finished their meals, agreeing to meet to watch the second half of the men's figure skating competition after their games tomorrow. Vaughan had made some parting comment about the *bravery* of those men participating which had Shane's hackles rising, but the thread of conversation had luckily dried up after both Shane and Hunter had made little more than polite acknowledgement of the fact.

Now, back in his room and hours away from the team meeting that would decide his fate, Shane wondered just how much more luck he had left this season, after a near-meteoric rise to goaltending prominence almost five years into his professional career.

Surely, the Hollander Hex couldn't last forever.

Could it?

- 🥅 -

Playing Russia on home ice was predictably a nightmare.

While Canada had amassed a decent crowd, it was nothing compared to the literal roar of the Russian fans, the leader of their country allegedly somewhere in the arena as well, upping the pressure to a fever pitch.

The Russians had been playing the aggressive hockey they were known for, Rozanov himself a terror as usual, with Mikhail Popov of all people in goal behind him.

From his near constantly besieged crease, Shane watched the 2–2 score remain unchanged as they soared through all three sudden-death overtime stages.

Floating over the boards as the clock ran out, the goaltending coach was in his ear immediately, reminding Shane of the Olympic rules and rattling off a list of strategic observations about Russia's top forwards with such nervous urgency that Shane didn't bother to say he'd memorized those stats weeks ago.

Whatever he'd thought about this game for the last brutal ninety minutes, the real nightmare had only just begun.

Shootout time.

And with the option to start repeating players after the three initial rounds, Shane knew without a doubt just who Russia would send to face him if things got tougher, 'Hollander Hex' be damned. He bowed to his posts, a little scared they might have intense Russian loyalties, and then asked his own ghostly ancestors to intervene in a much more serious way than he ever had before.

Easing his worries only slightly, Canada's first attempt scored, giving Shane the advantage against a non-Rozanov Russian pick who telegraphed his mediocre top shelf shot like a neon sign. Shane lifted a forearm easily, almost grateful for the fact he didn't need to worry about controlling the rebound here, just getting his body in front of the puck in any ugly way he deemed fit.

The puck ricocheted somewhere off to the right, and the crowd roared.

One round down. *Fucking hell.*

Popov blocked Canada's second attempt with a beautifully acrobatic butterfly, that lovely talented fucker.

Moments later, Shane was cringing as he saw a familiar numbered jersey skate up to the far blue line this time. The cheers rose to a deafening level as the Russians' hero took the stage.

Shane sucked in a deep, centering breath. Exhaled slowly.

This was Ilya Rozanov, number eighty-one, whose hands he knew better than anyone, skating toward him as he picked up the puck at center ice. 47 percent, an unbelievable statistic but not… insurmountable, Shane hoped. Rozanov approached methodically, gliding at an angle that Shane already knew he favored, and clearly aiming to lead Shane that direction with a cheeky low shot toward the open left side of the net as the final objective.

It was simple math. Shane slid up in the crease only slightly, shoulder angling to the right just enough to make Rozanov feel comfortable in his own calculation. The shot was textbook, execution and accuracy so precise it actually benefited Shane even more. Splaying wide, he felt the puck hit dead center on his left leg pad, fully extended as it was to cover every open centimeter between his body and the far post.

His Canadian teammates went wild on the bench, Rozanov spitting something nasty under his breath as he skated back to a much quieter Russian side.

Round three. Canada still the only team to score.

With a chance to win it, Shane cringed as the next Canadian forward opted for a slow approach, telegraphing a close-range backhand shot that he knew Popov would be expecting. The save came as no surprise.

Another top NHL scorer in a Russian jersey appeared at the blue line, with the advantage of being someone Shane had never personally played against. He skated fast and executed an admittedly beautiful slow fake right before the crease, chipping the puck into the net five-hole before Shane could slam his knees shut. The Russian bench erupted as Shane exhaled in frustration. An effective shootout move so classic it was almost boring. *Fuck,* he really should have seen that coming.

1–1 now. They would continue.

Shane glanced over at his bench where the officials were explaining the additional shootout rules, wondering if the coaches might pull him, given the opportunity to swap goalies before the extra rounds began. The signal did not come.

The Russians would start first now, the same player who had just scored on Shane looking to repeat with momentum on his side. He picked the opposite angle in his approach this time for variety, but his positioning was a little unsteady and his desire for a shot toward the middle was abundantly clear. Shane slid left and blocked it decisively.

Denied.

Shane collapsed forward, folding over his leg pads in breathless relief.

Canada just needed one.

In the end, he watched his next forward air-mail an open goal shot over the top of the net, leaving Popov without any work to do at all. *Holy shit.* Shane was going to kill half the Canadian offensive line with the power of his mind if they didn't free him from this.

And, of course, *of fucking course,* Rozanov was back to face him.

He moved differently this time, faster and hungrier, with puck-handling so skilled it scrambled Shane's brain a bit. He knew his positioning was correct, that he had done everything possible to follow the shot effectively, but Ilya Rozanov was *on fire* like he'd never seen him. Shane's last glimpse was an up close view of his shoulders, the red wings capping them seeming to take actual flight as he shot from deadly close range.

The puck found the back of the net.

Shane gaped as Rozanov skated away, his Russian teammates going absolutely ballistic. Many of them were probably aware of the Hollander Hex, and that — while still working its magic during regulation NHL games — it had *technically* just been broken.

Shane looked on, heart pounding out of his chest, as Canada, in all its middling shootout glory so far, scored one to keep the dream alive.

Back to Shane and, no surprise, back to Ilya fucking Rozanov too.

Fuck this stupid curse, he thought. It wasn't magic that kept Rozanov out of his net, it was pure fucking skill. A decade of it, in fact. And what better place than on an internationally televised stage to prove it.

Fatigue threatening to consume him, Shane watched as Rozanov approached, years and years of his patterns on the ice swirling in Shane's brain into something crystal clear. If Rozanov was on fire, Shane was a phoenix now, rising from the ashes of his crease to get one confident glove on the puck.

Saved.

Later, watching the replay, Shane realized he could not recall the next sixty seconds, having gone fully out-of-body as Vancouver's Frankie Goldman sealed their victory and a sea of red Canadian jerseys swarmed the ice in an instant. 'Shane Wall-ander' one of the announcers in the clip would cheer, in praise of his decisive performance, the next commentator offering a slightly more cringe 'Shane No hole-ander' as an alternative. God, he hoped neither would stick.

The handshake line was similarly a blur in his memory, no friendly words exchanged between the Canadians and the humiliated Russian squad. In a moment of weakness in the locker room, he'd texted Rozanov a 'good game' anyway, pathetically hoping he hadn't traded a brutal victory for the chance to meet again. The fact that, in his mind just then, the memory of Rozanov's hands on him rivaled the imagined sensation of a medal around his neck was actually certifiable. Shane turned his phone off for the rest of the day, pretending that he didn't care about Rozanov's response at all.

"You're a fucking national hero, man," Vaughan had said, sitting next to Shane that evening as a man in a sparkly pair of trousers executed impossible jumps on the ice down below. "All the Canadian athletes in the Village won't shut up about you."

Just hours before, the Americans had won in overtime too, though without a shootout required, and just one semi-final game now stood between each of their squads and a gold medal match.

Vaughan nudged him, meeting his eyes as he smiled salaciously. "A lot of girls were *really* interested in your stamina out there, by the way. You'll be celebrating well tonight, man."

Shane shifted in his seat, letting out a huff of awkward laughter. It was embarrassing just how difficult he was finding it to get into a celebratory mood, with the stupid nagging consideration of his hookup's feelings in mind.

“Let the guy breathe, Carter,” Scott Hunter cut in, clearly noting Shane’s discomfort.

Grateful for the out, Shane stood up and made a quick excuse about finding the restrooms, climbing out of the stands and into the less busy upper echelons of the arena.

He shouldn’t have been surprised at this point, with the way the universe liked to throw them together, that he would stumble right into Ilya Rozanov, dressed in plain clothes and leaning up against a pillar to watch the Russian skater's performance below.

“Hey, uh, great game,” Shane said awkwardly, watching Rozanov turn around at the sound of his voice.

Those familiar hazel eyes, which normally regarded him with a combination of eager competitiveness, amusement, and poorly-concealed warmth, gazed back at him with a haunting emptiness instead.

Not angry or cold, just… devoid of anything at all.

“What do you want, Hollander?” Rozanov asked tiredly, not meeting his eyes again.

“Nothing, sorry,” Shane replied automatically. Afraid Rozanov might walk away from him entirely, he hurried to add, “Just… that was a hard fought match. I wanted to see if you were…”

“If I was what?” Rozanov cut in, tone a little sharper this time, “Okay? Of course I am not okay. I have disappointed very many important people. My country, my *family*. You, Canadian golden boy, would not understand this.”

“... right,” Shane agreed quietly, sensing that there was no way to leave this conversation unscathed. “When we get back home though—”

“*We* are not anything, Hollander,” Rozanov interrupted once more, fists clenching at his sides, “I am Russian media’s laughingstock and you… are a distraction I cannot afford.”

The words cut Shane into ribbons, the intensifying competition between them having torn them apart just as he’d feared. It was heartbreaking to know that playing his best hockey meant sacrificing an intimate connection he knew was more consequential than either of them wanted to admit.

“Okay,” Shane almost whispered, feeling tears prick at the corners of his eyes, “Okay. But… you can still text me. When you need to. I want you to know that.”

Rozanov still wouldn’t look at him as he muttered, coldly, “I don’t need *anything* from you, Hollander. Go away.”

Well, that was that then. Shane nodded, scrubbing at his eyes as the first tears started to fall in earnest.

“Enjoy Russia,” he said as he walked away, landing a parting blow he wasn't at all proud of.

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The following week, Shane Hollander departed Sochi as a silver medalist and a veritable folk hero of Canadian sports, feeling strangely like he’d lost just as much as he’d won. Maybe more, if he let his stupidly sentimental heart get in the way.

Ilya Rozanov did not text.

Chapter End Notes

dodging your projectiles Sorry, sorry! I fear the angst is just getting started.

A few fun hockey things to include this round:

- GAA, or Goals Against Average, measures the average number of goals allowed in per full game. It's calculated in the same way that ERA is for baseball pitchers. While it *is* one of the main goaltending stats, many would argue that save percentage (which Shane often cites) is a more accurate assessment of a goalie's performance.
- Here's a super quick primer on international hockey rules used at the Olympics, including for shootouts, which do in fact allow you to have the same player shoot multiple times. Also, there's no fighting. Bummer!
- The shootout here is based partially on the real story of the American team beating Russia in a preliminary round of the 2014 Olympics, with many people remembering T.J. Oshie's legendary 4-for-6 performance over the fact that the USA actually failed to medal, finishing fourth overall.
- Oshie also earned the nickname "T.J. Sochi" from that performance, which served as inspo for the silly nicknames that the announcers were trying to coin for Shane.
- 'Five-hole' refers to the space between the goalie's legs, so-called because it's the fifth opening to defend; the other four being each corner of the net (glove and stick side, and high and low).
- Many of you familiar with shootouts in other sports will know that being a great forward or a top scorer doesn't necessarily mean you'll be good in a high-pressure shootout situation. Team Canada is also not exactly known for their shootout prowess, so maybe they'll appreciate the good vibes I've given them here haha. Here is a little more discussion about elite players and shootout performance.

As always, thank you for reading! Enjoy the Olympic hockey happening if you're reading these updates in real time, and I'll see y'all again very shortly for Chapter 7, where we finally approach the 2016 timeline of Devastation and Doom 🖤

Chapter 7: Even

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 15, 2014 – Montreal

The Cup going to Boston felt inevitable at this point.

Seattle had barely put up a fight in the final so far, leaving Boston up 3-1 in the series, and now — currently winning 4-2 in Game 5 — the Bears were just minutes away from the ultimate victory.

Shane sat on the edge of the wraparound couch in the Pikes' living room, watching the game play out on the big screen with the handful of Voyageurs who had remained in town after their own first round playoff elimination.

"I can't believe he's gonna fucking do it, man," Hayden said, wincing at his own swear word and quickly glancing around. Shane watched in real time as the tired father remembered that his children were with their grandparents for the day and not in fact left at home with a bunch of unruly, half-drunk hockey players. Several Voyageurs' fingers pointed to the Swear Jar on the kitchen counter anyway.

"Rozanov sucks," Comeau agreed, demolishing a chicken wing in one massive bite, "I hate that guy, but he has a good fucking team behind him."

"Too bad Wallzy's not in goal," JJ added, leaning over to shove at Shane playfully, "These playoffs would be a different story without Rozanov scoring."

Shane grimaced at the nickname, which had unfortunately been semi-seriously adopted by both Voyageurs fans and the hockey world at large. "I think you're forgetting what actually happened at the Olympics."

"Forgetting you winning a goddamn silver medal for my beloved Canada?" JJ chirped back, with a mock salute, "No way. And yes, Rozanov scored on you then, but we all decided that the Hollander Hex doesn't apply to the rare international competition. Regulation NHL only." He raised his beer can as if to toast, and shouted, "The curse lives on!"

Shane's teammates all cheered and clinked their drinks around the room, just in time for the final seconds to tick down on the television.

As black and yellow jerseys flooded the ice and gloves flew into the air, the announcers immediately launched into a historical retrospective on Boston's last Stanley Cup win and the timeline of events that had finally brought them back to this moment. On screen, as was tradition, the trophy was handed to the captain first. Surrounded by his cheering teammates, Ilya Rozanov held the Stanley Cup aloft, an almost viciously victorious smile on his face. He was shouting something repeatedly in Russian, the sheer depth of his pride evident in the wet shine of his hazel eyes.

Shane stared and stared.

He felt a sickening mix of emotions, chief among them a frustration that the current Montreal squad still seemed so far off from that level of success. They had good players and decent leadership, but their discipline through playoffs was shaky and their existing offense sorely lacking besides. There was only so much Shane could control from his crease to get them a win, scoring goals not usually in his remit.

And then there was the … well, he hesitated to say 'heartbreak' exactly … the *hurt* from the way he and Rozanov had left things in Sochi. It was just sex, had *always* been that, Shane knew, but he found it disappointing that Rozanov would be such a sore loser as to cut Shane off completely the moment he'd proven himself as an equal competitor. Of course, the tales of Rozanov's ego and callousness were legendary, but Shane hadn't really known that side of him at all. It was hard to reconcile the sweetness of the man behind closed doors with the one who apparently only fucked players he believed were beneath him.

And, worst of all, as Shane watched the celebrations continue onscreen, there was a little bit of pride in his heart too. As much as it pained him to say, he *was* happy for Rozanov, who had clearly needed this win after the loss in Russia. In another timeline, he was sending him congratulations, dreaming up an impossible scheme to see each other again before Rozanov went back to Russia for the summer, and exchanging the silly little texts that warmed Shane's heart at the idea that the other man was thinking of him between their meetups.

But then again, surely that warmth was nothing more than endorphins, a scientific result of the pleasure they'd shared, which was making him feel… attached. And fuck, it really was a logistical loss too; how annoying and improbable would it be to try to find a new discreet and *safe* hookup on the regular, just as he was really starting to discover things about himself? Shane was in no way brave enough to be an anonymous Grindr torso or to venture out to certain bars or clubs and hope that no one asked him what he did for work or, god forbid, actually recognized him. And while women were still on the table, of course, he wasn't sure how he could possibly broach the idea of maybe wanting to be fucked more than doing the fucking… as inelegant as that sounded.

All said and done, maybe he should count himself lucky that this brief… experiment… hadn't blown up in his face, but had instead ended as quietly and clandestinely as it began. And well, sad as it seemed, the return of the aching emptiness, that desire to be *known* by someone on a deeper level (even if purely physical), was a feeling he was all too familiar with. He had been lonely before Ilya Rozanov's touch and he could cope with being lonely again after.

He was a goalie, after all.

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June 22, 2014 – Boston

If Svetlana had been surprised that his late-night invitation wasn't an actual booty call, she didn't mention it.

Curled up on his sofa, a movie playing in the background, she had Ilya's head in her lap and her deft fingers in his hair again, knowing intrinsically that he'd needed the comfort. He tried not to think about the last time he'd been with someone on this couch, a pair of thick thighs pressing down to meet his own as they'd shared heated kisses between their banter. Fuck, he missed that in a way he really couldn't be allowed to.

"Today was exciting," Svetlana remarked, referencing the Stanley Cup Parade that had overtaken the streets of Boston for the afternoon.

"Mm," Ilya agreed distractedly. He was sleepy and still a little tipsy, after a day spent squished on a parade float with his team, overflowing champagne and beers shoved their way. His jaw ached a bit even, from the perpetual smile he'd kept pasted on throughout.

"I'm surprised you're not still out celebrating," she continued, glancing at where the clock above the mantle was just turning midnight, "And that you seem… sad?"

Ilya sighed, scrubbing at his face and letting out a long string of frustrated Russian before he could help himself. "I'm sad because Andrei only cares for the money I've won, and my father doesn't care at all, when he happens to remember I'm not twelve anymore. And because all of Russia thinks I enjoy failing them on the international stage while I piss away my talent in the NHL for stupid Ameri—"

"Easy, darling," Svetlana cut in, reaching down to rub at his shoulder. "Those are all valid feelings, of course. But you've felt that way since you were drafted, Ilyusha, maybe even before. Are you going to tell me what really has you upset this time?"

Ilya winced at her perceptiveness, not anticipating that he'd have to explain himself any further after that dramatic rant. She was right, though, that his common points of angst had been the same since he was being scouted for the NHL, and probably from the very moment his skates had hit the ice, as the second son no one really expected much of to begin with. Svetlana was still looking down at him expectantly now though, so he let out another pained sigh.

"I… there was someone," he said, cringing at his lack of a precise label for whatever ridiculous situation he'd gotten himself into with Shane Hollander all those months ago. At her raised eyebrow, he clarified, "It wasn't… romantic. Just… hooking up, but I had a fight with him, sort of. I was hurt by the loss in Sochi and the pressure from everyone around me, and I took it out on someone who was only trying to help. I have been feeling guilty about it, that's all."

"Have you reached out to apologize?" Svetlana asked, which was a very sensible question obviously, just not the advice Ilya wanted in the moment.

"No," he replied, a little sharply. His voice softened as he continued, "I feel bad, like I said, but I… I don't think he's good for my career. And honestly, I don't trust myself to reach out and not fall back into something again."

Svetlana was quiet for a long moment. "When you say he's not good for your career, do you mean you felt like he was distracting you from playing good hockey?"

Ilya nodded against her thigh.

"Ilyusha," she said patiently, "you just won the Stanley Cup."

He frowned, bristling a bit. "*After* I cut him off, Sveta. That's only proving my point."

"You just won the Stanley Cup," she repeated sternly, meeting his eyes, "and yet you are hiding away at home with your best friend instead of gorging yourself on parties and alcohol and sexy people like the Ilya Rozanov I know. Does it feel worth it without him? If you are going to act this lost about it?"

"Yes, obviously," Ilya replied, though his chest had begun to ache, "There's nothing worth more than winning. I have always wanted to be the best and now I am. I'm happy, really."

Svetlana tsked in disapproval. "I know you don't believe that."

"How could I let myself believe anything else?" he argued back, pressing up on one arm to level her with a look of unmasked irritation, "I play hockey. It's my job, my purpose. I have to chase victory, *that* is the motivation."

This time Svetlana openly scoffed. "You don't live for the sport like that. Don't lie to me, or yourself. You are excellent at hockey, yes, but you would never put it above everything else. You are lucky you have rarely been asked to."

Ilya bit back a more caustic response, turning his head away as a hot tear of frustration flowed down his cheek. She was the only person who had ever seen him cry and would continue to be, if he had any say in it.

"You know how you get when you spiral, my love," Svetlana continued, tone as even and empathetic as ever, "You will obsess about this guy until you resolve it. Either you reach out and apologize or you let this oh-so-not-romantic hookup haunt you forever. Your choice."

Ilya sniffed, gnawing at his lip against the raw emotion that threatened in his throat. "I think he hates me, Sveta. And I hate that that matters."

She was silent for a moment, still petting him with one gentle hand.

"Sometimes good things don't work out," she replied thoughtfully, "And sometimes we hurt people in ways that don't obligate them to forgive us. But I think continuing to live with this uncertainty will only hurt you, *both* of you, worse in the end."

Ilya felt another wave of shame crest over him. He had hurt Hollander's feelings already and he knew it; the fact that Hollander had always made a point of noting how Ilya was kind to him, when many others weren't, only made him feel sicker with guilt. Svetlana gathered him into her arms as his shoulders began to shake, a few tears falling in earnest now. *God, he was pathetic.*

"You are a very silly man with a very big heart," she whispered, thumbing away a tear from his lash line, "Why you insist on breaking it yourself is beyond me."

"I'm not heartbroken," he argued pitifully, though he felt a deep pain in his chest just the same. "We only slept together a handful of times, okay? I've known him for many years though and I just… I don't know. I guess we could've been friends, probably, if I wasn't a competitive idiot about it. He challenges me but… he's also so stupidly nice."

She hugged him a little tighter. "Do you want to tell me more about this mystery man, maybe?"

Ilya winced, imagining the conversation they'd have if he revealed just now that the 'enemy' he'd been complaining to her about since he was a teenager was the same person he'd accidentally bestowed with the power to mess him up this badly. Being… *curious* about Shane Hollander, from the moment he'd met him, had obviously been a terrible mistake.

"No," he replied eventually, "but thank you for letting me whine about it a little bit. I should… talk to him though, you're right. Get… closure."

And maybe he would have the chance to— terrifyingly soon, in fact, given the email about the NHL Awards that had arrived in his inbox that morning.

"Okay," she agreed softly, "but I am here whenever you need to talk, from whatever continent. You know that, right?"

"I don't deserve you," he replied truthfully, feeling her squeeze him again, with a little 'get it together' shake this time.

"Yes, you do," Svetlana protested, voice stern once more, "You deserve to have people in your life that love you and that make you happy." She met his eyes again. "And if that includes the mysterious man who had you smiling like a dope all last year, then so be it."

"I told you it wasn't… like that," he said, frowning.

She poked his cheek. "You tell me all kinds of things. I just don't always choose to believe you."

God, he hated her, and loved her, and hated her in turn. It was kind of…

He splayed a hand out on her thigh, venturing, "Did you want to…?"

Svetlana all but laughed in his face.

"Healthy coping mechanisms *only* tonight," she replied, waving her phone at him, "I just ordered from our favorite takeout spot. You will accept the food and platonic cuddles like a good boy, hmm?"

He pouted at her, but nodded anyway. "Did you get crab rangoon, at least?"

The look she leveled him with spoke volumes regarding how fragile she considered his current emotional state. "Double order. Obviously."

"Obviously," he echoed, smiling a little and feeling the ache in his chest reduce by a fraction with the simple feeling of being cared for.

He would fly out to Vegas the day after next, full of renewed bravery, and attempt to mend what he'd foolishly broken, even if that meant issuing an apology that would probably not be accepted and then making a compromise to fuck off forever. If Ilya of all people deserved happiness, then Shane Hollander — earnest and kind and a little misunderstood despite that — deserved it tenfold.

Ilya would give him all that he could.

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June 24, 2014 – Las Vegas

Shane stood backstage, sick to his stomach with nerves, and a little heated too, given that his co-presenter was nowhere to be found.

Just as he was about to signal to a nearby technician for help, a familiar presence sidled up next to him, sleek black tux a neat contrast to Shane's navy blue.

"Shall we?" Ilya Rozanov asked, completely nonchalant, as if the last time they'd seen each other hadn't involved him proclaiming he wanted nothing to do with Shane ever again.

His calm demeanor irritated Shane immediately, as did the fact that the glam team that had prepped them pre-show had made Rozanov look so stupidly handsome he was almost glowing with it.

Fuck, forget all that. Shane had a job to do. He would be perfectly professional and then get the hell away from this man before he did something *very* stupid. Like reach out and touch him, just to convince himself he hadn't imagined how it had felt. To be together. Once upon a time.

"Where the fuck were you?" he spat, channeling his anxiety into incidental brattiness instead. Okay, so not a *great* start, comparatively. "We're literally on in thirty seconds."

Rozanov glanced over at him, looking briefly wrong-footed, before his features contorted into something smug. "Busy."

Shane felt the blood begin to simmer beneath his skin. "Oh yeah? Finding some other mediocre player to fuck around with, I'm sure."

Rozanov blinked, an expression of genuine hurt and confusion appearing on his face this time. "Is that what you think I—" he started to say, cut off by an event coordinator shuffling them both forward from the wing to meet their cue.

Approaching the podium, they squeezed together at the single microphone, Shane doing everything in his power not to react to the brush of Rozanov's shoulder against his own. His mind was spiraling with the fact that Rozanov had looked… upset at his accusation, and that the moment of petty revenge hadn't felt satisfying at all.

Who's the asshole here, exactly? Shane wondered, before the brief walk-on music and applause ended and their lines began.

The script on the teleprompter was asinine and painfully tongue-in-cheek. A playful take on the Hollander Hex and their Olympic shootout, meant to contrast them as rivals with the fact that they were presenting an award for sportsmanship in the league.

The exchange ended with a selfie as ‘buddies’, Rozanov’s hand pressed to his back like a branding iron, and a joking ‘I’ll text it to you’ that felt like swallowing glass. The crowd ate it up, of course, Shane feeling the overwhelm grow and grow at the sound of polite laughter. The moment they’d placed the award in the winner’s hands, he was hurrying offstage and searching for somewhere, anywhere to catch his breath away from it all.

A passing stagehand in a headset looked at him with concern as he choked out, “Sorry. A little panicked. I— is there somewhere I can—?”

She nodded, quickly steering him toward an empty dressing room nearby. “Not to spoil anything, but we’ll need you back at your seat in fifteen minutes.” At his confused nod, she gestured to the door handle, and added, “Also, it locks.”

“Oh my god, thank you,” he managed as she scurried off with a final nod in return.

Slipping inside, he had nearly pulled the door shut behind him when an expensive leather loafer slotted itself in front of the frame.

“Hollander,” Ilya Rozanov said a little breathlessly, meeting his eyes, “Can we talk?”

Shane bristled, annoyed at the way that he instinctually stepped back to let Rozanov enter, even as he hissed, “Oh, so now you want to talk?”

“Yes. I do,” Rozanov replied, tugging the door closed and turning the lock. He must have been following more closely behind than Shane had realized. Which meant that, fuck, he had probably witnessed Shane panicking too. How mortifying.

They stood in the dressing room then, silently facing each other, as Rozanov huffed out a sigh.

“I hurt your feelings,” he said, honest and without embellishment, “I am sorry.”

Shane stared back at him in disbelief, having sort of expected anything and everything but a legitimate apology. “Oh.”

Rozanov looked down at his shoes, shifting his weight uneasily as he continued, “I… am under much pressure. Back in Russia. There are… problems, with my family, mostly. So losing was… not acceptable. Even so, it was not fair for me to take it out on you.”

Shane sniffed, unsure why his eyes were already threatening to well up with tears. Sheer fucking relief, maybe. Still, this same remorseful Rozanov — who had an easy, direct way to contact him — had ignored his few pitiful texts since February in favor of *this*. Holding him emotionally hostage backstage at a televised awards show. It was more than a little unfair.

“Why now?” he asked, feeling the frustration in his voice creep back in, “You could have apologized ages ago. I spent this whole time thinking you were angry with me for doing the exact thing we’re both paid to do. Be fucking good at hockey.”

At Rozanov’s pained look, he added, “I know I’m not… I’ll never compare to you, okay? I’m not a star center or a captain or a Stanley Cup winner, I’m just a pretty good goaltender on a kind of shit team. But I’ve worked my ass off to be able to play at this level and if it… if me

finally being recognized and rewarded for my skill is a *distraction* to you, then you're much more of an asshole than I thought."

By the time he'd finished, he was out of breath, chest heaving and a few real tears painting his cheeks. Rozanov looked stricken at the sight.

"I do not think of you that way," he replied, slowly, "I am… jealous, actually. That you are both talented and have people around you that care. That *still* care, even when you lose. My life is… more lonely than that."

Shane winced as Rozanov shifted closer and reached out a hand, gently cupping his cheek and swiping at the tear tracks there. He sagged into the touch, almost pathetically, the fight leaving him the moment contact was made.

"You are beautiful when you are confident," Rozanov said plainly, as if that wasn't the most ridiculous, emotionally devastating sentiment Shane had ever heard. "I did not mean to take that away from you."

His hand fell back to his side, Shane aching for the touch again as his heart beat almost violently in his chest.

"We… have to go back to our seats soon," Shane managed, scrubbing at his eyes and straightening his jacket, "But thank you for apologizing. I… it means a lot."

Rozanov glanced back at the door, looking torn.

"Are you in this hotel?" he asked suddenly.

Shane sucked in a breath. "I am."

Bad idea, bad idea, bad—

Rozanov swallowed, Shane's eyes tracing the movement. "Could I…?"

"No," Shane replied forcefully, "I mean, maybe. I don't— I'm a little overwhelmed right now."

"No pressure," Rozanov said softly, sounding like he meant it. "And I would not deserve it. I just… I think you will win the Vezina tonight. And if they give me the Hart… then we are both winners. Both the best. Even."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, completely overwhelmed by this softer, more vulnerable version of a man he'd spent months trying to hate. Blinking his teary lids open once more, he said quietly, "I like it when we're even."

"Yes, me too," Rozanov agreed, the tiniest of smiles on his lips, "Even if I complain about it like asshole."

Shane snorted, immediately hating himself for how quickly he'd let Ilya Rozanov make him laugh again.

"So," he ventured, taking a step closer anyway. *Like a desperate idiot.* "If we both win?"

“If we both win,” Rozanov echoed, taking a step of his own.

A beat of silence, a pulse of electricity between them, and then—

Their lips met in a collision that felt astronomical in scale, Shane exhaling into Rozanov’s mouth like it was the first real breath he’d taken in months. The chemistry that reignited was instantaneous despite the time that had passed, the kiss full and perfect and… shockingly tender… between them. They broke apart with a gasp, staring at each other.

Rozanov huffed out a laugh.

Shane bit his lip, shaking his head in a bizarre blend of amusement and incredulity.

And then they were both giggling, backstage at the NHL Awards in their too-expensive tuxedos, twenty-three and risking everything behind a single closed door.

“Okay, let’s… We should get back out there,” Shane said, a little dazed.

Rozanov nodded. “I’ll text you, after… If.”

“If,” Shane agreed, “Um, should you leave first, maybe? And then I’ll—”

“Yes, okay,” Rozanov said, then stepped forward to kiss Shane one last time before he slipped out the door.

Fuck, Shane thought, collapsing against the dressing room vanity. His fingers reached up to touch his now kiss-swollen lips, still in disbelief.

He couldn’t do this again— let Ilya Rozanov creep back into his life with a pretty face and prettier words and a mouth like sin itself.

But fuck it, he was going to, wasn’t he?

They were a little bit inevitable like that.

- -

Ilya was showing off, maybe, as Hollander walked into his penthouse suite atop the casino’s resort hotel.

He’d left his suit trousers on, white dress shirt unbuttoned fully in a way he hoped read as suave and sexy and not ‘sort of desperately slutty for Shane Hollander’ which was… closer to the truth. He swirled a crystal tumbler of vodka in one hand, trying for nonchalant, though it was really a shot of liquid courage instead.

Hollander blinked at him, jaw going a little slack at the vision. *Success?*

“A pretty good goaltender, hmm?” Ilya parroted back at him in greeting. “Is that what your trophy says?”

Hollander flushed a visible scarlet at the teasing, both of them knowing damn well he’d just been honored as the best goalie in the whole fucking league that season.

“You’re one to talk, Mr. MVP,” he replied, edging closer as he shrugged out of his suit jacket, “Stanley Cup wasn’t enough for you?”

Ilya hummed, near enough now to take the jacket out of Hollander’s hands, fold it neatly (he would protest otherwise), and toss it on the loveseat to their right. “I think you will find that I am… ah, very greedy.”

Hollander’s eyes were dark in the low light, pupils already blown wide with unabashed arousal. “Show me,” he whispered.

Ilya’s grin was wicked, as he grabbed Hollander’s hand and hurriedly guided him into the bedroom behind them.

“We are winners tonight,” he said, pushing at Hollander’s shoulders so that he sat down on the edge of the bed, “I think that means we both choose a prize.”

Hollander considered him for a long moment. “What if I don’t know what I want yet?” he questioned, voice pitched low, “What if I… want you to tell me?”

Ilya swallowed, suddenly apprehensive despite how well he knew how to play this game, had experienced it regularly with some of his more adventurous partners. Shaking his head to clear the nerves, he made a quick calculation and walked over to the wide-armed, decorative chair in the corner of the room. He dragged it to a centered alignment, perfectly positioned to gaze at the bed before him.

“Take off your clothes,” he said as he sat down, mustering up the firmness in his tone that this dynamic would require. “Then you are going to lean back and touch yourself. Like I know you have all these months without me.”

He watched Hollander swallow, looking a little shy and unsure, though he was already working at the buttons of his own dress shirt anyway.

“I want to watch you and remember what I have been missing,” Ilya added, taking a long sip from his drink and savoring the burn.

“There were others though?” Hollander asked, nearly undressed now as he slid off his underwear, the remaining piece.

Ilya blinked, a little uncertain of the rules now.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, truthfully, watching Hollander’s face for clues.

Hollander nodded, unbothered, putting two fingers in his mouth and wetting them before he reached down between his spread legs. “But not like this,” he said boldly, decisively even.

Ilya had remarked earlier — perhaps a little too honestly — that he found confidence on Hollander beautiful, and he'd meant that. But now, as he watched the NHL's best goaltender ease a finger into himself, other hand tweaking a pert nipple with a choked off gasp, Ilya found that confidence to be unbelievably, devastatingly sexy too.

He breathed out a quiet *'fuck'* at the sight of Hollander at work, shaking his head as he answered, honestly once more, "No, not like this."

He watched for a few torturous moments longer, draining his glass and setting it on the floor beside him. His dick was achingly hard between his legs but he denied himself the touch he craved, desperate to feel in control of what was unfolding before him.

"Please, I need…" Hollander was muttering, those dark eyes trained on him. "I can't…"

"What do you need?" he asked, a little meanly, "Tell me."

"I need you in me," Hollander gasped out, fingers pressing deeper, "It's… it's not the same when I—"

"When you?" Ilya prompted, raising a smug brow.

Hollander was almost teary-eyed now, his chest heaving and splotched with the same red that painted his cheeks. "When I use my… other things."

"Oh, poor baby," Ilya replied, though his hand snaked between his legs at the thought. He held in a gasp at the first brush of his fingers against his neglected cock, and risked the lightest bit of degradation, "Pretty cockslut can't come without a real dick in him, hmm?"

"Asshole," Hollander huffed out, but he looked absolutely fucking delighted by it, "You're so mean."

Fuck, enough. Ilya sat up, beginning to methodically shed his clothes. "If I were really mean, I would make you come by yourself first. Before I ever touch you. Or maybe I would not touch you at all."

"No," Hollander protested, though he very nearly moaned out the word, free hand on his own cock now and stroking slowly.

Ilya took pity on him, walking up to the edge of the bed. Before he could even prompt it, Hollander was flipping forward and crawling across the sheets, nuzzling his face into Ilya's crotch and letting out a pleased little sigh, like he couldn't be happier anywhere else.

At the first brush of his tongue, Ilya could not hold back his full body shudder in response. Grabbing Hollander by the hair, he tilted his head up and said, "Normally, I would be fool to not want your mouth on me. But—" His words were cut short by the way Hollander grinned and took him deep anyway.

Pulling off after a moment of suction that was actually *harrowing* for Ilya's self control, Hollander raised an eyebrow. "But?"

Ilya climbed onto the bed, wrapping his arms around Hollander's midsection and manhandling him into a kneeling position, facing the headboard.

"You," he said, and punctuated it with a cracking hand to one of Hollander's ass cheeks, "are a brat." He spanked the other cheek to make it even, grinning as Hollander collapsed onto his elbows with a drawn out moan. "But you are lucky," he sighed out, "because I am too turned on to deny you anything right now."

"Next time," Hollander gasped out, voice wavering as he begged, "Now, will you *please* fuck me?"

Ilya reached over him, grabbing at the nightstand which came pre-supplied with fancy hotel perks. He made quick work of the condom and lube, leaning over to spit at Hollander's hole anyway just to watch him shudder.

"Yes," Hollander hissed as Ilya finally pressed inside, "Hurry, fuck— *move.* Want to feel it on my flight home."

"Jesus, Hollander," Ilya said, a little shocked by the monster he'd created. He did as he was told, however, and snapped his hips with abandon, one hand reaching between Hollander's shoulder blades to hold him down for leverage.

Hollander was moaning beautifully, in a way Ilya couldn't believe he'd ever considered giving up. Svetlana was right. What the fuck did a Stanley Cup even mean to him when he had the 2014 Vezina winner, an Olympic medalist, and the only man who had ever really been his equal on the ice folded wantonly in front of him and taking his dick like he was made for it?

"Rozanov, oh my god," Hollander was keening, loud enough that Ilya would have worried if he didn't have this part of the hotel floor to himself.

"Touch yourself," Ilya commanded, a little desperately, keyed up beyond belief.

Hollander complied and moments later was coming with a loud cry that Ilya echoed only seconds after. They both collapsed onto the sheets together, breathing hard. He felt Hollander grumble a bit beneath him as he pulled out.

"Hey, are you…" Ilya hedged, suddenly feeling a little awkward as he tied off the condom and tossed it into the bedside waste bin. "Was that… okay?"

"One… second…" Hollander said into the pillows, "Processing. Brain offline."

Ilya laughed, though his heartbeat slowed beneath his ribcage with real relief. He had sought out Hollander's enthusiastic consent throughout, of course, but he worried still… with how they seemed to trade intense emotional build-up for intense sexual encounters instead.

Eventually, Hollander seemed to reboot, rolling over and arranging himself on the left side of the bed, parallel to Ilya on the right. Ilya itched to pull him into a closer embrace, but wondered if Hollander might need a bit of space after something more… hands on, like that.

"Hi, I'm back," Hollander whispered after another moment, cutely enough that it had Ilya glancing away to hide his own smile.

“Hello,” he whispered in return, meeting Hollander’s eyes again. “That was…”

“Really fucking hot,” Hollander replied easily, scooting over until his head connected with Ilya’s chest.

Ilya shifted to wrap an arm around him, grateful for the contact himself.

“Will you go back to Russia again?” Hollander asked after a few minutes of silence, the subject change giving Ilya a bit of whiplash.

He swallowed. “Yes, of course. For rest of summer.”

Hollander’s brows furrowed. “But earlier you said that—”

“It’s… complicated,” Ilya interjected, trying not to let any frustration creep into his voice but feeling very raw in the moment just the same. “I don’t have a choice right now.”

He felt Hollander nod against him. “Okay, but I mean it still,” he said quietly, “That you can text me if you need to. From Moscow, like you did before.”

Ilya could feel a real discomfort creeping in at the thought of being so consistently communicative and vulnerable with his… ‘sort of rival, now mostly benefits’ arrangement. He had bared too much of his soul already in order to apologize and was almost panicked now at the thought of Shane Hollander, with his picture perfect support network, realizing just how fucked up Ilya’s personal life actually was. A deadbeat cop of a brother and a cruelly aging father who no one else would admit was sick in the head, a country he represented that would not publicly accept him for desiring intimacy like this, and a mother who’d killed herself first to escape all that he could not and more. God, wasn’t he a fucking catch.

“Okay,” he said instead, chest tightening at the way the acquiescence made Hollander beam.

“I should go,” Hollander said after another long beat of silence between them, sitting up to stretch, “Early flight as usual.”

“Yes,” Ilya replied, watching as Hollander seemed to hesitate for a moment as he slid off the bed and began collecting his clothes. It was a strange visual parallel to the first time they’d done this, in a Toronto hotel room, roles reversed.

Ilya would not ask him to stay. *A terrible, sentimental idea.* So he didn’t.

Hollander did not offer in return.

When the door clicked shut a few minutes later, Ilya finally let himself breathe again. He reached for his lighter and the pack of cigarettes in the nightstand drawer and, probably against hotel policy, lit one up. Taking a long drag that he knew Hollander would disapprove of, he considered all that the whirlwind evening had brought him.

He had apologized which was… good. And now they were back to… whatever they’d been doing before… which was… also good? Probably? Definitely hot and satisfying, at least.

He exhaled another puff of smoke into the empty room, watching it dissipate into nothingness.

Maybe he could let himself have this: Shane Hollander in small doses.

Not enough to be habit-forming, but still something that would keep the constant cravings at bay. *Just sex,* like he'd told Hollander that first time. Easy, uncomplicated, mutual pleasure. It could not be anything more.

It was silly then, how it bothered him, to realize hours later that they hadn't even kissed.

- 🥅 -

December 2014 – Boston

Shane's phone buzzed on the shelf of his visitor's locker as he readied himself for the game, a familiar initial on the screen. He should consider changing that sometime, probably, if they were going to send things that were a little more… incriminating, like:

I: thinking about october, when you showed me just how flexible you are

Shane flushed, clicking away until his screen turned black. He took a deep, steadying breath and then sat down to finish securing his leg pads, triple tying them to his skates as was tradition. Reaching for his phone again, he fired back a reply.

Shane: Sexting before a game is cheating.

I: oh? i will be sure to let referees know of rule change

Shane rolled his eyes, annoyed as ever by the way Rozanov's little quips did genuinely amuse him. Though he would never give the man the satisfaction of knowing that of course.

As the Voyageurs took to the ice for warmups, skating out to the cheerful booing of the Boston crowd, Shane's eyes were unfortunately, automatically drawn to the other half of the rink. As if demonically summoned, Rozanov came skating by along the center red line, and waggled his fingers in a ridiculous 'hello' aimed right in Shane's direction.

JJ was sliding in front of Shane in an instant, cutting off his view. "What the hell is his problem?" the defenseman hissed, in French for a poor attempt at subtlety, "He wins a Stanley Cup and he still won't leave you alone? I'm going to do something irreparable to his knee joints."

"JJ, it's all good," Shane replied, laughing a little, "He's harmless. And cursed, remember?"

JJ did not look suitably convinced but he nodded all the same and skated away to complete his own warmup.

Still, as the real game started, Shane found he could not shake the strange, lingering sensation that *something* was off. He felt itchy in the crease, restless almost, and wondered if something about his equipment was worn out or not attached properly. At a break in their defensive play, he

mentally poured over memories of the locker room and warmup, searching for gaps, and then realized with horror that… with Rozanov's brief distraction, he hadn't bowed to his other post.

Uneven. Unbalanced.

Shane wanted to be sick.

With the puck at the other end, he bowed quickly to the left side, but it brought no real comfort. Everything was wrong now, the sense of that wrongness clawing at him until he felt like the only real relief would be to slip out of his skin entirely.

Focus, Shane, he begged himself, but the Rituals were important. They were essential.

He couldn't perform without them.

In his quiet distress, he let one goal in during the first period. It was a hell of a shot though, so maybe no one had noticed.

Montreal followed up with a goal in the second, the tie immediately bringing Shane a bit of relief.

It was in the third period when things went really, really wrong.

A teeth-rattling shot from Rozanov at distance, which he blocked out of sheer panic, still able to tap into his muscle memory at least. But the rebound was ugly, high and ricocheting, and so Shane executed a move that was not abnormal for a goaltender lacking a little control in the moment.

Swinging to clear it completely, the puck connected almost freakishly well with his stick and sailed overhead, baseball-like and… out of play.

Oh. Oh no.

Surely there had to be some kind of exception, a way to assess the rule based on intentionality because—

The official was issuing a penalty before Shane could rationalize any further. Delay of game. On number forty-two Shane Hollander.

Several Voyageurs were in the ref's face immediately, arguing the call, but Shane knew, of course, heart sinking, that the rules as written were not in his favor.

Two-minute minor confirmed; the imminent problem being that goaltenders couldn't serve their own penalties, and so a third line Montreal forward on the ice went to sit instead. Shane in his carelessness had created a power play opportunity.

And handed it to Ilya fucking Rozanov on a silver platter.

It took not even thirty seconds for Rozanov to set up the play, executing a series of tricky passes that were purposefully difficult for Shane and his defense to track, and then securing his second assist of the game with an unexpected but surgically precise backhand to his waiting winger. It

was an easy chip into the net on Shane's low glove side, especially given his already impaired state.

Boston 2-1.

Shane's fault entirely.

The remaining eight minutes passed by in a dissociated blur, Shane never more grateful — and quicker — to exit the ice than the moment the clock ticked to zero and set their loss in stone.

"Totally freak thing, man," Hayden offered in the locker room, patting him on the shoulder, "Batting the puck out like that? Don't stress it."

Don't stress it? Shane wanted to laugh. Of course he would. He would spiral about this for the rest of the week, the rest of the season, maybe…

And knowing that Rozanov had been the catalyst. Well.

Maybe it was Shane's turn to be a sore loser? To consider Rozanov a distraction, in the same way he'd accused Shane of throwing off his game. Funny, almost, with the way his stakes were so much lower in the NHL itself, external pressures aside. He could almost do no wrong in his role as Boston's captain and franchise star. Shane, on the other hand, in a position dependent on statistics down to the thousandth of a percentage point and with a hungry backup goaltender ready to take his permanent place at any moment, did not have the luxury.

Shane stewed as he removed his pads, considering how it might feel to ghost Rozanov in return. He didn't have to wait long to be presented with the opportunity.

I: come over

He chewed his lip, wishing for a sense of purposeful cruelty and pettiness to tap into for once, or else a fucking modicum of self control at least. He could ignore Rozanov entirely. He didn't have to reply. He—

Shane: Not in the mood.

I: you are angry

Shane scoffed at the oversimplification.

Shane: Yes. I don't make stupid mistakes like that.

I: come over anyway

Shane huffed out a sigh as he finished undressing. He couldn't let this become… something more. More than the occasional physical meetup with a few flirty, prodding texts exchanged in the interim. They didn't come together for comfort. And this definitely wasn't a relationship (although, fuck, with how easy things had started to feel between them off the ice, Shane often considered whether he was toeing the line).

Hockey was important, he reminded himself. The *most* important thing in his life by far. And while he'd made mistakes at center as a child, he never made them in goal. He just didn't. He was too locked in, too disciplined to let his … 'anxiety' — although he obviously suspected it was more than that — affect him in the crease. It was the safest, most mentally familiar place he knew. This was incalculable.

Showered, changed, and packed up, Shane prepared to turn his phone off for the rest of the evening, to give himself a taste of the loneliness he deserved for making an error on the ice and for… for knowing that seeing Ilya Rozanov tonight — the very player who'd capitalized off of that error — would *still* make him feel better.

He had once told Rozanov that he wasn't at his beck and call, and he meant that.

And yet, he hesitated, with his finger on the power button, at the two additional messages that waited there.

> **I:** hollander, if you obsess over small thing, it will haunt your career. and will be hard to get over later
>
> **I:** trust me, i'm cursed 👻

Shane snorted, loathing himself for it, though he considered Rozanov's words just the same.

He'd lived in this loop of perfectionistic self hatred for so long… What would it mean to escape the cycle for once? To not wallow in failure forever, always punishing himself for both the things he could and could not control? What would it mean to accept that a mistake had happened and just... move on?

His phone pinged again, a text from his mom this time.

> **Yuna:** Sweetie, are you alright? What the heck happened out there?

Right, okay, no more.

Shane, hating himself a little bit still, flagged down a cab outside the arena, beanie tugged low and puffer coat collar pulled high as he gave the driver an address he'd now committed to memory. Watching the Boston cityscape swallow him up, he shook his head, knowing that nothing — and *no one* — could be allowed to feel better than playing good hockey and winning games.

Fuck, if he didn't need to cut this off now before it got any worse. Before the warmth of one pair of arms in particular became the thing that soothed him best.

> **Shane:** On my way.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again, another case of massive chapter lengths where this time it was All Stars that got shifted to the following chapter. Please look forward to that (Popov fans especially 😉)! The goalie-involved format I've adapted is a fun one. And all the fluff and spice and gloom of 2016 Hollanov comes right after, yippee.

Just a few notes today:

- The awards that Shane and Ilya win are real. Sidney Crosby won the Hart Memorial in 2014, voted on by the members of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association (the media, basically), and Tuukka Rask of Boston won the Vezina, voted on by NHL General Managers, with a pretty ridiculous 2.04 GAA and 0.930 save percentage.
- The delay of game penalty that Shane receives is real and can happen, but applies whenever any player uses their stick to knock a puck entirely out of play and for... well, eight other reasons lol.
- Goaltenders are pretty rarely penalized and also can't serve their own penalties if they are, so another player goes to the penalty box instead. Here's a silly example of a player questioning this.

Chapter 8: All Stars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 2014 – Boston

"I don't think we should do this anymore," Hollander was saying, the moment he walked into the penthouse.

Ilya considered him from his standard greeting place on the couch, bare arms slung casually over the back of it. "And why not?"

Hollander shuffled his feet, hands in his pockets. His face appeared to go through about thirty disparate emotions as he searched for the words. "I don't think you understand how much hockey means to me."

Ilya shrugged. "You're right. I don't."

Hollander looked briefly thrown off by his easy acknowledgment of the fact. But it was true, Ilya thought, that while they both cared for the sport, it was clearly in very different ways. Their career journeys, their motivations… everything that had men like them putting their bodies on the line day after day to play a dangerous game *on ice*? It wasn't the same for anyone. And while he did know Shane Hollander as a player quite well (and maybe in bed too), he wouldn't pretend to understand all that made him tick.

Brows furrowing, Hollander continued, "Hockey is everything to me, Rozanov. *Everything.* I've worked my entire life for this. And so when things get in the way—"

Ilya sat up a bit, intrigued and a little irritated by the apparent final destination of Hollander's train of logic. "Oh, so this is my fault?"

Hollander snapped, "Yeah, kinda!" And then softened, grimacing as he explained, "I forgot to bow to my posts."

"You always bow to them."

"Exactly!" he hissed back, a hand reaching up to tug at his hair, "I *never* forget. And then… then I did that stupid shit with my stick—"

"An accident," Ilya interjected calmly.

"—and we lost!"

Ilya watched those familiar shoulders begin to hunch, Hollander's face contorting into something terrible and upset. Ilya wished he would come sit down, so that he could ground him with a touch.

Instead, he tried, “Hollander, you cannot possibly blame yourself for this. Montreal offense is terrible.”

“Well I do,” he replied, his dejected look shifting into one of near-anger, “I didn’t control the part that I’m supposed to control. I failed.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “Remind me what average save percentage is in NHL right now.”

“0.912,” Hollander said automatically.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “And remind me of yours.”

“0.92— Look, it doesn’t matter, okay! I fucked up,” he spat, waving a hand in Ilya’s direction, “And being… *distracted* by this thing between us is what caused it.”

“This thing?” Ilya questioned, purposefully a little harsher as he realized Hollander was spiraling unmitigated into an anxious loop. “There is nothing between us, Hollander. We meet when Boston and Montreal play each other and we fuck. Was there more to it for you? Because if so, you have created your own distraction.”

Hollander looked incensed in response. “Oh, don’t do some reverse psychology bullshit on me, asshole. *You* said you were distracted by me in Sochi. Clearly it’s possible for a… a hookup or whatever… to fuck up our game. We’re some of the top players in the league, *allegedly*. Shouldn’t we… focus on the hockey?”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “I called you distraction because yes, knowing I’m having sex with a goalie I cannot score on is kind of a mental fuck before *Olympic shootout*. But what is your reason? You have *always* had the upper hand here. You and that stupid hex.”

“*I’ve* had the upper hand?” Hollander hissed, stalking closer to the couch from the entryway with a baffled expression on his face. “What the fuck? You’re the most famous player in the sport, you asshole. You don’t think I worry about getting caught and being branded as just another girl on your roster? About our teammates and fans seeing us interact on the ice even and wondering more about it than they already do? I think we can agree that my precarious fucking position in goal is more at risk than the captain who just won a Stanley Cup.”

“So we both have things to lose!” Ilya argued back, annoyed at how easily Hollander was making him lose his temper in return. “Yes, I am scared of being exposed, obviously. But this felt… worth it, didn’t it? Easy? Before you got in your own head?”

“Of course it did!” Hollander nearly shouted. They both froze, and Ilya watched him blink at his own telling reaction. After a moment, Hollander’s shoulders drooped and he glanced away. “I mean… I… I’ve liked it, obviously. It’s secret and safe and… convenient.”

“Convenient,” Ilya deadpanned, “Getting on app and swiping in each city would be more convenient, I think.”

“For you,” Hollander said, voice softer and sadder again, “But I— I can’t do that. I’m a horrible flirt under pressure and, and I’m not… trusting or carefree enough to just… let someone in.”

“But you let me in?” Ilya questioned before he could help himself, not entirely sure why the answer mattered so much.

“You’re not a stranger, Rozanov,” Hollander replied with a beleaguered sigh, “We’ve known each other for like six fucking years, technically. And you were…” He shrugged helplessly. “You were nice to me. What if another guy… isn’t? Some of the stuff I think I like is—”

“Don’t go to other people for that,” Ilya cut in, shocking himself by how sharply he said it, “Unless they are advertising that service specifically, and maybe not even then. Let me boss you around, Hollander, hmm? Ease you into it, like we have been. That is something we can do for each other.”

He met Hollander’s eyes, those dark pupils dilating at the heated look on his face.

“But you’re having sex with other people,” Hollander pointed out.

Ilya flopped back on the couch again, bored by Hollander’s refusal to wrap his head around their casual situation. “Yes, obviously. And you can too. Do you think I care about that? I am not a hypocrite.”

He watched the gears turning and turning behind Hollander’s eyes. “So we both know we could get sex elsewhere and we’re still—”

“It’s *hot*, Hollander,” Ilya said, exasperated. “What else do you want me to say? You are attractive and a pain in my ass and I like having sex with you. I would not keep doing it otherwise.”

He flicked a hand at the space between them.

“And if you did not want to keep doing this, you could have told me. Or ignored my text. But you are here still? Why is that?”

Hollander’s face crumpled as he sucked in an audibly shaky breath.

“Because I’m sad,” he said, avoiding Ilya’s eyes, “I leave that game feeling like a pathetic loser, a failure, and then I think ‘oh, here’s a person who knows hockey, but who also knows what the pressure is like’ and maybe he’ll kiss me so I don’t have to fucking think about it anymore.”

Ilya felt his heart thump once, twice painfully in his chest.

“Come here,” he instructed, giving up the pretense of distance and patting the cushion to his left.

Hollander walked over immediately, as if supernaturally compelled, and plopped down on the couch next to him, stiff as a board. Ilya resisted the urge to reach out, the centimeters left between them feeling like a chasm he did not know how to cross.

“Hollander, I think you *should* think about it,” he said after a moment, “I think sometimes ignoring is worse. Though on that I am being hypocrite one hundred percent.”

Hollander smiled the tiniest bit at the admission, shifting closer.

“How do you do it?” he asked, finally connecting their eyes again, “Keep the pressure from eating you alive? You’ve managed much longer in the spotlight than I have.”

Ilya shrugged, scratching his neck. “I remind myself I am the best.”

Internally he knew that wasn’t a complete answer, or even a very good one. That the whole growing pile of crippling professional and personal expectations teetered on a cliff’s edge above him, ready to overwhelm at any moment. He had simply been lucky nothing else had fallen yet.

Hollander scoffed. “Yeah, I guess it’s easier when that’s true.”

It was a ridiculous thing for the league’s best goaltender to say, even after a — relatively minor, given the current division standings — mid-season loss to a rival team.

“You doubt yourself,” Ilya remarked, “Why?”

Hollander glanced away. “I told you I wasn’t always a goalie. And I’m also not… the traditional hockey player demographic, clearly. Maybe I feel like I have more to prove.”

Ilya nodded, wanting to ask more but knowing that the nuances of that conversation were probably out of his depth, especially this late at night and with the real post-game fatigue setting in. He wasn’t sure he was the kind of person Hollander wanted to talk to *for real* anyway. He sort of shouted emotions at Ilya in the heat of the moment, or else through muted tears, never just plainly as… well, as *friends* might. Ilya’s role was physical. And it was better to keep it that way, wasn’t it? To not cross the line further by… getting to know each other.

Instead, he very carefully reached a hand out and placed it on Hollander’s thigh.

“You want to stop thinking for a bit, yes?” he ventured, “That is why you come to me?”

Hollander swallowed, eyes following Ilya’s hand as it crept slowly upward. He nodded.

“Get on your knees.”

Hollander exhaled and slid off the couch cushion until he was in a kneeling position as instructed, rotating around to face him. Ilya yawned, picking up the remote and turning on the television, volume low, until some sort of mindless rom-com came on. He didn’t acknowledge the man before him, just sat back as if he planned to watch the movie alone.

“What are you doing?” Hollander questioned after another moment, shifting restlessly. His voice was small.

Ilya reached down to cup his cheek. “Stay very still for me. And wait. You are still thinking too much.”

He watched approvingly as Hollander sat back on his heels with pretty obedience, hands placed in his lap, as a hazy dissociation began to cloud his eyes.

The silence lingered, only the soft sounds of the television in the background and the whispers of nightlife from the downtown streets below. It could have been thirty seconds or thirty minutes for all he knew before he glanced back down to see Hollander had finally, properly drifted.

“Shane Hollander,” he said quietly, “You are *good*.”

He watched those dark eyes track upward at the sound of his voice, blinking all big and shiny in the warm light of his living room.

“I haven’t done anything for you yet,” Hollander protested, endearingly argumentative even while spacey.

Ilya nodded. “Yes, and yet you are still good, hmm?”

Hollander sucked in a breath, gaze falling to the floor.

“Do you understand?” Ilya asked, slotting two fingers under Hollander’s chin to force their eye contact again. “That you can make mistakes, you can disappoint people, but here. For me. You are enough.”

As Ilya cupped his jaw fully, every last bit of tension seemed to seep out of those tightly wound shoulders at once. Hollander made the tiniest sound, a whimper maybe, and pleaded, “Can I touch you?”

Ilya looked at him with practiced disinterest. “Do you want to? Or do you think you have to?”

Hollander blinked. “I… I don’t know yet.”

“Okay,” Ilya said, petting his hair, “Then wait a bit longer. No obligation. You decide.”

Hollander nodded, tilting forward at an angle until his forehead slotted in the crease between Ilya’s left thigh and the cushion beneath. Ilya tried his best to seem unaffected as he felt the warm, steady breath ghosting against his skin through the thin fabric of his track pants. This moment wasn’t about him at all. He would let Hollander take what he needed.

He kept his eyes glued to the television, a hand in the silky black waves in his lap, as a man called Harry professed his love via lengthy, saccharine monologue onscreen. He tugged ever so slightly on Hollander’s hair, wondering if he had fallen completely asleep, but was rewarded with a pleased hum and a nuzzle into his crotch instead. Ilya bit his lip to fight the too-soft smile that threatened there.

Eventually, the platonic mood slowly shifted and he let Hollander get a sweet but confident mouth on him, executing the slowest, most indulgent blowjob of Ilya’s life. It was perfect.

He told Hollander as much, frowning when the other man sighed deeply in response.

“I hate that I need this,” he whispered, awareness creeping back in as he came with just a few strokes of his own hand down his pants.

“But you do feel better, yes?” Ilya asked, unable to keep the concern from bleeding into his voice.

“Of course,” Hollander sighed again, as he practically spider-monkeyed his way from the floor into Ilya’s lap, their now oversensitive cocks brushing through their pants and making them both

shudder. Hollander shifted back a bit until he was straddling Ilya's lower thighs instead. "I always feel better with you."

It was Ilya's turn to frown. "Have others… not treated you well?"

Hollander hid his face in Ilya's shoulder, mumbling, "Not exactly, just… usually sex is a performance. More pressure. Not an escape."

"Like hockey," Ilya said, feeling immediately stupid for it.

But Hollander nodded vigorously. "I became a goalie because hockey wasn't an escape for me at first, not something that I thought would ever feel safe. In my crease, alone, it is. Except for times like tonight." He winced at the memory. "But the idea of this… *you*. That felt even safer, despite the earlier distraction. And I'm afraid of the associations my brain is making because of it. That's why I was… angry, earlier. Sorry."

Ilya parsed through the words, chasing the thread of Hollander's anxieties. "Maybe we just need rules?"

Hollander leaned back, a confused look on his face, as Ilya explained, "No texting before games. Even to tease. And I will ignore you during warmup. No distractions. Any other time you need to focus, you tell me."

Hollander gaped at him, so unearthly handsome it was killing him a bit. Each season, it seemed he only settled more beautifully into his features, so often hidden as they were behind the mask.

Unable to resist, Ilya reached out and guided Hollander's head forward until they were exchanging a soft kiss that quickly deepened. After the strange fear that Vegas had instilled in him, he would not let them leave without one again. Pulling back, their noses still brushing, he continued, "But we will have this. After."

"Surely I'm not worth the consideration," Hollander whispered into his mouth.

Ilya shrugged and kissed him lightly again, unclear why his offer of better boundaries seemed so monumental in Hollander's eyes. "I might be playboy asshole of NHL, but I care about these things. We are having sex to feel good. It should not leave us feeling worse before or after."

Transforming into something softer and clingier, Hollander snuggled into him, though his voice wavered a bit as he asked, "And if it ever does?"

Ilya could not name the feeling that swirled suddenly and sickeningly beneath his skin. His arms tightened around the man in his lap, and he offered a reply, perhaps with a confidence he didn't quite feel:

"Then we stop."

January 2015 – Nashville

Shane was sitting at the hotel bar, quietly sipping his Coors Light — a special treat for his happy hour nerves — when he felt a presence sidle up next to him.

“Hollander,” Rozanov said, whined even, as he slid between Shane’s stool and the next one over, suddenly shockingly close. “Little bird told me you are not coming out with us later.”

“No, I’m not,” Shane grumbled, not much for clubbing anyway, and certainly not with the temptation of Ilya Rozanov plus alcohol involved.

“You are so boring,” Rozanov complained, “Even Scott Hunter is going and he remembers when dance party was cavemen around a fire.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “What happened to not messing with each other before games?”

“It’s All Stars, Hollander. Doesn’t count. Let’s have some fun,” Rozanov replied, clinking their beers together before he spun away. “Besides, I am drafting you.”

“No, you’re not,” Shane called after him, sure that Rozanov wouldn’t waste a top pick on him.

He scoffed when Rozanov spun back to clearly mouth ‘tonight’ at him, punctuated with a salacious wink.

‘Asshole,’ he mouthed back, knowing perfectly well that they’d end up in each other’s hotel rooms at least once before the weekend was over.

Inevitable as always. Especially given that Rozanov had used the brief moment to slide a keycard into Shane’s back pocket.

“Shane! Hollander!” another voice boomed moments later and Shane felt a smile blossom on his face even before Mikhail Popov barreled into him, nearly knocking him off his stool. Huge even without his pads, Popov was broad and blond and handsome, with thick muscular proportions, a strong jaw, and a nose like you’d find on a Roman coin.

“Hi, Popov,” he said, always a little bashful around the man who was unfortunately his physical type as much as Ilya Rozanov was. And the accent… Well, Shane had often been called predictable. Sue him.

Popov clinked their drinks together, his own some sort of martini with a plastic spear of olives wearing a tiny, very Nashville cowboy hat at the end of the toothpick. He was dressed in double denim between his loose jeans and an oversized jacket, a Carolina red t-shirt underneath. Shane glanced down, snorting as he realized Popov had even matched his footwear to the occasion.

“Nice boots,” Shane remarked, genuinely impressed by the detailed leather stitching and even more so that cowboy boots came sized for giants.

“Thank you,” Popov said as he climbed onto the stool next to him, feet still basically touching the ground. “Raleigh is not so different to here, in some ways.”

He spun on the stool suddenly, eyes narrowing as he met Shane’s own. “You were talking to Ilyukha.”

Shane blinked, taking a moment to process what was clearly some sort of Russian address. “Oh, uh, yeah. He’s one of the captains so.”

“He likes you,” Popov said approvingly.

Shane willed his cheeks not to blush, sure that Popov meant that in a completely friendly manner and not with the extra euphemistic layer it could imply. But then again, he *had* been the one to provide Rozanov with Shane’s number, so who knew what he might think? He didn’t seem to carry any judgment either way; though with what Shane had looked up about views of LGBT identity in Russia (negative) and what he knew and had experienced of the NHL’s attitudes (arguably worse), it wouldn’t hurt to be careful still. Not that Shane had an… identity… to share or anything.

“I like him too,” Popov carried on, martini glass flying around animatedly as he spoke, “Strong Russian player, good hands. Never made fun of my accent.”

Shane nodded, recalling from various interviews and social media posts that Popov hailed from a rural town in Southern Russia, speaking with a distinctive drawl that the more cosmopolitan players found amusingly provincial. How anyone could have the heart to make fun of a ray of sunshine like Mikhail Popov, he didn’t know, but he was glad to learn that Rozanov was not among them.

“Are you excited for this weekend?” Popov asked with his signature wide grin, characterized by a prominent dimple and the one missing front tooth he’d never replaced. “New format is cool, I think.”

“Definitely,” Shane replied, excited to be selected for a year where the goaltenders were being given a more active role.

While there were more than forty guys here, the skills competition would feature just twelve top players earning points across skating, passing, and shooting events. After the first round, the top eight would move onto the One-on-One, where they would choose among the All Star goalies — Shane and Popov included — for a modified multi-puck shootout over the course of sixty seconds. It would be a fun challenge and Shane had already overheard some of the participating players debating their goalie picks, were they to advance. With a hefty cash prize on the line, Minnesota’s center had even jokingly swung by earlier to bribe Shane with a drink in exchange for an anti-‘Hollander Hex’ charm. Hence, the celebratory Coors Light in his hand.

“You are not going out?” Popov asked, interrupting Shane’s thoughts.

He shook his head. “Nah, not really my scene.”

“Me either,” Popov said, which was surprising to Shane given what an extroverted personality he radiated both online and in-person. “Do you want to come to my room later? We can have snacks. And I am working on a puzzle.”

Shane's brain chimed happily at the thought of a quiet night in. "Oh god, I would love that."

Popov lit up like a contained explosion. "Okay, yes!" he cheered, then raised his phone at an angle above them, "But first, selfie. My followers will love. Some of them think we kiss."

Shane winced, hoping that his discomfort wasn't visible in all of the subsequent hundred rapid-fire photos that Popov snapped.

"Misha," he hedged, adopting the name that Popov had urged him to use over text, "I don't think you should… encourage that."

Popov lowered his arm and looked at Shane for a long moment.

"Why not?" he asked, completely neutrally, flat almost, which was a red flag in and of itself given the normally exuberant tone of his speech.

Being on the receiving end of a blank stare from one Mikhail Popov was terrifying, especially when it wasn't blank at all but rather dripping with silent subtext.

"You're right, actually," Shane amended, heart in his throat, "Post whatever you want."

Popov's smile returned and he nodded, fingers moving across his mobile keyboard as he no doubt captioned their photo together with a flurry of hearts and a tag for Shane.

"There," he said with finality, Shane's phone buzzing in his pocket with the alert. "Now, let's finish our drinks and then we will have our own party."

Shane nodded, soaking up the attention from a goaltender he deeply admired and whose long-distance friendship he was not sure how he'd earned. Popov's relentless efforts via text and socials to keep Shane engaged certainly helped maintain it however. He hadn't begrudged the loss in Sochi even, just sent about a hundred congratulatory emojis and a highlight reel of 'Shane 'Wallzy' Hollander: sexiest moments in goal' which Shane refused to click on in fear of permanent damage to his YouTube recommendations.

As another player approached and greeted Popov hello, Shane felt his phone buzz a few times rapid fire. He fished it out, the message preview flashing on screen.

I: replacing me with other russian. i see how it is 😡

Shane searched the wide expanse of the hotel bar and restaurant for Rozanov's presence, spotting him fraternizing with a few Americans at the lone pool table. He wasn't even playing, just leaning suavely with a hand braced on the felted edge, making the two actual players — and the women presumably with them — all laugh with his easy charm.

Breaking his own no-contact rule, Shane quickly typed back.

Shane: He's taller 🤦🏻‍♂️

He watched Rozanov read the message and instinctually straighten up to his full height, flashing a middle finger Shane's way that made him laugh delightedly. Maybe Rozanov was right. A little interaction in this relaxed, not so serious hockey environment wasn't the worst thing.

Could be fun, even, with less prying eyes, in a place where conversations were being struck up between unlikely player pairs all the time.

Beer finished, Shane nudged Popov and explained that he was going to head upstairs and freshen up, a steadying hand on the man's bicep as he hopped down from the stool. Popov tucked him under his massive arm in a brief shoulder hug and then playfully smacked his ass as he walked away. Shane jolted at the contact in a way that was not very brotherly at all.

Fucking hell.

At least he wasn't alone, however, as he passed by the pool table on his way to the elevators and saw Rozanov regarding him with intense, barely concealed interest.

He was entirely unsurprised then by the text that was waiting on his phone later as he stepped out of his hotel room shower.

I: do not let him fuck you before i do

Reading it, Shane knew he should find the slutty assertion a little offensive maybe, but the idea that Rozanov thought him capable of pulling people like Mikhail Popov this weekend only made his cheeks burn hotter.

Shane: Better score on me tomorrow then.

I: oh i plan to. multiple times

Shane: Yuck 🤢

I: you like it

Shane rolled his eyes as he tied the fluffy white towel around his waist, a ridiculous smile pulling at his lips.

Shane: Brb recharging the hex 🔮

I: 😩

If — after exchanging more chirping texts with Rozanov while playing hard to get *and* finishing the 2,000-piece Frogs of the Amazon puzzle that Popov had purchased at the airport gift shop — *if,* after all that, Shane maybe slept better than he ever had before a hockey competition… that was nobody's business but his own.

- 🥅 -

A lot of guys found All Stars sort of tedious and performative, Ilya chief among them, but this year he was man enough to admit he was having a blast. The new skills format rewarded his

individual hockey prowess and competitiveness, while the chance to captain a draft team he would battle against three other prominent captains in the league tomorrow was an added treat.

Easily sliding into second place after his four point-scoring events, Ilya now had reverse order pick of his goaltender for the One-on-One. It was no surprise to anyone that Shane Hollander and Mikhail Popov were the last two standing across from him after the six other men had gone against their own — arguably, less competitive — picks. The two goalies had their marshmallow arms slung companionably around each other despite their significant height difference in a way that Ilya knew would be clipped in a million angles online, just to taunt him. The 'Hollapop' selfie had already gone practically viral the night before, not that Ilya had been checking or anything…

Anyway, the cash prize was a little meaningless to him, given he'd likely just donate it, but he wanted a fighting chance at winning the whole thing even so. He was certainly still tempted by the strategically worse choice, the fans chanting a deafening 'Wallzy! Wallzy!' as the host put a microphone in front of his face and asked him who he was going to select.

"Seems like the crowd is hungry for a particular matchup," the announcer teased.

"Yes," Ilya drawled sardonically, "they do not have my best interest in mind."

Laughter echoed around him.

"Pick me!" Popov shouted across the ice, raising his hands and doing a childish little hop.

A good subsection of the crowd cheered for that too, always eager for Boston redemption against Carolina after past years' playoff results.

"So what'll it be, Rozanov?" the announcer prompted, "A fellow Russian phenom or the Canadian wall himself?"

Ilya sighed, feeling that the decision was predestined at this point. "I will go with Shane Hollander."

The crowd shouted their approval.

He watched Hollander skate to the crease in his Montreal red and blue, executing the tiniest of bows to each post which unfortunately made Ilya smile, before clapping his glove and blocker together and bouncing on his skates with readiness.

Taking his own position near the first of the series of closer 1-point pucks, Ilya did some quick mental math. Five points to tie for first, eight for a healthier lead over Detroit's Dylan Rhone, who would go up after him. Rhone was constantly on his heels for regular season point totals, though had yet to edge Ilya out in the three seasons they'd overlapped. He was fucking fast though, and had earned full points in the speed skating round finishing several tenths of a second ahead of Ilya's own result.

Ilya swiped a gloved hand across his forehead to adjust his hat, already sweating a bit. The casual, fan-forward nature of All Stars meant that the forwards had all participated without helmets, most men opting for the branded beanie they'd been given, though Ilya and a winger from Colorado both wore backwards caps for the extra flair.

Ilya knew he looked good in the snapback, blond curls peeking out the sides, like an extra in an American college fraternity movie, and so he sent Hollander a smoldering look he was sure appeared simply serious and competitive on camera. From behind the mask, it was hard to tell if it had any effect, but Ilya was certainly going to use every trick he had in order to get a leg up on Hollander regardless. No distractions, they'd once promised each other, but this weekend was an obvious exception.

The whistle blew and Ilya skated forward, the shorter shots meaning he had little time to think and even less room for creativity. Hollander blocked the first two easily, as Ilya looped back to grab another puck, legs already burning from the long day of competition. The officials signaled the third as a goal, a lucky turn for Ilya who watched the shitty rebound ricochet just under Hollander's right leg pad.

The fourth puck he attempted to hold onto for longer, *too* long, as Hollander pivoted quickly to stick poke it out from his control. The move had the crowd cheering and Ilya shaking his head, embarrassed as hell to miss a shot he hadn't even taken.

He danced dangerously close for the fifth attempt, sneaking the puck five-hole just as Hollander dropped low. Again, he'd scored but by the skin of his teeth, Hollander having the ridiculous wherewithal to *very* nearly get his stick on the puck behind him still as it glided over the line.

Left with two points after a wide split from Hollander to save puck six, Ilya huffed and hauled ass out to the blue line where the longer range, 2-point pucks awaited. This was where he could make up ground, the distance giving the shooters more time to vary their speed and approach, though the sixty second clock was against him just the same.

He fired the first puck hard from middle distance, testing, and almost laughed as he watched Hollander glove it easily. Close range and full of tricks, it would have to be.

Chest heaving with effort, he skated forward with the next puck, chancing an idiotic wink that had Hollander hesitating just a millisecond long enough for Ilya to execute a Forsberg-style backhand, much to the crowd's appreciation.

Four points. *Fuck, he was tired.*

Hollander saved his next two attempts, pushing past the edge of the crease to aggressively cut off many of Ilya's typical routes. *Bastard.* As the clock ticked under ten seconds, he reached the blue line again in time for one, maybe two shots if he hurried. He skated at near sprint speed, sucking in a breath and telling himself that the Hex didn't apply here, outside of regular competition. He could get six points and remain a frontrunner. Rhone would have a hell of a time against Popov besides.

Ilya spotted a tantalizing hole on Hollander's high glove side and fired, feeling fucking relieved when yet another awkward deflection off the crossbar had the puck dropping over Hollander's shoulder into the net.

Rushing to grab one last puck as the clock hit zero, they granted him the final shot. No longer timed, Ilya slowed his pace to try and throw Hollander off further— not that he'd done much effective trickery so far.

Nearing the net, he flicked a shovel shot top cheddar, dismayed when the puck dinged off the upper left post instead. Hollander's ghosts were laughing at him surely.

The final whistle blew.

Ilya tried to tell himself that six points wasn't anything to shrug at, against a Vezina winner, and all while completely exhausted besides.

Like most of the other shooter/goalie pairs, they skated by each other and exchanged a friendly sort of half-hug. Ilya angled his lips near the corner of Hollander's mask as they made contact, whispering the room number that Hollander already knew, already had the extra room card to in fact, but had so far resisted visiting: "Twelve twenty-one."

Hollander shuddered, gloved hand on Ilya's chest applying pressure but not quite shoving him away with the awareness of the cameras closely following this interaction.

"Couple good shots in there," Hollander replied, all business, "Lucky mostly."

"I did get lucky, yes," Ilya agreed, smiling fiercely as he clapped Hollander on the shoulder. He lowered his voice again. "And I will later too."

Hollander skated off with an audible scoff, though Ilya could swear he spotted the eye crinkle behind the mask that signified a smile just the same.

At the end of the day, after an obstacle course of all things, Ilya took a respectable second place in the Skills Competition, and Shane Hollander — whose save percentage beat out Popov's own thanks to Ilya's additional shot attempts — accepted a fat winning goalie's check for his efforts, wearing a beaming smile. Ilya *had* chosen his fate, he supposed, susceptible to peer pressure as that choice might have been. He tried to feel grumpier about the imbalanced result, but found himself unable to really dwell on it.

How annoying it was to lose but feel a certain pride anyway, for the way Shane Hollander was finally being appreciated by the hockey world with the respect he'd long deserved.

- 🥅 -

That evening, as Ilya met with the other three All Star team captains in a nearby restaurant, finalizing their draft picks and accounting for the handful of last minute injuries and substitutions, he allowed himself a tiny smile. Nine skaters and two goalies each for their little 3-on-3 tournament, and Ilya had managed to snag Shane Hollander. Not that the other captains had put up much of a fight after he'd sat down at the table two hours ago and declared, "First pick. Hollander is mine."

"You're in a good mood, Rozanov," Liam Casey, a defenseman who wore the C at Calgary, remarked with an easy grin, "Thought you hated this whole production."

Caught out for his uncharacteristic enthusiasm, Ilya sniffed and gestured at the New York captain to his left. “I am putting on brave face for Scott Hunter here,” he intoned solemnly, “Could be his last season. He is ninety-five in hockey years, you know.”

“Fuck you, Rozanov,” Hunter said, rolling his eyes, “You’re just smug because you won the coin toss and won’t have to shoot against your little nemesis out of Montreal.”

“Last I heard, you were scared of the Hex too,” Ilya retorted, parroting some insider information he’d gleaned out of Sochi. He was nothing if not a prolific gossip. “Maybe my first act as captain will be to turn Hollander against you.”

“Ouch, and just when you broke through your scoring drought too,” Nik Nilsson, Nashville’s captain and their benevolent tournament host, added with a laugh.

Hunter grumbled but didn’t say anything more, taking a long pull of his beer instead.

It was this, the easy camaraderie of fellow hockey leaders, that was endearing Ilya to the All Star weekend more than anything: planning their 3-on-3 lines and general strategy over rounds of drinks and some healthy chirping, and otherwise getting to enjoy each other’s company in a way that was nigh impossible during the nonstop rhythm of the regular season.

An incoming text had Ilya’s phone buzzing on the table. He scrambled to flip it over, though not before he saw the message preview on the home screen.

S: Hurry up please.

As he glanced back up, Scott Hunter was regarding him with an inscrutable look, while the other two captains shook their heads in amusement.

“After party plans already, I’m sure,” Casey teased, “How can we even compete, boys?”

“We can’t,” Nilsson complained, throwing his hands in the air, “My wife once asked what it would cost to get me traded to Boston, just so she could watch Rozanov play in person more often.”

He’d put ‘play’ in dramatic air quotes.

“Plenty of room for you in our cap, don’t worry,” Ilya said drolly.

Nilsson morphed one set of air quotes into a single middle finger.

Ilya’s phone buzzed again.

S: In your bed. Going to start without you.

“But yes, I should go,” Ilya said quickly, pushing back from the table and rolling his eyes at the way the other men made kissy faces in his direction.

Scott Hunter was still staring at him, looking contemplative.

“Enjoy your night,” Hunter said, a strange smile on his face.

“Enjoy your last days of hockey,” Ilya said in return, “What a beautiful, Cup-less career you had.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Casey commented, snickering anyway.

“But unfortunately a funny one,” Nilsson added with a roll of his eyes, laughing as Hunter loudly protested their allegiance, “See you tomorrow, Rozanov.”

Ilya waved hurriedly, and then made his way out of the restaurant, stopping up front to pay the group’s entire tab knowing the incongruous gesture of generosity would annoy Hunter most of all.

Jacket hood up, he crossed the few city blocks back to the hotel in record time. Once in the elevators, number twelve button illuminated, he considered tomorrow’s games. A simple two round bracket: semi-final against Team Casey, and then a final against the winner of Hunter vs. Nilsson. The playing style would be more akin to beer league, a little unserious and injury-avoidant, without the full tilt roughness and all-out hustle of their regular matchups. They all still had a second half of their season to get through unscathed after all.

Arriving at the twelfth floor, he hurried down the seemingly endless hallway, finally tapping his keycard against the door of his corner suite.

The sight that awaited him was enough to have him freezing in his tracks in the entryway: Shane Hollander on his bed, wearing one of Ilya’s long sleeve black button-ups and seemingly nothing else.

At Ilya’s prolonged, stunned silence, Hollander looked a little nervous. “Too much?” he asked, then with a nose wrinkle added, “I thought about putting your jersey on, but I couldn’t stomach the Boston logo.”

At the brief vision of *his* name emblazoned across Hollander’s back that flashed behind his eyes, Ilya felt every single thought related to All Stars and winning and losing *and* hockey in general evaporate out of his brain. Here was his real prize.

“On your stomach,” he said as he rebooted, already tugging off his jacket and t-shirt with clumsy, rushed movements.

Hollander was practically giggling as Ilya stalked toward him, muttering all sorts of choice swear words in Russian and English alike.

“They all think you are *so* sweet,” he hissed, pushing Hollander into the mattress and settling his whole body on top like a weighted blanket, “But I know the truth, hmm?”

Ilya leaned in further, lips to Hollander’s right ear as he added, voice pitched low, “You will have to be very quiet.”

Hollander slipped one arm out from under him and bit down pointedly, right into the silk cuff of Ilya’s fucking Tom Ford shirt.

He groaned, grinding down a bit and pulling a muffled moan out of Hollander in return. Suddenly, Ilya cared fuck all for what tomorrow’s results would bring, which was not very

captainly of him, but he dared any man in this league — hell, in *any* sport — to maintain a modicum of focus with their own clothes stretched across Shane fucking Hollander's beautiful back, the hem riding up to reveal the bottom curve of his ass too.

Ilya remembered Casey's words. 'After party plans' indeed. He was sure none of his fellow captains were celebrating exactly like this.

In the end, having sex that night was probably ill-advised given the non-zero risk of other players sharing this same floor — Hollander with a dick in him was notoriously not very quiet at all, despite a genuine attempt at following instructions — but Ilya was finding it more and more difficult to deny him anything as his sexual confidence grew and their compatibility in the bedroom turned more seamless along with it.

And besides, after Hollander threw in a pleading 'Captain, please' between moans, Ilya was… not very quiet either.

- 🥅 -

Shane was back in his crease, happy as a clam.

Playing hockey with Ilya Rozanov skating *away* from him, instead of toward his goal with a vengeance, was basically a dream.

They'd sailed through the semis against Liam Casey's team with a comfortable 5-2 win earlier in the day. Though Shane himself had executed an easy shutout, he'd split his time with Edmonton's goalie (a fan vote nominee), and was careful to keep his expression politely neutral from the bench each time his tandem partner made an… interesting defensive decision.

Anyhow, they were now well on their way to victory once more, leading Team Hunter 4-1 in the final with just a few minutes remaining. As Shane looked on from his end of the rink, Rozanov scored again off a beautiful assist from a Colorado rookie. Make that 5-1.

It was a little unbelievable given that Hunter had drafted Popov, but had only put him in for the third period once the deficit had grown. It was possible instructions had come down from on high in Raleigh too, not wanting their prized goaltender subject to more physical exertion than was necessary for fan entertainment, a nonsense win, and a cash prize. Montreal had expressed no such worries for Shane.

Blocking another shot and clearing it wide, Shane watched as the game clock dropped to under a minute remaining. Team Rozanov kept easy control of the puck until the final horn sounded, arena filling with cheers from players' families and the fans alike.

The generally unserious nature of All Stars left room for a lot of extra silliness, so Shane was not at all surprised by the familiar sight of Mikhail Popov careening across the ice toward him, before most of his own team could even properly assemble to celebrate. Popov spread his arms

wide, as did Shane, and they smashed together like two Michelin tire men, wobbling a bit on their skates before falling to the ice. Shane was laughing, letting out an even louder shout of glee when a few additional members of Team Rozanov did a running jump onto the pile.

As Shane eventually righted himself to standing, he felt a gentle bonk against his helmet. Turning slightly, he came nearly nose to nose with Rozanov, who was smiling widely, mouthguard chomped between his teeth and dangling out of the left side of his mouth.

“Always long line for your goalie hugs,” Rozanov said nonchalantly, “Thought I would see what hype was about. Overrated, probably.”

Shane’s heart thumped hard beneath his chest protector.

“You are so annoying,” he replied, spreading his arms anyway.

It was freeing as much as it was sort of bittersweet, hugging Ilya Rozanov on the ice in front of thousands, with not a single other person knowing that they’d spent the night together, that they had years and years of history between them that went far beyond a probably-not-real scoring curse and an on-ice rivalry of sorts...

... that they had touched intimately, infinitely more than this.

Today, Rozanov had been Shane’s captain, his starting center… A fantasy that took root in Shane’s mind and spiraled out into the type of delusion that would have them one day playing on the same NHL team instead of in opposition. Seeing each other at morning skate versus merely a handful of times a year. Shane shook his head— what a silly, saccharine dream for something that they’d both agreed was just mutual physical convenience.

“Hollander,” Rozanov whispered with a laugh, interrupting his rumination, “We should probably let go now.”

Shane felt his cheeks flame, sure he was blushing visibly behind his mask, as he dropped his arms and skated backward to put a little distance between them.

“Good game out there, boys,” Scott Hunter said, gliding by a moment later to shake Rozanov’s hand and offer a fist bump to Shane’s glove.

“Any plans to celebrate after this?” he asked, a question which might have been completely innocuous, except for the way he pointedly glanced between them.

Shane eyed Hunter warily, poised to respond, but predictably Rozanov got there first.

“Are you inviting us to your retirement party?”

Hunter scoffed, though there was still the barest hint of mirth in his eyes. He clearly found the snarky song-and-dance with Rozanov to be entertaining. Shane knew the feeling.

“I don’t know why I try with you, Rozy,” he said, flicking his eyes over to Shane and adding, “You’re a saint to put up with him.”

“He doesn’t,” Rozanov said at the same time as Shane deadpanned, “I don’t.”

Hunter definitely looked amused now.

“Right,” he said slowly, “I guess that Hollander Hex would keep any man in line.”

His comments were toeing the edge between simple jest and some sort of deeper insinuation that was making Shane start to panic a little bit. What the hell did Scott Hunter know anyway? If they were at all being obvious, it was *as friends* at best, right? They were allowed to hug and… hang out, without speculation surely? Plenty of hockey players from different teams did so. Shane unclasped his mask and tugged it off, suddenly needing more space to breathe.

Rozanov took one look at his ashen expression and nodded decisively, skating over to grab Hunter’s arm and spinning him away toward the opposing bench.

“Listen, Hunter,” Rozanov was saying as they departed, “I met this guy in Natural History museum in Boston who said he knew you? … What do you mean ‘is this a dinosaur joke?’ So you know him too?”

Shane exhaled a laugh, grateful for the diversion as a few other players approached him and he eased his mind into the simple script of casual post-game small talk.

He hadn’t known exactly what to expect for his first All Stars, but this weekend had been sort of great actually. It was always lovely to see Popov again and reconnect with some of the guys he knew from Juniors and the AHL. Plus, what an honor to exist in the presence of all the veteran star players floating around that he knew childhood Shane would be in total awe of. It was a genuinely cool experience, even if most guys rolled their eyes at the obligation after the first one.

And then there was Rozanov.

The man who had casually changed his flight last minute after finding out that Shane wasn’t leaving Nashville until the following morning.

Another night together? Two consecutive days in a row? Shane shivered just thinking about it, knowing that much sex was liable to spoil him a bit. It would be needed though, to make it through the long spring until their next matchup— a thought which made Shane immediately cringe. He wasn’t sure when he had started thinking about the passage of time during hockey seasons in terms of when Montreal played Boston, but it felt like a slippery slope from anticipation into something… far worse, or dangerous even… like missing Ilya Rozanov for real.

“Hollander!” Popov called out, waving a glove in front of Shane’s face as he chuckled. “You were out in space there for second.”

“Ha, sorry,” Shane said, shaking his head, “Just… taking it all in, I guess.”

“It has been crazy few days,” Popov agreed, before pointing over to a group of families waiting patiently at the corner glass. One little girl in a Voyageurs t-shirt held up a poster painted to look like a brick wall, Shane’s face and number pasted over it, while the older boy next to her was clutching what appeared to be a plushie Pop Tart in a Carolina jersey.

“I came to get you because these children are crazy about goalies,” Popov continued, grinning, “Thought we could go make their day.”

Shane smiled and nodded, following along as Popov skated toward the group. Unable to help himself, his eyes wandered for a brief moment to where Rozanov stood in the other corner, chipping pucks over the netting for a herd of kids (and their very grown fathers) in Boston jerseys. He posed for a picture as someone held up their baby, body language more goofy and enthused than Shane had ever seen from him. As he watched, stunned, Rozanov executed a pretty decent figure skating spin, bowing when the kids all cheered. *Fuck.* One of the NHL’s most notorious assholes being adorable with children was doing very evil things to Shane’s heart.

He turned back just in time to see Popov regarding him with a soft, almost knowing look, now cradling the Pop Tart plushie they’d seen through the glass to his chest.

“Hollander, you coming?” he asked.

“Yeah, sorry!” Shane said, chest still constricted by a swirl of strange feelings.

He took a deep breath, pasted on a big smile, and assumed the role of Montreal Voyageurs’ number forty-two Shane Hollander once more. A serious, analytical goaltending professional with some notable quirks, most of them no longer a secret — now broadcast across sports networks and social media along with every other possible detail of his gameplay and personal life. Or, well, *almost* every detail.

It was strange to be so known and yet not really known at all.

Shane exhaled, feeling lighter with the knowledge that tonight, in the presence of Ilya Rozanov again, he could maybe take off the mask.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your patience awaiting this update! In the midst of me completing the chapter, I encountered about a dozen sitcom-style blunders, not limited to: my friend helping me move apartments this weekend and losing his keys somewhere in the process inspiring a treasure hunt twelve hours before he had to get on a plane; unexpectedly no electricity in said new apartment; spilling an entire bottle of shampoo in one of my electronics moving boxes; intermittent Ao3 outages; and more 😅 Hopefully it was worth the wait!

Quick goalie notes today, yay:

- This goalie-involved All Stars format has been done before, most recently in 2024, along with a 3-on-3 mini tournament (which actually had celebrity guest captains lmao?). Here's a fun interview with some of the participating goalies and here's the actual One-on-One portion. The shooters were competing for $1 million, woof,

though the top goaltender and the All Stars 3-on-3 winners did also receive a smaller cash prize.

- The iconic Forsberg move that Ilya uses to score against Shane.
- And finally, a desperate conceptual plea to someone out there with a digital art bone in their body: Mikhail Popov in double denim, a Carolina Crawfish t-shirt, and cowboy boots. For the people! **UPDATE:** Dreams do come true!

Chapter 9: Tandem

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 2015 – Buffalo

Playoffs seemed to come quickly this year, Montreal suddenly pulling together a decent second half to the season and ending up third in the Atlantic behind Boston and Buffalo.

Shane wished he could attribute it to their overall skills and chemistry improving as a team, or better coaching even; in reality, they'd received a hot shot young center in a deadline trade deal with St. Louis who had immediately started scoring like his contract depended on it. Shane had privately expressed his concerns to JJ a few weeks back about what this meant for their actual resilience through playoffs — he knew well from his place in the crease that one player alone did not a Cup-winning team make — and that was sort of proving true, given they were 1-and-3 against the Buffalo Broadswords going into Game 5 this evening.

Shane wasn't resentful by any means. Montreal was the team that had drafted him, allowed him to grow his skills in the development leagues, and still called him up in the end. He'd won a Vezina in the Voyageurs' net, after all. But damn if he didn't sometimes find himself longing for a more well-rounded squad… for playoff runs that felt like a steady, confident progression instead of chaotically snagging wins by the skin of their teeth.

Still, Shane's pathological love for predictability and routine meant that he'd stay put in Montreal until retirement if that loyalty meant never having to experience any significant change in his hockey career again. He couldn't imagine being subject to the all too common trade scenario of waking up days later in a new city on an unfamiliar team and being sent right out onto the ice with the expectation to perform. It was a reality of their sport, fast-paced as it was by every measure, but the uprooting was no less jarring every time for player and new team alike.

And, as many minor qualms as Shane might have had with the Voyageurs, he doubted any other NHL team had yet managed to balance the equation of positive team culture with actually winning games, and he dreaded ever having to find out. His agent knew to keep any offers out of his inbox for now, and an ear to the ground for rumors that Montreal might look to trade their star goaltender for, heaven forbid, *future considerations* or something.

Anyway, here they were, in upstate New York… not entirely out of contention yet, but very likely to lose while on the road tonight, and in front of a still sizable Montreal crowd who'd made the border crossing besides. Dreading what seemed like a foregone conclusion, Shane was anxiously sprawled out across the bed in his hotel room with hours still until the team bus departed, fiddling with his phone. Surprised, he watched a message preview pop up from a new but familiar contact.

Faye: good luck tonight

The alias had come about in the manner that many hockey nicknames did, through a roundabout association of concepts and sounds that produced something often comically far from its origins. In this case, after their second night together in Nashville, Shane — wary of Scott Hunter and anyone else who might be paying too much attention — had mentioned to Rozanov that it was probably a bad idea to keep using any identifiable contact names; the wider spread notoriety of their alleged rivalry and Shane's own growing prominence in the hockey world intensifying the risk of public scandal too.

And thus, Faye and Pippa were born.

Faye because Rozanov spent time in the *face*-off circle, and Pippa because Shane was between the *pipes*. God forbid he ever had to explain this to anyone else only to die of cringe as a result.

To be fair, Shane had originally proposed something simple like… Shana or Jane, but Rozanov had looked at him with such profound disbelief you would have thought he'd suggested they use their full government names followed by a series of eggplant emojis and their actual faces as the contact photos.

'Don't be obvious, Hollander,' he'd replied with a roll of his eyes, cuddling Shane against his chest just the same, and they'd launched into a ridiculous back and forth that was half brainstorm, half chirping the ever loving hell out of each other for their stupider ideas. The bickering had made them both so hot under the collar anyhow that they'd ended up going for another round, Shane in one direction with *Faye's* cock down his throat and Rozanov in the other, humming happily with his face between *Pippa's* cheeks. The Pavlovian response that Shane's dick had upon seeing that name onscreen after that night was maybe not any more subtle than the 'I' for Ilya had been, but at least he could worry a bit less about their text correspondence ending up in the wrong hands.

His phone buzzed again to remind him of the pending notification and he clicked into the chat, typing back his reply.

> **Shane:** Thank you.
>
> **Shane:** Can't help but think you have an ulterior motive for reaching out though 🤔
>
> **Faye:** no, nothing
>
> **Faye:** unless? 😺

Shane rolled his eyes, cock chubbing up in his sweats just the same. He refused to indulge pre-game though, always worried the first release would only leave him keyed up in a worse way rather than relaxed and focused… especially now with Rozanov's stupidly talented hands and tongue on his mind more often than not during his… alone time.

> **Shane:** No distractions, remember?
>
> **Faye:** boring, yes i know. was really just wanting to say i hope your shitty team turns things around
>
> **Faye:** i want to see you play in person again 🏒👅

Boston had easily vanquished their wildcard matchup 4-1 last night, ending the series with a decisive win at home. Half the hockey world seemed to begrudgingly accept that the Bears had the talent, the momentum, and most importantly, the so far healthy roster required to lead them to a repeat championship appearance. Shane couldn't imagine Montreal would fare any better against the division leaders in the second round than they had against Buffalo thus far, but playoff upsets were always possible, fairly routine even given many teams' propensity to nosedive after regular season dominance.

It would be nice to share the ice with Rozanov again, and maybe — if they could figure out the logistics — share a bed after too. For one fantastical moment, Shane envisioned playing through Game 7, splitting nights between Boston and Montreal, sneaking away from their respective arenas to steal a moment together. Realistically, he would never risk impacting his actual hockey performance for a hookup — hence 'no distractions' as their mantra — but the thought of knocking Boston out of playoffs while he had their captain's attention all to himself was a delicious prospect.

Fuck, he was hard. God dammit.

Shaking his head, he typed back:

Shane: Oh really? This was only about hockey? And not what you mentioned in Nashville?

More than a little sex drunk after two nights together, Rozanov had presented an exhaustive list of future positions, activities, and role-playing scenarios from the bed as Shane dressed for his flight, gauging Shane's mortified but blatantly aroused reaction to each suggestion with obvious glee. Shane had managed to purge sparingly few… concepts… from his memory so far.

Faye: was about hockey i swear

Faye: but i do still want to pick you up and fuck you against wall next time. not playoff exclusive idea

Shane shivered and clenched the fingers that had wandered near his groin into a fist instead. Grabbing his phone with his other hand, he launched to his feet and paced the length of the hotel room a few times.

Shane: I hate you.

Shane: I'm feeling… distracted 😡

Faye: you won't touch yourself? i would

Shane swallowed and walked another full lap of the room.

Shane: You don't have a game tonight.

Faye: that would not stop me. and should not stop you either

Faye: you have played good hockey. done your job. you don't think you deserve reward for that?

It was true that two of their three losses to Buffalo so far had been in overtime, and hardly within his full control. Shane had blocked enough shots in Game 3 in fact to feel empowered to chew out his defense for their egregious positioning *and* his offense for not scoring a fucking goal first. He never raised his voice like that, was always quiet and analytical in the locker room with any spice saved for the ice only, and so the entire team had stared at him with rapt, slightly terrified attention. As Coach Theriault openly nodded along, their captain had begrudgingly rolled his eyes and offered a backhanded affirmation: 'We cannot rely on Hollander in the net to win these games.'

Funnily enough, they'd won the next one, Shane fighting to keep the smug look off his face at the result and his captain in turn fighting to hide his irritation when JJ had clapped Shane on the back and exclaimed 'Now that's some fucking motivation, eh, boys?'

This was the same captain — now thirty-nine and surely on his last leg before retirement — who had continued to inexplicably hate Shane's guts all season, and who had also recently been exposed for a number of violently homophobic tweets from years back (that admittedly most of the league and its fans had seemed unperturbed by, before *and* after a vague statement about 'allowing room for personal growth' from the Voyageurs' GM). A part of Shane could not help but worry that his captain's hatred stemmed from some long-held assumption about him; that sleeping with a man had somehow changed him outwardly… made his most shameful desires visible in his mannerisms or his voice or how his lingering eyes could not always avoid drinking in a fit male body in view. Maybe it was obvious that he was no longer just a quirky goalie but instead a—

Faye: you are overthinking. i can feel it through airwaves 🧠

Shane let out a breath, plopping back down on the edge of the bed. Though their texting was as sporadic as ever, and usually only happened during the season when making plans to meet up, it was disconcerting — when they *did* manage to connect — how often Rozanov would make an offhanded, accurate diagnosis of Shane's emotional state. It had initially made Shane fear that he was more transparent with his feelings than he'd realized, as vaguely in touch with them as he was in the first place. But upon closer investigation, Shane found that the other people around him, even his family and few close friends, simply didn't observe and understand him to the same degree that Ilya Rozanov did, in that effortless sort of way of his.

Shane wasn't sure what to think about that. The way it felt easier to be open with a man he only sort of knew and to be understood by that man in turn, while recognizing that this was *not* what they were meant to be to one another. If this was the kind of vulnerable connection that casual sex was able to form, Shane feared for the soul-destroying intimacy that must come from properly falling in love with someone.

But back to Rozanov.

Shane: i'm definitely overthinking

Faye: oh no, small letters. you are VERY nervous

Faye: you really should blow steam

The attempt at the idiom made Shane smile.

Shane: Blow OFF steam lol

Faye: same difference i think. do you want me to talk you through it?

Shane frowned, obviously tempted by the opportunity to enter the brainless, out of body space that Rozanov loved to coax him into; it would certainly make him feel less nervous about tonight's consequential game, at least temporarily. Still, although he was certain he could reach that point via texts and a little imagination alone, it felt essential to have Rozanov there in person to bring him back to awareness afterward. It would feel… icky to not have a physical touch to ground him in reality again. And a voice to tell him he was *good* and safe and wanted.

Shane knew there were words for the sort of dynamic they were cultivating, but putting a name to it felt like admitting something deeper about himself. Something somehow even more shameful than letting the league's alleged womanizing rogue fuck him again and again and again…

Shane: I don't think I can let go like that right now.

A moment later, he all but fell off the bed when his phone started to ring.

This was not something they did.

He answered anyway. "Hello?"

"Hi," Rozanov's voice said back, low and with a touch of lazy amusement.

Shane felt something in his chest loosen at the sound. "What are you—?"

"Hollander, can you tell me about Ben Haskill?"

"Buffalo Broadswords. Number seventy-one," Shane said automatically, realizing what Rozanov was doing even as he felt compelled to finish, "Twenty-four goals, twenty-six assists."

Rozanov hummed. "And what place is he in for point total?"

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, letting out a shuddering breath as his brain latched onto the single-minded data collection task with gratitude. "Fifty points on the season. Tied for sixty-third as of yesterday, I think."

"Very good," Rozanov said approvingly, sounding legitimately impressed.

Shane felt a pleasant buzz creep across his skin at the words, scooting back on the bed to lie down against the pile of pillows at the top. He let Rozanov quiz him through the entirety of Buffalo's offensive lines; the kind of harried preparation he would have done alone on the ice during warmup was transformed into an almost rhythmic cerebral balm instead.

"How do you feel?" Rozanov's gentle voice asked over the line, after Shane had recited the final forward's stats.

He smiled, a little out of body anyhow. "Floaty. Good."

"To float is nice, yes?" Rozanov continued, "But you are still here with me?"

“Yes,” Shane whispered, tethering himself to the physical sensation of the phone in his hand and the sound of those pretty accented vowels in his ear.

He let his eyes fall shut after a moment though, imagining the warmth of a body next to him, a leg thrown over his own. Not moving, just… resting. Together.

“Do you want to do anything else? To feel good?” Rozanov prompted.

Shane frowned, realizing his previous erection had since flagged. “I… I don’t think so. Does that disappoint you?”

He heard Rozanov let out a little exhale of amusement.

“No, Hollander,” he said, “Disappointment will be if your team is eliminated tonight and I do not fuck you again until next season.”

“Prepare to be let down then,” Shane replied, a little morosely.

“You do not have to be Voyageur forever, you know?” Rozanov pointed out.

“Don’t I?” Shane said, a little clipped, “There are so few spots for goalies across the league. At least with Montreal, I get my ice time.”

“I think the NHL is bigger universe than we know,” Rozanov offered, “though obviously I can’t really speak on this. I have not left team who drafted me either.”

“Is it good for you?” Shane asked, realizing that for as often as he’d been in Rozanov’s apartment, he didn’t really know how the man felt about the city he’d been assigned to all those years ago. “In Boston?”

Rozanov hummed in thought. “It is good. But I think it would be good for me anywhere, probably. Most teams would take me in heartbeat, if they could afford me.” He paused, then chuckled a bit. “Maybe not Montreal. Or New York.”

“I liked All Stars,” Shane said quietly, “When we played together.”

His heartbeat raced a little faster in his chest, worried by how vulnerable that might have sounded.

“I liked that too,” Rozanov agreed easily, his tone a touch softer to match Shane’s own, “But I need you and your hex, I think. Was boring before you came along. I was missing a real rival.”

“No one actually thinks we’re rivals,” Shane argued lightly, “I’m just a funny anomaly on your stats sheet.”

“Anomaly,” Rozanov echoed, “Mr. Big Words today.”

Shane smiled. “It means like… one weird difference. Something outside the norm.”

“Ah, well, you are definitely that to me, yes,” Rozanov teased, “Off the ice, mostly. Also Russian word is the same, smartass. I know big words too.”

Shane laughed and opened his mouth to reply, but was startled by a knock at his door.

“Hollzy, open up,” Hayden Pike’s voice said from the hallway, “I know you’re in there stressing, so I’m here to entertain.”

From where his phone had fallen onto the duvet, he could’ve sworn he heard Rozanov mutter Hayden’s name plus a few choice swear words.

“One sec!” he called out.

Snatching his phone up again, he whispered, “Thank you, for helping. Sorry to just cut things off but—”

The reply was almost fond. “Bye, Hollander.”

“Bye,” he said, though he looked down to see Rozanov had already hung up.

Walking over to meet Hayden at the door, Shane felt substantially lighter. He wanted to win tonight, badly, to experience the thrill of a competitive game and the pride of being a Voyageur in the almost intoxicating way he’d felt during his rookie season. It concerned him, as anything Rozanov-related usually did, that each time the pressure started to create cracks in the ‘Shane Hollander #42’ locker room mirror, it was Boston’s captain — a sworn enemy of his team and basically the NHL at large — who was most capable of lifting the weight, of reminding him just what he was worth to the sport and to himself.

Shane loved hockey. He was living his dream.

He just needed to… reconnect with that, *on his own* preferably.

And win.

- 🥅 -

July 2015 – Montreal

Shane walked nervously up to the divey pizza joint, feeling self conscious about his outfit (too casual? too formal?), his new forehead-exposing haircut, whatever his many limbs were doing (something awkward, to be sure), and whether or not being five minutes early was going to make him seem lame and overly eager.

He didn’t often… hang out like this, without the pretense of something hockey-related, and so meeting Mikhail Popov and guest(?) as they visited Montreal on a city-hopping trip across Canada was an intimidating prospect.

As the bell on the door announced his entry with a jingle, he easily spotted Popov’s towering frame across the restaurant, seated at a corner booth with a similarly large man at his side.

They'd arrived even earlier; what a relief.

Shane approached and both men stood to greet him, Popov wrapping him up in a bear hug as was typical. Released from the embrace, he locked eyes with the other man, a ruggedly handsome brunette a few inches taller than him with shocking green eyes and a neatly trimmed beard, maybe late twenties if Shane had to guess.

"Hi, I'm Shane. Hollander," he offered awkwardly, sticking out his hand.

The man laughed, accent thick and syrupy with a Southern American twang as he said, "Yeah, I know. You're the one everyone thinks is kissing my boyfriend."

As he shook Shane's hand, he added with a smile, "I'm Jake."

Boyfriend.

Shane froze, feeling every shared moment with Mikhail Popov being rewritten in his mind on a molecular level.

"Ah, sorry," Shane managed after his internal systems had rebooted, "I told him he shouldn't encourage it."

Jake frowned. "On the contrary. *I'm* also encouraging it." He punctuated the statement with an easy wink.

Shane blinked.

"Jake is big hockey fan," Popov explained, as they slid back into the booth, the *couple* on one side and Shane on the other. "And used to be right winger. NCAA D1. But he also loves those cheesy hockey romance novels." He waggled his eyebrows. "Forbidden love on ice. Stuff like that."

Jake elbowed Popov, face contorting into an embarrassed wince. "I swear I'm normal about it. I was just your typical hockey-playing closet case looking for… representation. Wherever I could find it."

Shane let out a breath. *Hockey talk, thank god.* This was at least familiar conversational territory. Even if he wasn't going to touch the romance piece of all that with a ten-foot pole.

"You never tried to go pro?" Shane asked, the idea of starting a sport and not obsessively committing the rest of your life to it feeling totally foreign to him.

Jake shook his head, picking at the edge of one of the peeling laminated menus. "Nah, the plan was always to get a degree. I played four years at Cornell knowing they were my last."

"You know Wyatt Hayes? Toronto goalie?" Popov added, "They were roommates!"

Shane raised an eyebrow. "Wait, Hazy has a degree from *Cornell*?"

Popov nodded. "Yes? In something with numbers."

"Applied mathematics," Jake supplied, "We had some quant econ courses together."

Shane laughed a little, shaking his head. An Ivy League math degree? *Jesus.* Goalies were a strange fucking breed indeed.

"So, um, how did you two meet?" Shane asked after they'd ordered, watching Popov's face bloom in appreciation for the question. He wondered then how Popov had known that Shane might be someone safe to introduce his *boyfriend* to. (Fuck, Shane couldn't get over the word for some reason.) Acceptance certainly wasn't a common stance across the NHL, even on the slightly more progressive Canadian side. Shane wasn't homophobic, obviously, but he very well could have been.

"I'm from just outside Raleigh, originally," Jake explained, "Went back to spend the summer with family after I graduated. They're, um, not very accepting of my quote unquote 'lifestyle' so. It was kind of a last goodbye sort of thing before I moved for a job in New York City."

"He does fancy finance things," Popov gushed, eyes darkening, "In a suit."

Jake glanced at him fondly. "Misha, please, my job is super boring compared to literal NHL stars. No one wants to hear what a banker is up to."

"Shane likes boring," Popov argued.

"I do, famously so," Shane said with a laugh, "I'd probably enjoy the finance talk."

He sat back in the booth then, feeling a little more at ease. He hadn't really been around a gay couple before, and was a little embarrassingly surprised to find it wasn't any different than being around his heterosexual coupled-up friends and married teammates. Same gentle touches and soft glances and teasing banter. A general awareness that the person next to you meant something *more.* It looked… nice.

"Anyway, we met at local bar three years ago," Popov continued, picking up the story thread where they'd left off, "Jake did not know I was hockey player, at first. We hooked up that night and I did not think I would see him again after he explained New York move. So it was nice surprise when he started coming to the Crawfish home games." He winked, looking smug. "Front row view."

"My parents are… comfortably wealthy," Jake added, with another wince, "My dad has these company seats that rarely get used, so I just started going to games any time I was in town to visit. Around the holidays and stuff. Family time is stressful, like I said, and I find hockey to be a comfort still, so… I wasn't only there to see Misha."

"But mostly me," Popov argued.

"Yeah, mostly," Jake replied, Southern drawl colored with deep affection again. "It's a little complicated still. Doing long distance. And obviously Misha can't be out yet either, but. We're making it work."

Shane nodded, a little nervous as he ventured, "Do you ever worry about people finding out?"

They both turned to look at each other for a moment. "We have only told a few friends we really trust," Popov said, shrugging, "And with how Jake and I look… people do not usually see beyond stereotype. We are not very *gay* to them."

Jake turned his gaze back toward Shane then, appraisingly. “It’s nice to meet you for real though, Shane. Misha’s always had lovely things to say about you.”

Shane blushed. “I’m, uh, not very close with any other players who aren’t on my own team, so. I was really grateful for how he took me under his wing.”

Jake nodded. “He respects you a lot, as a player and a person. I do too. I was crushed watching that series against Buffalo end 4-3 after y’all clawed your way back through Game 7, and in overtime too. You killed it in goal.”

Popov nodded. “You really did. Would not have been so competitive without you. We were watching in New York and I was telling everyone in gay sports bar how proud I was to know that guy.”

“It’s true,” Jake confirmed, chuckling at the memory, “He was claiming best friend status and everything.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed even redder at all the attention. He met Popov’s eyes and said, “I know you put a lot of effort into staying in touch with me. I should really be better at replying to texts and finding opportunities like this to spend time together.” At Popov’s patient grin, he added, “I really am grateful for our friendship.”

If he placed some extra emphasis on *friendship*, it was only out of an abundance of caution. Shane was still uncertain of their particular relationship dynamic and was more than a little concerned that Popov’s boyfriend was being polite to his face, but secretly plotting his demise later. He hadn’t meant to be a homewrecker, but he was worried the internet speculation or Popov’s easy affection or both had incidentally made him seem like one.

Shane’s lingering questions were quickly answered, however, after they finished eating and he let himself be convinced to head over to the equally divey bar down the street.

As Jake left to get them a second round of drinks, Shane found himself apologizing profusely to Popov for ever crossing any lines. “I wasn’t trying to flirt or anything, I swear,” he emphasized, “I know the fans have their… theories… but I hope Jake doesn’t think I meant to come between you. He seems really nice.”

“Your concern is sweet,” Popov replied, quirking a smile, “But to be clear, Shane, I have been flirting with you.” At Shane’s perplexed look, he explained, “It has always been open relationship between us. We are very… secure. Not jealous people. As long as we give detail about other person first, it’s okay.”

Shane swallowed as Popov leaned in closer, knowing they were all but murky silhouettes in the dark back corner of the bar. “Like I could kiss you right now,” Popov continued, voice low, “That would be allowed. Or you could kiss both of us? Also allowed.”

He was grateful for the dim lighting, knowing his face must be tomato red by now. Popov’s lips touched the shell of his ear, “But would your man allow it?”

At that, Shane jerked back, shocked. “My what?”

Popov stared at him in confusion. “You are dating Ilya Rozanov, no?”

Shane gaped. “Oh my god, no. No! We’re not—”

“Oh, it is casual then?”

“It’s nothing! He’s not—”

“Not what?” Popov asked, looking amused now, “Interested in men? I can assure you he is. And at All Star game, I was certain you two were—”

Sirens went off in Shane’s head unprompted.

“Wait, what do you mean *you* can assure it?” he cut in.

Popov looked at him for a long moment. “There were rumors. In the leagues back home. We all sort of knew about each other.” He started to laugh, probably at the way Shane’s tense expression relaxed minutely at the explanation. “Wow, did you think he and I—? Your face did something very crazy then.”

“Is it… that obvious?” Shane asked instead, almost whispering, “That we…?”

Popov chuckled. “Are hooking up? Yes. Or at least that you were wanting to. But only to those of us who know what to look for, I think.” His face morphed into a frown of genuine concern, as he added, “You certainly picked big star to try to be discreet with though.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen,” Shane replied feebly.

“And when did it happen? In Nashville?”

Shane bit his lip, debating just how honest he wanted to be in the moment. Popov had shared so much with him this evening, though, that maybe he felt like being a touch vulnerable himself…

“Um,” he hesitated, letting the first words out that came to mind, “It’s been, uh, a few years… actually.”

Popov’s bushy blond eyebrows hit his hairline. “Years? Wow, okay. I didn’t know Ilyukha even repeated hookups, much less stuck to one.”

“No, I mean, he’s, uh… he’s still sleeping with other people.”

Popov’s eyes narrowed, his expressive eyebrows furrowed downward now instead. “Right, and how do you feel about that?”

Shane felt his hackles raise. “Why would I feel any particular way about it? He can do whatever he wants. And he told me that I can too.”

“Let’s send him a picture then,” Popov proposed with a shrug, looking deeply amused by Shane’s snappy reaction to his line of questioning.

“What?”

Sliding an arm around his shoulder, Popov said, “Just trust me, Shane.”

Raising his phone camera, Popov snapped a few selfies, one particularly cutesy one with his lips pressed to Shane's cheek that he added as a message attachment. He typed for a brief moment and then pocketed his phone again, cheering happily as Jake returned to their group with beers in tow.

Just a few minutes later, all three of them startled at the sound of Shane's phone vibrating loudly on the table with an incoming call. Popov looked smug, gesturing at Shane to answer it.

He barely managed a 'hello' before a familiar Russian voice was asking without preamble, "Hollander, what are you doing?"

"I'm out with friends," Shane said, feeling inexplicably nervous, "Mikhail Popov came to visit Montreal. His b— uh, his—"

Popov waved a hand and mouthed 'It's okay.'

Shane nodded. "His, um, boyfriend always wanted to travel across Canada. And they asked if I'd be in town during their summer trip so. We're getting drinks."

Rozanov was quiet for a long moment. "Ah, so now you want two men at once? *And* my attention too? You are very greedy, Shane Hollander."

"No, I wasn't—" Shane protested, painfully aware of Popov sneaking an arm around his waist.

Popov leaned in until his lips were close enough to the receiver and said something in Russian, voice low and clearly teasing in tone. Rozanov hissed something back, also in Russian, that only served to make Popov laugh.

Not wanting to share more of his conversation with two hot Russian men hellbent on antagonizing him and each other, Shane left his drink on the high-top they'd been hovering at and slipped back outside, into the quiet alleyway next to the bar.

"Hollander, you know you don't have to ask my permission," Rozanov was saying, "It is cute you think so, though."

"I'm not asking your permission to do anything, asshole," Shane argued back, cheeks flaming, "The photo was Misha's idea. And whatever else he said too."

"*Misha,* hmm?" Rozanov said, "And why does he get a nickname?"

"Because he's my friend," Shane replied quietly, not bothering to explain that he still defaulted to 'Popov' more often than not, always prone to thinking of fellow players in hockey terms. And 'friend' was an expansive term too apparently, given Popov had a boyfriend but was also theoretically happy to kiss Shane whenever he wanted. *What the hell.*

"Am I not your friend too?"

Shane huffed out a laugh. "Well… no. Not according to you, our teams, or literally any hockey commentator or fan ever."

Rozanov was quiet for a long moment, his tone noticeably icier as he said, "Okay."

“Rozanov, I didn’t mean—”

“No, Hollander, you’re right,” he cut in, coolly, “Our dynamic is… complicated. We don’t know each other well enough to be friends. It’s true. That’s not what we do.”

Shane swallowed, suddenly feeling wrong-footed. “I’m… I’m not planning on sleeping with him, you know? Either of them.”

Rozanov sighed. “Maybe you should. We won’t see each other until October. It’s a long time to wait. Or, I don’t know, find a nice girl even. Would be simpler.”

Shane felt his chest ache at the thought.

“Maybe I will then,” he said, full of bravado but lying through his teeth all the same.

Misha and Jake were lovely. He was sure it would be a spectacularly hot time, but he just… he wasn’t sure if he could have sex with a close friend and not have the wires cross a bit. And as for women, well… admittedly, it had been a long time now since he’d done much more with a woman than tipsy grinding in a club. He liked the confident girls, who approached him and took what they wanted, so he could turn his brain off a little bit. It was unfortunate that most of the women he encountered naturally expected him — or, the big bad manly hockey player he appeared to be — to take the lead in everything, the bedroom in particular. Shane was getting tired of feeling like he was disappointing them.

“Why did you call?” he found himself asking after a moment.

Rozanov made what could only be described as a choking noise over the line. “You and your *friend* wanted to tease me,” he said, recovering quickly, “So I thought I would tease back. Keep anticipation up for next time.”

It wasn’t the most believable excuse, even to Shane’s often gullible ears, but he let it slide.

Feeling emboldened by how successfully he’d earned Rozanov’s attention this evening, he heard himself offer, “But what if I make an excuse to go home right now? Would you still tease?”

Rozanov exhaled audibly. “I would do a lot more than that.”

Fuck.

“Give me thirty minutes,” Shane replied hurriedly, “And then I’m FaceTiming you.”

“Twenty minutes or else I won’t pick up,” Rozanov challenged.

“Fuck you,” Shane replied, laughing a little, even as he was already nearly running back inside, “You’ll pick up.”

Fifteen minutes later, tucked into the backseat of a cab on his way home, Shane swiped through the day’s series of unread messages he’d put off in his too-anxious state before meeting Popov

this evening. He ignored the latest one at the top from the man himself, a smug ‘You’re welcome 🤠’ and then a longer follow up about some of the museums Shane had recommended to the couple over dinner.

Next was a text from Hayden with a link to an Instagram profile:

> **Hayden:** dude, listen. you NEED to meet Jackie’s friend. she thinks you’re super hot. and she’s a yoga instructor! 🥲

And another from Yuna Hollander with a long itinerary attached:

> **Mom:** Sports Illustrated shoot coming up! Don’t forget to do your skincare! We don’t want you looking tired for their styling team ❤️ Word travels, you know!

The family realtor had also reached out, sharing a few listings for some modest lakeside property options Shane had been quietly saving toward. And the pinned conversation with his agent had a new notification too with a request for a career planning meeting ahead of contract renewal to see if his goals still aligned with what Montreal was willing to provide. *Great fucking question.*

Shane let out a breath, still overwhelmed at the thought of dealing with any of that this evening, and started to tuck his phone back into his pocket.

It buzzed again in his hand then, with a single text onscreen from a name that immediately put him at ease, as much as it served to make his heart race too.

> **Faye:** you will not regret picking me tonight

Shane smiled in spite of himself, knowing that — for all the complicated emotions he felt toward this stupid ongoing *thing* with Ilya Rozanov — regret was not one of them.

\- 🥅 -

September 2015 – Boston

“They have you dressing for any of the preseason games?” Marlow asked, waiting with Ilya near the boards for their turn at the next shooting drill.

Ilya hummed. “LeClaire said probably just last one. It’s Montreal so. They will want to please our superfans.”

“Yeah, I think I’m in for the last two,” Marlow replied, shifting his weight between his skates, “They’re hoping to test a few new line combinations with the rookie wingers.” Reaching down to tuck in his laces, he added, “Speaking of Montreal, d’you hear they signed some big name goaltending prospect from Michigan State? Dude’s supposed to be a monster.”

Ilya nodded, thinking about the several paragraphs of disgruntled texts from one Shane Hollander currently on his phone from this morning alone. He had, in fact, heard about the Voyageurs' new backup goalie, and knew more about him than anyone outside the Montreal locker room was likely supposed to at this point. Hollander, who had played his last seasons in a roughly 70-30 split with a rotating roster of chronically injured backup goalies and a middling waiver-exempt AHL call-up, had ranted for ages about the cocky little shit with whom they wanted him to develop a real tandem relationship.

('He's awful,' Hollander had despaired over FaceTime two weeks ago when their training camp had kicked off. 'He won't take any direction from our goaltending coach, but Theriault and the GM love him for whatever reason. And when I shared some stats about the B Team before our scrimmage, he told me he thought analytics weren't that important! How the fuck am I supposed to work with *that?*')

Meeting Marlow's eyes, Ilya chose to stir the pot a little bit, replying, "I have heard he is overrated."

Marlow loved gossip more than any straight man he had ever met, so he hoped a little meanly that word would spread.

"Shit, really?" Marlow asked, bait taken. "I guess we should hope so anyway. They already have fucking Wallender over there still cleaning house. And now that they have a starting center who actually makes plays too, they might succeed in bringing our old school rivalry back."

"We are the better team still, obviously," Ilya said blandly, struggling to keep cracks from forming in the visage of Mature Captaincy that he put on especially for training camp.

What he really wanted to say was 'fuck Montreal and their incompetent leadership too' but the wide-eyed teenagers who kept hovering closer and closer to him meant he needed to bite his tongue. Boston's coaching staff pretty much let him run a veritable locker room clown show during the actual season, but always asked that he take the preseason seriously, at least in front of the rookies. He was a leader here, whatever that meant, and so he was a little less jokey and a little more 'we're all in this together, Go Bears' vibes.

"You talked to Michaels much lately?" Marlow asked suddenly, referencing their goaltending coach, "My agent said there were whispers that Montreal was looking to train that new kid up and then ship Hollander off for the elite trade deal of the century before his contract's up. Do you think we could get him to come here?"

Ilya nearly tripped over his skates, blurting, "What the fuck? Why?"

"Because he's one of the best fucking goalies in the league, man," Marlow replied slowly, arching a brow, "Jesus, Roz. I'm not saying we write letters asking for his hand in marriage. Just… plant the seed. You guys go way back, right?"

I literally made Shane Hollander edge himself over FaceTime until he cried last night, Ilya thought, and then cleared that unhelpful memory from his head expeditiously.

"Yes, I mean, we faced each other in Juniors," Ilya said, fighting to keep his expression neutral, "And I drafted him to my All Star team. We have… talked. A little."

“Right, so you have an in,” Marlow agreed, “I know none of this player management stuff is up to us as captains, but like, imagine if you got Hollander thinking… and that got his agent thinking… and then he approaches with better terms already negotiated with Boston before Montreal can pull the trigger to send him elsewhere.”

Ilya nodded again, noncommittal. It was an intriguing thought, though he wasn’t sure Marlow’s sources had the full story. There was no way Montreal wouldn’t milk one more year of Hollander’s existing contract, maybe throw him a short extension, and then start their wheeling and dealing from there.

The whole trading process was messy and convoluted anyway, and at the end of the day, Hollander might not love Montreal but his hatred for Boston definitely outweighed any mild discomfort with his current team. Like a pesky new goalie tandem to contend with.

Ilya sighed and launched back onto the ice to subject the poor prospect in goal to the firing squad. This season would be… interesting, anyway, with two of their franchise veterans having retired and a hunger for another Cup on everyone’s mind after last year’s Final defeat.

But at least there were certain consistent things to still look forward to. Pretty moans and prettier freckles and the perfect shape of a body against his own, whose ghostly imprint seemed to last longer and longer each time they met and then separated again.

October couldn’t come soon enough.

The watch on Ilya’s wrist buzzed as if to punctuate the sentiment. He peeled back the edge of his glove just enough to read the message preview and smiled so big that Marlow immediately said ‘damn Roz, what’s her name?’ from over his shoulder.

Pippa: two more weeks

\- 🥅 -

May 2016 – New York

Shane checked his phone one last time before he headed out onto the ice, rolling his eyes at the message that waited there.

Faye: should have been me 😩

Shane: Poor baby. One Stanley Cup isn’t enough for you?

Faye: obviously not. i need at least 10 before i retire

Faye: but good luck. beat hunter pls. he is so annoying

Shane: 🫠

Shane put his phone on silent and tucked it back on the shelf, shifting into focused goaltending mode for Game 4 of the Eastern Conference finals, where the New York Admirals led 2-1 in the series. If the Voyageurs got through this, they would be in the actual Stanley Cup final for the first time in eleven long, dry seasons. The fans deserved to feel some fucking hope for once.

Montreal's latest season had obviously gone more smoothly than years past, and while Shane still held no love — or goalie hugs — for the snotty child they liked to swap him out with, he could recognize that Buzzard, as they called him, was keeping pucks out of the net at least.

Still, it was Shane's show tonight and as he watched his new and improved team play quick, intelligent hockey all around him, he felt the kind of electrifying pulse of competition beneath his skin that he'd been missing. They could do this. Together.

Well into the third period, he was pleased to have kept the Admirals out of his net entirely, his defensemen doing a valiant job at limiting the number of shots on goal to a less blood-pressure elevating level than they had managed in the past.

Dressed in angry Admiral red, Scott Hunter was playing with notable agitation, clearly not at the top of his game, and Shane was all too happy to block his shots specifically. After a gutsy but well-timed and ultimately legal poke check from Shane, Hunter lost his footing and the puck with it. He clipped the net in his fall, knocking it out of place which then stopped the play entirely. Shane whispered a quiet apology to his left post for the abuse.

Back on his feet, Hunter was immediately in the face of a nearby official, using all of the power of that 'C' emblazoned on his chest to complain about the lack of a call probably.

Shane rolled his eyes from his crease, unable to resist calling out, "I didn't even touch your skates, asshole. You fucking tripped all on your own."

Hunter's head whipped around and his eyes narrowed behind his visor. He looked at Shane for a moment, expression darkening. The look on his face was almost terrifyingly calculating as he skated away from the ref and toward Shane instead.

"Captain, please," he said breathily, voice pitched in some sort of accent that—

Shane saw red.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he snapped, ready to leave the crease just as JJ's massive arm slid in front of him like a train crossing.

Hunter looked smug, hocking a loogie onto the ice. "You heard me, Hollander. Or well, *I* heard you."

"And so what, you old pervert!" Shane hissed in reply, vision narrowing to one pinpoint black dot. A desire for physical violence coursed through his veins like never before, as he spat, "You probably liked it!"

Hunter looked momentarily stunned by the assertion. Yes, Shane had a lot of internalized bullshit to parse through, but fuck if he was going to let some crusty hockey homophobe make him feel bad for… enjoying himself. Hunter's loser geriatric dick was probably so neglected and lonely it was close to shriveling off, and Shane gleefully told him as much.

“Hollzy, man, relax!” JJ yelled, as two other Voyageurs joined in to hold Shane back, “*Câlice*, I swear he is not worth it.”

Eventually, the group wrangled Shane into submission as the referee determined there was no tripping penalty to be issued, releasing Shane back to his crease with a verbal warning to stop running his mouth.

Shane was happy to, especially when Hayden Pike put one in the net in the final seconds to clench their 1-0 win.

In the post-game locker room, he dismissed his teammates’ concerns, waving off the confrontation with Hunter as nothing more than the Admirals’ captain poking at old wounds.

“Hollander, just don’t get yourself ejected, okay?” Theriault said mildly in passing, “We need you for the final.”

Grabbing his phone from the shelf, Shane was unsurprised to find another text waiting for him too.

Faye: fuck, when i said beat hunter i did not mean literally

Shane snorted, tugging off his pads, just as a second message came through.

Faye: was hot though

Shane: Gimme 45 min 📞

Faye: 😈

Shane’s cheeks warmed with anticipation: a win *and* a reward.

What did stupid fucking Scott Hunter know about that?

- 🥅 -

May 2016 – Boston

“And they’ve done it, folks!”

On the television, Montreal’s captain hoisted the Cup, the announcers yammering on and on about a new legacy after several years of intensive rebuilding efforts. The other Voyageurs were spread out across the rink, greeting their families and celebrating with the fans on home ice as the cameras flashed all around them. If he squinted, Ilya could make out a #42 jersey standing with two people who were presumably his parents, one of his skates still making contact with the crease, tethering him to the moment.

Ilya was surprised when he noticed that a smile had crept onto his face, his eyes a little moist at the sight.

“Remember your precious teenage crush on Shane Hollander?” Svetlana laughed, her legs stretched across the length of the couch, feet balanced on Ilya’s thighs. “Look at him now!”

He froze, choking out his own laugh a second too late.

The minor hesitation was enough to set off alarm bells for someone as perceptive as his best friend, and she immediately sat up and turned to look him dead in the eyes.

“Please tell me you are not still pining,” Svetlana said, the disapproval plain on her face.

“I’m not pining,” he argued back immediately, “All we do is—”

Whoops.

He cut himself off, seeing how her eyes had narrowed at the present-tense phrasing.

“All you do is what?” she asked, switching to clipped, colder Russian as she demanded, “Explain yourself right now, you terrible man.”

Caught out, he flipped to Russian himself and attempted a weak, “All we do is… play hockey against each other. Maybe flirt a little bit pre-game? I don’t even know if he’s—”

“Surely I taught you to lie better than that,” Svetlana cut in, rolling her eyes, “When did you fuck him?”

“The first time?” he clarified like an idiot, wincing at his stupidly impulsive mouth.

She blinked. “Oh, so we’re talking about repeat encounters now?”

“It’s nothing serious,” he replied quickly, “We just hook up in person when Boston plays Montreal and like… over video chat sometimes. In between. That’s… a more recent addition.” *God, he needed to shut up. Why couldn’t he shut up?* “And sometimes we text. And call. But about sex… mostly.”

As his babbling trailed off, Svetlana nodded slowly. “And how long has this been going on? Since last All Stars, I assume?”

The panic must have shown on his face. She tilted her head, then leaned in closer, like a snake poised to strike. “Ilyusha,” she said warningly, “How long?”

He looked away as he mumbled his answer.

“Sorry, what was that?” she coaxed, voice soft and patient like a primary school teacher. A little condescending too.

“I said three years, okay,” he snapped, watching her eyes widen.

She hesitated, the tense silence lengthening between them, before she ventured, “Are you… together?”

“No,” he scoffed, a strange tightness in his chest forming at the thought, “I would have told you that.”

Svetlana scooted closer, reaching one sharply manicured hand out to place it on his knee. She squeezed once, twice, in comfort.

“Do you want to be with him?”

He exhaled sharply. “Sveta, please, leave it.”

She bristled, tone sharper as she replied, “Look, I think I am allowed to be a little curious about the man my best friend has been sleeping with for years apparently, and completely obsessed with for even longer than that.”

Momentarily stunned into silence, he watched the gears behind her eyes turn as she suddenly gasped, “Oh my god? The 2014 Stanley Cup night. You were heartbroken over some ‘mystery man’ and this whole time— Wow, you are fucked.”

He felt his heart twinge at the memory of Sochi and the devastated look on Hollander’s face at his rejection. The way he’d spent a cowardly few months not speaking to Hollander at all, before Vegas had come around and turned everything on its head. They had been so happy since then, it was strange to remember a time when Hollander hadn’t been in his life this consistently. If they weren’t fucking in person, they were fucking over FaceTime, and if they weren’t fucking at all, they were exchanging silly, gossipy texts frequently enough during the season now that he was pretty sure they might even sort of be friends. Hollander Hex, notwithstanding.

“You’re really overstating this,” he argued, grateful that they shared a native tongue that allowed for the nuance he needed, “I promise I’m not pining. There are no broken hearts, on either side. We have a convenient, mutually beneficial situation. And it’s lasted for years because it’s that easy. No feelings involved.”

“If it were anyone else, I might believe you,” she replied after a moment, “but Ilyusha, you have always been a little… crazy about him. I thought it was maybe just the silly curse that drew you in. But you *have* been different these last few years. Softer. Happier, even.”

Ilya swallowed, pulse fluttering at her implication. “I barely know him, Sveta.”

She frowned, something like pity shining in her eyes. “Sweet sunshine, do you really think you can claim that now? After all this time? I know what your other hookups are usually like, and you certainly don’t put in the same effort for them.”

She shifted back onto her own couch cushion, giving him a little space, and reached out to grab her cocktail from its coaster on the coffee table. “Do you like spending time with Shane?”

The use of the first name — something he bit back from his own lips most times now — sent a tingle up his spine that he worried she’d noticed. She probably had. He took a long pull from his own drink, wincing at the strength of it. Even in their youth, Svetlana had always been a particularly vicious bartender.

“I like having *sex* with Hollander,” he insisted, the overcorrection probably just as telling as if he’d actually admitted that he enjoyed the other man’s company, if not more so.

She rolled her eyes, taking a long sip of her drink and muttering, “Stupid, emotionally constipated hockey boys.” And then added, “Okay, fine. *Fine.* Keep doing… whatever it is you are doing with him. But just know that I see right through you, Ilya Rozanov.”

She leaned back over to poke a sharp nail from her free hand into the flesh of his left pec. “And when this blows up in your face, I will still comfort you because I am a good fucking friend, but I will also say I told you so. Many, many times. And you know you hate to deal with me when I’m vindicated.”

Ilya blinked, realizing that it really had been some time since he’d considered what the inevitable end of his dalliances with Shane Hollander would actually look like. He prayed that the aftermath would be something easy and mature, a clinical break. Hollander was boring and predictable. Surely only the standard dream of wife and kids and white picket fence would make sense for a man like that, especially now that they were approaching aging bachelor status in hockey years. Ilya, on the other hand, would be too busy winning more Cups and having unrestricted fun to care about Hollander’s adorable little life. Wouldn’t he?

Just as he opened his mouth to say more, his phone buzzed on the coffee table, ‘Pippa’ visible in the message preview.

Guiltily glancing over at Svetlana, he bit his lip, poised to ignore it. He wasn’t going to prove her right by looking too eager to speak to his casual fuckbuddy, even one who was most assuredly taking time to text *him* from the locker room after winning a Stanley Cup.

“Oh, this is worse than I thought,” she said, snorting as she fought a smile, “Go on, then. Answer your boy.”

Ilya stuck his tongue out, reaching for the phone and clicking into the chat.

Pippa: Now we’re even again 🏆

He rolled his eyes, biting back a smile. Maybe he did know some things about Shane Hollander that others didn’t. Like what an absolute troll he was.

Ilya: congratulations 🎉

The reply came immediately.

Pippa: Thank you 😊 My mom cried so much. I thought I would never escape her hugs.

Ilya winced, Hollander having no way of knowing just how poignant that scene felt for him. No one from Ilya’s family had hugged him for winning the Cup, especially not his mother. Obviously. His brother had asked if it came with a cash prize though, of course.

Ilya: what will you do to celebrate?

Pippa: I thought you might have some ideas.

Ilya watched as Svetlana rose from the couch and headed back toward his minibar, refilling their glasses with something probably even more evil and poisonous than before.

Ilya: i have someone over right now, sorry

And then, for no conceivable reason, he felt compelled to add:

Ilya: just a friend

There was a long pause then.

Pippa: Cute. You know you don't have to ask my permission, right? 😉

Ilya stared down at his phone, open-mouthed at the way Hollander was parroting his words from the summer right back at him. Spending time with that insufferable flirt Mikhail Popov and his probably very hot boyfriend had obviously turned Hollander into a monster. Even if he hadn't slept with them — *allegedly* — and had instead let Ilya edge him through a very delicious scene involving a sparkly purple dildo that Ilya hadn't stopped referencing in jest since.

Ilya: they are actually a friend, brat :P

Ilya: but tomorrow? maybe?

Svetlana padded back over, placing a drink in his hand and reaching for the TV remote to switch from the hockey coverage to something lighter. Ilya went to place his phone back on the table, just as it buzzed one last time.

Pippa: Yes, please.

Pippa: You can address me as Champion.

God, it was incredible how much Ilya hated this man.

And also how much he really fucking didn't.

- 🥅 -

November 2016 – Boston

The doorbell rang and Ilya padded over from where he'd been leaning very nonchalantly against the kitchen island for the last fifteen minutes. Waiting.

"This is a terrible idea," Hollander said as soon as he entered, though the huge grin on his face betrayed his delight. He paused, looking around and then added, "Nice fucking house, *Jesus*."

Ilya laughed, taking in Hollander's blue jeans and leather jacket — a far cry from his typical post-game athletic wear. They had never met *before* a game like this, but a last minute change to the flight schedule had put Montreal in the city a day early. Naturally Ilya had spent the entirety of Hollander's team flight to Boston engaging in a sexy psy-op to annoy him into agreeing to

come by. Primarily to tour the newest shining jewel in Ilya's real estate portfolio, of course. But also maybe… to give themselves a whole day together too.

Ilya couldn't ask him to stay the night. But he was probably going to anyway. All self control gone out the window after this long without Shane Hollander's hands on him; stupid freak Canadian thunderstorms keeping them apart in October this year.

"Are you going to show me around?" Hollander asked, hovering in the entryway and looking genuinely torn between ogling the interior design choices or Ilya shirtless in front of him.

"After," Ilya replied, grinning viciously as he grabbed his hand, guiding Hollander around the corner until he could press him up against the granite-topped island instead.

The moan that echoed across his spacious kitchen could have come from either of them, before their lips were subsequently attached in a kiss that felt borderline symbiotic.

Christ, nothing on a tiny phone screen could ever, ever compare to this.

An indefinite time later, he was fully lifting Hollander onto the counter with ease, feeling that perfect, solid body shudder against him as he got his mouth on Hollander's jaw, biting lightly down his neck and into the juncture of his shoulder.

"No marks," Hollander choked out, pawing at him weakly.

"No marks?" Ilya hummed, tugging the collar of Hollander's t-shirt down to trace his tongue over his clavicle. "Or just not visible?"

"I fucking hate you," Hollander gasped, even as he helpfully writhed out of his jacket to give Ilya better access, "You *know* where I like to be bruised."

Ilya did. Inner thighs, mainly. And a full set of fingerprints across his ribs, once, when taking him from behind had gotten… slightly out of hand. Hollander had sent close-up photos a few days later that would sexually haunt him for the rest of his life.

Finishing his already-purpling masterpiece on Hollander's sternum, he took a step back, breathing out a laugh at the way Hollander immediately moaned out a quiet 'no' in response. He tugged the man down from the countertop and said nonchalantly, "You want the tour now?"

For a moment, Hollander resembled something akin to an angry kitten, brows furrowed and hair stuck up in all directions from Ilya's wandering hands. "If you don't show me to your bedroom this fucking instant, I'm calling an Uber back to the hotel."

Ilya rolled his eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh, like he was ever so burdened by the request.

"Wow! You give a man one Stanley Cup and he becomes a total diva," he teased.

"I'll show you total diva," Hollander hissed, and then tugged him back into a bruising kiss, which was… not really a terrible punishment.

Ilya laughed as they broke apart, though he was harder than he'd been in fucking months probably.

“C’mon, Mr. Diva,” he said, leading Hollander toward the stairs to the master bedroom, “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Rachel Reid: hey don't even worry about what hollanov were up to in 2015 and like most of 2016. probably just bangin or whatever

Me: i'm going to worry about it for 10,000 words actually

Notes and a little fun trivia today:

- There is a specific superstition about not touching the Conference Final trophies (the Prince of Wales for the East and the Clarence Campbell Bowl for the West, which are awarded in the semi-final round before the Stanley Cup). Many captains refuse to hoist their respective trophy and most players won't go near them in general, considering it extremely bad luck going into the final, although some franchises have done so and continued to win without issue. I like to think that Ilya has hoisted that bad boy several times without giving a fuck, much to the terror of half of Boston.
- A reminder on some of the logic behind a goalie tandem and a fun tier list of the NHL's current tandems, in case you're looking to adopt a bonded pair of your own. Would not recommend you pick Shane Hollander and Daniel "Buzzard" Volturi right now. They're working some things out.
- If you thought the earlier details about the Draft and Shane's movement through the OHL and AHL were confusing, let me welcome you to NHL trading and player management. Highly recommend just taking my word for it on how complex it would actually be to move expensive, elite players like Shane and Ilya around the league before their initial contracts were up, and how that would become even more complex after they'd likely work with their agents and teams to add specific trade protections into their future contracts. Controversial veteran player trades are still possible (RIP Caps fans recently) but somewhat less common than they used to be given new restrictions.

As always, thank you for being here! I know there's been some discourse floating around on fic author etiquette, especially replying to comments, and I just want you to know that I do absolutely read every single comment and treasure them, even if I don't often find the time to reply between actively working on the next chapter. Seriously, y'all are just so, so generous with your engagement on each new installment that it often gets away from me! But please continue to interact here and with me on twt. It means a lot for a massive brain-draining WIP like this one! 🖤

Chapter 10: Rose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 2016 – Boston

When Shane blinked awake, he was momentarily disoriented, taking a second to realize that he was in Ilya Rozanov's *house,* in his bed more precisely, curled up against the man's chest and already sore in ways that were going to be annoyingly satisfying to play through tomorrow. He peered down at his own bare chest where a red mouth-shaped bruise just below his collarbone was starting to deepen to purple. *God, what a menace.* That would be a joy to ignore chirps about in the locker room later. Still, he found himself pressing a thumb into the center of it, smiling at the way the sharp ache served as a reminder of Rozanov's thorough attention.

Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, he realized it was only mid-afternoon, and that he had hours left — before he'd promised to meet Hayden out for dinner — to quietly savor… whatever this was. An indulgence and a mistake probably, when all was said and done. They didn't *do this*, this meeting up before a game thing, and he was nervous about the impact it might have on his goaltending flow state. Shane was breaking all kinds of rules lately when it came to Rozanov, the idea of 'no distractions' feeling a little silly given that he was arguably *more* distracted now in the long months between getting his physical fix than he was by the eventual relief of Rozanov's hands on him again. And, despite their semi-regular texting and calling (or maybe, because of it?), Shane *missed* Rozanov when they were apart, in a way he hadn't in the years before. That felt… dangerously close to a crush.

Which would unquestionably violate the secret Rule #1 on Shane's list of strict hookup guidelines:

(1a). No feelings.
1b. No distractions.
2. Quit them before they quit you.

There was a snuffle beside him as Rozanov awoke from his own nap, his eyes blinking open prettily, framed by those long, doll-like lashes. The sleepy smile that bloomed on his face at seeing Shane tucked against his shoulder was so sweet it was almost nauseating. He tugged Shane closer, squeezing a bit.

"Hi," Rozanov said softly, tilting his head down.

"Hi," Shane echoed, whispering the word just before Rozanov's lips met his own.

The kiss was more of a comfort than a prequel to something hotter, a shockingly tender 'just because' sort of affection that made the sense of unease in the pit of Shane's stomach triple in size. He fell easily into it regardless, the lightest brush of a tongue against the seam of his lips making him shudder.

"Time to eat something," Rozanov proclaimed after they broke apart, slipping out of the bed and rooting around in his nearby dresser until he produced a pair of tees and joggers. He tossed a set

Shane's way before getting dressed himself, Shane's eyes automatically tracking the waistband of the pants as he pulled them over the swell of his backside. "Meet me downstairs when you are ready. No rush."

Shane nodded, collapsing back into the sheets with Rozanov's clothes in hand. As Rozanov left the room, he exhaled and let the first small wave of anxiety crash over him. What the hell was he doing here? Cuddling and napping and now staying for lunch? It was domestic enough to cross the flimsy line he'd drawn in his mental sandbox between a casual exploration of his sexuality and something… more.

Shane didn't *want* a boyfriend. *Couldn't* have one, even if he did. Not safely at least; not like the girlfriend — the wife — he was surely meant to end up with once all of this… ended. (Even if he couldn't quite conjure up an ideal version of her in his mind just yet.)

So what if Mikhail Popov had somehow made a discreet, loving, long distance relationship with a man work for three years while winning Stanley Cups and a Vezina Trophy and maintaining a very public social media presence that delighted hockey fans from Carolina and across the league alike. It wasn't the same. He was basically dating a normal guy, not one of the most famous men in professional sports (much less the captain of his rival team), and there weren't many stans who parasocially worshiped goalies the way they tended to latch onto big name forwards with flashy scoring tricks and even flashier personalities. Shane would be better off dating Wyatt Hayes for the general lack of speculation that would result than he ever would Boston's star center Ilya fucking Rozanov.

But Rozanov had no intention of dating Shane either, obviously, so none of this even mattered.

It was just one of Shane's irritating weaknesses, a personality defect developed after a childhood of quiet ostracization and a series of friendships he'd latched onto that weren't actually friendships at all; show Shane Hollander a rare lick of kindness or polite interest and he would be immediately invested in a relationship, wanting to be as close to the other person as possible, whether that dynamic was platonic or romantic besides. And it was because of that, after being burned one too many times, that he now fought so hard against the instinct to let himself fall in love by any dimension, and certainly never with the recklessly pure heart of his youth leading the charge. Recently, he was just finding it a little harder to stick to all his rules where Ilya Rozanov was concerned, that was all, given that breaking them usually felt so damn good.

But he knew deep down he had to get that recklessness in check. All his many routines and rituals were important. Essential. Patterns to keep and not deviate from. More than anything, his hockey depended on it.

Shane shook his head and sat back up to pull on Rozanov's shirt and sweats, painfully aware of the irony of spiraling about getting too close to another man while he inhaled the familiar scent of his fabric softener and felt his mind quiet in response. The t-shirt was extremely soft and loose-fitting and in a Shane-approved shade of blue, though he was certain Rozanov had grabbed it at random. Feeling around the neckline, Shane realized that the itchy tag that normally made him want to claw his skin off had already been carefully cut out. *Funny.* He hadn't known Rozanov was sensitive about that kind of thing too.

As he padded downstairs and into the kitchen, he was greeted with the aroma of warm bread in the toaster oven, Rozanov with his back to him as he returned a stack of tupperware containers

to the massive double-door fridge. He was humming a little bit, hips swinging to an imaginary beat, and his bedhead had left one curl sticking nearly straight up from the top of his head like a bean sprout. It was sort of unbelievable: the scourge of the NHL, soft and rumpled and gorgeous as all hell in the late autumn sunlight, waiting on *him.*

Shane was devastated by the sight, momentarily frozen in place before he managed to clear his throat and step forward.

Rozanov spun around, flashing him a bright, toothy smile that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “You took your time, hmm? You did not get up to more in my bed without me?”

“No,” Shane replied, heart thudding in his chest, “I was just… cozy. You told me not to rush.”

Rozanov nodded. “That is true. I am glad you got some rest though. Seems like it was needed.”

Shane shifted his weight, suddenly feeling uncomfortable without the conversational barrier of sexual innuendo or snotty hockey chirping between them. This was… earnest. Almost painfully so. He wished he knew what to do with that.

“Yeah,” he said lamely.

“You can get comfy in living room,” Rozanov continued, either unaware of Shane’s awkwardness or choosing to valiantly steer them around it. Probably the latter. “Remote is on coffee table. I think Edmonton game is starting soon if you are feeling like hockey.”

Shane nodded, grateful for the instructions and for the opportunity to escape for a moment to recenter himself. He took a step toward the other room just as Rozanov’s voice cut in, “Actually, one second. Come here, please.”

It was mortifying how quickly the command had him spinning on his heel. Shutting the fridge with one hip, Rozanov cut around the kitchen island and stalked toward him, his hands coming up to grasp at Shane’s waist. He then pulled him into a kiss so thorough that Shane felt the vibration of energy between them all the way down to his toes, one of Rozanov’s big hands coming up to cup his jaw with delicious pressure. It was over all too soon, Shane practically gasping as they broke apart, a thread of saliva connecting their lips before it stretched and split into nothingness.

“Okay, thank you,” Rozanov said with a cheeky grin, patting Shane on the butt as he shooed him away, “I will bring sandwiches over. You like tuna, yes?”

What the fuck. He needed to get out of here.

Instead, Shane simply nodded. “Yeah, I… uh, big fish fan.”

He cringed. *Big fish fan?* Christ, he was losing it.

Scurrying away from the kitchen, he made the short journey over to the couch in the next room — a deep blue wrap around sectional covered in an assortment of jewel-toned throw pillows. Sitting down, he almost laughed at the irony, recalling all the times Rozanov had teased him for the inconvenience of too many pillows in his own Montreal apartment, though to be fair they did tend to make couch and bed-based activities more challenging without tossing them aside.

Not that Shane would be doing any more of that today. Nope. He would eat his sandwich and then make some kind of excuse to leave early and that would be that. And then they would see each other for another rushed night sometime in the spring, back to the typical rhythm of their seasonal hookups and not this strange, slow, dreamy day with altogether too much time to just… hang out and talk to one another. Talking to Rozanov was dangerous. Most of the hockey world tended to complain when he opened his mouth; unfortunately for Shane, each time he spoke only served to annoy and charm him further.

Rozanov wandered into the room a few minutes later, a tray with two plates and drinks in hand, just as Shane was chirping Edmonton's 2C for a truly terrible pass resulting in a turnover. Sitting down a respectable distance away, Rozanov set the food out on the table, sliding a cold diet ginger ale in front of Shane before popping the tab on his own red cola can. Not even a sugar free version, Shane thought with a wince, though he said nothing aloud of course. They ate in relative silence, grumbling here and there as both teams continued to play sloppy, early season puck on screen.

Swallowing nervously as he pushed his plate away, Shane ventured, "Do you cook for all your hookups?"

Rozanov turned to look at him in surprise. "Ah, no," he said, scratching at the back of his neck, "Or well, sometimes, I guess. There was girl in New York who had beautiful kitchen. I came back second night just to use her fancy stove. And another girl in Winnipeg who liked to bake together. Very wholesome and Canadian." He let out a groan. "Hollander, you have not lived until you eat fresh chocolate chip cookie after orgasm."

Shane bit his lip. "Do you see them often? These girls?"

Rozanov shifted closer, peering at him with an open, thoughtful expression. "As often as I am in their cities and our schedules line up, yes." He smirked, easy and confident as ever, though his next words were a surprise. "Calling you has been more convenient most times though."

Shane resisted the urge to preen at that, being chosen virtually over surely more desirable local options.

"But you prefer them? Women?" he pressed, not exactly sure *what* he was after, but feeling the buzzing in his ears just the same.

Rozanov shrugged, placing a hand on Shane's thigh. "What is preference, really? I like both. It is easier to meet women while out, of course. They are fun and very beautiful and my role with them is clear. Men are… more complicated." He wrinkled his nose. "And I am not interested in being on bottom."

Shane nodded slowly. "I mean, I've heard some women might like to, uh… top men too."

He hadn't 'heard' this in conversation exactly, so much as he'd spent a lot of time online in some *very* specific spaces, but there was no way in hell he was ever admitting his sources to a man who'd already chirped him within an inch of his life for owning a dildo that sparkled. (It was fucking cute and had been on sale, okay? And the fact that it looked nothing like a real penis had been comforting to him at eighteen, to be fair.)

Rozanov ducked his head to mouth at Shane's neck. "Oh? Is that what you do with yours?"

“My what?” Shane mumbled, choking back a moan as his body went boneless under Rozanov’s firm grasp.

Rozanov sat back for a moment, smirking. “Your women,” he clarified, “I never hear about you with them. But I did not realize you were doing secret kinky things. That is very sexy to imagine.”

Shane shook his head, trying to clear away some of the fog that gathered as Rozanov’s wandering hands crept higher still, massaging his inner thighs. “Ha, yeah. You know me. Kinky things.”

At that, Rozanov full-on snorted, though his voice took on a darker tone as he murmured, “But these women, they do not fuck you like I do, yes? Fill you up in the way you need?”

Shane shook his head. That was a much easier question to answer truthfully, considering it had never fucking happened and was extraordinarily unlikely to. He wasn’t sure any other man could respond to his desires so precisely either, but he bit back that response in favor of a simple, “No, not like you.”

Anyway, he was losing the plot a little bit here, forgetting exactly where this conversation had started and how he’d meant to end it. He’d been planning to leave, hadn’t he? What time was it even? Dinner with Hayden was—

“What do you need, Hollander?” Rozanov said, deep and tantalizing.

Fuck it.

Without a second thought, Shane was swinging a leg over him, climbing fully into his lap to straddle those big, gorgeous thighs as Rozanov helped him tug off his shirt. He pressed his head into Rozanov’s shoulder, breathing out, “I… I want to feel us both.”

“Mm, yes, we can do that,” Rozanov purred back, shimmying his pants and underwear down before reaching out to free Shane’s own aching cock from its confines.

Shane shifted his hips forward, brushing the now exposed skin together. They moaned in sync, Rozanov’s hands reaching back to palm at his ass and lower back, guiding him with gentle pressure as they began to rock slowly together.

“Take what you need, hmm?” Rozanov instructed.

Boldly, in a way he knew he’d find disgusting outside of this particular headspace, Shane spit into his hand and reached between them, wrapping his fingers around as much of their cocks as he could manage.

“Ah, there you go, sweetheart, yes,” Rozanov encouraged, eyes a little glassy as he almost babbled his words in a way that Shane had never heard from him.

As they rocked into Shane’s grip together, he could see something undefinable in Rozanov’s expression begin to shift. Wonder and awe at the dynamic maybe? Shane was a little dazed by it on his end, at least. Though he had been on top before at times, riding that same perfect cock, *this* was sort of new: both of their impending orgasms basically in his hands alone.

Feeling empowered by it, Shane aligned their mouths, kissing Rozanov messily until he pulled back just enough to murmur against his lips, “I want you to come for me.”

Rozanov shivered, moaning with a darkly colored timbre that filled Shane’s ears like a revelation. Fuck, he was beautiful. And *his,* for now. All his.

“Hollander, please,” Rozanov choked out, gazing up at him in a way that was almost reverent.

Shane swallowed at the uncharacteristic plea, chasing his pleasure more aggressively as he tried not to let the thoughts on the edges of his consciousness overwhelm him.

This was fine. This was so, so good. Shane wasn’t thinking about staying the night, waking up next to Rozanov in the morning, maybe making breakfast before their call times as they listened to something on the radio and Rozanov shimmied his hips to the music, smiling and smiling. He wasn’t thinking about how it was unlikely he would ever replicate this exact, stripped-bare sort of intimacy with anyone else. And he most certainly wasn’t thinking about a serious future that neither of them could fucking afford.

“Fuck, Sha- ane—”

Oh.

Like a bucket of ice water thrown over the fantasy of the moment. That was his name. His first name. Falling from Rozanov’s lips as his whole body went rigid before he was spilling over Shane’s fist.

What a fucking time to be mid-crisis, with his years’ long hockey-rival-with-benefits’ cum dripping down his fingers and cock, his own release joining it not a second later.

One painful beat thudded in his chest, ribs rattling, and then:

“Ilya,” Shane whispered into the silence. Just to try it. One time and never, ever again.

The sound of it — and the amazed look on Rozanov’s… *Ilya’s* face that resulted — was enough to break his fucking heart.

What were they doing to each other?

Ilya shuddered out a breath and chased his lips, managing to press a soft kiss to his jaw before Shane turned his head away. He slid out of Ilya’s lap — fuck, how was he supposed to go back to the chill of ‘Rozanov’ now that he’d let the name slip — and reached for the discarded t-shirt on the cushion next to him.

His hands were shaking as he dressed hurriedly, the world blurring around him in the bad way. Everything too loud and too bright for the body he was suddenly disgustingly aware of down to a cellular level, the cliff’s edge of total meltdown rapidly approaching. Panicked, Shane watched as Ilya sat up, regarding him with clear concern.

“I, uh, Hayden is,” he tried, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, “I have to—”

“Hollander, what are you saying?” So ‘*Shane’* was gone then. A heat of the moment thing maybe. Though it had permanently altered his fucking brain chemistry just the same.

“I have to go,” he said, chest heaving, “I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t— it’s…”

Ilya— fuck*, Rozanov* was on his feet then.

“Hollander, please,” he said, the same words from just minutes before as Shane had brought them both to completion, but this time colored with worry and a little hurt too. “You can go,” he continued, hands clenched at his sides, “You know I would not stop you, but. Can you tell me what happened?”

Shane felt like he might vomit, with the overwhelming sense of *wrongness* all around him and the way this man wouldn’t take the fucking hint to let it go. He was trying to *run.* To leave without explanation. And yet his socked feet were frozen to the ground, stuck with the urge to make the horrible expression on Rozanov’s face go away.

“My name,” he said. *Stupid. Unintelligible.*

Rozanov tilted his head, stepping closer. “Can I… touch you?”

Shane slammed his eyes shut. Shook his head no.

“Alright,” Rozanov said softly, “So I said your name. I should not do that again?”

Shane sucked in a breath. No, that wasn’t right. Rozanov hadn’t done anything wrong. It wasn’t fair to make him think that.

“I liked it,” Shane whispered, “but it scared me. We’re not—”

“We’re not anything, you’re right,” Rozanov replied, though something complicated was warring on his features. “But here you could just be Shane,” he offered, so brutally gentle with it, “If you wanted.”

It was the temptation of a fucking lifetime. To just give in. To be something and nothing to Ilya Rozanov all at once. To stay.

“I can’t,” Shane choked out, feeling sick with it, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can do *any* of this anymore.”

There was a long, frigid silence.

“Okay,” Rozanov said eventually, expressionless now.

Shane swallowed, still rooted to the spot, blurting out before he could stop himself, “The game tomorrow.”

Rozanov sighed, shoulders sagging. “What about it?”

“We’ll still be normal, right? Play our best?”

He watched Rozanov’s jaw work, those wet green eyes cutting away as he thought it through.

“I don’t know,” he said eventually, “It has been long time since I have played you and not felt anything but happy about it.”

Shane winced, watching Rozanov take several steps backward, face still hauntingly devoid of emotion.

The increased distance was visceral, as was the way he punctuated the moment with a resigned, “Goodbye, Hollander.”

Shane fled, before he could ruin the moment further, or else do something as ridiculous as risk his entire future as the Voyageurs’ Hollander to be Ilya’s Shane instead.

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“Hey, buddy!” Hayden greeted as Shane slid into the booth, “I ordered ahead for us like you asked. Got an extra appetizer too. Which you can stare at longingly from over the rim of your salad bowl.”

“Hi, thanks,” Shane replied stiffly, jamming his hands below the tabletop to hide that they were still shaking.

He’d barely had time to get back to their hotel to shower and change — fuck, he’d basically stolen Rozanov’s clothes — before rushing over to the Michelin starred Italian spot at which they’d managed a last minute reservation from the airport gate in Montreal that morning. None of the management must have been Bears fans to let them sneak onto the list like that after Hayden had casually mentioned over the phone that they were professional athletes from out of town looking for Boston’s finest pasta dishes. Or maybe they were, and still quietly planning to take out two Montreal players with poison-laced breadsticks.

“Earth to Shane,” Hayden said, waving a hand in front of his face. God, he’d probably been staring silently into space for ages. “Are you okay, man? You look a little—”

“Can you break up if you were never together?” Shane blurted, then immediately collapsed face first onto the table, head in his arms.

“Whoa?” Hayden said from above him, confusion evident in his voice, “Uh, I had no idea you were seeing someone. Did something happen?”

“Yes,” Shane moaned into the tablecloth, “No. I don’t know. I think I fucked up, Hayd.”

Hayden poked at his shoulder. “You’re gonna have to give me more to work with than that.”

“It was supposed to be just sex,” Shane said as he lifted his head, watching Hayden’s eyebrows approach his hairline at the words, “but it felt different this time. And I freaked out.”

“This have anything to do with that Faye you’re always texting?” Hayden ventured.

Shane jumped in his seat, startled by the observation. “How did you—?”

Hayden clearly bit back a laugh. “Shane, dude, you’re not very subtle. I thought she was some girl you were like… old fashioned courting, though. Slow burn style. Didn’t know casual was your thing.”

If only you fucking knew just how long casual has been my thing, Shane thought with a grimace.

“So you realized you want to date this girl for real?” Hayden asked, “Is that… a problem?”

Shane glanced down, picking at a loose thread on the hem of his sleeve. The pressure that had been steadily growing in his chest since he’d arrived at Rozanov’s house that morning and had exploded into mumbled half-truths by afternoon seemed to retract behind his ribs, if ever so slightly, with Hayden’s compassionate expression.

Fuck, he’d told someone about them. *Sort of.* Admitted it might be more than casual, at least on his end. *Kinda.* Even if he was still omitting a few tiny details that made this a ‘problem’ in the first place, like a) *she* wasn’t a girl at all, and b) *he* was in the press for being a womanizing playboy almost more often than his actual hockey was reported on, and c) everyone in Shane’s personal and professional life openly hated him due to said hockey, and d) Shane could probably be secretly… not straight… in the NHL for the rest of his career but being not straight with the man on the cover of EA’s NHL 16 was another fucking thing entirely, and e) it had all been building for years now into a knot in Shane’s mind so tightly tangled that it was giving him literal whiplash feeling it all unravel in front of him.

Realizing Hayden was still waiting on a response, Shane took a shaky breath and replied, “I… I don’t know. Dating wasn’t ever on the table. I just… didn’t think about it.”

Hayden hummed sympathetically. “But now you’re thinking about it?”

Shane groaned. “I think I thought about it too much. And then I panicked. There might be something there, between us, maybe…” He blew out a breath, praying that he wouldn’t trip over the substituted pronouns as he continued, “But Hayd, it would be so fucking hard. And honestly, I don’t even know if *she* has any real feelings for me at all. She’s definitely been, um… with other people too, this whole time.”

“Shit, I feel like I need to refer you to Jackie for this complicated romance stuff,” Hayden half-joked, “I’m pretty sure I just annoyed her into marrying me. Or she lost a bet or something.”

“Definitely lost a bet,” Shane tried to chirp back, though it was clear his heart wasn’t in it, “It’s just… I’ve always thought sex and relationships and all that were distractions. Nothing can be more important than hockey, you know?”

Hayden snorted. “Yeah, no, I don’t know that actually. That’s a pure Hollander take, I think.”

“We’re professional hockey players,” Shane argued.

Hayden shrugged, looking amused. “I mean, sure, but not forever. I’m going on four kids, you know. As fun as it is out there on the ice, eventually I want to be a dad who doesn’t travel two-thirds of the year, missing out on so much of their lives.”

At Shane's blank look, he added, "And hey, this Faye chick probably already knows how much hockey means to you. You never stop talking about it. And she's been coping with the distance and our crazy schedule, right? That's like half the battle."

Shane swallowed, worried he might give everything away if they kept talking in detail like this. Still, he added, "Yeah, she, uh… she actually really knows puck."

Hayden smiled, ever the optimist. "Hey, that's great then. You sound perfect for each other; her loss if she doesn't see that. And as your friend, I gotta say, you have seemed happier for a while." He winced at Shane's eyes, which must have gone all pathetically wide and watery again. "Ah, not at this exact moment obviously. But in general."

As the server arrived and placed their plates in front of them, Shane held in his sigh, exhaling with a mixture of sadness and frustration after they'd departed.

"It doesn't really matter how I feel though," he said, the panic beginning to creep back up in his throat, fingers tapping in a rapid rhythm where they were splayed across his thigh under the table, "I think it might be over between us."

Eyes getting watery again, Shane realized he really hadn't given himself enough time to properly decompress between running out of Rozanov's house and trying to keep the rest of the day's schedule intact, operating on some kind of pure anxiety autopilot.

"I think it has to be," he added decisively.

Hayden considered him for a long moment. "Shane, pal, I can tell you're on the edge of freaking out again, so I'm not going to push this," he hedged, voice gentle, "But I do think that sometimes things are worth it, even if they make us scared or uncomfortable in the short term."

Shane's sheer repulsion at the thought must have been reflected openly on his face. Hayden cringed in return, cracking a nervous smile.

"Okay, shit, you hated that," he said, scrubbing at the back of his neck, "but my point stands. Not everything always fits seamlessly together. If people choose to make room for us in their lives, that means something, don't you think? And caring in return is wanting to make room for them too. Even if that room in *your* brain might require clearing just *a little bit* of hockey out."

Shane bit his lip, thinking about all the big and small ways that Ilya Rozanov adapted for him: phone calls to talk him down from his pre-game anxiety; constantly checking in any time they tried new activities in bed; asking questions when he didn't understand something Shane said instead of just assuming his meaning or intent; following all of Shane's rules without complaint while seemingly having few requests of his own…

Shane sniffled pitifully. That cold ginger ale in the fridge…

What did Shane even offer him in return though? His sexual contributions felt crude in comparison. But maybe that was all the 'room' Rozanov had ever wanted from him anyway?

"Hey, you think you're gonna be good for tomorrow?" Hayden asked around a bite of farfalle, interrupting Shane's spiraling thoughts once more. "I bet Buzzard wouldn't mind jumping in, if you're not sure your mindset is right."

Shane bristled, replying with a sharp, “And give Buzzard the satisfaction of calling me old and unfit again?”

Hayden rolled his eyes. “Okay, yeah, the dude kinda sucks personality wise. But we have multiple goalies for a reason.” He shrugged. “I’m sure Theriault won’t freak out over you sitting for one regular season game, even if it is Boston.”

“I’ll be *fine,* Hayden,” Shane argued back, irritation mounting as he stabbed into his caesar salad, “I’m just kind of… off kilter today. It’s not going to impact my game.”

“Right, yeah,” Hayden said, still looking doubtful, “You’re Shane Wallender. Nothing gets past you.”

- 🥅 -

“Hollzy, the hell, man?” JJ asked, skating by after Shane had allowed yet another blockable shot to hit the back of the net.

3-3, Boston now tying it up. And a third assist for Rozanov too.

Shane was nearly vibrating in the crease with the force of his frustration at blowing their lead. They were well into the second period and still nothing was clicking today. His equipment felt ill-fitted, his reaction time was slow, and his limbs simply weren’t cooperating in coordination with his brain. Even Boston’s worst forwards seemed to have an edge on him that they’d never had before.

He just needed to focus, but that was proving impossible. Not least because Boston’s star center was on the fucking warpath.

Rozanov’s hockey was *stunning* today. There was no other way to put it. Despite a valiant effort from Montreal’s offense to keep up, the Boston captain was weaving beautiful chance after chance for his own wingers seemingly out of thin air. Even on a good day, Shane would have struggled against the barrage of well-timed shots, and given his… distracted mental state, he was faring markedly worse. Maybe the Hex *was* real, if only for the fact it seemed improbable that Rozanov hadn’t scored on him yet.

And speaking of, here came the first line again, flying out onto the ice for their next shift, surely aiming to make Shane’s hips ache and his head spin with the effort to keep them at bay. Time slowed as he recognized a particular play, Rozanov to Marlow back to a d-man at the blue line for the set up and—

There he was. Rozanov now just meters from the crease, the puck on his blade taunting Shane like an explosive device, countdown clock seconds from detonation. Shane could feel it then. The shift in the air between them. The fearsome, determined look in Rozanov’s eyes. And how he seemed to see all of Shane at once, those perfect hands shifting the puck to the ideal position, stick angled confidently toward Shane’s weaker side. He was absolutely, unmistakably going to score.

He was going to score, to finally lift the Hollander Hex after all these years, and then Shane would be *nothing* to him. Not a rival nor a friend, not even a statistical anomaly. Just another goaltender, an obstacle for Rozanov to dance circles around for the rest of his career, eyes trained only on the net behind him and never ever on Shane the Person again. The only man who'd ever really seen him, looking through him instead.

Oh god, he was probably a little in love with him, wasn't he?

The roar of the crowd faded out to complete silence as Shane made a split second decision. One that would haunt him into eternity, from the moment his arm started to move before his brain fully caught up to the motion.

Blood rushing in his ears, he jammed his stick out for a poke check, bold and blatant and shameful as he tripped Rozanov. On purpose.

It was possible he made contact with the puck first anyway, but it certainly hadn't been his intention. And the force plus the awkward angle, especially cruel, sent Rozanov briefly airborne, sailing past the net and into the boards beyond.

No goal.

The sounds of the arena returned tenfold, the Boston crowd singing for Shane's blood as their captain shot up from the ice, knocked-off helmet in hand and fury in his expression. Shane found himself almost cowering, braced for that anger to be turned directly upon him. But Rozanov didn't spare him another glance, skating over to the nearest official instead. It didn't take much arguing, given the egregiousness of the action, before they were issuing Shane a tripping penalty, stacked with a five-minute major when a brief scuffling fight was started by a rookie forward in his honor, misplaced as that defense was.

One man up, Boston made quick work of Montreal on the power play. 4-3. And then 5-3 another minute later. A humiliation.

Shane should have expected it then, when Theriault signaled from the bench and pulled him off the ice entirely just before the third period.

"Thanks for leaving me your bullshit to clean up, asshole," Buzzard muttered as they traded places.

Shane couldn't even chirp back, not having a leg to stand on. He'd been in those backup goalie skates once and would have been just as pissed to relieve his starter after a performance as pitiful as the one Shane had just put on. And whatever, maybe Daniel 'Buzzard' Volturi thought analytics were overrated, but he probably cared a hell of a lot about the impact of this game on *his* stats anyway. The chaotic, vindictive spirit that had possessed Shane this evening almost cheered at the personal retribution, until it remembered that the Voyageurs likely losing this game in embarrassing fashion wasn't an ideal outcome for anyone on Montreal's side.

Several coaches and an AT were in Shane's ear immediately as he hunched over in a seat behind the main bench, good cop/bad cop style chastising him for sloppy, unfocused play while interrogating him about his physical and mental health. He mumbled back a half-hearted lie about family issues and not sleeping well, just to get them off his back for now, knowing that a meeting in Theriault's office and a practice full of punishments were likely to be in his future.

More than anything, he dreaded the chill of the locker room that was sure to immediately follow, and a deserved ‘I told you so’ from Hayden, if his teammate even deigned to speak to him at all.

In the end, Montreal scraped by with a shockingly less ugly-looking 6-5 loss after one of the Bears’ key defenseman left the ice with a knee injury early in the third. Buzzard, much to Shane’s dismay, had looked calm and confident in the net despite the deficit, allowing only one more in. A Rozanov goal, of course. One pretty enough to make the highlight reel too.

After a locker room reception just as frigid as he’d imagined, Shane sat alone at the front of the bus for the team’s ride back to the hotel, headphones jammed in his ears and hoodie-clad head hung low. Minutes before, he’d heard Hayden at the back of the bus attempting to do some positive Shane PR with the rest of their teammates, bless him, via the half-truth that Shane was going through a bad breakup. The news had garnered little sympathy.

“Most of us suck it up and keep that shit off the ice though,” Buzzard had chimed in, and Shane couldn’t even begrudge the number of players who nodded in agreement.

Isolated and angry with himself, the last thing on earth he expected was the vibration of his phone in his pocket. It had to be one of the few contacts he’d allowed to ring through despite having his notifications silenced, which could only mean his mother or—

Faye: you are better than that, hollander

Shane was typing out a reply before he could reconsider, filled to bursting with guilt and self-loathing, and one impulsively idiotic decision away from just ubering right back to Rozanov’s house and begging for… for what he didn’t know. To be talked down from the ledge maybe. To be offered chance after chance to take a risk on being happy until he finally agreed to try.

Shane: Clearly I’m not.

Rozanov’s reply was instantaneous.

Faye: we should talk about it

Shane felt his lips begin to tremble, fighting back a sob. Stupid Rozanov, ever so patient and understanding, always giving him the space to logic out his emotions, to not wallow in his mistakes until they consumed him. ‘Making room’ as Hayden had called it. Could there even be a storage unit big enough in anyone’s mind to hold all Shane’s baggage though, much less someone who’d be willing to let him permanently move in with it? He was already full to overflowing on his own. And after tonight's panicked realization, he now had a new bag balanced precariously at the very top of the pile with a tag that read 'idiot who fell in love with guy notorious for refusing to be tied down' too.

Shane: I don’t think there’s anything to talk about anymore. Sorry.

Hands shaking, he navigated to Faye’s contact page, finger hovering over the block button. He should do it. Drive the final nail into the coffin and give this up just like he’d always intended. He could be free of distraction once and for all. Never mind that he’d played his worst hockey in years today after running away with the fear of what growing closer to another man might do to his game.

Cowardly as he was when it came to all things Ilya Rozanov, Shane clicked back several steps until he was staring at their messages again. Years of them, intensifying in frequency over the last season until they'd been texting nearly every day. A whole chronology of this ridiculous situation from shaky start to violent conclusion.

In the end, deleting the entire conversation thread brought little relief.

It would take more than that to scrub his memories clean.

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Sveta: do you want to talk about it?

Ilya: нет

- 🥅 -

December 2016 – Montreal

Admittedly, Shane had been all but pacing alone in his apartment when JJ's call came through, begging him to come out to a bar nearby, with the added incentive that the cast and crew in town for the filming of the next blockbuster superhero franchise were hanging out there post-shoot.

"Tu es un geek, right?" he'd said, making Shane roll his eyes, "You will love it."

Though normally not susceptible to peer pressure, Shane had been going out more often in the last month for the 'team culture', in an attempt to mend the growing rift he could feel between himself and many of his fellow Voyageurs, driven wider undoubtedly by Daniel Volturi's less than subtle smear campaign against him. Ironic given how the commentators now loved to highlight the combined success of the tandem, calling them one of the league's most solid goaltending duos. Maybe Buzzard was right, in a twisted way, about stats not showing the whole picture.

At least the bar had good wings, Shane thought, fingers coated in hot sauce as he gave his strict performance diet the night off. (There was still a source of protein in this meal, at least.) Annoyingly, another person slid into his hidden booth at the back just as he was sucking a finger clean with a pleased little moan.

Blushing, he said, "Shit, sorry. That was gross."

"I was going to ask if this seat was taken," a woman's voice replied teasingly. As Shane glanced up, she gestured at the basket of wings with a raised eyebrow. "But maybe I should leave you

two alone?"

Shane fought back a literal gasp, finding himself momentarily starstruck. It had taken a second to click in his brain, her famously pretty face framed by a redder hair color than was typical. With such a travel-heavy job, he watched *a lot* of plane movies of varying budgets and genres, and there weren't many that Rose Landry, former Disney child star turned household name, didn't seem to have at least a supporting role in.

"I'm Rose," she said, holding out a hand and then retracting it with a laugh as they both realized Shane's own hands were still a saucy mess.

"Shane," he replied, blabbering on, "And sorry, about uh… the wings. I'm kind of eating my feelings tonight."

She smiled kindly, looking amused by the sight. "I'll forgive you if you give me one. I haven't been able to eat my feelings for months now. Stupid skin tight costume."

He nodded, sliding the basket her way and watching in awe as she plucked out a singular chicken wing and slowly savored it like it was her last meal on earth. At least now he wasn't the only one moaning over barbecue sauce in this bar tonight.

"So. Feelings," she said, after swallowing her last bite, "What's your deal?" She eyed him closely, adding, "Is it because of that loss to Detroit two nights ago?"

Shane blinked, realizing that he had clearly also been recognized, and by someone who knew a fair bit of hockey no less. "Oh, uh, no. I mean… that sucked, yeah."

He swallowed, hesitating, and then making the potentially foolish assumption — fueled at least in part by the alcohol JJ had supplied him with earlier before he made his antisocial retreat — that celebrities were used to being discreet.

"I've had… romantic troubles," he whispered.

Her mouth made a cute little 'O' shape of surprise as she nodded. "Guy or girl?"

At that, Shane jolted, eyes going wide. "What?"

"Ah, sorry, Hollywood habit," she said, waving a hand, "Though I do hate to assume."

As he continued to silently gape, she added, "Seriously, I didn't mean to shock you. I know that hockey isn't the most… inclusive sport. My brothers used to play. And we come from a long line of Detroit fans of, ah, varying sociopolitical flavors."

"No, it's… fine," he replied haltingly, "I'm not, um, homophobic or anything." Under the scrutiny of her preternatural blue-eyed gaze, he continued, "It's just… was there something about me that made you think—?"

She burst out laughing, and then winced apologetically. "Sorry, I mean, no, I didn't like, intuit your sexuality based on anything you did in these few minutes since I met you. But, uh, asking that 'what made me seem gay' question as a follow up is kind of a rainbow flag, to be honest."

She winked at him and said, “I would know.” And then, “Shit, you probably have to sign an NDA now, sorry.”

It was Shane’s turn to laugh. “Wow, legal documents on the first date,” he deadpanned, “At least take me out to dinner first.”

Rose looked delighted by the joke, exclaiming, “Shane Hollander! No one mentioned that you’re funny.”

He smiled, tugging a napkin from the holder on their table to wipe the last of the sauce from his fingers. “Yeah, it tends to surprise people. Hard to see past the mask and the stats obsession, I guess.”

“Okay,” she said, leaning forward and lowering her voice to a near-whisper, “but I didn’t forget about these not-boy problems of yours. What’s going on?”

“I think you might have to sign an NDA as well if I tell you,” Shane replied, half-jokingly, though even hinting at the details of his situation beyond what he’d told Hayden at dinner that one night would probably be cause for legally-mandated discretion.

Rose grinned. “Deal. That’s how you know the gossip is good.” She gestured to herself. “Clearly.”

And so, completely ill-advisedly, Shane launched into an abridged, gender neutral version of the beautiful hellscape he’d been living in since he was basically a teenager:

1. Years of hooking up
2. Public-facing jobs that made it extra complicated
3. Feelings(?)

And…

“Also he— um,” he cut off, his eyes falling shut for a moment, frustrated that he’d let such a telling pronoun slip through despite her earlier reassurance.

“He…?” Rose prompted, looking completely unbothered by the revelation.

Shane ignored the kindness in her eyes to stage a cowardly retreat. “Ah, they’re kind of known for being a womanizer, so… even if I somehow get them to talk to me again *and* successfully apologize, confessing my… *like*… for them is still going to make me feel like an idiot.”

“I’m going to say something crazy,” Rose said, taking a long sip from her free beer (JJ having sent drinks over to their table moments ago with a wink and two massive thumbs up in Shane’s direction). “What if he— sorry, *they* are into you too? And you don’t know because…” her nose crinkled adorably as she shrugged, “... you’ve never asked? In all these years, by the way? Which is kind of insane.”

“He’s out there fucking like… supermodels,” Shane argued, accidentally dropping the pretense with the fervor of his reply. “Zero chance I’m in the same league as the other prospects.”

“Shane,” Rose said, lowering her voice as she leaned forward, “as a raging bisexual with excellent taste who has *also* walked a runway, I can assure you that you are shockingly hot.” She shrugged, flipping several strands of auburn hair over her shoulder. “If I’m extra honest, it’s why I came over here in the first place.”

“*You* wanted to flirt with me?” Shane asked, surprised and extremely flattered, “But you’re like super famous?”

Rose laughed. “Yeah, but I also have eyes.” She let out a long sigh, adding, “Plus, I’m sure I’m preaching to the choir here, but all this weird fame stuff can get kind of overwhelming. I was hoping to find somewhere to hide out for a bit. Looks like we had the same idea.”

“I’m glad you crashed my pity party,” Shane replied, a small but genuine smile on his face for the first time in several weeks, “I’ve been kind of in my head about this… guy. It’s fucking up my hockey game. And making me pretty miserable to be around too, I think.”

“I’d offer to flirt with you again, if I thought it would make you feel better,” Rose joked, “But something tells me I’ve encountered you at a weird time.”

Shane flushed. “Um, yeah, I… I don’t know that women are really… on the table for me anymore,” he whispered, the extra beer and the confidence of a stranger with no preconceptions of his character making him feel infinitely bolder, “Probably not, given that you're Rose Landry and it didn't occur to me to shoot my shot for real. Dating jokes aside."

Rose laughed politely at that, and he continued, "Also, um, after a lot of encouragement from my teammates, I took this girl home last week and… god, it was kind of a disaster.”

She hummed in sympathy. “You’re sure it wasn’t just because you’re mopey and heartbroken?”

He shook his head. “No, I just… she was really pretty and we had an interesting conversation at the club, so I fell into the same trap of thinking ‘yeah, I can get along with girls just fine’ you know?” He gestured between the two of them as evidence of the fact, watching Rose smile in return. “But then the physical stuff, it always ends up feeling like a performance. Or a test that I’m terrified of failing. It’s not very… sexy.”

“I see,” Rose replied, then held out her hand, “Give me your phone. I have like a hundred pertinent articles I want to send you.”

Shane laughed but complied easily. “Okay, wow. Legal documents and assigned readings for homework? This date is kind of intense.”

Rose handed his phone back and reached even farther across the table to shove at his shoulder as she did so. “First of all, yes, our people should probably get in touch. There are definitely paparazzi outside and at my rental that are going to spoil my lowkey invitation to have you at my afterparty in a few. We could even start a fun little rumor together.”

Shane nodded, unsure that the photographers here to capture a group of A-list actors would be interested in a random NHL goaltender, but he was grateful for the heads up anyway.

“But also, let’s be friends,” Rose continued, laughing at the way Shane’s eyes widened at the offer. “I’m serious! You spilled your gay little guts out to me just now. We’re basically besties.”

Gay. The word was terrifying still. But it helped that she had said it with only completely positive intentions. That was not a variation that Shane had often heard growing up, in locker room after locker room, and as a smaller, oft-targeted ‘pretty boy’ on the ice. Maybe he could be… gay. That would solve part of his angsting anyway.

Just not gay for Ilya Rozanov though. Too complicated. Surely he could find some regular guy, like Popov’s Jake, to settle down with in his forties. Once his hockey career was over and he was mostly forgotten, left alone to coach a timbits girls’ team in his hometown. A brief memory of Rozanov entertaining the kids at All Stars appeared in his mind and he quickly swiped that away, picturing a faceless, handsome husband with dirty blond curls and— Fuck, it might be time to go easy on the drinks.

“I’ll tell you later about the girl who is like totally ruining my life, to keep our secrets even,” Rose added with a wink, “Now go close your tab and get your friends. I’m having a real party.”

Hours later, as he sat tipsy and grinning on a sofa somewhere in Rose Landry’s long term stay penthouse hotel suite, he fished out his phone.

Shane: heyyy I think I’m gay

Misha 🍿: shane, i am shocked 😦

Shane: Wait really?

Misha 🍿: no??))0)0))))

Misha 🍿: but thank you for telling me, you are very brave, etc

Popov probably knew some other nice gay boys. With regular faces and regular jobs. Shane should ask him for a recommendation. But, then again, he was also willing to kiss Shane too, wasn’t he? At least for fun? Maybe that was exactly what Shane needed to get one blond Russian out of his system? It sure sounded like a good idea to him right now.

Shane: Next time we hang out, can I kiss you to make sure?

Misha 🍿: i am pretty confident about your gayness, shane. if you are asking for peer review))))

Misha 🍿: and how about we have rest of that conversation sober hmm

Shane’s fingers fumbled a bit over the letters as he typed.

Shane: Not that drunk 🍄

Misha 🍿: sure thing, гриб. where are you right now?

Shane: Rose landrys couch

Misha 🍿: ???????????

Shane: LOL. tell you later

Misha 🍿: ok. can you tell me when you get home safe too?

Shane: 👍👍👍👍

- 🥅 -

January 2017 – Boston

“Bro, is that Shane Hollander?”

Ilya whipped his headphones off sort of embarrassingly quickly, turning his eyes to where their rookie winger was pointing at one of the gym televisions hanging above.

“Rose Landry and new hockey player beau?” the ticker read, along with a series of pap photos of the actress and a man who was unmistakably the Voyageurs’ goalie waltzing around Montreal together, walking side by side and dining out at restaurants and wearing matching moony smiles. In one specific photo, Ilya recognized the same black puffer coat he’d often peeled off of Hollander at his penthouse’s entrance tossed over the actress’ shoulders instead, her head thrown back in laughter.

What the fuck. Hollander was *not* that funny.

Drawn in by the gossipy news story, Ilya resisted the urge to climb off his spin bike and walk toward the screen for a better look, like a moth approaching a flame that would surely kill him.

“Good for him, damn,” Marlow said appraisingly, “She’s a fucking babe.”

“Yeah, dude,” another teammate called out from the weights area, “Do you remember her tits in that one bad horror movie from—”

“Enough,” Ilya cut in. He hopped off his bike and located the remote, switching the channel to ESPN instead. “Focus on your workouts. We do not care about who Shane Hollander is dating. We only care about not losing to Dallas tomorrow. Which we will, if you are lazy and slow.”

“Alright, who jammed a stick up your ass, Cap,” Marlow muttered with a roll of his eyes, but he cranked his treadmill speed back up obediently.

“Nice to see you finally taking this part of training seriously, Rozanov,” Nick, their strength and conditioning coach, remarked drolly from the corner, making the rest of the room laugh.

Rolling his eyes, Ilya swung a leg back over his bike, turning the brightness on his phone screen down enough to hopefully avoid Marlow’s wandering eyes, and masochistically typed ‘Shane Hollander and Rose Landry’ into his search bar.

He was admittedly confused by this turn of events more than anything, certain that Hollander had fled his home because he felt like they’d been getting too close, crossing the line from hooking up into something… more. Which hadn’t exactly been Ilya’s intention when he invited

him over but wasn't… *not* not his intention either. Admittedly, he had zero formulated plan besides spending a little bit of time with Shane Hollander that didn't involve trying to burrow into each other's skin and seeing how that felt but… he guessed he knew now, given the pure panic it had caused, and the way Hollander had shown his whole fucking hand lashing out during their game the next day. Months later and Ilya still felt a little sick with it, how something as simple as letting Hollander's first name slip had chased away a seemingly good thing forever.

And now Hollander was completely fine publicly dating someone else? An A-list actress even? And peacocking around out in the open like he hadn't been getting fucked by Ilya for *years* beforehand.

It took a second for the rationale to click.

Oh. A woman. Of course.

An easier, more acceptable option for a good boy and his good boy hockey career.

Fuck, whatever. Ilya swiped at the sweat that was dripping down his forehead as he pedaled even more furiously, feeling suddenly as if the room was boiling around him. Maybe this was better for both of them in the end. It wasn't like he could parade a boyfriend around and play professional hockey either, much less ever make it back to Russia safely again— and especially not now with his entire extended family on the brink of implosion. Just his luck that after Hollander had left his house in November, his father had called, lost wandering their busy city street while completely disoriented. After calming him, Ilya had spent the rest of the evening furious with his brother and all his father's irresponsible 'caretakers' back home, then heartbroken by several dimensions in turn for weeks after too.

Swiping through the numerous photos of 'Hollandry' (barf), Ilya couldn't find any confirmation of the two actually dating, though both of their publicists had issued bland PR statements about the stars meeting during Rose's film shoot in Montreal and enjoying spending time together.

Well wasn't that cute. He wished Shane Hollander all the best then, with his perfect little life: a successful hockey career, loving parents, and a pretty girl on his arm. Lucky fucking asshole.

Ilya had been delusional to think he could find a way to have Hollander choose him. Or worse, maybe he'd just been a little too late.

But their... thing... was always going to end this way, wasn't it? Not with Shane and Ilya, together, but with two formerly friendly NHL players from rival teams who now carried a uselessly painful secret.

Closing all the tabs on his phone with a huff, he reached down and turned the dial on the bike up to its highest setting, pushing through the burn in his chest that was only partially from the exertion.

Ilya had done a lot of stupid things over the course of his near decade-long, high-profile hockey career, but fuck if falling a little bit in love with a boring, unavailable goalie from Montreal with freckles and a weak glove side wasn't his worst move yet.

March 2017 – Ottawa

When Shane woke up the morning after the trade deadline, having gone to bed at his parents' house feeling confident all the worst rumors about his future had been dispelled in the week leading up to it, his heart dropped instead.

There were a dozen missed calls and about fifty texts on his phone, the most prominent being an ominous message from his agent that simply read 'call me.'

With his contract up at the end of the season, Montreal had assured him that they didn't plan on forcing anything permanent until more talks could be had between both parties. Everyone involved had expressed confidence that Shane would re-sign, just with a higher salary and more protective terms baked into his veteran contract, of course. He would have accepted a one- or two-year extension even with a little nod toward future negotiations if they'd presented the option. In general, he had been as meek and grateful and flexible as his agent had advised, given he just wanted to keep playing hockey and sort of have an okay time doing it.

So what the fuck was this then?

"Shane, hey," his agent Laurie said, picking up before the first ring had even gone through, "Did you call me first or have you already seen the news?"

"Called you first," Shane replied hollowly, terrified by whatever Montreal had done in the middle of the night that was bad enough they'd chosen to hide it from him completely.

Laurie let out an exasperated sigh. "Fuck, still, I'm sorry to drop this on you. I would have bothered you at like 2 a.m. but I know you're with family right now and those conniving little dickheads made sure to make a move we couldn't block anyway."

Shane felt his panic growing. "Laurie, where did they send me?"

"It was a package deal, Shane," she said gently, "You're not the only one who got shafted. Montreal rented you and Comeau to Tampa Bay for the rest of the season. As I'm sure you know, their goalies have been plagued with late season injuries and they have plans to make a deep playoff run, so… The Voyageurs were willing to accept first and third round picks for the pleasure of your service. Bastards."

Fucking Florida? This couldn't be happening.

"But we're still in wild card contention?" Shane protested, confused and still a little in denial, "Aren't rental players for teams that are rebuilding?"

Laurie scoffed over the line. "Yeah, you'd fucking think so. But the GM kindly let me know that he considers a middling season performance post-Stanley Cup win to be a failure for the Montreal *brand* anyhow. He wants fresh blood and he was willing to do a whole fucking lot to get it."

Shane felt his hands begin to shake, waves of nausea churning in his stomach.

“And the team? Do they know?” he ventured.

“I’m sure they’ve reached out to you,” Laurie said, brusque and businesslike as always, “But yeah, Theriault was pissed as hell to lose his most consistent playoff performing goalie and a first line winger in one fell swoop. He’s been railing about the organization’s lack of faith in his leadership since he got the news.”

Shane heard a few audible clicks and the sound of typing as she clearly navigated through documents and emails on her laptop at light speed.

“Let’s see,” she continued, “JJ Boiziau just issued a statement this morning saying the team was blindsided and that while it’s a reality of the sport, they won’t pretend to understand the decision. Hayden Pike was approached by reporters looking quote ‘devastated’ but refused to give a sound bite. Oh, and that little twerp Volturi told Sportsnet he was ‘ready to step up for the team and really shine given this’ — oh, for fuck’s sake — he called it a ‘bittersweet opportunity.’”

Shane sucked in a breath, the impossible reality of the trade setting in.

“When does Tampa want me there?” he asked.

“Their preference is that you’re at practice on Monday,” Laurie said, sounding skeptical, “but that I can absolutely negotiate. And you’ll start there, obviously. No tandem or backup bullshit.”

Monday. Fuck. That was four days away. Though Shane had known guys who had been compelled to show up the very next morning.

“Okay,” Shane all but whispered, feeling his heart begin to shatter in his chest.

For someone who hated even the tiniest disruption to his daily routine, this was a veritable explosion of it. He would need to find a new place to live and a new favorite grocery store with new aisles to memorize for shopping efficiency and a new preferred route to drive to an arena where the goal posts only knew him as an enemy. Not to mention contending with an entire group of strangers with their own locker room vibes and established team chemistry on and off the ice right before making a grueling playoff run together where they’d expect Shane to perform for the price they’d paid for him.

All that and the Tampa Bay Storm wore entirely unacceptable shades of gray and light blue.

This was going to be a nightmare.

“Shane,” Laurie spoke gently, mercifully interrupting his doom spiral, “Montreal will want you to re-sign in the summer. In fact, they expect it. The Storm have already confirmed they don’t plan to make a move on you.”

Shane bristled. “So they get to send me away without their consultation and then assume I’ll come begging at their doorstep for a chance to play again? Even after I said I wanted to spend my career with them?”

“We could negotiate decent terms with them salary-wise,” Laurie said neutrally, “But I doubt they’ll let even a modified NTC through. Frankly, they just don’t care about you enough now to consider making provisions to allow you to stay with confidence. But they obviously think *you* care enough about the team and your legacy to be a willing sacrifice for new talent acquisition. There's no guarantee they won't pull this again. Or trade you permanently.”

Shane bit his lip, feeling betrayed and a little hopeless. “Then what do we do?”

Laurie sighed again. “You’re basically a UFA the moment Tampa is out of the playoffs. Or wins the fucking Cup for all we know. If you play hot, you’ll have hush-hush offers by May and we can have you out of Montreal July 1, easy. I can work my magic, just give me a list.”

Shane nodded, the idea of moving anywhere else right now feeling like an absurd alternate reality. Fuck, this really was happening, wasn’t it? He watched as the room began to narrow in around him, his breath coming quicker and quicker.

“I guess I’ll, uh, start packing then,” he choked out, desperate to get off the phone and like... hug his mom or something.

“I’ll send over everything you need to prepare for the move,” Laurie confirmed, confident and levelheaded like he paid her to be, “And Shane? They’re letting you keep 42, if you want it.”

He shut his eyes, imagining the number he’d worn for Montreal — with unquestioning loyalty, through years of shitty results until they'd finally clawed their way to a fucking Cup — in shades of Tampa Bay gray instead. He wanted to be sick.

“Yeah,” he said anyway, resigned to his fate, “I do.”

His fingers twitched around his phone as he grasped it tighter, knowing the first person he instinctually wanted to talk to about this was someone he could no longer speak to at all.

Shane would wake up in Florida next week, completely alone.

Chapter End Notes

My silliest HR hill to die on is that Shane would not drink regular ginger ale due to the high sugar content 💚 Also hi hello, sorry to all my Goalie Shane stans, we can hold hands while we suffer in my Torment Nexus together. Trust me, it gets better for our boy. Maybe not in Chapter 11. But eventually, I think. And hey, at least they have, uh, feelings for each other now?

Some pretty specific hockey details today:

- Goaltenders are actually rarely penalized for tripping, as long as contact is made with the puck first before the player's skates and they're genuinely attempting to defend the net, and it's almost always assessed as a two-minute minor penalty. Some would argue even this infamous hit by the Red Wings' Hasek in 2007 was technically a legal

play. Shane was theoretically at risk of receiving a more serious game misconduct because his contact was particularly dirty and could be considered intent to injure. Still, the tripping call plus the 'five-for-fighting' after is probably an iffy officiating result for my own dramatic effect (and yes, you can score unlimited times during a 5-minute major, with the record being 4).

- Ah, rental players. Lots of reasons this happens, and it does happen enough that teams basically know the deals they should be getting in return for loaning out particular players. Goalies are kind of offensively cheap and I based even an elite goalie like Shane being worth a third round pick on a pretty comparable irl trade. Although it's boo tomatoes from me, Montreal has *technically* done nothing wrong, and many players *do* re-sign with their original teams after the rental period, but it is an indication, as Shane's agent points out, that they couldn't give a rat's ass about rewarding how loyal he feels to the franchise.
- Trade clauses also came up here, which are basically protections that help players (usually seasoned veterans) prevent unfavorable trades. Very few players have NTC (no trade) or NMC (no movement) provisions, which means they essentially have veto power over **any** trade offer and/or cannot be sent down to the minors, and some teams historically refuse to issue these at all (given it's in their best interest to have flexibility to do with their players as they'd like). More common are players with modified trade clauses, where they provide a list of teams they definitely don't want to be traded to for whatever reason and can block those trades. Shane hasn't played long enough and is still on his first contract with Montreal, so he's pretty much fair game for their experimentation until he enters his Unrestricted Free Agency (UFA) period when that contract expires July 1.

Also, Shane's brief fantasy about coaching hockey references Canada's youth hockey age group names, which are much more whimsical than the American versions. The U7 are indeed called Timbits 🥺

Chapter 11: Business

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 2017 – Boston

"Man, I fucking knew it," Marlow said over the bustle of the Bears' locker room, phone in his hand as they dressed for morning skate.

Ilya glanced over at him, raising an eyebrow.

Marlow briefly met his eyes, before he continued his scrolling and explained, "Montreal traded Shane Hollander last night. All the big hockey accounts are freaking out online."

Ilya froze, one elbow pad half-secured and dangling crookedly off his arm. That… that couldn't be right. The last time they'd talked league politics, Hollander had expressed a clear willingness to spend his career in Montreal, despite his frustrations with their leadership and — in Ilya's humble opinion — how the team treated him in general. A trade would be quite the betrayal after the loyalty he'd pledged to them. But it would also be business as usual for a team eager to chase every last drop of prospective talent for themselves. *Bastards.*

Ilya tried to keep his voice even as he asked, "To where?"

"Fucking Tampa," Marlow muttered, peering at his screen, "Some kind of rental deal for the playoffs. Damn, and they threw in a first line winger too."

"Snobby Quebecer assholes," Campbell, their starting goaltender and a very loud and proud Nova Scotian (so much so he was nicknamed Bluenose), chimed in from a few lockers down, "Those greedy losers really decided to power up Tampa as a fuck you to the rest of the Atlantic, huh?"

"They are idiots," Ilya stated simply. Irritation mounting, he hoped the degree to which he was rattled by the news wasn't visible on his face.

"I guess they don't think they're making playoffs," Marlow replied, tugging his practice jersey over his head, "Kinda stupid given they've been on the wildcard bubble since last month. Lots of points left until April."

Ilya shook his head, the urge to rant loudly about Montreal's ridiculous mismanagement of their best fucking player burning hot on the tip of his tongue. Sure, his chest was still an ugly mess of emotions when it came to Shane Hollander and his panicked pivot to hot celebrity girlfriend, but he would never lie about the respect he had for Hollander's game.

Shrugging, he said, "Montreal think the Vulture boy is equal replacement in goal. They are wrong."

"You think Hollander will re-sign with them after this?" Campbell asked, as he laced his pads to his skates, "If he keeps that save percentage over point-nine-two in Tampa, I wouldn't mind

having some professional help around here before I retire."

"You've been threatening to retire for five seasons, Nosey," another forward called out, making the room laugh, "We're tired of getting our hopes up."

"I've heard Florida's nice for seniors, though," Marlow said sweetly, "We could send you down there and get Hollander in exchange."

Though internally his thoughts were still racing, the chirp did make Ilya snort, the sharp ache in his chest momentarily soothed by the locker room camaraderie.

"Oh, fuck you guys," Campbell snapped back, still grinning, "See if I stop a damn thing tonight."

In a better mood, Ilya would've taken that perfect comedic setup and ran with it, but he found himself reaching for his phone instead, possessed by idiotic sentimentality as he typed out:

Ilya: they did not deserve you

Shaking his head, he lifted a thumb to start erasing the message, stupid as it would be to reach out after months of silence and definitive instructions to never speak again. Just then, however, a friendly shoulder bump from a passing defenseman jostled him enough that he brushed against the send arrow on screen instead. He watched in horror as the bubble appeared in the chat, bright blue and damning.

Motherfucker.

He shoved his phone back on the top shelf of his locker and hurriedly finished dressing, ignoring the way his heart had started to pound in his chest.

Whatever. Ilya meant what he said, as a professional observation at least, and regardless of what had transpired between them.

It wasn't like Hollander was going to reply anyway.

- 🥅 -

March 2017 – Tampa

Shane stared as another shark swam lazily by behind the wall of glass, the soft blue glow and gentle ambient underwater soundtrack helping to soothe his frayed nerves.

He tugged down his cap a little as a family led by a father in a gray Storm t-shirt wandered past, not wanting to deal with the energy of small children — or overzealous adult male sports fans — after a mentally draining morning practice out east at the Ice Plex.

Dotted with palm trees and boasting allegedly year-round sunshine, Tampa felt like an unlikely place for an ice-based sport, but the Storm had top of the line facilities, a streak of playoff

appearances going back to the early aughts, and a fiercely supportive, bordering on feral, Floridian fanbase bested in intensity maybe only by their vicious rivals down south. Shane had already signed two autographs in the Publix on his first day and, just that morning, found himself trapped in an inexplicable conversation in his building's parking lot with a snow bird retiree in a Boston Bears cap. He'd asked for an autograph first too, then thanked Shane and Montreal heartily for clearing the way for another Boston championship. *Ouch.*

Watching a sea turtle cut a smooth path through the artificial reef, Shane exhaled deeply and wished that that could be *him* swimming peacefully in circles instead (brain smooth and barely the size of a human thumb, according to the informational placard), without the skin-crawling sensation of being perceived that came from his own life as captive entertainment in a big glass bowl.

Anyway, despite his melodramatics, Tampa was… fine. Having been a regular visitor with the Pikes' brood at the Biodôme, he'd been relieved to spot the sign for the Florida Aquarium after his visit to the arena the day prior, a short drive up from his new condo building in Davis Islands. The high-end property management company specialized in fully furnished summer rentals, but had been perfectly happy to accept a sizeable chunk of Shane's NHL salary for the privilege of some unconventional leasing terms. He figured if he was going to be stuck in Florida through June at least, he might as well get private pool and pier access out of it. In the end, watching the sunset over the channel from his balcony that first evening was the only thing that had kept him from melting down completely.

In the Ice Plex locker room the next morning, his new teammates had welcomed him — and the stoic winger, Gilbert Comeau, who rarely spoke to anyone, much less Shane — in a rehearsed and professional way, which honestly suited his drained emotional battery just fine. Most of the men had expressed polite appreciation of Shane's goaltending skills, the 'Wallender' nickname immediately applied. A few forwards had also wanted to test out his infamous analytical memory by quizzing him on their own stats. They'd seemed genuine in their awed responses as he robotically spat out goals and assists going back several seasons, but Shane had been teased often enough about his idiosyncrasies (without realizing it) that he was wary to accept the exchange as real sportsmanlike camaraderie. And anyhow, everyone including Shane knew the deal: he was on loan for a Cup, unlikely to remain long term, and so there was little use in properly bonding.

Out on the ice, the coaches had seemed pleased with his performance in the practice scrimmage, at least, which was the only first impression here that really mattered. They'd sent him off to spend a few hours with the equipment managers afterwards, planning out rush-ordered designs for a mask and leg pads in Tampa's Home and Away color schemes while he wore plain whites in the meantime. And, several hours after *that* was spent pouring over film to learn the rhythm of his new d-pairs which, full day all said and done, had Shane nearly crawling out of his skin with overstimulation. Thus, the whole 'escape from the metaphorical shark tank to the actual sharks down the road' thing.

Sooner than was preferable, though, Shane would have to swallow down the anxiety and focus on the job at hand. Exactly as his agent assured, the Storm had every intention of starting him, and just two days from now he'd be on his still-unfamiliar 'home' ice for a matchup against Carolina. The pressure was relatively low, at least, given that second-place Tampa Bay would have to lose literally every remaining game in the regular season to not clinch the playoff berth,

while Carolina were hovering at the edge of contention sitting fourth in the Metropolitan. It wouldn't be the worst March and April he'd been through, hockey-wise at least.

There was the added bonus of seeing Popov again too, who had sent one of the only texts that made Shane feel better in the immediate aftermath of the trade. While others had justifiably expressed extreme variations of anger or frustration or sadness on his behalf, his fellow goaltender had simply said:

Misha 🍿**:** this does not change what you are worth to this sport. remember that.

And if there was one additional text, in an otherwise empty message thread, that Shane continued to consult on the daily while screening all communication from the Voyageurs' GM and Theriault and his mom and a dozen hungry reporters through his agent and publicist instead, well…

He was lonely, okay.

Maybe lonelier than he'd ever been.

And imagining he deserved something better from a sport he'd overcome innumerable odds to be successful in made the sting of Montreal's indifference feel a little like a fresh start instead.

they did not deserve you

Feeling tears prick at the corners of his eyes, Shane rolled his shoulders back and straightened his posture, watching enraptured as a giant stingray flapped its 'wings' in a beautiful, undulating motion, gliding just above the sandy faux-seabed.

He could do this.

Axis-tilting disruption to everything he'd ever known in this league aside, Shane had been challenged before, underestimated and taken for granted, and he'd proven them all wrong. He'd clawed his way, one save at a time, to a Stanley Cup last season fueled by spite and grit and a love for the game they could never take away from him. And, though the self-doubt had once crippled him, he knew at his core that he was a good fucking goaltender. Probably the best, even.

He would make Montreal beg for his return, ideally with another Cup in hand.

And he would show the Storm he was worth more than the standard rental price tag too.

Number forty-two Shane Hollander on display in the crease, having shed one set of goal posts for a shiny, new pair like a hermit crab in search of the perfect home. Bigger and better than ever.

He smiled to himself, thinking of how fitting Tampa Bay's terrible, cheesy team slogan was in this case:

Big Storm comin'!

Another shark went swimming by, just as a teenage girl's voice asked from behind him, "Hi, sorry, but are you Shane Hollander?"

Never one to deny a fan once he'd been spotted, Shane pasted on a congenial smile and turned to face his future.

"Yeah, I am."

- 🥅 -

"Oh, this is cute!" Mikhail Popov exclaimed as he entered, immediately swan diving to laze the full length of his body across the burnt orange couch, socked feet dangling off the side.

Shane smiled, even as he cringed. He'd sort of expected more… modern… furnishings when he'd quickly signed the paperwork for the condo based on the floor plan alone, but instead he'd turned up to a home straight out of an American beach movie, complete with every variation of 'sand and surf' painting, coral and ocean blue accents, and flamingos and tropical fish and anchor motifs splashed across every visible surface.

It was… charming. In a sort of garish 'coastal grandmother' way that was fighting tooth and nail against Shane's Canadian flannel sensibilities.

"I feel like I am on vacation," Popov murmured face first into a throw pillow printed with sailboats.

"You deserve one after tonight," Shane chirped back, settling himself in the armchair arranged on the other side of the coffee table. He grimaced again, noticing the wooden armrests were carved into seahorses.

The Tampa-Carolina game had been physically brutal on both of them, but Shane was shocked by how easy his job felt in comparison. What a wonder to have a well-oiled offense across the line practicing the art of 'shooting and scoring' — a method which had yet to make it to Montreal with any consistency.

Poor Popov, on the other hand, had been left to block damn near forty shots, just to have his team lose 4-1. It was sweet though at the end, when they'd done their traditional big goalie hug, to hear the roaring cheers of Tampa's home crowd, many of them clearly familiar with the friendship between the two.

Popov rolled over with a groan and sat up, eyeing Shane closely. "It is nice to see you smiling," he said, "I know this is not easy."

"It's only because you're here, really," Shane replied, probably a little too honestly, "and because my first game went okay. But I've been… struggling with the changes." He sniffed. "I thought I'd retire in Montreal and now…"

Popov frowned and patted the cushion next to him. "I would like to give you another hug, no pads this time, please."

Shane, touch starved beyond belief for months now, was out of his chair in an instant.

“Thank you for being here, Popov,” he whispered as those familiar arms wrapped around him in comfort.

There was a snort. “One day I will convince you to call me Misha, you know.”

“Misha,” Shane echoed gingerly, from where his cheek was pressed into Popov’s sternum, “Sorry, I… I just… the nickname feels so personal out loud, and I'm spooked by friendships, in a way. Of getting too attached and caring too much. It’s a knee-jerk reaction to keep the distance where I can.”

Misha pressed a kiss to his hair. “I am happy to keep proving I am your friend, Shane. Until you believe me.”

“I do, I promise,” Shane whispered, “And you’ve helped me so much. I didn’t have any friends who were… gay, before you and Jake. I mean, obviously we were friends well before I knew about you too, anyway. But I think I would have struggled with this for even longer without your influence.”

He felt Misha’s chin shift into what seemed like a smile from where it rested on the top of his head, a big hand rubbing a gentle circle on his back.

“And you feel okay? About being gay too?” he asked softly.

Shane shifted, exhaling a long breath. “I’ve… accepted it. I think I’ve maybe always known. But fuck, it sucks to add another entry to the long list of things that already make me *different,* as a hockey player especially.”

Misha nodded. “You are very, ah… inspiring, for showing up in NHL as you are. It means a lot to many people. Kids who want to play and see themselves.”

“Yeah,” Shane said simply. He’d been one of those kids once, searching for a role model in a sport that touted inclusivity when the marketing studies said they should, while remaining silent about the reality (and endless controversies) that contradicted that commitment.

At that, they fell comfortably, companionably quiet for a while, Misha continuing to rub his back in soothing strokes. It wasn't long though before Shane shifted against him, suddenly restless and buzzy under his skin. His heart was beating faster in his chest, noticing the touch of another man with piqued interest, even if it wasn’t quite the right touch… nothing filling the aching gaps between his ribs in the way Ilya Rozanov’s hands were able. He was starting to fear no other hands ever could. But maybe, if he…

Wordlessly, Shane tilted his head back and met Misha’s eyes, letting his gaze flick intentionally down to those plush lips and back up.

“Shane,” Misha warned, voice pitched low.

He froze, worried that something had changed from the couple’s previously open dynamic. He would accept rejection for any reason, of course, though it smarted a bit. It was a little pathetic then, when he felt the tears that had been threatening on his lash line for days start to spill over.

Shane reached a hand up to scrub at his face, hiccuping, “Sorry, I just… I just needed to know if I—”

Misha was rearranging them immediately, both hands on Shane’s cheeks as his thumbs swiped away the tears.

“Oh, Shane, no,” he said hurriedly and so painfully gentle, “I’m not saying no. I’m just worried you are not in right, um, mind place for this. Have you even been with anyone besides—”

“Yes,” Shane interjected quietly, watching Misha’s eyebrows lift in surprise, “Twice. And just, um, hand and mouth stuff. A while ago. I was too nervous for more.” He bit his lip. “It’s stupid but… I wouldn’t let them kiss me. He’s the only one.”

Misha’s gaze was extraordinarily fond. “That is very romantic, Shane Hollander. I should not take that from him.”

“Please,” Shane whispered instead, "That's why I need one from you. I’m terrified I made up how it felt.”

He wasn’t sure if he was making any sense, tongue tied by the thought that he had spent years projecting something onto his fling with Ilya Rozanov that had never really existed. That the closer physical intimacy they’d shared had created a thread of emotional attachment that he was mistaking for more. They’d been friends, sort of, and Mikhail Popov was also his friend so… maybe the math was a little shaky, but it was adding up for him in the moment at least.

Misha seemed to sense this internal struggle and took pity on him. “Just one, hmm?”

Shane nodded, watching Misha’s face draw nearer. He really was handsome and kind and so very safe, with a boyfriend who loved him in spite of all the complications and who trusted him enough to be with Shane like this. Sort of painfully jealous and monogamous, in theory at least, Shane knew he could likely never do the same.

There was a brief, almost intimidating silence and then Misha was kissing him, radiating easy confidence even as he kept their connection rather chaste, lips moving slowly together without parting for more.

Physically, it was lovely, with an intrinsic undercurrent of pleasure he had to work much harder to chase with women, which was the other question that had lingered since Shane had started measuring kisses against Boston’s star center as the standard. This didn’t feel like work at all. It was really almost as easy as—

Oh. Here he was thinking about Ilya fucking Rozanov again, not twenty seconds in, with another beautiful man’s mouth on his own.

They parted in a silent, mutual conclusion, Misha’s eyes immediately roaming over his face, checking for any sign of discomfort.

“I’m really in love with him,” Shane murmured, touching two fingers to his lips, “Fuck.”

Misha snorted, shifting back to put a little distance between them. “I will try not to be offended that is your first thought. But yes, obviously. Did you not know?”

“Sort of,” Shane winced, “but I just… filed that away for later. Or for never, really. An actual future together is... unattainable, even if I hadn’t already ruined things.” He glanced away, venturing, “But how did you know? For sure?”

Misha smiled, expression shifting into something more thoughtful as he considered the question. “I don’t think that I have perfect words for it in English. But I guess basic answer is that I don’t believe love has to be big and grand. Or meet others’ standards. Sometimes it is so simple, like… When the door opens after weeks apart, or longer even, I want him to be the one standing there.”

Doors, huh?

A layered series of scenes played out in Shane’s mind all at once — a rolodex of hotel room numbers and shifting hallway carpet patterns, soft knocks and hands tugging each other in; the penthouse key code he still knew by heart, a head of blond curls and the curve of familiar shoulders over the back of the couch, waiting for his late night arrival; or something as mundane as stepping through the gate onto the ice, heart racing at the sight of a black and yellow jersey across the distant blue line, in the endless cycle of Montreal and Boston and back again… Years and years of barriers both physical and metaphorical between them, and still reaching out despite that, wanting someone to *arrive* to.

His memories transported him farther back even. The sound of creaking metal hinges and hesitant footsteps in a back alley in Saskatchewan. A superstar in the making, already hated and feared, cloaking himself in cigarette smoke but so, so kind to Shane — a nobody backup goalie from Ottawa — when he had no reason to be kind at all. The softest twitch of a smile that would haunt him until he one day pressed his mouth against it and, for years, never stopped.

And then, the distant future. The late afternoon glow of a rural Ontario summer, Shane coming home to a lakeside cottage, door opening before he could even reach for his key to reveal Ilya Rozanov standing there, tanned and smiling and *his.*

Fuck. Maybe he had his answer then.

Though what precisely he was supposed to do with the now very concrete recognition of his feelings, he didn’t know. Reach out? Apologize maybe? But where would that get them? He seemed to be stuck on the same wheel of terrible fates he’d been strapped to when he’d met Rose, just… in *love* love now. Something complete and undeniable. And all of this while he was trapped in fucking Florida.

When Misha stood to leave a few hours later, he hugged Shane tightly in the entryway and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Mr. Wallender, always a pleasure,” he said with a wink. “Jake will be terribly jealous of me. And your Ilyukha too.”

“Not mine,” Shane said automatically, even as a memory from what felt like an eternity ago blossomed in his mind, “But um, do you remember when you visited Montreal? You said something to him on the phone. I’ve always wondered…”

Misha braced a hand on the doorknob as he folded slightly forward, choking out a laugh. “Oh, was stupid, really. I told him that he better stake his claim soon, seeing how pretty you looked on

a Russian arm."

Shane gulped, a deep blush blooming on his cheeks. "And do you remember what he said back?"

Misha hesitated. "Ah, it's a little…"

"He has literally had his dick in me," Shane deadpanned, startling himself with the confident crudeness of the reply, and making Misha burst into laughter once more.

"Shane Hollander," Misha gasped out, bringing a faux-scandalized hand to his chest, "What have we done to you?"

His eyebrows furrowed in concentrated memory as he continued, "But yes, it was something like that. How he had no right to claim you, but was confident no one would ever fuck you better. I remember thinking he was very loud with his feelings in Russian. Hard to explain."

Shane shivered, knowing there was real truth to Rozanov's claim. Tentatively, as if balancing on a single skate blade, he asked, "Do you think he…?"

Misha smiled indulgently. "Yes, I do. But you should ask him to be sure, I think." Reaching out to clasp Shane's shoulder, he squeezed once, twice, and then tugged open the front door.

"See you in playoffs, Shane," he said cheerfully, if a little optimistically this year, and then, "And tell Montreal to get fucked!"

When the door clicked shut, Shane let the wave of loneliness wash back over him, predictable almost in the way it ebbed and flowed like the sea to the shoreline just beneath his window.

- 🥅 -

Rose: I think we should break up

Shane: 😟 This is so sudden?

Rose: I um… figured some things out with that girl I mentioned 💃

Rose: It hasn't been that long, but I think I might want people to know about us one day. And if the press gets wind of anything while you and I are still "together" well…

Shane: Could be ugly.

Rose: Exactly.

Rose: So what do you say my people and your people have a little chat again? I promise to say you were a kind and gentle lover, but the distance was just too much to bear 💔

Shane: Maybe we could have you be the one to initiate the breakup though? I could use the public sympathy points for playoffs.

Rose: Deal.

Rose: But for what it's worth, you were my favorite fake boyfriend by far 😚

Shane: An honor and a privilege 🫡

Rose: And now I set you free 🤲🕊️🌈

- 🥅 -

Marly: bro

Marly: http://www.tmz.com/2017/03/28/what-we-know-about-hollandry-breakup/

Ilya: 👍

- 🥅 -

April 2017 – Montreal

It was a beautiful gift, Ilya thought, being handed a first round playoff matchup against the wildcard Voyageurs team.

Boston had finished first in the Atlantic by a healthy margin and had proceeded to *obliterate* Montreal 3-0 through this series, in Game 4 tonight with an all but assured chance of a sweep.

Ilya was fucking delighted, skating literal loops around the Montreal players like he was back in his Russian kiddie leagues. Sure, he could have crushed them with textbook hockey alone, but he knew the extra showy flourishes he tacked on were infinitely more demoralizing.

As proof of concept, the Voyageurs were frustrated and sloppy not even two periods in, playing penalty-heavy defensive hockey and flubbing even simple passes on their scoring lines. And their goaltending? Well.

A gorgeous head-man pass had the puck arriving to Ilya's blade in the neutral zone, leaving just one out-of-position Montreal defenseman to clear before he was cleanly breaking away. Streaking across the ice, he held the puck in his typical scoring position until the last possible second, catching Volturi frozen as he switched to a backhand and — definitely showing off a little — slid one skate forward to shoot from between his own legs.

5-1. *Delicious.*

“You will never be him,” he said pointedly, meeting Volturi’s eyes and watching the fury grow within them as he twisted the knife a bit.

He shouldn’t have been surprised maybe, when just a few minutes later, a close play in the crease had Volturi going for an unbelievable cheap shot during the scramble. Taking the full force of a blocker to the face, Ilya fell to the ice, shooting up with every intention of dropping his gloves and starting the team brawl of the century by putting hands on the Montreal goaltender on his home ice. Fucking goalies. You just didn’t touch them, regardless of whether they deserved it or not, but *god* did Ilya want to make a personal statement.

Marlow had his fingers wrapped around Ilya’s bicep in an instant but was only half-heartedly pulling him back as Ilya yanked against the hold. Just as he broke free, however, he heard the roar of the crowd rise to a fever pitch and spun to see Nosey making his way to center ice, signaling at Volturi that he wanted the fight instead.

For a cocky young hot-head, the showy temptation of a goalie fight was irresistible and Ilya smiled viciously as Volturi left the crease, tossing his mask to the ice as he did so. He probably thought that Campbell, nearly fifteen years his senior, was some wilting flower and not a veteran powerhouse who’d started his NHL career still in the Enforcer Era. The Bears on the bench knew all too well what the outcome would be, banging on the boards and tapping their sticks in a show of enthusiastic bloodlust.

In the end, Nosey was brutally efficient with it, clearly pissed off enough on Ilya’s behalf not to draw out the bout for entertainment value. One hand in Volturi’s collar, he threw a nasty hook with the other that had Volturi’s head turning with the impact. Nosey then ducked a shoulder and tossed the Voyageur goalie to the ice, ending the fight with a conclusive win, the referees rushing in quickly to separate them. Centre Bell was the quietest Ilya had ever heard it, some sporadic half-hearted boos ringing out, though he smiled seeing the Boston fans dotted throughout the crowd clearly having the time of their lives.

Play remained stopped for a while as the officials assessed a series of overlapping infractions, five for fighting on both goalies, additional time for removing their helmets pre-fight, another stack of penalties on Nosey for instigating, and a final 10-minute misconduct on Volturi for the initial hit. The effort to hash all this out was sort of silly, given that neither would actually sit these penalties, a skater each taking their place in the box instead.

Ilya rolled his eyes, annoyed that the little twerp basically throwing a padded punch to his face apparently wasn’t grounds for ejection, but then again, he was used to the refs looking the other way in his case, sometimes quite happy to see him get roughed up after running his mouth. While not very rules-based, it was probably mostly fair, given how often he terrorized their rinks himself. The league was *his* and they knew it, and so he usually coasted by on sheer star power alone.

Clearly over his volatility in the net, Montreal pulled a seething Volturi a moment later, sending in the backup to close out the second. *Pity,* Ilya thought. He was sure he could goad Volturi into making frustrated contact again. A game misconduct and an automatic suspension would be the cherry on top of this brilliant evening, though probably overkill given that Boston was going to eliminate these fuckers in twenty minutes anyway. Already there were blue and red jerseys climbing the arena stairs and clearing the stands, resigned to their team’s losing fate. The empty

seats made Ilya's grin widen even further as he chomped at his mouth guard like a horse bit, hungry for the game to resume.

The last period passed by in a blink, Boston's third line chipping in to make it a humiliating 6-1 at the final whistle.

Ilya, ever the magnanimous media-trained captain, wrangled his team into a handshake line, the Voyageurs participating in the act of sportsmanship with the most begrudging body language he'd maybe ever encountered on the ice. Volturi, who'd disappeared off the bench before the game's end, did not join them.

"The Storm might sweep the Guardians tomorrow too," Marlow said, knocking into Ilya's shoulder in the tunnel, "Hell of a second round matchup that would be, us and TB."

"Yes," Ilya agreed with an abbreviated nod, post-game fatigue starting to set in.

Last night's hockey highlight reels had gone on and on about the second-place Storm's deadly precision and sparkling playoff momentum in Toronto, though of course Ilya's pathetic eyes had been drawn right to Hollander in the crease, wearing a #42 jersey in Tampa's visiting white and grayish blue that still felt incongruous to his memories of him. He'd found himself in bed clicking article after article about Hollander's performance for the Storm so far, spending a little longer scrolling through the ones with high-res, close-up photos of Hollander's serious game face or gentler, smiling eyes at practice.

Ilya had been surprised to see that his simple, boring red Voyageurs' mask design had been replaced by a marbled blue oceanic print, foamed with stormy, white-capped waves. Emblazoned on the right side was an oarfish (Hollander explaining a bit of the mythology in an accompanying interview), the fish's red-feathered head reaching up to the temple and the long tail fin curling along the jaw toward the blue '42' on the chin; and, on the left, was a series of stylized Japanese characters interspersed between thunderclouds, with the name 'YUNA' written out by bolts of lightning below.

Ilya had long observed the ways that Montreal made Hollander shrink in on himself, diminishing his talents and foolishly instilling doubt while expecting the goaltender to deliver perfection anyway. This new Storm helmet, bold and brash, was not a mask to hide behind. It was a call to attention. A warning and a threat, even. It was the Shane Hollander he'd always seen, now inviting everyone else to look too.

As predicted, Hollander had never responded to Ilya's post-trade text, but he was playing like he knew he was fucking hot stuff anyway, which made Ilya smile. With two shutouts across three playoff games, a goaltender that consistent would have a fat stack of signing offers by July regardless of how the rest of playoffs went, and Ilya was sort of sickeningly proud of him. He could only hope that the siren call of false comfort and routine that might draw Hollander back into Montreal's clutches was now falling on deaf ears.

"Hey," Marlow said, nudging him again as they reentered the visitors' locker room, "D'you think the Hex still applies now that Hollander's off the Voyageurs?"

He snorted at Ilya's stricken expression, laughing even harder as Ilya grumbled, "Yes, I am sure it does."

- 🥅 -

- 🥅 -

May 2017 – Tampa

Finally home, Shane peeled off his stupid, suffocating suit and collapsed onto his bed in just his underwear, utterly fucking destroyed.

They were now 2-1 in the series against Boston, Tampa leading after a win at home, but all three brutal games had gone to overtime so far. He was sure Boston would take them all the way to Game 7 if they could. The matchup between the Atlantic's two top-ranked teams was probably thrilling to watch as a spectator, but fuck if this wasn't the roughest playoff run Shane had experienced in his career so far, and they still had something like sixteen possible games left before they could hoist the Cup aloft.

In addition to the endless physical exertion, he was now faced with the challenge of seeing Ilya Rozanov in all his spectacular playoff glory, sexy beard included (although Shane was convinced with how well-maintained the scruff looked that the notoriously non-superstitious Rozanov *had* to be trimming it). If Shane was posting semi-legendary playoff stats in the net so far, Rozanov was hunting for scoring records like he'd decided to personally shit on Wayne Gretzky's front lawn. Already, he'd put up two hat tricks against the Voyageurs in round one. *Two fucking playoff hatties,* like it was the easiest thing in the world and not a feat accomplished by less than twenty players *ever.* Asshole. Shane was enraptured by him.

Tonight and in Boston, Rozanov had seemed almost nervous to shoot on Shane though, instead opting for more playmaking maneuvers than hungering for goals himself. Shane's teammates on the Storm were of course aware of the Hex and had been thrilled to find it was not just a French Canadian exclusive. Honestly, Shane hadn't been sure of that either, until he'd gloved Rozanov's opening shot of the series and felt the addictive sensation of being *challenged* flow through his veins in a way it hadn't since the Olympic shootout years before.

God, seriously, Rozanov was *so* distracting. And in a way that wasn't even his fault, given he'd been exceedingly well-behaved so far, at least where Shane was concerned, with not a single smarmy wink or pointed chirp lobbed in Shane's direction. It was pathetic, how the silent proximity only amplified Shane's loneliness, nestled in goal amongst a strange team and a foreign crowd. Shane *missed* Rozanov, even as he skated right in front of him, damn near starving with the memories of their teasing, flirty interactions on the ice knowing what was to come later.

What's more, he still felt guilty for freaking out at Rozanov's house, and for leaving things so unfinished; even more so since he'd realized the feelings he felt confidently now had been just under the surface back then anyway. And so, as much as Shane wanted Rozanov's hands on him again, he wanted to talk things out in person too. Leading with a particular type of offer was the only way he could imagine getting the man's attention without sounding like a brokenhearted loser. They fucked and then talked. That was the way of things. And given that they weren't doing either right now…

Grasping for his phone on the nightstand, he fired off a text and then buried his face into the pillows with a long groan.

> **Shane:** Scale of 1-10, how stupid would it be for me to invite my ex-hookup over right now?

Minutes later, he felt the vibration under his left arm and tilted his head to check the message, groaning again at the result of his extra careless level of desperation.

> **Rose:** You realize this message REALLY narrows down the mysterious NHL player you've been fucking right
>
> **Rose:** Like hmm, who could the notorious womanizer on the Boston Bears be 🤔
>
> **Shane:** Okay you caught me. It's Leo Campbell.
>
> **Rose:** Knew you were into daddies 🧔 But also, goalie on goalie action? Sounds hot

Shane felt his cheeks burn, thinking of Mikhail Popov's soft lips on his own in this very apartment. That was one encounter he was keeping very close to his chest, even if Jake had separately texted him a series of confetti emojis the next morning that had nearly exploded his brain with horny embarrassment.

He jumped as his phone buzzed again.

> **Rose:** But genuine q… is booty calling the enemy going to make you play worse?
>
> **Shane:** Um, historically no.

Rose: Does that thesis hold up now that you're in 💕🩷✨❤️love ❤️✨🩷💕 with him?

Shane winced, somewhat regretting the way he and Rose had continued their friendship post Montreal movie shoot with weekly 'Wine and/or Whine Nights' which, as appropriately named, had often involved Shane complaining about his mystery man's general existence while Rose sipped chardonnay and said kind of mean but accurate things that usually helped to un-spiral him in the end.

Shane: Insufficient data to conclude. Probably should… acquire some?

Rose: Shane Hollander, it would shock the world to know just what a delightfully messy bitch you actually are lmaooo

Rose: But, having overcome my own relationship constipation through thoughtful boinking, I say go for it 💪

Shane: He's not going to reply anyway.

Rose: Babe, trust me, if he's not gagging for it after the hockey you've been playing recently, he no longer has a pulse

Rose: Let me know how it goes! Or FaceTime me in, even 👅

Shane: BYE.

Rising up from his duvet faceplant with a sigh, Shane wandered over to his closet and slipped on a soft blue t-shirt and a pair of running shorts. If he chose the ones with his most daringly short in-seam, well. Sue him for dreaming.

Glancing at the clock on his nightstand which now read just after 10 p.m., he reached for his phone again and proceeded to draft at least twenty progressively embarrassing variations of horny texts — and one really god awful shirtless selfie — that might get Ilya Rozanov's attention. He was competing against an infinite number of hot, blonde, and available baddies in Tampa tonight, surely, so he needed to get this right.

In the end, exhausted, he sagged into the seahorse armchair in the living room and opted for plain honesty instead.

Shane: I miss you. And I'm sorry.

Slipping his phone into his pocket, he stood and padded over to the kitchen, flicking on the electric kettle to make an herbal tea as he busied himself with selecting just the right mug and blend for what was shaping up to be a solo Tuesday night in. Just as the kettle beeped to signal it was boiling, he felt his phone vibrate and nearly dropped the 'VISIT OTTAWA' mug he was holding, which would have been disastrous given it was his luckiest one by far.

Faye: no distractions, remember?

Shane sucked in a breath. That wasn't… complete rejection, at least.

Shane: Too late for that. Seeing you up close again has been torture.

Seconds later, as his phone began to ring through with a call, he found himself thanking the hockey gods for his reflexes — the device almost slipping from his fingers in his surprise and the steaming echinacea tea in his other hand swishing up to the mug's rim just before he regained his grip.

"Um, did you mean to—?" he answered, cut off by the way Rozanov's gruff voice echoed across the line.

"Beg."

Shane gulped. "What?"

There was an impatient sigh. "You want to see me so bad? Beg me to come over."

"Please," Shane said, so immediate it was like a switch had been flipped in his brain.

"Eager slut," Rozanov replied lazily, making Shane's whole body light up with the sensation of delicious fucking shame. Oh, he had needed this badly. "What would your girlfriend think of this?"

"We broke up," Shane said, sure that Rozanov must have seen the news. It had been hard to avoid for several weeks after. Swallowing, he added, "And it wasn't real to begin with. An accidental photo op turned PR move. Convenient for both of us."

There was a long silence, so long that Shane checked to see that Rozanov hadn't hung up entirely.

"You… didn't love her?" Rozanov asked, the dominant tone in his voice all but vanishing into something starkly vulnerable.

"I'm gay," Shane said plainly, figuring there was no sense in maintaining the illusion.

For some reason, saying the words out loud to the man who had patiently allowed him to explore his sexuality without judgment since they were basically teenagers hit Shane harder than he anticipated. He sagged back against the kitchen counter, raising one arm to scrub at his wet eyes.

Fuck, he was lonely, adrift, and tired of putting on a mask just to be seen. Stuck in a place thousands of kilometers away from his friends and family and former teammates, desperate to be touched in a way that mattered, and knowing concretely — after Misha's visit — that there was only one man who could truly get through to him when he was hovering on the knife's edge like this. Shane was playing good hockey, spectacular hockey really, but what did that matter when this was all still so temporary. Tampa was only a postcard-worthy pit stop, with a series of terrifying decisions looming in his immediate future that could change the trajectory of his career forever. Of his life, even, too.

And yet, here he was, ready to beg for one singular night of Ilya Rozanov's undivided attention just to get that temporary fix.

Sniffling, he tried and failed to choke back the emotion in his voice as he continued, "I'm gay, okay. And I know that you're not and that Florida is full of Boston fangirls in bikinis or

whatever who want you just like I do and that's fucking fine, but… But I've been all alone bouncing back and forth between this unfamiliar city for weeks on the verge of a total breakdown and seeing you in person for the first time since… since I left like an idiot fucking destroyed me, alright? Which is stupid because now all I can think about is how much I need you to hold me, even though I don't deserve it. We don't have to do anything else, I— please, I just want to see you."

At the lingering silence, he sucked in a breath, heart hammering in his chest, "*Ilya*, please. You told me to beg and I'll do it until I'm blue if I have to, I just—"

"Text me your address."

Shane let out a sound that was nearly a sob.

"Fuck, thank you," he gasped, almost delirious with relief. He dropped a pin on the condo building on his maps and added the access code for the front gate in the message, still babbling across the line in nonsensical gratitude.

"Shane," Roz— *Ilya* cut in, voice gentle but firm, "take a breath for me. I will be there soon. Twenty-six minutes it says. And…" he hesitated for a moment, breath audible over the line, "I missed you too."

The call ended and Shane tossed his phone onto the ugly orange couch with a squeak.

Half an hour to kill and he already felt insane with adrenaline, whole body nearly shaking in anticipation. If this was a mistake… actually talking about his feelings, then so be it. He'd already torpedoed things between them once. What was one more disastrous confession going to do?

At least he would feel those hands on him one last time.

- 🥅 -

When Ilya stepped through the door into Shane Hollander's Tampa condo, he immediately locked eyes with a seemingly life-sized pink flamingo statue right next to the shoe rack.

Jolting back, he couldn't help but splutter a horrified, "What the fuck kind of souvenir shop threw up in here?"

He'd been in Hollander's spaces before, of course, and was certain he couldn't have changed his design sensibilities *this* drastically in such a short time. Meeting Hollander's eyes from where he stood hovering in the entryway, Ilya was shocked as he watched the Tampa Bay Storm's solid wall of a goaltender promptly burst into tears.

Rushing forward, he had both hands cupping Hollander's jaw before he could consider that they hadn't even exchanged a proper greeting, shushing him gently as he swiped at those freckled cheeks.

“Hollander, hey,” he coaxed, searching for context in those wide, wet eyes, “I am sorry if I offended. Maybe you like the beach a lot? I did not know.”

Hollander hiccupped a wet laugh, taking a step back so that Ilya’s hands dropped down to his sides.

“Fuck, sorry,” he said, scrubbing at his face, “I just… everyone keeps lying to me about the decor not being terrible to spare my feelings — it came like this, I swear — and it’s just so fucking nice that you didn’t.”

Ilya exhaled sharply, part amusement and part relief. “It is… I don’t have words in English, to be honest. But yes, really terrible. How do you sleep here?”

Hollander chuckled, swiping a hand through his dark hair, the waves grown out longer in a sort of classic hockey flow. God, he was so, so pretty. How could Ilya have possibly ignored the late night summons knowing that this was what awaited him? Not that he’d put much effort into resisting it at all, really, receiving Hollander's message and changing out of his suit so fast it would have made for a passable magic act.

“I sleep okay given this is all temporary,” Hollander replied, the mood shifting abruptly with the unmasked sadness in his voice.

He took a few more steps into the living room and Ilya followed, unsure exactly what Hollander wanted from him tonight but desperately willing to provide it regardless.

“I’m sorry,” Hollander blurted, whirling around to face him, “I’ve been such a fucking disaster about this. Us.”

Ilya nodded slowly, still uncertain.

“I can admit I was… confused. After the last time,” he said haltingly, “I thought things were good.”

Hollander moved to sit down on a truly atrocious orange couch, motioning for Ilya to join him. Sitting a healthy distance away, Ilya slid his hands under his thighs in a feeble attempt at resisting the urge to reach out and touch.

“I was unfair to you, when you tried to communicate,” Hollander said quietly, “Things *were* good, you’re right, but I freaked out because it felt… different, that time. Like we weren’t just having sex, you know? And that scared me.”

Ilya swallowed, terrified that they had somehow ended up on the same page, but were reading entirely different meanings from it. “What about it scared you?”

Hollander shrugged, a little shyly, and then the words came pouring out. “It made me realize that I *like* you, okay. For real. And I wasn’t ready to admit that yet, or ever. I wanted to think I could have our thing and be content with it, until the right girl came along and then I’d be married and acceptable and no one would ever know that I spent half my hockey career fucking another player. Worse, the captain of my rival team. But I can’t… be with a woman in the way she would deserve, not like you can. And I don’t want to stop seeing you either. Since I realized my feelings, being away from you has been killing me.”

Ilya shifted uneasily, feeling a growing panic radiating from the base of his skull, one he assumed must be similar to what Hollander had described after the tuna melt debacle.

“Hollander, you don’t like me, okay,” he argued gently, “You are anxious and vulnerable right now and I will dom you because we both know it will help. But you can’t confuse that with actual feelings. I am not what you want or… deserve. Some other nice man with a normal job and less baggage, maybe. But not me.”

Hollander had gone tomato red as Ilya spoke.

“I’m *not* confused,” he replied, surprising Ilya with the anger that simmered in his tone, “I wasted so much time in that state already, in denial of who I am, who I’m attracted to.” He huffed, dark eyes blazing. “You are not allowed to suddenly tell me I don’t know what I want, that I can’t possibly make my own informed decisions, and so whatever *you* decide is ‘all for the best’. Everyone else who’s planned my life out around me likes to do that, feels entitled to it even. But not you. Never you.”

“Fine, Hollander, okay!” Ilya said, voice breaking as it climbed in volume, “So you like me then? Is that enough to keep up this secret forever? Even if you stay in Tampa we are still professional hockey players. Right now we are facing each other in playoffs, or did you forget? And then what? We go back to only seeing each other few times a year?”

Hollander’s shoulders sagged. “You don’t want to return to what we had, at least? Isn’t that better than nothing?”

Ilya broke at that, blurting out an impassioned, “Shane, what I *want* is impossible.”

And well, if he’d managed not to betray the extent of his feelings at any other point in this conversation, he sure as hell had just then. Loud as a goal horn with the way he wanted Shane Hollander for more than just stolen moments. For forever, probably. It was emotional whiplash, given that he’d just spent months learning to accept that he would never have this again and now the full feast was being dangled in front of him.

Blinking in surprise, Hollander — fuck it, Ilya was tired of fighting against the instinct — *Shane* argued, “You don’t know that. Misha and his boyfriend are making hockey and long distance work, and they even sleep with other people. You could still—”

Ilya cut in again, a sudden fear running ice cold through his veins as he snapped, “I’m not your boyfriend, Shane.”

At that, Shane seemed to deflate entirely.

“Would it be so bad if you were?” he asked after a moment of tense silence, voice small.

Yes, it would, Ilya thought, *because you being mine for real would show on my face like a neon sign, the way I would want everyone to know. The way I would love you so loudly.*

Outwardly, Ilya winced, frustrated that their careless words kept drawing blood even as they both seemed to desire more from each other. “I don’t… I wouldn’t be able to go home.”

“But you hate it there.”

Ilya frowned. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Shane said plainly, “In Vegas. And all the times you’ve mentioned your father and brother since, I— it doesn’t matter. I pay attention. I know you.”

“Then you know that Russia is important, no matter how I feel,” Ilya replied tiredly, “And that I could not be out and play for national team again. Or return home without putting myself and family in uncomfortable position and probably unsafe one too. It would bring shame that I could not recover from.”

Shane nodded, expression serious. “I’m not advocating for anything public, to be clear,” he said hurriedly, “God knows I’m not ready to come out to my friends and family either, much less a locker room of guys throwing out slurs like a hobby. I just thought, maybe, when we meet up like this… we could know that, just between us, it means a little more than it did before.”

“Just between us?” Ilya echoed, surprised by how that tiny step warmed the chill in his heart.

“Yes,” Shane affirmed eagerly, clearly sensing how Ilya had softened at the thought, “We have a lot to figure out, obviously. Like, we know the sex is good, but we’ve never been on a date, you know? What if we talk over takeout and discover something irreconcilable? Like completely different opinions about pets in the bed? Or who should be considered hockey’s best center pre-1980?”

“Esposito,” Ilya answered, at the same time that Shane said, "Béliveau.”

Shane laughed. “See! This might be a disaster.”

I’d still be in love with you regardless, Ilya thought, biting down hard on the tip of his tongue to keep the words in. *Always, and no matter what, I think.*

Shane plowed on through his silence, saying, “Look, it’s crazy to ask you this, but since I have you here now…” He shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever happens in playoffs, don’t go home this summer. Or not as long, at least.”

Ilya scoffed, knowing his expression was incredulous and a little mean, as he replied, “And where the fuck else would I go? Back to Boston? Or god forbid, Montreal? I think they will find it harder to ignore if we are together in off season.”

He watched Shane from across the sofa crease, nervously wringing his hands. “I just bought this place on a lake in Northern Ontario. It’s small, but big enough for two. Really private and discreet. Hours from anything. Come for a week. We could finally see how it feels to spend more than a day or two together and—”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupted, heart cracking a little in his chest, “My father is dying. Maybe months left, at best. I can’t… make plans like that.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Ilya sighed, ready to deflect from this topic as he usually did. Instead, Shane’s patient eyes on him, he found himself saying, “Is it very fucked up if I say that I am not?”

Shane was frowning, though his tone was free from judgment as he asked, “He wasn’t… good to you?”

Ilya turned away from him, eyes stinging.

“On good day, he was indifferent to me,” he explained flatly, “On bad day, he was cruel with words, and on the worst days…”

нахуй. *Damn it all to hell.*

“On the worst days,” Ilya whispered, “he swung.”

He heard Shane suck in a breath, the couch shifting as he scooted closer and placed his hand on Ilya’s shoulder. Even through his t-shirt, the contact seared into Ilya’s flesh like a branding iron.

“I’m sorry for you then,” Shane said to the back of his head, as his shoulders trembled, “That he didn’t understand what a gift he was given, having a son like you.”

Ilya choked out a sob, a handful of tears flowing freely now. Oh god, here he was, meant to be comforting a lonely Shane, being dominant and in control so Shane could get out of his head, and now he was the one crying instead. He knew the moment he left here and was back to his steady state, he would be sickened by the degree of vulnerability he’d shown tonight.

Tears are weakness, he heard his father say in disgust, a warning hand raised above him, *No son of mine will cry.*

“I hate that I sort of just want it to be over,” Ilya mumbled, words tumbling out that he’d never said to another living soul before, “He doesn’t remember me most of the time, not that he ever really knew me to begin with, and I know my brother is squandering away half the money I send instead of using it for our father’s care. My stepmother wants money too, and the house and the cars. That’s all they’ve ever wanted from me. But I still feel like I have to go back to them. Like I owe them something.”

“I don’t think you should have to try so hard to be loved,” Shane said softly, finally reaching out to gather Ilya in his arms. Ilya went easily, folding into a strange reversal of the embrace they usually adopted when Shane sought the comfort of being mindless and small. “It’s not something to be earned. Especially not from your family.”

“We have very different families,” Ilya whispered back, unable to meet Shane’s eyes. Not while there were still tears in his own.

“We do,” Shane agreed easily, “but thank you for telling me a little more about yours. Even if they, and Russia, kind of suck right now.”

“So you understand why it is not so simple?” Ilya said after a moment, turning around to look at Shane, heart heavy, “Even if we both have feelings, this would be…”

“Impossible,” Shane filled in, “Yeah, I know. But family and hockey consequences aside, you’re right that doing this for another decade until we both retire sounds miserable anyway. It was easier when I could pretend that I was just experimenting, or that I didn’t miss you all those times in between.”

“The sex is just that good, I guess,” Ilya tried to joke, though he sounded a bit sad as he added, “Even when we try to quit, we keep coming back for more.”

Shane squeezed him a little tighter as they breathed each other in, before reaching out to swipe at the tear tracks still drying on Ilya’s face. “Listen, what if we table the hard stuff for after playoffs? Between this trade and impending free agency, I’m kind of tired of logistics. Tonight, we could just be together like we have been, except maybe we say some simple, honest things too.”

“Like what?” Ilya asked, heart skipping at the way Shane looked at him fondly in return.

“I like you, Ilya Rozanov,” Shane confessed in his flattest, most sincere affect, laughing when the statement made Ilya squirm, “See, simple.”

Not simple at all, Ilya thought, but he was admittedly tempted by the opportunity to vocalize even a thousandth of what he felt for the man wrapped around him.

“I like you too,” he whispered, and the feeling was sort of as glorious as he’d imagined.

Better even was the resultant smile on Shane’s face which rivaled the sun itself, blazing enough it could have dried up the ocean below them. Ilya knew then, with an intrinsic certainty, that he would find a way to keep this if it killed him.

He tilted his head up, or maybe Shane leaned down, and their lips connected in a way that made his brain run through every terrible romantic cliché at once. Waking up and coming home, fireworks and golden hour, the kind of kiss that could break an evil spell in a fairytale. It was ridiculous, the way Shane Hollander turned him into someone who could dream.

Parting to catch their breaths, Ilya watched Shane’s brow furrow in deep thought, unsurprised when he launched into another monologue just as Ilya tried to kiss him again.

“Once, when I was freaking out, you said I was enough for you, when we do this together,” Shane said, leveling Ilya with a look so intense he fought the urge to shrink away, “I should have told you then that I felt the same. That no matter what other people expect of you, you have always been enough for me. You are kind and smart and so fucking funny and a hell of a hockey player, as much as it kills me to say. And from the moment we met as teenagers, you acted like the mask wasn’t even there. No one has ever seen me like you do, Ilya. That fucking terrifies me.”

Ilya fought a grimace, finding the flurry of compliments overwhelming. Instead, he pressed a kiss to Shane’s jaw and said, “I want the whole world to see you like I do.”

Shane’s ears turned so red it looked like he might explode, and he did in a way, spluttering out, “Oh my god, what the fuck. Fuck you. You can’t just… be romantic like that, asshole.”

Ilya shrugged against him, secretly pleased by how he’d thrown Shane off so badly just by being honest. “You said for now we are hooking up, but with *more*, right? I am practicing the more.”

Shane grinned, rearranging them until he was seated in Ilya’s lap, a more familiar configuration. “We should probably practice the other part too, don’t you think? I’m a little rusty.”

“In these tiny slutty shorts?” Ilya growled, palming Shane’s ass in both hands, “I find that hard to believe. I am sure the Florida boys have had their fun with you.”

Shane’s face went impossibly redder as he gasped out a ‘No!’ in protest, squirming in Ilya’s lap with a pleased shiver just the same.

“Ah, that’s right, you had fake girlfriend,” Ilya teased meanly, sliding his hands past Shane’s waistband until he was cupping bare skin instead. “Such a cruel trick, when you know how many men were hungry for this.” He dragged two fingers over Shane’s perineum, before tapping them against his hole for emphasis.

“You’re so gross,” Shane protested, even as he ground down against the dry pressure, seeking the contact. “Don’t know why I like you.”

Ilya froze for a moment. *Oh.* There was that *more* again.

“What you like is a big dick,” he retorted, dodging the sentimentality a bit, “I’m sure you could not care less who it was attached to.”

Shane shook his head almost violently, snaking a hand between them to grasp at Ilya’s crotch. “Just want yours,” he nearly whined, “Want you.”

Ilya swallowed, fighting to tap into the dominant persona he knew Shane liked best, but being thrown by the tenderness just the same. His hands slowed their movement, a little stuck.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Shane said, pressing at the concerted wrinkle that had formed unknowingly between Ilya’s eyebrows, “I like when you’re mean to me, and when you tell me what to do, but we can also just be… vanilla, you know?”

He ducked to press a soft peck to Ilya’s lips, leaning back as he then teased, “Or maybe I boss you around, hmm?”

The statement was said lightly, probably nothing more than a joke, but the idea had Ilya letting out the tiniest of moans, shifting his thighs as his dick perked up in interest.

Shane, observant little shit that he was, raised an eyebrow and rocked his hips. “Oh? Big bad Boston Rozanov wants to give up the C for a change?”

It was horrible and cheesy, but his mind did feel lighter at the prospect, especially after the unanticipated, emotionally intense evening they’d shared.

“Fuck, I hate that this is doing it for me,” Ilya retorted, groaning at Shane’s shit-eating grin before kissing him soundly.

“Alright, up, up,” Shane said with a gasp, clambering out of his lap.

Ilya flopped dead weight against the sofa just to be contrary, yelping when two strong hands slipped under his thighs and lifted him instead. He was in the air in an instant, clinging to Shane with all four limbs and blushing so furiously he would probably never live this down.

Sure, he was a little taller and broader, but Shane was still 183 centimeters of pure athletic muscle, so maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise that he could replicate some of Ilya's own tricks. By the time they got to the bed, Shane tossing him inelegantly onto it, Ilya was laughing so delightedly it probably classified as a giggle. He watched with amusement, sprawled across the comforter, as Shane sat back on his heels and appeared to appraise the situation.

"Okay, here's how this is going to go," Shane stated, nodding seriously with his hands on his hips, and clearly trying to adopt some dominant mannerisms.

Ilya bit his lip to hold back a smile.

"I'm going to suck your dick while I open myself up, and then I'm going to ride you," Shane continued, his adorable monotone making it sound a little like he was reading off his grocery list. "And you," he paused to poke a finger at Ilya's chest, "are going to lie there and take it."

"Yes, sir," Ilya agreed, saluting lazily.

He watched Shane's nose wrinkle a little at the form of address, which unfortunately only endeared him further. He was so stupidly hard it hurt. Fuck, he was getting *love boners* now apparently. Ridiculous.

True to his word, Shane got to work immediately, swatting at Ilya's hands any time he so much as tried to touch. It was maddening and perfect and— by the time Shane was slipping on the condom and swinging a leg over, Ilya was delirious and gasping for it, out of his mind now in a way that would have prevented him from contributing actively at all. He'd never experienced this sort of focused emptiness, the place where Shane and the other subs he'd dabbled with seemed to depart to, primed to give and receive pleasure with no thought but the physical sensations between them.

As Shane sank down with a reverent moan, Ilya felt himself disappear completely.

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"Ilya, hey," a voice was saying, familiar and warm, as he blinked back into awareness.

Big brown eyes gazed down at him, full of compassion and… and something else. His heart beat hard in his chest as he whispered, "Sweetheart."

"Yeah, there you are," the voice, *Shane*, said approvingly, "You scared me for a second. Is that what I—?"

"Yes," Ilya replied, quicker this time as his consciousness reconnected, "I think so. It has never… happened to me, though. Like that."

"Did you… like it?" Shane ventured, dropping down to his elbows so that their bodies were connected nearly head to toe. The sticky sensation Ilya expected was not there, and he realized

that he must have been out long enough that Shane had cleaned them up as well. Such a good boy, Ilya appraised, even if he wasn't in the space to call him that this time.

"Yes," he said tentatively, answering the question on instinct, just as his mind was flooded with memories of sweat and heat and choked out moans: *Shane pressing Ilya's joined hands into the mattress above his head to keep him from touching, coming inside him first and so, so early — how embarrassing, Jesus — and then begging Shane to sit on his face as he ate him out to completion. Slipping fingers into Shane to get him off a second time, breathing into each other's mouths like they were both their only source of oxygen in the room. The word 'mine' echoing between them like a mantra.*

"Yes," he repeated, more assured this time, "but, maybe, we save that for special occasions?"

"Oh, good," Shane exhaled, looking relieved. He pressed a kiss to Ilya's chin. "I was worried I was going to have to audition for your job. Giving instructions is really stressful."

"You felt good, though?" Ilya ventured, pressing a thumb to Shane's freckled right cheek, "I was supposed to come here to make you feel better. But I think maybe I was a little selfish instead."

"No, no," Shane protested, "It was still so fucking hot, oh my god. Like. You were *really* into getting me off." He laughed, expression bashful, as the tips of his ears went red again. "And I do feel better. I wasn't, um, exaggerating about feeling lonely here."

He rolled to the right, molding himself against Ilya's side, and sighed out, "I'm grateful every day that I get to play hockey for a career, obviously, but this part… being uprooted on a whim… kind of really sucks."

Don't go back to Montreal, Ilya wanted to say, to beg actually, but he bit back the words. Asking Shane to choose another team, to maybe consider Boston specifically, felt too close to asking Shane to choose *him.* And they weren't there yet, were they? Not in a real, serious relationship where people made the difficult decisions to be together like that. Just a hookup still, and now, a little more. And anyway, after months spent agonizing over the end of this, Ilya should be grateful he even had Shane back at all.

After playoffs, Shane had said. Maybe then Ilya could ask what the future might hold, if there even was a future for two closeted hockey players at the top of their games who had no business spending time together in any off-ice capacity.

"You might win another Cup here though," he offered, pivoting back to hockey talk like the coward he was.

Luckily, Shane just laughed. "Oh, yeah? I'm afraid there's a series of black and yellow road blocks on the journey there right now though. And one very annoying, Russian obstacle, specifically."

Ilya shrugged, grateful to settle into their familiar banter.

"Maybe tomorrow I will score on you then. I have been holding back so I don't hurt your feelings," he teased, "Last time I did, *someone* tripped me."

Shane groaned, burying his face into Ilya's collarbone. "I'm *really* sorry about that," he said, voice muffled, "You keep being the unfortunate victim of the fact that when I panic, I make some incredibly stupid decisions."

He raised his head, meeting Ilya's eyes. "And, I thought… I don't know. I thought if you broke the Hex, you wouldn't have a reason to pay attention to me anymore."

"I am always paying attention to you," Ilya replied, frowning. *More than you even know.* "And also, you are best goaltender in the league. Even if I do score on you one day, like I did in Sochi shootout by the way, it does not make playing against you any easier." He poked at Shane's cheek, laughing at the way it made him grumble. "You are not magic, Shane Hollander. You are just that good."

Shane sighed, relaxing full-bodied into him once more. After a moment, he whispered, "Can you stay?"

Ilya felt himself smile, glancing at the clock that now read just past midnight. "I think yes, though I will need to leave before ten. I am in town for important work event actually."

"Oh, that's okay," Shane said lightly, catching the joke and playing along, "Weirdly, I have a work event a day from now too. Need to rest and prepare myself tomorrow. There's a… sales guy from this other company coming that really gets on my nerves."

"Sales!?" Ilya spluttered, feeling sort of mortally offended, "I am obviously the sexy CEO, you little shit."

"We'll workshop it," Shane said with a laugh, kissing Ilya in a way that made it very hard not to forgive him. "We have time."

They didn't, really. But Ilya nodded in agreement just the same.

Maybe one day they actually would.

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In the end, the Hollander Hex persisted, Ilya breaking a single playoff series record for assists even as he remained goal-less himself. Two hat-tricks in the first round and then *nothing,* the Storm edging out Boston 1-0 in OT to finish the series 4-3 on the Bears' own ice. Shane Hollander, with a *fucking* shutout to end it, was being publicly lauded as a hero by his Tampa teammates, now on their way to New York for the Eastern Conference Final, and Ilya still wanted to kiss him. *What a joke.*

He texted Shane congratulations anyway, and pretended like the one night each in Tampa and Boston that they'd managed to sneak away to see each other was at all enough to satiate… whatever it was they'd reignited between them. Shane's teary-eyed expression leaving Ilya's home as he promised they'd still message and call all summer had haunted Ilya through to the

final whistle, the silent, parting handshake they'd exchanged on the ice feeling like heartbreak all over again.

As if the universe was waiting to punch him in the chest a second time, Ilya's brother called the same night, warning him that the months the doctors had predicted had eroded into days instead.

And so, off to Russia he went, like the stupid, obedient son that he was. At their beck and call like a dog, and sick with preemptive grief and guilt and so much anger, it threatened to consume him whole. Still, maybe when it was all over and the arrangements had been made, Ilya could go back… to Boston. Or.

Or.

He shook his head, needing to protect his prettiest dreams from his destination, on his way to the hospital to see a man who hardly remembered him and hated him when he did.

Though it killed him to communicate in this state, Ilya had at least mustered up the energy to text Shane about going back to Russia earlier than planned and not being able to talk much once he was there. That wasn't true, exactly, but he would feel even worse than he did now if he burdened Shane with the distraction of his sadness.

Shane was dealing with enough already with the trade, and even though they were hooking up with *more* now, they had agreed that the hockey still came first.

Number forty-two Shane Hollander, in his ocean blue mask and Tampa Bay jersey, would win another Cup, maybe.

And Ilya would…

Ilya would wait.

Chapter End Notes

Hello and welcome to 'chapter that I threatened would be angsty, but was mostly me being overcome with the urge to make Hollanov actually talk to each other... sort of... for once. Yay.' Plus, subby service top Ilya anyone? ANYONE?

The temptation to use the term 'situationship' in this fic before it really took off in the 2020s cultural zeitgeist is so tempting here, but don't worry, because the boys are doing mental and linguistic gymnastics with the concept of a hookup plus more, eh?

Really nerding out on all the hockey things we can talk about from this chapter:

- Ah, NHL team slogans and hashtags. Some are fitting. Some are literal. Some are bad puns. And some are, uh, the Vancouver Canucks telling me to 'Embrace the Hard' ??
- Goalie fights are rare, but man, do they rule. Volturi's penalty was based lightly on a frustrated post-goal punch the Blues' Binnington once threw, which resulted in a match penalty. More on that and other hockey penalties here.

- The type of goal Ilya scores on Volturi to piss him off in the first place.
- Current NHL goalie mask designs explained. Some are really beautiful and thought out (Vasilevskiy's, based on Russian ceramics, is a favorite of mine) and some are... deeply heterosexual in a way that requires no explanation.
- Wayne Gretzky. Great hockey player. Generally bad dude with terrible politics. In my mind, Ilya breaks all his records eventually, and does so in a much more challenging modern hockey environment, just to make it an even more impressive achievement. More on Stanley Cup playoff records for scoring and other things.
- And finally, it's something I kind of ignore in hockey fics and hate to write out myself, but until this season, NHL players had to wear suits. Everywhere. As a league requirement. On the plane even, changing into sweats, and then back into the suits to get on the team bus, and to arrive and depart from the arena. The silliest, longstanding dress code in modern sports, imo.

Stunning artwork of Shane's new mask in this chapter is from @natsunogyoumi on twt. Please give it some love there too!

Chapter 12: Yes and No

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 2017 – Moscow

Ilya hated it here.

The hospital. Moscow. Russia in general, probably.

Almost as much as he hated himself for needing to see him. For feeling like he had to.

Good sons didn't let their parents die alone.

It was nauseating, the way that standing in front of Grigori — his *father*, though the word held looser connotations for Ilya than most — made him feel like a stupid child again. Small and worthless and reduced to nervously shuffling his feet, like he was standing outside of Grigori's study, waiting to ask simple questions ('Can I go play at Sveta's?) that his father would turn into a torturous game ('Do you really think you deserve that?'). Ilya's childhood had been one of deprivation, emotional and sometimes otherwise — ironic given the grand wealth they had once possessed — and for a while he *complied,* carved himself into perfect shapes to bleed at the altar of his father's mythical approval, asking, begging, 'It's enough now, isn't it? Haven't I done enough?' What he wouldn't have given back then for a single chance at earning Grigori's pride, his respect… his love. It had taken Ilya twenty years, a humiliating Olympic loss on home ice, and the total erasure of his existence from the man's memory to accept that his father would die without giving him any of it.

He let out a bitter laugh, knowing that Grigori remembered Andrei with shocking consistency, and hated him openly still, just as he had when his brain wasn't devouring itself. Evidently, Ilya wasn't important enough for the mental effort, an inconsequential blip near the end of Grigori's illustrious life, his ignorance a final dagger to Ilya's heart that his father would never even realize he had thrown. But then again, he wasn't sure what was worse: to be known but held in contempt or to not be known at all.

A nearby monitor beeped and Ilya looked up, sick with guilt and internal conflict at the image of Grigori wasting away in this bed in front of him. His cadaverous gray skin, sunken cheeks, and vacant eyes, devoid of their typically cruel intensity, made Ilya feel vindictive instead of just sad. *Pathetic,* he thought with a flicker of satisfaction, eyeing the military medals and ribbons the nurses had pinned to the front of his father's hospital gown, the physical reminders of his life's achievements the only thing that still calmed him when his demented mind raged. It had to be wrong, immoral even, how Ilya *liked* how the hands that had once bruised him looked like they would crumble at the lightest impact now.

He swallowed it all down, fearing nothing more than the idea that his father's sadism lived within him too, dormant in his genetic code. He prayed most days, hand pressed to the crucifix at his throat, for his mother's gentleness. And he begged most fervently for something that not even she had been able to give him: the ability to love without letting it destroy you.

It came as a shock, the sudden hacking cough from the bed as Grigori shifted, reaching a hand toward him.

“You look just like her,” he wheezed out, a moment of terrifying clarity before his eyes glazed over again, a side effect of his latest morphine dose, until his lids fluttered closed entirely.

Ilya didn’t have to ask who he meant.

Grigori had said it in the familiar, sneering tone of his lucid past. *You look just like her.* It wasn’t a compliment.

Afraid of more terrible truths should his father awaken again, Ilya stumbled out of the room and down the sterile white hallway with his heart in his throat, collapsing into his well-worn seat in the area meant for hospice visitors. He tugged off his protective mask, sucking in a shaky breath. It had been days longer than the doctors predicted, his father clinging stubbornly to life despite the bone infection that had turned fatally septic, poisoning him from the inside out. Though barely conscious and surely in horrific pain when he was, he hadn’t left either of his sons ‘the power to kill him’ as he’d long described it. Should it come to it, he would rather the doctors crack his ribs or shove a tube down his throat to draw artificial breath than go in peace at his family’s hands. Ilya had no idea if his stepmother had been given the privilege instead, her name absent from the visitors logs entirely when he’d arrived.

(But not absent on his phone, of course, constantly begging for updates on the will, even as Ilya’s expensive lawyers combed their way through with a fine-toothed comb. They’d advised him, though he’d requested an easy out, that it wouldn’t be as simple as telling his ridiculous, greedy relatives to fuck off and take it all. Legally, Grigori’s ghost would haunt him for months, if not longer, though at least he could handle a good deal of it remotely.)

God, why the fuck had Ilya come here? Had he really expected anything to be different? For the sobering reality of illness and death to manufacture closeness, a unity their family had never had? *Pathetic,* he thought again, and heard it in his father’s voice this time.

It was many hours later, when Andrei nudged Ilya awake in the waiting room.

“He’s gone,” he said simply, “In his sleep. I didn’t think you would want to say goodbye.”

Ilya jolted, unable to tell if the decision was from cruelty or kindness; life with Andrei had long been that way. Tiny glimpses of mercy used to blindside him from bigger wounds on the horizon.

“Okay,” Ilya said, voice breaking on the word, “I will… make the arrangements.”

“Yes, you will,” Andrei agreed sharply, his tone turning threatening as he continued, “And then, I think you should stay away from this family, from Moscow, unless you decide to clean your faggot act up.”

Ah, right. The reason Andrei hated him most of all, never mind the resentment of being the less favored son; a languishing failure to launch with only nepotism on his side while Ilya soared independently into stardom, not because of their father but in spite of him. No, the real insult to his brother was that he did it all while sucking dick.

“Clean my act up?” Ilya hissed, rising to his feet, “You’re a fucking coke addict. And whose *faggot* money pays for that, hmm?”

Andrei was on him in an instant, a furious hand in the collar of his shirt. “Consider your next words wisely, *little brother*.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow at the provocation. “Okay, how’s this? Your daughter will grow up knowing you are just like him,” he spat, a decade of altercations on the ice leaving him unafraid of the fight, practically craving it really.

Andrei was shaking, lurid anger overwhelming him, his eyes bloodshot from exhaustion (and probably withdrawal too). Ilya could have stopped then, spared both of them the anguish. But their father was dead and he was tired, so tired, of being the bigger man, the better-behaved son. The only one among them who wanted nothing monetary or material from his family, just love freely given, and still couldn’t fucking get it.

Leaning forward, lips against Andrei’s ear, he struck the final verbal blow. “Actually, you are worse than him, I think. Since you still have the opportunity to change. To be a real father to her. But we both know that you won’t.”

Ilya didn’t attempt to block the punch, even as Andrei telegraphed it from a mile away, letting the pain explode in his orbital socket instead. He deserved to hurt a little, for the way his heart had been singing this whole time, buoyant with the relief of knowing it was all finally, blessedly over.

Good sons didn’t celebrate their father’s death. Pity then, that Ilya was a bad one.

Hospital security arrived a moment later, pulling Andrei off of him with unnecessary force given his brother was all but frozen in shock. His hand had remained hovering in the air from the moment his fist connected with Ilya’s cheek, maybe realizing just how acutely he’d proven the point. Ilya could see the fear reflected in his eyes: He *was* like their father, wasn’t he? Letting the instinct to inflict harm control him, in a way that Ilya never would, off the ice at least.

After speaking with the police, who had predictably changed their tune about assault charges once they’d run Andrei’s ID and realized he was one of their own, Ilya all but sagged against the waiting room’s front desk. He accepted the ice pack from the on-duty administrative nurse there with quiet thanks.

“Grief does terrible things to people,” she said kindly, patting his shoulder, “You’ll work it out.”

I’m not grieving, Ilya nearly snapped, biting back the words with not insignificant effort.

He was shocked to feel the first tear roll down his cheek anyway.

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May 2017 – New York

Shane was just getting settled in his hotel room, clothes and toiletries unpacked and stored neatly, when his phone buzzed with a message.

He smiled at the contact name, though his face dropped immediately upon seeing the attached image: a selfie of Ilya doing a thumbs up from what appeared to be a bench outside of a hospital complex, the admission bracelet visible around his wrist. Face swollen, he had dried blood crusted under his nose, a wicked black eye, and three stitches through his eyebrow that looked painfully fresh. The fucker had the audacity to caption it with the stupid bandaged head emoji; Shane was going to kill him.

Shane: Oh my god. What the hell happened?

Faye: fight with my asshole brother

Faye: also my father is dead. yay or whatever

Shane was hitting the FaceTime audio button immediately, hands beginning to shake.

“Hi,” Ilya answered after the first ring, sounding so exhausted in that single syllable that Shane could’ve teleported to Russia with the force of his worry alone.

“Ilya,” he breathed out instead, anger waning, “are you okay?”

“Yes,” Ilya replied, the sound of an ambulance echoing in the distance, “My face will heal, do not worry. Nothing broken. Will be pretty for you to look at again soon.”

Shane fought a nervous burst of laughter, irritated by the way this had been sprung on him and yet pleased, of course, that he was the one who Ilya had reached out to first. But, either way, this was the opposite of no distractions. How could he focus on kicking Scott Hunter’s sorry ass in the Eastern Conference Final tonight knowing that the man he loved was thousands of kilometers away, apparently hurt and alone? When Ilya had told him to expect minimal contact after he’d left for Russia earlier than expected, Shane hadn’t anticipated breaking their silence until after playoffs at least. Still, he had ached to speak to Ilya this whole time, knowing just what that departure implied. Finding him unwell now, in the apparent aftermath of his father’s death, was excruciating.

“Did you win?” he ventured, trying valiantly to match Ilya’s lighter tone, “The fight, I mean.”

Ilya’s resultant laugh sounded pained. “In a way,” he said, “I think I am free of him at least. Of all of them. Maybe Russia too, I don’t know.” There was the sound of an uneven breath. “Sorry. They gave me strong medicine for pain, so English is… harder right now.”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Shane replied quickly, “I just… you’re hurting. I hate that. What can I do to help?”

“Waking up to Scott Hunter with Game 1 loss would be very healing, I think,” Ilya joked weakly, though it was clear that he was deflecting with humor as usual.

“I’ll do my best,” Shane affirmed, unable to stop himself from babbling on with additional suggestions, “But I’m serious. If you want to talk, we can. If you want to hang up and send me

all the weird memes I know you save, I'll pretend to understand and laugh at them. Or we can just breathe at each other over the line in silence. Some people find that comforting, I think."

"You hate when you can hear people breathing," Ilya observed immediately, with a certainty that made Shane laugh and blush in turn.

"Okay, yeah, I do," he agreed, "but I'd tolerate it for you, if it made you feel better. You could muse on Dostoevsky's collected works in Russian right now even and I'd listen more closely than any of my school lectures, until I have to go to the arena at least."

"That one does not count," Ilya argued lightly, the hint of a smile in his voice, "You love when I say Russian words. Not a hardship for you."

Shane grinned a little at being caught out, halting his nervous pacing to settle himself on the end of his hotel room bed. "Might be a good idea, though, you speaking Russian instead? Feelings are hard enough without translating them, so… if you wanted, maybe you could tell me about today? Or… your father? Only if it would help, I mean."

He heard Ilya's shaky exhale over the line. "I have told you more than anyone already, I think. About how it is… difficult here," he said slowly, "But I could… Yes, let me try."

Without further preamble, Ilya was launching into what sounded like a rant at first, the bitter anger and frustration in his words abundantly clear. But, after a while, the sharp edges seemed to erode. Phone pressed to his ear, listening, Shane heard the build up to the collapse, a tonal shift to complete and overwhelming sadness. The held-back tears were audible in the way his words wobbled, until finally Ilya cut off with a single sobbed out syllable, biting it back like he was afraid for Shane to hear it. A longing grew in Shane's own heart that he wasn't there to comfort him like… like a real partner would, given the death of a parent, even a shitty one. At times like this, Shane felt consumed by it, the heartbreaking knowledge they carried that in all the spaces they existed, they could not exist together. Except on the stupid ice, of course.

After a few more stuttered words, Shane heard Ilya sniff as he announced, "Okay, I'm done."

Swallowing nervously, Shane hesitated and then said, in probably terrible Russian, "*Ilyushenka, you are good. You are enough.*"

There was a long silence, lingering to the point Shane worried he'd been hung up on.

"Did you… did you understand any of what I said?" Ilya asked, obvious worry creeping into his words.

"Did I learn fluent Russian since we last saw each other a few weeks ago, you mean?" Shane teased, trying to soften the moment, "No. I just… memorized a few phrases. When I missed you. Sorry."

He heard Ilya sniffle again, huffing out a wet breath. "Shane Hollander, I hate you," he complained with a groan, "Why sorry? You are very nice to me. And you sound good in Russian too, close to perfect actually. That is so annoying."

Shane preened a little at the insult-veiled compliment. Though he was pretty good with languages in general, he'd practiced hard in order to be able to surprise Ilya in moments exactly

like this (or, well, ideally less bloodied ones anyway). Asking Misha for Russian lessons was out of the question, obviously, with too much opportunity for chirping. And so poor Toropov, Tampa's Russian left winger, had been subjected to Shane's questions instead. It was nice to be a goalie sometimes, in that you could say 'I'm trying out different language affirmations for my posts pre-game. Can you help me be nice and encouraging to them in Russian?' and your temporary teammate wouldn't blink an eye. The downside had been that word had spread — all of Tampa's players thinking these were essential spells for the Hex — and now Shane could express support and admiration in Swedish, Finnish, Swiss German, and Latvian too.

"Do you feel any better?" Shane asked softly, glancing at the clock. He was due on the team bus in about twenty minutes, but found he was willing to be late to a hockey thing for the first time in his earthly existence if Ilya still needed him.

"Yes," Ilya affirmed, so soft it was breaking Shane's heart all over again, "Just hearing your voice was good. And the Russian part. Thank you."

"You can text me all night if you need it," Shane told him, stalling a little, "I'll read them after the game."

"After you send Hunter crying back to Manhattan nursing home, you mean," Ilya teased, sounding a little more like himself.

"Yeah, after that," Shane agreed with a quiet laugh. He lowered his voice a little, adding, "And I miss you. A lot. I wish I was there."

"I wish I was *there*, in New York, closing in on the Cup," Ilya retorted, Shane able to clearly envision the pout he was wearing, "But yes, I… I miss you too. A little, always."

"How long do you have to stay?"

Ilya sighed. "A week, maybe two, though I hope less. There will be the funeral. And then dealing with the estate. It is complicated."

Shane hummed. "I know you said your family was… meddling with that. Are they still being difficult?"

"More difficult than punching me in the face, you mean?" Ilya deadpanned, making Shane choke out a shocked laugh.

"Ilya!"

"Sorry, sorry," he placated, though there was a little laughter in his voice too, "Was that, ah — what is the expression — too soon?"

Shane rolled his eyes, replying sternly, "No injury talk until after you're back and I can see that you're safe and healthy in person." He softened his voice as he continued, "But, for real, is the family stuff okay?"

"Yes," Ilya replied, though his exhaustion was clear, "except no, because I am trying to give it all away to them. It is not like I need the money or the properties. Turns out it is harder by law to not be selfish."

“That’s frustrating, I’m sorry.”

Ilya sighed again. “I am used to it,” he said plainly, “Mostly frustration is what I feel when I am here now. But anyway, I don’t want to keep you. It is very late for me and you have your game.”

“I do,” Shane affirmed, feeling regret for not being able to talk longer, “But you can text me. I’m serious.”

“I know you are,” Ilya replied and it was so, so very fond, “Good luck tonight, Shane.”

“Thank you, Ilya,” Shane said, the gash in his chest deepening as they exchanged a murmured series of goodbyes.

He hung up and immediately fell backward onto the bed, face in his hands, overcome with something desperate and incomplete and aching. Why was this so hard? They liked each other, they *talked* for real now, and yet it was still not enough. Chasing moments together across borders and timezones, always just a beat out of sync.

Well, at least now Shane had something extra compelling to motivate the win for tonight, the call both distraction and encouragement all in one.

And then, after the playoffs, no matter what happened, he would ask Ilya again. About the cottage.

About how they could possibly, impossibly, steal a little more time.

- 🥅 -

Shane was tracing the boards on the Tampa side, waving at the handful of Storm jerseys in the crowd after their 3-0 victory to start the series, when he heard a familiar voice call out:

“Hey, Hollander!”

He spun slowly on his skates, watching warily as New York’s captain approached him, his crimson uniform reminding Shane for a moment of his own ghosts back in Montreal.

“I’m not going to fight you, Scott,” he said tiredly, watching the surprise bloom on the other man’s face.

“Whoa, no,” Hunter was quick to reply, gloved hands in the air, “I just… Look, I’m sorry about what I said before. I was going through some things.” He paused, adding a heavy emphasis to his murmured voice as he clarified, “*Similar* things. And I took that shit out on you, which was unfair. I didn’t want to play this whole series without apologizing for that.”

Shane blinked. So Scott Hunter was—? He shook his head, the memory of his intimate words being thrown back at him reigniting a low-grade fury under his skin. “I don’t care what you’ve

got going on," he said testily, "That was so completely out of line. And *dangerous*. Just like this conversation."

Hunter shrugged, the look on his face seeming genuinely remorseful at least. "Still, I really am sorry. I just… I thought you might want to know that you're not alone in this."

"I know I'm not," Shane spat back, irritated now, "And you wouldn't have to be either if you actually cared about creating community and not just being miserable."

Hunter shrank in on himself a little at that. "I got your number from Carter," he said quietly, "Would it be okay if I texted you? I've been working on this inclusion initiative actually and—"

Noticing the crowd and some of his fellow players now eyeing them with interest, Shane fought back a loud no, and instead replied, "Fine, whatever. But keep my name out of your mouth. And his too."

Hunter nodded, skating closer until he was wrapping one arm around Shane and tugging him into a side hug in a way that Shane knew would set hockey socials on fire.

"Are you two…?" he whispered into Shane's ear.

Shane wrenched himself away, incensed. "That. Is none of your business," he said primly, "Have a good game tomorrow. Or don't, preferably. Apology sort of accepted."

And then he skated away, even as his heart raced, wearing a winning smile for the cameras and the fans.

A smile he wore all the way through Game 6, until one goal in OT from Scott fucking Hunter, suddenly playing hockey like it was his last night on the ice, clenched a spot in the Stanley Cup Final for New York instead.

In the blink of an eye, the Tampa dream was over.

And Shane… was going home.

- 🥅 -

June 2017 – Tampa

"All set for the move back to the Great White North?" Laurie asked when Shane answered her call, surrounded by suitcases — and the same haunting beach decor — in the soon to be vacated Tampa condo. He wouldn't miss being watched by flamingoes and fish eyes every night, that was for sure.

"I guess," Shane replied, shrugging, "This felt more like a vacation instead of a proper move so… I didn't really get attached."

It hadn't been the worst experiment. Some of the Storm players had been nice enough, making Shane promise not to Hex them post-Tampa and chirping him about missing his weird rituals in a way that felt like he was in on the joke at least. And he'd learned a lot, of course, playing with a completely different group of guys, grateful for the way his skills and confidence had undeniably grown in this short time. Still, he wouldn't miss the condo or the uncomfortable local politics or the Tampa Bay gray that washed him out severely. Ah, but his mask though. He ached for that design again, already scheming for a way to include bolder colors and more Japanese iconography on his next helmet. Maybe Montreal would— or, *not* Montreal, actually. That was a thing he had to decide now. Soon.

"Shane, they're clamoring for you," Laurie said, as if reading his mind, "I know you said nothing in the West, which knocks out a few teams, but to be honest, the East is really where the competition is for your level of talent."

"And Montreal?" Shane asked, biting his lip.

He could hear Laurie scoff over the line. "They've offered a two-year extension. Existing terms. Enough time for us to propose better ones obviously, for another multi-year contract after that. But also enough time for them to trade you for real. Without protections. Waivers would be insane, but I wouldn't put it past them."

"They really don't care, do they?" he murmured, knowing he was being perhaps a little more vulnerable than was becoming of a professional athlete. But he hadn't stopped feeling dejected and betrayed in the months since he'd left Montreal, knowing this part of the sport, and the purely business-based calculus that powered it, was to blame for his tenuous reality now.

"No, Shane, they don't," Laurie replied, gentler sounding, though still with her typical no-nonsense lack of coddling, "But they were pretty damn certain on our call last week that you would come back based on loyalty alone. They seem to think the tandem is also a draw."

Shane snorted. "Um, that part is a definite no. Buzzard is nothing more than a necessary evil."

"It would be simpler, though," Laurie continued, "For you to go back. Logistically, legally, financially… As your agent, since you've said the money isn't the issue, I would almost advise it."

"And in your off the record opinion?" Shane asked, sensing her hesitance.

"I would love to tell Montreal to go fuck themselves," Laurie deadpanned, "On your behalf, of course. I've been known to write a hell of a passive-aggressive email."

Shane exhaled a laugh, though the idea of a blank slate with yet another new team still made his skin crawl. A team without Hayden and JJ, without the city he knew like the back of his hand, French words on his tongue a familiar balm. He knew other guys floated around the league without much complaint, but Shane… wasn't like them. He had only made it through his time in Tampa *knowing* that there was routine and safety to return to. He maybe didn't care if signing with Montreal would be a reversion to a past self, or a worse decision for his career in the long run even, not when it would get him back the control he craved.

Except, *was* it control? Laurie seemed to distrust Montreal's long term intentions anyway. And while Shane understood that he'd been rented out to better his team overall, in exchange for top

draft picks for the following season, there was still that icky, oil slick feeling of being made a pawn in games bigger than himself. Not actually appreciated, just… useful.

“Let’s say I do declare my free agency in a few weeks,” he asked, gritting his teeth, “Top three potential offers?”

“Ottawa would certainly give you the better end of the deal,” Laurie said, “They can’t afford you, but I think they’ll be honest about it in negotiations at least. And they need a goalie, so you’d start for sure. Plus, hometown allure and all that.”

Shane nodded slowly. The Centaurs were… well-rounded, in the sense that nearly everything about the franchise was terrible, from the ancient arena to the merry-go-round of coaching staff and enough last place division finishes to make relegation sound like a good idea for the NHL. Always a pleasure to play though, with players who seemed like they were having fun, even as their own fans lovingly booed them half the time.

“And there’s Pittsburgh,” Laurie continued, “They have some strong goaltending already, but they’ve expressed interest in a proper tandem and are willing to pay top dollar to have someone elite share the ice time. And obviously you’d play with some offensive legends. Could be a great place to build a legacy for yourself. Cons are it’s, uh, Pittsburgh. Not America’s sexiest city, to be frank.”

Shane exhaled a laugh, but found himself nodding in consideration anyhow. Pittsburgh was a good team, a great team sometimes even. *Farther from Boston though*, he thought before he could stop himself. Like that had mattered to him before. Like he was going to make a life-altering decision around a man he wasn’t even dating. That would be… crazy. And so painfully unlike him that even the thought of getting Ilya’s opinion on a move felt nauseatingly close to a love confession. *‘Haha, hey, which team should I sign with to make it easiest for us to keep secretly seeing each other for the next decade? Yes, I am that serious about this. Any thoughts?’* No, god, he had to do this completely on his own.

“Okay, and I need you to hear me out on this one,” Laurie hedged, sounding nervous, which made Shane’s hackles raise, “The PR firm, with my blessing, might have moved some things around on your calendar and booked a CCM photoshoot for you next week.”

“Okay?” Shane said slowly, a little annoyed by the last minute mid-summer trip just after a big move, but understanding that publicity was key for him right now.

“It’s in Boston,” Laurie said quickly, “Just so, you know… you could explore the city a bit. And then, maybe, first week of July I conveniently also say yes to a meeting with their GM.”

Shane froze. Veins turning to ice at the mere proposition.

“Laurie, are you serious?” he spluttered, hands flapping about with such force that he nearly knocked a painted ‘Suntans & Tequila’ sign off the wall, “Fucking Boston? I can’t do that. It would be… They’re our rivals!”

“They’ve dangled the best initial ‘wink, wink’ offer by far, Shane,” she replied evenly, “Maybe just to blow a kiss and say ‘fuck you’ to Montreal, but still… it sounds extremely generous, as much as I can glean without a tampering charge pre-July 1. A big salary hike and a modified trade clause on the table too. Someone over there is a fan of yours.”

Shane was shaking his head almost violently, nearly vibrating out of his skin with the idea of abandoning his home in Montreal for the den of the enemy. *Wouldn't that be fair though,* the tiny devil on his left shoulder whispered, *to show those traitors what a real betrayal could look like?* There was a loud and sensible 'NO' from his opposite shoulder. Boston was… completely out of the question.

"And if Pittsburgh sounds tempting," Laurie continued, glossing right over his stunned silence, "Imagine being surrounded by the talent on the Bears roster? You'd be on the ice with Rozanov. The hype would be unreal. Even if he's, you know, a little controversial."

Controversial? Shane thought, panicked, *You have no idea the controversy I might create there.*

"Laurie, tell them no," he said quickly, almost choking out the words, "Just… I can't do that."

"Shane, hey, take a breath," she replied, "I know it would be jarring, and that the transitions have already been difficult for you as is, but… if you value stability in your career, Boston is a team that could give it to you." She let out a sigh, continuing, "Go, spend a few days in the city. If it's really a hard no, I'll contact their GM once you're in UFA. I just think maybe you should hear them out, at least."

Shane collapsed onto the terrible orange couch, where Ilya Rozanov — *captain* of the Boston Bears — had kissed him once, and where they'd agreed (like idiots, probably) to sex with a little more feeling.

Ilya had returned to Boston from Moscow just a few days prior, and Shane, coward that he was, had been exchanging perfectly pleasant texts with him, waiting for the right moment to broach the idea of summering at the cottage once more. He'd been hoping it would afford them not only extra time together, but also a chance to discuss how the hell they were going to manage anything approaching an actual — he gulped even thinking the word — *relationship*, given that coming out publicly, even individually, was out of the question at this point in their careers and that seeing each other for two, maybe three nights a season felt emotionally unsustainable in the long run. Part of Shane's hesitation for asking again came from the fact that he was all but certain the only realistic conclusion was that it simply wasn't worth it. A right person, wrong time sort of situation. Doomed to be a beautiful but temporary chapter in each other's post-hockey memoirs.

The thought of ending things, of only seeing Ilya Rozanov again from his place in the crease and only ever touching him in a playoff handshake line, had been making Shane sick and miserable for weeks now. And yet suddenly here was his agent presenting him with a too-good-to-be-true solution on a silver platter?

If Shane was honest, Boston had never factored into the equation. Playing hockey together was for All Stars and daydreams. It wasn't real life. They couldn't just… be together *and* share a locker room, winning Stanley Cups with both of their names engraved on the trophy. That would be insane. Almost as insane as the way Shane gripped the phone a little harder and replied:

"It's… not a hard no. Yet. I'll think about it."

"Glad to hear it, Shane," Laurie said cheerfully, "It's really in your best interest to keep all teams on the table for now."

'Is it in my best interest to be in a years' long entanglement with the star captain of one of those teams?' he thought with a wince, already knowing what any rational agent and publicist's response to that would be.

"And who knows?" she added, oblivious to his inner turmoil, "Maybe you'll visit Boston and fall in love with it."

- 🥅 -

Marly: yo guess what

Ilya: you finally got a woman to go on more than three dates with you 🎊

Marly: what? no, you asshole. and connecticut sarah and i were together for like six months

Ilya: did she know that

Marly: ANYWAY

Marly: i have a photoshoot coming up. CCM deal. and they just added shane hollander to the spread

Ilya: cliff don't

Marly: oh i'm gonna. he should know the team would be cool with it

Ilya: hollander is nervous person. you will scare him. i told you i would text him about it

Marly: and have you?

Ilya: … no. but i have a plan, i swear

Marly: fuck the plan, man. you're moving too slow. the rumor mill is going nuts over montreal possibly screwing this up

Marly: do you want to be cursed forever???

- 🥅 -

June 2017 – Boston

Laurie was right about Shane knowing Boston but not really *knowing* it, usually spending his forty-eight hours in the city cycling between airport, hotel, Ilya's home in the suburbs, and the

arena, and then off to the next game on the road.

It was strange to be here without hockey to play and with a whole chunk of morning hours to kill, which he'd spent at a touristy Boston-centric sports store (the man behind the register greeting him happily in that peculiar vowel-heavy accent with "Wallender, what an honor!" and "Fuck New York!" in the same breath) followed by an indulgent stop at the New England Aquarium and a stroll along the wharf. Now, with the afternoon CCM call time approaching, Shane opted to walk across a section of Boston Common on his way to the photoshoot location, in the second floor studio space of a gallery off Newbury Street.

It was an admittedly beautiful day — summer in Massachusetts not all that different from Quebec, mid-20s in temperature and with gentle sun, a welcome contrast to the sweat-soaked heat and humidity of Florida. They enjoyed all four seasons here too, which Shane found essential as a creature of the North, and there was enough greenery, flowing water, and visible sky (in this part of the city at least) to keep him from feeling completely swallowed up by the glass and steel highrises beyond.

As he arrived at the shoot location, one of the coordinators greeted him at the door, making pleasant small talk as they climbed the stairs up to the brightly lit set. The concept, according to the briefing Laurie had sent along, was a simple and classy monochromatic advertisement for CCM's new line of pro compression wear (knowing he'd be blessedly fully clothed, Shane had indulged in a lobster roll for lunch with minimal guilt about the butter or mayo or whatever the hell they mixed in there).

As the team started their prep work, Shane was immediately grateful for the comfortable outfit, the light touch of makeup, and the straightforward art direction; he'd been dowsed with water before, asked to deliver lines while running on a treadmill, and once — for a tonally strange 'NHL Celebrates Cultural Heritage' campaign — been done up in a sort of modified men's yukata and made to hold a sword in one hand and his stick in the other. A basic white backdrop with some standard lighting and a request for bland 'sporty' poses with a serious expression was child's play in comparison.

Arriving late, though not late enough to derail the entire production timeline, thank god, was Boston's Cliff Marlow, who slid into the chair next to Shane with a wink and a handsome grin.

"Hollander," he greeted, nodding his head Shane's way.

"Marlow, nice to see you," Shane said neutrally in reply, wrinkling his nose as the makeup artist used a fluffy brush to apply a fine layer of powder over her finished work.

"Listen, man," Marlow half-whispered after a moment of silence between them, leaning over until he caught Shane's eye, "It fucking sucked to play you when you were with Montreal."

Shane snorted. "Uh, thanks?"

"No but for real," he emphasized, shrugging to appear nonchalant, "I heard you might be in the market for a new team, and well, we're not perfect here in Boston but we protect our own."

Shane winced, wondering if the universe was just playing jokes on him now with how aggressively the Boston Agenda continued to come up around him.

You wouldn't say that if you knew, he thought, considering Marlow's words, *You'd never look at your captain the same way again either.*

Marlow plowed on, unbothered by Shane's lack of response as he lowered his voice even further to say, "And don't ever tell him I said this but… Rozanov is kind of a fanboy of yours."

Shane raised an eyebrow, biting his lip to fight a smile. Okay, maybe this encounter with the man Ilya had once described as a serial gossip wasn't so bad after all. "Oh, really?"

Marlow chuckled. "Yeah, bro, I once caught him watching a YouTube compilation called Shane Hollander's Sexiest Saves. He's never let me close enough to see his phone screen again."

Shane shrugged noncommittally. "Maybe he was just doing some research," he chirped, "given the whole never scoring on me thing."

His words startled an even bigger laugh out of Marlow, who punched his shoulder, before immediately being reprimanded to sit still by the hairstylist who'd started on his messy waves.

"Hollzy, you're a riot," Marlow said, looking pleased, "But I promise all the Bears boys really do kinda vibe with you."

Shane frowned. "I'm sure that's not true."

"Nah, I'm serious," Marlow replied, "You're like… good goalie energy, man. And the Hollander Hex is fucking hilarious. Roz is such a ragebaiter and we all try to poke him back, but nothing gets under his skin quite like you do. Which *rules*."

At that, Shane fought the urge to preen a little, the thought of being special to Ilya Rozanov in a way that others *noticed* doing terrible things to his greedy heart.

"Anyway… if you're looking," Marlow added, "and I know for a fact that you *are*, you should think about us. I know the whole 'moving to a rival team' dynamic probably isn't ideal, though I won't pretend to understand all that PR shit or whatever. Just thought I'd, uh, 'shoot my shot' is probably the wrong way to put it but—" He appeared to blush a little as Shane raised an eyebrow at the phrasing, stuttering out, "Y-you know what I mean. I wanted Roz to hit you up first to be honest, since you at least kinda know him, but I think he's too shy."

Shane tilted his head, 'shy' being a word he'd never heard used in relation to the league's biggest personality, though it did make him wonder why Ilya hadn't brought up Boston directly to him yet. Maybe he didn't want to influence Shane's decision, or maybe he thought a return to Montreal was a foregone conclusion (a camp that Shane still lived in himself most days). Or… the most mortifying possibility: maybe he didn't actually want Shane at Boston at all, the professional proximity creating a new pressure on their situation that Shane also found completely terrifying if he thought about it too hard. They weren't exactly casual, but they weren't *that* serious either. That, and in any other context, a hookup from out of town getting a job at your company to be closer to you would warrant a restraining order probably.

"Shane, we'll have you up first," the photographer called over, freeing him just as Marlow opened his mouth to presumably prod a little more.

After several rounds of poses and two outfit changes, the CCM reps onsite declared his performance satisfactory and Shane stepped off the set of blocks they'd had him standing on for the last part of the shoot. He ducked behind the curtain divider, shedding his gear and changing back into his street clothes, and accepting a makeup remover wipe from one of the assistants with a whispered thanks.

Just as he was prepared to depart, waving a hand over at where Marlow was now modeling for the camera, a showstoppingly gorgeous woman in the most powerful pantsuit he'd ever seen sidled up in his periphery.

"Shane Hollander?" she asked, as if his identity here was a mystery.

"Uh, yeah," he replied awkwardly, turning to face her. A mistake given how even more coldly beautiful and intimidating she was head on, with sharp eyes, full lips painted deep mauve, and hair like a burst of flame.

"Svetlana Vetrova," she said, reaching out a hand which he shook gingerly, "Regional Marketing Director for CCM's East Coast and Maritimes operation. Wonderful job on the shoot today."

Shane winced, sure that 'wonderful' was a polite exaggeration. "Ah, thanks. It's nice to meet you."

"Yes," she said, as if agreeing it was *his* pleasure. With a vicious smile, she simpered, "You won't believe how long I've been waiting for this. Let's chat outside."

He blinked, confused, though he found himself trailing behind her down the stairs duckling-style anyway. "Er, waiting for what, exactly?"

She turned to gaze back at him as they slipped out the front door and into a side alley, sultry smile folding into a frown. "Ilya didn't say anything about me?"

Shane hesitated. "Um, Ilya as in Ilya Rozanov?"

Svetlana rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. "I *know*, okay. Let's not play dumb."

"Know what?" Shane asked slowly, eyes narrowing in suspicion. Why exactly a marketing executive at a hockey equipment brand would be cornering him to speculate on any business he might have with Ilya Rozanov was still *very* unclear. Better to hold his cards close to his chest.

"I'm his closest friend," Svetlana said, sounding a little exasperated, "He tells me everything."

Shane wracked his brain for any mentions of a 'Svetlana' from Ilya, though he was drawing a blank. There was a girl in Boston, a childhood friend turned regular hookup, he'd talked about at length once, though Shane had tuned the rest out, stewing at the idea that there was some pretty Russian woman out there who might know Ilya better than he did. Fuck, what was her name?

"He might've called me Sveta?" she ventured, Shane's synapses immediately awakening like a sleeper agent at the clarification.

"Oh, you're *Sveta*," Shane replied with a bashful smile, "He has mentioned you. Sorry, I— I'm still a total beginner in Russian. The diminutives are so interesting though."

“He’s teaching you Russian?” she asked, cocking her head in a way that made her curls move with a gentle, hypnotic bounce.

“No, I’m, um, learning independently. Just in my free time.”

“For him,” she said conclusively, as if there was no argument.

“For…” Shane began, feeling argumentative anyway. His shoulders sagged. “Yeah.”

“Well,” Sveta said, looking amused now, “I was going to give you the scary best friend speech about taking this seriously and not breaking his heart, but that seems kind of silly now.”

“We aren’t… dating,” he argued back weakly.

She all but laughed in his face. “Oh, believe me, I know. I have been hearing all about just how *casually* this has progressed for the better part of the decade.”

At that, Shane fell awkwardly silent, reaching down to pick at the hem of his t-shirt. It was simultaneously strange but freeing to have a handful of supportive friends know the full or even partial truth about them (like Hayden’s belief in ‘Faye’ and Rose’s educated guess) and Shane found that he wasn’t nearly as spooked by the idea as he would have been in the early days of their meetups. He was gay and in love with a man and that was mostly okay; it was the rest of the world — the *hockey* world, specifically — that would have a problem with it.

“Hey, you know sports business stuff, right?” he inquired, watching as Sveta raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘clearly’ and gestured to her suit. Shane nodded with a slight smile, asking, “And he trusts you?”

Her expression was almost offended as she replied, “Yes, obviously. There would be *infinitely* more scandals about him if I wasn’t a discreet source.”

Shane blushed a little, hesitating, before proceeding to pick her brain about a move to Boston. Like his agent and Cliff Marlow, she didn’t seem concerned about the rivalry, pointing out that the media spin around the Hollander Hex being forever immortalized as unbroken would be any publicist’s dream.

“And the fans love an ‘enemies on the ice, friends off of it’ arc,” she added, “Sign with Boston, have the social team cut a few cute, bantering clips of you talking about each other to get the fans used to it, and then, bam! Secret lovers for life. As long as you’re not like straight up tonguing in the Roche Bros, you’ll have plenty of very normal excuses to be seen out together.”

Shane blinked several times at her specific choice of words, but found himself nodding along slightly anyhow. She was *definitely* a marketing executive, convincing and confident as hell.

“Did he… put you up to this?” he asked, scratching the back of his neck.

Sveta looked at him for a long moment, analyzing. “Ah, you haven’t talked about it.”

Shane winced. “No, well, I mean… Boston wasn’t really on the radar, until my agent mentioned they might make an offer.” He shrugged, shuffling his feet a little. “And uh, before Tampa, I sort of thought I’d be a lifer in Montreal so…”

“So?” she echoed, “Without Boston, what was your plan to keep seeing each other?”

“Um,” he began sheepishly, “we didn’t really… have one. I was hoping we’d spend a little time together this summer and figure it out?”

“My god,” Sveta muttered, “Men are an incredible species. It’s a wonder you’ve survived this long.”

At that moment, Shane decided that he liked her very much. Unsurprising, maybe, given he seemed to be a magnet for hot Russians who took specific pleasure in making fun of him.

“I can’t just ask him about Boston,” he said, voice low, “I don’t know how to do that without making it sound like I’m… serious about us.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you?”

He hesitated. “I— I don’t know. We’ve spent so much time talking about how the situation is impossible. It feels too easy to just… end up in the same place together. Plus, everything that could go wrong afterward, if we got caught. Hockey is still important to both of us.”

“The romantic in me wants to say ‘fuck it, love is love’ and all that,” Sveta replied easily, leaning back against the brick wall next to him, “but I actually think it’s smart that you’re considering every angle. It’s good to not be reckless, but… I’m not sure people are paying as close attention as you think. His reputation as a playboy bachelor helps a lot too.”

Shane frowned at that, remembering that he was indeed speaking to another one of Ilya’s long term hookups. Who was to say that he wouldn’t pick *her* in the end? It would be the infinitely simpler option.

“Are you two still…?” he asked before he could stop himself, watching an amused grin bloom on her face.

“No, not for years now,” she replied, “though your angry jealous look is *very* cute.”

“It would be fine, if you were,” he said, though the way he fought to keep his tone even and his expression painfully neutral was probably an obvious tell.

“You should tell him you’re here, you know,” Sveta suggested gently, “We usually watch the finals together, but I’m leaving for a business trip tonight. He’d probably like the company.”

Shane scuffed his sneaker against the pavement, contemplating. “Maybe. I’m here for another day and a half, so there’s time. I just… I was going to mention it earlier, but… Things with his family have been tough obviously and I didn’t want to overwhelm him.”

Sveta’s pretty eyes had gone almost cartoonishly wide at his words. “He told you about all this? His father?”

Shane nodded. “He called me from Moscow right after. Or well, I called him, but he’d been texting me. His brother fucking sucks.”

Sveta stared and stared, something complicated passing over her features. “I’m glad he has you,” she said softly after a moment, “and I would really, really hate it if you made choices that would take you away from him.”

“The hockey comes first,” Shane stated on instinct, “We agreed.”

He watched her smile turn bittersweet. “I’m sure he told you that. But he would never pick hockey over everything. He’s probably cagey about Boston because he’s not sure you’d make the same choice.”

Shane swallowed, hesitating just long enough that Sveta’s eyes became steely, expression darkening. He’d always treated their hookups as an *‘and’* or maybe an *‘in spite of’*… hockey and Ilya Rozanov; Ilya Rozanov in spite of hockey. Never, ever *‘or’*. The *‘or’* required giving them a future beyond the NHL — an ostensibly public one — and Shane was already personally terrified of who he’d be, if there was anything left at all, once the mask came off for the last time.

“If you wouldn’t choose him, you shouldn’t drag this out,” Sveta said, not bothering to hide the icy warning in her tone.

“We only just admitted there are feelings involved,” Shane argued back, “Forgive me if I’m not yet sure how much I’d sacrifice for a relationship that doesn’t exist.”

Sveta pushed off the wall, folding her arms as she gave him one last stern look. “Talk to him,” she said, “You’ll just keep slowly killing each other until you do.”

Pivoting on one impressive heel, she called over her shoulder, “Enjoy Boston, Shane Hollander. We’d love to keep you.”

Shane slid back against the brick with a groan and breathed and breathed.

- 🥅 -

Shane: Would signing with Boston be crazy?

Misha 🍿: career wise? not really. nosey will retire after this season

Misha 🍿: for the real reason you are asking? yes. definitely. good crazy tho

- 🥅 -

Shane: This is stupid but

Shane: I'm in Boston.

Faye: come over

Faye: obviously

- 🥅 -

Ilya was a little embarrassed by the way he practically manhandled Shane Hollander into his home the moment those boring white Reebok sneakers crossed the threshold.

But then again, Shane seemed nearly as desperate, molding their bodies together and connecting their mouths with a shuddering gasp.

Fuck, Ilya had missed this.

They were stumbling through the entryway and falling onto the couch in an instant, clothes flying everywhere, when Shane suddenly glanced up at the television and said, "You are *not* fucking me while Scott Hunter wins the Stanley Cup in the background."

Ilya laughed against his lips, sitting up to scrabble for the remote on the coffee table and turn off the TV.

"We better hurry up then," he said, "I was watching that."

It was ravenous then, how Shane had Ilya's shorts off and a mouth on his cock in mere moments, swallowing him down until there were tears staining those freckled cheeks.

Ilya started with two fingers, Shane begging to feel the stretch tonight, murmuring a string of Russian endearments as he opened him up. Several of them Shane clearly recognized with the way he echoed them back, annoying perfectly-accented polyglot that he was. Not long after and Ilya was sliding home — the missionary position strangely vanilla for them — Shane gazing up at him with such open vulnerability it had Ilya biting back all the words he absolutely could not say.

In the end, they didn't hurry much at all, Ilya's slow strokes keeping them both on the cliff's edge for what felt like an eternity. They clung to each other, exchanging tender kisses, as Ilya let weeks of agony bleed into his touch before it evaporated in the air between them. He felt flayed open, viscera on display, the heat of the man beneath him cauterizing the wound.

"I missed you," Shane choked out, nearly sobbing with the force of his orgasm, fluttering around Ilya in a way that had him spilling into the condom seconds later with his own broken cry.

"Missed you so much," he murmured back, face pressed into Shane's shoulder as he collapsed on top of him, bodies aligned head to toe.

There was a particular Russian phrase on the tip of his tongue but he dared not whisper it, fearing that Shane might already know one crucial word in the mix.

Ilya sucked in a breath, very determined not to cry but feeling the tears threatening at his water line anyway. Maybe he deserved to shed a tear or two though. He'd had a genuinely horrible couple of months, the few nights spent with Shane during playoffs and that ridiculous, half-delirious Moscow phone call the only bright spots in all of it.

Shane was more talkative than normal as they got cleaned up, the absence of subspace in the night's dynamic keeping him perfectly aware throughout as they changed into two sets of Ilya's comfiest clothes and settled in to watch the final ten minutes of Game 5. The Admirals, leading 4-1 in the game and 3-1 in the series, were all but guaranteed the Cup now, a first for Scott Hunter who had been captaining since the very start of New York's decade-long drought.

"Hunter has been playing well," Ilya remarked, flinging an arm around Shane who immediately curled up catlike against him, "How annoying."

"He knows about us, you know," Shane said, making Ilya jolt in surprise, "Speculated at first, I think. But then he said some stupid shit to me about Nashville. That's why I tried to fight him."

"I will kill him," Ilya replied, suddenly incensed, "What the fuck? Why did you not tell me?"

Shane squirmed. "I was… kind of planning on not continuing this back then. I kept coming up with reasons to end it. So, I don't know, I just didn't tell you stuff like that." He sighed, burrowing more deeply into Ilya's side, "But you shouldn't kill him. He's, uh, he's like us. He said something to me about a diversity initiative."

"That's… optimistic," Ilya remarked dryly.

Shane laughed. "Yeah, I know. But he's brave for trying."

As the minutes ticked down on the ice, Shane spoke again, lips moving against the fabric of Ilya's t-shirt. "I met Sveta today, you know?"

Ilya blinked. Fuck if this man wasn't full of surprises tonight. "Ah, she mentioned a photoshoot. Tried to get me to appear in it actually but it sounded boring."

Shane smiled. "It *was* boring. I was happy about that. I hate the weird high fashion ones you like, where they always ask me to make shapes I've never heard of." He coughed. "And, um, Cliff Marlow was there too."

Ilya froze, knowing that there was a less than zero percent chance that Marlow had kept his mouth shut about the Boston offer.

"Did you talk much?" he asked, trying to keep the quiver out of his voice.

Shane hummed, shifting against him. "Not really. I talked to Sveta a lot more actually. She really cares about you."

"She's my best friend," Ilya acknowledged, heart still racing in his chest, "It is nice you met. Makes me happy."

“Is it crazy that I like that some people know?” Shane murmured, “I know it’s risky but… it feels less *huge* when it’s not our secret alone.”

“Feels real almost,” Ilya agreed, afraid the bittersweet thoughts he carried about their not-relationship might be too visible on his face.

There was a beat of silence and then: “The Voyageurs offered me a two-year extension.”

Ilya tensed, a hand on Shane’s jaw immediately as he tilted his face up. He held on until Shane’s stubborn eyes were meeting his own and then said, very carefully, “Shane, I need you to listen to me. Do not go back to them.”

Shane sniffed, breaking the eye contact. “It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Ilya was sitting up fully now, grasping both of Shane’s shoulders to look at him head on, a little desperate. “All I want is for you to be happy. You could be happy on many other teams I think. But Montreal is… you cannot stay there. With stupid vulture boy. You hate him.”

“I owe a lot to them,” Shane whispered, already shrinking.

“You owe them *nothing,*” Ilya hissed back, “They make you small. I hate it! You are Shane fucking Hollander, Olympic silver medalist, Vezina winner, Stanley Cup champion. Your curse haunts this stupid league. We all *fear* you in the net. An oarfish. Doom, destruction. You should make those cunts in Montreal regret losing you until their last breath.”

Shane was shaking, eyes close to tears. As he opened his mouth to reply, the announcers on the television were shouting about the Admirals clenching it, the ice filling with red jerseys as the final horn sounded in victory. Ilya knew the feeling intimately, watching Scott Hunter hoist the Cup aloft, tears in his eyes. The championship was a legacy that lived with you forever, but that moment of unbridled ecstasy on the ice was painfully ephemeral. You could spend your entire career chasing it, ‘just one more season’ until your body finally gave up completely.

It was pure insanity, the way his brain connected the sensation of holding that trophy to the man he currently held in his arms instead. A sudden wave of nausea washed over him, realizing that he would treat this just the same: begging Shane Hollander for 'just one more season' of sporadic hookups all the way through to his retirement, chasing and chasing until the heartbreak killed him. And actually, Ilya might not even have another opportunity to plead that far ahead. Right now, Shane would choose hockey over a chance to be together — or rather the smoothest path to keep playing the sport in his boring, familiar way — unless Ilya showed him there was a simple solution. A way to have both.

Hockey *and* Shane. It had felt impossible long before he’d gone and fallen in love with him like an idiot, maybe from the moment he’d felt compelled to let a weird kid in Saskatchewan talk his ear off in an alleyway, full of anger and bitter contempt for the world, his family, himself… This brilliant, strange, compassionate goaltender from Ottawa, making him believe in gentleness again.

Maybe it was stupidity or bravery or a little bit of both that powered his next impulsive decision.

“Say yes to Boston,” Ilya said, just as Shane blurted, “Come to the cottage.”

On screen, Scott Hunter was kissing a man at center ice.

Chapter End Notes

Update: Now that this fic is completed, I've chosen to remove the lengthy author's note at the beginning for better chapter flow. You will notice reactions to the note in the earlier comments here, as it addressed some serious issues with reader fic etiquette in the fandom, including screenshotting fics to poke fun on social, cruel/critical comments and bookmarks, and largely unfounded AI accusations which led to fics being locked or deleted entirely.

Please consider your behavior in this troubling era of consuming fics as content, and remember that the simplest and most appropriate response to a fic you don't like is to close the tab.

I've archived the full author's note here for anyone interested.

Chapter 13: Lakeside

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Say yes to Boston."

Shane pushed up from where he had been leaning against Ilya's side as their eyes met, Ilya's wide and terrified in a way he knew must mirror his own.

"What?" Shane whispered, heart pounding. *So he knew about the offer. So he knew and he didn't —*

"Shane," Ilya cut in, voice shaking as he reached out a hand. He used the tips of his calloused fingers to turn Shane's cheek, angling his gaze to the left and up. "Look."

On the television, clear as day, New York Admirals captain and newly minted Stanley Cup Champion Scott Hunter was kissing a man in plain clothes and sneakers, their mouths and bodies melded in a way that left no room for ambiguity.

Oh.

The bold expression of truth hit Shane like a transport truck, visceral and devastating. He could not imagine a love that loud, that beautifully confident. He was *in* love, yes (whether reciprocated or not), but believing that he'd ever have a realistic chance to go public with it was another thing entirely. 'Come to the cottage,' he'd asked, his words tangled up with Ilya's own. His offer of limited time and a place to hide away felt pitiful in comparison, when the NHL's Ilya Rozanov — star captain of a historic hockey dynasty — was bravely proposing an entire future on his team in exchange.

Watching Scott Hunter cradle another man's face with deep, open affection, tears sliding down his game-flushed cheeks, Shane felt like a terrible and selfish person for the way that his very next thought was: *At least I don't have to be first.*

He sat silently side by side with Ilya for an endless moment, staring at the television with their matching slack-jawed expressions as the announcers attempted some neutral damage control. After a few more pained laughs on the air, the coverage shifted awkwardly back to an analytical summary of the series. A huge graphic showing a detailed breakdown of the Admirals' offensive lines filled the screen to cover the celebrations on the ice, probably thrown together at the last minute at the network executives' panicked behest. Unable to help but scan the numbers, Shane immediately spotted two errors, finding himself irritated that not only were they censoring a historic moment but doing so with sloppy stats too. Wordlessly, Ilya leaned forward to pick up the remote again and turned off the television, bathing the room in silence.

"Did you know he was going to…?" he asked, Shane turning away from the darkened screen to face him.

"No," Shane replied, swallowing, "I didn't know he was seeing anyone, much less that he was planning… all that."

“I might send him a message. Thank him,” Ilya said earnestly, laughing as Shane wrinkled his nose, “Do we think this will change anything?”

“No,” Shane answered on instinct; jealousy, skepticism, and something naively hope-like forming an ugly knot in the space between his ribs, “Well, maybe a little. He did just win a Cup. That’ll be harder for people to dismiss.”

“We have won Cups,” Ilya replied, wearing a halfhearted smirk, “Would it be the same if we —?”

“If we what, won a championship together and kissed on the face-off dot?” Shane cut in, tone sharper than he intended. He was embarrassed by the way in which the fantasy made him angry almost, too pragmatic to believe in improbable dreams. Still frowning, he joked, “It would one-up Scott Hunter in terms of shock value, that’s for sure.”

Ilya smiled down at him indulgently in spite of his attitude, pressing the lightest of kisses to Shane’s nose in a way that made him squirm. “Together? So you are seeing the vision?”

Shane sighed so hard it seemed to rattle his ribs. “Of course I am. I’ve dreamed about playing with you since the last time.”

Ilya hummed, eyes searching, “And I have dreamed about having you for as long as I want. Now there is maybe a way to do that. Without waiting forever.” He placed a gentle hand on Shane’s thigh and said, “Talk to me, please. What about Boston offer scares you?”

Shane hesitated. “I guess… I— I’m struggling with the idea of doing something that everyone is pointing me toward. After the Tampa trade, I’ve been so tired of hockey feeling like a thing that happens *to* me, without my input. I know that’s a whiny opinion for a millionaire hockey player to have but… look, we’ve both invested so much in this sport. I don’t want us to lose sight of that. We have a lot of seasons left to play.”

“You can want me *and* hockey, Shane. That is allowed, you know this, right?” Ilya prompted, expression deadly serious in a way that Shane rarely saw him, “It is how I feel about you.”

It was surgical, the simple precision with which Ilya negated all of his most agonized thoughts about having to choose. Even so, Shane’s brain found ‘worry’ to be a particularly sticky emotion; he often needed to ruminate on tough ideas over and over again, picking at the gluey residue of indecision like a stubborn paper sticker.

“Ilya, god, of course I want both. I… I like you a lot, obviously. I just don’t know if it’s a good idea to let these two parts of my life interact that closely.”

“Do they not already?” Ilya questioned, raising one of those damn eyebrows.

And, well. That was unfortunately a good point, given they’d been tracing each other’s orbits one way or another for the better part of a decade.

“They do,” Shane acknowledged, “but… we’ve never been together for longer than a few days, and even then we had players clock onto us. How am I supposed to act indifferent around you if we’re on the same team? No distractions, right? We’ve *always* said that.”

Ilya frowned. “I think we have shown for years that we can have this and still be at top of our games. And we proved before too that we are a good team on the ice. Unbeatable team, really. Maybe now we just tell people we became friends through all that.”

At Shane’s hesitation, Ilya pushed forward, impassioned as he said, “Come to Boston. We would be good to you here. And Nosey is retiring for real, so you would play. It has been hush hush while your contract is still in place, but I met with the GM and he asked me if I want you in our goal. I told him yes, it’s a great idea. Because it is.”

Shane bristled at the confirmation that there had indeed been serious discussion going on behind the scenes, even if he understood the very real need to keep anything vaguely like tampering off the league’s radar. “You can’t… you can’t influence these decisions without me, Ilya. I want to feel like I’ve earned it. Like I’m in control of my destiny, for once.”

“Shane Hollander, you have to believe in yourself,” Ilya said with clear exasperation, flopping back against the couch, limbs sprawled all over and poking Shane with his boniest parts. “This — what is it called? — party of *pity* is exhausting. You are good in goal. You are the best, probably. You have earned every step of your NHL career, more than most of us. And Boston would not pay millions for nothing.”

Shane nodded slowly, though accepting the straightforward praise still felt like gnawing on barbed wire. “I— okay. You’re right. And I know that I’ve worked hard. I’m just… afraid of the risk. I don’t want things to change.”

“They have to. For you to be happier,” Ilya replied, with a degree of uncharacteristic sincerity that was almost unsettling, “But to change, to grow, it does hurt. Trust me, I know this.”

For a moment, his hand was at his throat, touching the gold crucifix that rested in the hollow there. Shane had never asked him about it, though he knew it must mean a great deal given that he had never moved to take it off in all the years they’d known each other.

Expression gentle, Ilya reached out then and captured Shane’s chin with two fingers like before, though this time he tilted their mouths together. Shane went easy, sighing happily as the kiss deepened, his toes curling into the carpet at the lightest swipe of tongue against the seam of his lips. Mouth occupied, his mind still raced, wondering if he’d ever get used to this side of Ilya Rozanov, plainly sweet and affectionate as he was. His hookup plus more, giving him a *more* that felt as natural as gliding across a freshly resurfaced rink.

“I have a little time to weigh any offers before training camp invites go out,” Shane said eventually, still breathing hard once they broke apart, “I promise I’m seriously considering it.” He gnawed at his bottom lip, venturing, “But if I… if I say yes to Boston, what else am I saying yes to?”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “I think… we could try this? For real.”

“For real?” Shane echoed, hearing his pulse in his ears, “I thought you didn’t, um, date.”

“Never wanted to before,” Ilya shrugged almost shyly, as if his words weren’t tilting Shane’s cynical little world on its axis. The *'I'm not your boyfriend'* he'd shouted once still echoed in Shane's ears even now. “And they— the others knew it was just physical attraction. But if you

like me and I like you, well. We were feeling so defeated about… ah, *logistics* before, in Tampa, but now this is easy math, maybe?"

Shane found himself swaying forward sunflower-like, drawn to Ilya's warm and optimistic smile. "When have we ever done anything the easy way?" he asked, mouth pressing to the juncture of Ilya's neck and shoulder — one of his favorite places in the world to just… exist.

He inhaled. *Yes.* The crease and this.

"Sign with my team, *stay*," Ilya said again, getting a hand in Shane's waves, "We can play good hockey, win games, the Cup even. And we will be in the same city, maybe permanently. I don't want to keep feeling sad when I have you here, knowing that what comes after is months of missing you again. I cannot survive more years of that, Shane Hollander, you will kill me."

"So what?" Shane questioned, glancing up as his cheeks burned with the earnestness of Ilya's admission, "We hide in plain sight? Can we really pull that off?"

Ilya shrugged. "As teammates, we would have excuse to be seen together."

Shane hummed, thinking of Sveta's similar argument from earlier, and pictured a future where he could stand at Ilya's doorstep without constantly looking over his shoulder. Where they could go *out* even, instead of just clandestine Point A to Point B. He smiled a little, imagining them wandering the grocery store aisles together, arguing about cereal sugar content and optimal banana ripeness, or running laps of the park near Ilya's home, competitive to a fault, posting negative mile splits until they were both gasping for air. Feeling silly at the thought, Shane wondered if Ilya knew about the duck house he'd spotted on the harborwalk that morning. He wanted to go with him either way, standing on the commuter ferry dock at the end of the long wharf at sunrise and watching the ducks emerge from the structure, swimming back and forth from the floating platform. They could let their hands brush even, in the first light of day, with only the birds and the boats there to witness.

"That's true for the public, I guess," Shane said after a moment, "But what about in the league? What if one day we need allies on the team. To help protect this. Are any of them…?"

Ilya shook his head. "Not that I know. But Cliff Marlow, he would be good I think. His brother is gay. Left his college football team because of… problems with that. Marly does not let other hockey players forget the hurt they can cause. Got suspended last season for punching that asshole Dallas Kent, if you remember."

Shane frowned, knowing that giving up a future in their chosen sport to be out was the fate for many queer athletes, especially without the legal and financial privilege that he and Ilya had amassed as high-profile professionals. In some ways, he was lucky that elite hockey careers began so young, drafted before he could possibly work out that what he felt toward other men — and one man in particular — had a name, and all the stigma that came with it.

"And your management?"

"Not good but… not the worst," Ilya answered frankly, "They actually care about Pride Night here in Boston, though bar is low. And since I am captain, well. I try to change things where I can. There is a lot my players know we do not tolerate, at least in our locker room. Marly, with the A, helps me to… enforce that."

Shane exhaled against him, fighting the urge to purr as those deft fingers massaged into his scalp. “I’m sorry I’m being so annoying with all the questions,” he said softly, mumbling the words into Ilya’s neck, “It just sounds too good to be true.”

“You are never annoying to me,” Ilya said, bursting into laughter at the way Shane scoffed and punched at his chest, “Okay fine, yes, you are annoying me constantly. But not for asking for more information about something you care about. That is only fair.”

Shane relaxed back against him at the words, hiding his face in the fabric of Ilya’s shirt, cheeks and ears burning impossibly hotter at the feeling of being both teased and cared for in the manner he liked best.

“Let’s make a deal,” Ilya proposed, “I will come to your cottage, hmm? We will spend two weeks together. And if we can tolerate it, prove this really works for us, you tell your agent to meet with my GM. Make sure contract promises are what you need, that other teams are not offering better. And then…” He ducked his head down, pressing a kiss to the top of Shane’s head with a cute little smack, “*then* you go over Boston offer for real. And if the answer is no, we will figure something else out, okay?”

Shane sniffed, feeling overwhelmed by Ilya’s patience, for how easily he seemed to understand that — although probably aggravating from an outsider’s point of view — Shane needed *every* possible input before going all in on a decision like this. It was an impossible sort of kindness; Ilya wasn’t forcing Shane to choose Boston as an ultimatum, but rather positioning it as an opportunity that was good for Shane’s career *and* his heart. He appeared to accept just how important it was that Shane be able to make this choice for himself.

“Okay,” Shane whispered back, pressing his own version of a kiss to Ilya’s collarbone.

“Okay,” Ilya echoed again, voice dropping lower, “But in meantime, will you stay here tonight? We can start practicing for Boston sleepovers right now, just in case.”

Shane sat up and smiled, batting his eyelashes as the mood shifted to something more playful. “If I stay, can we practice other things too? Like what if my new captain this fall is really mean to me?” he simpered, “But turns out, it’s just because he has a *huge* crush.”

He watched Ilya’s eyes light up, smile widening. Still, he slapped Shane’s thighs, standing up despite the noises of protest Shane made in response. “I am sure that poor captain will make an appearance later tonight,” he said, winking, “But for now, why don’t you pick something gross and healthy from takeout menus on the fridge? And then we can watch boring hockey documentary you will not stop talking about.”

“Sidney Crosby is *not* boring,” Shane argued, even as he stood up to follow Ilya into the kitchen.

Ilya’s laugh was fond enough to warm him down to his toes. “Yes, Shane, he really is.”

Shane shifted anxiously in his seat at the gate area at Boston Logan, criminally early to the airport as was his nature. His short flight home to Montreal wasn't due to board for another hour, though he'd all but fled Ilya's that morning with a mumbled excuse about traffic. Used to his travel anxiety, Ilya had just smiled at him, kissed him at the door like he was a salaryman off to work for the day, and said, "Bye, I will see you soon."

Right, the cottage. That was a thing that Shane had done.

It was hard to believe that next week he'd make the drive to his parents' house in Ottawa for a pit stop and then head up north to the lakefront property to ensure it was cleaned and well-stocked with food and supplies for his guest. He adored the small, two-bedroom cottage, with its rustic wood siding and rickety dock, the second floor recently re-paneled with glass to overlook the water. Though he could undoubtedly afford to custom build something bigger, more modern and extravagant now, he felt a nostalgic sort of attachment to the first piece of real estate he'd managed to save up for on his own. And his parents also liked to summer nearby, which made it easier to see them during the off season. He was sure the house itself would probably seem quaint to one of the NHL's highest-paid players; still, Shane hoped that the beautiful winding backroads and kilometers of old growth forest stretching between his hideaway and more concentrated civilization would give Ilya the same sense of peace and freedom it did for him anyway.

He would know soon enough, he supposed. A ticket booked for a July 3rd arrival to YOW with Rozanov-comma-Ilya on the flight ledger.

Standing up to stretch his legs, Shane decided to wander over to the nearby lounge, flashing his credit card and ID to the attendant at the door. Optimized for business travelers, there were a few private call pods available at this early hour, Shane shuffling into one and pulling out his phone.

He took a deep breath. Better late than never.

Shane: Hey guys, can we talk?

The replies flooded in almost instantly.

Hayden: oh he lives!

JJ: We're just leaving the gym. Want to give us a call? I'll sit in the back of Hayden's car like he's my uber driver just to piss him off 😇

Hayden: no you will not 😡

JJ: Is there or is there not a giant pile of mystery mess on your passenger seat right now?

Hayden: fuck you man, you try keeping anything clean and glitter-free with four child sized gremlins running around

JJ: What do you mean child-sized? They ARE children. YOUR children???

Shane shook his head as the two continued to argue in their group chat, stabbing at the call button anyway. Hayden picked up on the fourth ring.

“Hey, Hollzy, my boy,” he greeted cheerfully, “Hold on one sec, let me put you on speaker for Mr. Boysenberry over here.”

“We are not making that nickname a thing,” JJ called out in the background, “I’ve been playing hockey for over twenty years as ‘Boise’. You do not just reinvent yourself whenever your idiot teammate *thinks* he’s got a better idea.”

“Sure you do,” Hayden argued back, “Like Shane here is ‘Wallender’ now. And I bet you’ve never even *been* to Idaho—”

“Ok but Wallender is actually meaningful because—”

“Guys, hey,” Shane cut in, his heart aching a bit with how much he missed his teammates’ stupid banter, “Sorry, I just… I have something kind of serious to talk to you about.”

“Do not tell me you signed with Montreal again,” JJ said immediately.

Shane lowered his phone, gaping at the screen for a moment. “Wait, what?” he asked, putting it back up against his ear as he recalibrated, “You don’t want me back on the Voyageurs?”

“Shane, we love you man, but your self worth kind of sucks,” Hayden jumped in, “You did incredible things in goal for us here, but no one would blame you for leaving with the way you’ve been treated. Morale was shot to all hell with the Tampa thing, obviously — you saw how Boston demolished us — but it’s not on you to fix that.”

“Um, wow, okay,” Shane said slowly, “This is really not how I thought this conversation was going to go.”

“Hollander, my brother, we will miss you for *éternité,*” JJ replied, voice steeped in faux-drama, “But it’s not like you are retiring from the sport. We will still play each other, and we can catch up in person when we have breaks. Assuming you are considering another Canadian team, yes?”

That question gave Shane pause. “Um,” he began awkwardly, “maybe one or two? Ottawa is on the table and—”

“Quessé ça esti!” JJ exclaimed, in deep Québécois offense, “Ottawa, Shane? You are not serious. I take it back. Montreal is the second worst option actually.”

“You asked!” Shane replied through his laughter, “And my agent has her reasons, I swear.” He let out a long sigh. “Look, all I know for sure is that I’m trying to end up somewhere in the East. Maybe even the Atlantic.”

“Go where the pipes call out to you, Hollzy,” Hayden intoned, adopting the demeanor of a sagely monk, “We just want you to be happy. We’re your friends and we’ll support your choices. Except Boysenberry — *ow*, JJ, fuck you — is right about Ottawa. They’re a disaster. Uh, no offense to your hometown.”

“No, you’re right, they are pretty terrible,” Shane agreed, anxiety growing as he continued to stall a bit. He hesitated, free hand kneading rhythmically at the fabric of his shorts, before biting the bullet as he said, “But, um, there’s sort of one top offer we’re anticipating anyway.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hayden questioned.

“It’s purely practical, you know,” Shane hedged, “Their veteran goalie is going to retire after this season so… it would be the perfect time for me to transition to the team.”

There was a long silence over the air as Shane felt both hockey players attempting to put the pieces together.

“*Crisse,* Hollander, you want us dead, huh?” JJ blurted, first to solve the puzzle, “You give Montreal one Cup and then say ‘oh, never again boys, I am going to put a mouth to Ilya Rozanov’s butthole,’ is that it?”

Shane startled, just as Hayden quickly interrupted, “Kiss ass, JJ, fucking hell. ‘*Kiss ass’* is the phrase you’re looking for.” He paused for a moment, with an awkward cough. “But Shane, it is a little… shocking. If you’re seriously looking at Boston, I mean.”

Shane let out a breath. “I know, I know. I told my agent she was crazy when she first brought it up too, but they really are hoping to build something long term in goal, and I… I can see how I might fit into that vision.”

“I am sure they are,” JJ hissed, “If only to rub it in our faces. What’s a few million dollars if it means humiliation for their rivals for years to come!” He let out a long breath of French vulgarity, part *joual* and part Creole that even Shane’s fairly well-trained ear struggled to parse. “If they don’t give me the C this season, I am going to beg for a trade. I hate this damn team, I swear.”

“No you don’t,” Shane and Hayden said simultaneously.

JJ sighed audibly over the line. “No, I don’t. But she is like a toxic partner. I am so sure I can fix her.”

“Speaking of partners,” Hayden said after a moment, “Shane, this move to Boston wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with your not-girlfriend, would it?”

Shane blinked in surprise. He hadn’t considered that Hayden might put a few more pieces together, still holding onto details from that one pitiful Boston dinner where he’d thought he’d ruined things with Ilya forever.

“Um, I mean, it’s an added bonus. Long distance always kept us from pursuing things seriously.” He paused, formulating his bluff, “But you guys know me, it’s hockey above everything. All that other stuff barely factors in.”

“Hockey, your first and forever love, yes,” JJ agreed, “But maybe you can be a little reckless for your human lover, no? Very romantic to move countries to follow your heart. Now we will really look like assholes if we stop you.”

Shane cringed. Though their support of him leaving the Voyageurs was a pleasant surprise, he doubted his teammates would feel the same if they knew the truth in its entirety — kissing Ilya Rozanov’s ass being almost exactly as literal as it sounded.

“You sure you don’t want to beg me to stay in Montreal?” he asked, only half-joking, “I’d give up my, uh, girl for my boys, you know that."

“Your loyalty means a lot to the team, Shane,” Hayden said easily, “But this is *your* career, man. And your happiness in general. You gotta do what’s right for you.”

“Obviously we will miss our wall in goal,” JJ added, “But if you leave, we are left with Buzzard as the starter. I am worried the only way to get rid of that asshole is to have him play enough that his weaknesses become obvious and that nasty temper takes over. The GM will not see sense otherwise. Plus, he will be furious to play against you. Which is a bonus for me, personally.”

“It’s always fuck the Bears, to be clear,” Hayden joked, “and yeah, it’ll suck to shoot on you, with how well you know my tics. But we’ll still respect you as a player and a person, Shane. You’re our Hollzy, no matter what. We practically raised you.”

“Our weird, anxious goalie baby,” JJ agreed, practically cooing at him, “All grown up now and abandoning us for Boston.”

Shane snorted at their silly back and forth, though the feeling was somewhat bittersweet. He’d been expecting more resistance about signing with the Bears from, well, everyone basically, and instead he’d encountered nothing but support and understanding from friends and players alike. Had he really spent so many years fighting to earn and then keep his precarious spot on the Voyageurs, tolerating their treatment with the expectation that he’d retire there, only to realize he’d been transparently unhappy all along? And could he really expect better from another team in the way the people around him all seemed to believe? Being actually appreciated in goal by his employer was one thing, but many of the league’s problems were systemic in nature. Shane would have no choice but to bring all of his intrinsic differences to a new locker room and a new arena full of fans, with no guarantee he’d find even the small pocket of acceptance he’d cultivated with Hayden and JJ. He’d been lucky in Tampa; the prospect of Montreal but *worse* was still terrifying.

“I really do appreciate you both,” he said, fondness creeping into his voice, “I wouldn’t have made it this far in the NHL without you. I’m just a little… scared to leave the nest, I guess.”

“You’ll make the right choice, Shane,” Hayden replied, gentle and genuine, a far departure from his usual sardonic tone, “Don’t let the uncertainty scare you away from something good. And I proposed to my wife like, immediately, so I'm kind of an expert on the 'just go for it' brand of hockey romance too.”

Shane winced. *But what if that something good involves me dating a man you all hate? A man who made me brave enough to want better for myself in the first place?*

He could tell them that Faye wasn’t a girl at all, maybe… a fellow hockey player, even. But he knew that they’d be unlikely to leave it at that, if they even accepted Shane being gay in the first place. No, better to wait. Scope out their reactions to Scott Hunter even. It was too risky to trust any other players right now, not unless they had just as much reason to hide.

“Nothing’s set in stone,” he hedged, taking the coward’s way out, “I’ll start considering my options in-depth when the contract expires, but I just wanted you both to know first. That I… might not be coming back. Please don’t tell the rest of the team just yet.”

“Sworn to secrecy,” Hayden said, “And hey, we love you, bud. We’re proud of you, okay? This shit isn’t easy.”

“Yes, we are,” JJ affirmed, “though it feels very cringe to say so. I wish you could have seen Pike’s facial journey fighting through that ‘love you’ — it was incredible.”

Shane blushed, feeling the warmth of their friendship even at this distance. They really were the brightest part of his Montreal career (well, besides winning the Cup, of course).

“Ugh, love you too,” he muttered, embarrassed, “I’ll keep you updated, alright?”

“You better,” Hayden warned, “And tell Faye I said hello. We’d love to meet her, you know?”

“If she really exists,” JJ chimed in, immediately followed by a loud smacking sound — from Hayden’s hand almost assuredly — and a pained yelp.

“Someday, yeah,” Shane said carefully.

A decade from now when we retire, he thought, *or after we shock you all with surprise wedding invites…* then immediately spiraled at the idea of dating Ilya Rozanov long enough to become his husband. What the fuck? Where had that even come from? *Husband,* his brain sang again anyway, and he shivered at the word and the rightness of it.

Eventually, they all managed to say their proper goodbyes, Shane wandering back over to his gate just in time for the boarding process to start.

Bye bye, Boston, he thought once he was seated, sipping on the mimosa the flight attendant had served to his section pre-take off, a fruity balm for his nerves.

‘Bye bye, Boston.’

He wondered how often he might say that come October.

And what and *where* home would actually be.

- 🥅 -

Ilya: you know shane well, yes?

Popov: VERY well 😉😜

Ilya: what

Popov: kidding, kidding)))) did you need something?

Ilya: i want to talk about you and jake

Popov: a foursome? ilyukha i thought you’d never ask

Ilya: you are so irritating

Ilya: but no, like about how you keep it secret. safe

Popov: !! is this a boyfriends reveal????

Ilya: … not yet

Popov: oh you are nervous)0)) this is so cute i will cry

Ilya: can you just answer some questions please

Popov: 👍

[incoming call]

[call ended: 43 minutes 8 seconds]

- 🥅 -

July 2017 – Montreal

"Your father and I are so excited to have you over, sweetie," his mom was saying, "It's been too long!"

Shane rolled his eyes fondly, phone on speaker as he meticulously placed his folded clothing into his suitcase. "Mom, it was only a few months, really."

"I know that," she said, long-suffering, "but you've had a tough go of it recently. And there's so much to discuss! Have you talked to Montreal yet? I really think you and Laurie could push for better terms if you—"

"No," Shane cut in, "and I'm, um, really not planning on re-signing with them."

There was a curious sound, something between a gasp and a scoff, as Yuna seemed to falter at the news.

"Well, there's no *real* rush until the training camp invites go out, I suppose," she said, recovering quickly, "We still need to do more cost-benefit analysis on the Voyageurs, of course. But I could potentially see another Canadian team being good for your branding. Toronto, maybe, or W—"

"Mom, please," Shane interrupted again, a little exasperated, "Slow down. Laurie and I can handle it. I pay her to do that, you know." He took a deep, slightly fearful breath. *Here goes nothing.* "But you should know that I'm, uh, I'm thinking about signing with Boston. Pretty sure, actually."

The following seconds were the longest of Shane's mortal life.

"Don't be funny, Shane. You hate Boston."

He shook his head, hurrying to explain the choice aloud when he remembered she couldn't see him right now, nor the matching look on his face that would show just how serious he was about the prospect. "No, I mean, I can understand why you'd think that. But I've had some really good conversations about goaltending there. And Laurie says that the offer is—"

Her next words were clipped, harsher, as she seemed to recognize he wasn't speaking in jest. "Shane, sweetie, I don't think Boston is for you."

"And I don't think you get to decide that," he snapped back, wincing immediately at how caustic it had sounded.

Shane could count on one hand the number of times he'd actually stuck up for himself against Yuna Hollander's barrage of 'always brilliant' ideas, the first and worst being when he'd declared he would categorically *not* be trying out as a forward anymore, hand-me-down goalie pads packed in the back of her car. She'd spent the entire season that followed being face-value supportive but with an unsubtle undertone of hockey mom righteousness, certain he'd admit to being bored in the net, to wanting to be a skater again. Obviously that hadn't happened, and he could sometimes sense, even now, her lingering disappointment that he wasn't the star franchise captain she'd invested in.

This time, in response, there was an even longer silence.

Finally, he heard her huff. "Right. Okay. Then tell me why Boston. Is this just about another Cup? Because Montreal's rebuild looks very promising and—"

He sighed. "Mom, no. It's… it's about hockey in general and being on a team that might give a shit about me. But also, um." He squeezed his eyes shut, blurting out the same rationale that had worked to sell Hayden and JJ on the idea: "I'm kind of seeing someone. Have been for a while now. And Boston would be… closer."

"Shane, what? How long? Who is she?"

He wasn't surprised by the pronoun, obviously, but it stung just the same.

"Uh, well. We met when..." He shook his head, deciding that a specific time or place would be too revealing for a woman whose encyclopedic hockey knowledge rivaled his own, especially when it came to her son's career. "Um, just… years, really. It was complicated with travel and our jobs and… I don't know how we'll do it but, well, I'd like to try."

"You'd go to Boston? Your sworn rival? For a girl?" she probed, sounding baffled by the thought, "Shane, that seems *very* unlike you."

He sighed, feeling the conversation begin to stray into familiar territory. His mother's parenting style, even in his adulthood, mostly involved telling him how to feel about something and repeating that idea until he either genuinely accepted it or otherwise acquiesced just to avoid more conflict. Pleasant, shared interests in conversation were fine — they could talk about hockey or interior design or low-carb recipes for hours — but emotional vulnerability? Not often

found in an Asian parent's wheelhouse, Yuna Hollander most definitely emblematic of that cultural in-joke.

"I'm… in love, I think," he said quietly, and the honesty felt like chewing glass, "I… I know I am, actually."

"Shane, you realize this is a shock for me," she replied, tone even frostier, "I would have thought, as your mother, you'd tell me about a relationship *before* it was serious enough to stake your whole career on it."

Imagine how shocked you could really be, he thought, tempted to just rip the Bandaid of Total Truth off all at once, *if I told you I was gay and for Ilya Rozanov specifically.*

"Romance is… fickle, honey," his mother continued, "I don't think you should be making such consequential decisions based on another person."

"I know you think I'm being reckless," Shane replied testily, "but I told them, *her* the same thing. That this move has to be for me, first and foremost. And mom, I… I want you to trust me, sometimes. That I'm a fully grown adult who knows what I'm doing with my career. And trying to balance that with the fact that hockey isn't forever."

He heard the sharp inhale that followed. "Okay, maybe I *do* believe you," she said slowly, "Given you've always talked about hockey like it was the only thing in the world that really mattered to you and—"

"And where do I get *that* from, hmm?" he cut in, a little meanly.

She sighed. "I know I've pushed you when it comes to the sport. But while I love hockey, I love your father and *you* most of all, you know that, right? My point was that I don't think I've ever heard you acknowledge that your career will end one day, that there's a lot of life worth living after hockey too. Not soon! Obviously. You have plenty of seasons left and then if you wanted, we could think about coaching opp—"

"Mom!"

"Okay, okay," she placated, taking a deep, audible breath, "So, Boston. Talk me through it."

- 🥅 -

July 2017 – Ottawa

As the seatbelt sign turned off with a pleasant chime, Ilya could feel his pulse begin to accelerate.

He was really doing this, wasn't he?

A veritable vacation with the recently Unrestricted Free Agent goaltender Shane Hollander during which he planned to:

1. Convince him to sign with Boston (in progress, promising?)
2. Ask him to be his boyfriend (embarrassing, juvenile), and
3. Manage not to scare him off by confessing his love over ten days of terrifying intimacy (unrealistic, foolish).

He scrubbed his hand over his face, anxiety prickling on his skin.

The handful of passengers ahead of him in the First Class cabin shifted restlessly in the aisle, waiting for the signal to grab their luggage from overhead. Relaxing in his seat, Ilya pulled his phone out of his pocket, switching it off airplane mode to send a quick arrival text.

Ilya: just landed

Pippa: Long term parking, level 4. Black Range Rover. See you soon!

Disembarking a minute later, Ilya rolled his carry-on behind him, his baseball cap and oversized sunglasses a low-effort but mostly passable disguise. He made a quick bathroom pit stop, freshening up a bit, before texting Shane that he was on his way out.

A singular eager teenage girl in a Bears sweatshirt waved as he exited the men's side, nearly spilling the water bottle she'd been filling up outside the restrooms in her excitement. Her family must have come off his same flight, with a pile of luggage and a gaggle of younger kids including a newborn in a stroller, all being herded by her exhausted-looking parents.

Sue him if the chaotic travel scene hadn't tugged on his heartstrings enough to have him stopping to sign her sweatshirt and take a quick selfie, her father — in a Bears cap of his own — thanking him profusely for the kindness. The man was tired enough that he didn't seem to question why Boston's captain was spending part of his off season in Canada of all places, which was a blessing given Ilya really, *really* didn't have a passable backstory prepared.

Following the signage, he made his way through the airport and out to the nearest parking structure, where he eventually spotted Shane's car — expensive but boring — and Shane himself, sat ramrod straight in the driver's seat and looking like the least relaxed man in the world. Waving a little stupidly, Ilya walked around to where Shane had popped the trunk and quickly tossed his suitcase in, before climbing into the passenger seat a moment later.

"I kind of told my mom about you," Shane blurted the moment the passenger door clicked shut.

Ilya blinked at him. "What?"

"We were talking about Montreal and my other offers and she thought me going to Boston was insane, which it is, and I sort of told her it was partly because I met someone?" Shane said, seemingly all in one long breath. "Also, hi. You made it."

Ilya felt a smile begin to creep onto his face. They'd only spent a week apart and yet he'd missed Shane's particular, endearing brand of neuroticism more than he could possibly justify.

“Hollander,” he teased with a gasp, “you met someone in Boston? Is she prettier than me? Will she be at your cottage too?”

Shane had started the car during Ilya’s dramatics, but still took time to slug him in the arm with his free hand as he steered them out of the lot.

“Shut up,” Shane muttered, the tips of his ears a brilliant crimson.

“So what did you tell her exactly?” Ilya fished, grin widening.

“Nothing specific,” he answered quickly, still flushed, “Just that it’s been going on for years and that I— um, that I have strong feelings, I guess? She assumed you’re a girl, obviously, but it was kind of nice to like… surprise her for once? I’m pretty sure my parents both thought of me as a celibate, hockey-worshiping monk this whole time.”

“Even with Rose Landry?” Ilya asked, unable to keep a hint of bitterness out of his tone.

Shane glanced over at him, frowning. “My mom talks to my personal team a lot, especially my publicist, so she knew the Rose thing was just for the press,” he explained, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, “but I think she hoped it would turn into something real, anyway, even if she probably didn’t have much faith in her awkward son to bag a movie star.”

Ilya sniffed, perpetually peeved by the way that so many people in Shane’s life seemed to underestimate him by one dimension or another. “And look at her son now,” he said loftily, “Bagged himself playboy prince of NHL instead.”

“Have I?” Shane asked, lips quirking into a pleased smile as they merged onto the highway.

“Hmm?”

Shane cut a glance over at him again. “I know we’ve never really been exclusive. I mean, I slept with a few other people and *your* body count is probably like—”

“Shane,” Ilya said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “it’s… it’s just you. Since Florida, little before that actually.”

Shane blinked. “Wait, really?”

“Yes,” Ilya affirmed, actually embarrassed now.

“But that’s...” Shane started, then shook his head, “We should really talk about these things. You didn’t have to—”

“I didn’t *want* to, okay?” Ilya interrupted, casting his bashful gaze firmly out the front windshield instead as he muttered, “You have ruined me, Shane Hollander. Are you happy?”

He shouldn’t have been surprised by Shane cheerful wriggling in his periphery, a seeking hand reaching out to grab at his own. Tangling their fingers together, Shane said, “Yes, very.”

“Of course you are, smug brat,” Ilya replied grumpily, though the way his thumb was rubbing a soft pattern atop their joined hands surely gave him away.

“I haven’t, either,” Shane said, “I mean, I kissed Misha after our Carolina game but—”

Ilya jolted in his seat, sunglasses falling down the bridge of his nose. “You *what?*”

“He was helping me!” Shane protested.

“Helping you with what exactly?” Ilya said, tugging his hand away petulantly to cross his arms over his chest, “Unless he was giving you CPR to save your life, I cannot see how—”

“He was helping me figure out that I want to kiss *you* only,” Shane grumbled, “Forever, probably. Asshole.”

Ilya turned to stare at him, wide-eyed.

“The point is,” Shane continued, “that we’ve both ruined each other for everyone else, apparently. So we just have to deal with it, I guess.”

Grumbling back, Ilya stuck his hand out palm up, biting his lip to hide the giddy smile that threatened to bloom there. Shane laughed at him a little, threading their fingers back together.

“Look, the cottage isn’t much,” Shane said after a moment, “It was the first property I was able to afford after I started getting my Voyageurs paychecks, but… it means a lot to me. And the area is really beautiful and isolated. We won’t be bothered.”

“No pizza delivery?” Ilya asked, just to be contrary.

He watched Shane roll his eyes. “I drove out a few days ago to make sure the kitchen was all stocked for our stay. I’m not a gourmet chef or anything, but I'm pretty confident between the two of us we can manage not to starve.”

Ilya waggled his eyebrows. “Mm, and what if I am hungry for other things?”

Shane scoffed. “There will be *plenty* of time for that too, you horn dog. But I hope we can just… enjoy being together, you know? We don’t really get that… back in the real world.”

Ilya softened, squeezing Shane’s hand. “I want that too.”

Outside, the sun was shining, the road was clear, and the man Ilya loved was driving them to what amounted to his own private slice of heaven. It was unbelievable, really, how he — a mostly sad and selfish person — could possibly deserve a second of Shane Hollander’s time, much less his undivided attention and affection after all these years. Ilya touched the crucifix at his neck again and prayed: *Please, let me keep this.*

“We’ve got about two hours of driving ahead of us,” Shane said, “Do you want to put the radio on? Or we could just… keep talking? I never really know how to do small talk right though, I’m sorry. Um, the weather is nice?”

Ilya smiled softly, shaking his head. “I like how you talk,” he replied, “Straight in deep and with detail. It feels, ah, *genuine.* And it’s nice to listen to you when you are very excited about something too. Even if it is boring thing, like hockey numbers.”

Shane gasped. “I *knew* you didn’t really want to hear me recite statistics over the phone all the time.”

Ilya shrugged, chuckling, “It calms you, Shane. And I like when you are happy. You could read me dictionary and I would listen, if it meant you would have a good game.”

Shane sniffed, untangling his hand from Ilya’s own to place it back on the steering wheel, the skin over his knuckles whitening with the way he squeezed tightly. “You’ve always been so nice to me. Even when we first met. Why?”

Ilya reached out to touch his shoulder, grounding. “Why not? You think you do not deserve kindness?”

“I… I don’t know,” Shane said, hesitant in a way that broke Ilya’s heart, “I’ve just always known that I’m… weird and difficult and… not an easy person to like. And I try really, really hard to change that, but… sometimes I think I just suck at being a human in general.”

Ilya’s brows furrowed at the claim. “Everyone else sucks, actually,” he said plainly, “Yes, you are strange and very… particular. But you are the best person I know. Because of those things, not in spite of them.” He shrugged again, palming at the back of Shane’s neck. “Besides, I am the asshole between us, remember? You are media’s perfect angel baby goaltender with beautiful face. You take the mask off and there are one hundred gifs of your sweaty waves moving slow motion with sparkle effect. I know this. I save them all.”

Shane’s lower lip was full on trembling now, his eyes looking suspiciously wet even as he laughed. “I like you so much, Ilya Rozanov,” he said, voice wobbly, “I never thought we’d end up here, but I’m… I’m so glad it’s you.”

Ilya couldn’t help but gravitate across the console, seatbelt stretching to its limit as he leaned in to press his lips to Shane’s cheek.

I love you, he thought. “I like you too,” he said aloud, lips at the shell of Shane’s ear, “So much.”

Shane shrugged him off, even as his cheeks reddened, and said, “Okay, enough sappy emotions and kissing and stuff. I need to focus on the road.”

“Oh, sure,” Ilya agreed, even as he dropped a hand into Shane’s lap, smirking.

Shane flinched, the car swerving ever so slightly.

“Ilya, I will strand you on the side of this Canadian highway,” Shane hissed, thighs shifting, “Do not try me.”

Ilya laughed and retracted his hand, leaning back in his seat. He was so happy he was almost buoyant with it, arguably having the time of his life and they weren’t even at the cottage yet. Could he really survive ten entire days of bliss, alone with the man of his dreams?

They drove for ten or fifteen minutes in easy, companionable silence, and then:

“I think there’s a rest stop ahead,” Shane said, voice perfectly neutral and eyes refusing to meet Ilya’s own. His grip around the steering wheel was vicelike.

Instinctually, Ilya glanced down at Shane's lap and felt his smirk grow.

"Oh, I'm okay," he replied, voice pitched low and teasing, "Better keep driving. And watch the speed limit, hmm?" He faked a yawn. "Long day ahead. I might take a nap until we get there."

He heard Shane exhale out of his nose in irritation, but could see that he was still fighting a smile, pouting cutely. He watched smugly as Shane rocked in his seat a little.

"We're going to get tired of each other, aren't we?" Shane joked.

Impossible, Ilya thought, *I want this for life.*

"No," he replied, less intensely but still steeped in truth, "I don't think we are."

- 🥅 -

Shane watched the puck travel toward him off Ilya's expert blade, sailing across the PolyGlide panels in his custom built hockey shed.

During the brief tour of the property, Ilya had poked endless fun at him for splurging on a detached building with decked-out gym and hockey facilities for his alleged *vacation* home, but had immediately — or well, after they'd sucked each other off against the open glass-paneled wall of Shane's master bedroom — demanded to have a turn on the 'ice'.

They wore roughly the same size skates, so Shane had let Ilya have his pick of the lot, though he hadn't missed the way Ilya had raised an eyebrow at the fact that he owned several pairs of player skates in addition to his typical goaltending Trues. And that the stick rack held a mixture of regular sticks next to his wide-bladed goalie sticks too.

"Sometimes my dad comes over. He used to play in college," Shane had explained, which was… some of the truth, anyway.

Now, receiving Ilya's pass, Shane fiddled with the thinner stick a bit, his hands rusty but not completely inept when it came to handling the puck outside of the crease. He went in tight and then out wide, and then executed a few side to side sweeps, before writing his name, punctuating it with a smiley face. Satisfied with the brief warmup, he sent the puck back Ilya's way. The pass, sharply precise, ricocheted off Ilya's skate instead — the man frozen in place and staring at Shane with round, searching eyes, stick limp in one hand.

"You…" he said, skating closer, "You said you were not always a goalie."

Shane shrugged, caught. "I wasn't."

Ilya was still staring. "Shane Hollander, you have been holding out on me. Those are not the hands of someone who is only using them for defense."

Shane looked away, scratching the back of his neck in discomfort. “Yeah, well, they raised me to play center. Marked me as a generational playmaking talent from the moment I could balance on the ice.” He shuffled his skates, feeling suddenly awkward at Ilya's prolonged silence. “You’ll probably find this funny but… I couldn’t score. Used to overanalyze the possibilities for every shot on goal and miss horribly, or else totally panic and not get a shot off at all. In the end, I didn’t get better, despite all the best coaching in the world, so… I pivoted. Came home from an elite summer camp and announced I would never be a forward again. My mom was angry for a long time. Sometimes I’m… well, I’m still angry at myself a little too. That I couldn’t handle it, live up to my *full* potential or whatever.”

Ilya looked shocked at the revelation. “But you still practice, clearly.”

Shane shrugged again. “Yeah, I… I can play pretty well when I’m not under pressure. And it makes me a better goaltender too, knowing how certain moves feel based on speed and positioning.” He smiled at Ilya’s astonished expression. “You didn’t think I was *all* numbers and theory, did you?”

“I hate you,” Ilya stated plainly, startling Shane into a choked out laugh.

Raising an eyebrow in challenge, Ilya skated a wide loop, scooping up the puck and coming in closer, attempting to deke around Shane to shoot at the shed’s single net on the far end. Instincts kicking in, Shane met him shoulder to shoulder, executing a subtle stick lift and coming away with the puck on his own blade. He spun to face the goal and aimed an easy wrist shot top cheddar, grinning widely as it hit the back of the net.

For a moment, there was complete and total silence.

Letting out a string of disbelieving Russian sounds, Ilya whirled around, gliding up to him and poking a finger to the center of Shane’s chest, looking furious by the turn of events. “What the *fuck* do you mean that you are the most well-rounded player in this fucking sport, you Greedy.” He poked again, twice for emphasis. “Little. Slut.”

Shane bit his lip, fighting another laugh. “What?” he asked innocently, “You can’t play goal?”

Ilya let his stick hit the faux-ice with a clatter, fisting two hands in Shane’s t-shirt and kissing him soundly.

“You are unbelievable,” he hissed into Shane’s mouth when they parted for breath, “All this time I am thinking that we are evenly matched, our skills balanced in our own lanes. Oh, but nooo, apparently my long-time rival would have been kicking my ass in a face-off too.” He twirled away from Shane with a comically flamboyant degree of drama. “This is just… cruel. I am demoralized, Shane Hollander. I am better off retiring to be your WAG at this rate.”

“I thought you wanted us together in Boston,” Shane teased, watching Ilya skid to a halt at the words, “How am I supposed to win games from goal if you’re not up there scoring for me?”

“Marly will do it,” Ilya answered with a sniff, “He is your biggest fan anyway.”

Shane raised an eyebrow. “We both know who’s doing the scoring on your line, Ilya. Don’t make me tell you his stats.”

Ilya groaned, circling back to wrap Shane up in his arms again. “I am begging you to be bad at something, *anything,* Shane. Sveta is always saying I have a competence kink and I think she is right. I am so horny for you and your talent and even your stupid numbers, it’s embarrassing.”

Shane hummed, genuinely contemplating his skillset. “Um, I can’t draw?” he offered, Ilya snorting in response. “And, I mean, I’m pretty sure I meet the criteria for *several* disorders in the DSM so…”

“And I am depressed, Shane, join the club,” Ilya said flippantly, though Shane made a mental note to interrogate that tidbit later. “Anyway, Mr. Perfect, I *will* be making you draw me a portrait while we are here so I can feel better about myself.”

Shane laughed and reached up to pat Ilya's cheek, a little condescendingly.

“Deal,” he agreed, skating backward to scoop up another puck, “Now, are we going to keep shooting, or will my stickhandling make you cry?”

He watched, pleased, as Ilya registered the euphemism and stuck out his tongue in response.

“You are the one who will cry, Hollander,” Ilya threatened.

Launching forward, he body checked Shane, both scrabbling for the puck as they laughed and cursed breathlessly at one another.

I love you, Shane thought, as the NHL’s big bad Rozanov twirled him around on the ice, pressing wet kisses to his cheeks.

At the far end of the shed, tucked between the stacks of equipment, a phone was ringing.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, hello. Wow, okay. First let me just thank all of you for your extremely generous outpouring of support on the previous chapter and for your commitment to etiquette in all the places you read free, transformative work. I've been posting fic on various sites since about 2008 and while fandoms have come and gone, I'm serious when I say that y'all might be the most wonderful reader community I've ever had.

Now, back to the hockey stuff we enjoy in these notes and not me preaching to the choir:

- A little more about tampering here, which is a big no-no that will get you fined by the league, but also... it's sort of accepted that most teams are going to be talking to players via their agents before their contracts are officially up. A note for any of you who might be writing about trades/drafts/signing deals in your fics: it's the General Manager (GM) that makes these decisions, not the coaches or captains, though it isn't uncommon for GMs to speak to a captain about a potential player being a good cultural fit for the team (plus, more on hockey decision-making hierarchies, if you're interested). Re: tampering, a lot of signing deals will come through at 12:01 PM ET

on July 1, basically as soon as free agency hits, which can risk making your recruitment tactics look suspect.

- It's not unheard of for players to end up with their division rivals. This 'Love To Hate You' article from 2010 covers some of the well-known cases, including how the trade ended up going for them. Spoiler alert: Often, not well 😬
- Goalie skates are significantly different in terms of their blade and the protection they offer compared to those worn by offensive/defensive players, so Ilya would definitely notice this discrepancy. Shane mentions wearing True brand skates, which according to this SUPER nerdy statistical breakdown of goalie gear, were worn by 75% of NHL goalies in 2023. Seriously, this might be the most niche thing I've linked yet.
- Here are some of the drills that Shane does which clue Ilya in to his actual stickhandling prowess. If you've been to a hockey game, you've probably seen players warm up their hands in various ways. Crosby, bless his neurotic, superstitious soul, is known for tracing the sponsor logos on the ice.
- The stick lift technique Shane uses to strip Ilya of the puck is pretty much exactly what it sounds like, where you're simply using your own stick to create a tiny bit of space between the puck and your opponent's blade. Pretty slick!
- Just for fun, here's a vague reference for the more modest sort of cabin I imagine Shane investing in. And the PolyGlide in his hockey hideout is a type of synthetic ice.
- Also not hockey-related, but equally important: the Boston duck house that Shane mentions is real and I unfortunately could not stop thinking 'what if we kissed at the Boston waterboat duck house?' the entire time I was writing this chapter. Anyone want to meet there at sunrise or...?

Chapter 14: Truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya's phone vibrated again from its place on the living room end table, the sound making Shane pull back from their kiss.

"You've been getting messages and calls all day," Shane said, eyebrows furrowed, "It might be important."

"It can wait," Ilya grumbled, shifting his hips and groaning at the perfect weight of Shane in his lap and the tantalizing warmth all around him.

He'd been cockwarming Ilya for the last twenty minutes or so — Ilya's so-called 'punishment' after Shane had slipped into a bare bones approximation of his goalie gear in the shed and made a bet he could block twenty shots in a row. It had been the strangest, hottest foreplay of Ilya's life, and had nearly resulted in them fucking right then and there, until Shane had sniffed and said he was categorically *not* cleaning cum off of his expensive synthetic ice and/or the locally-sourced, handcarved wooden bench that they'd also spent time… *distracted* on.

Back in the main cottage now, Ilya sat on the L-shaped sectional, technically not allowed to move or touch until Shane said so; although, with the way that Shane had started to wriggle a bit in impatience, he knew the moment of reprieve was coming soon.

Shane sighed prettily at Ilya's tease of a slight upward thrust, though the low simmer of building pleasure between them evidently wasn't enough to distract him. Ilya would have to fix that, maybe put a repeat hockey game from the season on the TV and make Shane recite how each player's stats had evolved through the end of the season, until he went all hazy and boneless in the manner he often craved.

"I really think you should check your phone," Shane emphasized, lips brushing against Ilya's jaw as he ducked his head to nuzzle into his neck. A breathier moan followed, Shane rocking his hips a little more intently now.

"You are sending — *ah*, fuck — very mixed messages," Ilya replied through gritted teeth, though at Shane's strict look he found himself reaching a hand out to blindly grasp at his phone beside him.

Unlocking it and bringing the screen closer to his face, he cringed at the dozen or so missed calls from his agent, the PR firm, and oddly Svetlana too.

Shifting Shane in his lap again, he leaned back and managed to use one hand to clumsily type out a brusque 'Is it important?' in his message thread with Sveta, knowing she would at least be more truthful about the degree of urgency than his management team would.

Sveta: Very. Call asap please

Frowning, Ilya rolled his eyes, positive that nothing could possibly be paramount to being blue-balled to death by Shane Hollander at golden hour, the first orange hues of sunset silhouetting him so beautifully that Ilya was half-convinced he'd dreamt this moment up. Still, he could sense from the combination of Sveta's tone and the repeated attempts of his team to reach him (despite instructions that he was on a private summer vacation), that *something* legitimate required his attention at least.

"Is everything okay?" Shane asked, reading the consternation in his eyes.

"Mm, not sure," Ilya answered truthfully, letting his phone drop onto the couch cushion as he reached out to clasp Shane's pretty waist in both hands, "But I think you need to move, sweetheart… if you want to come now, anyway. I should probably call Sveta back soon."

Shane's lips pursed momentarily at the mention of her name, his mouth reshaping into a slight frown before he shook his head and recovered a more neutral expression. The hint of jealousy made Ilya feel warm and wanted, though he was glad there was no real beef between the two.

(Shane had quietly admitted to a positive first impression of Ilya's best friend while back in Boston, admiring of Sveta's steadfast loyalty and protectiveness rather than scared off by it. *'You deserve people in your life that care about you like that,'* he'd stated, a definitive nature to his monotone that had done its damndest to smother Ilya's crueler inner voice, even as it crept in with classic commentary about his own unworthiness.)

"Have you been punished enough?" Shane asked, cutting through Ilya's musings with a teasing lilt.

He had adopted that vaguely dominant affect again, the one they both knew theoretically suited the situation while not really suiting Shane's more submissive persona at all. It was fun though, sexy even, and god help him, the way that Ilya found Shane's endearing and awkward delivery infinitely more arousing than the degrading talk he'd exchanged with past hookups for show.

"Yes," Ilya answered immediately, a little desperate with it.

"Hmm," Shane pretended to think, grinding down in a way that had the probably unintended effect of making them *both* exhale sharply, "I'm not so sure."

"I have suffered your Hollander Hex on ice for years," Ilya groaned, sliding his hands down from Shane's waist to cup the swell of his ass instead, guiding him as he started to ride in earnest, "Please do not bring to the bedroom, I am begging. Let me score."

Shane laughed breathlessly, matching Ilya's next groan with a series of melodic whimpers as Ilya's thumbs caught on the edge of his rim, applying a bit of pressure to where he was already so deliciously stretched around his cock.

"Taking me so well," Ilya appraised, raising one hand and swinging down with moderate force, just enough to leave a satisfying reddish tint across the left cheek.

"F-fuck," Shane choked out, fluttering around him as his rhythm stuttered, "Close, Ilya, I'm—"

"You should be," he replied, a little meanly, "Greedy as you are for everything today. Hiding me away in Canadian woods so I fuck only you, beating me at my own hockey game, and then

sitting on this cock like possessive pet. Keeping me all to yourself, hmm? Mr. Master Plan."

Shane threw his head back, moaning louder as Ilya began to thrust his hips up to meet his bouncing, the slapping sounds of their skin connecting echoing obscenely in the small space.

"It worked, didn't it?" Shane hissed in return, blunt nails pressing sharply into the skin of Ilya's upper back as he clung on for dear life, "You're mine, Ilya Rozanov. I — fuck, oh *fuck* — I made that happen."

Ilya swallowed, suddenly overcome by the flash of alternate timelines that his brain teased in response. What if Shane *wasn't* so persistent and stubborn, and Ilya so pitifully obsessed in return? What if one or both of them had refused to be vulnerable about their feelings, especially after that day that Shane had fled in panic? What if… what if Shane had rejected a younger, cockier Ilya's advances in that post-photoshoot locker room all those years ago, as he would have been wise to? So many ways that they might have missed each other entirely…

Ilya felt sick at the imagined outcome; the thought of a single NHL season not partially defined by nights with Shane Hollander and texts and calls in between was inconceivable. Even now with their feelings mostly uncovered, the fear of losing Shane lingered, caught up as they were in this precarious moment before he decided on his future in the sport… the future of their not-quite-relationship at stake along with it.

"Yes, yes," Shane was practically chanting now, the grip on Ilya's cock almost painful as his orgasm approached.

"Mine," Ilya whispered in English, and then again in Russian, sealing it like a promise, "You are mine too."

"Always have been," Shane said, improbably soft, even as he wrapped a hand around himself and came with a full-bodied shudder seconds later, cum dripping off his fingers and pooling in the muscular ridges of Ilya's abdomen between them.

Eyes a little hazy, Shane seemed to contemplate something, before raising his wet hand to Ilya's lips with a quiet instruction to suck.

It was a testament to how much Ilya loved this man that he complied without complaint, tongue laving at the skin of his palm and then swirling around each digit as he tasted Shane's bitter release. Shane had yet to tell him to pull out and so Ilya began to chase his own completion, mouth full as those calloused fingers brushed against the pad of his tongue. They'd played around with overstimulation here and there, and while Shane preferred not to continue to the point of coming dry, he certainly didn't mind Ilya finishing in him before getting a mouth back on his sensitive, half-hard cock and pressing a pair of mean fingers against his prostate. Sometimes Shane cried, big fat tears' worth of submissive angst and pleasure; they both liked those encounters the best.

It was unfortunate that they didn't have time for all that now, the lingering anxiety behind the afternoon's missed phone calls (and Shane's insistence that he be, *ugh,* responsible and follow up) leaving Ilya too wary to consider initiating another round or two. He shot his load into the condom just as Shane was replacing the fingers in his mouth with lips and tongue instead, sucking in Ilya's broken gasp like a helium balloon.

“That’s it,” Shane coaxed, in a rough approximation of Ilya’s own dominant voice, before ducking down to kiss him again, deeper this time.

“Stealing my tricks,” Ilya complained when the cottony, post-nut feeling in his brain finally began to subside.

In truth, he liked the more balanced, intimate dynamic they were building, enjoying the breaks between the more intense scenes where his full awareness as a responsible dom was required. Shane’s propensity to lose most or all of his speech in subspace was so hot it made Ilya delirious, but it took extra sensitivity to navigate and often left him a little drained afterward, in need of his own form of recovery. He also couldn’t help but correlate some of the more *present* sex that Shane had initiated recently to the way he seemed more confident, less anxious, and generally settled in himself, and to correlate *that* further with the fact that he was nearly free from Montreal’s soul-crushing clutches.

Efficient as ever post-coitus, Shane was swinging one leg over to detach himself, nose wrinkling at the sensation of emptiness he often loudly complained about. He was kind enough — or just *that* adorably neat — to tie off the condom and take it with him as he toddled naked toward the first floor bathroom on shaky legs.

“I’m going to shower,” Shane explained, laughing at Ilya’s pouty expression as he continued, “*Alone.* While you take care of business or whatever. Back soon.”

Ilya flopped back against the couch, tugging his shorts up again with an awkward wiggle. Sticking his tongue out, he reached over for his phone and waved it at Shane in proof of his compliance. He sighed, not bothering to listen to the voicemails waiting for him first, and went straight to the call log instead.

Sveta answered on the first ring. A bad sign, given she was normally busy enough to ignore him for a bit.

“Ilya Rozanov,” she said seriously, the unadorned full name jarring, especially as she continued in clipped Russian, “why are the CCM e-suite asking me if you’re being traded to the Centaurs?”

Ilya blinked, waving at Shane as he disappeared around the corner. “What?”

“Ilya,” she repeated, with more urgency this time, “where are you right now?”

“Ah, I’m not sure exactly,” he said, squinting into the early evening sunlight through the sliding glass doors, “Northern Ontario?”

Sveta sighed. “And did you land in Ottawa this morning?”

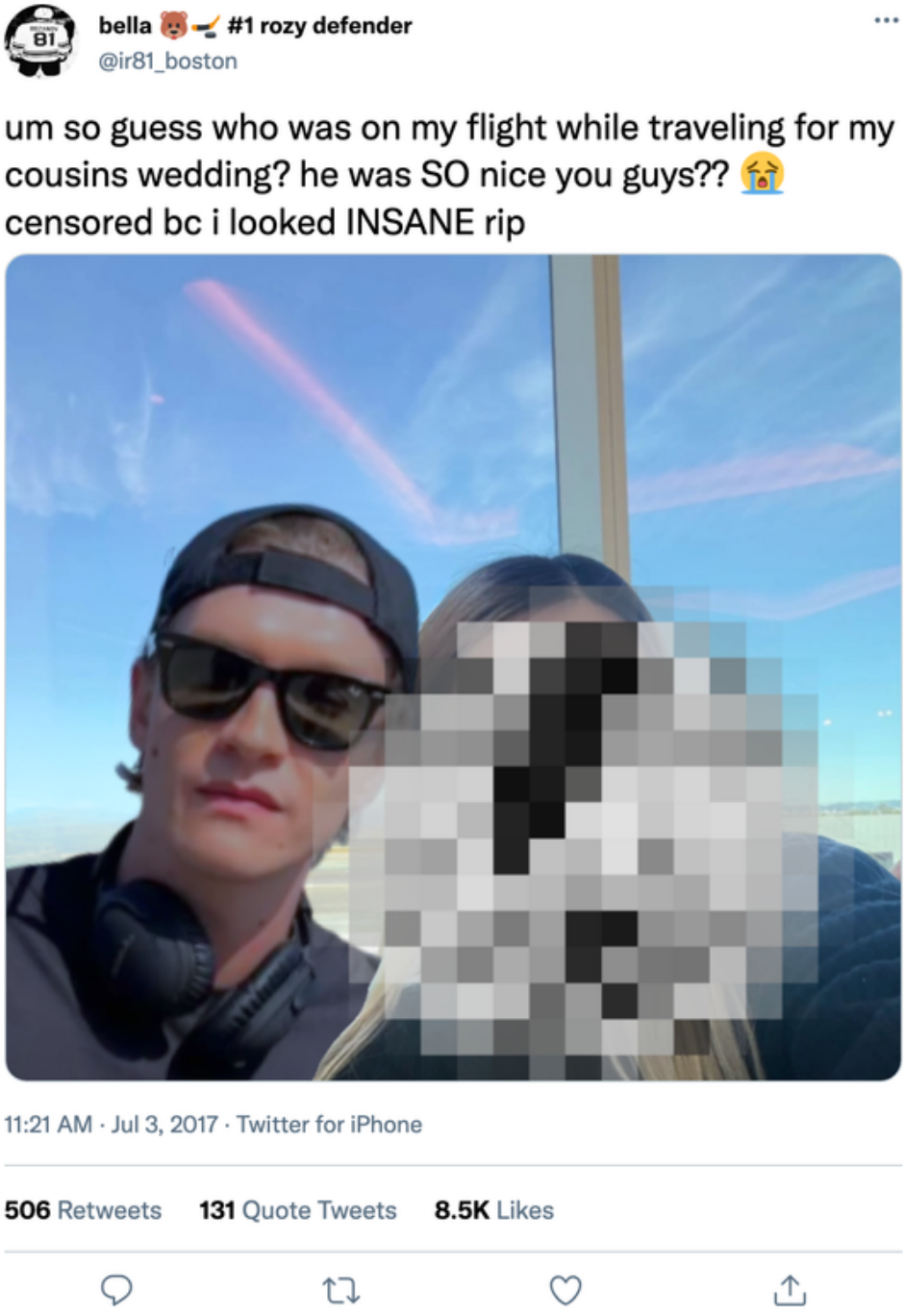
He hesitated. “...yes.”

“And did you then, oh I don’t know, take a picture at the airport with one of your biggest fans?”

Ilya frowned, the Russian feeling suddenly clumsy in his mouth as he explained, “I took a selfie with a teenage girl in a Boston hoodie. Harmless, I thought. She was friendly? Dad was nice too. Hot.”

“Harmless,” Sveta laughed, disbelieving, “She has *quite* the Twitter following, you sweet idiot. Look at your texts.”

Ilya lowered his phone to see Sveta had sent him two screenshots, smiling a bit at the photo’s caption before his heart dropped as he saw the reply that incidentally revealed his general location to the whole of the hockey Twittersphere.



"So people are wondering about Ottawa then?" he asked.

Sveta made a noise of assent. "Obviously this 'Bella' meant nothing by it," she continued, "but it's been blowing up for the last few hours on Twitter and in the hockey spaces where she's active. Just your luck that it reached the NHL news correspondents and those podcasting pests too *and,* given it's July, they're now speculating that you're leaving Boston. Whether voluntarily or not is up for debate."

Ilya sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'm not leaving, you know that. And who even has the cap space to afford me right now?"

He heard Sveta scoff over the line. "Obviously the rumors are stupid, but they're timely enough that the men with money who care about this stuff are starting to demand answers. Your people couldn't reach you earlier, so I told them I'd give it a shot. They're not … *concerned* per say, not yet anyways, but they — and the Bears, of course — want to get ahead of the chatter."

Ilya grumbled, bemoaning the whole celebrity part of sports stardom that kept him on the radar in ways just significant enough to be annoying. "It's true that there could be a big change for the team coming, just not on my end. Another rumor I've seen a few of those sources running with."

"Shane Hollander," Sveta said immediately, Ilya wincing at the open secret that the Boston offer was becoming, "I told him it was a good idea. You asked him too?"

"Yes," Ilya said, shifting on the couch cushion, "and, ah, I'm at his house."

"What?"

"He picked me up at the airport this morning. That's why Ottawa."

Sveta hissed out a breath. "You two are so lucky, you know that, right? What if someone had recognized you? Or if this Twitter superfan followed you out?"

"Then all the evidence they would have is two NHL players meeting up in a neutral location," Ilya argued, snappier with the anxiety that her pointed logic was causing him, "It would be a little strange, yes, but it's not like Shane jumped out of his car, kissed me on the mouth, and slapped my ass hello. Even then, they might chalk it up to bro behavior." He glanced around, as

if looking for photographers in the bushes. “And out here, really, there is no one for a hundred kilometers or more. It’s safe.”

“It’s risky and a little stupid, is what it is, but…” she paused, Ilya able to intuit the exact moment she softened, given their years of intimate friendship. “But,” she said again, gentler as predicted, “I’m glad you’re able to get some time alone together. You need that.”

Ilya’s heart thrummed in his chest.

“It’s beautiful here, Sveta,” he remarked quietly, glancing out to where the lake’s gentle waves lapped at the dock, framed by the early setting sun. The trees were blessedly free of paparazzi too. “And I’m… I’m really happy.”

She hummed affectionately. “It’s nice to see you sweet like this, Ilyusha.” And *finally*, there it was, the diminutive from her lips almost motherly in its fondness. “I can’t remember the last time you let yourself just… *be*, maybe since we were kids. Soft and sensitive and so big-hearted under that tough shell. I know I teased you for ages about your crush, but… you really love him, don’t you?”

“I do,” Ilya replied immediately, though the truth of it was still staggering in its intensity.

“Then you need to protect this,” she emphasized, surprising him with the sudden gravity of her tone, “And look, I won’t nag at you because that’s your publicist’s job — who you also need to call back, by the way — and because I know *you* know how important it is to be smart here, strategic to a fault even. I just… I don’t want to see you get hurt. Either of you.”

“We’ll be careful,” Ilya affirmed, though the morning’s close call had obviously rattled him a bit, “We’ve pulled this off for years, you know. And with Boston… *if* he chooses us, I think it will be easier. Who cares if I befriended the player who cursed me season after season and now we’re teammates who hang out? It’s a good story.”

“Cuter than the real story, anyway,” Sveta teased, “All that pining and fucking and pining, my god. It was miserable, Ilyusha. I’m so glad it worked out in the end.”

Ilya bit his lip, not wanting to jinx it. “We’re… getting there,” he said, rife with hesitation.

“He loves you too,” she said plainly, “You know this, right? And that you deserve it?”

Shaking his head, Ilya felt a bittersweet smile tug at his lips. He picked at a loose thread at the hem of his shorts and mumbled, “I should be so lucky.”

He could almost hear Sveta’s eye roll over the phone when she replied, “Trick question. I will not entertain your woe is me attitude about this. You’re on vacation with arguably the most attractive player in the NHL—” She ignored Ilya’s sounds of protest at that. “Presumably having hot, filthy sex.” *That* Ilya couldn’t argue with. “*And* he puts up with all your bullshit? With affection, even? You need to lock this man down, Ilyusha. Marry him while in Canada, maybe.”

Ilya kicked his feet, an embarrassing degree of whininess in his voice as he said, “Sveta, please. I’m trying, okay.”

“Try harder,” she said, completely deadpan, “and try *not* to blow up hockey socials again while you’re there, please. I’ll be in Toronto tomorrow for a photoshoot with the CWHL player that’s bringing her air-quotes ‘friend’ Rose Landry along and I’m planning on being *very* occupied after that.”

Ilya blinked at the curious string of words. “Wait, Rose Landry is—?”

“Oops,” Sveta said and promptly hung up the phone.

He snorted at the abrupt end to their conversation, though the sobering reality of the mini-PR mess he’d created for himself came crashing back in almost immediately. Carding a hand through his hair, Ilya sighed and made the ‘big boy’ decision to call his publicist next, knowing one professionally written sentence about his commitment to leading the Bears to victory would quiet most of the speculation.

All that aside, Ilya had nine more idyllic days with Shane Hollander to get through, and he was committed to finding a way to avoid all future interruptions. Maybe he could suggest they go fully off grid? No phones, no problems, surely.

Ugh, and he’d made embarrassingly little progress on his three part plan anyway. Ilya rolled his eyes, knowing Sveta was right, as usual. If he wanted to leave the cottage with a teammate *and* a boyfriend, he would need to make his intentions abundantly clear.

Easier said than done, not being a coward about it all, but fuck if Ilya wasn’t going to try.

- 🥅 -

When Shane stepped out of the shower, steam still swirling around him, he was surprised to see his own phone screen on the bathroom counter covered with notifications. Strange given he’d told his friends and family he was off to the cottage through mid-July, which they all knew meant Fortress of Solitude Shane protocols were activated.

Drying his hands, he unlocked his phone, the texts apparently belonging to his chat with Hayden.

> **Hayden:** LMAO dude sorry, this is too funny not to share. the hockey girls who like shayden think you’re cheating on me with ilya rozanov wtf 💀 and like also your goalie friend i think???

There was a screenshot attached, which Shane tapped to expand.

Shane paused, scrolling down as the increasingly baffling conversation continued in the second screenshot.

Shane: The hell? Where did you even find this?

Hayden: sometimes i go in the shayden tag, it's wild. but actually i saw the NHL news guy's tweet come up first

Hayden: related, you wouldn't happen to know why rozanov is in canada rn, would you? it is kinda random

Another screenshot accompanied Hayden's final text, showing Ilya in that morning's airport fit, a young girl's face blurred out next to him. Shane felt a little lightheaded when he saw that the likes were approaching 10k.

Forgoing a reply, Shane's hand squeezed vice-like around his phone, dropping it to his side as his breath quickened. He hurriedly pulled on his shorts and stormed back out to the living room area, where Ilya was sitting relaxed against the cushions and playing one of his obnoxiously noisy mobile games.

"Why wouldn't you tell me about this?" Shane confronted him, holding out his phone and watching Ilya wince at the photo he showed on screen.

"Was not a big deal," Ilya replied, shrugging, "I interact with fans all the time. I did not know she would post today."

“Not a big deal?” Shane hissed, sitting down on the sofa one cushion’s length away, “I’ve got fucking Hayden Pike in my messages asking me if I know why you’re in Canada all because some people online put one–one thousandth of the puzzle together and I’m not supposed to be freaked out by the ripple effects of that?”

Ilya shrugged again, wrinkling his nose. “And I apparently have rich men worried I am leaving Boston for worst team in the league. I agree that not-hockey parts of hockey are very silly.”

Shane knew his anger was misplaced, that he was simply petrified about getting caught and that Ilya had behaved at the airport no differently than he would have with a young fan, but the live wire of irritation was sparking across his skin in a way he couldn’t seem to get a handle on. It singed his fragile nerves and caught fire, the contrast of Ilya’s serene exterior making Shane feel worse, inhuman in comparison. *Why couldn’t he calm down?*

He tugged at his hair, pain at the root centering him enough to say, “I swear to god, Ilya, I need you to be serious about this! They’re watching us. Fuck, I knew they were. They’re going to fucking find out and then—” he sucked in a breath, feeling the panic begin to fully take hold.

“And then what, sweetheart?” Ilya asked, still far too calm and collected for Shane’s liking as he reached out to touch him. “We are allowed to be seen together, to be friends. There is nothing wrong with that. We have agents and PR people to monitor ridiculous talk for a reason. And mine are not worried, I promise you.”

Shane wriggled away from him, still shaking, the contact of Ilya’s hands feeling prickly and *wrong* on his skin.

“Shane, hey. No one will be expecting a statement on random tweets. The NHL *loves* silence, you know this,” Ilya said, serious and thoughtful, “If, I don’t know, fucking ESPN picks it up or something, I will have my publicist add that I was in Ottawa for brand deal. Easy. Otherwise, we ignore it, like all stupid things they say about us and our game.”

Shane tensed, though he found himself nodding slowly, anxious gasping breaths slowing a bit. “You’re right. I know it’s not… we haven’t done anything wrong. I just, I’m terrified for my career right now, you know? There’s so much to lose. And at the same time I… I feel like I need to tell people?”

He watched Ilya sit up a bit, expression shifting into one of surprise.

“Accepting that I’m gay is one thing but I can’t… I can’t imagine if others found out about me — or fuck, *us* — as a total surprise. Not the people who care about me most, at least. I’ve… god, I’ve been *lying* to them for so long now.”

Ilya was frowning now, hands clenching at his sides like he wanted to touch, to offer physical comfort, but was actively resisting. Shane loved him something terrible for that, respecting the boundary even as his own ugly, conflicted conscience silently begged for the overstimulation of the touch anyway. He was a mess, and Ilya let him be. That was unprecedented.

“Shane, I know that you like control,” Ilya said slowly, clearly picking his words with effort, “but you do not *owe* anyone the truth, you know this, yes? You have not been lying, not really. You are protecting yourself in world of many people who unfortunately will not like the truth we have to give.”

“But, my teammates, Ilya,” Shane said helplessly, “And… fuck, my *parents.* What if they start getting suspicious after seeing social media speculation or like… god forbid there’s some kind of hack and people start combing through our messages for real? Or I accidentally touch you publicly in a way that’s just a little too friendly for me to take back? Or—”

“We have to be prepared for every possibility,” Ilya cut in, halting his mental spiral, “But if we are going to do this, for real, we cannot live in fear all the time. You need to do what makes you feel safe.”

“I should tell Hayden,” Shane said, heart racing, “In his text, he gave me like the perfect segue to explain why you’re here. Is that… is that stupid?”

“No,” Ilya said immediately, “Just risky, maybe. I would call, not text, in case he… does not take it well. At least then only proof is his word against ours.”

Shane bit his lip, finding himself scooting closer across the sofa. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. I’m just… scared. By how much I want this for me. For us.”

Ilya shifted, angling his body to face him, though he still kept his kneading hands to himself.

“You want me to go first?” Ilya offered.

Shane raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to come out to Hayden?”

“Eww, no,” Ilya said immediately, making Shane snort out a laugh, feeling a tiny bit lighter at the absurdity of this fucking situation. “I was thinking I could tell Cliff Marlow. Kind of silly I have not said anything about me, knowing what he has shared. There was much more fear, maybe, when Russia was still on table.”

Shane frowned, sliding closer still until he could place a hand on Ilya’s thigh. “I really am sorry, about your brother. About the risks you’d face there. It’s not fair.”

Ilya exhaled. “It is what it is. I have opportunity in North America, so I should be grateful. I can work toward citizenship now that I know I will stay.”

The first visa solution that popped into Shane’s mind was absolutely not one he could say out loud, without sending Ilya hightailing it out of the cottage at least, so he simply nodded, hand on Ilya’s thigh moving up to rub at his arm instead.

“Anyway, here, I will start,” Ilya said nonchalantly, though Shane could feel his pulse fluttering beneath his skin.

He watched, rapt, as Ilya swiped out of Rainbow Cake Clicker 3 and pulled up his messages, typing out an absurdly simple:

Ilya: so i’m dating this guy

They watched together as the typing bubble immediately appeared, then disappeared for a long moment.

Marly: dude

Marly: are you serious?

Shane tensed, though the response didn't seem to draw the same reaction from Ilya, who rapidly responded with:

Ilya: yes

The reply came quicker this time.

Marly: ok first of all, fuck yeah. need all the details about who finally locked ur sorry ass down

Shane let out a breath, sensing Ilya sag in relief beside him too. Maybe he *had* been just as nervous.

Marly: but also my brother would be so pissed if he knew. he had the biggest crush on you despite all the ladies man stuff

As Shane read the second message, the hand that was clasped on Ilya's arm involuntarily squeezed a little tighter.

"Okay, great!" he said, fighting the darker jealousy that wanted to leak into his voice. His cheeks burned at the amused and very knowing look Ilya cast his way anyhow.

Ilya: secret, obviously

Marly: obviously bro

Marly: and does this also mean you won't be needing any of your roster's numbers anymore bc if so… 😜

Ilya snorted, laughing openly when he saw the look of disgust on Shane's face.

"Shane, he's a hockey player," Ilya said with clear amusement. He clicked the side button so that his phone screen went dark and shifted to face Shane head on. "And a straight, white one too, like majority of them. We will take what allyship we can get, I think."

Shane wrinkled his nose. "Still, he can always learn. Rose has sent me *a lot* of feminist literature, you know. When I'm in Boston, I'm definitely going to—"

He trailed off, recognizing the slip, though Ilya only smiled back at him with his eyes shining hopefully.

"Anyway," Shane continued awkwardly, "Um, that was really cool and brave of you." He watched Ilya's expression shift into something gleefully teasing, Shane elbowing him sharply as he opened his mouth and interjected with a clipped: "Shut up!"

Ilya clamped his lips together obediently, though his tongue was visibly working at the inside of his cheek with the effort at holding back his chirp.

"*Anyway,*" Shane repeated, "I… I'm going to call Hayden. Now." He swallowed, launching into a ramble that was more for his own reassurance than anything. "He's my oldest friend. We've

known each other forever. And I think Jackie would kick his ass for being homophobic. She used to make them both audit gender studies courses at Mount Allison every time he got her pregnant, just to threaten him a little."

Ilya looked baffled by the last sentence but he nodded anyway, asking, "Do you want me to stay?"

"Yes, please," Shane said quickly, letting out a nervous breath as Ilya nodded.

Before he could second guess himself, he was dialing Hayden's number, feeling a strange mixture of nausea and… a lot like giddiness, maybe. He remembered the relief of Misha guessing at their relationship and the quiet thrill of Rose sending him silly gay memes he pretended to understand, though the safety of clandestine queer friends was obviously different to risking an archetypal Canadian hockey bro's opinion. Oddly, though, this felt like the final thread tethering him to the Voyageurs, real closure with the sense that no matter his teammate's reaction, Shane could leave Montreal as his full and complete self. Tampa Bay had given him the oarfish, and Boston… Boston would give him Ilya.

"Shane, hey, all good?" Hayden answered, Shane barely holding back a sound of annoyed disbelief as Ilya plucked the phone off his ear and poked the speaker phone button, setting it on the coffee table in front of them.

"Sorry I texted you," Hayden continued, none the wiser, "I know you're, like, into the whole meditative silence thing while you're up that way."

"No, it's uh… it's okay," Shane recovered, casting Ilya a nasty glance anyway, "I'm actually calling because I have something to tell you. That I've been wanting to tell you, I think, for a while now."

He heard Hayden snort. "Dude, if this is about Boston, there's no need to be so dramatic. We talked about it, remember? It's cool."

Shane ignored Ilya's eyebrow raise in his periphery, replying, "No, it's not that. It's just… you know. Faye."

"Yeah, your girlfriend," Hayden said easily.

Shane winced. "So, that's the thing. Ha. She's, um. I'm gay."

Cringing, he watched as Ilya essentially facepalmed next to him. Right, so, not his most eloquent work.

There was a long silence.

"Shane, can you repeat that?" Hayden said eventually, "In like, very specific terms for my dumb hockey brain."

Shane swallowed. "Okay, so Faye is… real. Has been. She's just… a he. And I'm gay. I like guys… exclusively. Things with, uh, *not*-Faye are getting serious, I think?" He trailed off, feeling relieved when Ilya simply grinned at the words. "So I thought you should know. Um. The truth."

“Wait, so Faye isn’t a girl?” Hayden asked, “Who the hell are they then? And why would you need to hide that?”

Shane exhaled. “I’ll tell you soon, Hayd, I swear. It’s just… we’re figuring some things out right now. He’s with me. At the cottage.”

“But you don’t let anyone come there with you,” Hayden replied in confusion. Shane almost rolled his eyes at the way that statement had Ilya preening so hard he all but resembled a bird of paradise in a nature documentary.

“I know,” Shane affirmed, “Serious, like I said.”

“Shane, enough with the half-truths, dude,” Hayden replied after a moment, “You know I’m not gonna care who this chick— *guy* is, unless he’s like mean to you, obviously. You’re safe, right?”

Shane glanced over at Ilya next to him, biting his lip as he telegraphed a *very* specific question. Ilya shrugged, mouthing ‘Up to you.’

“Okay, but you have to hear me out…” Shane hesitated, “He’s here and—”

Leaning over the phone, Ilya said, “Unfortunately I *am* very mean to him.”

There was a muffled crashing noise from the receiver, as if Hayden had dropped his own phone entirely.

Shane, mouth agape, shoved at Ilya and hissed, “Not helping!”

The silence seemed to go on forever.

“Shane Hollander, FaceTime me right now,” Hayden said, voice as deadly serious as Shane had ever heard it.

Shane swallowed against the lump in his throat and hit the button to switch to video call, remembering just as the FaceTime feed connected that they were both still shirtless from that afternoon’s activities. *Fucking great.*

Hayden stared and stared at the two of them in frame, and then blurted, “What the hell? You *are* cheating on me with Ilya Rozanov!”

Ilya turned to look at Shane sharply.

“No, no, oh my god, no. We’ve *never*—”

“Shane, dude, let me reiterate that the gay thing is cool,” Hayden cut in, waving a hand, “Er, did I say that yet? Whatever. Kind of was in camp JJ in thinking this girl wasn’t real anyway, but *Rozanov!?* Are you sure this guy is even into you? He’s like… historically swimming in puss.”

“Jesus, Hayden,” Shane said.

“I’m bisexual,” Ilya replied, unbothered, “Which a man *can* be.” He paused to level Hayden with a particularly meaningful look. “Regardless of how many women he’s been with.”

“I know what bisexuality is,” Hayden replied quickly, his voice breaking on the word as his face went strangely red, “I just… I didn’t know if you were serious about Shane.”

“Everything I told you about Faye before was true,” Shane said, shrugging, “Except for, you know…” He waved his hands at Ilya’s very male form.

Hayden nodded slowly. “Fuck, okay. So by Boston being closer, you meant… literally sharing the ice with your…?”

“Yes,” Ilya answered, “though I did not propose Boston deal, to be clear. My team wants Shane for his skill in goal. They do not know anything about… us.”

Hayden blinked. “And you think that’s… sustainable?”

“Not in the long term,” Shane responded this time, “though we *have* managed to hide this for years, and it makes more sense that we’d be seen together if we were teammates. Still,” he paused, glancing at Ilya, “things are changing, somewhat, with Scott Hunter and… other queer players in the league. I don’t think either of us plan to come out publicly anytime soon, but we’re kind of… test-running things with some people close to us. Like you.”

“JJ will want to know too,” Hayden said immediately, “and like, obviously I’ll keep this a secret. Who the fuck would believe me anyway? But, ugh, please tell him soon. And Jackie too, maybe. I’m going to need an emotional support group to debrief with.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said unexpectedly, though he made a face like he was swallowing something particularly disgusting as he did so. “You are good to Shane. Even if Montreal was not.”

Hayden’s brows furrowed. “Hey man, look. We know how the culture is. Same goes for your ugly Bears. If I hear one word about homophobic or, like, racist shit directed toward Shane in your locker room, I’m gonna tell every team in the league that you guys like roughing up goalies. See if you get a moment of peace on the ice after that.”

Shane choked, glancing over at Ilya who, if anything, seemed impressed by the threat.

“We’ll protect him,” Ilya said, definitive in a way that made Shane’s heart flutter. He caught Shane’s eye, smiling indulgently as he linked their fingers together just out of view. “And now I am allowed to beat up anyone who touches him out there.”

“Ugh, oh my god,” Hayden muttered, looking between them, “This is like actually a real thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” they answered simultaneously, which only served to exacerbate the consternation on Hayden’s face.

“Shane, buddy, I’m… happy for you, I think,” Hayden said warily, “Confused but… happy you’re happy. I just… let’s talk again later, okay? The image of you shirtless next to Ilya Rozanov is going to haunt me for a while. Fuck.”

“How nice that you will think of me later,” Ilya teased, making a hand gesture that had Hayden’s face going impossibly redder as he spluttered in response.

“Talk soon, Hayd,” Shane said quickly, cutting the call and turning to full body tackle Ilya into the throw pillows.

“Fuck you,” Shane told him, unable to fight the laughter in his voice, “You made that *so* much worse than it had to be.”

Ilya had Shane’s face in his hands in an instant, raising up to peck him on the lips. “Why ease him into it? Better to just… put it all out there, no? More believable.”

Shane huffed at him, dropping from his elbows to settle on top and tangle their legs together. The adrenaline rush of the moment hit him all once, and he was annoyed to find that the uncontrollable smile that crept onto his face was *beaming*.

“People know,” he said, giddy with it, “They know that you’re my— that you’re… *more* to me. That’s crazy, Ilya. Are we crazy?”

“Shane,” Ilya said, suddenly serious as they locked eyes. He felt his heart beat harshly in his chest, the look on Ilya’s face so intense with adoration as his lips parted that Shane was almost certain he was going to—

“Let’s swim.”

Shane deflated a little, recovering quickly as he used Ilya’s chest to shove to his feet, already halfway to the sliding doors to the dock as he called back:

“Race you!”

- 🥅 -

Ilya stirred, the sensation of a shift on the bed rousing him from his deep sleep.

Outside, the myriad bugs and birds and things were making their terrible night noises, never mind that Shane — apparently also a Canadian naturalist, among his many encyclopedic talents — had patiently catalogued them all for Ilya as they ate dinner outside after their time in the lake.

Ilya winced, knowing he’d chickened out of yet another love declaration with the swimming excuse, unsure why the cowardice still lingered. Shane *liked* him, was telling other people about him, and making important plans for them besides… He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t—

“Hey,” came a whisper, waking Ilya fully with a little jolt.

“Sorry, sorry,” the Shane-shaped silhouette murmured, rubbing at Ilya’s chest where he leaned over him.

“Everything okay?” Ilya asked, biting back a yawn. “Where did you go?”

The bedside lamp flicked on, bathing them in warm, gentle light.

“I was on the phone with my agent,” Shane said, the words coming out in a rush, “Um, signing some paperwork.”

“Oh?” Ilya asked, sitting up to scrub the sleep out of his eyes. “New brand deal or something?”

Shane poked at him. “No, I… I *signed.*”

Ilya blinked. “For what? Shane, it’s very late and I don’t—”

“Boston, Ilya.”

At that, Ilya sat up ramrod straight, the words like an electric prod to the heart. “What? But we were going to wait for after, I thought?”

“I didn’t need to think about it any harder,” Shane said easily, meeting his eyes, “After we talked today and with the close call at the airport and Cliff and Hayden… I just… I know I want a new chance at hockey. And I want *you* with it.”

“Shane, you… you are sure about this?” Ilya ventured, looking back at him with what he knew was unmasked awe.

Shane chuckled. “I mean, I signed a binding contract, Ilya. It’ll be *really* expensive to back out now.”

Ilya glanced at the clock over Shane’s shoulder, noting the past-midnight hour. “Your agent must want you dead.”

Shane laughed again, sheepishly this time. “I think Laurie was just relieved I was finally making a decision,” he explained, “And that she didn’t need to worry about her own pay. The other offers weren’t nearly as lucrative, to be frank.”

“You’re really a Bear?” Ilya asked, feeling silly for the need for total confirmation. He just… it was impossible to think he was getting everything he wanted. Happiness, even. He had learned long ago never to trust that feeling wholeheartedly. Not when things he loved could very easily be taken away.

“I’m really a Bear,” Shane said, eyes shining, though he looked a little shell shocked by the idea himself. That was until he added, voice low, “Captain.”

With a growl, Ilya had him rolled onto his back in an instant as Shane practically giggled, wriggling happily beneath him.

“I’ve been… looking at apartments too,” Shane gasped out, Ilya’s lips on his neck, “I don’t think I’m ready to buy a whole house just yet, but maybe after a season or two, if things feel right.”

“Or you could move into mine then?” Ilya suggested as he propped himself up, detaching his mouth from Shane’s collarbone, now emblazoned with a deep red mark.

Shane’s eyes went wide and he shoved at him. “Be serious.”

“What? I am,” Ilya shrugged, though the reaction made him nervous, “You do not think that far ahead?”

“I do, oh my god, I really do,” Shane replied quickly, “But that’s… a commitment. And if I moved in with you, eventually, people would definitely notice? We’re not rookies anymore. I don’t think we could pull off just being thirty-year old bachelor roommates without *some* scrutiny.”

Ilya ducked down so that they were nearly nose to nose, looking at Shane in a way he did more often than he could really control, gaze stripped bare with affection. Shane stared back, eyes colored with something amused and soft and so, so adoring it made Ilya want to shed out of his skin and float away, a perfect buoyant shapeless thing made of desire for Shane Hollander alone.

“But whatever happens,” Shane continued, lips almost brushing Ilya’s own, “I’m going to be in Boston this fall. I’m… I’m choosing hockey, Ilya. And I’m choosing you. You were right to convince me that I could have both.”

“Shane, sweetheart,” Ilya said, after a long moment of silence. He was tired of being afraid, of swallowing the depth of his emotions down for fear of scaring this man away. Shane had chosen *him.* And fuck, of course, he would choose Shane back. “In your Russian study, did you come across word for love?”

“Люблю,” Shane whispered, a little tongue tied around the letters, though Ilya had heard enough of his Russian to know that was likely just nerves, “And I learned how to say ‘I love you’ too.”

At that, Ilya froze, staring at him with eyes glistening. The hand he had gripped around Shane’s bicep began to tremble, and he choked back a gasp as Shane reached up to cover Ilya’s fingers with his own, squeezing in comfort.

“So, if you said ‘Я люблю тебя’ for example,” Shane continued, braver clearly than Ilya would ever be, “I would understand you. And I would… I would say it back.”

Ilya swallowed. “Would it mean to you what it does to me?”

Shane hesitated. “Yes, I mean, I think so. In the car, I— I wasn’t joking about forever.”

There was a moment of silence, in which Ilya was convinced he could hear their timorous hearts beating in sync, and then:

“I love you,” Ilya said, in English, bright and clear.

Fuck, he’d done it.

“Я люблю тебя,” Shane replied, Ilya still shocked at the way the phrase he’d whispered to himself night after night left Shane’s lips so smoothly. Ah, and there was that near perfect pronunciation, of course. *Multilingual asshole.* “I love you too.”

Ilya couldn’t help the dry sob he let out, Shane’s arms coming up to wrap around his shoulders, almost cradling him as he rocked them both gently under the blankets.

“Don’t cry, солнышко,” Shane said softly, petting at his hair.

Ilya sniffed, ready to protest that he *wasn't,* until he felt the first tear slide down his cheek.

"Say it again, please," he whispered, feeling so vulnerable he feared his every thought was liable to leak out of him, threatening to drown Shane in an ocean-sized reservoir of repressed emotion. God, he was *ruined*, completely ruined, for anyone else, wasn't he?

Shuddering, he felt Shane's arms tighten around him. "I love you, Ilya Rozanov. So fucking much. It was killing me not to tell you."

Ilya burrowed into him, fully shaking now. "I knew you liked me," he said pitifully, "I just… I did not think we were on same page. Yet. Maybe ever."

"Ilya, oh my god, of *course* we are," Shane said from above him, voice breaking, "How could I not fall in love with you? You *see* me. You're… you're the only one who really does."

The sentiment all but bowled Ilya over, his heart swelling in pride with the thought that he, of all people, might know Shane Hollander best. *Love* him best, even.

"I am… difficult," Ilya replied anyway, "and moody. Sometimes I am very, very sad, even when there is no reason to be, which can make me a little mean too. And my parents are dead. Boo hoo."

Shane surprised him with a laugh. "I know all that, you idiot. And I don't care. You're not going to chase me away now." He poked at Ilya's cheek. "You can't, really. Not for the next seven years at least."

"Seven?" Ilya asked, perking up to meet Shane's eyes again.

Shane smiled at his reaction, shrugging. "Yeah, I mean. It was a really good offer."

Ilya could feel his lingering doubts begin to melt away, a matching smile tugging at his own lips. "That's… that's so much time."

"I know," Shane said, eyes twinkling, "Think of how many Cups we'll win, Cap—"

"Don't," Ilya cut him off, groaning, "Or I will start to associate with other things. Will make locker room speeches *very* awkward."

Shane nodded, though Ilya could see from the curve of his grin that he was filing that response away for future evils.

"If you love me, though…" Shane teased, the casual use of the word making Ilya's brain stutter in a way he wasn't sure he would ever get over. Shane shifted, aligning their hips and rutting up against him, as he continued, "... then you'll lose a little sleep to fuck me again, I think."

"Insatiable," Ilya muttered, pleased when his mouth cooperated with the English word he'd recently come across, thinking it was perfect for the hunger of the man beneath him. He was even more pleased, then, with how it made Shane's cheeks go pink in the low light.

"Please fuck me, I love you," Shane whispered wantonly, making Ilya slap at his cheek with a roll of his eyes.

“You are not allowed to use that to, ah, manipulate,” he chastised, laughing at Shane’s resultant pout.

Shane’s retort was accompanied by the telling press of his thigh against Ilya’s obvious hard-on. “It’s working, though, isn’t it?”

Ilya stuck out his tongue, then bent down to lick Shane’s cheek, making him splutter.

“Eww, fuck you, asshole!”

Ilya raised an eyebrow, pleased to be given the upper hand. “I thought I was fucking you, hmm? You were just begging for it, yes?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Shane replied, making a face at him, “I hate you, actually.”

Ilya shrugged, peeling back the covers as his fingers worked their way past Shane’s waistband.

“To be fair, sweetheart, that worked for us too.”

- 🥅 -

Shane exhaled, looking down at his phone screen where the duration of his call with JJ was reflected.

He slipped the phone into his pocket and braced both hands against the kitchen island, contemplative, as he sucked in another shaky breath.

It had gone… okay. All things considered. Though JJ had been much more openly hurt about Shane’s… omission of truth, and clearly annoyed that Hayden was first to get the news — even as Shane assured him it had been a spur of the moment thing. Like with Hayden, though, the gay thing had been received shockingly well, and the… Ilya thing… less so.

“Rozanov,” JJ had muttered, like he was cursing his anime antagonist, “Damn, I should have known, with how he was obsessed with you in Juniors.”

JJ had then proceeded to make a series of increasingly creative threats, swearing that — as presumed incoming captain of the Montreal Voyageurs — he would be enacting as much league-sanctioned violence upon his Boston counterpart as he could get away with.

“And that is not personal, Hollzy,” JJ had assured, though Shane was … skeptical that there wasn’t at least a bit of ‘big brotherly’ posturing happening there.

His recollection was interrupted by the sound of footsteps padding up behind him, a smile blooming on his face as a pair of familiar hands wrapped around his waist.

“Good morning,” Ilya said, hooking a chin over his shoulder, “And what is for breakfast?” He glanced at the microwave clock, correcting himself, “Lunch? Crisis of existence, looks like?”

Shane spun around, lower back pressed against the counter as Ilya kissed him in greeting. “I told JJ,” he explained, “He was… kind of mad at me, actually. But he accepts it. I think he’s going to find an excuse to fight you in our first game though.”

“Boiziau,” Ilya said darkly, eyes traveling somewhere else for a moment, before his ‘happy to see Shane’ face returned. He did not elaborate further.

“I made some coffee,” Shane said, gesturing to the still-warm coffeemaker on the other countertop, “and I figured we might go for a run later? The lakeside trails are gorgeous and very secluded.”

Ilya hummed in agreement, pecking him on the cheek before he wandered over to the cabinet to grab a mug. Shane watched him navigate confidently through the space, his heart warm with the way the man he loved had settled into his boring little life so neatly. They would have this, forever probably, in Boston and beyond, and god, wasn’t that… Shane laughed to himself… fucking fantastic.

“Your parents,” Ilya said suddenly, hopping onto the island to perch, legs swinging.

Shane startled. “What about them?”

“They do not know about you, yes?”

He shook his head. “No. And I don’t think they’d have reason to suspect either. I don’t really… talk to them about my partners, and what I’ve mentioned has always been about girls so…”

“But I could meet them, one day? Maybe in Boston?” Ilya ventured. He was nervous, Shane realized, as the coffee mug in his hand visibly trembled. “I would like to get them good seats to a game. Show them that you are in good hands with us. With… me.”

Shane blushed, overwhelmed by the sweetness of the offer, and just as tempted to dream. “I think that’s a really nice idea. I could introduce you as my friend and captain, for now, but… I want them to meet you as my… um. *More* than friend. If things feel right at some point, we could tell them? Like with Hayden? But I mean, I don’t want to put pressure on this. It’s so new.”

Ilya took a sip of his coffee, clearly trying to hide his smile. “You know,” he mused, “There is a word for boy who is more than a friend. If my English knowledge is correct.”

Shane turned even redder. “Oh, I mean. Is that… what you want?”

“To be your boyfriend?” Ilya said, the word making Shane jump even as he was expecting it, “Yes. And more than that, eventually, I think.”

“I love you,” Shane blurted, almost laughing as he said it, “Fuck, that’s going to be hard to control.”

Ilya set his mug down beside him, stalking back around to Shane’s side of the island. He pinned Shane back against the counter as he’d done so before, a hungry look in his eyes.

“In Russian, please,” he said sweetly, Shane feeling his cheeks heat up as he echoed the words again on command.

He watched with a shiver as Ilya appraised him head to toe, lips quirking as he took in the t-shirt Shane had nicked from his suitcase earlier.

“Boston Bears,” he pretended to read, tracing the yellow letters on Shane’s chest, “I’ve heard that is a good team.”

“Great goaltending,” Shane remarked with a nod, letting Ilya hoist him onto the counter as he chirped, “First line could use some work though.”

Ilya pinched his side, making Shane wriggle, though the gasp he let out was embarrassingly reflective of just how much he’d enjoyed the sharp pain at his ribs anyway.

“I will make sure to tell Marly that,” Ilya deadpanned, “I have been teaching him trick called ‘scoring.’ But he is slow learner.”

Shane snorted, wrapping his legs around Ilya’s lower back as he tugged him in closer. Their lips connected, as perfectly as ever, and he melted into Ilya with his happiest sigh yet.

It was no one’s fault, really, that they hadn’t heard the front door open.

Nor the approaching footsteps, shifting from carpet to kitchen tile.

But they certainly heard the sharp gasp, and the “Oh!” that permeated their wonderful, love-clouded bubble.

Ilya jumped back like he’d been burned, Shane’s head snapping just as quickly to the source of the noise. His heart sank, ears recognizing the truth of the voice before his eyes caught up to it.

Yuna Hollander stood there, completely frozen with a cake box in her shaking hands. Visible through the plastic lid was the word “Congratulations!” written clearly in black and yellow icing.

“Mom,” Shane said, feeling his world tilt on its axis.

Ilya was hovering near him, eyes going so comically round at the realization of just *who* their mystery intruder was exactly that it might have made Shane laugh, given *very* different circumstances.

Yuna’s smile was fragile, wobbly even, as she said, “Well. Isn’t this a surprise?”

Chapter End Notes

Haha, hey. That's definitely not a cliffhanger again or anything...

You'll also notice that there is now a theoretical chapter count attached to this fic, which includes an epilogue, though please don't hold me to it. We all know I'm gonna write a 20k chapter again and have to split that up. But, in general, we are entering the final arc of Goalie Shane's story for now.

Only one brief hockey note for this chapter:

The Canadian Women's Hockey League (where Rose's 'friend' plays) existed until 2019, after which it folded under dramatic circumstances. The 'competing' women's league, the NWHL, would eventually become the PWHL of today, though it also suffered its own issues. And women in both leagues were, um, basically not making any money. So please support your nearest PWHL team, or whichever one speaks to you (ideally, while condemning transphobia in the sport), today!

Chapter 15: Golden

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Well. Isn't this a surprise?"

They look just alike, was Ilya's first thought, watching mother and son stare each other down across the kitchen with matching sets of dark, almond-shaped eyes.

Despite her petite stature, Yuna Hollander was every bit as intimidating as Shane had once briefly described her, with beautiful, strikingly symmetrical features which were framed by ink black hair cut to a severe chin length bob. She had terrifyingly perfect posture, not unlike a trained ballerina, and an air of total control over her *presence* in the space that told him she was consciously and constantly adapting to whatever eyes were upon her. Her practical button up shirt and pressed linen trousers were disturbingly wrinkle free, a fact that made Ilya — in his just-woke-up state and wearing a bleach stained sleep shirt with a hole in the armpit — feel even grubbier in comparison.

He cringed. *Maybe he could avoid raising his arms.*

Ilya watched as Yuna's gaze flicked to Shane's (his) Boston Bears t-shirt, the plastic lid of the cake box crinkling slightly under her fingers, the only subtle sign of her discomfort thus far. The smile pasted on her face did not waver as she rolled her shoulders back and breathed out in a soft huff. Frozen to the spot, Ilya felt quite justified in his fear of her, compounded by the fact that her very next words cut through him with razor sharp precision:

"So you got tired of losing to my son? Is that what this is?"

"Mom!" Shane near-shouted in protest, eyes going as round as dinner plates, "You can't talk to him like that. He's…"

He hunched his shoulders, the worst of his nervous tics, though Ilya hadn't seen him do it with any regularity in a very long time. Ilya felt a low anger begin to simmer in his gut, affronted that interactions with this woman — blood relative or not — might regress Shane to a less confident version of himself.

"He's my boyfriend," Shane continued, bolder, "The person I told you about. The one I… love. Am in love with."

Yuna's left eye twitched. "Ah yes, the person waiting for you near Boston," she said crisply, "Though you conveniently left out a few details about them, such as their gender." She sniffed. "And occupation."

Shane bristled. "If you have a problem with me being gay—"

Ilya looked on warily, not knowing if Shane's parents were as likely to be as supportive about his sexual orientation as they were about his hockey.

Yuna winced. “I don’t, Shane, that’s not… Listen, this would be a shock for any mother.” Her eyes flicked over to Ilya, expression expectant as she added, “I’m sure you can imagine if your __”

Shane hissed out another ‘Mom!’ as Ilya shifted his feet uncomfortably at the assumption. He didn’t blame her, but the observation cut deep just the same. Grigori may have suspected and hated him for it, but Irina… she would never know. Even if Ilya was probably romanticizing her a bit, childhood lenses rose-colored, he chose to believe she would want him to experience a love that felt like living. No matter who it was with.

“I… not really, no,” Ilya spoke into the fractured silence, maybe more forthcoming than was advisable, “She… passed. Many years ago.”

Yuna looked at him for a long moment, something in her eyes shifting. She seemed to take in how Ilya couldn’t help but fold in on himself a bit, mirroring the hunch in her son’s shoulders. In his periphery, Shane straightened up and glared at her in challenge, taking a step forward so he was just slightly in front of Ilya, protective almost. The movement brought a tiny smile to his face.

“Oh,” Yuna replied, softening more noticeably, “Rozanov, I… I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I mean, I suppose I don’t know much about you at all.” Her gaze cut back to Shane, immediately harsher. “Either of you.”

Ilya could all but feel the weighty frustration of Shane’s exhale in the air between them.

“Just… can you put that down?” Shane snapped, gesturing at the cake, “Let’s sit. I guess we’re talking about it. Since you decided to wander into *my* home.”

“You gave me a key,” Yuna replied primly, though she did move to place the cake on the kitchen island as instructed.

“For emergencies,” Shane emphasized, catching himself mid eye roll.

He motioned to the four-seater wooden table in the open plan dining area, sweetly pulling a chair out for Ilya before seating himself on the same side, forming something of a united front.

“I was going to tell you about me, first,” Shane explained, once Yuna was settled across from them, “That I’m… gay. Then later, you know, maybe work in the fact that I have, um, Ilya too. I just had so much going on with Tampa and playoffs and signing with a new team and...” He trailed off, flapping his hands a bit, Yuna’s eyes tracing the anxious movement with an air of disapproval.

She frowned, gesturing between them. “And you expect me to believe that choosing Boston had nothing to do with… this?”

“It didn’t,” Shane and Ilya said simultaneously.

“I mean, not really, anyway,” Shane continued without him, running a nervous hand through his hair, “Boston offered stability, with a chance to add an M-NTC in subsequent seasons when I’m eligible, and a future for me in their goal. They were bidding for me before Ilya and I even, um,

committed to this relationship for real. I told him I wanted this to feel like my decision alone and he respected that."

Yuna leveled them both with another analytical look, deeply searching.

"Help me understand. How long has this been going on, Shane? I thought you said years?"

Ilya watched Shane swallow, shifting awkwardly in his seat, the both of them obviously aware that they were going on twelve hours max as actual boyfriends. "Officially? Um, maybe a couple of months? But we've been…" Shane hesitated, visibly parsing just how to phrase their years of sporadic hookups, "... off and on since my rookie season."

"The feelings were always there," Ilya added quietly, "At least for me. From the day we met, probably."

Shane turned to look at him in open adoration. "Since 2008?"

Ilya nodded, having long reconciled the fact that his pathetic obsession with the strange Canadian goaltender had always been motivated by more than just the fact that Shane could shut him out of goal without breaking a sweat. Something inexplicable had hummed between them in that alleyway all those years ago, the inevitably of a life spent chasing Shane Hollander born in a single puff of smoke.

Yuna blinked, her eyes finding Shane's once more. "You kept all those secrets for this long? Sweetie, you know your father and I would have—"

Shane bit his lip, chancing the interruption: "You can't blame me for hiding a lot of this. Mom, you *love* hockey, and me signing with Montreal was the happiest I've ever seen you on my behalf. For a while, most of my career actually, I believed in your vision too, that I'd retire as a Voyageur, with a pretty wife and kids waiting for me. But we both know that I've… well, I've never been the kind of son you planned for. It kills me that I'm—" He choked a little on the words. "That I'm disappointing you even more."

Ilya reached for him instinctually, threading their fingers together under the table. He squeezed, once and then again, feeling their twin pulses thrumming skin to skin through the palms.

Something complex warred on Yuna's face, though Ilya could spot the raw hurt that peeked through. It was the kind of pain he was familiar with, the constant fear that loving someone would never be enough to keep from inflicting hurt upon them, even accidentally or else motivated by misplaced care.

"Shane, honey," Yuna said, words careful and decidedly less brusque than before, "Maybe we can discuss some of this in private." She tilted her head in the direction of the backyard rink. "Pass the puck like we used to?"

Shane tensed, though Yuna quickly added, "To be clear, I'm not angry… about your boyfriend. I would have wanted to meet Roz— *Ilya,* on better terms." She pursed her lips. "But there's maybe an overdue conversation to be had between us first. Ilya, dear, would you mind if I stole him for a bit?"

The polite endearment surprised him. It clearly surprised Shane too, and he seemed to let his guard down ever so slightly, giving her a singular stiff nod in reply.

In an act that felt almost adolescent in its rebellion, Shane leaned into Ilya's space to whisper a tender, reassuring 'be right back, солнышко' before pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. If Yuna was at all bothered by the display of affection, she didn't show it. In fact, if Ilya squinted, he could almost make out the tiniest hint of a smile on her lips, fleeting but maternal.

There was, however, a definitive arch of surprise in her brow once Ilya replied 'Okay, love you, good luck' in Russian, Shane smiling and nodding in clear understanding.

Ilya supposed that *would* be strange, seeing your son so enamored with his longtime hockey rival that he'd learned an entirely new language in secret just to communicate with him. The gesture still left Ilya floored every time Shane spoke Russian, and he'd had at least a little time on his end to get used to it.

"If you need me," Ilya said, switching to English so that Yuna would hear the subtle threat within it, "Say the word and I will come."

- 🥅 -

They didn't bother switching to skates, Shane itching at the absence of Ilya almost immediately and instructing his mother that they should keep this quick.

She nodded magnanimously, plucking the custom-length stick that Shane kept stored for her from its place on the rack and gliding seamlessly across the synthetic ice in her sneakers.

"Tell me, then," Shane prompted, following her out and immediately slinging the puck her way. "What you couldn't say back there."

"I love you," Yuna told him plainly, "Without conditions. Though I know you think I have them."

Her pass was perfect in return, speed and angle calculated to the nth degree. *Of fucking course it was.*

"You *do* have them," Shane argued, frustrated tears already pricking at the corners of his eyes.

The words that poured out of him next were almost rehearsed in their precision, thoughts that had been stuck behind his teeth for the longest time, always avoiding the fights he was unlikely to win.

"You can't tell me that you wouldn't be happier if I were a center and a captain, like we'd planned. If I had been… normal, and not weird and anxious and probably something diagnosable that I *know* you'd hate to hear confirmation of, to have me branded as even more different, clinically speaking. And that if I'd been better at the forced normal-ness you wanted for me, at being human, you would have walked in on me and my girlfriend back there instead."

He sighed in exasperation, syllables sticking in his throat. “I can’t help but feel like I’ve done everything wrong in your eyes, been ungrateful somehow, even as hard as I tried — *fuck,* I swear, I really did try — to be the right kind of son for you.”

From across the ice, Yuna looked distraught, the first real emotion he’d seen on her face since the surprise of that afternoon’s interrupted kiss.

“Shane, I just wanted you to be happy,” she replied, her eyes shining wetly, “It hurt me to see people judge you as a child. I thought… maybe if I corrected you, if I helped you find a way past your anxieties and your… quirks, that your life would be easier. I didn’t understand you, so I helped you in the only way I knew how, in the way my parents helped me. Fitting in, keeping up appearances… those things mattered. We are different, you and me, *visibly* so. In life and in hockey, there will always be the temptation to…” She grimaced, perhaps hearing her own generational harms reflected back for the first time. “... to make that more palatable for people.”

Shane sent the puck flying back, a little wobbly given that his hands were shaking.

“You made me hate so much about myself,” he whispered, broken and bare, tears falling in earnest now. “Even if you didn’t mean it. Even if it was out of love and for the best or whatever. It still took a long time to recover from.” Sniffling, he scrubbed at his eyes, and stubbornly pressed on, “And I *am* happy. Now. In goal and with Ilya. I know our relationship seems crazy at face value. I… hated him a little, envied him worse, for being the kind of hockey player I’m not. But despite all our struggles, he has never once made me feel like I should be anything but myself.”

Shane shuffled his feet, before looking bravely up at his mother’s face again, knowing that the eye contact he fought to maintain would send just as much of a message as the words that followed.

“With Ilya, I put the mask on to face him, like with anyone else. But when we leave the ice, when I go to see him, I… I can take it off, Mom. Do you—” he hiccuped, vision blurring so badly he suddenly couldn’t make out the puck near his feet, “do you know how *good* that feels? And… and how much it hurts at the same time? Realizing that I’ve wasted so much of my life not believing I could be *known* like this? That it was possible all along to be loved without tearing myself into unrecognizable pieces?”

He swayed, head full of cottony pressure as the wet, gasping breaths took over. “I’d never been enough of anything, for anyone,” he sobbed out, “until Ilya Rozanov told me I was enough for *him*. But I want… Mom, all I’ve ever wanted is to be enough for you too.”

Immediately, there were hands on his face, on his shoulders, pressing at him, and tugging him into a hug that felt like decades of gauze-shaped catharsis packed into an open wound.

Two hockey sticks — bits of tape on their handles bearing ‘S’ and ‘Y’ in faded, childish script — clattered to the ground. In this moment, forgotten.

For a long time, Shane simply let himself be held, breathing in the weight of her smaller body. Yuna was his mother, as complicated and terrible and overbearing as that felt at times, and Shane was her son, even if his culturally distant upbringing and strangely wired brain aggravated the hurt between them in ways he could not always heal on his own.

“I am proud of you, Shane,” Yuna hissed fiercely, only releasing him once his full-bodied cries had calmed. She grasped his shoulders, meeting his eyes as she said, “You have grown into someone I could never have imagined. And you are showing me that that is a good thing. You and Ilya both.”

She sniffled, using a gentle hand to brush away his remaining tears before she reached up to swipe at her own. “I know this conversation isn’t over. And that there are things that are harder to forgive. But… it’s important that we’re trying, hmm?”

“I love you,” Shane whispered back, hovering over the ice with the weight of so many secrets lifted from his shoulders, “Let’s keep trying. To love each other better.”

Yuna nodded, smiling tearily, before her entire being seemed to rearrange itself into something more akin to her regular confidence. “Ilya will love you for me too, it seems. And I will help protect that however I can. Just tell me what the plan is.”

Ah, and there she was, the proactive, solutions-oriented momager Yuna Hollander back on the case.

“I just want you to be my mom, for now,” Shane replied hesitantly, “My PR team will help me navigate the future, er, once I get them up to speed.” He gulped. “But maybe you can help me find a way to tell Dad too without immediately bursting into tears again.”

“Dinner this week,” Yuna offered firmly, collecting their discarded sticks as Shane trailed behind her duckling-like. “Bring Ilya with you. I’ll… brief your father a bit. Unless you want to go in cold?”

“No!” Shane blurted, cheeks immediately flushing at the intensity of his outburst. Sheepishly, he continued, “No, let’s… not do any more surprises.”

Yuna’s lips quirked into a smile. “I think that would be wise, yes.” She hummed, holding open the door of the shed for Shane to pass through. “Though be careful, in general, darling. You were *very* into each other. Took you way too long to notice me there. Who knows who else might—”

“Mom, *please,*” Shane begged, sure that his face must be deep red, bordering on purple with the force of his mortification.

“Okay, okay,” she placated as they made their way across the lawn. Her face wasn’t visible from where he followed, but Shane was certain she was laughing at him.

Her amusement was a good sign, wasn’t it? A pretty solid indicator that Shane’s entire world wasn’t at risk of going up in flames just yet, at least not in the ‘Imminent Threat!’ way the anxious hum of his brain still wanted him to believe.

It’s actually going to be okay, he thought, letting out an exhale of pure relief. *You are safe and you are loved and that is so, so lucky.* He let out a second shaky breath, with the knowledge that Ilya had never been afforded the same privilege, but that hopefully now he might find a tiny spark of familial support too. Yuna Hollander was a force to be reckoned with once she’d committed herself to a cause. Ilya Rozanov, probably already labeled Future Son in Law in the latest iteration of her fifty-step Shane Hollander Life Plan, didn’t stand a chance.

Not long after, Yuna was standing on the front porch of the cottage, Shane and Ilya hovering together in the doorway. Shane had flashed Ilya a reassuring smile when they'd entered the main house again, though they hadn't yet had the chance to debrief in full. He could tell that his red-rimmed eyes, still swollen from the hard cry, had not escaped his boyfriend's notice.

There were several awkward beats of silence, before surprisingly Yuna reached her arms out wide and yanked them both into a hug, Ilya's body going completely stiff in shock where he was pressed into Shane's own.

"I am happy for you both, about the team and being together," she said, voice muffled from where her face was smushed between their broad shoulders. Leaning back to pet each of their heads in a gently mothering fashion, she added teasingly, "It's just too bad for your Stanley Cup chances that *I* will never root for Boston."

"Not even with your son in goal?" Ilya questioned, real worry in his tone.

"Never," Yuna repeated with a smile, and fearlessly reached back up to pat the cheek of one of the NHL's most formidable players. "And us Hollanders are very good at hexes, you know."

Boston's captain looked aghast, mouth parted as Yuna Hollander spun on one dainty foot and departed down the short stone path to the driveway.

Shane shrugged, snaking an arm around Ilya's waist. "We'll work on it," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "Just smile and wave for now."

Ilya blessedly did as he was told, though he was chewing at his cheek, probably fighting the urge to beg her to reverse the curse already.

"Try the cake!" Yuna called back as she tugged open her driver's side door, "The yellow icing is banana flavored."

Ilya visibly perked up a bit at that.

"C'mon, sweet tooth," Shane said affectionately, steering them back inside, "We have a couple things to celebrate now."

- 🥅 -

The fire crackled in the pit in front of them, orange sparks dancing in the crisp evening breeze off the lake.

They'd been out here for hours already, Shane tossing fresh logs onto the pile each time the flames dipped, neither of them very eager to detangle from each other to head back in.

"Your mom," Shane murmured, curled into Ilya's side under the woven blanket, "I know that she… died. When you were young. But… would you want to tell me a little more about her?" He shifted, clearing his throat. "Since you, uh, met mine today."

Ilya smiled, soft but with a bittersweet edge to it, rubbing Shane's shoulder where he had his arm hooked around him.

"Her name was Irina," he said fondly, though his heart splintered at the way the memories seemed to fade a little more with each passing year. "She was beautiful, with blonde curls just like mine, though refused to be seen without her classic red lipstick on. Too pretty for my father and a lot younger too. I was twelve when she…" He blinked rapidly, fighting back the emotion in his voice. "When she killed herself. So. I do not remember much."

"Your Wikipedia page says her death was accidental," Shane whispered.

"Yes, well," Ilya replied stiffly, "That is what my father wanted everyone to believe anyway. Important to save face, politically." He swallowed against the growing lump in his throat. "And he always thought she was weak, because she did not often fight back against him. He hated that about me too."

Shane was quiet for a long moment. "But she was kind to you?"

"Yes," Ilya breathed out, grateful not to dwell on Grigori any longer, "She, ah, wanted me to be a goalie actually."

At that, Shane sat up, meeting Ilya's eyes. "What?"

He laughed, though it pained him a little to reminisce like this. "When I first started hockey, she would not even come to practice. She hated the idea that I might get hurt. Thought I would be safer in net. With all the padding."

Shane snorted. "There's probably a little truth to that. Much riskier to hurt the goalie on purpose, at least."

"Either way, she would not have liked to see me play as professional," Ilya added truthfully, "She did not care that my father thought it was a strong man's game. We would dance together, me stood on her feet while she waltzed, and she'd always tell me not to grow up too fast. To have fun while I could." He glanced away, swiping at the growing moisture in his eyes. "The world can be cruel, she would say. It was, to her."

He bit his lip, the difficult words coming in fits and starts. "I blamed her sometimes, for leaving me alone with my father and brother. But even that young I could see she was… not well. She was sad my whole life I think and probably before that too." He frowned, feeling Shane press closer against him in comfort. "Near the end, she mostly slept; never spoke, never laughed or smiled. But the day before… before I found her, she took me everywhere in the city, to do all the fun things I had always wished for. My father was so angry when we got home, seeing how much of *his* money she had spent."

This time the tears could not be helped. "But it was like she saved up the energy to give me one last gift, to say goodbye." He sucked in a breath. "It is hard to remember her after many years, but I don't think I will ever forget how that day felt. It was so wonderful."

The silence lingered between them for a moment, embers from the fire illuminating their tired faces. So very grown and yet kept young, delayed almost, in the way their childhood traumas had shaped them. In the way, too, that the hockey world upheld rigidly masculine ideals,

discouraging men from healing their wounds, from finding the care and vulnerability that they had been lucky enough to discover in one another.

“She loved you,” Shane said eventually, tilting his head to press a kiss to Ilya’s cheek, “While she could. There’s so much strength in that.”

“She loved me,” Ilya echoed, smiling a little. Though he knew this and believed it wholeheartedly, acknowledging the *good* that his mother had given him in front of another person, speaking it aloud even, made the hazy memories solidify into something all the more real. “Like your mother loves you,” he added, “Even if it is not perfect.”

Shane nodded back, eyes trained on the flames. “I know. Today was a lot but I’m glad she’s trying at least. And she really likes you, I think. She just… tends to like hockey more, and she grew up as a Voyageurs fan so… the rivalry runs deep.”

He shook his head, chuckling a little. “I know she respects your game though, and if she decides to root for me in goal this fall, she’ll have to root for you too, at least a little.”

“Did she mean it? About the losing hex?” Ilya asked, feeling like every bit of the ridiculous, superstitious hockey player stereotype, “You know I cannot afford another.”

“She’s all talk,” Shane assured him, though he added a teasing, “And hey, you don’t have to worry about mine anymore at least.”

Ilya wrinkled his nose, reaching up to poke at Shane’s cheek. “Will you break up with me if I get myself traded? I am realizing I need more chances to score on you.”

“Yes,” Shane deadpanned, “Might break up with you now for even considering it.”

“Ooh, strict boy,” Ilya teased, a hand sneaking down to grasp at Shane's thigh through his shorts, “But who will you call Captain then?”

“So many to choose from,” Shane shrugged, though he was already sliding off the seat and onto his knees with a cheeky grin, fingers at Ilya’s waistband. “Some Russians even. You are very replaceable.”

Ilya pouted at that, threading a hand into Shane’s hair and tugging harshly in a way that made him gasp. “Ah, so we are back to being bratty this evening, hmm?”

Shane stuck out his tongue as if proving the point, though his expression shifted to something more thoughtful after a moment. “Are we fucked up for always turning to sex like this?” he mused, “A little emotional vulnerability and then…”

Ilya hummed, considering. “I don’t think there is anything wrong with connecting in way that feels good for us. But we could never have sex again and still I would be happy to be with you.”

Shane frowned, looking almost disappointed at the thought. “Do you really mean that?”

Ilya paused at the question, groaning when Shane freed him from his briefs and stroked once, twice, with a calloused hand. “I…” he hesitated, looking down at where Shane was staring hungrily at his cock, licking his lips, “I mostly mean that.”

“Cool,” Shane replied, pausing to lick a long stripe up the length, “Let’s keep the sex part forever then. I’ll suck your dick at eighty-five, dentures out, if you still want me to.”

Ilya choked out a laugh, impossibly fond. “I will always want you,” he said truthfully, if a little saccharine with it, imagining Shane in his eighties, all wrinkles and grey hair and saggy skin, and feeling enamored by the thought just the same.

Shane swatted at Ilya’s thigh with his free hand. “Ugh, gross. You’re so cheesy.”

“I am your boyfriend and you love me,” Ilya replied, intending to be teasing with it but sounding more proud and affectionate than anything. “Now shut up and suck my dick.”

Shane scoffed, though he paused to salute him even so, making Ilya snort out a laugh.

Ilya laughed even harder when Shane whispered ‘Sorry, nature’ — presumably given their outdoor surroundings — before ducking down to lave a tongue around the head.

And then, surrounded by wet heat and the glowing warmth emanating from the fire, Ilya was definitely not laughing any longer, toes curling at the onslaught of sensations from Shane’s focused work.

“Are your knees okay?” he asked, gesturing to where Shane was balanced on the thin woven mat that covered the seating area on the floating dock.

Shane pulled off for a moment, a string of saliva stretching obscenely from his lips, thinner and thinner until it disappeared into the night air.

“No,” he answered, shaking his head. His voice was husky with the way he’d just had Ilya down his throat. “But I like that it hurts a little. It’s grounding.” Unexpectedly, he winked. “Would be better if you stopped holding back and fucked my mouth like we both want you to though.”

Ilya playfully rolled his eyes. “Ah, well, if you insist.”

Shane smiled up at him, beaming and brilliant, and like always — at least where Ilya Rozanov was concerned — got exactly what he wanted.

- 🥅 -

His parents’ summer home was located in a small, close-knit community of estates, slotted on grassy land in between the sprawling system of lakes and tributaries in this part of the province.

As they parked out front, Shane released the tight hold he’d had on Ilya’s hand for the duration of the drive, exhaling a shaky breath.

“This will be great,” he said, mostly for Ilya’s benefit but a little for his own nerves too, “Honestly it’s a good thing we got the tougher parent out of the way first.”

Ilya just nodded, uncharacteristically quiet, though Shane could only assume that his own history with fathers was making him extra nervous to meet Shane's own. Never mind that David Hollander was an even milder, more boring version of Shane himself.

They'd barely taken a joint step toward the house before the front door was opening, Yuna Hollander barrelling outside to greet them. She immediately threaded her arm through Ilya's own to tug him back up the sidewalk, talking his ear off about the evening's dinner menu and leaving Shane to trail behind the pair, mouth agape.

It was lucky, he supposed, that it had taken precious few days for his mother to come around to the idea of Boyfriend Ilya Rozanov, though it was probably just the fact that Shane had finally come home with a serious partner for her to spoil and dote on in general. She had surprised Shane less than a day after her unplanned arrival at his cottage by emailing over an entire annotated list of LGBT-friendly sports and indie lifestyle brands, in the event they needed to monetize their relationship after coming out (or, god forbid, being outed forcibly). Shaking his head at her stubborn refusal to leave his career completely alone, he still recognized the action for the olive branch that it was. And he'd bookmarked the email for his own management team anyway, planning to send it over once he got around to fessing up about the huge potential PR risk he'd decided to create for them for the rest of his NHL career. *Oops.*

Entering the home, Shane watched as Ilya greeted his father shyly with a polite handshake, his temperament nothing like the bold, brash hockey captain he was on TV.

David Hollander was smiling gently, calling Ilya 'son' in his casual congenial way, and then emphasizing with a stricken look on his face that the use of 'Sir' to address him was most definitely *not* necessary.

Sat around the dining room table, plates laden with pasta, the conversation flowed quite easily, to the point Shane mourned the fact that he hadn't been brave enough to create this reality earlier for them. But then again, the Ilya of even just a year ago would likely not have been ready to do something so *serious* as meet the parents, and the Shane of a year ago would never have asked anyway. Incredible, really, how far they had come from biannual hotel room hookups to Hollander Family Spaghetti Night.

"It's nice that you'll both be in Boston together in the fall," David said, ignoring the dramatic look of betrayal Yuna sent his way. "You two had such great chemistry on the ice during the All Star games."

Shane nodded. "It's definitely way less stressful having Ilya shoot in the other direction."

Ilya knocked their shoulders together in playful contact. "Shane is just happy the Hollander Hex will now become legend."

"Ah, that's right," David replied with a chuckle, "I guess no one will ever be able to accuse Shane of letting you win."

Shane's brows furrowed at that, realizing for the first time that the intensity of their teams' on-ice rivalry could very well have generated that type of speculation amongst players and fans if news got out about them. Thank god he was a good fucking goaltender then, for the insurance of it all.

Conversation shifted to plans for David and Yuna to visit for Boston games, and then to the two-bedroom condo — thankfully free of beach-themed paraphernalia — that Shane had made an offer on in the city's ritzy Seaport District. Ilya was still quieter than usual and a little nervous, but when he did chime in he was effortlessly charming and very, very funny. Shane was sure his heart eyes for the man were cartoonishly huge, with the way his parents kept glancing at each other and exchanging soft smiles.

"Did you two want to stay for a little while?" David offered, once they'd cleared their plates, "It's game night, which usually means Yahtzee or cards, but Yuna got herself addicted to something called Mario Party on Shane's old gaming console and she's been using it to hunt me for sport."

"I call Peach," Ilya said quickly, rushing over to the living room, Yuna already loudly trash talking both David and Ilya as she followed.

Hit with an overwhelmingly sentimental feeling, Shane froze in place for a moment, just taking in the full picture of his parents and his boyfriend sitting together on the couch, laughing and joking as Yuna passed out the controllers.

"Shane, you coming?" Ilya called over toward the kitchen, his gaze full of warmth and unmasked adoration.

Shane nodded and took a step forward, fighting the urge to say something stupid and cheesy like 'Hey, isn't life kind of beautiful sometimes?'

Instead, he rolled his shoulders back, matched Ilya's easy smile, and replied:

"Yeah, be right there."

- 🥅 -

September 2017 – Boston

The buzz of his new fancy doorbell, complete with video feed for added security, startled Shane from where he was neatly breaking down the last of the cardboard moving boxes.

Padding across the dark hardwood, he glanced at the camera, immediately flinging the door open when he realized who the unexpected guests were at his doorstep.

"Misha! Jake!" he greeted, ushering them inside, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Surprise!" Mikhail Popov said, ducking slightly to pass through the doorway, Jake trailing right behind him.

Tucking a lock of wavy blond hair behind his ear, Misha regarded Shane with open affection, looking as effortlessly handsome as usual in the classic double denim outfit and cowboy boots he favored in his charmingly Southern-assimilated way. Jake, just as statuesque, was a pretty

sight too, with his circular gold-framed glasses, dark beard grown out in full, and cozy, thickly-knit cardigan and corduroy trousers. Besides their towering heights, they had always visually been a bit of a mismatched pair, but in a Bert and Ernie sort of way that made Shane smile.

“Jake is here for a FinTech conference,” Misha explained once they were all crowded in the entryway, kicking off his shoes, “And Carolina’s training camp doesn’t start until next week, so we thought a joint trip was a good idea.” He glanced around, nodding in approval. “Got your address from Ilyukha in secret. Nice place!”

“Thank you,” Shane said, his eyes shining, “It’s really, really good to see you both.”

“You too, Shane,” Jake replied with a smile, “You seem happy lately. How’s married life treating you?”

Shane spluttered in protest. “We’re not—”

“You might as well be,” Misha cut in, tossing a dramatic hand in the air, “The way it is impossible to talk to you both now without ‘Oh Shane said this’ ‘Oh Ilya would love that’ … it is very sick behavior.”

Shane stuck his tongue out. “You’re one to talk! You two actually got married.”

Misha sniffed, flashing the gold band around his left finger. “Yes, but notice how we did it in secret. And did not even invite anyone to rub our love in their faces. Very classy.”

Jake laughed out loud at that. “Thank you, darlin’, that’s a really cute spin on our tipsy post-brunch elopement at a Brooklyn courthouse.” He elbowed Misha in a very unsubtle manner, adding, “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Misha startled, thrusting the massive gift bag he’d been clutching toward Shane, saying, “Here. Your housewarming gift. I know it is kind of cheesy, but...”

Shane blushed, always a bit embarrassed to be enthusiastically fawned over by the two handsome giants.

“Here, let’s head into the living room,” he said, motioning for them to follow, “I’ll open it there.”

After offering drinks that they both politely declined, Shane perched on the loveseat with his gift, pulling tissue paper out of the bag to reveal a huge stuffed animal. He unfurled the soft bundle, realizing as he did so that Misha had found him an oarfish plushie, probably half a meter long, embellished with glittery boning and a series of cut felt strips representing the red mane-like dorsal fins.

“Look at the belly,” Jake urged.

Shane looked down, flipping the fish over to reveal the number ‘42’ embroidered in red thread on its underside. Immediately, he felt his eyes well up with tears.

“Misha, this is—”

“Silly, I know,” Misha said, looking a little embarrassed, “And I am sure you have cool plans for your Boston masks, but I thought the symbolism was, ah, appropriate. Good luck for your new beginning.”

“Don’t let him fool you, Shane,” Jake cut in, “He had this custom ordered. Drove the Etsy girl half crazy with the details.”

Misty-eyed, Shane placed the oarfish gingerly back in its bag and all but flung himself at Misha where he was sitting on the adjacent couch, tugging him into a tight hug.

“Thank you,” he breathed out, “I’ll put him with all the decorative pillows on my bed. Ilya will hate it.”

“A bonus,” Misha murmured, face pressed into Shane’s hair.

“Jake,” Shane prompted a second later, leaning back to meet the other man’s eyes, “Get in here.”

Scooting over with a laugh, Jake wrapped his long arms around the both of them, Shane snuggling in so happily he was nearly purring with it.

Just then, there was another chime of the doorbell.

“Ah,” Misha said, smiling furtively, “That will be your surprise, part two.”

- 🥅 -

The upscale steakhouse was packed full when they arrived, though Ilya had pulled a few strings to secure their group a reservation at a much sought-after corner booth with a view of the city’s illuminated skyline, the river glittering darkly beyond.

A few pairs of curious eyes lingered on them as the hostess led them to their seats, perhaps in recognition of their local star captain, but it was just as likely that their combined heights alone were the reason for the attention. They *were* four-fifth’s of the way to forming a pretty decent NBA lineup after all.

Earlier that afternoon, Ilya had arrived at Shane’s new condo building, begrudgingly impressed by Mikhail Popov’s plan to engineer a double date that would not raise any public suspicion. Three current NHLers and one pro-sized, former NCAA forward to boot? If spotted, it would be difficult to argue that this was anything more than hockey bros splurging on a steak night out. Strength in numbers, or something like that, with extra plausible deniability.

Selfishly, it also warmed Ilya’s jealous heart, any time he had the opportunity to stake his claim on Shane Hollander in front of his many, many fanboys around the league, Mikhail Popov and husband included. It was unbelievable, the number of secret admirers that had crawled out of the woodwork and into Shane’s DMs over the summer alone, using the announcement of the Boston move as an excuse to reach out with all sorts of offers for Shane’s time and attention.

“Do they always message you like this?” he’d asked, aghast at the boldness of some of the DMs and snaps that Shane had freely shared with him.

Shane had shrugged, smiling wryly, “I mean, yes. But I didn’t realize they were like… flirting, you know? It definitely increased in um, volume, since I used that new story feature thingy on Instagram to share some of Scott Hunter’s posts though.”

“It is already bad enough these magazines are calling you league’s hottest player,” Ilya had replied despondently, “Now I am having to add whole roster’s worth of hockey men to my ‘To Fight’ list.”

“Please, there’s no need to defend my virgin honor,” Shane had responded with a roll of his eyes, though his grin had turned devious as he’d mused, “Although, it *would* be a pretty sexy view from my crease to watch you beat up the creepy ones…”

(And it wouldn’t be them if they didn't have several very interesting rounds of sex about all of that after.)

But anyhow, here and now, Shane Hollander was decidedly *his,* sitting next to him in the spacious half-moon booth, wearing a black silk shirt that he’d stolen from Ilya’s closet, and proclaiming with each new course brought to their table — his wine-flushed cheeks growing pinker and pinker — how he couldn’t believe they could just do something like this, out in the open.

The evening *was* turning out rather splendidly; Ilya, for all that he grumbled, liked Misha and Jake quite a lot, especially seeing just how much they clearly cared for Shane and his happiness, doting on him with relentless fervor. He was happy for the husbands and a little envious besides, that they’d made their relationship legally binding that summer, though Ilya hadn’t missed the opportunity to tease a blushing Shane about wanting his permanent resident card too.

The concept of the double date was a little funny though, absurd even, seeing as Ilya had never once imagined himself as someone with ‘couple friends’, much less part of a whole network of high-profile queer individuals across the professional sports and entertainment industries: Rose Landry, a name that still made Ilya frown in the way Mikhail Popov’s did, was due to meet up with them in New York for the Bears/Admirals matchup this winter. Speaking of the Admirals, Scott Hunter had summoned an Avengers-style squad of players from both the men’s and women’s leagues for his ‘Hockey is for Everyone’ initiative, a whole summer camp with scholarships for underserved populations in the works for the following year. And big, sweet Ryan Price, for whom Ilya had long harbored a soft spot since they’d shared the ice together in Boston for a season, had already reached out about connecting in Buffalo, thrown from team to team as he was each year and seeking familiar faces. Ilya thought that Ryan, who was not very subtle about his queerness but carried a reputation scary enough that no one ever looked closer, might not mind if he brought his new ‘teammate’ Shane along too.

A second hour passed, as the four of them lingered in their booth, ordering another round of drinks and a few dessert plates to share between them. No one was particularly eager to burst the bubble of pretend normalcy that they’d created, the illusion of four friends hanging out loosely curtaining the truth, Misha’s arm hooked lazily around the back of the booth behind his husband and Ilya’s hand on Shane’s upper thigh beneath the table.

“You will be hell to play, together,” Misha remarked, wincing at the thought, “The league is furious with Montreal for basically giving Shane away. And there is big target on Boston’s back now, to see if you are beatable.”

Ilya let a smug smile grow on his face. “I can almost taste the Cup already.”

His smile only widened as Misha booed, elbowing Jake to join in.

“And the Crawfish?” Shane asked, “You’re happy with them?”

“I am,” Misha affirmed easily, “And they are happy with me in goal too, I think. I am afraid we will always be fighting on same side of the bracket, Mr. Wallender. Sorry.”

Ilya gestured to Misha’s ring finger. “And does your team know about… that?”

Misha’s expression shuttered, shifting to something more complicated as he said, “Yes. The marriage they are less happy about. Though there is nothing they can do now, obviously.” He shrugged. “I have already told them that I will take the fall and leave team if big PR mess happens. I love hockey, of course, but I have been able to play it for many years. I have my Stanley Cups and my goaltending trophies. Might sound kind of… ah, *egotistic,* but there is not much left to achieve. Nothing worth not being happy with Jake anyway.”

“I’m just hoping I might get a WAG jacket this year,” Jake added jokingly, though his eyes on Misha were glistening with obvious pride.

“What about Boston?” Misha ventured, “Will you tell them about the two of you?”

“A few of my players, yes, eventually,” Ilya replied, “And our individual management teams know, in case of PR issue, of course. But I don’t think we will risk telling Bears’ top brass, definitely not until Shane is settled and has trade clause in place. As long as we play well, I do not think it is really any of their business anyway.”

“It helps that I’m a goalie and Ilya is a skater,” Shane added, reaching below the table to briefly squeeze Ilya’s hand, “Even if we fight before a game or something, it’s not like we share the same line. Harder to impact each other’s play directly.”

Misha nodded and then reached for his drink to hold the glass aloft, prompting a soft cheers: “To goalies and their forwards.”

The four men clinked their rainbow assortment of cocktail glasses together, smiling both at the secrets they kept and the truths that were bravely coming to light.

“To forwards and their goalies,” Ilya whispered sweetly in Shane’s direction, marvelling at the way his freckles seemed to brighten atop the pinky glow of his blush in the low light.

'I love you,' Shane mouthed back in Russian, and Ilya felt that love all the way down to his toes.

They emerged on the ground floor another half hour later, Misha and Jake waiting at the curb for the Uber that would take them back to Jake’s conference hotel. Ilya and Shane, having parked valet up front, waited with them.

“Oh my god,” a young girl, maybe college-aged, exclaimed suddenly as she passed by with a group of her friends. Her eyes were fixated on Shane, jaw hanging lax. “You’re Shane Hollander.”

“Um, ye—” Shane started to say, interrupted by the girl’s muffled shriek, a hand over her mouth as she noticed Mikhail Popov hovering nearby.

“Hollapop, together,” she whispered reverently, maybe louder than intended, before shaking her head and asking, “Could I please get a picture with the two of you? No worries if not, I’m just a huge fan of you both. I, um, I actually play in goal for BU.”

Ilya watched Shane glance over at Misha, before they both shrugged and nodded, arranging themselves for the picture as the girl’s friends — who turned out to be her hockey teammates — coached them on the perfect angles, snapping about a hundred photos between them.

Jake sidled up next to Ilya as they waited, nudging him teasingly as he said, “Looks like we’re both WAG status now, huh?”

Ilya grumbled again, a common theme of this evening apparently, though he felt a smile tugging at his lips anyway. Looking on, they both laughed as Misha scooped a beet red, wine-tipsy Shane into a bridal style carry, matching the pose of the BU goalie and her backup goalie teammate next to them.

“Does it fade over the years?” Ilya asked in a whisper, surprising himself with the words. He watched Jake turn to him, a question in his eyes. “The love, I mean.”

“No,” Jake replied softly, understanding dawning on his features, “It softens maybe, gets less… frantic. But if it’s real, it will weather most anything. Time included.”

“Hey, Rozanov!” one of the girls called out, interrupting the tender moment in a way that made both Ilya and Jake snort at the brashness of the request: “Will you come take a picture of all of us together?”

Ilya sighed good-naturedly, wandering over to enable more of the goalie shenanigans, with enormous, ridiculous love for Shane Hollander beating louder in his chest than ever.

Later, after a sobering walk in the autumn chill, Ilya drove them both back to his house in the suburbs, Shane singing along nonsensically to the radio — unfamiliar with even the most ubiquitous of Top 40 hits — and clutching Ilya’s hand over the gear shift like he hoped their fingers might melt together.

“Thank you for tonight,” Shane said, eyes twinkling in Ilya’s periphery, “It was nice to feel almost… normal. Like a real couple would.”

“It was your goalie friend's idea,” Ilya admitted, tapping his free hand on the steering wheel, “but yes, I agree. Was really nice to be regular boyfriends, even if mostly no one knew.”

“Do you think your— *our* teammates will notice?” Shane ventured, “With training camp starting in a couple of days?”

Ilya shook his head. “I think they will be surprised we are friends, though I have planted that seed in a few preseason interviews already. Honestly, most will not be looking any closer than that, more worried about keeping their spot on roster.”

He tapped out another staccato rhythm on the wheel, considering. “Marly will catch on at some point, I imagine. He has been begging me since July for more details about my boyfriend, and he knows me too well to not recognize if I am flirting with you. Will be a little funny, I think, to watch him put pieces together.”

Shane smiled at that, squeezing Ilya’s hand. “I don’t want to get cocky but… we’re actually going to pull this off, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, projecting confidence, “And then one day, in far future, when we have won five more Cups, maybe six, we will come out in an explosion of rainbow confetti on Pride Night like NHL Commissioner’s worst nightmare.”

“You are quite the dreamer, Ilya Rozanov,” Shane replied, voice steeped in sleepy fondness.

You made me one, Shane Hollander, Ilya thought, sentimental to a fault.

Exiting off the highway, he steered them toward home.

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“Saw the proofs for your mask designs when I was getting my pads fitted,” Nosey said, approaching Shane in the locker room as he was tugging on his black practice jersey, ‘42’ on the back in bright Boston yellow.

Clasping Shane on the shoulder, he continued, “They look cool as hell, man. I don’t know much Japanese, but that one for home games especially is going to be a hit with the fans, I can tell.”

Shane smiled. “Thanks, Nosey. I used the same illustrator I worked with in Tampa, who has a background in East Asian design motifs. She can do pretty much anything though, if you ever want me to hook you up.”

“Oh, for sure, bud,” Nosey said, face lighting up at the offer, “I could use something slick for my final season.”

“Final season,” another player echoed from down the line, making the locker room laugh with the way he put the words in huge, dramatic air quotes.

“Oh, fuck you!” Nosey called back, “I’m really calling it quits this year. Why do you think we got Wallzy here? He’s gonna let me retire in peace without worrying about you dumb kids crashing and burning in my absence.”

Shane looked down shyly, delighted to have found a real mentor in the veteran goaltender, now a week into their training camp practices. The stark competition for spots had always led to

antagonism between Shane and his backups in the AHL and then up at Montreal with Buzzard, of course, never affording him the opportunity to build out a real, secure tandem relationship. Leo Campbell, though he was a little slower than he used to be, was a bit of a goaltending legend in the league, chock full of bizarre superstitions that made Shane look like the normal one between them, and irreverently hilarious to boot. Also a big believer in tandem hugs, Nosey had wrapped Shane up on the first day of practice, leaving him blushing so red and giddy that Ilya had teased him relentlessly about his quote unquote ‘adorable goalie daddy crush’ for the entire ride home.

Oh, and that was a thing they were doing now, Ilya offhandedly explaining that Shane’s condo was (vaguely) 'on the way' to the practice facilities, their teammates chirping a ‘Rookie’ Shane for needing a chaperoned ride from the Captain without blinking twice. If Ilya rarely dropped Shane off and instead drove straight through to home, where half a drawer now held tag-less shirts and soft sweats in Shane’s size, well. That was just extra thorough captaining, wasn’t it?

Speaking of, the mask proofs that Shane had submitted had been laid out on Ilya’s kitchen countertop just that morning, as he decided on the final versions with a bit of input from Ilya too.

Though his two primary options were gorgeous in their own ways, he agreed with Nosey, that the home game helmet design really knocked the concept out of the park. Themed around the Japanese folk hero Kintarō, famed for bravery and strength, the mask featured a black koi fish on one side, scales glinting gold in the sunlight, and the hero’s classic weapon — a small hatchet — on the other, the 金 kanji for ‘gold’ inscribed on the ax’s handle and repeating in the margins, a tiny 'Yuna' snuck in for luck too. On the top of the helmet were a series of parallel scratches like a bear’s claw would leave, each of the bleeding wounds oozing gold instead of red, a nod to some of Kintarō’s more debated lore, including rumors of him wrestling bears, being accompanied by a tame bear friend, and perhaps even raised amongst the mountain’s animals from childhood, the bears included. A perfect, chaotic metaphor for the way Shane now felt amongst the familial Boston squad.

“Golden Boy,” Ilya had said approvingly, when Shane explained the symbolism in detail, “Yes, here you will shine.”

Skating out with the rest of the A Team, their positions already a lock on the roster for the upcoming season, Shane gave an encouraging shoulder tap to one of the nervous young goaltending prospects on C, who was visibly vibrating as the goaltending coach explained the afternoon drills. The poor boy let out a squeak when he met Shane’s eyes, head tucking down into his shoulder pads like a turtle retracting into its shell. Shane smiled at him anyhow. He’d been there once, fighting to be seen and to be taken seriously, though he had long ago committed to never subjecting upstart goalies to the same lonely ‘earn your place’ treatment. Spots were limited, yes, that was a reality of their position, but it didn’t mean Shane couldn’t make things a little bit better from *his* home crease at least.

“Hollander, you’re up in goal for A!” one of the coaches shouted, interrupting Shane’s musings, “Show us what you’ve got.”

Shane nodded, his smile growing beneath the plain black practice mask. He skated up, accepting a gentle helmet bonk from Nosey as all of B and A swapped places.

“Go get ‘em, kid,” Nosey said cheerfully, “You’re the future here.”

Shane bowed to the Bears’ posts, as he had every day since camp started, hoping they’d accept him as one of their own too. With how well he'd played in the scrimmages so far, he had a pretty good feeling about it.

“Show no mercy, boys,” a familiar voice called out from where the A Team hovered near the blue line. Ilya Rozanov winked in the direction of the net, his own smile bigger on the ice than Shane had ever seen it. “Let’s give this ex-Voyageur a proper Bears welcome.”

The drill began, a barrage of shots coming rapid-fire Shane’s way, terrifying and exhilarating all at once. Hands busy, he felt his mind go quiet, eyes tracking the play they were running, positioning shifting minutely in response to every exchange of the puck blade-to-blade, breathing in data and breathing out action in the way he did best. Seamless and perfectly centered.

You belong here, he thought, the pretty sentiment bobbing away as the roiling ocean in his brain calmed to still waters. *In the crease, in Boston.*

As the drill reset, he found his eyes immediately drawn to Ilya out on the ice, heart skipping with the joy of playing together in a way that still felt brand new. Boston’s captain, feared and revered in turn, was already looking back.

You belong, Shane Hollander, he told himself again, mantra-like now, *In the crease, in Boston.*

Beneath his visor, mouth guard pinched in his teeth, Ilya Rozanov smiled.

With him.

Chapter End Notes

No cliffhanger, eh? *crowd cheers*

Not our heaviest hockey chapter, so I have but a few notes to spare:

- Another refresher on trade protections, like the M-NTC that Shane mentions. As far as I can tell (though these rules have changed over time), you must be 27 years old and have accumulated 7 active NHL seasons to request a no trade or no movement clause, which would put Shane just out of eligibility for his first season in Boston. As Shane tells Yuna, however, the Bears have strongly signaled that negotiation is on the table for future seasons and, once a clause is in place, players do in fact have to submit a list of no-trade teams every year to maintain the contract terms.
- A recent behind the scenes from an irl NHL team on what training camp is like.
- And finally, more on Kintarō, the folk hero that inspired Shane's new mask. This video touches on traditional Japanese-style tattoo depictions of Kintarō as well, which I like to imagine Shane's artist would have drawn from, especially in the bold colors and textures of the design.

Chapter 16: Misconduct

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 2017 – Boston

It was a strange feeling, being in the Boston Bears' locker room before their home opener against Philadelphia.

Training camp and then the preseason had passed by in the blink of an eye, Head Coach LeClaire starting Shane and Nosey for just one game a piece, preferring to test the depth of the other goaltending prospects on the radar. In many ways that was a relief, Shane having proven to Bears management that he was a valuable acquisition, a worthy tandem partner for Leo Campbell, and, after said goaltender's planned retirement at the end of the season, the appointed heir to the team's true veteran spot in the net.

Shane wouldn't start tonight — that honor was reserved for next week in DC — but he was dressed as the backup of course, and eager as hell to observe a game time Boston squad from his seat on the bench.

Focused work with Nosey, their goaltending coach, and the d-pairs during their recent practices had been no less than electrifying, Boston so far making good on their word that they wanted to develop Shane into a franchise-defining talent. Realistically, at this point in his career, any other NHL team would have afforded him the ice time, equipment and resources needed to train at an elite level, but it was the team culture in Boston that had really drawn him in and continued to surprise him, more so than any shiny, high-tech facilities. They seemed to respect Shane in earnest, treating him like the Vezina-winning, stats-topping goalie that he was. And there was a sense of inclusion here too, of every voice mattering, that had him startling each time one of the assistant coaches asked his opinion and genuinely wanted him to weigh in.

Just weeks into his official Boston tenure, Shane wasn't yet used to feeling like part of a team in a Whole Person sort of way, more than just a cog in the wheel that made the hockey go, routinely blamed as he'd been for Montreal's defensive failures (and rarely seen as contributing to their wins in the same way the flashier forwards were). Even so, some of the Voyageurs' fanbase, as well as the league's more goalie-fluent media analysts, had long defended him online, even before the Tampa trade that *really* made waves regarding Shane's treatment at the hands of Theriault and the GM. And he also knew — courtesy of Twitter screenshots from Hayden and pointed requests for comment from the media in the preseason — how fans of his former team had cast their judgment: Canadian headlines and forums falling mostly on the side of 'Not another historic goaltending fumble by Montreal' over 'Hollander's great betrayal across enemy lines.' Then again, he hardly expected them to wish him well in Boston regardless.

Unlike others, Ilya included, Shane wouldn't place all the blame on Montreal's management, content or perhaps simply complacent as he'd long been to live in the background there, tucked away in his crease and performing the precise, robotic goaltending that was expected of him. But it *was* bittersweet to discover that the insecurities he carried about both his playstyle and his public-facing persona while with his former team were not at all shared by his new employer.

After a serious meeting with Communications and Marketing regarding social media use policies and promotional obligations, the gaggle of early-twenties 'Bearstagram' admins in the back had all but threatened a hostage situation in their fervor to book his involvement in all their upcoming content.

"You're, like, ridiculously trendy online," one of them had gasped out, "The admins' group chat for the Atlantic is losing it with how jealous they are. Our average engagement rates are already up ninety-four percent this month from your 'welcome to the team' post alone!"

"Seriously," another had chimed in, "Montreal was *criminally* underutilizing how adorably awkward you are on camera." She squealed. "We already have a 'Just Goalie Things' series planned for you, and a BFFs Tag with Rozanov too. We're going to be so viral, it's insane."

Looking back at their smiling faces, iPhones brandished almost menacingly, Shane had merely blinked and said he was down to do anything but dance.

Still, all that… excitement about personal career development paled in comparison to the immediate feeling of watching Ilya Rozanov rise from his seat and take his place at the center of the room, the white C emblazoned on his jersey glowing like a beacon. Once upon a time, Shane too had yearned for the weight of that patch, though he now found himself grateful that other braver, thicker-skinned men existed to take the helm.

(He'd spoken to JJ several times after news broke that Montreal had bestowed him with the captaincy, given that the fanbase's reaction had been… mixed, to say the least. Voyageurs followers and hockey fans from around the league alike were *still* in the comments of the announcement post, finding every other possible excuse to express their disagreement with the decision besides what obviously motivated their disdain.

Shane's heart hurt for JJ, and a little for himself too, with how far they clearly had to go to make diversity in the NHL a normal part of the sport and not cause for mostly negative attention. Shane knew that Ilya had also reached out to JJ in support and that, despite perhaps being the face-value, desired poster boy for hockey leadership, he *was* one of few captains who did actually care, who wanted to use what power he had to cultivate a locker room that was safer than league standard at least.)

In his years in Montreal's goal, Shane had caught brief glimpses of Captain Ilya Rozanov out on the ice, defending his players and arguing calls as was his right, but this… this was entirely different. An intimate, behind the scenes look at the Bears' inner sanctum, the 'Den' as they jokingly called it, and the charismatic leader who could again lead them to ultimate victory.

Ilya held up a hand, surveyed the room with one long sweeping look, and said, "Alright, listen up."

Shane glanced around, watching even the rowdiest players quiet down in an instant, gazing up at their captain with shining respect in their eyes. The posturing, hot-headed young player that Shane had once known was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a man who held himself with an effortless, mellowed sort of self-assuredness, seeming to soak up the rapt attention of the room and glow impossibly brighter with it.

That, or maybe Shane was just really fucking in love with him.

Either way, Ilya delivered the opening speech in accented but near-perfect English, mainly speaking in motivational sports cliches but sprinkling in enough zealous profanity to earn whoops of agreement from the room at large. He ended the speech with a teasing: “And don’t lose. Or you will make our sweet rookie Hollzy cry from the bench.”

“Fuck you, Rozanov,” Shane called out, making the other men laugh, “If you don’t score at least one yourself, I’m dropping *you* off at home in the Lambo.”

There was a low ‘ooh’ from their teammates, it being common knowledge now that Rozanov and Hollander were still continuing their carpooling schtick during the regular season, though always in one of Ilya’s expensive sports cars over Shane’s [also expensive, to be clear] subcompact SUV. For his part, Shane pretended to hate the ostentatious show of wealth, and yet… he *was* a red-blooded male in many ways, highly susceptible to the purr of a nice engine, the feeling of the Huracan hugging the curves of the road at high speed, and most notably, how handsome Ilya looked in the driver’s seat, shades on and arm slung around the back of Shane’s headrest once they’d left the city limits.

Collecting his stick from the rack, Ilya looked delighted by the bet, nodding at Shane sharply in agreement. There was a subtle heat in his eyes that Shane hoped would be read as competitive intensity by their teammates and nothing more. He’d been terrible so far at estimating just how obvious they seemed to the other guys, especially when he felt like he was wearing cartoonish heart-shaped goggles every time he made eye contact with his *boyfriend* — the word still sending a pleased little shiver through him — and that Ilya was more often than not regarding him with lingering affection in return. No one had expressed even a hint of suspicion yet though, and it would be one hell of an accusation besides, so for now their easy bromance lived on.

All too soon it was time to begin lining up in the tunnel, the roar of the fans intensifying as the pre-game intros on the Jumbotron began. Shane smiled and Ilya smiled back, all teeth, eyes crinkling beneath his visor. *Hockey and this.* It was hard to believe he really had both now, not ready to wake up from what was surely a dream just yet.

“Huh,” Marlow murmured, glancing between them thoughtfully as he stood from his bench seat one locker over, though he quickly waved Shane off in lieu of an explanation.

They poured out onto the ice, TD Garden a sight to behold on its true opening night, the black and yellow sea of sweaters thrumming with energy. Shane had gotten a good taste of Boston hockey mania from the more modest preseason crowds, but that was incomparable to the sheer wall of noise he was faced with now. He winced instinctually, anticipating their boos and angry jeers, before he remembered that he was no longer branded by Voyageur red and blue. In Montreal, they might call him a traitor, but to Boston, he was part of the spoils of war, a prize they had stolen from right under their enemies’ noses.

After warmups concluded and Shane was tucked away in his spot behind the bench, Boston went to work, dismantling the Philly defense with near surgical precision. As if engineered in a lab just to annoy Shane to death, Ilya went on to score not once but twice that night, putting up two assists as well to solidify Boston’s easy 4-1 victory.

Leaving the arena, Shane crossed his arms in the Lamborghini's passenger seat as they pulled out of the garage and past the crowd of fans waiting at the exit, Ilya cracking open his window just enough to wink at a group of girls who let out a harmony of high-pitched screams. Shane

rolled his eyes, continuing to pout heavily through several stoplights, until Ilya reached over and grabbed his hand.

“You are very sad for someone whose sexy hockey player boyfriend just won him a game,” Ilya teased.

Shane sniffed, fighting a smile. Almost grumbling, he said, “You’re a really good captain, you know that, right? The guys, especially the younger ones, clearly look up to you. It was… cool to see you in action like that.”

Ilya shrugged, though he was focused *very* intently on the road ahead now, his cheeks pinking. “I care about the team a lot. It is not perfect, sometimes frustrating, but we have good people.” He glanced over at Shane for a split second, eyes warm. “And now we have you too.”

Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand and felt a gentle pulse back in return.

“You are okay, yes?” Ilya asked softly, “Not playing all the time? I know at Montreal you were used to more games but...”

Shane fought a laugh at the very skater-minded concern.

“Part of the job,” he answered easily, “though it’s sweet of you to worry. I promise I like your team, Captain. And I’ll like it even more when I see ‘Winning Goalie: S. Hollander’ on record after my start next week.”

He watched the smile bloom on Ilya’s side profile as he drove.

“Would be kind of romantic,” Ilya mused, “if next to that was ‘Game-Winning Goal: I. Rozanov’ hmm?

“Careful,” Shane teased, reaching up to grasp at the place where Ilya’s curls met the nape of his neck, “You know what stats talk does to me.”

Ilya’s expression morphed into an interested smirk, even as he replied nonchalantly, “I’m not dropping you off at yours on the way, am I?”

Shane retracted the hand he’d been petting with, looking out the passenger side window to hide his pleasure at the assumption. Though he was tempted to play harder to get, a feature of their past dynamic they both still liked to indulge in, sometimes it was nice to lean into the fact that Shane for Ilya (and Ilya for Shane) was kind of a sure thing now.

In that vein, he simply smiled a little to himself and said:

“No, you’re not.”

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October 2017 – Washington, D.C.

Ilya hopped the boards and glided across the taloned eagle logo at center ice, both teams resetting for the face-off. Marly had knocked one in after a scramble in front of the net to put the Bears up 2-0 in the second, finally using his physicality and size advantage to score over simply being a check-happy nuisance to the other team.

“You should be on my wing,” Ilya had told him gently before the season started, “Put the puck in the net and get back up here, please.”

In a perhaps predictable move, the coaching staff had shifted an ‘aging’ Marly to the second line, favoring a wicked fast Icelandic-American draft pick who seemingly refused to look Ilya in the eye but who received his passes with precision at least. The 19-year-old Ólafsson, who’d accepted the Frozen-derived nickname Snowman with a shrug, was apparently the son *and* grandson of famous goaltenders, but had been so terribly uncoordinated in goal as a child that they’d shoved him out on the ice and hoped for the best. In a twist of fate, he’d been all but adopted by a starstruck-turned-protective Shane Hollander when his three-time Vezina winner father had dropped him off on day one of camp and shared that same story with a slightly condescending laugh.

Watching Shane goof around a bit with Ilya outside the crease, the painfully shy teenager had been delighted to discover his goalie had a forward’s puck-handling skills and the two sometimes stayed late after morning skate practices, Shane feeding him passes while he’d quietly gained the confidence to play up with Ilya in the way he did now. The sight of the pair working together had strangely paternal feelings flaring in Ilya’s chest, picturing the future retired Shane who sometimes mused about coaching a group of U7s for a local Canadian league, tiny bodies dwarfed by their pads and pucks going in all the wrong directions. Shane would smile at them, patient and kind, and gently redirect the chaos; maybe not an NHL captain in this universe, but a better coach and mentor and ambassador for the sport than Ilya would ever be. And if they one day wanted kids of their own, well—

With a clash of sticks, the puck drop brought Ilya back to reality, muscle memory taking over at the first contact with the ice.

Winning the face-off, Ilya made a controlled entry, knowing the goal now late in the second was to keep possession, wearing out Washington’s already fatigued defense with long cycling loops off the boards between the forwards and back. Thirty seconds turned to forty and the long change was signalled, Ilya peeling off to get back to the far bench in time.

He let out a breath, squirting a stream of water into his mouth from one of the communal bottles. 2-0 was good, though a few more for insurance would be better. A win now meant a shutout for Shane in his Boston debut and, feeling dramatically sentimental about the prospect, Ilya was playing like his life depended on it. He had received an intrigued look from St-Simon, a true stay-at-home defenseman, when their shifts had last overlapped, clearly surprised by Ilya chipping in when he was… not lazy exactly… but not really known for his two-way game as much as he was for forcing quick turnovers and capitalizing on the odd-man rush. Tonight, he’d been involved in distinctly more slot protection than usual, transparently concerned about keeping every screen and scoring opportunity out of Shane’s crease.

“Rozanov, glad you’re here,” Shane hissed during his next shift, poke checking the back of his legs to reposition him, “but I need some fucking visibility, if you wouldn’t mind?”

St-Simon laughed from his spot on the weak side, after a viciously-timed slap shot sailed right over Ilya's left shoulder, Shane's nimble blocker the only thing on the ice with adequate reaction speed. The defenseman skated back into position, knocking Shane's helmet with his own in thanks, and making Ilya a little irrationally jealous with the gesture. He'd forgotten that he needed no excuse for fawning over Shane in goal now that they were on the same side, the taps and hugs and nose-to-nose stares of appreciation all fair game between teammates.

"Roz, I think your pal Wallzy is hanging in there just fine," St-Simon teased, as they left the ice at the end of the second, "You're scaring the other centers into thinking they need to be heroes. Just hold onto the puck for us, or better yet, put it in the other net even, and we'll handle the rest."

Ilya nodded, a little bashful at being caught out for his hovering.

Unsurprisingly, Shane cornered him in the locker room before the third as well, standing in front of his seat as he retaped his stick. Poking a glove-less hand to the center of Ilya's chest, he said lowly, "Rozanov, look, it's cute that you're worried about me. But I'm a fucking professional." His eyes were dark and intensely narrowed, the full force of his displeasure visible without the mask. "Nod yes if you trust me in that net."

Ilya gulped as he was chastised, mouth suddenly dry for a very different reason than game time exertion. He nodded.

"Right," Shane continued, tone clipped, "You score goals and *I* prevent them. You know how to deflect a puck into the net and I know how to keep that from happening." He gave a rough but playful shove to the side of Ilya's loose helmet, voice brightening a bit, "We're both experts. And we're going to win this game. But only if *you* stay in your lane and off my welcome mat. Nod again if you agree."

Ilya tilted his chin down immediately, cheeks hot and pulse thrumming beneath his chest protector.

With a cheeky smile and a smack to his thigh, Shane lumbered off, all hugely padded up and adorable and scary at the same time. Ilya swallowed and then exhaled a breath, having forgotten the raw, focused energy that thrummed from Shane Hollander in goaltending mode. He was confident and fearsome and Ilya loved him nonsensically, in ways yet undocumented by science but perhaps worthy of study. *Christ, would it always feel like this?*

Glancing up as he finished his tape job, Ilya noticed Marly watching him, something inscrutable in his expression.

"Alright, Cap?" he asked, punching at Ilya's shoulder as he walked by. At his careful nod, Marly's face relaxed into a grin. "Right, let's finish this out."

Back on the ice for the third, Boston operated like a well-oiled machine, playing clean, clinical hockey against the Eagles' sloppier efforts. 3-0 flashed above as little Snowman sent a beauty direct to Ilya's blade for a showy one-timer, doing his damndest to endear Ilya's grouchy veteran heart into accepting the teen's place on their line. Minutes later, winning another face-off, Ilya grinned through his mouth guard, knowing that the Bears maintaining tight possession and slowing down Washington's game was restricting their opponents to just a handful of shots on

goal in this period so far. That was good for the team and even better for Shane, given that Ilya had taken the intermission's reprimand to heart and adopted a more balanced defensive presence in the slot since.

Still, there was always room for error. From the bench, three minutes on the clock overhead, Ilya winced as a sloppy pass was intercepted by Washington's top scorer, who immediately went streaking through the neutral zone and into Shane's defender-less domain.

Holding his breath, he watched as Shane darted out a few lengths and gauged the forward's speed perfectly, maintaining the ideal stick-length gap that Ilya knew from experience kept the available net behind him irritatingly small. At the last possible second, Shane went akimbo, spreading frog-like as his glove-side leg and arm darted out to full coverage. The movement was enough to have the forward hesitate, his attempt at a deke awkwardly interrupted by Shane's accurate read. Ilya knew even before the shot left his panicked blade that it would miss, the puck sailing high over the crossbar.

The decent-sized Boston crowd in attendance went fever-pitch feral at the stop as they leapt to their feet, Eagles fans all around them visibly distraught at the missed opportunity. Ilya, preparing for the next line change, glanced back in time to see the tiniest smile appear on their head coach's lips too. That boded extremely well for the rest of Shane's season, seeing as it was a fucking miracle to get any emotion out of the stoic LeClaire besides righteous playoff fury.

Self-indulgent to a fault, Ilya used the next break in play to give Shane a little appreciation, wrapping an arm over his shoulder and pulling him in until they playfully bumped their helmeted foreheads together.

"Fucking gorgeous," he said under his breath, in reference to the previous save. Mostly that, anyway.

Summoned to the circle by the refs, Ilya spun away with a wink that he *knew* Shane would roll his eyes at. He won this face-off with ease yet again, finding that the motivation to keep pucks off of Shane's half of the ice was almost intoxicating (when channeled toward the right efforts at least). He needed to discover a way to harness this feeling always, to bottle it up and let it supercharge his puck. In the same way that skating *toward* Shane for all those years had turned him into a well-studied offensive powerhouse, maybe there was room for defensive growth too. He would propose some very specific drills at their next practice to find out, anyway.

The game ended 3-0, still goalless for Washington. The lineup at the boards that followed was unprompted and immediate, not a single Bear missing their chance to bestow a gentle bonk for their new goaltender's debut. The visiting crowd cheered loudly in approval as Nosey wrapped Shane up in a full-on goalie hug. Shane Hollander was their future and they loved him for it; Ilya understood that sentiment completely.

"Proud of you," Ilya whispered on his turn, grin widening as Shane replied with a low 'Show me later' before ushering him along.

And show him he would, Shane sliding into his hotel room after they'd both begged out of the team's U Street club-hopping plans, looking freshly showered and pink all over. A much softer version of the commanding man out on the ice, but Ilya's Golden Boy just the same.

"This is the weirdest deja vu," Shane commented, as he methodically undressed, "Sneaking out to see you, but it's just going down a floor instead."

Ilya snorted from his place on the bed, clad only in his underwear and offering a joking, "Did you want it to be like the old days? All that, ah, *angst* to get you hot?"

Surprised, he didn't miss how Shane's eyes flashed in intrigue at the thought, something shifting on his face as he said, "Fuck you, Rozanov."

Ah, so they were playing games today.

At the prompt, Ilya let his previously amused smile contort into something crueler, a haughty laugh filling the air.

"So much attitude for a man who is coming to *my* room," he sneered, watching Shane shiver as he kicked his underwear off more messily than usual and approached the bed, entranced. "You need to be fucked that bad, Hollander? Cannot go one night without it?"

Pupils blown wide, Shane huffed a little, crawling across the duvet until his face was hovering above Ilya's crotch. He nosed downward, tongue out, focused and eager. A half-second of wet contact through the fabric and he was suddenly left gasping as Ilya shoved a hand in his hair and yanked him off by the roots.

"Please," Shane whispered, looking thrilled by the surprise shock of pain and denial.

"What would your fellow Bears think, hmm?" Ilya mused, lightly slapping those reddening cheeks, left then right knowing he craved the balance. "Their favorite rookie so desperate to get captain's approval. A cock down his throat. Whatever it takes."

Shane pouted, the first hint of tears appearing in his eyes. "You were proud of me tonight," he argued, "I earned it."

"Earned it?" Ilya echoed meanly, grip on Shane's hair tightening, "I was the one scoring goals, I think."

"My shutout," Shane all but moaned back, voice gone breathy in the way it often did before he sank down completely, "I helped."

Ilya scoffed, using his hold to press Shane's face down into the crease of his hip and groin, holding him there just long enough that it would leave him a little choked for breath again. Letting up, he released his grip entirely, watching as Shane, eyes glazed and chest heaving, nearly purred against where he was rapidly hardening, nuzzling in deeper of his own volition. Tongue lolling out, Shane licked wet stripes along the length, soaking the fabric until the shape of Ilya's cock was a visible imprint. Ilya bit his lip, holding back bravely even as those plush lips found the head and suckled.

Groaning, his resolve weakened past the point of resistance when those big brown eyes turned up to gaze at him, the question in them clear.

“Suck,” Ilya commanded, nodding in approval when shaky fingers slid down his briefs just enough to immediately get a mouth on him. At Shane’s first true moan, Ilya kicked his hips up meanly, watching Shane splutter at the intrusion.

“If you are not quiet, they will hear you,” he threatened. In truth, both of his next door room neighbors had opted to go out, but he knew that Shane in this hazy state might not remember that fact. Strategically, he added, “Though you would probably like that, hmm? Them knowing you are the captain’s special toy.”

Pulling off, Shane gasped out harshly, almost petulant with it, “I *am* special. Yours. No one else can give you this.”

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Ilya said, fighting off the sweetness that lingered under the words, “No one else is a needy slut like you. Gagging for it.”

In lieu of an answer, Shane took him all the way into his throat, holding there for a long moment. *Showoff,* Ilya thought affectionately. *Perfect boy.*

With the way Shane hummed happily around him, he thought he might have said the last bit out loud.

“Fuck, enough,” Ilya choked out after a few more tortured minutes, Shane bringing him nearly to the edge with his mouth alone, hands clasped behind his back politely though Ilya hadn’t prompted that part. He reached over for the supplies in the bedside drawer, instructing, “Get yourself ready for me.”

Shane looked suddenly bashful as he crawled up Ilya’s body, head tucking into his shoulder. Ilya sensed the mumbled vibration of words there.

“What was that?” he questioned.

Shane’s exhale was shaky against his collarbone, before he tilted his head back and said clearly, “Feel.”

Ilya blinked, confused for a moment until Shane huffed and grabbed his hand, guiding him so that his fingers slid into his crease. Searching, he felt his pulse quicken when his blunt nails clinked against something hard. Glass-like, maybe.

“Oh,” he murmured, dominant spell briefly broken by his genuine shock. He sucked in a breath, carefully piecing the mask back together, voice wavering in a way he hoped was not noticeable as he said, “Turn around.”

Shane immediately complied, bending over so he was perched on his elbows, legs spread on either side of Ilya’s chest to make the plug more visible. It was made of dark, near-black glass, with a yellow-gold gem sparkling in the center. *Sentimental freak.* Ilya reached up, heart pounding, and nudged at it a bit, earning a long moan in reward.

“Pretty,” he appraised softly, running both hands over those muscular cheeks before carefully removing the plug in one smooth pull.

Shane’s resultant keen was blindingly hot, but loud enough to have him wincing a bit. He kicked at his discarded underwear near his feet to get Shane’s attention, adding, “In your mouth. Now.”

Testing, Ilya slapped one ass cheek harshly, pleased when Shane’s moan came out distinctly muffled this time.

Focus returned, he stared for a long moment, the now-empty hole before him darkly flushed and puffy at the rim, shining a bit too with the lube used to insert the plug. He pulled Shane toward him by the hips, close enough to get a tongue on him, licking one long circle before he speared into the puckered muscle with ease. Suddenly ravenous, Ilya went to work, slipping a finger alongside his tongue not long after, Shane wriggling with pleasure as his muted sounds filled the room.

Eventually, there was a wet spitting noise — *fuck,* those briefs were probably ruined — and the sound of Shane’s voice whining out the most plaintive ‘fuck me’ Ilya had ever heard.

He paused, a new dynamic they’d recently introduced requiring him to check in. “Condom?”

“In me,” Shane clarified immediately, making Ilya raise an eyebrow in response.

After the preseason physicals, both receiving their STD-free clean bills of health, Shane had started to request it raw, though he was rarely a fan of the mess created by Ilya coming inside.

“Come in me,” Shane pleaded again, wiggling a little, “And… and then, put the plug back.”

Ilya froze. “What?”

Shane was quiet for a moment, face hot where it was pressed into Ilya’s lower thigh.

“I want to walk back down the hall with you, get onto the elevator, and have a drink at the hotel bar,” he whispered, words clear enough that Ilya knew he must have rehearsed them earlier, “And I want us both to know I’m holding in your cum the whole time.”

The series of Russian swears that left Ilya’s mouth at that were probably at odds with the crucifix around his neck, no greater cause for damnation than Shane Hollander arriving with a plan to be bred full.

“Insatiable,” he hissed out, his favorite word between them, and reached for the packet of lube on the bedspread to slick himself up. “Wanting everyone at fancy hotel to know you are mine, marked by me.”

“They won’t know,” Shane whined, presenting beautifully, truly desperate with it, “but we will.” His voice dropped back to a ragged whisper, “I’ll feel it.”

Fuck, if Ilya wasn’t in a rush now, hard to the point of painful. Pressing in, Shane was so wet it was almost impractical, hole squelching filthily as the old and new lubricant mixed with Ilya’s spit too. They let out twin gasps at the sensation.

“You are mine, Hollander,” Ilya echoed again approvingly as he started to move, watching Shane press back to meet his thrusts with little choked out *unh's* at the impact.

“Yours,” Shane gasped back wetly, “Rozanov, Captain, fuck. *Harder*. Please. Need to feel it.”

Ilya’s heart was in his throat. Christ, he would give this man anything. His team, his Stanley Cups, the rest of his fucking life…

For a long moment, the push and pull felt infinite, the air filled with the sound of skin on skin and the groans of pleasure between them. In Ilya’s brain, there was room for nothing else but the rhythmic motion, flexing hips and searing heat.

“Can I?” Shane begged eventually, trembling as a hand started to reach between his legs.

“No,” Ilya replied, feeling strict as he neared the edge, “You don’t need it.”

Shane made a noise that might have been a full-on sob, but his hand went back to the duvet anyhow, so perfectly obedient.

Ilya could feel his hole begin to pulse, close in a way that the condom couldn’t quite mimic, and aimed with even sharper precision for the spot that would get him there hands-free.

“Oh, I’m—” Shane cried out, whole body seizing up with the force of it before he was coming untouched in endless spurts, probably rendering Ilya’s hotel bed unsleepable. Good thing they had another room.

Not far behind, Ilya fucked up into that fluttering heat once, twice, before he found his own release. Grabbing Shane around the chest, he lifted him until they were pressed back to front, turning his cheek to kiss him with fervor.

“Fuck,” Shane was gasping, mouth gone completely lax after a moment, “Rozanov, *Ilya*... I love you, oh my god.”

He squirmed where they were still connected, though Ilya didn’t move to pull out as he softened, knowing that Shane liked the overstimulation and hated the emptiness most of all.

“Shane,” he whispered, pressing affectionate kisses to his bottom lip, his cheeks and eyelids and forehead, anywhere he could get a mouth on. “I love you too. I am proud of you. You are so, so good.”

He shifted his hips slightly, honestly by accident, and Shane all but shrieked, Ilya getting a hand over his mouth just in time to muffle the worst of it. He watched, awed, as Shane’s poor dick twitched hard and leaked just a little more from the tip.

“You’re right on my—” he gritted out, falling forward onto his hands again as Ilya slid out with murmured apologies.

His eyes caught on the plug where it sat on the nightstand next to them, crusted with lube. “Did you still want me to…?”

Shane’s whole body jerked with the force of his nod. “Please.”

Humming his agreement, Ilya leaned forward to press a kiss to the small of Shane's back.

"Wait," he said, scooting off the bed to take the glass plug to the bathroom sink, letting the water warm up a little to make the clean toy feel more comfortable.

He returned after a moment, Shane frozen on his hands and knees, breathing slowly. "Ready?" he prompted, adding the last of the lube packet to the tip before he carefully nudged the plug back in, a few drops of cum sliding down the back of Shane's thighs as it settled in place. He bent down, indulgent as he lapped up the extra, feeling the full-bodied shivers in response.

"Two hours until lobby bar closes," he said, pulling Shane to lie back against him, both of them still panting a bit with the exertion. "How about that drink?"

- 🥅 -

November 2017 – Toronto

Cliff Marlow: hey shane

Shane: Hey! Everything okay?

Cliff Marlow: i was wondering if you would stop by my room later?

Cliff Marlow: shit i mean

Cliff Marlow: it's not what it sounds like

Shane: ???

Cliff Marlow: look, i just wanted to talk to you about something. kind of serious

Shane: Oh my god

Cliff Marlow: NOT THAT

Shane: Cool. Not ominous at all.

Shane: I'll come by in like fifteen minutes?

Cliff Marlow: 👍

When Shane stepped into Marlow's Toronto hotel suite, he was surprised to see a nervous expression on the normally confident (borderline smarmy) man's face.

“Shane, hey,” Marlow said awkwardly, motioning to the upholstered chair in the corner of the room, “Have a seat. Sorry for like freaking you out over the phone earlier.”

Shane sat down warily, watching as Marlow perched at the end of the bed across from him. “Still freaked out, to be clear.”

“Okay, yeah, fair,” Marlow replied, scrubbing at the back of his neck, “So, um, I guess I’ll just — you know that Roz is like one of my really good friends?”

Shane nodded slowly. “Yes?”

Marlow swallowed, wrinkling the duvet as he swayed a little. “Right, so he told me kind of recently that he was… bisexual. And when we talked about you coming to the team and like locker room culture and stuff right before camp, he also said you know about him too. And you’re cool with it.”

Shane blinked, completely lost at the direction this conversation was going. “I’m, yeah. I’m very cool with it.” He felt his eyes widen, taking in Marlow’s awkward posture. “Wait, are you trying to come out to me right now?”

Marlow spluttered in surprise, nearly choking with it. “No! No, I’m straight. Well, I mean, I haven’t really thought about it *that* much, but everyone should be a little open-minded I think and…”

He trailed off, seeming to notice the way Shane’s eyebrows had all but merged with his hairline.

“Anyway,” Marlow continued, coughing, “um, I just noticed, maybe, that you guys were getting really close. And I don’t know what you’re into so like, this is a crazy fucking thing for me to say but… Look, I feel like you might have a… crush?”

Shane froze, feeling his jaw slowly fall open.

“But Roz has a boyfriend,” Marlow barreled on, “And maybe he told you that? Or maybe he didn’t, which would be kind of shitty? But like, as one of the alternate captains, and for the sake of avoiding team drama, I just needed to say something, you know? Since you’re kind of really flirty? Both of you.”

Pulse picking up, Shane bit his lip and fought back a panicked laugh. “Marly, that’s… I don’t think Ilya cares that I’m flirting with him.”

He watched Marlow’s eyes go perfectly round, his mouth forming silent noises before he properly rebooted. “Wait, you are? For real?”

Shane snorted, deciding that now was probably as good a time as any to confess the key bit of context Ilya’s coming out texts from the cottage had omitted. “Yeah, I’m gay and he’s hot so…” he offered, a little teasing now, though there was some real relief in it.

Marlow nodded, oblivious to Shane’s growing amusement. “He is,” he agreed quickly, a little too quickly maybe, before he winced and added, “But his boyfriend… Shane, that’s kind of fucked up on both of your parts.”

Shane shrugged, smiling for real now. “I don’t think his boyfriend minds either.”

Cliff shifted again, uneasy. “So it’s like… an open thing?”

At that, Shane scoffed immediately.

He shook his head, deciding to take pity on the poor, concerned bystander before him. “No, we’re definitely not open.”

He watched the cogs turning behind Marlow’s eyes, the revelation dawning in one cartoonish ‘lightbulb above the head’-like surge of brain power.

“Shane, yes!” he all but cheered, making Shane burst into startled laughter. “Oh my god, I felt *so* guilty for kind of wanting you guys to get together instead. Ilya, like, never talked about this mystery guy in detail and I was getting major red flags from that. Bro, Hollzy, this makes so much more sense, fuck.”

“I can’t believe you thought I was homewrecking my own relationship!” Shane accused, still laughing.

Marlow winced. “To be fair, it was more like I thought you were crushing hard and that Roz was veering into unethical territory when he usually keeps his slutventures above board, so…” His expression blossomed into a sudden grin. “Wait, tell me everything. How long has it been?”

Shane hesitated, feeling the same sheepish embarrassment he did any time he thought too hard about their not-relationship timeline. “Ah, well, we were… meeting up for a lot longer than we’ve been officially together, but… going on five years?” He shrugged, cheeks reddening, “Though Ilya likes to rewrite history a little and say it was a first sight thing. Which would make it more like nine.”

“The hell?” Marlow blurted, “That’s… you’ve been keeping this up for that long?”

Shane shrugged. “We had some road bumps in there but… yeah. And then, you know, the Boston opportunity came up and it made sense for a lot of reasons. Being closer together was a bonus.”

Understanding bloomed on Marlow’s features. “And now you can sort of hang out whenever? More publicly too?” He jolted. “Oh. The carpooling. And the staying in at the hotels. Wow, we’re idiots.”

Shane nodded, smiling a little again, though he ventured, “Do you think the other guys have… noticed?”

There was a firm head shake ‘no’ in response.

“Nah, and I think they’re just glad that Roz has a permanent target for his attention,” Marlow explained waving a flippant hand, “He gets kind of motherly in the locker room when he’s stressed out about something, team-related or otherwise, and latches onto the nearest rook usually. Sort of like when chimps groom the bugs off their babies, but with more nagging? Though we call it Mama Bear mode, for obvious reasons.” He cringed. “Um, don’t tell him I told you that.”

Shane laughed, though he held up a pinky in promise, thrilled to be blessed with deeper Bears' lore from Marlow's infamously loose lips. Which, speaking of…

"Um, obviously our relationship is a secret still," Shane reiterated, "My parents know and like a handful of guys around the league who we can trust, but we're not planning on coming out to the team and like *definitely* not publicly. At least for a while."

"Oh no, of course," Marlow agreed, tone sobering, "Roz probably told you why I'm such a staunch advocate for this stuff." At Shane's nod, he continued, "Yeah, it just… it hits close to home. So, you guys are still good friends in my book. And if you ever need me as cover for anything, hit me up. I got you."

"Thanks, Marly."

"And sorry again, for like, calling you gay and in love with our captain," Marlow added, looking genuinely apologetic about it.

"You're forgiven," Shane told him, deeply amused by the actual regret in Marlow's expression, "Like you said, you were looking out for the team, I get it. And I mean, it's not like you were wrong about either of those things so…" He trailed off, carding a hand through his hair as he huffed out a laugh. "But, um, let's maybe not accuse any of the other guys of anything similar."

Beneath his dark scruff, Marlow's entire face seemed to glow stoplight red. "Ha, right, yeah… not my most tactful approach."

A long, awkward silence followed.

"Okay, well," Shane said, standing up and taking a few steps toward Marlow. He patted him on the shoulder, adding an awkward, "Um, good talk."

"Good talk," Marlow echoed, "I'll give you the scary best friend speech another time."

"No need," Shane chirped back, nearing the doorway, "I already met Svetlana."

There was a beat and then Marlow choked out a laugh. When Shane glanced back, he was nodding approvingly. "Right, yeah, I see why Roz likes you. Little ragebaiters, the both of you."

"Night, Marly," Shane said firmly, though his tone softened as he added, "And thank you, really. The support means a lot."

"Bro, of course," Marlow replied, "And we'll keep the other guys in check in the locker room like we always do. Safe space, and all that."

Shane nodded, knowing that most hockey minds would not be swayed by the Bears' strict captaining, though making them feel uncomfortable about sharing their bigotry aloud was a meaningful, if baby-sized step toward changing the culture at large.

He waved another awkward goodbye, smiling when Marlow waved back and said, "And tell Ilya to inform his roster I'm available, dammit. Dude owes me!"

Shutting the door behind him, Shane rolled his eyes. *Fucking hockey players,* he thought, though there was a tiny bit of affection behind it.

Baby steps.

- 🥅 -

December 21, 2017 – Boston

Shane could almost pretend he was imagining the tension during warmups, the Voyageurs far enough away from his goal that their steely looks might just be ones of concentration instead.

The media had already done their best to stir up the rivalry during the pregame interviews, Shane being sent to the press area very much against his will, even after being media trained within an inch of his life (also against his will) by Bears PR earlier that week. Sat next to him at the table, Ilya — who, as a team spokesperson, was obviously media trained but famously noncompliant — had looked openly murderous as question after question centered around Shane's experience in Montreal, his alleged betrayal of team and even country(!?), and if he felt pressure to not be outperformed by Montreal's Volturi in goal tonight.

Shane had diplomatically provided enough boring, analytical responses to the provocations that they'd eventually eased up a bit, though it seemed his hot-headed captain was not content to leave the earth unscorched.

"We trust our goalies," Ilya said pointedly, cameras flashing, "Ask Montreal if they trust theirs."

Shane had never fought harder to suppress a smile in his life, dress shoe shifting behind the cloth tablecover to press his foot firmly against Ilya's own. The comment was especially cutting given that Shane had already noted Volturi was threatening to drop under .900 SVP this season, the closest he'd gotten to giving the reporters the snappy soundbite they were clamoring for. Tonight, faced with Rozanov and Snowman, the league's breakout rookie talent, Shane hoped Buzzard would end up roadkill in the crease instead.

Now, doing his best to focus on his own routine, he couldn't help but spot Ilya's '81' jersey up at the red line, JJ's familiar towering frame standing across from him. They were talking animatedly, the conversation appearing friendly at least, though Shane watched as not one but two Voyageurs skaters passed by and very clearly lobbed some choice words in Ilya's direction.

Fuck, this was going to be ugly.

Skating a wide loop back toward the net, Ilya clasped a gloved hand on Shane's shoulder, murmuring, "JJ warned me to protect you tonight. I think they are planning to be rough. I will let other guys know. Might make LeClaire stack the checking lines a little different, bigger if I can."

Shane nodded, though he felt his blood run cold at the threat, knowing that most of his former teammates did not feel as charitably toward the move as JJ and Hayden did. With Shane gone

for months now, it was possible that Buzzard had planted even more seeds of doubt about his intentions with Boston, probably selling the team on the selfish betrayal angle over Montreal's own player mismanagement.

Shaking his head, Shane focused on what he could control, bowing to his posts and beginning to recite the stats he'd hardly needed to memorize, already knowing most of Montreal's forwards like the back of his glove. There were just two new fourth liners, and a new first line center in place of the retired captain — drafted on the pick that sending Shane to Tampa had earned them — to add to his mental rolodex. Studying up, he'd taken great pleasure in noting how many of the forwards were scoring poorly in the season so far, smiling hungrily as he devoured the film that showed the new center still telegraphing his shots like a neon sign. Shane would deny them all; he could feel it.

And at least the Boston fans were funny, he thought, eyes catching on a poster that read 'Thanks for the goalie!' in gold and black glitter. He'd have to give that fan his stick at the end.

As predicted, the game got off to a brutal start, the Voyageurs happy to play dirty if it meant making a statement. The Bears responded in kind, both teams racking up penalties like it was their last night on the ice. While Shane could appreciate the need for physicality, he could have done without the seemingly endless power plays putting him on high alert as a result. It was hard too, watching Ilya bear the brunt of the assault, as if Montreal had decided to personally blame him for Shane's departure. They very well might have, news spreading in the preseason about Rozanov and Hollander's years-long secret friendship, the Ottawa visit sometimes resurfacing as fans across the league debated the timing of the Boston move.

And they'd done that viral video too — 'Roz and Wallzy: BFF Tag' — that had turned into a full Buzzfeed feature, Hayden sending him the link to *'10 things to know about the internet's fave rivals-to-besties'* with a dramatic: "What the hell man?? He can't have ALL the titles."

Regardless of motivation, Montreal was channeling their hatred into checking. If they couldn't touch Shane without inciting a riot, Boston's star center was a worthy consolation prize.

A first period. And then a second. The number of shots on goal in the tens for both teams, near record lows.

The locker room was frosty and almost deathly quiet at the intermission, score still a brutal 0-0. Shane watched a bit of tape, worried for overtime, as his fellow Bears all went through their rituals and treatments, more trainers in the room armed with ice packs and KT tape than Shane had ever seen.

Fifteen tortuous minutes into the third, there was a breakthrough. Though probably not one the Bears would have wished for, considering…

A scuffle in the slot had Shane sliding back deep, realizing in terrifying slow motion that the Voyageur careening toward him was not making an attempt to meet the puck flying ahead, nor did he seem to have the intention of slowing down at all either way. Stick held dangerously high, he slammed into Shane with enough force to knock him off his skates, mask catching the crossbar with a clang as he was bounced sharply off of it and into the netting. Despite a painful ringing in his ears, Shane was quick to untangle himself and leap up, trying to avoid the watchful eyes of the pesky concussion spotters who would yank him at the slightest wobble.

St-Simon, bless him, had located the puck in the chaos and sent it flying across the blue line, though it mattered very little considering the bloodbath that had already commenced around them.

Shane stood there helplessly, a little dizzy and looking on as a helmet-less Ilya scrapped with the Voyageurs' center, more Voyageur-Bear pairings forming across the ice (though a few seemed to be simply holding each other back from the fray, at least).

"Rozanov, I'm good!" he tried to yell, wincing when the refs were finally able to peel an incensed Ilya away after he'd leveled the Montreal player to the ground, other Voyageurs still rushing toward him. They were a little slow to it though, half-hearted in their efforts as they probably realized that attempting to injure a goaltender had crossed a line from general roughing to straight up malicious intent.

In the end, it was Snowman of all people who'd fully dropped his gloves, throwing an MMA-worthy bare knuckled punch at the player that had actually checked Shane through the net, blood splatter and maybe a tooth flying through the air.

"Don't touch my fucking goalie!" he was still spitting, even as the official began rattling off the combined penalties, ending with game misconducts for Boston's Ólafsson and Montreal's Harvey, both pulled from the ice.

Down players on both sides, the third period ended scoreless as well, Shane spending most of his break in the quiet room being evaluated by the team physician for concussion symptoms. In the end, the medical staff had shrugged and told him he was borderline, probably okay for overtime, but that he should flag for help immediately if he started experiencing worsening symptoms.

'You're not really okay, but you can play through it without brain damage' was the gist of the message, and so Shane, competitive to a fault, was obviously back out on the ice.

Please let them score, Shane prayed to the ghostly ancestors in Volturi's opposing posts, begging for a Boston goal within the five minute window. He was in no condition for a shootout, though he was stubborn enough to stay in goal anyway if it came to that.

Though the now-ejected Snowman would have come in clutch here, Shane was happy to see Marlow brought up for the 3-on-3, moving comfortably on Ilya's wing. It was probably the thrumming at the base of his skull making him deliriously sentimental, but he couldn't help but smile goofily to himself, watching that '81' jersey sail across the ice. It was a pretty thought, wasn't it? To play on the same team. To have Ilya skating away from him, leaving, but knowing that later, he would be coming back home.

In the end, it was always them, wasn't it?

The goal horn sounded. Boston 1-0 to win it.

Tonight the stats would read 'Winning goalie: S. Hollander and game-winning goal: I. Rozanov' just how they liked it.

Together. *Yes.* A pretty, pretty thought.

It was pretty too, how the lights above him were merging into one brilliant blur.

“Shane,” a voice said insistently, too sharp for the softness of his cottony bubble, “Shane, hey!”

He smiled back anyway, thinking the face seemed familiar, and swayed and swayed.

- 🥅 -

December 27, 2017 – Boston

“Sweetie, you have to get off your phone,” Yuna Hollander said, making the Shane-shaped lump on the couch grumble in annoyance.

“It’s been almost a week, mom,” Shane snapped back, “I’m allowed to have screen time again.”

“Minimal screen time,” Ilya and Yuna said simultaneously from their seats at the kitchen table, quoting the doctor’s orders.

“Dad, help, they’re teaming up against me!” Shane complained, flopping back dramatically against the cushions in a way that made everyone else wince.

“Red,” David Hollander said mildly, placing a wild card on the top of the Uno stack, before calling back, “I’m quite fond of your brain, Shane. I’d like it to heal.”

Ilya smiled at that, nodding approvingly at being united in their strict approach, the Montreal hit still replaying over and over again behind his eyes.

He’d been certain that Shane would be pulled after the brutal impact against the crossbar, but then he’d stood up seemingly without issue and had allegedly passed the tests involved in the concussion protocol after the period ended. Skating back to Shane to celebrate the hard-earned win in overtime, Ilya had been furious to find him blurry-eyed and confused, wobbling on his skates. *No concussion, my ass.* He’d been sending a number of strongly worded emails throughout the franchise and to Player Safety with his concerns since then.

Freshly diagnosed just four days before Christmas, everyone had agreed that Shane flying home to Ottawa was inadvisable, given the risk of even temporarily worsening his symptoms. In a blink, Ilya had the Hollanders on a plane on his dime and the guest room in the house cleared out, ready to spend Christmas with his boyfriend’s parents.

He just hadn’t anticipated said boyfriend being the Worst Patient Alive.

Despite Shane’s near constant moaning about being allowed in Ilya’s home gym (not true, he wasn’t cleared for light activity until one week out), they’d enjoyed a lovely home-cooked dinner on Christmas Eve, Yuna categorically refusing to allow Ilya to go through with his original plan to have everything catered in. She’d been extremely, almost offensively, surprised by his own culinary abilities when he’d offered to chip in at least, though she had praised his well-appointed kitchen and adequately sharpened knives enough to sort of make up for it.

With Shane now truly on the mend — though you'd think missing at most two or three games was a terminal diagnosis — the Hollanders were set to fly out this evening. They'd spent the cold morning inside playing board games, Ilya unsurprised to discover that Shane was the sort of coddled only child that made him a sore loser at *everything,* randomized and not precisely strategic card games like Uno included. And okay, Ilya might be on his fifth round against Shane's parents for similar loser reasons, but at least he hadn't quit entirely.

"Do you want to come with us to the airport?" Ilya asked, leaving to join Shane on the couch after he'd been hit with three consecutive rounds of 'Draw 4' from Yuna, who absolutely had to be like… counting cards or something, Shane was right. "Or do you think the car ride will make you sick?"

Humming, Shane lifted up and laid his head onto Ilya's lap instead, Ilya's hand coming down automatically to card his fingers through those dark waves. Their eyes met, a rare happy expression from Shane the Infirmed making Ilya smile in return. 'I love you,' he mouthed, just because.

Shane puckered his lips, making Ilya roll his eyes, though he bent down to grant him a tiny peck anyway.

"I think I might get sick," Shane admitted, Ilya relieved to hear him being honest about his symptoms, "The headache came back after I was on the spin bike earlier." *And, ah, there was the reckless non-compliance again.*

"You sure you don't need us to stay?" Yuna asked, eavesdropping from the dining room, "Sick Shane is a handful until he's medically cleared."

"Mom, no!" Shane whined, "I'm a grown adult. And Ilya is too."

"Then listen to your boyfriend!" she called back, "He and that sweet baby of yours fought half of Montreal for you, the least you can do is act grateful about it."

Ilya smiled, genuinely enjoying the boisterous noise of the family around him. They'd been having the same circular discussion for days, Yuna (and Ilya) nagging and Shane pouting, with David tugging Ilya away for vodka and cigars in the basement lounge when mother and son needed more space to hash it out.

"It is nice," Ilya had told David one night, clinking their glasses together, "to have people that worry about you. I hope he knows this."

"He does, despite the grumbling," David had replied with a chuckle, "He's stubborn and competitive, but sensitive too. Gets that from both of us. Shane knows that injury is a part of the sport, but he doesn't take well to feeling like he's being pitied or babied. Or worse, like someone is claiming to know his body better than he does."

"He ignored his symptoms to keep playing," Ilya had argued back darkly, "I am angry at him for this. It was dangerous."

David had hummed, eyeing him thoughtfully. "Son, I seem to remember you being very obviously hurt in a regular season game. Ribs, was it? And you didn't even go on IR."

Face flushing, Ilya had grumbled, embarrassingly Shane-like as he said pitifully, “Ribs cannot be treated. They heal on their own.”

“They heal with *rest*,” David had corrected kindly, cigar smoke curling around him like a wise old dragon, “And you know we would do the same for you, right? Me and Yuna?”

Ilya had blinked, confused. “What?”

He remembered it still, would probably never forget it, the way that Shane’s father had smiled at him with a warmth that Ilya never knew fathers could possess. “We want you to be healthy, Ilya. To take time when you’re injured. Same rules that apply to Shane apply to you too.”

It was stupid, maybe, when he’d asked, “But why?”

“You’re the person our son chose to love,” David had replied, shrugging easily, “and for that, we love you too. You said it was nice that Shane has people who care about him. So I’m telling you now that you, Ilya Rozanov, are cared for like any Hollander would be. How’s that?”

The tears had been nearly instant, Ilya cringing to think that Hollander men might have the Hex of Emotional Vulnerability with how easily they made him cry.

“That is very nice,” he’d replied, words a little wobbly, “Though now I am scared to lose him and—” pausing to make a sweeping gesture in David’s general direction, “all of this too.”

David had placed his drink on the side table between them, then reached from his own leather armchair to pat Ilya’s knee once in comfort, the touch fleeting but loaded with meaning all the same. He’d said a lot of wise things about love after that, the haze of smoke cocooning them from the outside world, though Ilya had admittedly been several vodkas too deep to appreciate the full impact. Regardless, he’d left the late night conversation sort of terrified Shane’s father might try to hug him one of these days, knowing that would undoubtedly be the final emotional nail in his coffin of daddy issues.

Back in the moment, Shane cradled in his lap like something very precious, he closed his eyes and let himself breathe. In and out, in a square sort of pattern, exactly as the team’s sports psychologist had once instructed, before she’d suggested some other things for Ilya to try that he felt were… frighteningly diagnostic.

He opened his eyes and saw that Shane was staring back, full of adoration and concern in equal measure. Ilya winced. He could have this, yes, but could he protect it?

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Shane whispered, not for the first time this week, hand reaching up to touch Ilya’s cheek, “I keep making you sad.”

“I’m always a little sad,” Ilya replied, just as softly, “though with you, it is less, I promise.”

“Let’s work on no sad at all,” Shane fired back, brows furrowing, “Sadness performance indicator maybe. Conservatively down twenty percent before the season ends, but our stretch goal could be—”

“Okay, Mr. Data,” Ilya cut in, heart a tiny bit warmer, “I do not think, ah… analytics are part of your recovery.”

“What about more kisses?” Shane asked, widening his eyes in the exact manner he knew made Ilya roll over completely. He threw the final dagger with a pleading, “If you love me?”

I do, Ilya thought, *in terrible and wonderful ways. In the sense that love is a constant fear that one day you will hit the ice and not stand up. In the sense that there is danger in what we do, and danger in loving each other for it all the same.*

Hockey and Shane. He had asked for this, not knowing that sharing the rink would open as many wounds as it healed.

Swallowing, he pasted on a smile, leaning down to press his mouth to Shane’s own, longer this time and waiting for the touch to fix his mood completely.

He breathed in square and hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all will never guess where I was originally planning on cutting this chapter off 😅

Speaking of chapters, you will now see that I've updated the total chapter count to 18. This includes one more current timeline chapter that gets us through the full 2017-18 season of Shane with the Bears and a time-skip future epilogue. I will post both the final chapter (standard length) and the epilogue (a bit shorter) at the same time, so there is still technically one update remaining until this fic is complete 🖤

A lot of interesting [to me!] notes today:

- The reference to Montreal fumbling a goaltender comes from the very famous Patrick Roy Mid-Game Incident. If you have time for a little watch, I love this video summary of the conflict and the subsequent trade.
- Some recent goalie discourse (iykyk) — more recent even than me writing and outlining this fic — illustrates well what I think Shane would have gone through at Montreal in those difficult seasons prior to their Cup win. There can be a lot of outsized blame on goalies when teams struggle or lose, especially in playoffs. Using my platform to call for justice for quite a few guys this 2025-26 season in particular! Here's a longer take on Ullmark of Ottawa, a clip of Swayman chewing out Boston, and a heartbreaking look at SidCros going to Silovs after elimination. Respect for the goalie love there, Mama.
- Hockey game summary stats do in fact list the winning goalie and the game-winning goal. Funnily enough, the game-winning goal is sometimes not the last goal scored, but instead the goal that puts the team up by 1. So the game-winner when it's 6-3 is actually goal 4. Very silly, goofy mood of the NHL, in my humble opinion.
- Goalie 101 on how to cover breakaways. Naturally, Shane is textbook with it.
- Slightly dated but very in-depth analysis of concussion protocols in both the NFL and NHL. In Hollanov's timeline, the new protocol would have just been introduced in the previous season, so they're working out the kinks a bit (and it's still unfortunately quite controversial in terms of effectiveness). Also some pro-athletes have been

known to attempt to intentionally score worse on the baseline test (BAD!), so they're not assessed to have a concussion when they do the comparison test with an actual game injury later. In general, don't be like Shane and please take head trauma seriously!

Chapter 17: Future

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 2018 – New York

Ilya liked the Kingfisher, had always liked it really, at least where Scott Hunter's irritating influence could be ignored.

Unlike the ear-thrumming, body-to-body luxury nightclubs that he'd favored in his early twenties, the divey queer-friendly 'sports' pub was all dark wood and peeling wallpaper and tables that had the sort of perpetual lean to them that required a stack of paper coasters under one leg to fix. The music was terrible — bizarre indie pop tracks that clashed with Ilya's Top 40 sensibilities — and the drink specials were mostly worse, half of them now themed around the Admirals and leaning heavily on the grenadine as a result. Still, it was the perfect cozy and clandestine spot, rarely frequented by the kinds of people who'd cause any fuss at the sight of two-thirds of one of New York's professional hockey teams, and a good chunk of Boston's to boot, placing bets around the air hockey and foosball tables. That and the establishment's unspoken but strict anti-discrimination policy which was always in effect, bolstered by the subtle threat that Scott Hunter, no small man himself, was surrounded by the league's biggest lines in both average height *and* weight. Any sort of open bigotry would be very unwise here.

And good for Kip for locking down that pro athlete salary, Ilya thought, feeling a little mean (and admittedly jealous too) as he watched Hunter's boyfriend openly cling to his side where he was holding court under the 'Captain's Booth' placard. Bartending had never really been Kip's calling, pouring Ilya vodka sodas so strong that the bubbles were a mere suggestion; and, according to a chatty Vaughan from earlier, he was much happier doing some art history research thing now anyway. At least Kip enjoyed hockey in general though, especially compared to the twinky blond who'd taken over most of his shifts and liked to give Ilya extra attitude. He seemed the type to think that ragebaiting straight athletes via over-the-top flirting was funny (true), but unfortunately that Ilya was also one of them (false, obviously), and chose to pour every hockey player a beer with a head so egregious it was probably a fineable offense. Despite offering what he thought was a polite, neutral greeting earlier, Ilya's first IPA of the evening had come out looking like more air than liquid. *Asshole.*

Poor Matti Jalo, the Admirals' latest defensive acquisition, had ordered next to him after and looked so visibly distraught at the sight of his lager that Ilya found himself gearing up to intervene. Of course, it had been perfect angel Shane Hollander however who'd swooped in instead. Both Ilya and Jalo had watched as Shane stubbornly camped at Twinky Blond's well until he could ask for his name, before suggesting with terrifying politeness that *Kyle* make Jalo's drink again. Ilya could've sworn he saw stars appear in the Finnish man's eyes (and a slight twinkle in Kyle's too, ugh), as a perfectly acceptable pint then appeared in front of them.

"Wow, thank you, Hollander," Jalo had said, clasping Shane on the shoulder with one massive hand before he wandered off to rejoin Hunter's booth, "You are very cool! I owe you one!"

While Shane had smiled back with total innocence, Ilya fought to keep his possessive hands to himself, seething very, very quietly at the fact that yet another handsome blond hockey giant had likely just joined the harem of Hollander admirers.

Incredible, really, how Shane *still* had no idea the effect he had on men across the league, even more so now that he had managed three more shutouts for Boston and was radiating the kind of confidence that was a siren's call for superstitious guys looking to up their game and/or their luck too. *'Your favorite player's favorite player'* all the headlines proclaimed, using the newest online catchphrase du jour, and the Bears' social media team had taken that in stride, turning 'Wallzy' into a recurring oddball character in their videos, full of equipment tours and sage advice for training and performance. Half the Bears roster alone had purchased memberships to Shane's preferred yoga studio, convinced that the focused meditation and deep stretching that Shane droned on and on about would unlock their competitive Third Eyes too. Just last week, Boston's Strength and Conditioning Coach went on record calling Hollander a saint for joining his battle against hockey boys and their tight hip flexors.

(Admittedly, Ilya was also feeling looser these days, if only because he was the lucky beneficiary of private one-on-one yoga sessions at home. Though 'class' was prone to ending early given some… wandering hands, the studio time usually extended after hours, Shane all too happy to show off his goaltending yogi bendiness in other ways too.)

Seated again, second foamy beer in hand, Ilya glanced around the bar from his usual vantage point, the angle allowing him to observe the room in full. Marlow and St-Simon were elbowing each other on one side of the foosball table in the back, Connors and Vaughan chirping loudly across from them as they spun the handles. Baby Snowman, not old enough to drink in the States, was sipping soda with two black marker X's on his hands, blushing terribly under Nosey's watchful eye as the college-aged younger sister of one of the New York WAGs chatted at him with clearly flirtatious body language. And, though Shane had been sitting with Ilya earlier, he was over on the barstools now, deep in conversation with the Admirals' longtime goaltender Eric Bennett.

Nosey and Bennett had been drafted in the same year and it was rumored they'd retire together too, though Bennett was notoriously stubborn despite his reduced playing time this season. Still, he'd had a mostly healthy, productive career and was a starter at the ripe age of forty, so it was no surprise that Shane wanted to pick his brain a bit. If the rare interview requests he granted were to be believed, Bennett was at least as strange and disciplined about hockey as Shane was, maybe to the point of being a bad influence on Shane's already strict routine. Either way, Ilya was certain Bennett would come away from the conversation as another Hollander fanboy too, if he wasn't one already. Ilya knew from experience that more than thirty seconds of those starry eyes directed your way and you were done for; he had almost a decade of proof of that now.

Leaning back in his chair and zoning out for a few minutes, he was startled when the crooked table jolted, signalling the arrival of an unexpected visitor. Grasping at his pint glass to steady it, Ilya glanced up just in time to see Scott Hunter plopping into the seat to his left. Boldly and without an invitation, of course, as was his nature.

"Good game, Rozanov," Hunter said, clinking his blood red cocktail against the edge of Ilya's glass. "Another shutout for Hollander in goal. That's gotta feel good."

Ilya sniffed, eyeing Hunter warily. He had not forgotten Shane's recounting of the man's previous antagonism, and felt even less accepting of Hunter's supposed apology than Shane had been (which was to say, not at all). Even though both he and Shane obviously respected the act of coming out and the bravery required to be the first, Scott Hunter was a trusted ally only in the sense that he knew what it meant to have a secret. He definitely wasn't a friend.

"And *I* scored twice," Ilya replied testily, "Or did you forget? I know memory can be a problem in old age."

"Always such a delight," Hunter remarked drolly, rolling his eyes, "Just thought you might like the chance to brag about your boy a bit, since you brought him along. Safe space and all."

"My boy," Ilya said, eyes cutting over to Shane at the bar, "knows how good he is. And he also knows how I feel about his hockey, and about him too." He waved a hand. "Not every couple needs to be so… in the face."

Hunter scoffed, his gaze trailing back to Kip as he laughed brightly in the booth, surrounded by Admirals players like he belonged there. "Look, you have no idea what it's like on the other side. Kip never wanted to be in the closet, you know? I wasn't going to drag him back in there with me. There's a lot of freedom in not having to hide anymore."

"I am sure," Ilya acquiesced, though his voice was tight, some of that earlier jealousy churning in his gut again, "But is it really better? For you, in the hockey world?"

At that, Hunter sagged a little, letting out a beleaguered sigh. "I mean, I won't sugarcoat things, Roz. The shit I hear out there is pretty brutal. I don't regret it, showing up as my full self, but at the same time, I feel an added sense of peace knowing that I don't have many seasons left in me." He shrugged, cocktail in hand sloshing at the rim. "And we're big names, right? You and Hollander too. Think about the guys always on the bubble, or rookies just starting out. There's a long way to go to make the league's tolerance extend to every player who might want to… make a bigger deal about their identity."

Ilya didn't miss the careful choice of wording there — tolerance over acceptance — reflecting what they both knew to be true about the current state of their sport. Scott Hunter had proven he could win a Stanley Cup, which made him valuable to the franchise and its fans *for now.* But he was getting old for a forward and the enhanced public scrutiny meant that the Admirals likely wouldn't hesitate to replace him the moment he started to falter in skill or speed. If they could nudge him into declaring his own retirement instead, the PR would be even more favorable, with less speculative risk about the 'why' too.

Ilya frowned, knowing Shane had once expressed similar worries about being outed early on in their… exploits, goaltending spots on a roster already limited as is. And he was probably right, given all that Montreal had done to him regardless. At the end of the day, the GMs were fickle. You could be the NHL's top player in your position, but if you so much as rocked the boat — coming out being more akin to a rogue wave, of course — you had better hope there wasn't another reason on the long list of excuses (from age to injury to being labeled as generally 'difficult') for them to justify your trade with instead. For goaltenders, who relied more heavily on analytics than most, a media controversy timed with a drop in save percentage would be a death sentence.

And perhaps more common and quietly insidious was the risk that your teammates would ice you out, making the day-to-day experience so uncomfortable that staying wasn't worth it, so that maybe it was better to quit hockey entirely and live a life out and free than pretend to have camaraderie with men who hated you for it. That was the failure of culture that Ilya, as captain, was working so hard to guard his team against.

"Boston is… trying," Ilya said, taking a sip of his beer, "To be better. But even today one of my players made a stupid comment about you in the locker room before our game." At Hunter's raised eyebrow, he continued, "Marlow and me, we cut it off, of course. Said it was not a joke. Actually, Marlow was very funny and, ah, *intense* about it, saying how guys could be gay on our team and as long as they play good fucking hockey, who cares?"

Ilya caught himself smiling at the memory. Marlow had gone as far as to proclaim 'Hell, we win the Cup this season, I'll kiss a man at center ice too. Worked well enough for Scott Hunter!' to which Ilya had replied with a teasing 'Pucker up, Marly, I'll be waiting!' The quip had generated enough laughs to mostly diffuse the tension. That was until Shane, already in focused game mode, had looked at the offending defenseman with a chilling expression and quietly threatened, 'If you let Hunter past you tonight, I won't forget it.' The locker room laughter had faded as quickly as it had begun, several men visibly gulping in fear when their new quirky goalie did not appear to be joking in the slightest.

Hunter snorted at Marlow's words when Ilya repeated them, though his expression quickly sobered. Straw pinched between his fingers, he idly stirred his drink, muddled cherries at the bottom swirling with the motion.

"You're a good captain, Roz," he said seriously, tone and body language shifting into the realm of informational PSA. "We can't change the culture overnight, but it's the little things that really do matter. What we allow in our locker room is a part of that."

Ilya nodded, rolling his shoulders back uncomfortably at the earnest turn this conversation had taken. "I did mean to thank you," he said slowly, avoiding eye contact, "What you did was… important. It helped us, I think… me and Shane, to see a future."

Hunter flashed a megawatt charming smile, a face that Ilya had seen him adopt in interviews countless times, though it was strange to have it directed his way.

"I'm glad to hear that," Hunter said, grin blinding and media trained voice in full force now, "And I've been meaning to ask if you might want to volunteer at one of our youth camps this summer? The two of you together as coaches would be a big draw for our paying families, and drum up a lot of donor interest to support the needs-based scholarships too."

Ilya hummed at the offer. He did like working with kids, in the brief practice appearances the Bears sometimes made for community outreach. And getting to watch Shane with tiny future goalies would be… ah… very— *fuck, control it, Ilya.* He swallowed, feeling something akin to those 'omg my ovaries!' exploding gifs his fans liked to use (Marly once having to explain that it was an English-language exaggeration and that no actual reproductive organs were being harmed in the process).

Hunter eyed his reaction, taking another sip of his drink before adding, "Another good excuse to spend more of the offseason with Hollander too. Not that you really need one these days,

obsessed as everyone is with your… bromance."

Ilya bit his lip, annoyed by the way the word seemed to sting, even when said in jest. His eyes found Shane across the room again, drawn in by the constant magnetism between them. In his head, just for him, he allowed himself to say it: *I love you. I'm yours.*

When he glanced back, Hunter was looking at him with something a little pitying in his expression, a real softness there as he said, "You know the guys here wouldn't care, right? If you wanted to—"

Ilya shook his head sharply, cutting in with a clipped, "I will ask Shane about the summer camp."

For a moment, it seemed like Hunter wanted to say something else, but he simply nodded instead and rose from the table after another beat of tense silence. Ilya winced at the feeling that those bright eyes were seeing more of his growing internal struggle than he could allow, that they might recognize from experience a very specific sort of ache. *How humiliating.*

In truth, it still shocked Ilya just how much the years spent loving Shane Hollander had changed his staunch closeted bachelor mindset, how he sometimes yearned to be an open secret in the league now that they were really together, or — in his most delusional spirals — imagined them out to the public in a fantastical, celebrated 'Kings of the Ice and the Crease' sort of way. Even if not out jointly, it could be nice to tell more people he was bisexual, that he had a 'Boyfriend, Unspecified', and stick it to the homophobes that yet another star player and Stanley Cup winning captain was the exact sort of flamboyant cocksucker they feared. He just didn't know how to do that without immediately implicating Shane too; even if the league stayed ignorant and unsuspecting of their real closeness, a not insignificant number of people online were adamant that they were hiding something *more* behind the high-profile friendship.

Maybe Hunter was right, that the guys willing to hang out in this little bubble of inclusivity would be a safe crowd, but Ilya was sure that Shane still wouldn't want to risk it. He was always telling the people that knew about them — their agents and PR teams included — that they didn't have plans to come out any time soon, and so Ilya parroted the same. And besides, Shane's career was taking off now in a way that didn't deserve the huge distraction that that sort of personal news would cause. They hadn't even made it through a full hockey season as boyfriends yet anyhow, and already Ilya was whining about the desire to what? Post Shane on his Instagram with a heart caption? Hold his hand in the South End as they used one of the rainbow crosswalks? *Ridiculous.* He was being selfish, wasn't he? Having the audacity to be *sad* when he'd gotten everything he wanted.

In the end, it was a simple equation.

Shane was happy in Boston, with the way things were. And Ilya loved him.

So he would find a way to be happy too.

“Hi,” Shane said, reaching out a hand to Eric Bennett in greeting, “I’m Shane. Hollander. I don’t think we’ve had the chance to really meet yet.”

The Admirals’ goaltender swiveled on his barstool to look at him, effortlessly handsome with his shoulder length salt and pepper waves, chiseled jaw, and deep smile lines. His expensive Burberry sweater was tightly fitted, showing off the sculpted musculature that he’d obviously worked hard to maintain despite recurrent injuries. Bennett was, simply put, very ‘daddy’ as Ilya might phrase it, Shane knowing Ilya would almost certainly tease him later for how bashful he’d been about announcing his intention to start up a conversation with the man. Sue him if sometimes a little… *experience*... on a masculine face didn’t intrigue him, even as he was mostly in it to mine for hockey wisdom from one of the NHL’s most senior goaltenders and a fellow Canadian transplant to boot.

“Eric, or Benny if you prefer the nicknames thing,” Bennett replied, interrupting Shane’s musings as he shook his hand in return, “Good game out there. You look great. Technique is really tight.”

“You too,” Shane said politely, watching Bennett flinch, “I’m serious. Not much of that was your fault, to be fair. And you’re still point nine—”

“Point nine-oh-two,” Bennett finished, “Yeah, believe me, I know.”

Shane frowned. “Is it… um, do you feel a lot more pressure to keep up at this point in your career?”

Bennett burst into laughter. “Damn, kid, you go right for the jugular, huh?” He shook his head. “I mean, yeah, of course I do. Every sports analyst has declared me washed for years now. And I’m pretty sure my coaching staff is starting to believe it too.”

“But you’re so… disciplined?”

There was a snort. “All the training in the world can’t keep your body from slowing down eventually. You want advice? Minimize stress, take your health seriously, and have something post-hockey worth waiting for. It’s over before you know it, and then you’re just a grouchy middle-aged guy with no cartilage left in his joints and a lifetime of future surgeries and PT to look forward to.”

Shane blinked, a little surprised by the gruff, honest answer.

Bennett smiled wryly, shrugging. “Eh, sorry for the rant. I’ve been… doing some thinking about my career lately. Obviously. Leo Campbell over there can tell you a lot more than I can about giving up when it’s actually sensible.”

“I’m hoping to play for as long as I can,” Shane said plainly, “But, um, you’re right about hockey not being *everything*. I’m learning a lot about that as I get older.”

Bennett looked at him thoughtfully, pausing to nod his thanks when the bartender with the bad attitude reached over the counter and used the gun to top off his club soda unprompted. Shane fought a pout when his similarly half-empty ginger ale was ignored.

“You seem happier with Boston,” Bennett said after a moment, “Lot of us old guys in the net are used to teams pissing off their tendies in one way or another, but the way Montreal fumbled you… Epic loss, really.”

“I’m grateful for the start they gave me,” Shane replied diplomatically, “And the Cup, of course. But Boston does feel different. The training suits my style a lot better. And it’s nice to have functional defense *and* offense in front of me, for once. Even if the sight of black and yellow still makes me hiss on instinct.”

Bennett laughed at that, clinking their glasses together. “Noticed you’re pretty buddy-buddy with Rozanov, huh? That happen just this season?”

Shane felt his heartbeat skip in his chest, a Thing it always did now — in both fear and quiet possessive pleasure — whenever people noticed that *he* commanded Ilya Rozanov’s attention.

“No, we… we’ve known each other for a long time,” he explained, “The whole Hollander Hex thing kind of became a joke between us. And we’ve been, uh, long distance friends for years, though we kept it… lowkey. The Boston – Montreal rivalry and all that.”

Bennett nodded. “It’s cool that you came out here with him. Not all the guys are comfortable with the fact this place is… you know. Technically a gay bar.” He shrugged, both of them glancing over to where Ilya was deep in conversation with Scott Hunter. “But Rozanov has been coming here for ages, after most Admirals and Scouts games. Always seemed perfectly chill with it.”

Bennett spun back on his stool, eyeing Shane with a pointed arch of his brow. “Funny. For a guy who’s such an alleged womanizer to be such a good ally at the same time.”

Shane bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, trying to fight his scowl. “Not everything you hear about him is true. And he’s grown up a lot since his early seasons.”

Bennett nodded, taking a sip of his soda and not seeming particularly concerned about Ilya’s virtue one way or another.

“And you’re here too, aren’t you?” Shane pushed, embarrassed by the way Bennett’s mild remarks were making him prickle on his boyfriend’s behalf. People routinely had much worse to say about a polarizing player like Ilya Rozanov; hell, there were plenty of sound bites from Shane himself over the years deriding his irritating rival. Still, Ilya was *his* now, even if no one here (except Scott Hunter’s nosy ass) could know that.

Shane scoffed. Falling in love with a bad boy would have you defending that asshole for the rest of your life apparently.

“I’ve always come out with the team,” Bennett said easily, twisting at the wedding ring on his finger, “Don’t have a problem with it. You play long enough, you see all sorts.”

Shane relaxed minutely at the casual acceptance, curiosity blooming instead. “Did Hunter tell your team before he…?”

Bennett nodded. “Yeah, a few of us that he was closest to. Then Coach Murdock, who took it well enough. We haven’t had a lot of Black coaches in the NHL, you know, so I think he

understood better than most how the league treats any deviation from the norm." He shrugged, gesturing toward Shane. "Though I don't have to tell you that, obviously."

Shane jumped in his seat, letting out a panicked huff of a laugh to hide the reaction as he realized Bennett was referring to him being Asian and not actually implying anything layered. Sometimes he worked so hard to be under the radar, to fight to make his hockey stand out and nothing else, that he forgot just how much 'otherness' he truly carried with him. How different would it feel to wear it all with pride, instead of shrinking down to fit? Not white and not straight either. The NHL's worst nightmare.

"And the team is… okay with it now?" Shane ventured, fearful with just how much the answer meant to him.

Bennett sighed. "More of a détente than true acceptance, to be frank. Most guys don't care as long as the hockey is hockey-ing, but still I think they would rather Scott have kept it quiet until retirement. A lot of those 'it should stay in the bedroom' kind of views."

Shane rolled his bottom lip between his teeth, pondering just how far he could probe without revealing too much. "Do you think it's worth it? Coming out while still actively playing?" At the way Bennett's eyebrows shot up, Shane hurried to clarify, "I just ask because you're his close friend. I assume he went through more than what we saw publicly. His speech at the NHL Awards was so confident but… rehearsed, you know?"

Bennett visibly relaxed a touch. "Kip makes Scott really happy," he said carefully, something a little odd in his tone, though it faded as he continued, "To be honest, I thought coming out for another person was kind of foolish. Like, who knows if love is ever a sure thing? I've been with my wife for twenty years and I still—" He shook his head sharply. "Anyway. Scott was in a really bad place when things with Kip were on the rocks. Played like shit because of it too, angry and erratic as hell. Gave your boy Rozanov quite the shiner."

Shane winced, both at the perfectly neutral phrasing of 'your boy' *and* at the recollection of Ilya's fading bruise after he'd goaded Hunter into violence last season. Shane had pressed a kiss to Ilya's orbital bone the next time he saw him and whispered, 'You deserved it, didn't you?' watching as Ilya had simply grinned back, proud as ever for his on-ice shithead antics. Hockey was funny like that, the two men involved now sitting together at a nearby table and chatting sort of amicably (though Ilya's lips were pursed in the lemon sour way of his that meant he was working hard to behave).

"Scott wanted to be able to go out in the city with Kip," Bennett continued, frowning, "Do normal couple stuff, you know? The stress of hiding really got to him. He was verging on paranoia honestly. For as much grief as he gets on the ice now for being gay, he's still a lot happier with a boyfriend he can be openly proud of. Pros outweigh the cons, I guess." Bennett quirked a smile. "I'm sure he'd tell you as much, and more. He won't shut up about Kip and, like, his 'journey to finding his truth' once you get him started."

Shane wrinkled his nose. "I'll take your word for it."

"You, uh, asking for any particular reason?" Bennett ventured. It was a coincidence, probably, how his mild gaze seemed to flick to Shane and then Ilya and back.

Shane swallowed. *Yes.* “No. Just… curious.”

Bennett looked almost disappointed by the answer. “Right, well. I’m glad we can have this type of conversation anyway. A lot of my teammates poke fun at me for being too deep and cerebral for a hockey player. Must be a goalie thing.” He smiled. “You’re a decent sort, Hollander.”

“You too, Bennett,” Shane replied, meaning it, “I’ve been a Canadian fanboy of yours for a long time. I’m honestly geeked to talk to you as like… a peer.”

Bennett’s smile widened and he tucked a lock of hair behind his ear almost shyly. “More than a peer, I’d say. You’ve got one more Vezina than I do and a save percentage that makes the rest of us look like amateurs. I should probably be the one asking *you* for advice.”

Shane shook his head, eager to avoid the compliment battle that would only embarrass him further. “Okay, but actually, I noticed you’re in the Bauer KONETKs now,” he said, forcing the subject change, “You really like those?”

Bennett looked just as thrilled to shift back to the hockey stuff, eyes brightening. “Yeah, they were a big adjustment, but the ankle support is killer. After the fit and bake, they felt great even on the first few skates.”

They launched into a full discussion after that, Shane taking copious mental notes on things he might want to try with the Bears’ goaltending coach and equipment managers in the off-season. Though some guys were cagey about their preferences and routine, Bennett was happy to share, and Shane absorbed each training tidbit like an eager sponge. It was good to talk to fellow goalies in general, unique as their position was, and even better to connect with one he shared some strategic approaches with; Mikhail Popov, for example, as much as he was Shane’s close friend, was constantly making perilous journeys on the ice that worked for him and his 6’7” frame but which gave Shane (and Crawfish fans) actual nightmares.

With Bennett, conversation on goaltending philosophy flowed easily and Shane completely lost track of time, startling when a familiar hand clasped his shoulder.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Ilya said, nodding at Shane’s companion in stiff greeting, “but it is getting late. Thought I might call a car soon.”

“Ah, yeah,” Shane agreed, with some regret. “We should rest. Early flight,” he added for Bennett’s benefit, the explanation unnecessary and a little untrue, given that Shane would more than likely be back in Ilya’s hotel room soon performing the opposite of a good night’s sleep. While they used to get off on competition against one another, they had found that winning games *together* left them just as riled up and desperate for it, if not more.

It was habitual then, the way that Ilya’s hand slid down to briefly grasp at Shane’s waist as he stood, a soft ‘Are you ready, my love?’ in Russian leaving his lips. Shane nodded in response, freezing as he realized that his growing Russian fluency was probably the most incriminating aspect of their relationship, the touches alone being easier to excuse. Sure enough, Bennett was regarding him with piqued interest from where he stood, slipping a designer peacoat over his sweater. Shane’s eyes went wide, caught, as Ilya’s hand retreated, the after-effects of the touch burned into his skin like a hot poker.

“T'inquiète,” Bennett quickly murmured, surprising Shane with his French.

He didn't add anything more, but the message was clear. Whatever he might have pieced together, he wouldn't talk.

Seeing that the bar had all but emptied out, Shane swallowed, not sure what reckless demon possessed him to do what he did next. Feeling very, *very* brave, he carefully reached down to slip a hand into Ilya's own. He felt Ilya tense, fingers tightening almost to the point of pain before his grip relaxed.

"C'mon," Shane prompted, tugging at Ilya who remained frozen in place, staring back at him with big, shiny eyes.

Though Bennett was no longer paying any mind, back to them as he waited at Kyle's well to close out, Shane felt dangerously exposed regardless. The walk from his previous barstool perch to the front door couldn't have been more than ten or fifteen steps, but to Shane, heart pounding, it lasted a lifetime.

They both let go simultaneously as they crossed the threshold, stepping out onto the sidewalk where Greenwich Village still hummed with late night energy.

"Sorry," Shane blurted, "That was stupid. I don't know why I—"

His words were cut off sharply when Ilya, always bolder between them, wrapped him into a crushing embrace. The hug was brief enough to read as friendly, but long enough for Ilya to whisper 'thank you, I love you' in his ear. Shane shivered.

Ilya released him, taking a step back. His expression was one that Shane had seen sparingly few times; he looked… devastated. For a moment, Shane was back in Ilya's new Boston home, telling him like an idiot that he couldn't do *this* anymore, while Ilya stared up at him from the couch in the same broken way. Fuck, he'd never wanted to see that face on the man he loved again.

"Ilyusha," Shane prompted gently, resisting the urge to reach out and take his chin in hand, "are you alright?"

A beat of silence and then—

"Better now," Ilya replied, though he didn't quite meet Shane's eyes.

As their Uber pulled up to the curb, both of them sliding into the backseat, Shane was left to wonder. Something was wrong, *off* between them. He could feel it, patterns all out of whack like bowing to a single goal post. But identifying specific emotions had always been a struggle of his and Shane didn't want to push Ilya too hard, or worse, corner him, knowing he'd once mentioned that his sadness, if overwhelming, could withdraw him into isolation. If Shane poked and prodded at bruises he did not understand, he might make Ilya disappear, a detachment he feared from a personal standpoint and an irresponsible consequence to force their team, *Ilya's* team, to bear as the end of season rapidly approached.

And besides, what if he was wrong?

It wasn't like they were fighting nor did they seem tired of one another, even nearing the end of what the internet had told Shane was the 'honeymoon phase' of a new relationship. They spent

nights at each other's places and unofficially shared countless hotel rooms, dominated the ice during games and practices with adrenaline-fueled smiles, and doted on one another with a gentle affection that Shane had never dared to dream of from a guy he used to fuck two or three times a year, with more anger and rabid lust to it than anything else. Ilya Rozanov was his boyfriend, unbelievable as that still sounded, and they were executing their plan to balance hockey and their romantic partnership seamlessly.

Weren't they?

The silence stretched between them, as it had out in front of the Kingfisher, and maybe even since Shane's concussion, if he thought hard enough about pinpointing the moment things had shifted. It was strange, this bittersweet feeling of disconnection, against the backdrop of such a beautiful night. The bright lights of Manhattan filtered through the car's windows, reflected in the first falling snowflakes of an oncoming storm. A perfect city soundtrack cocooned them: soft music from the radio, honks and rumbles from the bustling after-midnight traffic, and the rhythmic beat of the windshield wipers. Ilya's side profile, half-veiled in shadow, was as gorgeous and Romanesque as ever, dirty blond curls peeking out from under his Boston Bears beanie. Dressed like this, dark hat and dark jacket cloaking his figure, he reminded Shane of the boy he'd met, god, nearly ten years ago now.

They had been painfully young then, were still young really, not knowing they'd one day be faced with the bizarre, unprecedented reality of being in love in a way that felt as easy as breathing and yet deeply complicated by factors outside of their control. *Have something post-hockey worth waiting for,* Eric Bennett had cautioned, but Shane hadn't wanted to wait, greedy as sin for the sport he loved and the man he loved with it. And he had both, didn't he, for now *and* for after? It was madness then to still feel the sting of jealousy over stupid Scott Hunter, so loud about being gay and partnered, knowing that their circumstances couldn't be more different.

"I'm happy," Shane murmured softly in Russian, working hard to roll the 'р' on his tongue, as if pronouncing it perfectly would make it more true. Unshakeable.

Ilya glanced over at him, smile small, no teeth.

"Good," he said, and then in English, "That makes me happy too."

Shane exhaled, not missing the semantic nuance.

They hadn't said the same thing at all.

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April 2018 – Los Angeles

In hindsight, Shane should have known things with Ilya were a cliff's edge away from disaster.

The signs were all there and he hadn't… ignored them exactly, so much as he'd been trapped in a doom spiral of 'something is wrong but *what*?' that had paralyzed him into weeks going on months of inaction.

It started in the bedroom. Though their sex life was as healthy and routine as ever, they'd veered into harsher kinks as of late, both of them perhaps in search of a pleasure mindless enough to avoid the emotional strain that stretched between them. It was a thread of tension so obvious and yet so indecipherable in meaning that Shane had taken the coward's way out rather than tug at it further, proclaiming as often as he could that he loved Ilya, that Ilya made him so happy, and that he looked forward to a real future together one day. But the reassurance combined with their physical intimacy wasn't working, that much was evident, with the way his boyfriend smiled and smiled without letting the light reach his eyes.

As a result, Shane had been online almost constantly these last few weeks, his browsing history pitiful as he'd combed through endless relationship advice columns and Reddit threads searching for answers. Irritatingly, they all seemed to suggest that *more* communication was the solution. Which might be true, if not for the fact that Ilya grumbled a dismissive 'I'm fine' or 'just tired' any time Shane nudged at a deeper conversation about their current mental states. Confusingly, the same threads often said you should believe your partner and listen at face value, not reading too much into the possible hidden meanings behind their words. So maybe Ilya *was* just tired, captaining them through a nonstop stretch of games right into the post-season. Worse, maybe Shane's worry was making him *more* tired, unable to fully relax from his hovering anxious energy whenever they were together.

In a moment of true weakness, Shane had even asked his mom for advice too, rolling his eyes when she'd unhelpfully noted that no couple was immune to a rough patch here and there while also pointing out that Boston were the undisputed division leaders and just a handful of games away from clenching their playoff berth. The implication that nothing could really be that serious if the hockey wasn't affected had left him confused and a little angry. Shane was certain that Ilya was hurt and hiding it in some way, but he was also leading the NHL in points this season. Was Shane really better off just ignoring his shaky gut instinct all the way to a Stanley Cup?

In the end, his hesitation wouldn't matter, everything coming to a head in sunny Los Angeles, when the video feed showed Hollywood sweetheart Rose Landry on the Monarchs' jumbotron during warmups, beaming from her suite in a new yellow HOLLANDER 42 jersey.

Shane looked up from the ice and waved his stick happily, considering it a thoughtful surprise, and smiled even bigger when the LA crowd politely booed at her disloyalty. She pouted adorably and shouted what looked like an enthusiastic 'Go Wallzy!' anyway, the actual Boston 'Claws Out!' cheer probably too much to stomach as a born and raised Detroit fan. Shane really was looking forward to connecting with her again, with Rose between projects and Boston with an extended break in LA, no use flying cross-country and back with three days until their next road game in Seattle.

As the game progressed, it became clear that Ilya did not share the sentiment, if his perpetual scowl, penalty-heavy play, and frankly ugly passing game had anything to do with it. Rose had always been a… touchy subject between them, and while Shane did not regret befriending her and the much-needed time she'd afforded him to breathe and settle into his definitive sexuality,

he knew that the fake relationship had hurt Ilya deeply regardless. A feeling he obviously had not forgotten, puck sloppy and unfocused in a way that was unlike him.

The 1-0 win in OT was an embarrassing result, given the Monarchs were sixth in the Pacific and on a prior five-game losing streak. With their captain's energy out of whack, Boston had held back Los Angeles by the defensive skin of their teeth. Shane left the ice so hot he was surprised he hadn't melted his crease down to the arena's concrete floor. Thirty-four fucking saves. Not a moment to breathe between them.

The locker room was frigid, LeClaire saying nothing more than 'don't let it happen again' before leaving the players to marinate in the discomfort of his disappointment. The lack of a follow up speech from Ilya entirely was the final death knell for team morale, not even Marlow — who'd scored the game winner — able to rescue it. Feeling petulant, Shane sat next to a nervous-looking Snowman on the shuttle ride to the hotel, watching Ilya tuck himself into the single seat at the very front without a word.

Back in his room, Shane's phone continued to light up with friendly texts from Rose, including an invitation to go out clubbing that evening, though Shane eventually typed back suggesting they meet for dinner the following day instead. He hit send on the message just as the hotel elevator dinged on arrival, his feet taking him directly to Ilya's door where he applied a forceful knock.

"Shane, I am tired tonight," Ilya said as he opened it, admittedly looking pretty damn awful, dark bags prominent under his eyes. His t-shirt was stretched at the neckline and badly wrinkled, and there was an obvious orange stain — hot sauce, probably — on the left thigh of his sweat shorts.

"You're always tired," Shane replied a little meanly, "We're going to talk about it."

With a sigh of resignation, Ilya allowed him into the suite, the team's randomized reservation block affording him a room with two queen beds instead of a single king. Kicking his shoes off, Shane walked over and sat down on one, watching as Ilya arranged himself to face him on the other. Sure enough, over his shoulder, Shane spotted a Wingstop bag on the table by the window. One of Ilya's indulgent comfort foods, and an even worse sign of where his head was at tonight.

"I thought you would be out with Rose by now," Ilya said after a moment. There was palpable venom in it, though he shrugged in a poor attempt at nonchalance. "She was *so* excited to see you."

Shane bit back a sharper reply, fighting for patience. "No, though she did invite me. I'll see her later. You're more important."

"Am I?" Ilya snapped.

Shane's hands found the tufted fabric of the comforter, gripping tightly. "Of course you are. And I would have come to your room regardless, if you'd called. You know that." He shrugged pitifully. "But I know that something is… upsetting you. And that it didn't start with Rose wearing my jersey tonight."

"There will be headlines," Ilya said, the response seemingly a non sequitur. He gestured to his phone charging on the nightstand. "It is already on social media. Rumors you are back together."

Shane winced, wondering if Rose's on-and-off again girlfriend might be upset at the fake news spreading. She knew the truth of the previous PR relationship at least, and had benefited back then from the cover that 'Hollandry' provided for her own CWHL career. Though they'd yet to meet in person, surely she knew that Rose and Shane were friends from the start and would never be more than that. A fact that Ilya knew as well, though he sometimes needed... reminding.

"That's… good though, isn't it?" Shane hedged, in a similar vein, "Takes even more pressure off of us. No one will suspect a relationship when there's a rumored girlfriend back in the picture."

Ilya broke eye contact, his lower jaw visibly tensed. "Maybe I want them to suspect."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Maybe I am bitter, jealous that it is so easy for everyone to love you, to do it out loud when I —" Ilya sniffed, voice catching on the words as his fingers left stark imprints on his exposed thighs, "—when I cannot."

The pieces began to slide into place, Shane's heart shattering with the realization that hiding had not come without consequence, for either of them. 'Thank you,' Ilya had whispered once, arms wrapped around him after Shane had spent all of twenty seconds at the Kingfisher holding his hand, agonizing over the risk for days after. *Fuck.* Ilya had to know it was killing him too.

"Sweetheart," Shane said, achingly soft, "Look at me."

Ilya's bottom lip trembled, his eyes wide and wet as they met Shane's own.

"I think I understand," Shane continued, shaking his head, "No, I know I do. We thought this would be easier, didn't we? Being closer together, sharing a team and a city."

Ilya scrubbed at his face, mouth twisting. "It should be enough."

"It's okay that it isn't."

The response was visceral. "No, it's not!" Ilya's eyes were blazing, chest heaving a bit with the force of his outburst. "It is selfish of me. To ask for more when you are not ready, when it would harm your career. And it is stupid that I am *still* sad. That having you like this did not fix me. I —" His voice cracked and dropped to a whisper, horribly dejected as he murmured, "I do not deserve you."

Shane gaped at him, the sudden head rush of blood as he leapt to his feet making him momentarily dizzy. In an instant, he crossed the space between the beds and sat down parallel at Ilya's side, their knees knocking together.

"Unfortunately, you're stuck with me," Shane argued, wrapping his arms around Ilya and frowning as he felt just how hard he was shaking, "Whether you think you deserve me or not."

At Ilya's sharp, teary inhale, Shane continued, "I need you to know that I'm only hesitant about coming out right now because I worry the negative response won't be worth it. You've seen how Scott Hunter is treated, how the league says it supports him even as they actively go against his inclusion efforts, how he's basically a pariah out on the ice." He reached up to touch Ilya's

cheek, turning his face so that they locked eyes again. “It is *not* because I’m ashamed of who I am. And it is *especially* not because I have any doubt about my love for you. Fuck, Ilyusha. I want to tell the whole world you’re my boyfriend. It’s fucking agony to hold that in.”

Twin tears slid down those golden cheeks, Ilya’s expression a conflicting blend of heartbroken and hopeful. “I hate this secret,” he said, still barely a whisper, “I hate that sharing it would hurt you more than me.”

Shane frowned, the reality infinitely more complex than that simple observation could convey.

“Look, it’s true that hockey has always been harder for me than most. I’m not a star forward, nor the face of a franchise, and I wouldn’t have the nice white boy look they’d prefer even if I was. I’ve fought for this career, yeah, but I did so knowing damn well that I invested in a sport that didn’t like me very much.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair and tugging at the roots a little. “The biases suck and they’re not fair. But being gay is kind of the least of my problems, not like it would be for you back home. I’d send a text blast to every guy in the NHL tomorrow if I didn’t think they’d start to wonder about you too.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, his hands running a wandering path along Shane’s limbs, as if assuring that he was solidly real. “I have thought about other versions of this,” he said, “If I could come out as bisexual to the public to make change, so that Hunter is not the only one. Mention that I have a boyfriend maybe, and that it is private between us. Yes, Russia is a problem, but I think as a big star I am… safer in the league than most. Still I worry the same, that they will think of you first. Put more pieces together.”

Shane let out a huff of frustration. “Yeah, maybe, and there’s enough speculation about us online already that I can see every stupid hockey podcast jumping on the news. They’d love an excuse to further scrutinize my Boston move.” He groaned. “Fuck, it really is so much harder both being professional athletes. Why couldn’t one of us have worked as like… a firefighter or a vet or something?”

Ilya snorted, the tiniest hint of a smile appearing on his lips. “Are you just listing specific fantasies to me now, Dr. Hollander? You want me to come into your clinic with the dogs I rescue?”

Shane stuck out his tongue. “No, shut up. Don’t deflect with sexy humor,” he warned, “I’m onto your tricks.” He poked at Ilya’s sternum. “Tell me something true and real about how you feel right now. I’m serious.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Fine, yes, I… I admit that I, ah, *underestimated* how it would feel to hide our relationship. And that it has made me sad. But I do not have an easy solution. You are right that we are not the same as Scott and Kip, or Mikhail and his Jake. People know we are friends, that we are close… if one of us came out, we could not act the way we do now. If they think we are straight, as default, they do not look deeper.” He shook his head. “I hate this, but it protects us.”

Shane worried his bottom lip between his teeth again, an action that had become so commonplace over the last month that the skin felt perpetually raw there. “Would it help? If we had a date to look forward to?”

Ilya furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… if we set a real timeline, instead of thinking about a vague future for after we retire. Like, what if next season we tell the team? Let our relationship exist as a league-wide rumor even, if it leaks a bit, which let’s be real, it definitely would. And maybe, if we really see attitudes in the NHL changing, or else… want to, um, make this more obviously permanent between us—” he swallowed, the prospect of marriage a terrifyingly real possibility, on his end at least, “then we… get a little less careful, and let everyone else sort of… figure it out? If they choose to see it for what it really is.”

Shane had barely finished his half-coherent ramble when Ilya’s lips found his own, warm hands pressed to his cheeks as he melted into the contact. The kiss was different, healing in its tenderness, and a stark contrast to the angry, biting heat of their recent makeouts.

“Next season?” Ilya asked once they broke apart, a sort of wonder in his voice, “You would tell the Bears?”

Shane shrugged, fighting a smile. “I mean, Marly knows right? That’s one down already. And I have it on good authority that my captain would be cool with it too.”

Ilya kissed him again in lieu of an answer, a soft peck that deepened until they were both gasping with it. Shane resisted the urge to chastise him for the distraction, sensing that the closeness was helping this time and not being used as more avoidance of the hard stuff.

“When I was talking to Eric Bennett,” Shane added, “he mentioned that Hunter told their coaching staff first. I don’t know if it ever made it to the GM but… we could have our agents give Boston management some kind of heads up, about us individually. Probably better they know before the risk of our relationship being outed increases. Maybe that would… make them feel a little kinder about it.”

Ilya nodded. “It is complicated. So much is political. But we should wait until you have your trade clause in place. Maybe have our people all talk and plan for what is next.”

“This is… serious for you, right?” Shane asked quietly, taking Ilya’s hands in his own. When Ilya nodded again decisively, he added, “Good. Because it’s serious for me too, a forever thing, and even then I’m terrified that we’ll lose this somehow. That things won’t work out.” He quirked a smile. “Even if we fucked around and hurt each other for years and still managed to make it here in the end.”

“I have this fear also,” Ilya admitted, “and maybe it is wrong to think of love as something that will leave you, but… I have experience.”

“Your mother.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, fingers finding the crucifix at his throat as was habit, “And when you were hurt in December. It made me think the worst.”

Shane frowned. “You’ve… mentioned being sad a lot. Is it grief still? Or…?”

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, Shane worried then that he’d pushed too hard, fucked up what had been a shockingly productive conversation between them, stilted as they were with their

emotions.

“Or,” Ilya affirmed, looking down as he started to explain in quick, chopped fragments, “I have depression. Or did. Probably still, yes. When I was young, after my mother… the school had me see some kind of therapist or doctor, I do not remember. They gave me a diagnosis but my father did not agree. He did not think actual treatment was needed.” Ilya shrugged. “To him, sadness was simply… weakness. And if I was strong, I would hide emotion. Like a real man.”

Shane let out a heartbroken noise. “Ilya, you were a child. That’s—”

Ilya shrugged again, still refusing eye contact. “So yes, sometimes I am sad. I can feel it creep in, though there is not always a clear reason. Everything becomes… empty of color. Not interesting. Tiring. And that makes me feel selfish, like I said. To have all I want, more than most people, and feel this way. To not be able to control it.”

Shane squeezed where their opposite hands were still connected, using his free hand to rub at Ilya’s shoulder in comfort. “Have you thought about talking to someone professional again? Or maybe… medication?”

Ilya glanced up at him, something surprised and curious in his eyes. “It does not make you think less of me? That I might need that?”

“The hell? No. Fuck what your father said,” Shane blurted, impassioned with it. He knew from personal experience at the Yuna Hollander School of Tough-It-Out, just how damaging the expectation of stoicism and poise could be, the pressure enough to drive a young star forward into the net, for example.

“It doesn’t make you weak, taking advantage of the resources that are out there. And…” Shane hesitated. “I don’t know, I’ve been thinking about seeing someone for an evaluation too. I’ve been doing some reading, watching a lot of videos, and I think it might be worth learning some things about myself, even this late. I’ve always kind of felt like I was bad at being a human, but maybe there’s a reason why.”

Ilya looked stricken at that, pawing at him. “Promise me you will not let them change you. You are allowed to be strange and interesting and very obsessed with hockey numbers and sometimes saying words that others would not. I love you for this. You are the best, most *human* human I know.”

Shane smiled, feeling something almost giggle-like catch in his throat at the sweet words. God, it made him giddy still, the way that Ilya Rozanov genuinely liked so much of what made him tick. The way he did not always understand Shane but never shamed him for that, never asked him to change. And how protective he felt over Shane’s freedom to exist as his whole self. How he could possibly think he wasn’t deserving of Shane’s adoration for that alone was maddening.

“No, I… it wouldn’t be to like… treat a sickness,” Shane explained, “But I think maybe a sports-focused psychologist might help me strategize how to cope better, with how some of my routines and *preferences* make me get so anxious I shut down, and how others kind of disrupt my life at large. Sometimes it helps to have someone tell you what’s a reasonable thought or behavior and what’s kind of… harmful, actually.”

“I think I have been doing this harm,” Ilya replied, looking thoughtful, “Pulling away. Hiding that I was hurt. I did not want to… be a burden, when things are going so well for you. But that made my problems yours anyway.”

Shane shook his head. “I don’t want a dynamic where both of us have to always be happy for it to be worth it. If anything, our relationship should be the safest place we have, to be vulnerable and hurt and scared about things. It is not a burden to me to care for you, Ilya. You know that, right? It’s kind of the greatest privilege of my life.”

Ilya winced, his eyes looking suspiciously moist again. “Ah, well, I know this now.”

“We are good for each other,” Shane said definitively, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s temple and then one to each cheek, “And we have things to learn, like, I’m not used to just… being myself, so I might try to perform the role of Boyfriend and follow the script so strictly that it actually makes things worse. And you aren’t used to being cared for, maybe? Or expressing emotions without being judged for them?”

Ilya nodded slowly. “Yes, it is hard to be… open. My instinct is to keep all bad thoughts away from us. In my mind, they will make you love me less.”

“Nothing ever could,” Shane assured him, clarifying, “And you really don’t have to tell me *everything*. I know it’s not that simple. But if you start to feel the colors fading, could you try to give me a heads up? I’ll still worry, but I’ll obsess a lot less if I anticipate more challenges ahead.” Choking on the words, he whispered, “You scared me a little, these last few months.”

“I will try,” Ilya agreed, nuzzling his head into Shane’s shoulder as he murmured, “And I am sorry. For making you worry. It is different when we have so much time together now, instead of just a few days in a year. I forget how much you can see of me.”

Shane leaned down to kiss the top of his head, before pulling Ilya into him, the bigger man swinging a leg over and settling atop his thighs with a pleased little hum. He smiled, knowing he was getting better and better at sensing when Ilya wanted to feel small for a change.

“I don’t want to go back to how things were. I meant it when I said I was happy in Boston. With you.”

“No, you are right,” Ilya murmured, Shane’s hands grasping at his waist as he rocked in his lap, “This is better.”

For a long moment, they simply held one another, breathing in deeply for the first time in months without fear of the bubble bursting. The arousal was set to a low simmer, building slowly. What a luxury it was after all these years, not to rush. To have time.

“You are mine,” Shane said, Ilya’s annoyingly perfect ass now cradled in his hands, grinding down slowly. “Other people can wear my jersey, they can jokingly flirt, and the public might notice, but it will never mean anything if it’s not you. I know it doesn’t change our situation long term to remind you of the fact. But it’s true.”

“I love you,” Ilya replied, letting out soft little moans now as he shifted in Shane’s lap, though neither moved to speed things up.

“This summer,” Shane said, “After playoffs. Let’s work on some of these things we talked about, hmm? Mental health and future plans. All of it.”

“We have two weeks of Hunter’s camp too.”

Shane nodded, thrilled about the opportunity to coach kids in goal, knowing the difference that a single adult extending him patience in the sport had made for him.

“Will you go back to the cottage too?” Ilya asked, face a little flushed, “See your parents?”

“Yes, maybe early August,” Shane said, “And you’ll come with me, obviously.”

Ilya looked at him with such delighted surprise that Shane realized maybe it hadn’t been that obvious after all. “But what if people start to ask more questions? With me in Ottawa again?”

Shane, fingers finding their way past Ilya’s waistband, felt the same surge of bravery (and mild insanity, probably) he’d had in New York. They could make every contingency plan in the world, but at some point, people would know. Best case scenario: it happened on *their* terms. And sooner rather than later, before the pressure of keeping half his world compressed under his left-side ribs could tear them apart.

“People might talk, more than they already do,” he acknowledged, ducking his head to lick a stripe up Ilya’s neck, mouth ending near his ear to whisper, “I think we let them.”

In the end, the sex that night was as close to ‘making love’ as Shane would allow, always a little squicked out by the cheesy term. They took turns blowing each other, Ilya in just the right mood to let Shane slip a single finger in, the slightest brush against his prostate making him come so hard he shed a few tears with it. Shane made a vow to gently tease him for crying later, though once Ilya pounced in return, he found himself very quickly muted and cock-dumb, laid back on the sheets with every conscious thought punched out of him in tortuously long, deep strokes. It was beyond embarrassing, the thought of anyone seeing the two of them fucking slow and tender in missionary position, coming almost simultaneously with whispered ‘I love you’s’ and endearments in English and Russian both. Shane had begged Ilya for some truly freaky things over the course of a decade and yet he’d rather any of *that* leak in a hypothetical sex tape than whatever worshipful, teary-eyed, soul-bonding intimate monstrosity had transpired in this hotel room.

Cleaned up and cuddled together, Shane was annoyed and endeared in turn as Ilya spent several minutes extolling the virtues of makeup sex.

“You’re disgusting,” Shane said, feeling disgusted with himself instead at the way it came out sounding just as much like ‘I love you’ as anything else.

“Some of the guys are going to Disney tomorrow with the extra day,” Ilya remarked offhandedly, ignoring Shane’s heart-eyed insults, “Flew their families in. I have never been but it seems… fun.”

It was as close to wistful as Shane had ever heard him. He smiled, picturing Ilya in a pair of mouse ears, strolling through the cartoonish landscape and consuming enough calories in themed snacks to send their team nutritionist into a doom spiral. “Did you… want to go?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, rolling over until he could lay his head on Shane’s chest, “We could walk around, go on rides together, get drinks… Would not be so strange to be seen there, as tourists.”

Shane carded a hand through those soft curls, smiling growing. “Ilya Rozanov, are you asking me on a date to Disneyland?”

Ilya tilted his chin up and then back down. A single shy nod.

“I love you,” Shane said, never tired of saying it, no matter how much he might pretend to grumble, “Yeah, let’s go.”

- 🥅 -

Shane: NHL’s bad boy btw

[Ilya Rozanov, wearing a Lightning McQueen ear headband and holding a churro the length of his forearm, smiling at the camera with a lovestruck toothy grin]

Rose: I see your adorable boyfriend and I raise you …

[Instagram post from @roselandryofficial with Rose and a woman tagged as @chelsearose.thunder romantically embracing on the beach at sunset, captioned “what can I say? love myself a hockey player 😍😉”]

Rose: Thought I’d clear some things up. You’re welcome 😘

Shane: Rose. The caption??

Rose: God forbid a girl get a little cheeky with her own rumors 🍑🏒

Rose: Should I change it to one of the fuck/puck puns I workshopped first?

Shane: Never mind! Support women!

Rose: That’s what I thought 💗

- 🥅 -

Sveta: This is my wallpaper now. Incredible.

[Ilya, still wearing a Lightning McQueen ear headband, collapsed and dead asleep post sugar coma on top of the hotel bed’s white duvet, mouth hanging comically wide open and a trail of drool running out one side]

Ilya: delete

Sveta: No 🫶

Ilya: you are an accomplice to my boyfriend's murder

Sveta: I'm prepared to testify that I always liked Shane more than I liked you

Sveta: But my father will ensure I go free anyway

Ilya: 😦

Sveta: Now it's perfect ❤️

[same sleepy photo but sprinkled with 🩷💙💜 and 🎀 everywhere, a glittery filter applied, and the word 'BABYGIRL' in cursive across the top]

Ilya: do not send this back to him. i beg

Sveta: 😈

- 🥅 -

May 2018 – Boston

Yuna Hollander: Play your game tonight, Ilya. You've got a good head on your shoulders.

David Hollander: What she's trying to say is "good luck in round 2, we love you, make us and Shane proud"

David Hollander: I watched her type and retype "Go Bears!" before backspacing so many times.

Yuna Hollander: 📣🐻

Yuna Hollander: There.

Ilya: 🖤💛

David Hollander: Go Bears, son 💛🖤

- 🥅 -

June 2018 – Boston

One careless turnover was going to cost them everything.

Ilya felt sick, watching horrified as the breakdown in their defense allowed the Scouts' top-scoring center to slip through, a wide open path of ice to the goal awaiting him. The puck sailed past Nosey's right shoulder, ending Game 7 of the Eastern Conference final in overtime and Leo Campbell's career along with it.

It was over.

The Brooklyn Scouts would battle the Colorado Blizzard for the Stanley Cup. And the exhausted Boston Bears would lick their wounds for another year and head back home.

Ilya was the first to reach Nosey as the Scouts celebrated all around him, pressing his visor to the goaltender's mask and whispering an endless stream of thanks. The tears in Nosey's eyes had Ilya's welling up too. Twenty-one seasons in the NHL, seventeen of them with Boston. That this was really the end was unfathomable.

Shooed away as Nosey embraced more of the Bears' roster, Ilya skated back to the boards, immediately finding Shane and wrapping his padded body up in a brief, awkward embrace, uncaring of what it might look like to the cameras and fans all around them.

"I did the right thing, didn't I?" Shane asked quietly, looking just as heartbroken by the result as the guys who'd been out on the ice, "Ceding this round to him?"

"Yes," Ilya told him, believing it.

Shane, at peak energy and fitness, had carried the team through the bulk of playoffs, Boston at the A1 position easily sweeping their first round opponents 4-0, followed by a mostly straightforward 4-1 in the second round. When it became obvious that Brooklyn might be their last stop, tied up 2-2 in the series with not a single game ending in regulation, Shane had gently pushed LeClaire to start Nosey for the remaining games, no matter what happened. It was an honorable decision, letting Leo Campbell retire in the crease as he deserved, instead of watching his younger, fitter replacement decide the end for him.

And Nosey had held his fucking own anyhow, through 3-3 in the series and into Game 7, with the beautiful, bittersweet opportunity to bleed his heart out onto Boston ice one last time. He skated to the center red line, saluting the home crowd as the fans roared their approval, just as many attendees in Brooklyn jerseys clapping too. They all knew they were losing one of the greats tonight.

"Shane, this is not your fault," Ilya said under the cover of the noise, watching fat tears roll down Shane's cheeks. Tugging his helmet off, he pressed their bare foreheads together, emphasizing, "You got us this far, малыш. We needed to score and we didn't. You are not the whole team."

"Next year," Shane replied, something fearsome and determined already brewing on his features.

Ilya huffed out a breath, endeared beyond belief, and kissed Shane's forehead quick as anything. God help the team who came between Shane Hollander and his next Stanley Cup. Boston's new premiere starter was going to be an absolute nightmare.

Shane Hollander, number forty-two, Ilya thought, hit with a feeling so sentimental it was almost sickening, *0.928 SV%, 2.11 GAA, GQ's hottest man in hockey and the love of my stupid fucking life.*

He laughed delightedly as Marly sidled up to him and Shane and pulled them both into another tight hug, a string of Brooklyn themed curses leaving his mouth.

Snowman joined the mini pile on then — two of the goals tonight his own, what a star — and then St-Simon, and Connors, and eventually a whole mob of big, sweaty, heartbroken hockey boys. Ilya would lead them to another trophy if it killed him. And another, and another, until he would need to build Shane Hollander a fucking palace to hold them all.

"Next year, boys," Marly echoed, the black and yellow blob letting out some muffled cheers along with him, Nosey smashing through them like bowling pins as he dove in at a full sprint with a guttural, rallying cry.

"And the year after that," Ilya joked a little breathlessly, squeezed in amongst the full roster now, "We have so many years, really."

"Yes, Captain," Shane's voice piped up, meeting his eyes over their teammates' shoulders. There he was, Boston's Golden Boy and Ilya's entire future, smiling gloriously even through his tears. "We do."

Chapter End Notes

Someone once asked me if I would write Goalie!Shane into The Long Game as well and the short answer to that is "Miscommunication Trope Demons, you will *not* catch me this time!"

Wow, hi, so... that was kind of it, really? Except for the incoming time-jump epilogue which will be uploaded within the next twenty-four hours. I had hoped to sync them, but the epilogue still needs one last edit and my dear beta friend is asleep (as I should be too). Lucky for you all, I'm impatient and eager to get this chapter out. And you'll have the FINAL final one shortly after. If you're not reading in real time, lucky you. No delay!

A handful of hockey notes here:

- Shane mentions working with the Bears' equipment managers, which from what I've read and seen is an extremely stressful job, sometimes requiring 24-hour days in keeping everything prepped for their teams. Here is a wild video showing an equipment manager with the Leafs being intensely focused and ready to replace a player's stick mid-game at any point.

- Eric Bennett references baking his skates for a better fit, which would be done by a professional for elite players, but which can also be done at home in your oven?
- More on Black representation in the NHL. There have only been a handful of Black coaches, and only one head coach, Dirk Graham, so far. Interestingly, the majority have been goaltending coaches, a neat tie-in that I was unaware of before researching for this fic.
- A compilation of goalies on perilous, usually unnecessary journeys, in a way the very disciplined and not so flashy Wallzy would avoid, despite his stick-handling prowess. And shoutout to the latest irl habitual escapee Jakub Dobeš who simply cannot be contained by his pipes.
- Rose's mysterious girlfriend has an IG username that suggests she plays for the now-defunct CWHL's Markham/Brampton Thunder.

See you for the grand finale (which will indeed feature That One Rare Thing some of you have wanted this entire time) and a more detailed author's note goodbye from yours truly. Love y'all, uh.

Chapter 18: Epilogue (Goal)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 2019 – Dallas

They were so stupidly close.

Up 3-1 in the series against Dallas, still tied scoreless and into the *third* overtime of Game 5 in enemy territory, Shane was experiencing a sensation he rarely felt out on the ice.

He was… maybe, *maybe*... just a little tired of playing all this fucking hockey.

Exhausted and annoyed, with a left hip that remained stubbornly swollen and aggravated despite the cortisone injection their trainers had timed to last the duration of playoffs, Shane promised the angry ancestors in his net that he would *definitely* get his injury properly treated in the offseason, if they would just Let. Boston. Score. In fact, he'd mother every hurt player on the Bears into signing up for the 'Slow Flow for Seniors' stretching classes at his yoga studio — Marlow with his technically still attached right ankle ligaments; Ilya with his ribs bruised five different colors like a xylophone, wrapped up mummy-like under his chestie; and a handful of guys out for playoffs entirely with various upper and lower body ailments — if the ghosts in the posts across the ice would be so kind as to invisibly nudge that cursed rubber disc across the goal line.

Offense flying toward him again, Shane exhaled, repositioning himself and preparing to react. *Just one, just one,* he chanted like a mantra for his own scoring lines, with the knowledge that every shot he stopped gave Boston another chance to answer. A chance to finish this once and for all.

Puck recovered by Dallas after a battle at the boards deep in the corner to Shane's left, he winced as two Bears overlapped errantly in their coverage of the winger, leaving him with a completely open passing lane across the slot. In the blink of an eye, Shane registered the shadow of the awaiting recipient, perfectly positioned in empty space over his shoulder. *Shit.* He tasted bile in his throat with the realization that he had been drawn uncharacteristically *out* of position, unbalanced and off his skates as he careened desperately forward to paw toward the puck. It was a series of mistakes that would cost them the Stanley Cup if he didn't correct it and—

Puck gliding past his gloved fingertips, Shane knew immediately that it would connect with his opponent's blade for an easy chip shot, simple enough to not risk anything trickier than swinging through. A boring, textbook goal to end it. *Unacceptable.*

Turned slightly toward the net, like an idiot, with no time to fully rotate, no momentum to slide back across the crease with control, and nothing but blind fucking trust in his body to do the Thing he was meant for, Shane Hollander threw his glove-side arm out, leaned backward…

… and leaped.

It would be on the highlight reels that night and for years to come, the way the puck glanced off his forearm, maybe a centimeter away from a healthier Dallas team extending the series into more games than beleaguered Boston could afford. A save so spectacular and ridiculous and *fast* that even Shane's analytical mind could not compute or explain it, no matter how many times they asked him in interviews later. How could he illustrate for a layperson exactly how everything would disappear in those fragile moments, replaced only by the 3D grid-mapping overlay inside his brain that flattened the rink into moving data points, information and sensory inputs knitting together into something almost… comfortable in its chaos? More simply put, success in the crease meant focus, and years of that focus translated into recognition of predictable patterns, of shapes in space and all their configurations, infinite possibilities folding in on themselves like origami until just one outcome remained. And even then, it was only statistically probable, never exact, never certain.

Still, in professional hockey, there were moments where you just *knew,* numbers aside.

And Shane knew then, landing on his injured hip with an impact so jarring he was worried that his leg was no longer attached at the joint, that the leap had been worth it.

Not ten seconds later, momentum stolen from the Dallas side, Ilya Rozanov had the puck.

Back on his feet, nauseous and head swimming with the sharp ache that seemed to radiate through him, Shane watched in awe as the man he had staked his life on — whose waiting arms he would return to night after night no matter how a silly hockey game might end — carved his way across the Dallas side with ruthless precision, flicked his wrist, and made them both champions.

The world erupted in a confetti cannon of black and yellow, gloves and helmets in the air, abandoned sticks careening around the rink, and a player in an '81' jersey streaking across the ice faster maybe than Shane had ever seen him move. Tossing off his mask and falling to his knees, Shane braced for impact as Ilya slid into him, the adrenaline keeping the worst of the pain at bay for now. Player after player on the Bears joined the pile, Shane collapsing with the weight of it, smiling at the realization that they had done it — Hollander and Rozanov — and that the men wrapped around them *knew* what they were to each other and were celebrating regardless. Yes, some of them had taken the relationship news… *worse* than others, but here and now, they were forced to reckon with a simple truth: the goddamn queers had won them a Stanley Cup.

It really was unbelievable: a championship in goal for Boston(!?) with his fucking superstar boyfriend(!?) clinging to him as he shouted nonsensical noises of victory into his ear. Baby Forward Shane would have dropped dead at the sight.

It was further madness then, when Shane was nudged forward by his team as the official celebrations commenced, a notable limp to his movement that he knew the coaching staff would chew him out for later. *No*, he would tell them honestly, he hadn't planned to leave the net, even if they went another round without the Rozanov goal. Shane would honestly have rather been carted off the ice on a stretcher than watch a Stanley Cup final end from the bench, and Mr. Chestful of Contusions, glowering as he skated stiffly by, had no room to complain. They could [gently] fuck about it at home later.

"It is only natural that the most valuable player of the 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs…" the Commissioner was saying into the mic, voice booming, "goes to the league's new record holder

for the most saves in a playoff year, at 799, surpassing his team's own Leo Campbell in his 2010 season. Join me in congratulating your Conn Smythe winner, Shane Hollander!"

Shane startled, the words sinking in, as his teammates smacked his back in celebration, shoving him farther forward. He managed a slow, awkward glide to the other end of the rink, shaking the Commissioner's hand as they held the massive silver Maple Leaf trophy aloft together. Stubborn to a fault, Shane bit back his wince and carried the trophy to where the Bears had congregated, finally accepting the help from some of the staff with a relieved exhale as they offloaded the weight.

The mortification of being singled out for an award finally over, Shane smiled as the real white-gloved Stanley Cup presentation began, Ilya hoisting the trophy as captain before taking his ceremonial lap around the rink. Once he'd passed the trophy onto their eager teammates, Bears' family members and guests flooding in from the stands for teary embraces and photo ops, Shane and Ilya found themselves facing one another, comically and cosmically positioned near center ice.

Ilya looked at him, pure unfiltered adoration shining in his eyes and something a little evil too, as he briefly pursed his lips, flicked his gaze pointedly down to Shane's mouth and back up, and shrugged in offer.

Shane let out a burst of incredulous laughter, pulling him into a crushing hug instead as he hissed, "Don't even think about it."

The Hollanders made their way over shortly after, Yuna stubbornly pairing a "Support Canadian Hockey" baseball cap with her HOLLANDER 42 Bears jersey, but wrapping Shane up in her arms with sobs of joy just the same.

Embarrassingly, Shane felt his own tears spring up not from his mother's proud embrace, but from the view when she released him: Ilya frozen completely still on his skates as he took in a beaming David Hollander wearing ROZANOV 81.

Shane, whose parents had attended nearly every hockey game he'd ever played as a child and most of his professional ones too, could not begin to fathom how the moment must feel, for Ilya to finally have a family on the ice with him, who loved him regardless of how many hockey games he won.

"I'm going to hug you, Ilya," David warned, words barely out of his mouth before Ilya was bursting into tears and diving into those fatherly arms of his own volition, crying harder than Shane had ever seen.

"I'm glad you ended up here," Yuna said softly, as they watched the heartwrenching scene between the two men unfold before them, "I always wanted this sport to accept you, to love you back, with all that you've given it. I thought I knew best how to get you there." She gasped wetly, Shane jerking back in surprise given she cried less often than any of them. "But… but you made your own way, didn't you? From the moment you told me you belonged in that goal, you were building a life for yourself, of your own accord. And look at how beautiful that life is."

Yuna swept a hand out, toward Ilya and David, toward the Stanley Cup and Conn Smythe trophies, toward the fans cheering in the stands… before wrapping that same arm around his

waist, her tiny figure tucking into his side as he towered above her in his skates.

She smiled up at him and he knew then that she did love him, that she had done her best, and that Shane's definition of success was allowed to be different from hers. That he could be 'good' without feeling that it was only just 'good enough'.

"You did it, Shane," she said, "I am so, so proud of you."

We did it, he thought, catching Ilya's tearful eyes and watching as a smile grew on his face in tandem with Shane's own.

'I love you,' Ilya mouthed back at him and Shane, mask off and heart laid bare, *bloomed.*

- 🥅 -

Shane: Hi, I'm gay.

Misha 🍿: Hi gay, I'm dad.

Misha 🍿: we've been over this i think?

Shane: I'm practicing.

Misha 🍿: what do you mean practicing

Misha 🍿: for what???

Misha 🍿: SHANE HOLLANDER

Shane: See you tomorrow! 🙂

- 🥅 -

April 2021 – Boston

It was funny, how certain things felt inevitable, once you realized that all the gears were already in motion.

Like how a smoke break in Saskatchewan might bring you face-to-mask with the eventual love of your life.

Or lesser dominoes of consequence:

Such as, Ilya Rozanov scoring a hat trick to make it 3-1 against Carolina, leading them to pull their goalie — a very furious looking Mikhail Popov — in the final minutes of the third period.

A move which resulted in Boston's goalie, two-time Vezina winner Shane 'Wallzy' Hollander (who was also pretty damn good with a stick), catching Rozanov's eye with ten seconds on the clock as he slid out of his crease to snag an errant puck behind the net.

And which, in the end, had Hollander — never typically one to wander — deking around a single half-hearted Crawfish forward at the goal line before sending the puck airborne, whizzing across the full length of the rink.

TD Garden waited, holding one collective breath, the trajectory of the shot becoming increasingly clear and the volume of the murmured cheers increasing with it.

Maybe this moment connected deeper into the past after all, if you squinted. A decades' old domino chain knocked over so long ago you could barely trace the winding path of bricks back to their origin.

Ah, but there it was.

On the ice in Ottawa, a young boy, his stick held in quivering fingers, knowing that he would never live up to their expectations.

Hollander, shoot, god dammit!

On the ice in Boston, the same man, hands steady and aim true, as the crowd erupted with the sound of the goal horn.

Shane Hollander scored.

- 🥅 -

"Last regular season game coming up and you're already locked in for playoffs as division leaders. That has to feel good."

Ilya nodded at the reporter and said plainly, "Yes, it does."

Polite laughter filled the room. Although Ilya was a known terror when it came to media availability post-game, his mostly snarky sound bites were valuable stock, so the interviewers were always extra sweet to him, at the start at least.

"Follow up to that," another reporter jumped in, "Do you feel pressure as the defending, back-to-back Stanley Cup Champions to make a repeat appearance in the final?"

"No," Ilya replied, to the sound of more laughter, "We will be there. Other teams should feel pressure to keep us away from our, ah, *inevitable* third win."

“And what about that goalie goal tonight?” a third correspondent asked, “What a treat for Boston and the fans.”

Ilya grinned, knowing the moment they’d talked about had finally arrived, the taste of Shane on his lips from the locker room making him bolder and braver than ever.

“Ah yes, my husband is very talented,” he said pleasantly, “It is an honor to be married to the best goalie in the league.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the confused silence that followed.

After a moment, a single hand appeared in the air, Ilya nodding in friendly greeting at the woman it belonged to, a longtime sports journalist with ESPN.

“Sorry, is that…” she began, coughing awkwardly mid-question, “Is that a joke?”

Ilya’s grin widened, as he said, “Oops, forgot this. He will kill me.”

Reaching into the inner pocket of his suit jacket, he pulled out a simple gold band, slipping it back onto his left ring finger with a wink.

The press area all but erupted, a cacophony of shouted questions and blinding camera flashes.

It took ages for them to settle, before one man was able to shout above the fray, “How long have you been married?”

“Forty-eight hours, give or take.”

The assholes on the Vegas expansion team were an irritating bunch to play against, but their city did offer certain touristy perks. Such as same-day wedding chapel appointments, with marriage ceremonies that had basically no legal bearing on the relationship status of a pair of non-U.S. citizens, at least until they filed the actual paperwork back in Canada. But Ilya wasn’t going to let those minor technicalities stop him from repeating the word ‘husband’ as often as possible in the next — probably extended, if the Bears would allow it — five minutes or so.

Poor LeClaire, who was up after Ilya’s time and would have to pretend that his two star players, one of them a generational talent in goal, hadn’t dropped the news on him just before gametime today.

“And, um, how long have you been together?” another voice called out.

“Ah, this is a harder question,” Ilya replied, a little smirk tugging at his lips, “Let’s say thirteen.”

“Months?” the reporter gasped, the shocked murmurs around the room growing louder.

Laughing, Ilya tossed the final match into the metaphorical barrel of crude oil before him.

“Years.”

July 2029 – Ottawa

“Hop in, old man!” a voice called out, Ilya rolling his eyes as his husband waved across the Arrivals parking lot, head stuck out the driver’s side of his newest ugly luxury SUV. *Their* SUV, Shane liked to emphasize, with the way most things in life were now jointly shared between them.

Carry-on dragging behind him, Ilya approached the car window and leaned in, pretending to be grossed out by Shane pressing a wet kiss to both cheeks, his nose, and finally a quick peck to his lips too, murmuring endearments in his disgustingly fluent Russian.

“How was the flight?” he asked, once Ilya had settled into the passenger seat beside him, their hands immediately tangling over the gear shift.

“Long,” Ilya said, pouting, “and boring without you.”

“You don’t always have to say yes, you know,” Shane pointed out, referencing Ilya’s tendency to agree to any and every volunteer youth coaching opportunity in his retirement.

“I know,” Ilya muttered, “but the initiative in Atlanta is—”

“—bringing much-needed racial and socioeconomic diversity to the women’s hockey talent pool,” Shane filled in, “Yes, sweetheart, I know.” The pad of his thumb rubbed against Ilya’s hand in gentle comfort. “I just wish you’d look at some more Canadian opportunities too. At least for the summers.”

Ilya sniffed. “It’s not my fault you left Boston.”

Shane laughed. “It is, actually, *specifically* your fault.”

And okay, there was… maybe a little truth to that.

Ilya, though deeply enamored with the sport, had never planned to have the type of career that left his physical or cognitive health hanging by a thread by the end of it. A single conversation with the team physician about the need for a total knee replacement to eke out one or two more seasons *at best* was enough to have him on the phone with his agent that evening and announcing his planned retirement at the comfortable age of 35 the very next day. A respectable sixteen years of his professional life with Boston, four Stanley Cups, and the hilarious fucking honor of the Lady Byng in his final, most well-behaved season, and Ilya felt he’d departed from the sport with a legacy he could be proud of.

From there had come the tiny wrinkle known as ‘no longer being an American sponsored visa holder,’ and within the year, he’d found himself putting down permanent roots in Ottawa, Canada of all fucking places, his husband’s boring, terrible, hockey-loving hometown. Rather than attempt to go back to the long-distance relationship of their youth — both of them kind of pitifully codependent on one another after being lovers for more than half their lives — Shane had arranged a very convenient trade to the local team.

The Ottawa Centaurs, the league's most chaotic, queer-friendly, 'Power of Friendship'-ass franchise, worshiped Wallzy like a god, both players and fans alike proclaiming him the prodigal son returned home. And at *just* 38, Ilya knew Shane wanted at least two or three more seasons with them, especially after they'd made an unexpectedly deep playoff run this year.

Despite Ilya's whining, Ottawa wasn't *all* bad anyway, with Shane's parents just one neighborhood over, the Centaurs WAGs Plus Harris being adamant that Ilya was one of their own (the jackets *were* nice), and a few of the retired Voyageurs sometimes inviting the couple to events in nearby Montreal too. Like a few weeks ago, when Ilya had been unfortunately extremely endeared by Hayden Pike's youngest child's clarinet recital, not knowing it was possible for the horn to produce those… specific sounds. Shane had elbowed him repeatedly to behave when the adults grabbed drinks later that night, Ilya nearly brought to tears by how dismayed Pike was at the fact that he was oh-for-four in athletically-inclined offspring.

"You know, I talked to Coach Wiebe and he said the Centaurs would have you on the coaching staff in a heartbeat," Shane said lightly, fingers tapping on the steering wheel as he merged them onto the northbound highway, "If you wanted to… go back to adults."

"I just escaped my toxic coworker situationship at my last workplace," Ilya teased, "and now he is trying to hire me *again*?"

Shane untangled their joined hands to shove at him. "Shut up, asshole. I just… I missed you, okay. And I know I'm actually the culprit when it comes to work travel, but… sometimes I do dream about coming home to you more often during the regular season."

Ilya softened, echoing, "I missed you too." Perpetually embarrassed by deeper displays of affection even after eight years of marriage, he added a mumbled, "And maybe I can look into coaching a season for the girls' league here. I think the U12s in Kanata were wanting to add another team given demand."

He watched a smile bloom on Shane's side profile. "I'd still like to coach Timbits one day, I think. Give me like five more seasons max—"

"Five!?" Ilya interjected.

"I said *max,*" Shane argued with a laugh, "We both know my splits aren't what they used to be." Of course, he immediately noticed the way Ilya licked his lips at that, scoffing, "You're a pig."

"And you still married me," Ilya said dreamily.

"Under duress!" Shane argued, "I maintain that yard drinks should be criminalized, *especially* the fun, colorful slushie ones. It's a stupid American measurement anyway."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "And the part where we had a wedding, for real? With witnesses? And guests?"

"You've met my mom," Shane grumbled, which yeah, alright, Ilya would give him that one.

They'd both been perfectly happy to consider their elopement an official celebration, especially after the news had temporarily thrown the entire National Hockey League into a full blown gay panic, compounded by Mikhail Popov happily hard launching his husband too; noted villain's

accomplice Troy Barrett turning out to be a *really* sad gay instead; and both Eric Bennett (Shane constantly swearing that he'd caught a vibe all along) and Ryan Price (Ilya *had* caught a vibe for real and was very smug about it) in openly queer relationships in their retirement too.

Yuna Hollander, bless her, had found the idea of a simple courthouse appearance to deliver their documents an *unacceptable* consolation as a mother-in-law.

So they'd held a wedding, still a small affair, but with all the wedding things that were apparently supposed to happen, planned by Shane's mother in such a way that all they had to do was show up, exchange rings, and eat.

Ilya would never admit it, given that Shane mostly considered the event to be a huge Yuna-shaped intrusion, but he had always secretly thought it was kind of… nice. And Shane didn't hate *every* aspect of the day, at least; the framed print of them in their coordinating tuxes, holding each other close as they shared a first dance, was prominently displayed above their fireplace.

"I love you," Ilya said because he could, feeling the tension in his shoulders ease as the familiar signposts toward the cottage began to appear on the roadside.

Shane pouted. "Do you still love me knowing that I found *three* gray hairs this morning?"

"I loved you when you wore a mask you refused to take off, idiot," Ilya argued goodnaturedly, watching Shane wriggle in his seat, always exceptionally pleased to be reminded that he'd pulled Ilya Rozanov with his ridiculous personality alone.

"And when I hang it up for the last time?" Shane prompted, eyes wide and curious as if they didn't rehearse this bit all the time. Only a month older than him and Shane seemed to think that old man retirement roleplay was perfectly suited to their late thirties. Ilya was terrified of his plans for the real golden years. He'd probably have them review their actual investment portfolios or something before he let Ilya hit.

Rolling his eyes, Ilya decided to risk going off script this go-around. "It never kept me from seeing you, Shane. The real you."

He heard his husband's sharp intake of breath, watching that familiar lower lip start to wobble.

"Ilya Rozanov, what have I told you about being romantic with me?" Shane complained loudly, an obvious ploy to hide that he'd been caught emotionally off guard in the way he hated.

"Can't recall," Ilya shrugged, letting a smirk grow on his face, "I guess, once we get to the cottage, you will have to punish me very thoroughly for forgetting."

"I love you too, asshole," Shane muttered back in an attempt to derail the teasing, though his pinked cheeks and ears betrayed his ongoing interest.

"If you are a retired goalie in this scene, am I allowed to make sex puns about the crease?" Ilya asked eagerly.

"One pun," Shane warned, "and if you use the word 'pipe' I'm safewording."

As they continued to banter, Highway 11 taking them deeper into the province's interior, Ilya found himself reminded once more of their youthful rivalry, the Hollander Hex and its beautiful, freckled spellcaster haunting his every moment, on ice and off. Thank god both of them were too obsessed with one another to ever let it go.

"Thank you," he said, watching Shane glance at him in question, "for letting me score back then." He wriggled his eyebrows. "And later."

Shane huffed out a disbelieving laugh. "I want a divorce."

"No, you don't," Ilya argued, watching as the forest rose up around them, "We are a permanent thing. And think of the… optics. They have us, ah, *immortalized* side by side in the Kingfisher. And in at least three gay bars in Boston too. We are for the people!"

"Those were life-sized cardboard cutouts and hockey-themed drag show promo, Ilya, not like… bronze statues."

"Admit it. We have a legacy together, Hollander," Ilya simpered, "And you love that."

Shane reached over blindly to cup his cheek, a tiny act of affection, his responsible eyes still fixed on the road.

"Ilya Rozanov, *retired* number eighty-one—" he began, laughing brightly when Ilya was the one to shove at him this time. "Hey, I'm driving!"

"Shane Hollander, number forty-two, my dickhead husband," he retorted.

"Your goalie," Shane said after a moment, tone nostalgic in a way that was no longer teasing.

To forwards and their goalies.

It had made it into their wedding toast even, Misha Popov bursting into tears as he'd proclaimed it, champagne glass held aloft.

"That's right. My goalie, from the moment I saw you," Ilya whispered.

This time Shane turned his head to look at him, just for a moment, and Ilya looked right back; the way they'd done so across the ice in multiple countries, in countless hotel rooms and high-rise apartments, and once in the backyard of the home they'd built together in Ottawa, promising forever and then some.

Ilya settled back in his seat, smiling at the crazy perfect lot in life he'd ended up with, despite all the odds stacked against them and the happiness they deserved. Hockey and Shane and all the years that came after.

Fuck if that didn't sound *good.*

Chapter End Notes

Ok so, predictably, I still have hockey notes even for an epilogue. One last bullet point list before I switch to the mushy stuff.

- Shane's save is based on this bonkers playoffs stop by the Panthers' Bobrovsky.
- Shane wins the Conn Smythe for his MVP playoff performance, which is awarded live at the end of the final game of the series. I projected Nosey's veteran stats onto real Boston Bruin Tim Thomas who does hold the actual record for most saves in a playoff year (as of writing this!).
- Highly recommend going on a Keeper of the Cup deep dive if you want to be entertained by more NHL idiosyncrasies. I do not recommend, however, looking up what players do with the actual cup when they get their turn with it. [It's piss. The answer is piss.]
- A compilation of Stanley Cup Finals celebrations over the last 30 years. I can't lie, as a big hockey fan, this made me tear up a little. What a sport, man.
- And a compilation of NHL goalie goals over time, which despite a recent uptick (like with goalie fights), still remain incredibly rare. Y'all didn't think I'd write a goalie fic without one though, did you?
- Ilya winning the Lady Byng would be objectively hilarious considering it's a sportsmanship award that is judged based on character but also on clean play (usually taking low penalty minutes into consideration). My favorite headcanon is that Shane, goalie or not, never wins a Lady Byng in any universe because while he's lovely out of game-mode, he's a mouthy shithead on the ice.

And with your last learnings out of the way, it's time to say goodbye, for real!

I want to first extend my thanks to the entire community that emerged around this fic as it developed from humble hrtwt prompt to the brain worm that possessed me to write... All This. Though I've been a bit overwhelmed by comment volume (a privilege to have as an author), I promise I have and will continue to read every single comment you leave here and on socials. As a *deep breath* late-diagnosed autistic gay wasian, goalie-obsessed hockey lover, and former elite athlete, I fear this particular Shane Hollander and the reception he has received from all of you means more than I can possibly convey. #42 Wallzy forever, from Boston to beyond 🖤

To the readers who have commented that this fic made you get into hockey for real or appreciate it more (or even start playing as some of you have told me!?), I am so, so happy to have you on board for as long as the spirit of puck moves you. May your new favorite teams and favorite players (especially the goalies) prosper with my blessing, Chicago Blackhawks fans excluded (we can still kiss as rivals though). And remember, these hockey men are evil. Don't let them fool you! The mostly less evil PWHL also awaits.

To the puck lovers and current/former hockey players and ACTUAL goalies in the comments who have patiently let me yap about your sport as a backdrop to silly queer romance, I hope I've done it real justice.

To the fan artists who have contributed their pro bono talents to this fic and surprised me with detailed renderings of my characters beyond my wildest imagination, you have truly transformed my words into art. If you create anything in this universe, please share in the comments or tag me on twt @minrozanov and let me know if you'd be comfortable having your work linked here too and in my fanart thread.

To the Popov fan club and #Hollapoppers, thank you for adopting an OC who unexpectedly became much of the fandom's funky little companion. Full sprint goalie hugs and oarfish plushies for all of you.

And to Joe, an IRL true friend who reads the smut I write and dares to look me in the eye the next day, thank you for live-texting your line-by-line reactions to the first HR fic I posted (my first serious fic in a decade). You encouraged me to keep writing more for this fandom. This wouldn't exist without you.

For the last(?) time in this universe, user impetuous is leaving the crease.

Be good 🖤

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Come poke and prod me for fic updates and more hockey and fandom things at @minrozanov on twt 🖤

Works inspired by this one

cover for good on my own accord by impetuous by zepampez

Cover for Good On My Own Accord by blondietrying

Cover Design for Good on My Own Accord by Impetuous by Aurelia__Sun

-COVER- good on my own accord by impetuous by Floo_Flame

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!