

home economics

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home economics

by Anonymous

Summary

The Swiss National League doesn't care about the legendary Hollander-Rozanov rivalry. When the MLH can't negotiate with the Hockey Players' Union in time to prevent a hockey lockout at the start of the 2015 season, the Zürich Lions jump at the chance to sign both Shane and Ilya to short-term contracts. For four months in Switzerland, they share a team, a line, a house, and a bed.

Then the lockout ends in January, and it's time to go back. Back to different countries, cities, lives. Beds.

Reentry is harder than expected.

Notes

this fic surprised me lol but i listened to our house by crosby, stills, nash & young and then the scientist by coldplay and then dream song by shallow alcove and when i came to, i had this written and edited

i don't think there's much you need to know for this fic. the premise of MLH lockout meaning no hockey is a thing that's happened a couple of times in the NHL, where negotiations between the NHL Players' Association (basically their union) and the NHL couldn't agree on contract terms/changes to be made, and so strikes happened/no hockey was played until the two sides came to an agreement. the most recent one was in 2012/2013 and lasted from september through to the beginning of january. during that lockout, a handful of north american players went to play in europe like shane and ilya do in this fic. then when the lockout ended, they came back to the NHL for a compressed season (like ilya and shane do in this fic - but probably with less drama about it idk)

the fic is split into two POVs, shane's and ilya's. shane's starts from when he gets back to montreal after the lockout is over, january 2016, and goes forward from there. ilya's also starts from january 2016, but it goes backwards in time instead of forwards. so basically everything that happens in switzerland is in ilya's pov and everything that happens afterwards is in shane's pov <3

i promise this fic isn't that angsty!! it will have such a sweet and beautiful happy ending as soon as they communicate with each other!! i just wanted to write a fic that provides an answer to the no-doubt burning question on everyone's minds rn: how would hollanov handle it if they were forced into emotional intimacy via domestic proximity before they were ready

for it and For Reasons Beyond Their Control (hockey) while already sorta in love, and THEN were forced OUT of that same domestic habitual intimacy and separated For Reasons Beyond Their Control (still hockey)?

the short answer is: not well. the long answer is, like, 20k

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

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [【授权翻译】家政学](#) by [FerineFlame](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [home economics](#) by [lissara22](#)

Chapter 1

January, 2016.

Shane finally sleeps mostly through the night on Thursday. It's his fourth night back in the city. He wants to think that means it's better, everything's resolved, but the house settles weird around his bones, and even though he'd skated himself near-empty during his first practice back at the training rink, he'd still needed two sleeping pills and three hours of tossing and turning in his bed before he could fall under.

So it's not better. Everything's fucked.

He misses Switzerland; he misses a lot of things.

It doesn't change anything.

The fifth day back in Montreal, he wakes up with a bone-dry mouth and a pounding headache. When he blinks up at the ceiling of his bedroom, it takes him a minute to recognize it as his. It takes him another minute to stop holding his breath and waiting for the mattress to shift next to him, for an arm to fling over his stomach and drag him back into a firm chest, for feet to hook around his calves and tangle their legs together beneath the covers.

It's like he's operating on a five-second delay, body and brain not in sync. Maybe it's like jetlag, if jetlag also makes you feel like you've been run over by the plane too.

And it really doesn't make sense for him to feel jetlagged still. He's had almost a week to acclimatize back to Montreal. Five whole days of getting up in the morning here, of going to the rink before noon, of shutting everything down at ten at night for sleep. There's nothing for him in Zürich anymore, and his body should know that as well as his mind does.

There's no time for anything else; he'd gotten off the plane, a direct flight from Zürich to Montreal, and he'd hit the ground running. Everyone's saying that the team has got to give 110% this season, to make up for the lost time. Crowell makes a big show of setting up a press conference in the MLH headquarters and professing his sincere gratitude towards the fans for sticking around during the lockout, telling them that the 2015-2016 season is going to be amazing. Worth the wait.

Sure, it's going to start in the middle of January instead of October, and yes, there are going to half as many games as usual due to the compressed scheduling, but everyone in the MLH is dedicated and committed to bringing hockey back to North America—even if hockey only ever left in the first place because leadership in the MLH was driving for unfair changes to players' contracts and salaries and protections, and and and.

The important thing is that this season is compressed, yes, but every hockey player is going to play their hearts out on the ice, leave everything out there for the fans. They're all just so excited to be back. They can't wait to make up for lost time.

Shane is so excited to be back in Montreal. He is so excited to be back in Montreal that he knows all of his lines. He started practicing on the plane back to Canada.

He can't wait to make up for lost time, get going, take a crack at this season. The ice was nice in Zürich, but it wasn't MLH nice. It wasn't *home ice* nice. And his team—of course he missed his team. He missed being a captain, he missed his guys. Sure, it was fun playing with the Lions over in Switzerland. Definitely a learning experience, it's a whole new kind of hockey out there, and the players are just phenomenal. And—yeah, of course, no. Yeah, go ahead, ask about Rozanov, haha. It's expected. Yeah. Uh, yeah, playing on a team with Rozanov—it was good. He's a special player. Good winger too, which Shane didn't expect because he's such a strong center, but hey, some guys get all the luck. Haha. And what, sorry, what was the question?

Oh, yeah. We did live together. Just for a few months. But, you know, neither of us spoke Swiss-German, so it just sort of made sense. To stick together. Be the two guys from the MLH figuring out Swiss hockey and Swiss traffic and Swiss grocery stores. Together. The Lions' front office set it up. It just. It just sort of made sense.

Anyway, I'm so excited to be back in Montreal. We've got a good group of guys here, I think we can take it all the way this season. I can't wait to get back out on the ice at the Bell Centre, ring in the season with the fans. Make up for lost time.

When Shane tilts his head away from the ceiling, his eyes land almost immediately on the hulking form of his unpacked suitcase, resting up against the wall of his bedroom. He hasn't touched it since he got in.

He can't remember what he packed. He can't remember what he left behind, threw out, or gave away to the guys on the team because there was no point bringing it back to Canada. There was so much *stuff*. Shane hadn't realized exactly how much stuff he was accumulating until it was time to do something with it.

A potato peeler, a bottle opener, a Swiss flag mug: all things he thinks he left in the house. The souvenir cup from one of the thousands of Christmas markets they'd walked through, he thinks—he threw it away. A pair of sweats that could have been either of theirs and smelled like the both of them—he isn't sure.

He knows he kept a Zürich jersey, white and blue with a stenciled lion's head embossed on the front and a border of red along the hem. He just can't remember which one he grabbed in the flurry of packing up four months of his life in eight hours. He doesn't know what he'll do if he opens his suitcase and sees a large 81 looking back at him. He doesn't want to risk it.

He's been trying not to think about it. It's only been five days.

It's already been five days.

Shane's condo feels too big. So empty it's like it echoes with every step he takes. He has the heating on high, and it still feels drafty, but that's just Montreal in January maybe.

Tonight, Boston faces off against Philadelphia. It's their first game of the season. Half the commentators think they should take another week, tee up some low-stakes pre-season games so the players can figure out how to meld with each other again after such a long break. The other half thinks it's puck time, that they've waited long enough, that if the season doesn't start now, it may as well not start at all.

Shane's been trying to avoid all the press about the Boston game, but it's splashed all over his Twitter feed and his Instagram feed. ESPN's posting about it, of course. Banners with links to watch it take up half of the website. *Welcome Back, Puck-Time*, is what Shane's greeted with when he clicks over to the official MLH homepage.

It's a big deal, first game of the new season.

Shane wants to text Ilya so badly he thinks he's going to be sick.

He doesn't though. There's not much to say. They lived together for a few months in Zürich. It was the Lions' idea. It just sort of made sense at the time. Rozanov became Ilya around the end of October, and Shane keeps trying to remember to call him *Rozanov* again, in his head, but he keeps messing it up, like maybe the version of himself that could look at Ilya Rozanov and see a rival, a last name, a guy he wanted to keep at a distance, is lost forever. Perpetually out of reach. Only a memory.

Add it to the fucking list.

In practice, Shane keeps shooting the puck to empty ice and expecting to hear the sound of it catching against a stick that's just not there. Hayden keeps sending him these long longs, all wide eyes and slanted brows. "I know," Shane says, every time, before Hayden can even speak. "Fuck. I know."

It's never what he wants to say, but what he wants to say is way too cruel. Uncalled for.

Ilya would have been there. Ilya would have completed that fucking play.

It's no use anyway. Ilya's five hours away, back in Boston where he belongs. Playing as a 1C for the Raiders, like he hasn't spent the last four months being the best right wing Shane's ever had. He wonders how many passes Ilya's missing, how many shots he's still trying to send Shane's way despite the distance between them.

He hopes a lot, even though he knows it's selfish.

He knows he could probably text Ilya and ask and Ilya would tell him, because it's not like they sat down and decided they'd never speak to each other off the ice ever again or anything.

It's not like they took a break out of packing the house to re-package themselves back into, like, the people they'd been when they first arrived. It's not like they talked about it, the aftermath of it all.

It's not like there's much to say.

They lived together for a few months in Zürich. It was a small house, owned by one of the Lions' owner's brothers who only ever spent the summer there. Two floors, three bedrooms, a nice kitchen even if someone decided to paint it this fugly yellow color, a tiny balcony overlooking a narrow street that Ilya would smoke out on at least once a week. It was conveniently located, close to the training rink and a few tram lines for getting around the city, even though Shane rented out a car the second he got off the plane. It was convenient. It was a nice place, small but not so small that they had to live on top of each other or anything.

They just did that anyway. It was a choice they made.

And Shane can't unmake it, the same way he can't stop misfiring pucks on the ice and making enough pasta for two and waking up disjointed and confused, reaching out across his mattress for a body that's five hundred kilometers away.

But texting Ilya—or not texting Ilya—that's still something he can control. Missing him is a different beast altogether, out of his hands and a battle he's been losing since he boarded the fucking plane back to Montreal. Since before that. Since he'd pulled all his clothes off the hangers in Ilya's closet and put them in his suitcase, maybe. Since before that. Since they got the call that the lockout was over, maybe. Since before that. Since before Zürich, maybe.

He just didn't have the word for it back then. Or he did, but he'd only had the one word for it, and now, after knowing Ilya for four months, he has a hundred new words for it. For all the ways he misses him.

But texting him? Shane can put his foot down there. Rein it in, pull it back. Sometimes you can't help how you feel, but you can definitely decide what to do about it. That's what a coach had told him when he was eleven, after the first and only time he'd gotten so mad at a missed goal he'd broken his stick on the metal frame of the net.

Sometimes you're gonna feel things you don't know what to do about. But the important thing, hey, Shane. Listen to me. The important thing to remember is that you control those emotions up until the second you let them control you.

The problem is that they'd been sort of stupid, in Zürich. It'd been a convenience thing at first, a live-in hook-up that was always as up for it as the other guy. And then it'd become an avalanche of feelings Shane couldn't ignore, syrupy sweetness in the early mornings and late-night whispers breathed out in the space between their pillows. They'd lost sight of who they were in Switzerland, where no one cared about them outside of the hockey they played. They'd toed the line of being *more*, of being *something*, and then they'd catapulted themselves across it in wordless agreement. They'd spent four months living out some sort of fucked up parody of domestic bliss, except the love wasn't really mutual and they weren't building towards any sort of future except the next tomorrow morning.

And then the MLH pulled them back, two dogs on leashes with collars cutting into their throats. And there's no point arguing against it or pretending otherwise. They both got on the plane. Separate planes. Heading towards separate cities they'd have to relearn how to call home.

There's not much else to fucking say.

January, 2016.

Ilya groans, long and low as he tangles his fingers through Shane's hair and tugs. This is his favorite sensation in the world, paired with one of his favorite sights: Shane Hollander on his knees for him, gagging for it. Gagging around the length of him and still trying to take more like he's starving for it. Like it's been months in between this, instead of just a few hours.

It feels good. Every fucking time it feels so good that Ilya thinks he's going to lose his mind. Shane pulls back, just a little, and runs his tongue up over the underside of him; Ilya's helpless against the urge to buck his hips forward and throw his head back.

"Fuck," he curses when his skull connects with the wall behind them with a loud *thunk*. In front of him, he hears Shane hum in something that sounds like amusement. It's garbled though, muffled by the cock in his mouth.

"Is something funny, *solnyshko*?" he asks, tearing his focus effortlessly away from his own pain to instead center around Shane. Shane makes another noise, blinking up at him with smug laughter lines blooming around the corners of his eyes.

It makes Ilya want to be mean. Well, it makes Ilya want to be a lot of things, say a lot of things, do a lot of things, but it's safest just to be *mean*. It's the least risky of all his emotions, all his desires when it comes to Hollander. It always has been. "Other than the fact that you cannot take all of me down your throat, even after all this practice, hm?"

It's supposed to be harsh, maybe mocking, because whenever he uses that tone with Shane, Shane goes shivery all over and tries so hard to be even better at whatever he's doing. Sucking cock, riding it, letting Ilya split him open. As if he isn't already the best Ilya's ever had.

So he wants to be harsh, but his hands haven't received this message. His thumb is too busy stroking tender lines along Shane's cheekbone, over the spray of his freckles while the other hand pets over his hair gently. Over the last few years, it has become increasingly difficult to reach for cruelty around Shane, even the feigned kind. It doesn't fit right around him these days, like he's reciting lines for a part of a play he doesn't want to be cast in anymore.

The most frightening thing about that is that if he's honest with himself, that was true before Zürich.

"Maybe this is for the best though," Ilya listens to himself say. Shane's eyes are closed, but he nuzzles his head into the brush of Ilya's fingers like he can't help it either. "We have dinner reservations."

It's a nice spot too, some place Nimar told them about during practice that had Shane looking quietly interested in the locker room afterwards. It's very, very early January, still technically the holiday weekend, which means Ilya can probably convince him to order the full fondue

experience the restaurant's known for instead of whatever birdfood diet-friendly meal he's planning to subsist on for the rest of the year.

Ilya is excited for it. He's even dressed up a little more than normal, but he doesn't think anyone can blame him. He's taking Shane Hollander out to a nice, quiet, candlelit restaurant in Zürich for a dinner that's just the two of them, and no one will care. No one will take pictures of them on their phones, no one will post about it later.

They will have a nice dinner, just the two of them at a restaurant, all the rest of the world left outside on the doorstep to wait. And then they'll come back here, to their house, and they'll fuck each other stupid in their bed the way they've done pretty much every night since September. And then tomorrow, they'll wake up all tangled together in fresh sheets, because Shane will make them change the bedding before they go to sleep, and they'll drive to practice together. And then they'll play hockey. Together.

If someone told Ilya that sequence of events two years ago, he'd have accused them of wasting his time with nonsense and fever dreams. But it's not nonsense. It's just his plan for the night.

His daily fucking schedule involves Shane Hollander sitting across from him at a restaurant, laughing and covering his mouth with his hand while he hooks their ankles together beneath the table.

It also involves, as of five minutes ago, meeting Shane at the door of their home, ready to leave with his phone and wallet in his hands, only for him to receive a very reproachful, almost angry look before Shane's sunk down to his knees in front of him.

Like it's *Ilya's* fault Shane's so desperate for it all the time.

"I can suck you off and we can still make our dinner reservations," Shane mumbles, pulling back enough to speak. His voice is rough. Ilya knows logically it's probably because he yelled himself hoarse during practice today. His dick twitches at the sound anyway, a learned response.

"How many times do I have to tell you," Ilya scolds, brushing his fingers through Shane's fringe again, helpless. "I am a gentleman, Hollander, I would have to get you back."

Shane flushes a deep red, and his eyes fall down. "That won't take long either," he mumbles, and Ilya groans. It is always so good with Shane. He is always so sweet like this. So earnest. Somehow, six years into this and four months into having this all the time, it still catches Ilya off-guard.

It still makes him feel weak at the knees, but then—he's always been a weak man when it comes to Shane Hollander.

"Okay, this is what we will—" Ilya starts to say, only to be cut off by the harsh and unwelcome sound of Shane's phone ringing from the small table next to the door.

On his knees, Shane tenses, automatic. He pulls off of him completely, sits back on his heels.

“No, Hollander, get back here, please,” Ilya whines, only partially joking. He’s already lost him though, he knows it. Shane’s never once in his life ignored a fucking phone call. He’s the only person under the age of fifty Ilya even knows that keeps his phone’s volume on high.

“It could be an emergency,” Shane tells him, not for the first time.

“It could be Hayden Pike,” Ilya says, but he’s been beaten by Hollander’s sense of *responsibility* and *duty*, and he knows it. At least just the thought of Pike is enough to make his dick begin to soften.

Shane pats his thigh, only a little condescendingly, before he stands. “And Hayds could be having an emergency,” he reminds him reproachfully, like Ilya’s supposed to care very deeply at the thought of Pike’s hypothetical emergency.

“*This* is emergency, Hollander,” Ilya growls playfully, tugging Shane into his arms and pressing his hips up against the matching bulge in Shane’s dress pants. Like he always does, Shane melts into his touch for a moment, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck and tucking his smile into his chest. Ilya’s so fucking glad he didn’t put on his jacket; he can feel the edges of Shane’s lips pressing into his skin. “This needs immediate attention.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Shane tells him, but there’s no sting to the words. He kisses him to take it away, right over his pulse. Then he lingers for another moment before pulling away.

Ilya thinks that he’ll be grateful for the rest of his life for that—for the fact that Zürich taught Shane to linger in his arms. Or maybe just that something in the last four months has softened within him and he’s allowed himself learn.

“It is the restaurant calling because we have missed our reservation,” Ilya predicts, leaning back against the wall as Shane stomps over to the entryway table. He almost trips over his own shoes, lying discarded next to the shoe rack from where Shane kicked them off after practice this afternoon, and Ilya has to focus on stuffing his dick back into his pants so he doesn’t ruin everything right then and there by saying *Shane Hollander, I love you*.

Shane shoots him a dirty look over his shoulder. “We have plenty of time,” he argues, but it’s weak because they both know he’s never been good at keeping track of things that aren’t already divided into twenty-minute periods.

“Tell them that we are running very late because Shane Hollander is *moy dorogoy*,” he grins, flashing his teeth in a smarmy enough way that Shane’s rolling his eyes and coloring up automatically.

That’s something Ilya’s learned in Zürich: say something in Russian like it’s dirty, and Shane’s never going to demand a translation, probably too embarrassed by all the possibilities of what Ilya could have said. And Ilya can survive Shane thinking he’s calling him a desperate slut or something even worse, if it means he can really look at him and say *my beloved*, no follow-up questions asked.

It’s wrong, probably, to take advantage of the fact that Shane doesn’t speak the language that Ilya finds himself reaching for to convey his rawest emotions. It’s also become the only thing

keeping him sane since they started living together. If he couldn't release the pressure building up inside of him, he thinks he'd have blown it all back in October, September. Maybe earlier than that.

"Haha," Shane says, and then he accepts the call without looking at the ID. "Hello? This is Shane Hollander."

Ilya adjusts himself in his pants, splitting his attention between his own hands and Shane's face in case it really is the restaurant calling. He'd used Shane's telephone number to make the booking a few weeks ago. He'd been a bit stupid; he'd put down the reason for the occasion as *anniversary*. It'd felt like a joke at the time, given that today is technically the anniversary of the day Russia beat Canada to win the Prospect's Cup in 2010, but it feels like it lands wrong now. If the restaurant is calling Shane to ask about it. To confirm something or another.

"Wait, Hayds, I can't understand you, dude, slow down," Shane demands, and Ilya has a moment to feel the normal pang of irritation he feels when Pike rings Shane. It happens far too often, in Ilya's opinion. Doesn't Pike have children? A family? Shane is in Switzerland, it is not as if he has gone overseas to fight a *war*. He does not need to be looked after from afar. Ilya is here, from up close.

But before he can even paste his usual exaggerated and expected Hayden-Pike Grimace across his face, Shane blinks and takes a half-step backwards, like he's just taken a hit.

His eyebrows crease together. The smile lingering in the edges of his mouth melts away, like it was never there at all.

Ilya's chest constricts automatically; his heart beats once at its normal pace, lagging behind the stimuli his eyes have documented, and then it's in freefall, because Shane looks blindsided. No, he looks devastated.

"What is it, Hollander?" Ilya hears himself ask, and Shane's eyes snap to his like they're magnetized. His shoulders are at his ears, Ilya doesn't know if he's seen him breathe yet. His phone is still in his hand, fingers white-knuckle tight around it.

Something is wrong. Pike is still talking, and it's loud enough or maybe everything else is just suddenly quiet enough that Ilya can hear him. Not the words, but the steady blur of noise screeching through Shane's phone.

Something is wrong. Something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. Ilya knows it. He can feel it in his gut. He's felt it before. Like missing a step on the stairs but you never stop falling. There's a lurch and then nothing. There's a door, ajar by just a few inches that Ilya knows better than to push all the way open. But maybe he's still that child who pushed open the door anyway, even when he knew he shouldn't. Maybe he's still twelve years old, just grown up a bit more, because he takes a step closer to Shane.

Shane, who looks—

"Shane, what has happened?" Ilya asks, and it's not a plea except it is.

He should never have let Shane pick up that phone, he thinks nonsensically. They could have ignored this. This didn't have to happen if he didn't let Shane pick up the fucking phone. And now something is wrong because Shane looks—

“Yeah, I hear you,” Shane says, hollow, and his dark eyes are fixed on Ilya's face, roving over it like he's trying to find any hint of comfort he can. Ilya takes another step forward automatically, hands reaching out to offer it to him. He doesn't need to ask. He never needs to ask.

Hayden, okay. Ilya tries to think. Pin the thoughts down into some manageable order. Shane loves a plan, loves actionable items and things he can control. Ilya can do this for him if he needs it. Okay. Something is wrong with Hayden Pike. They will need a car. To the airport. Which means they will need a ticket. Ilya will need Shane's passport information to get him a ticket. They will need to talk to the coaches, mark Shane as a healthy scratch for the game.

Maybe for multiple games, because something is wrong and hearing about it has made Shane look wrecked, devastated, like the aftermath of a flood: everything you know and recognize and love is still there, but it's different now. Misplaced, broken into new and strange configurations.

“It is Hayden?” Ilya asks, unsure and wrong-footed. He cannot help if he doesn't know the problem, but Shane's still on the phone. “Is Pike okay, Shane? His family?”

Shane's eyes are wet. Ilya steps closer. There is nothing in the world strong enough to keep him away.

“Yeah,” Shane says into the phone, and he blinks. His eyes fall down, then up, then over Ilya's shoulder, and then he's turning away completely, *no, don't*, focusing on the other side of the entryway hall where they've hung a poster of a *New Yorker* cover—no frame, just fraying tape holding it up that Ilya's been meaning to replace for the last month and a half. He'll get to it later, it's fine. It's not important. Not right now, not when—

“Yeah,” Shane says, like he's agreeing with Ilya, but he's not even *looking* at him. “So excited, dude,” he adds in a monotone. “I'll let you know, alright? About dates. Soon though, I guess.”

His face is a mask when he hangs up his phone, and Ilya's stomach is a mess of knots. It's hard to breathe around the fierce desire to wrap his arms around Shane and hide him away from the world.

Shane blinks at him and opens his mouth. His eyes are still distant, even as they look straight at him, like he still hasn't quite come back to himself.

No, the coward in Ilya wants to say, even if it's useless. Even if it's too late. *No, wait, I don't want to know. Don't tell me, solnyshko. Please.*

“They've reached a deal,” Shane says, hollow. “The MLH and the Association.”

Ilya's heart lurches. His knees sting, carpet burn from the feeling of the rug being yanked out from beneath his feet.

"The lockout's over. They want the season to start by mid-January, so they're calling all the North Americans players back from Europe as soon as possible."

No. Nono.

"They'll call you too, soon," Shane says. But it's not Shane speaking. It's Hollander. It's the Captain of the Metros, face set into hard lines like he's staring down an opponent across a face-off circle. "Time to go home."

"But—" Ilya starts, but there's no good way to finish the sentence.

There's nothing to fucking say that would change any of it.

But I like living here with you. But I love you. But this is home. But we have dinner reservations. But I talked with Paolo and he agreed we could repaint the kitchen for him, get rid of the yellow you hate. I was thinking maybe blue, light blue, but you know it can be whatever makes you smile the softest. I was going to ask you about it tonight, I have already found a store that can send us swatches of options.

But, but, but.

But I don't want to go.

"I need to—I'm gonna take a walk," Shane decides, and his voice wavers. It makes Ilya's chest ache. He slides his phone in his pocket, tries to shove his feet into his shoes. He has to bend down to put them upright first though; when he'd kicked them earlier, one had landed sole-up on top of Ilya's boots.

Ilya bites at the inside of his cheek.

"Shane—"

"I need to call my mom," Shane says with a shake of his head. His hands are stuffed inside his pockets, and he glances at Ilya once before he turns away quickly, like it hurts to look at him. He grabs a jacket off the hook by the door; it's Ilya's. "I need to get tickets for the flight back. They want us back as soon as possible. We need to—to talk with the Lions. I need to pack."

There's an unfamiliar burning sensation at the backs of Ilya's eyes, and it gets worse with each word Shane says. "But," he tries to say, and Shane stops. He looks back at him, waiting with something like hope splashed across his face, like he thinks maybe Ilya can still save any of this if he can just find the right words to stop a moving train in its tracks.

But he can't. He can't find *any* words. Doesn't know if there's anything he can say in any language that would make Shane stay.

He can't stay. Neither of them can. They knew that going into this, that the moment the lockout ended, they'd be called back to the MLH and their teams, back to the way things are supposed to be. That this was a little slice of a summer's day that was never going to last the deep winter's freeze.

It doesn't matter that Ilya loves Shane and the way he can't ever remember to rinse out the milk container before throwing it out or put his shoes on the rack by the door when he takes them off. It doesn't matter that Ilya loves living here with him, that this little, ugly house in Zürich is the first home Ilya's ever really allowed himself to sink into. It doesn't matter that they have reservations for dinner tonight or that they have teammates they enjoy playing with or loose, nebulous plans to see the upcoming spy movie in theaters next week.

None of it matters. The MLH has reached a deal with the Players' Association, and the lockout is over.

This was always temporary and this is how it ends—with nothing left to say.

January, 2016.

JJ texts him around midnight, just a Youtube link and a series of laughing emojis.

Shane's awake even though he shouldn't be, because of course he's awake. Everything's fucked and his body's keeping score, even if his brain's trying to forget the how and the why's of it all.

The page loads slowly, and then it kicks into gear; the video plays automatically without Shane having to press anything.

Ilya smirks at him from the screen. He's partially undressed, hockey pads still on his shoulders and curls slicked back with sweat. He looks good. But then, he always looks good.

There's three microphones at the edges of the shot, beat reporters hungry for the first scoop of the season, and Ilya's entertaining all of them with the detached demeanor of a predator who's already gotten his fill of his kill and is allowing the other, lesser members of the pack to take their nibbles. Boston won, then. Shane knows it in his gut just from the way Ilya's holding himself.

"Ilya, how do you think the lockout will affect your team's chances this year?" One reporter asks, and Ilya turns to look in her direction, tilting his head this way and that as if he doesn't already know exactly what he's going to say.

He probably practiced the same script Shane had on his flight to Boston. He is probably so excited the lockout is over, so excited to be back in Boston, so excited to play with his team, so ready to skate on home ice and leave everything out there for the fans.

"I think if all teams play like Philadelphia now after lockout, then our chances are very good," Ilya says. *"Demonstrably."*

Shane bites hard at the inside of his cheek, feeling the word land like a physical blow. *Demonstrably*. Ilya's English has always been pretty good, as far as Shane's concerned, and he's listened to the subtle ways its improved and his confidence has grown every time they've met since 2009.

This is just the first time he's ever heard Ilya use a word that Shane was there to teach him. It feels like he's in on a secret, something only the two of them understand.

He wonders if Ilya was thinking about Shane when he said it, if he was remembering that night in October when he'd ruined a pan trying to make a fancy chicken dish to prove he was a better cook than Shane and how Shane had laughed himself sick but still helped him clean the kitchen while they waited for food to be delivered from the restaurant a few doors away.

I think it's safe to say one of us needs eyes on him at all times in the kitchen, Rozanov. And it's demonstrably not me.

Hollander, you can keep your eyes on me all you want. I will never complain about this.

"Ilya, you played hockey in Switzerland over the lockout, do you think that experience in a different league will affect your game now?" Another reporter asks, and Ilya shrugs, all long and languid and beautiful.

He doesn't hesitate before he answers though; he doesn't even pretend to. "I am better player now," he says. "It was a good experience. I learned a lot."

"What did you learn from having Shane Hollander as a roommate?" Someone asks, and the beat reporters chuckle and shift, swaying closer to Ilya like a rising tide.

For a moment, Ilya's face freezes in a half-smirk. It's such a small thing that Shane isn't sure anyone else can see it, and then in the next second, he's moving again, looking alive. His eyes are bright. "We shared a house, not a room," he tells the guy, scratching at his cheek before turning away slightly, obviously searching for another question. Obviously unwilling to talk about it. Obvious to Shane, maybe. Not to anyone else.

"How was it sharing a place with Shane then, Ilya?" A different reporter asks, shark in bloody waters maybe or just looking for any gossip she can find. "Didn't know they made houses big enough in Zürich to fit the rivalry between you two."

There's a new tension in Ilya's jaw, Shane thinks. He can feel a matching tightness in his own chest. Obviously he'd known people were going to ask about it. But it's one thing to *anticipate*. It's another thing altogether to *experience*.

Especially because it's not him staring down the question. It's Ilya. And that means Shane can't do anything about it except brace for impact.

Then Ilya smiles, a small sliver of a smirk that doesn't really reach his eyes. "We had quiet days," Ilya says in the video. "I am sure is normal with all roommates, no? We are not special."

“Oh,” Shane breathes, an exhale, and he doesn’t even mean to allow the sound to leave his mouth. It just does.

It’s not a lie. They’d had their share of adjustments, of *quiet days*, of learning to give space and give way. Once, back in November, they’d been so angry at each other that they’d only spoken in Russian and French all evening, even as they fucked on the couch in the living room. It wasn’t like it was perfect.

It’d just felt like it, more times than not.

“C’mon, man,” someone says on the video, “give us something. One thing.”

There are so many things Ilya could say, Shane knows it. Obviously not the sex stuff, which is a relief. Obviously, he’s not going to tell Johnson from PuckNet that by the end of December, Shane’d hated sleeping alone so much that he’d risked catching Ilya’s flu just to curl up next to him in his bed.

Or that they’d accidentally swapped over half their closet of athleisure wear without even realizing it and a teammate had to point out that a shirt Shane wore to practice once had Cyrillic on the back.

Or that Shane hated mornings even if he always forced himself out of bed before the sun rose and it took him two cups of coffee before he felt human, but they discovered in November it only took three soft morning kisses from Ilya to make him feel human again.

Like, obviously Ilya isn’t going to tell Chester from Crease Talk about the morning kisses.

But Shane’s chest feels tight like he is. It isn’t—he doesn’t—

On the screen, Ilya is looking thoughtful. “Hollander is a very good roommate,” he says finally, firmly, like he’s daring someone to argue. Shane’s mouth is dry. “I liked living with him in Zürich, was good experience. Less good experience almost tripping over shoes by the door every morning, but it has made me best skater in the league, I think. It sharpened all my reflexes.”

“Hollander’s shoes?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, and he scratches at his cheek again, glances down and away from the reporter with the very first smile that looks real curving softly across his face. “He takes them off and leaves them at the door. Right in front of the door, always. First time, I told him we are on same team now, no need to try and kill me with broken neck. Second time, I put them away for him in nice, convenient shoe-rack also by the door, and he thinks I stole them.”

Shane’s stomach flips over itself, and he lurches upright in bed, half-afraid that he’s going to be sick.

With shaking fingers, he exits the video, leaves JJ’s text unanswered, and tosses the phone facedown on his bed.

There are a thousand things Ilya could have said, and it's not like the story he picked is *bad* or anything. It's probably one of the best things Ilya could have mentioned, if Shane's thinking about it logically. It's harmless, the sort of small everyday annoyance that housemates learn to live with. It probably, like, *humanizes* Shane or something like that. He could have said way worse, something that would feed into all the conversations on Twitter that are always happening about how weird and frigid and stiff Shane is off the ice.

He could have said that Shane hated having his food touch on his plate or hung up all his clothes to dry as soon as the washing machine was finished so nothing got wrinkled or folded his socks or vacuumed every Sunday before lunch. He could have been crueler, maybe.

They hadn't talked about it. What they were going to say when people asked them about living together. Apparently, it wouldn't be enough to gloss over it. Apparently everyone wanted the details, one thing, just a little small thing they could pull apart and write articles about and tweet about and repurpose and repackage and sell.

So Ilya didn't—it wasn't *wrong*, the answer he gave. It was probably a perfect answer, but Shane feels wrong anyway. Small and unstable, like a glass teetering on the very edge of a counter.

It's just shoes. But it's theirs. It was theirs, and now it's everyone's.

He's grabbing his phone and calling Ilya before he knows what he's doing, hands working on instinct to reach out for the person his body's spent the past week crying for.

And even though it must be past midnight now, Ilya picks up within three rings.

For a moment, they just blink at each other through their cameras, both maybe equally taken aback at the sudden reappearance of the other.

"Shane, hi," Ilya says. He looks tired. There are dark shadows under his eyes, ones that Shane had thought were the results of a bad camera angle or shit lighting in the Boston locker room. Except he's taken them home with him now. He looks like he hasn't been sleeping well.

The background behind him is flooded with lights, despite the late hour. He has a streak of something that looks like creamed butter across one cheek, and his curls are being pushed off his forehead and held back by a bandana that makes his hair stick straight out. It's ridiculous. He looks ridiculous.

Shane's throat feels so fucking tight, it's hard for him to breathe, and each breath he manages to drag in feels shallow, like it can only fill him halfway up. He hasn't felt like this since he left Ottawa for the first time to play in Calgary as a teenager.

Homesick. It's the only word he knows to describe the feeling. It's a relief to be able to label it, but that does nothing to cure it.

"Hey," he says, clearing his throat. "Um, sorry. For calling, I don't think I meant to."

It's lame, the words weak, and he doesn't know what he'll do if Ilya calls him on it. If he says, *okay, then hang up*.

But Ilya doesn't, which is kind of him. His eyebrows furrow, and he works his jaw as he stares at the camera. He used to look like that doing crosswords too, out on their little balcony in Zürich. Hayden had sent Shane across the ocean with a book of easy crosswords for the trip out there, '*something normal people do on planes when there's no game tape to review, buddy*,' and Ilya had appropriated it sometime in early October.

Is good for the mind, Ilya had said once, primly, flipping from the current puzzle he'd been working on to the back where the answers were. He'd only ever write down a word once he'd confirmed he was right, and then he'd written it down in pen. It'd driven Shane crazy. It'd probably been one of the things that made him fall in love with him, in the end.

That's how Ilya's looking at him now though, like Shane's a puzzle to be solved. Like he's trying to translate a clue he's been given into the right language to understand it.

"You can always call me," Ilya finally says, slowly and carefully, like it's important.

Shane huffs and rubs at his eyes, like that'll dissipate the tightness he can feel building behind them. "We never did though," he points out. "Before."

Before Zürich. Before Switzerland. Before they learned the ins and outs of each other and all their small, inconsequential shortcomings and endearing habits.

Before the lockout, Shane never would have called Ilya Rozanov. They texted, infrequently and mostly about the sex they were planning to have, sometimes about the hockey if the hockey was good enough or bad enough to be worth mentioning. They didn't talk about anything else. Back then, Shane didn't know about the way the tip of Ilya's tongue stuck out of his mouth when he tied his skates up, and Ilya didn't know about the shoes.

"I saw your interview," Shane rushes to say before Ilya can reply. He can't figure out what Ilya will say, and the not-knowing is the dangerous part. The only thing worse would be the knowing.

Ilya hums. He moves, sinks down onto something. It's weird that Shane doesn't know what Ilya's house looks like. They've never—it's weird, is all. Every time Shane closes his eyes, he can see the mismatched furniture of their house, the light green of their duvet cover and the fiery orange of the throw blanket on top of it. But he can't picture what color sheets Ilya's are in his actual house, his Boston home. He tries to picture it now, but he can only see him wrapped up in green.

"I score one goal and get two points in the first MLH game of the season," Ilya says. He sounds as tired as he looks, but he also sounds soft. Teasing. "And Shane Hollander calls to talk about interview I give where I mention him. This is very narcissistic behavior, *solnyshko*."

Shane's ears burn, which is either in response to the nickname he doesn't understand or the way Ilya's *right*. Shane doesn't want to talk about hockey. He wants to talk about—

About—

“You told them about the shoes,” he says. It’s mostly a whisper. The words don’t want to leave his throat, but he forces them past his teeth anyway. They can’t stay inside of him, there’s not enough room in the tight crevice his chest has become.

On the FaceTime, Ilya blinks and leans forward like he can’t help himself. It’s just a few inches though; it’s nothing compared to the kilometers separating them. “You are upset,” he says. Not a question.

“No, I’m not,” Shane says. It’s a lie as much as it isn’t. He isn’t upset, because it’s a harmless story. And it’s not even *bad*, it’s the definition of a harmless media soundbite, the kind he’s been trained to give out since he was sixteen. The kind Ilya’s been reciting for just as long.

But before it was a media bite, it was just theirs. And now it’s not, and if Shane’s upset, which he’s not, but if he *were*, then it’s because—because he doesn’t want to share. Not any of the pieces he has of Ilya. They’re his. It’s all he has left of him, except for phone calls and bi-annual hook-ups. Maybe when they play Boston, he’ll invite him to his house. But it won’t be the same. One of them will always be the guest. Zürich will get further and further away, trapped in the rearview mirror, an anomaly and a memory, and Shane will spend the rest of this season standing in front of the post-game scrum and having to share small fragments of the Ilya he knew there with the world.

It’s what’s expected.

But suddenly he can’t think of anything he wants to tell them. Anything he’d want Ilya to say. All of it should be kept safe. Bundled away. The shoes and the crossword and the potato peeler and the New Yorker poster Ilya had been thrilled to find in a market stall back in November.

Ilya rakes his hand through his hair on the screen, which pushes his bandana off his head, but he doesn’t look angry. He just looks the way he did when Hayden had called to let him know that the lockout was over.

Helpless. Frustrated. At a loss, which is exactly how Shane’s been feeling since he got back to Montreal. Like he’s toeing the edge of a loss so enormous he can’t bear to wrap his head around it.

“We did not talk about it before,” Ilya says, exhaling in a rush of air. “I did not know what to say when they kept asking. I’m sorry, Shane, if the story was--”

“No, don’t—” Shane interrupts, shakes his head. “Don’t apologize. It’s stupid. *I’m* sorry, I know—it’s stupid. It’s me.”

“Hollander,” Ilya says, and Shane instantly misses the *Shane* the way he misses the man who’s saying it, “we are not dating. Tell me what you are thinking, do not tell me *it’s not you, is me.*”

But Shane doesn't know what he's thinking. He doesn't even know why he called. Or at least, he can't think of a good enough reason to tell Ilya, one that would be the truth but still be survivable to say.

Ilya said it himself: they're not dating. It's a necessary reality check, even though he's had checks on the ice that have hurt less slamming into him.

But at least there's this boundary. This line he can build his emotions against and make sure he doesn't cross.

He clears his throat, buys himself some time. "You have, uh. Something on your cheek," he tells Ilya, tapping just beneath his own eye. "Are you baking?"

Ilya gives him the sort of incredulous look the question warrants, but he leans closer to the camera to look at his face himself. He swipes his finger through the line of yellow. It smears slightly. "No," he says. "I am painting."

Shane blinks. "You paint?"

"You have seen me paint, Shane," Ilya reminds him, and it's so sweet to hear the *Shane* again that he doesn't even register the eye roll. "I made those very pretty watercolors for our Christmas cards."

Pretty is a bit of an overstatement, from what Shane can remember. Still, "Yeah, I know, but that wasn't at—" he peers at the clock by his bed. "12:17 in the morning."

"I am an artist," Ilya says with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "Inspiration strikes no matter the hour. You would not understand this, of course. Too hockey-brained."

It's ridiculous enough that Shane lets out a huff of laughter, and Ilya grins at him like he's won something. It's a disarming sort of smile, or maybe Shane's just so fucking in love with Ilya Rozanov that every smile he gives him makes him want to start tearing down his defenses.

He pulls his knees up to his chest so he can rest his chin on them and admits, quietly, "I've been having trouble sleeping too," because he can't think of another reason Ilya would be out of bed and *painting* after a hockey game. He must have practice tomorrow. He looks tired, like he wants to be asleep. Maybe his body is being stubborn too.

The words linger in the air between them, and Ilya's face softens into something Shane recognizes from Zürich but doesn't know how to handle in Montreal.

"It's the jetlag," he says quickly, an expert in pulling back after so many months of forcing himself to learn how.

"The jetlag," Ilya repeats, and then he nods, like the word makes sense. "Okay."

He doesn't say anything else and neither does Shane. The silence feels awkward now, tense and heavy with something unsustainable. Ilya still has yellow paint on his cheek. It looks

more mustardy now that Shane's looking at it closely. Less creamy. It reminds him of their kitchen in Zürich, that awful color that'd been spread over the walls and the cabinets, the color that Ilya had cheerfully called *cat vomit spread over a Nashville Night Stalker's jersey*, like it was the best thing he'd ever seen.

Shane doesn't want to think about this. It's probably not healthy. It's definitely not productive.

This time though, Ilya beats him to the punch before he can make his excuses. "I should go," Ilya says. He looks off-camera and then back at Shane. "I must go watch paint dry," he adds. "Is very thrilling. Definitely more fun than talking with you."

"Haha," Shane says, but he can feel the way his lips tug up in an honest smile. He doesn't even try to hide it; that feels dishonest. This is Ilya's. It belongs to him.

"Goodnight, Hollander," Ilya says, and Shane's transported back a week, a month, two months. Back to every time Ilya would say the same thing before turning off the lamp by the bed and kissing Shane on the forehead or the cheek or the nose, like those sorts of kisses had to be reserved for absolute darkness.

Goodnight, Hollander, he'd say, and then he'd slip into bed next to him and tug him into his arms like Shane wasn't almost six foot and two hundred pounds of muscle himself. Like he was something to be held through the night and into the morning.

It's that memory that loosens the words in Shane's throat. He pushes them free, gives them up to Ilya in a voice that sounds small to his own ears. "Don't tell them about the shoes," he says, and Ilya blinks, confused maybe.

Maybe Shane can play this off as just him being private. He *is* private. He doesn't like it when the media scrum pushes for more of him than he wants to give. He's wanted to play good hockey since he was a kid; someone else had to tell him that meant being a household name too.

But it's not the whole truth, and the Ilya that kisses him on the eyelids after whispering *goodnight*, that Ilya deserves the whole truth. Doesn't he? "It's ours," he says, and he wants to wince when he hears the way his voice wavers. "It was our house."

It borders on nonsensical. And it's definitely not a solution for the next time it happens, because of course they're going to be asked again, and of course they're not going to be allowed to say nothing. To ask for privacy in this trying time or whatever. It's stupid and it's illogical. Shane isn't doing anything other than throwing a fit like a little kid who hasn't been given his way, but it feels important to say all the same. It's true. It was their house. Only theirs.

"It was," Ilya agrees, just as quietly. His crossword expression is back, but it's softer this time. Like he can't help it either. He takes a breath and then exhales it slowly, a sigh that makes him concave, shoulders slumping inwards. "Okay, Shane. You are right. We will think of something to tell them, but—I will not say anything about your stupid shoes."

“And I won’t say anything about the hat-trick of stupid basil plants you killed,” Shane says. It’s the first thing he can think of, and he says it like it’s a joke, but even as the words leave his mouth he knows he’d never tell anyone about Ilya’s bad luck with houseplants and herbs, his stubborn black thumb that had him killing every plant he brought home. The threat’s empty; he’s already decided that that’s his too.

But it makes Ilya laugh a little, even though he still looks so tired. Just around the eyes. “Good,” he says. “You are right. That would be terrible for people to know. I have a reputation as lady killer, not plant killer.”

“Ha,” Shane says. He hopes it sounds less hollow than he suddenly feels, or at least that Ilya’s not paying close enough attention to him to notice. “Alright, well. It’s late, you gotta be tired, so. I’ll let you go now.”

Which, Shane is learning, is easy as fuck to say and so much harder to do than he ever imagined.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

ok ok so on one hand, yes, updated chapter count so this is still not the end where they make up and talk to each other like adults who are in love

on the other hand,,,,,10k of more yearning??? international yearning even!!

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

December, 2015.

The team's primary physician takes one look at him and rules that Ilya has a mild case of the flu.

Ilya thinks that's an overblown diagnosis; at most, he has a very severe cold. He is good to keep playing. They're running up against their short winter break, only two more games before the Christmas holiday, and Ilya doesn't have the time for influenza. He has hockey practice.

"If this was the Raiders, they would give me a bottle of Gatorade mixed with three shots of Dayquil and send me out on a double shift," Ilya complains to Shane from the inside of his blanket cocoon. They're on the couch, Ilya stretched out over the majority of it with Shane pressed up against the arm. "But no, this is Switzerland. They care about *health* and *wellbeing*. This is travesty. Why care about *health* when you should care about *hockey*?"

Shane hums, which Ilya hates because he has no hope of understanding what Shane's thinking if Shane refuses to speak at all. He peeks over the mound of blankets he's wrapped himself up in to look at him. Shane's on his phone, scrolling through something with a serious, pinched expression on his face.

Ilya is dying, next to him, and he's on his *phone*.

"Ow, *Ilya*," Shane yelps, offended, the moment Ilya kicks him in the thigh. "What the fuck, dude?"

"Do not call me dude, I have had your cock in my mouth," Ilya says stiffly. "You are going to make me sick all over you."

He's mostly joking, even though he also isn't. *Dude* is very far down on the list of names he prefers Shane calling him, especially now that he's heard the way he says *Ilya*.

But Shane jolts up in his seat like Ilya's being serious. His hand falls to hold onto Ilya's ankle through the throw-blanket, a steady weight that makes Ilya feel strangely anchored within his

body. “Shit, Ilya, you should have said something, I can—let me get a bowl from the kitchen.”

He’s on his feet then, phone discarded on the couch cushion behind him and hands fluttering in front of him, like he can’t decide what he wants to do with them. It’s cute in a way that makes Ilya tuck his smile into the safety of the blanket.

“What bowl, do you think, I mean—there’s that salad bowl? Or one of the mixing ones. Or —”

“Hollander, sit, you are making me dizzy,” Ilya demands, reaching up and tugging on the hem of Shane’s sweater. It’s black, loose-knit, totally unremarkable, except Ilya thinks it technically belonged to him first.

Shane has ruined it though, stretched out the sleeves because he likes pulling them over his hands when he’s thinking or when he’s nervous or when he’s bored. This doesn’t matter much to Ilya; he can keep it if it means Ilya will see him wear it again. It looks better on him, anyway.

“I am okay, it has passed,” Ilya says when Shane hesitates. “Is just a cold, *zaychik*. I will not ruin our nice salad bowl because of a cold.”

“You wouldn’t *ruin* it, we’d clean it out,” Shane mutters, but he sits back down. Well, he pushes the loose blankets further into the crease between Ilya’s body and the couch first, tucking him in. Then he sits down, as if that was a normal thing to do and a simple thing to survive.

Ilya has to focus very hard on the thread of their conversation so he doesn’t do something very stupid, like beg for more. Beg for another soft touch, another glimpse into the great well of tenderness Shane Hollander is capable of bestowing upon people. Ilya feels strung-out, desperate, starving, aching for more, for *again*.

He clears his throat, which he can at least pretend is related to his cold. “We could wash it many times, *solnyshko*, and you would never eat from it again. Don’t lie to me. I am sick, I am not stupid.”

“So you admit you’re sick,” Shane says, triumphant and resplendent in his petty little victory.

They have been arguing about this for two days now. Ilya thinks he has a cold; Shane thinks he’s contracted the black plague. The Lions’ team doctor weighing in with his diagnosis of *influenza* was a devastating blow to Ilya’s argument, but it’s also *his* body. He knows it better than anyone else.

“Did I say that? I did not say that,” Ilya says, rubbing his cheek over the scratchy fabric of the blanket. He’d taken it from their bed this morning; it smells like them, wisps of Ilya’s aftershave mixed with the powder-mint scent of Shane’s deodorant.

“You literally *just—ugh*, ” Shane cuts himself off with a disgusted noise that makes Ilya grin. He doesn’t bother to hide it this time, hopes it’s smarmy enough that Shane doesn’t notice all the love that is surely bubbling up underneath it.

“Did I? I do not remember this. I have a bad case of brain fog, due to my mild cold-like symptoms, you know this,” Ilya sniffs, but he kicks out his feet until he can push the edges of his toes under Shane’s thigh. “Don’t be mean, *solnyshko*. I am *vulnerable*.”

Shane scoffs something under his breath that sounds like *I’ll show you mean*, but if Ilya is supposed to take this as a threat, then it’s missed the mark completely. Mostly because Shane has shifted on the couch again, dragging Ilya’s feet into his lap and pressing his fingers against the knob of his ankle bone.

Time passes in a slippery, syrupy blur after that, afternoon sun unspooling in front of him and the early evening darkness of Zürich creeping through the living room’s windows. Ilya has difficulty keeping his eyes open. He doesn’t even know why he’s fighting against the tug of sleep; his body feels exhausted and his eyelids are heavy weights impossible to hold up.

Except Shane still has his fingers wrapped gently around his ankle, thumb stroking occasionally, almost absentmindedly, over the knitted material of his sock, and falling asleep for even a moment would mean missing this. So really, it is an easy trade to make.

Shane has his phone in front of him again. The pinched, serious expression is back, and Ilya thinks if he had more energy in his hands and a more steadfast place in Shane’s affections, he’d feel brave enough to reach across the couch and smooth out the wrinkle between his eyebrows.

“What are you looking at?” he asks instead, groggy and hoarse and from the peripherals of Shane’s life.

“Hm?” Shane’s eyes dart to him before his attention is back on his phone, thumbs flying over his keyboard. Ilya scowls. If Shane is texting Hayden Pike while Ilya is *dying*, then Ilya is never going to let it go. But then, “Oh, I asked my mom about something.”

Ilya waits, but Shane doesn’t say anything else, like he thinks that’s enough of an answer.

He is so stupid sometimes. So pretty, but so stupid if he thinks Ilya doesn’t want to know everything about him, all the time. He props his head up on his fist and raises his eyebrows, impatient. “Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s uh—” Shane’s eyes are steady on the phone, but his cheeks are growing steadily darker. Embarrassed. “So my dad’s mom has this recipe for chicken noodle soup he always made when I was sick as a kid?” It’s not really a question, but Shane says it like one anyway. “And it always made me feel better when I was sick—”

“I am not sick—”

“*When I was sick*, so I’m...trying to track it down.”

Ilya blinks. “You are texting your mother about me,” he says, which is not what he means to say at all. It’s far too honest and far too clunky in English syllables. Things like this are reserved for Russian, late at night, when Shane is mostly asleep under the blankets and in his arms.

“I’m texting my mother about chicken noodle soup,” Shane corrects, but his ears are turning red and he hasn’t blinked at his phone screen in a while. “Dad’s at work right now, he won’t get off for hours, so I’m hoping she has it.”

Ilya opens his mouth and then closes it again. Shane’s words sink heavy like a grenade in his gut before flickering out, going supernova.

Shane is texting his mother about Ilya. Shane has decided that there is urgency in this, that he doesn’t want to wait for David Hollander to check his phone during the work day because he needs this now. Chicken noodle soup. No one has ever made this for Ilya in his life.

“Oh,” he finally says, because he thinks it’s all he’s capable of in the moment.

“Yeah,” Shane says, and he looks at him from the corner of his eyes, like he isn’t sure if this is okay.

Ilya isn’t sure if it’s okay either, but he thinks maybe for different reasons. He thinks maybe for very different reasons.

He forces himself to drop back down onto the couch. “I could eat,” he tells the blank television screen in front of him.

“Yeah?” Shane asks, but there’s relief in his tone. He can do something now, which is where he thrives. Hollander is not made for waiting around. “It doesn’t look complicated or anything, and I thought I could make some adjustments, you know. Keep it low-sodium, use bone broth and chickpea pasta for higher protein.”

“Oh my god, Hollander,” Ilya groans, because it’s the safest thing to say, even though it’s incredibly difficult to summon even a flicker of irritation to drape over his words. “I am sick, I should not have to think about protein right now.”

Shane squeezes his ankle. “So you admit you *are* sick.”

Ilya groans again, louder. “I am sick of *you*, Hollander,” he says, but he pushes his legs further into Shane’s lap just in case Shane thinks about taking him seriously. He pauses and then adds, very quietly, “And maybe a little sick with the flu also, yes.”

He doesn’t realize he’s holding his breath after the admission until his chest begins to ache from it. This is not like him. He does not do this, does not laze about in the living room when he is feeling poorly. Either he forces himself to push through the illness like it is not there at all, or he holes up in his room until the worst of the storm has passed.

There has never been someone to stroke over his ankle before; there has never been the promise of chicken noodle soup.

Vulnerable, he said, and it'd been a joke then but it doesn't feel much like a joke now. No one's laughing. There is just an audience of two.

He braces for Shane to say something triumphant, like *I told you so*, like *I knew it*, like *you've never fooled me once in your life*. Then, even worse, he braces himself for what Shane will surely say next: *I think I should probably sleep in my room tonight. You should probably go back to yours. Quarantine, you know. I don't want to catch what you have.*

But Shane doesn't say any of those things. It's a bit like a gift from the universe and the worst thing in the world, what he does say. "Okay," he tells him. And then, "Chicken noodle soup will help."

It sounds a lot like *let me take care of you*, and Ilya is far too weak when it comes to Shane Hollander to say the smart thing, the survivable thing, which is, of course, *no*.

February, 2016.

It'd felt like a good idea at the time. A win against the Minnesota Yonder had put them all in a good mood. It hadn't been clean or pretty, a fight right until the buzzer, but they'd come out of it 3-2. First win of the season, never mind that it's already February.

Things like that need to be celebrated, especially in times like these, when the locker room feels suffocating in its quietness, no one really clicking the way they should be and the rookies looking around like they're thinking, *wait, this is what I've been wanting my whole life?*

So it'd felt like a good idea at the time, to volunteer his house up for a feel-good team get-together, the day after Minnesota slinks back across the border. He'd checked the schedule even though he already had it memorized: they didn't have another game for three days and their next practice was pretty easy to get the coaches to change to *optional* once Shane told them why. Everyone was worried about the Metros this season. It was just on Shane to fix it.

And he'd thought—maybe it would help. Him.

If he hosted other people in his house, maybe it'd stop feeling so empty. So strange and unfamiliar. Even just for a night.

And then maybe he'd stop feeling so empty and strange and unfamiliar in his own body, and things would unfuck themselves and he'd remember that he had a *team*, guys he liked playing with. That he had *hockey*, still, always.

Maybe one night surrounded by his teammates would be enough to break him out of the mess of thoughts his head's become, and tomorrow, getting out of bed won't feel like going over the boards in a game against Vegas—like he's just waiting for the dirty hit to put him out and take him down.

So it'd seemed like a good idea. Team mixer at the captain's house. Bring your girlfriend, bring your wife, your friend, whatever. Skate tomorrow's been changed to optional, but let's

not get too crazy, okay?

But now that it's happening, that Shane's in the midst of it, he just wants everyone gone.

He just wants a moment to breathe, preferably alone, in his bed, with the lights off and a pillow pressed up around his head.

"And *then*, Panky gets an *Albatross*, Cap," Lachlan Pucey, #22, is telling him excitedly, throwing his hand up into the air. Thankfully, it's not the one with the beer bottle in it—though, at this point, the floor's already sticky and gross. What's one more Corona going to do, big picture wise? "I mean, he told me he was good, so, like, I knew that going out there and especially when I turn up for tee time and the fucker's carrying his own clubs, but an *albatross*, man? I was hitting above par every hole. Was fucking *embarrassing*."

"Yeah," Shane says, nodding and widening his eyes enough to convey his genuine interest, understanding, and investment in the conversation. "Wow. I mean..."

Hayden coughs and leans closer to Shane so he can mutter into his ear, "Albatross means three under par." He pauses then adds, "which means the kid's good."

"Three under par," Shane says to Lachlan, shaking his head. "I didn't realize Panky had a good swing like that."

"He's the best," Lachlan agrees, putting his bottle down on the counter. Probably the best idea he's had his whole life. His face is already red, eyes sort of dazed. Shane's going to make sure someone knows where he lives so they can watch until he gets home safe. Should he make up his couch for him? No, there's two guest bedrooms. He could have one of those. "Fucking annoying, but fucking A too."

"Hey, rookie," Hayden says, and he reaches out to clap a hand up against Lachlan's shoulder. "Go get Hollzy another drink, yeah? Something from the cooler by the door." He waits until Lachlan nods, eager. "Good kid, thanks, Bagsy. Get yourself some water while you're at it, too."

"Maybe you should be wearing the C, not me," Shane says as they both watch the rookie scamper away. He's only mostly joking.

"Nah," Hayden says immediately, which is sort of nice. "Drunk rookies are just easy. Like talking to Ruby and Jade, and they're two."

Shane shakes his head, but he can feel himself smiling. "Didn't look so easy talking to Ruby and Jade during the lockout," he says. "I think everytime you called me, there was a kid crying in the background."

"Yeah," Hayden says. He's glowing when he says it. "Best fucking months of my life, man."

"Yeah," Shane echoes, and his throat is dry. The feeling is back, unignorable. He just wants to be alone, which isn't really what he wants at all, but he knows he can't have what he wants so the next best thing is to have nothing.

Best fucking months of my life.

Yeah. Pretty much. That's the whole fucking problem.

Hayden's looking at him from the corner of his eyes. He's been doing that since the lockout ended. Shane isn't sure what he's looking for; he's not sure he wants him to find it either.

So he clears his throat and takes a sip of the drink in his hand. It's something absolutely rancid, a mix of at least three different alcohols that Shane definitely didn't own before tonight. "Which one is Panky, by the way?" he asks, the first thing that comes to his mind.

"Hank Crawford," Hayden supplies, and Shane gives a little nod of recognition. Crawford, #8, the rookie D-man the Metros signed before the lockout. American, from somewhere down south in the sticks, between the Carolina Tempest and the Florida Cougars. Maybe Shane's supposed to know this already. Maybe more than the losing streak he hasn't managed to pull them out of, this is what makes him a terrible captain. The unfamiliarity he's let sink into the locker room. This is supposed to be his team. It's not supposed to feel like—like a placeholder for something Shane can never get back.

"*Hanky Panky's* pretty cruel," he says and he takes another sip to try and loosen the words from his mouth. "Do we need to sit everyone down for a talk about workplace harrassment? Been a few years since the last one."

"Nah," Hayden replies, and he tips his chin up towards the living room. Shane follows his gaze; Lachlan—Bagsy?—has apparently gotten distracted on his journey back to them. He's been waylaid over in the opposite corner of the living room. A new bottle's in one hand, and his other arm is slung around Crawford's shoulder like it's the most natural place for it to be in the entire world.

Crawford, for his part, is splitting his time studying the bookshelf in front of him, the room around him, and the boy at his side. His gaze lingers longest on Lachlan though, like everything else around him is just something he has to muscle his way through before he can look at him again.

Shane blinks and then looks away. It's hard to swallow around the sinking feeling in his gut. He just wants to be alone, but his house is full of people and none of them is the right person, but they're all he has. This was a terrible idea; he should have known it would be.

It's been forty-one days since the lockout ended. There's probably someone else in the house now. Not an intruder, not a trespasser. Just someone who got the keys from Paolo, who belongs there. It's not Shane's anymore; it's not Ilya's. The tenses have shifted—the possessives have changed.

I live there, that's our house. We lived there once; it's theirs now.

Shane wonders if the new tenant has realized they have to kick the radiator a few times before it rattles to life. Maybe they've got someone beside them who's so warm they haven't even needed to reach for the thermostat yet. Someone they can curl up next to under a blanket

during the coldest nights of the year. He wonders how long the new tenants will live there. If they know. If it'll feel like long enough when it's time for them to leave.

"Rest of us call him Crawdad, cause *we're* not assholes," Hayden is saying when Shane wrenches his attention back to Montreal. He's still looking over the rim of his cup at the pair of rookies by the bookcase. "And I'm pretty sure he'd let *that* asshole call him anything he wants."

"Well," Shane says, and then he doesn't say anything else because he can't figure out what there is *to* say.

Maybe they should have left notes about all the little inconveniences of that place for the new tenants. It would have been polite, surely. *The faucet in the kitchen drips. The stove's shit, don't even try the back-burner, you'd honestly have better luck building a fire. The coffee table is at the perfect height to bruise your shins on about nine times a week. And say a prayer before you shower if you want a shot at getting decent water pressure.*

"I guess that explains how Lachlan got a golfing buddy in February when there's snow on the ground," Shane says lamely, putting his drink down on the counter in front of him. He feels sort of sick, which means it's time to stop drinking.

Hayden grins, but he has a look on his face that Shane doesn't like. "As opposed to what you do in February, which is go skating. In an ice rink. When there's snow on the ground."

"Oh fuck you," Shane says, shoving lightly at Hayden's shoulder. This is normal, this is good. He can be normal. He can be good. "At least it's an indoor skating rink. Crawford and Pucey were probably freezing their asses off by the ninth hole."

"Nah, I think they were fine," Hayden says. "But good job on your golf lingo there, buddy. You're learning."

Maybe Shane should have left a list for the new tenant. Maybe he should have taken a few minutes and written out all of the things they'd need to know to live there. Things like: *the doorknob is weird, you have to lift and twist it to lock it. And: don't use the salad bowl for food, someone vomited in it a few months ago. We kept forgetting to get a new one. And: the dishwasher works, but it goes faster if you have two people in the kitchen—one to wash and one to dry.*

And, of course: *the bedroom on the east side (red duvet) is drafty. The sun is too bright and sudden when it hits the pillow. There's a smell in the closet there you can't get rid of. It looks over the main thoroughfare, so it's very noisy. All of these excuses will work if you need to figure out a way to worm yourself into the other bedroom on the west side (green duvet). Eventually, maybe, the other occupant will stop asking and you'll just be able to crawl into his arms with no clothing or pretense between you.*

Maybe he should have sat down and written about all the small things there were to love there, too. Just to cover all his bases. *Sit out on the balcony in the morning when it's sunny. Cold as fuck and it smells like cigarettes, but it's sort of beautiful to watch people you don't know walk by below. The place is good for a party, but not for a very big one. Can fit fifteen*

to twenty hockey players maximum. If you put one of those bottle-green vases on the little table next to the armchair in the living room, the sun hits it about two in the afternoon at just the right angle to dilute the color across the floor. It's the perfect match for Ilya Rozanov's eyes—it'll probably take you a few months to realize, but it'll be your favorite color by the end of the first week.

Maybe it would have been good to get it all out. Write it down and pass it along. Like how people on Instagram say you should write letters to your exes and burn them. Maybe the smoke wouldn't even sting Shane's eyes that much. Maybe it would, but it'd feel good to cry a little. Maybe Shane would have less ghosts hovering in the peripherals of his vision if he just did an exorcism and got it over with.

"Hey, uh," Hayden says. He clears his throat and purposefully relaxes back into the counter they're standing next to. He's got his eyes straight forward, focused on where JJ's holding court in front of Shane's television, a ring of young guys around him and a handful of playing cards spread out before him. It looks like he's doing Tarot with a Bicycle deck, but then Shane's never claimed to be up on the latest party games.

He glances at Hayden then mirrors his posture, picking his glass back up just so he can have something to do with his hands. There's a strange, new weight to the air between them now that wasn't there before. Hayden's lips have started twitching—not with a smile or a frown, exactly, but like he's picking through options of what to say and sounding them out in his mouth first.

It's a facial quirk usually reserved for dire straits or pregnancy announcements.

"So I'm only gonna ask you this once, alright," Hayden tells the used lime wedge resting on the cutting board in front of them. "And then, like. I won't push it after."

He turns his head and squints at the side of Shane's face, Shane can feel the pressure of his gaze.

He doesn't—can't—won't look at him. He can't even breathe, really. What does Hayden want to know? What has he guessed at? What does he already know? What—

"Should I be worried about you, man?"

Shane blinks; he processes the question on a delay, already flinching away from Hayden like he's spat out a curse. It takes a moment for his brain to catch up, after the words land. "Uh, what?"

"Like, are you okay?" Hayden asks, and now he turns his whole body towards Shane, feigned indifference apparently tossed out the window. "Cause I'm gonna be honest, man, I'm not really convinced."

The used lime wedge is really interesting, actually. There's two, now that Shane's looking, one was just squeezed so hard it's basically shriveled up into a husk. "I didn't realize I was supposed to be convincing you," Shane tells the bigger lime wedge. "About anything."

His chest loosens in increments. Hayden doesn't know about the—the Rozanov Thing. Okay. This is survivable, then. No matter what else Hayden wants to talk about. It's something Shane can survive.

"Bud, *Jackie's* worried about you and she saw you for about ten minutes after the Pittsburgh game."

"Okay, well, I'm *definitely* not supposed to be convincing your wife of anything, dude," Shane says and then he drinks heavily from the cup in his hand. It still tastes like shit, but fighting his instinctive desire to hurl is a good distraction from this. Whatever this is.

When he lowers his glass, Hayden is still looking at him. Not glaring, not scowling. He's just there, staring. His attention is heavy. He doesn't even pretend to be satisfied when Shane shrugs, rolls his head in a tight circle, and gestures weakly into the air in front of him, the universal gesture for, *Dude! C'mon. Seriously?!*

"Dude, c'mon," Hayden says. "Seriously. It's just a question."

"Is it? Feels like a fucking—interrogation, I don't know," he snaps back, even though he knows it's unfair. That Hayden's just—trying to be a good friend. Trying to be there for him, any way he can. Same way he whispers golf terminology in Shane's ear during boring conversations so Shane doesn't look like an idiot; same way Shane fast-forwards through game tape of Hayden when he's in a scoring drought and they both already know what he's gotta do better; same way Shane picked him up once, height of their Cup Summer, with two crying babies in the backseat, and he drove around Quebec until his gas tank ran empty and all three Pikes were asleep and drooling on themselves in his car.

Good friends rarely accept a *Dude! C'mon. Seriously?* at face value.

Which is really fucking annoying sometimes.

"I don't know how I could have made this any easier for you, bud, I'm gonna be honest," Hayden is saying, waving around at their surroundings. "We're drinking, it's loud and no one's paying attention to us, practice is optional tomorrow, I made Jacks sit this one out so it was just me. Perfect conditions."

Shane grits his teeth and looks from the lime wedge to the cup in his hand. He makes himself relax back into the counter carefully, so slowly that maybe Hayden won't notice he ever stiffened.

Then he lets himself think about the question and all his possible answers. Is he okay?

Well—

Probably not. But that's not something he can say, because how the fuck can he explain his feelings to Hayden when they're so wrapped up in Ilya Rozanov and the Rozanov Thing, which is really just the fact that he likes kissing guys, especially guys named Rozanov, but maybe just—guys. Sometimes.

And—and Hayden was fucking thrilled when the lockout ended. Oh, he loved the lockout the way the family guys loved it. More time at home, with their kids, kissing them goodnight on their cheeks instead of waving from the screen of their iPads.

But he was thrilled about the lockout ending too. Thrilled to get hockey back, to get back on the ice, to get Shane back from Zürich. That's what he said when Shane landed in Montreal—he'd asked the coaching staff if he could be the one to call Shane with the news. Because he thought Shane would be just as fucking thrilled, and so how is Shane supposed to tell him that he thinks he might always hate him a little bit now? For being the one who called. For being so genuinely excited to be back on Metro ice. For being able to skate with Montreal and go home to his wife and kids—to have everything, to have lost nothing.

"Look, Hayds," Shane says. He puts down his cup. He picks it up again. "I know...look, I know I'm in a point drought, missing passes and dropping—"

Hayden's hand curls around his wrist before he can put his glass down again. It cuts him off at the knees. "Jesus, Shane, I don't care about the *hockey*, dude. Jackie's right, it's like you've been a zombie lately. Full-on sleepwalking, shuffling around, undead, dead-eyes sort of zombie. It's concerning."

"I'm *fine*," Shane says. "Look, I was probably still—I don't know, jetlagged when Jackie ran into me. Or something, I don't—" When did they play the Puffins? That was early on in the schedule. Pittsburgh at Montreal, one of their first games. Mid-January? End of?

"Dude." C'mon. Seriously?

"I've had a bit of trouble sleeping lately," Shane tells him, and he moves his arm out of Hayden's grasp. Putting down the glass, he rubs at the back of his neck. "And, everything else...the hockey's a big part of it. Most of it. Swear down, Hayds. I'm fine."

Technically, it is about the hockey. Or, at least, the hockey is a big part of it. The underlying reason, the context and background. The palatable truth. Shane's life's gone off the rails, a little bit. If it's not the jetlag, it's the fucking hockey. How can he tell Hayden that he found a rink he loved playing at more than the Bell Centre? How can he possibly explain that he's spent his whole life thinking the MLH was the best league he could reach to play the sport he loved more than anything, and now he's not sure about any of that?

He can't. Fucking of course he can't. So: "I'm *fine*, dude."

Hayden still looks skeptical, but he'd said he'd ask once and then drop it. Shane's not stupid enough to take him at his word, Hayden's like a dog with a bone about some stuff. But if he can just—drop it for now, then Shane will be over it the next time he asks. Hayds thinks he's walking around like a zombie? Time to wake up. Be more enthusiastic. Learn the rookies' convoluted nicknames. All that fucking jazz.

"And you'd tell me, if you weren't," Hayden says. It's the no-man's land between a statement and a question.

“Nah,” Shane replies truthfully, and then he jostles Hayden’s shoulder and adds, “I’d tell Jacks, and she’d tell you. That way, we’d have a plan of action before the New Year, yeah?”

“Haha,” Hayden says, but the tension in the air lessens into something bearable. Crisis averted, maybe. Or at least postponed.

“Cool, so,” Shane glances at Hayden, then back to the limes on the cutting board, and then around again. He shoots his thumb up, over his shoulder as he pushes away from the counter. “I’m gonna go—do the rounds, you know. Make sure no one’s broken anything major. Bones or decor.”

“You don’t have much decor to break,” Hayden points out, finishing off his beer. It’s the sort of protest that’s designed to be ignored, a way of having the last word in a conversation that finished up ages ago.

Shane doesn’t argue though; he’s too busy pretending that this doesn’t count as running away. It’s not. He has captain duties to see to. He needs to make sure everyone’s enjoying themselves. He needs to make sure people are happy and safe and accounted for. He needs to disappear around the corner to the entry hall and take a second to just—lean his head back against the wall and breathe.

He doesn’t check his phone, even though it’s right there in his pocket. Ilya hasn’t texted him in four days.

Okay; okay.

There’s a party going on in his house, teammates and strangers filling every crevice of empty space. Shane can’t stay here, in his own entry hallway. There’s no point. No one else is going to come through the fucking door. Ilya isn’t going to text him. Shane isn’t going to check.

There’s no point.

Drapeau and his girl are getting ready to leave; Shane bumps into them the moment he slips back into the flow of the party. They’ve got their coats in their hands and that look in their eyes like they’ve maybe got ten more minutes of sociability left within them before they’re going to start tearing off each other’s clothes.

Shane goes through the motions of the goodbye, thanks them for coming, slaps Drapeau on the back like a good captain should and compliments his girlfriend—wife?—on the wine she’d brought, even though he definitely didn’t have a taste. Either it’s long gone or still unopened. It’s probably the thought that counts—in the bringing and in the thank you.

What does he even have to text Ilya about?

Well, so much.

He wants to know about the weather in Boston, if it’s cold, if it’s windy. He wants to know about Ilya’s day. What happened, if he got stuck in traffic, if the grocery store clerk tried to flirt with him over a pound of granny smith apples. He wants to know if he’s taking his pre-

game naps on the couch or in his bedroom, and Shane wants to know what that looks like—the color of his duvet, if he has any art on his walls, if he organizes his Boston closet by season, by color, by hockey and not-hockey. Did anyone hold the door open for you today? Did a stranger drop their hat on the bus and did you pick it up and give it back to them? Do you even take the bus in Boston or do you drive that fucking ugly sports car around everywhere you go?

JJ offers to deal him in for the next round. It's a conversation Shane barely escapes unscathed. He's really not one for drinking games, but hey, it looks fun as shit. Watch the carpet, yeah? And Jage, if you make someone throw up in my living room, I'm never going to fucking let it go.

They never texted like that before, is the thing. Before Zürich. The only times they texted each other before the lockout, it was about sex and hockey.

Javi's wrapped up in a serious conversation about the Admirals' power play, girl tucked underneath his arm while he gesticulates wildly with the other. Malcolm's frowning back, shaking his head and pointing out something about penalty kills Shane tries to force himself to hear, but the words slip through one ear and out the other.

He wants to know about Ilya's day, about his life and all its small, mundane inconsequentialities.

But they didn't text like that before Zürich. And they didn't text like that during Zürich either. There was no need to. All of what they wanted to say to each other, they'd just said. Texts were reserved for reminders to pick up milk at the store, notifications that one or the other was running late after practice, the name of a book someone mentioned that they didn't want to forget.

They never had to ask about each other's days. Why would you text someone about their day when you were an integral part of it? There for the won scrimmage during practice, there for the piss-poor winter weather, there for the finished book, the cooling mug of tea, the dying embers of the cigarette.

And here, in the aftermath of Zürich, Shane doesn't know how to text Ilya because he never needed to learn. It's all shifting tectonic plates now, one earthquake after the other. If he doesn't figure out how to ask about Ilya's day, then he just--won't know. It's as simple and complicated as that.

But how do you ask that question, without undergoing a silent anatomical study of every way that this new After is different from the During, the Before?

Shane doesn't know. *Hey, how was your day?* sounds like a eulogy, an admittance of everything they've lost, and he's not—he's not ready to face that kind of music, not when it feels sort of like the last song the band plays before the lights come up.

“Oh, Cap! C'mere, come settle something for us.”

Someone tugs at Shane's arm, pulls him away from his aimless trajectory and into a bubble of conversation. Lachlan. He's lost the snapback he'd had on his head sometime over the last thirty minutes, but he's still got his hand on Crawford like he's forgotten it's there at all.

And, oh, yeah. There's Lachlan's hat—perched on top of Crawford's mess of curls like it was never anywhere else.

Right. "What can I do for you, rookies?" Shane asks. They're still standing next to his bookshelf, sweaty drinks in sweaty hands. When he was their age, no way would he have ever felt like he could grab at an older player and demand their attention. Maybe that says more about him as a rookie. Maybe that says something about him as a captain though, too.

"We've been debating this," Lachlan announces, shoving at Crawford's shoulder. His accent's stronger than Shane's ever heard it. *De-bay-din'*. Deep American South. Could have fit right in on the Dallas Drivers, but he got drafted to Montreal instead. Least he found a little slice of home in Crawford; maybe that's why he's been clinging to him so tightly since the season began.

"When's the last time you read one of these books you got up here on this shelf, Cap?" Crawford asks, grinning down at Shane with both eyebrows raised up. "Cause—"

"Cause we've never seen you with a book," Lachlan says like he's already laughing and the sound of it's stuck in his throat. "Even on the plane it's always game tape."

"I read," Shane tells them, wondering if he should feel stung. Of course he reads. He reads a lot. All the damn time. Right? He thinks so.

"Alright," Crawford agrees. *Ahl-rah-yh'*. He's got a nice smile, except it makes him look even younger than he already is. It's the gap between his two front teeth, maybe. "Then, like, what's the answer, Hollzy?"

Shane hesitates, but it's not even worth the lying. "Probably never," he admits, and Lachlan crows.

"I *knew* it, Panky, I *told* you!"

"Alright, alright," Shane says, but he can feel his own corresponding smile. Maybe Hayden's right; talking with drunk rookies is like talking with two year olds. Or like herding puppies or something. "Yeah, alright."

"I *told* you," Lachlan is still saying, thumping Crawford on the shoulder and then on the arm. He beams over at Shane, incandescent and desperately in need of water. "Told him no one who has a New Yorker poster hung up in his house is actually an intellectual."

It's a small sting, more from surprise than from any actual offense. Maybe Shane should be offended. Mostly he just feels winded. It's sort of stupid. Really stupid. He'd forgotten about the damn New Yorker poster when he'd volunteered to host the team get-together. He should have taken it down before the guests arrived. He should have moved it so no one could see it.

“Bagsy,” Crawford says like a warning. His eyebrows are sort of pinched now, and he’s studying Shane’s face like he’s seeing something he doesn’t know what to do with.

“Not even framed!” Lachlan continues, grinning at Shane. “Just taped to the wall! My girlfriend would never let me, dude.”

Shane blinks and lets his eyes flick over to Crawford, whose smile suddenly looks as fixed on his face as Shane’s feels. His shoulders look tighter beneath Lachlan’s arm, and he inches away from his buddy til there’s a bit more space between them. Enough space to fit someone else, maybe, even if no one’s there.

“Uh, yeah, it’s a recent addition,” Shane tells an expectant Lachlan, rubbing over the back of his neck and giving him his patented media smile. “Haven’t had time to get a frame for it yet. You know how it goes.”

But they don’t, not really. They’re rookies. They have no fucking idea how it goes yet.

It’s pretty easy to extract himself from their conversation after that. Neither Lachlan nor Crawford fight against him leaving them to their own devices; he’s not sure either of them even notice because Lachlan’s got his phone out, showing Crawford some picture he’d taken a few days ago, and they’re pressed shoulder-to-shoulder again, like magnets.

Montreal’s quiet when Shane steps out onto the empty balcony and tugs the sliding door closed behind him. Quiet and cold and beautiful.

He pulls his phone from his pocket.

There’s nothing. No missed calls, no text messages. He didn’t think there would be. It’s been four days.

Still, he finds his text thread with Ilya, still listed under *Lily*. Should he change it? They’ve lived together now, they’re friends. Or, at least, they say positive things about each other to the media, and no one acts like it’s the end of the world. They’re rivals, sure, but now they’re also former teammates too. Housemates. Maybe that means that there’s room on Shane’s phone for Ilya’s contact name, is all he’s saying.

But not really.

Not the way he wants Ilya. Safe to keep it *Lily*. Safe to keep it the way it was before Zürich.

Hey, he types out and sends it quickly, before he can overthink it. Before he can pull the word back and stuff it down inside of himself again.

How was your day?

No. Too obvious. Too direct. Too weighted, even if it’s all he wants to know.

He tugs at the edge of his thumbnail with his teeth and then carefully deletes the words—*how was your day?*—until there’s only a blank text box and a blinking cursor. He’s never—they didn’t, during. They didn’t before. They just didn’t.

Safest to play it close to chest. They didn't talk about it before they left. They didn't talk about anything. They're just—Lily and Jane again. Back to their regular scheduled programming.

Shane can do that.

Saw the game, he texts. *Congrats on another almost hat-trick.*

He sends it. It's not what he wants, but it's close enough.

Then he puts his phone back into his pocket and goes inside. The house is full, noisy and filled with light and people who know him. It's not what he wants, but it's close enough.

November, 2015.

"You know, you have not been what I was told to expect," Jonas tells Ilya as he bends down and picks up one of the tiny sausages from a platter someone else brought. It's almost empty, but then it's very late now. People have been here for hours, sprawled over their sofa, leaning around their kitchen, taking smoke breaks on their balcony. It's not the whole team, thank God, Ilya isn't sure their little place could fit all the Lions. They've been coming in through the door in shifts and leaving in waves of twos and threes.

But it's late enough no one else has arrived in the last two hours, and the party has died down considerably. Shane is sitting at the kitchen counter now, in deep conversation with Metternik. His beer bottle is the same it's been all night. Ilya's considered bringing him a ginger ale pretty much every hour, but he hasn't.

Next to him on the couch, Jonas coughs slightly, more amused than irritated. It is an effective noise for getting someone's attention; Ilya thinks he is going to start using it with his own team back in the States.

Here and now, he looks back at his captain and makes sure he is wearing his toothiest grin on his face. "You are so sweet to me, Jonas, I love exceeding people's expectations."

"Mhm, but it is not just you," Jonas says. "It is Hollander, too. You both are not what they warned me about. They sat me down before you arrived, did you know? A special meeting to tell me about your *rivalry*."

Ilya blinks, startled despite himself. "I did not know you knew about that."

"Oh yes," Jonas says drily. "It is a very recent discovery, but it turns out we have the same Internet as you do in North America, ah?"

It's supposed to be funny, and Ilya is supposed to laugh, but he isn't sure he can. The realization that this is the first time he's thought about the rivalry between himself and Shane in months sits like a lump in his throat.

It does not belong here. In this house, in this city.

“I was worried it would hurt the team dynamics,” Jonas tells him easily, every inch a captain. He has about ten years on Ilya and about two inches, though it’s hard to tell when they’re both sitting down and relaxing like this. It’d been Jonas’ idea to host a party in Shane and Ilya’s house. Just the team. They’d been playing well, consistent and smooth, putting up wins at double the amount of games they lost, and Jonas had wanted to celebrate that. Especially if they could celebrate it at the North Americans’ expense.

“Yes?” Ilya makes himself say. At the kitchen counter, Shane is laughing at something Metternik has said. It’s his genuine laugh, the kind that makes his shoulders curl in and his eyes close from the force of his cheeks rising up with his grin. “And how have you found it, Captain? Is it difficult to have two people share a line when they hate each other?”

The words are nothing, automatic. A farce that Ilya is so used to wrapping around his shoulders, one that no one ever looks closer at. It is easy to fit the narrative when it has been scripted down to such minute detail for you. It is just—surprisingly difficult tonight, to reach for the usual sneer or cockiness. How quickly he has forgotten his lines. It has only been two and a half months away from the show; Ilya barely remembers his cues.

He doesn’t expect Jonas to laugh, but he does. It’s long and loud enough that it snags Shane’s attention from across the room, wide onyx eyes turning and finding Ilya on the couch like a honing missile. Ilya shakes his head, just slightly. *Don’t come over here.*

He is very beautiful, as always, but Ilya has had enough to drink tonight that he isn’t sure he can trust himself if Shane comes anywhere close to him right now, trust himself not to pull him into his lap or kiss him along the bridge of his nose or something even worse. Ilya’s body is very stupid; it has only taken a few months for him to build a new kind of muscle memory when it comes to Shane. He sees Shane in their kitchen, wearing a rumpled collared shirt and a nice pair of slacks, and his hands itch to touch him, to push him up against the counter, to tug him into his chest. That is what they’d do if there were no one else around.

It is good to know that Ilya still has some self-control when it comes to Shane Hollander.

“So you do say you hate him,” Jonas says, taking a very large swig of his bottle. “I was not sure.”

“I thought you had the same Internet as we did,” Ilya replies. He picks up a piece of carrot from the vegetable tray Shane had insisted on leaving out. It is mostly untouched. “If that is true, you should already know this.”

Jonas shrugs, long and languid with it. His smile is tucked away in the corner of his mouth as he watches Ilya. “I listened to what you said, yes,” he says. “It was very surprising, actually. How many interviewers ask you about it instead of asking about the hockey you play.”

Ilya blinks. He’s had the same thought more than he can count, if he’s honest.

“But then I see you play here, together, on the same line. Living in the same house. Going on little day trips when we have no practice. It does not match what you say in your interviews. You have not been what I was warned about. Neither of you has.”

“We care about hockey too much,” Ilya says, because that sounds right. Like a good explanation. They care about hockey too much to jeopardize it by continuing their feud in Switzerland when they’re on the same team here. It doesn’t explain the day trips, but then Ilya doesn’t want to have to find an explanation for those. He just wants to keep the memory of them separate from everything else. Indefensible, maybe. Sun-warmed and sparkling too, though. In his mind. Untouchable.

Jonas hums. He picks up another little sausage and offers it to Ilya, who declines. There is still half a carrot stick in his hand. He feels a bit like a horse eating it, but Shane thought it was a good idea to leave raw vegetables out on a plate amidst pastries and cheeses and cured meats, and so of course Ilya has to fucking eat the carrot.

“It is true,” Ilya tells his captain with a forcefully unbothered shrug. “In the name of hockey.” He hesitates and then adds slyly, “but, if it makes you more comfortable, I can trip him during practice tomorrow, Captain. Punch him when he is down? I would hate for your research to be so wasted.”

“No, no,” Jonas waves him off. “Please, not in my name, Rozanov. I like my peace the way it is. I only thought it was interesting.”

“Then you have many things in common with the MLH reporters, Jonas,” Ilya says, but he isn’t even looking at him anymore because Shane has stood from the barstool at the kitchen counter and has started winding towards them. The sight of him coming closer has electricity sparking beneath Ilya’s skin, and it’s all he can do to hold his body in the same inelegant sprawl as Shane moves in front of the couch, reaching down to pluck a cucumber spear off the vegetable plate, like that’s the only reason he came over here in the first place.

Ilya pitches his voice louder, even if there’s no way Shane can’t hear him from how close he is. “But I promise, there is not many interesting things about Shane Hollander, captain. I have been looking, but he is very boring.”

“Fuck off, asshole,” Shane chirps automatically, standing back up and tugging—playfully—at one of Ilya’s curls as he strides away, back to Metternik and the kitchen.

Ilya turns back to Jonas and gestures at Shane’s retreating back with a wave of his hand. “You are going to let him bully me like this, Captain?” he asks. “Now that is not good for team cohesion.”

Jonas shakes his head, like he can’t decide if he wants to smile or roll his eyes. His drink is empty, and he sits up from the back of the couch, clasping his hands together between his knees with the bottle dangling loose in his grip.

“I think,” Jonas says, his English slow and heavy beneath the weight of his Swiss-German accent. “If you can stop hating someone and then start again and then stop again, it is not hate at all. Maybe it is just that you have been told you hate them.”

Ilya blinks and opens his mouth, but he doesn’t have anything to say. Suddenly, his mouth has run dry and his tongue feels like it’s been carved from stone.

Jonas shrugs and stands up with a tiny stretch. “Real hatred, I am not so sure it can be turned on and off, depending on who is watching. It is like love in that regard, I think.”

The words knock into Ilya directly, like a gunshot wound to the chest or a puck to the unprotected mouth. Immediately, they leave a crater in him. Something he knows he is going to pick at for the rest of his life, maybe. Until it scars over.

Unbothered and oblivious, or maybe just feeling kind enough to look the other way, Jonas scratches at his arm and announces, “I am going to get another drink. Do you want anything, Ilya?”

“No, I am okay,” he hears himself say, and Jonas claps him on the shoulder as he meanders towards the kitchen, stopping for a moment to talk with Klem and Sascha in the corner by the stairwell.

Alone on the couch, Ilya lets his head fall back against its stiff edge, closing his eyes and releasing out a breath he doesn’t remember deciding to hold.

It hasn’t even been ten seconds before the cushion next to him dips with someone else’s weight. Shane. Ilya knows that it’s Shane before he even opens his eyes and looks. No one else sits that close to him. His knee is digging into Ilya’s thigh, and he can smell his cologne. It is like he invades all of his senses until he is the only thing Ilya can feel and smell and see, every time.

“What did Jonas want?” Shane demands, even though he frames it like a friendly question. His tone is a bit too direct for it though. If Ilya looks at him, he’d put good money on Shane’s eyes staring straight into his own.

“You can ask him yourself,” Ilya points out, but he lets his hand fall to clasp over the ball of Shane’s knee just in case he decides to leave.

The only direction Shane moves, though, is closer. Maybe he is feeling the same tug of muscle memory as Ilya is. Any other night, they’d be curled up together on this couch, Ilya’s hands in his hair and Shane’s lips on Ilya’s neck.

“I’m asking you,” Shane tells him, which is its own kind of demand. So fucking effective. Hopefully Shane never connects the dots; hopefully he never realizes Ilya cannot hold back from giving him something if it’s in his power to give.

He makes a point of shrugging and stretching, shifting closer to Shane with every minuscule movement of his body. When he opens his eyes, it’s only a bit of a thrill to find Shane staring at him. “He had captain questions,” he says, waving a hand. “Wanted to ask the best captain in the MLH, I think.”

“Fuck you,” Shane says like Ilya knew he would. It makes him smirk; Shane is so fucking easy to read. Ilya thinks he is fluent in it these days, after a few months of full immersion. Now he can speak Russian, English, and Shane Hollander. “C’mon.”

“What? Is true,” Ilya lies. He shrugs again. They’re close enough now that the motion drags the fabric of his shirt against Shane’s chest. He wants to glance around the room, see if anyone is watching, see if anyone’s still even *here*, but he doesn’t want to look away from Shane’s face. It’s like all night he has been forcing himself to pay attention to other things, other people, stealing glances at Shane from across the party like a swimmer breaks his head up over the water’s surface to gasp for oxygen.

Why would he look at anything else now? That would be very rude. He and Shane are having a conversation.

“He asked me if I thought it is time to drop you down to second line,” Ilya says, pursing his lips to hold back his grin at the offended noise Shane makes, a knee-jerk reaction maybe on both their parts.

“You’re lying,” Shane snaps, and Ilya raises his eyebrows, puts his hand up to his chest.

“Do not kill the messenger, Hollander, please. Have some *decorum*.”

When Shane reaches out and shoves at Ilya’s shoulder, his touch lingers, fingers brushing along the bare skin of Ilya’s arm. The electricity is back. If Ilya is feeling truthful, it never really left.

“You do not want to hear what I told him?” Ilya asks, raising his eyebrows in faux-offense. “You just want to abuse me, is that it, Hollander?”

Shane’s smiling. It’s small and genuine, the kind of smile Ilya’s never seen anyone else pull out of him. That will be his defense if he ever goes to court for this. How could he not fall in love with a boy who has a special smile, one he saves just for him? Who could have resisted that? Certainly not Ilya, but maybe the world is full of stronger people with prouder spines. Ilya knows himself though; he has never been above begging when it comes to Shane Hollander.

“Alright,” Shane agrees. “What’d you tell Jonas after he definitely asked for your thoughts about moving me down a line?”

“*Moving me down a line*,” Ilya mocks, and it is so hard to remember that there are other people around them. It is so hard to remember that the world is wider than just this couch. Ilya cannot lean over and kiss the bridge of Shane’s nose and the corner of his mouth. There are other people here, and they may be watching them. It is so hard to remember why that matters, but it does. He knows that—distantly. “Who has given you this big ego, Hollander? *Me, me, me*, you say. You say, ‘oh, of course I am on starting line always, I am Shane Hollander. Big hockey player, I am not made for *second line*. I am Shane Hollander, prince of Canadian Hockey.’”

“Okay, okay,” Shane shoves at him again, but he’s laughing. It’s really more of a giggle. This time, he leaves his hands where they are, clutching onto Ilya’s bicep. Anchoring him. Holding him. “What’d you say then? Give him the green light? Tell him to push me down to third?”

“No,” Ilya says, and he doesn’t really mean to. It’s just the first thing that comes out of his mouth. It’s the truth amidst a crop of lies. He’d never tell anyone that Hollander deserved to be anywhere but on the starting line, and it’s stupid to think otherwise. “I told him I would refuse to play. Break my stick, score goals for the other team, sit in penalty box as protest until he gives me back my pretty center.”

“God, shut up,” Shane mutters, and now he breaks eye contact, looks around them like he’s checking to see if anyone’s close enough to hear. Maybe no one is, or maybe Shane’s feeling the same kind of electric recklessness that’s coursing under Ilya’s skin because he doesn’t move away. He even looks back at him, ducking his head and blinking at Ilya through the fan of his eyelashes.

He thinks, maybe, Shane is a little bit evil.

“You didn’t really say that,” Shane says, and Ilya wants to tell him that it doesn’t matter if he did or didn’t. All that matters is the faint blush climbing up over Shane’s cheeks. All that matters is the way he’s holding him in place, touching him when there are other people around. He’ll say anything to get this, again and again and again.

“No, I did not,” Ilya tells him instead. *But I think I would*, he doesn’t say. *If someone asked and I thought I could tell the truth and not pay for it with everything I loved. I think I would. I don't know what would be left of me, if someone took you away. Nothing good, I think. All of that would go with you.*

Chapter End Notes

btw in my head when i am picturing this fic like it's a movie, the flashback scenes in zürich are shot with the dead-wife golden glow & soft lens flare effect & the scenes in montreal are edited with the blue-gray twilight movie effect. this is the optimal viewing experience i think

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

a few people guessed in the comments that i would have to extend the chapter count again and let it be known im looking none of y'all in the eyes rn

(i'm already about 6k into their resolution scene which is like the final scene of the fic, but i can't be doing with 15k-long chapters so....have this 7ish k chapter to tide you over)

by breaking this chapter up into two, i sadly only have 2 contrasting scenes in this update instead of the usual 3 which i'm totally fine with and it doesn't bug me at all because im normal about numbers and also routines :)

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

March, 2016.

It's nearly two in the morning, but it's Ilya calling and so Shane picks up.

“Wha,” he says, trying to force the cotton-dryness of sleep out of his mouth. “Ilya?”

For a second, there's nothing, just a staticky canyon of silence. Then: “Shane,” Ilya says, guttural, like the word's been ripped out of his chest half-formed and covered in blood.

Just that, nothing else. It's enough though, enough for Shane to shake off the last of the cobwebs at the corners of his mind and jolt forward in bed, phone pressed up to his ear and heart already picking up speed in double time. “Ilya?”

There are a dozen questions on his tongue. He tries to fit them all in the two syllables of that name, doesn't know if he succeeds. The line is quiet, just the sound of irregular breathing. Distant traffic, maybe, but that could be from Shane's end, not Ilya's.

“I fucked up,” Ilya whispers finally, on a thousand year delay.

Shane blinks into the darkness of his bedroom. Then he swings his legs off the bed, flinging the covers off him as he goes. “Where are you?” he demands, sliding his palm along his side table until he can hit at the light. It flickers as it turns on, four hours ahead of schedule, casting a dull yellow light around the room. “Ilya? Tell me what's going on. Tell me where you are.”

Ilya makes a protesting noise, a grunt that could mean a hundred different things. Shane's head is empty, static and electricity, different thoughts sparking into existence and disappearing without lighting a fire, without issuing commands to his brain.

Where were the Raiders supposed to play? Did they just have a game in Nashville or was that Dallas? Are they on the West Coast, in Vancouver, are they back in Boston? Shane doesn't know, can't remember, hasn't been tracking the days like he should, has just been letting them spin past him in a blur of going through the motions.

"Is nothing," Ilya says and maybe he can hear the way Shane's breath has picked up. Maybe he can hear his machine gunfire heartbeat, all the way across the phone line, all the way across the fucking country.

It's not nothing or Ilya wouldn't be calling. They don't do that. They don't call each other, not over nothing.

"*Ilya*," Shane says, and even to his own ears it comes out helpless. He's standing in the middle of his bedroom. He's not even wearing a shirt, just boxers and a pair of socks. He's in Montreal, and that's the one place Shane knows Ilya is not. Helpless, pointless, useless energy courses through him anyway. His hands are shaking. His voice, also. "Ilya, you gotta say something, *mon chou*."

It's a holdover from Zürich, the French affectionate. A holdover from that day back in November, when they'd done nothing but snipe at each other in Russian and French until Shane had broken the stalemate by pressing their lips together and riding Ilya into the couch cushions, spitting out petnames like they were insults just to get the weight of them off his chest.

He reaches for them instinctively now, sinking down onto the edge of his mattress and pressing his phone so hard against his ear that it hurts. "I am in California, in hotel room," Ilya tells him, and his tone is pinched, angry, but not the kind of anger Shane is used to hearing from him. There's no competitive edge, no cocky angle to it. Even to Shane, it sounds self-directed, pointed inward. "I fucked up, Shane, is bad."

"What happened," Shane asks, tearing at his lip with his teeth. He wants to demand to know what Ilya thinks he's done, but there's no way the words won't come out sounding like an accusation and that's the last fucking thing they need right now.

California is miles and miles and miles away from Montreal. If he pisses Ilya off, he'll just hang up the phone, and then Shane'll never get the answers to his fucking questions. He'll never get to know whether or not *Ilya is okay*, and that's not a reality Shane thinks he can live in right now, despite the fact that he's been forcing himself to get used to that lifestyle for the last three months.

Okay. Okay. California.

Ilya is in California. Too many fucking teams in California to know anything more specific. San Francisco Sea Lions, Anaheim Dukes, Los Angeles Aces. Raiders could have played against any one of them tonight.

Okay. Okay. He's in a hotel room.

His? Shane doesn't know that either. He fucking knows what he *wants* the answer to be, but—until Ilya says, until he tells him, he doesn't *know*.

Ilya's speaking again, but it's jumbled Russian, words tangled up in pauses, tripping over each other in fits and starts, and Shane can't understand any of it.

"*Ilya*," Shane snaps, sharper than he intended, but he's tired and he's angry except he's not angry at all; he's just sort of scared. And displaced—his body doesn't feel quite like his, doesn't feel like it's where it should be.

He's up on his feet again, pacing around his bedroom that's half shadow, half-light, and he can walk as many circles as he wants and he'd not be anywhere closer to Ilya.

God help him, but he's scared.

"We were out after overtime win," Ilya says, and his voice is thick with Russian, despite the English words. Out after an overtime win means he's been drinking with the team. Okay; okay.

There are hundreds of ways a scenario like that could have gone wrong. Maybe Ilya slept with someone; maybe Ilya forgot a condom, or it tore, or it fell off. Survivable, theoretically, despite the way Shane's stupid heart rolls over at the thought.

Worse: maybe something happened to *Ilya*. A fight, fists meeting flesh under a club's strobe lights, out by the backdoor of the club. Did someone hurt him? Did someone spike his drink? Take advantage? Is he hurt, is he alone? He must be, if he's calling Shane. Does he need—what does he need?

It's awful; Shane's mind keeps spinning, trying to fill in the blanks like the world's most fucked up pre-dawn game of Mad-Libs. He just doesn't know. Can't figure out what could have happened to ever make Ilya Rozanov's voice sound like that, and that's the only thing he has to go on.

"Okay," Shane says when Ilya doesn't continue. "That's okay."

He feels a bit like a doctor trying to set a bone, running his hands over unbroken skin attempting to find the point of fracture.

"There is video," Ilya tells him flatly, sounding torn between angry and despondent and then just sounding torn, straight down the middle and bleeding with it. "Someone asks me—*asked, tch*—if I miss it, and I say, yes, obviously, I miss—it."

Shane tries to take a breath, but it stalls out somewhere in between his mouth and his lungs. *Yes, obviously, I miss it*. There are so many things *it* could mean, but Shane thinks—he knows. He thinks he knows immediately what Ilya means.

"It has been months now, I didn't think people would *care still*," Ilya adds, drunken frustration pouring over the phone. "But she ask what I miss about Switzerland and I say you talk in your sleep. And is on *video*, she posted it."

“I don’t talk in my sleep,” Shane says, and everything around him freezes. Something cold and inescapable starts to slither through his veins. One thing at a time.

“You do,” Ilya disagrees, immediate, visceral. “And I *miss it, solnyshko*. But I did not mean to say so and there was a *camera*, and now there is a video, and it is online and it would look worse if it is taken down but it is so bad now. Is not what you wanted.”

Shane blinks at the darkened doorway to his closet. His brain is static, operating on a delay where he hears something and thinks something else and nothing is related to each other and nothing makes sense.

Ilya is still talking, like he can’t make the words stop now that he’s started. “I said, after, you take naps before games on the couch in the living room. I said that. Is not only explanation and people will talk and people *know* and you did not want people to know and I’m sorry, *solnyshko*, I can fix this—”

“But you’re okay,” Shane interrupts blankly. It’s the only thought he keeps circling back to, over and over again. The only thing that sounds out crystal-clear within the jumbled ringing of his head. “You’re okay?”

“I—yes, I am back in hotel room for the night, I told you. We fly out early tomorrow. But *Shane—*”

“It’s okay,” Shane says, cutting him off. He wants to close his eyes. He’s sitting down, but he sort of wants to sink to his knees too. That’s how strong the relief is when his body catches up to his brain.

Ilya is okay. Okay.

Everything else is survivable.

“Is okay,” Ilya repeats, incredulous. “You were angry about the stupid shoes, but I tell the world you talk in your sleep and *is okay*.”

Shane huffs and drags his hand down the side of his face, giving into the urge to flop back onto the bed.

How the fuck can it not be okay? Inconvenient, maybe. Embarrassing. Maybe even dangerous, skirting too close to the line of what they are in public and what they’d been behind the closed doors of their house in Zürich. For Ilya to know Shane talks in his sleep, he’d have to be there, beside him when he’s sleeping. But they shared a house and a couch, so it’s not far-fetched to say Shane took naps somewhere outside of his bedroom. Hell, the Zürich team took buses to different games, stayed in hotels on the road. Ilya could know about the sleep-talking if they shared a room in a hotel, if they shared a row on a bus. There are a dozen other explanations than the truth. It’s a bit dangerous, maybe, anyway, to have Ilya admit to missing something that’s probably a little objectively annoying.

But how the fuck can it not be okay, when Ilya is whole and safe and unhurt?

Shane feels like—like a secret agent in one of those action movies JJ always makes them watch during team movie night, the one who cuts the right cord to disable the bomb a second before it's going to blow. He's, like. Looked the worst case scenario in the face now, experienced five different stages of grief and had to confront his own helplessness. He understands how it feels to be thousands of miles away from Ilya Rozanov and not know if he's okay.

And he *is*. He sounds like he's gonna be hungover in the morning, or at least really tired and embarrassed, but he sounds okay too.

So of fucking course it's okay. Doesn't Ilya know what they're dealing with? Shane hadn't known, for a few minutes, and he'd thought the worst.

He doesn't say that though. It's too soon, not enough time has passed yet, from the beginning of the phone call to now. Shane doesn't know how to put it all into words yet.

So he says, instead, "I wasn't *angry* about the shoes," even though he kind of was. But not at Ilya. Not really. "I just didn't want them to know because then they'd talk about it."

It was theirs, the shoes. Shane's and Ilya's. The house was theirs too. It still feels like theirs, all these months later.

Shane has been trying to avoid Ilya's post-game interviews, but what that really means is that he only watches them very late at night when he's on the road in some hotel room, headphones on and phone brightness dialed to low. And he's noticed that whenever Ilya talks about Zürich, he uses present tense: *I play, I sleep, I like, I eat*. Shane knows it's probably just a disjointment in his second language, a translation error Ilya's making in his head by mistake. Tenses are slippery things, constant math equations to calculate on the fly. He wonders though, sometimes, if maybe it's as hard for Ilya to move forward as it has been for Shane. Like maybe a part of him is still there, present time. Playing and sleeping and eating.

"I will fix it," Ilya promises. "I can fix it. Give them something else to talk about. I can make it okay."

"Ilya, it's fine," Shane says, half-way around a yawn. The adrenaline has mostly fizzled out, and the exhaustion of the sudden early morning's set in. "You also said I took naps in the living room, right? That's good, that's fine, normal for roommates to know. It's not—it's not *optimal*, but it's not like the end of the world or anything, *mon cherie*."

On the other end of the line, Ilya is quiet for a second. Maybe processing Shane's words. Hopefully realizing that Shane isn't mad at him. Maybe a tiny bit annoyed, in the heart of him, the way he was about the shoes. But not *angry*. Not when it could have been so, so much worse.

"Maybe someone will pick it up, spin it or something," Shane says, wincing up at the ceiling as he imagines the articles. "But it'll go away. We'll play hockey. We'll be more careful. It'll get buried by itself."

It's only really a news story at all because of how tight-lipped Shane has been about the whole thing. Ilya has followed his lead on this one since the shoes back in January. The things the press and the world know about Zürich can probably be counted on one hand, and so everyone's rushed to fill in the blanks themselves with rumor and speculation. Something like this is small, embarrassing, only a little dangerous, but it's also unignorable because everyone's going to refuse to ignore it.

But it'll get buried by itself. It's not like Ilya said anything actually damning. Anything undeniable.

"Sveta has a friend," Ilya tells him, apropos of nothing. "I think—artist maybe. Or model. I don't know. But we are back in Boston in two days. I will meet her when I get back, and she wants the exposure. It will bury."

"What?" Shane says. He's sitting up again, even though he doesn't remember moving. The sick, icy feeling from before is back; even his veins feel cold. He shakes his head even though Ilya can't see it. It doesn't do much to get his thoughts in order. "What the fuck."

"Is convenient," Ilya says, and he can hear the shrug in his voice. "No one will care about Switzerland if hockey accounts post photos of me with Russian model in fancy restaurant."

I will, Shane thinks. He has to bite his tongue to hold the words back. *I'll care*.

He fights to keep his tone light when he says, "I hate to break it to you, Rozanov, but pictures of you with blonde women aren't exactly newsworthy anymore. That's just like, your standard weekend plans."

Or it was. Shane hasn't caught sight of any of Rozanov's dates or hook-ups on social media since Zürich, but then—he hasn't been looking. He's been trying really, really hard not to look.

"If I spend a day with her, is different," Ilya says, sounding stubborn now. Digging his heels in. "It will fix this."

"Nothing's fucking broken, Ilya!" Shane snaps back, harsher than he meant to be, but now it's all he can think about: Ilya with some pretty woman on his arm, out to dinner with him, sharing a fucking appetizer, hand on his chest, tongue in his mouth. No one's going to care about Zürich if they think Ilya's dating someone, but Shane is going to spend the rest of his fucking life caring about Zürich, no matter who's standing by Ilya's side, and he's just—he's so— "So don't fucking go out of your way to date someone you don't even like for my sake, Jesus, I'm saying it's *fine*. There's nothing to fix."

"You are angry," Ilya replies, annoyance bleeding through his own voice. "I can hear it, Shane. Let me fix it—"

"I'm going to be angry if I have to see pictures of—" He makes himself shut up by biting at his cheek. It takes him ten seconds, counting up to five and then back down to one, before he trusts himself to speak.

He's got no fucking right. That's the problem. Ilya can do whatever he wants. He can be seen with whoever he wants. Telling Shane about it is a fucked up sort of courtesy; that doesn't mean Shane gets veto powers or whatever. The fact that Shane feels physically sort of sick and nauseous at the idea of it is his own problem, his to carry. Same as the love.

He's standing now. Oh, he hadn't realized he'd left the bed at all. The same useless helplessness from before threatens to overcome him for a second as he stares at his socked feet pushed into the soft thread of his bedroom rug.

"Shane?"

Suddenly, Shane is so fucking tired, like the jet lag's back with a vengeance. California is thousands of miles away; Zürich is too. And Boston. Everywhere important is somewhere Shane isn't, and that's not—Shane never signed up for this. "Do whatever you want, Ilya," he says, pressing his fingers over his eyes. "I'm telling you, there's nothing to fix and I'm not angry, but if you want—fuck, I don't know—an excuse to date a hot blonde or—or whatever, then that's—" terrible, awful, heartbreaking— "whatever."

"What do you *want*, Shane?" Ilya snaps, and at least he sounds frustrated now too. There's some kind of twisted comfort in that, that Shane's not alone in feeling like he's clawing at the walls and walking in circles and going nowhere. "What do you want me to do? I will do it!"

"Not—that," Shane says, pushing harder against his eyelids. "Jesus, Ilya, I don't know, just—do whatever *you* want. I'll live."

It sounds weak to his own ears, like a fucking question instead of a statement.

Ilya lets out a gusty sort of sigh, and there's shifting on his side of the phone call, like he's turning over in bed or standing as well. "Is not important, what I want, *solnyshko*. Please, just let me fix this for you."

The image of Ilya, thousands of miles away, pacing in his hotel room with his fingers in his hair and his phone up against his ear, the perfect mirror of Shane, makes the words loosen in his chest. Or maybe it's Ilya's tone. He sounds just as exhausted as Shane feels. Just as displaced.

"Don't—don't date her," Shane whispers even though he has no right to ask. "Don't get pictures with her or, or take her back to yours, or..." He trails off. No right, no right. Even if it kills him. He'll just have to find a way to live with it.

"What do you want me to say when they ask?" Ilya's voice is softer now. They've toed around this conversation before, months ago. "If I cannot bury, they will ask, *solnyshko*. What do you want me to do?"

Shane breathes out, goes to sit back down on his bed and accidentally falls onto his back instead. The ceiling is the same as ever when he blinks up at it. "I don't want them to ask," he says.

Over the line, Ilya's breathing is heavy. He's tired too. It's not as late in California, but maybe that doesn't mean anything. Jet lag doesn't really care what the sun's doing. Jetlag's just the body's way of keeping score despite how fast you're trying to get away, despite how many timezones you put between yourself and the thing you're running from.

"*Kotenok*, you are impossible to make happy," Ilya finally tells him, and Shane closes his eyes, turns his face into the rumpled duvet beneath him.

"I'm not," he says.

"No? Then maybe I am just very bad at it," Ilya replies just as quietly.

Shane wets his lips, shakes his head. "You weren't," he whispers, because it's the truth. Ilya was really good at it, making Shane happy.

But maybe they were different people then. Maybe they changed for Zürich or Zürich changed them and now they're back to normal and nothing fits right, machine parts that have rusted or warped and can't slot into place.

The agony of the now doesn't change the memory of the soft beauty of the then. It would be kinder if it did, maybe. At least it would make it easier to bear.

October, 2015.

When Ilya gets out of the shower, Hollander is nowhere to be found at first, which really means he is not in Ilya's room nor is he in the room he doesn't sleep in, and Ilya can't hear him moving about in the kitchen below.

So he pulls on a pair of joggers and a sweatshirt, and he goes to look for him.

Practice was good today, the kind of brutal that sinks its teeth into your bones and leaves an indent. Ilya will always appreciate that flare of post-practice, muscle-sore pain, but it doesn't exactly make it fun to go wandering around the house, navigating staircases, when all he wants to do is lay down.

He sees Hollander as soon as he gets into the living room. He's out on the balcony, door mostly pulled closed but left open a few inches. Ilya can see the stiff way he's holding himself in the small metal chair, the way his legs are pulled tightly in beneath the table, the way he's gazing out at nothing and spinning his phone between his hands without even looking at it.

He isn't even wearing a jacket for Christ's sake, despite the faint early October chill in the air. He's flushed from the rink still, but that's going to wear off and then he'll be cold.

Ilya stares at him, the set of his jaw, the distance in his eyes, the flex of his bare arm as he moves his phone.

Then he goes back upstairs and grabs a sweater from his closet, something black and soft and recently washed.

“Catch,” he tells Hollander as he throws the sweater at his head. It hits Hollander in the cheek and falls down against his shoulder, making him jump in surprise, splutter and then turn to glare at Ilya.

Ilya makes sure to have his smirk already stretched across his face as he takes the other seat and sprawls out in the chair until his foot is close to nudging against Hollander’s. He doesn’t, yet. Doesn’t touch him. Yet.

They don’t give out hockey awards for self-control in the European leagues or the North American one, but Ilya thinks they should really consider it.

He tosses a pack of cigarettes on the table and Hollander shoots him a look, all offended eyes and lips pressed tightly together. “That shit’s gonna kill you,” Hollander snaps, because even when he’s in a mood, he can always take breaks away from brooding to bitch at Ilya. It’s sort of comforting. Ilya makes a big production out of pulling a cigarette out of the box and lighting it with an easy one-two press of the spark wheel and the stone.

Hollander makes a disgusted sort of noise, but he doesn’t move to go back inside either. It’s enough of a victory that Ilya finds himself pushing for another one. His father has always called him lazy, but his mother was the first to call him *greedy* and Ilya thinks she was right. She’d been laughing as she said it, pulling him up into her arms and letting him sit beside her on the couch. *Greedy little thing, synochek*. But she’d been right then, and she’s right now, too, even though she’ll never know it.

Ilya pushes his foot forward, tapping his toes along the line of Shane’s ankle, and Shane doesn’t move away.

“Put it on,” Ilya nods to the sweater that Hollander’s been running his hands over. “Is cold.”

“I’m fine,” Hollander says, and Ilya taps his cigarette against the edge of the ash tray at the table’s center.

“Put it on,” he says again, tilting his head to the side so he can watch Hollander from the corner of his eyes, no nonsense, no room for argument.

Hollander puts on the sweater.

Good boy.

“I don’t want to talk right now,” Shane says quickly, tugging the sleeves of the sweater over his hands and crossing his arms. Maybe he is trying to look threatening, firm in his convictions and ready to continue to brood through the afternoon, but he is very far away from the mark. He looks like an angry kitten.

“That is fine with me, *kotenok*, ” Ilya replies easily, tapping his cigarette against the ashtray again. “I am not here to talk.”

Shane narrows his eyes at him, all furrowed brows and distrustful moue of his lips.

“What?” Ilya says, innocent. “You yell when I smoke in the house, so I smoke out here instead and you yell some more? Hollander, you are impossible man to please, and I like to think that I am usually very good at pleasing men.”

“Stop it,” Shane bites out, cheeks flushing a dull red. He really is so very easy to fluster. Ilya has lived with him for four weeks now, and he has not gotten tired of it. Sometimes, all it takes to have Shane blushing and trembling in his arms is standing behind him at the stove while he’s cooking something, bracketing his hips with his hands and resting his chin on his shoulder.

Ilya’s never smelled more burning food in his life; his dick is starting to make associations.

“What’s that mean anyway?” Hollander snaps, looking at Ilya for a moment before his eyes skitter away. “*Cotton-neck.*”

“*Kotenok,*” Ilya corrects instinctively. And then, he lies just as automatically, “I call you this when you are being a very broody and sad man, Hollander. It is like living with weeping ghost. I felt it in the shower.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Hollander says, but his shoulders have loosened a little and he leaves his foot pressed against Ilya’s, so he means it about as much as he means, *I don’t want to talk right now.*

So Ilya hums in simple agreement and turns his head from Hollander to blow the cigarette smoke away from him.

He’s gotten better at handling Hollander since moving to Zürich. He knows how to wait him out now. Through his long and overly complicated showers, his focused and forgetful silences, his bouts of early morning sleepiness that leave him half-dozing in the passenger seat until they get to the rink.

It’s not even a surprise that Ilya’s barely halfway through his cigarette before Hollander is tapping his fingers along the tabletop. Before he’s two-thirds of the way finished, Hollander is opening his mouth.

“My mom called,” Hollander tells the ash-tray. His fingers are still drumming rhythmically against the table, but it’s not any rhythm Ilya’s familiar with.

“Oh?”

“She had some news about the lockout,” Hollander nods and then shoots Ilya a sideways look. “Negotiations aren’t going anywhere yet.”

“Hm,” Ilya says, tapping the cigarette against the ashtray again. Shane’s eyes follow his movements, and he shifts in his seat. Ilya should have made coffee, he thinks. Shane looks tired, like he hasn’t been sleeping well. But that’s not true; he’s been sleeping fine. Ilya would

know otherwise, would feel him tossing and turning in his arms otherwise. Just one of the many benefits of sharing a bed with Shane Hollander.

“She said they’re projecting after American Thanksgiving, at the latest,” Shane says. He hesitates. “I think she knew more, maybe, but she didn’t want to tell me. Like, over the phone.”

Ilya snorts before he can stop himself, but Hollander is too sweet sometimes. “*Kotenok*,” he says, probably too fondly, stubbing out the remainders of his cigarette. “This is negotiations between MLH and the Association, is not Soviet Russia. Your mother can talk about it on the phone, no one is wire-tapping her calls.”

The flush deepens for a moment, and Shane reaches over to shove at his shoulder. “Shut up,” he says, but he hooks his foot around Ilya’s ankle, and Ilya lets him. Ilya holds himself very, very still so that he can let him.

But then the half-smile melts away from Shane’s face—*no*—and he looks back down at the table. “Yeah,” he admits quietly. His fingers have stopped moving. Ilya doesn’t know if that’s a good sign or a bad sign. A part of him wants to ask, but he knows he never will. The question is too hard to word; the intent behind it too nebulous to pin down.

“Yeah,” Shane says again. He clears his throat and adds in a voice he probably thinks is very level and unbothered, “I guess if, uh. If she’s not telling me something, then there’s another reason for it. Like. She *can*, she just—doesn’t want to.”

Ilya blinks at him. Hm.

“Maybe,” Ilya says. Carefully, leadingly, he adds: “I am surprised your mother knows so much about the lockout since you are not in the room for these conversations.”

And—there. It’s a small thing, but Shane flinches. His eyes flicker away, past the ashtray, down to the street below. It’s just a small reaction; it’s just enough of one though.

“Oh,” Ilya says before he can bite his tongue. “I see what this is about.”

Shane’s gaze snaps up to his, eyebrows furrowing in a way that might read as angry if it weren’t for the perpetual wetness of his waterline. “You do?”

“Yes,” Ilya tells him with an exaggerated shrug. “You think she is angry at you for coming to Europe to play hockey instead of staying in North America for boring meetings with the Commissioner like other captains did. And you have never disappointed parents before. You do not know how.”

Whatever he’d been expecting Ilya to say, it must not have been that, because Shane’s head rears back like Ilya’s tried to stick him. “What, I have—I *definitely* have,” he splutters, and Ilya raises an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, yes? When?”

Hollander opens and closes his mouth, but he doesn't say anything.

"When you were drafted second overall?" Ilya asks, pitching his voice high and folding his lips down into an exaggerated pout that has Shane glaring back at him.

"No, asshole, of course not, they're my parents. They were fucking proud of me on Draft Day," Shane snaps, eyes all fire and hand tightening into a fist on the table top.

Ilya grins back at him. An irritated Shane Hollander is a much better creature to deal with. A morose Hollander, Ilya does not yet know how to handle. He is afraid of it, if he's being honest. Of being shown the quiet cracks in Hollander's soul and widening them when he only meant to glue them shut.

Shane's still fumbling around, English suddenly worse than Ilya's has ever been, and Ilya sits back in his chair to look at him. It would be too cruel to tell him the truth, he thinks. To point out that Ilya's father would not have been proud of his son for achieving anything less than first overall in the MLH draft.

Or, more accurately, that Ilya has still never been able to find or achieve what exactly would make Grigori Rozanov proud of his son. First overall, Captain of the Russian Olympic team at twenty-three, Stanley Cup engraved with his name—nothing has worked so far. Ilya has simply stopped searching, these days.

"I mean, what, have *you* ever disappointed your parents?" Shane demands, and Ilya snorts out a laugh before he looks over at Shane and realizes he's serious.

He can feel his eyebrows raise, but he is not going to be cruel to Shane. He doesn't like to be cruel to Shane, these days. It's a by-product, he thinks, of spending so many nights with him tucked up into his arms, head resting over his heartbeat.

"Yes, Hollander," Ilya tells him honestly. "I am expert in this topic."

Shane blinks at him, bewildered. "Wait, I don't understand. How could they be disappointed in you? You're—" he waves his hand through the air like it's saying more than his words ever could.

It is a nice, if blunt, reminder that Ilya's decision to treat Hollander with kindness is his own; Hollander, as far as Ilya is aware, has made no such resolutions.

Demonstrably.

Ilya gives him a careful, polite smile, the sort he reserves for the reporters in the media scrums who speak too fast and jump over each other trying to ask him questions he'll never be able to understand at that volume, all jumbled up.

"Hollander," he says. "They will get over it. Is small thing, only few months in a distant country. Is small disappointment."

Hollander's lips purse out, jaw clenching. Stubborn, digging his skates into the ice. Perhaps

he has already decided that his mother hates him for leaving. That his parents will never forgive him for going to play hockey in Europe for the lockout. Maybe he has already decided that he should have stayed in Montreal, forced his way into the closed-door meetings with the MLH and the Players' Association and been an advocate and leader off the ice.

Maybe he is already regretting coming to Zürich.

The thought makes Ilya's stomach twist and tighten into knots. He doesn't know what to say to Hollander if that's true. He doesn't want Hollander to regret living here. It'll strike too close to the foolish, aching heart of his.

But then Hollander slumps back into his seat; his fingers start tapping again, and his eyes dart from Ilya's to the table and then back. "You think so?" he asks, and his voice is small.

It makes Ilya want to fold him into his arms, grab his hand, lace their fingers together, and tug him into his lap. But he can't. This is not something they do. They fuck, and they sleep together in one bed for practicality's sake, and they share a house and a routine. But they do not comfort each other with those kind of touches. They do not hold each other close except for when there are considerably less clothes involved.

But Ilya is starting to think that maybe Hollander is cruelest when he isn't even trying to be, so all he does is smile back at him. It feels soft and real on his face, the sort of smile he'll never let the media see if he has the choice.

"Yes, Hollander," he says, and he almost calls him Shane by accident. He catches himself at the very last moment. He clears his throat and swallows the name back down. "They raise a boy to play hockey, they cannot be upset that he has decided to play hockey. Is the natural order of things."

"Natural order of things, huh," Shane says.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "Anyway, what would you be doing in conference room, Hollander? Making trickshots into trashcans with crumpled up pieces of paper until the Commissioner agrees to extend the no-trade clause for rookie contracts? Pah, you are the second-best hockey player in the league. You should be on ice, with me, the first bestest."

That makes Shane laugh and bite his lip which is devastating in a way Ilya has grown very used to. Like he is a town built too close to a flooding river; every year promises devastation. He has mostly learned to survive it.

"It's not *bestest*," Shane mumbles. "You're the *best*."

"Ah," Ilya says, raising his eyebrows. "So you agree, I am the best hockey player."

"God, fuck off," Shane says, but he's still smiling, head cast down and looking up at Ilya through the gentle fan of his eyelashes. The blush has returned and he looks—soft. Relaxed. His phone is turned facedown on the table in front of him, like he's forgotten it's there at all, and Ilya has to fight the urge to grab it and throw it from the balcony just in case Shane's parents decide to call him and undo all of Ilya's hard work.

Maybe it is not their fault at all. Maybe they are not even disappointed with Shane for leaving. Maybe his mother has just wanted to inform him of the lockout negotiations because she thinks he will find them interesting. But somehow the thought has wormed its way into Shane's head anyway, into the tap of his fingers, and that is enough for Ilya to feel... protective. A little.

Shane is here, in Switzerland. Playing ice hockey with the Lions, with Ilya. That was his choice. They should let him be here. They should give him grace. Give him *room* to enjoy the experience.

It is hard enough already, the first time you realize being here means not being there. No matter the *here*, no matter the *there*. The least Shane's parents can do is keep their disappointment to themselves. They have the kind of son who makes it easy to love him across timezones. They will be fine.

"Were, uh...were your parents...disappointed?" Shane asks, and Ilya blinks at him. "When you signed with Zürich, instead of a Russian team. For the lockout," he adds, like Ilya is going to become confused and wonder if Shane thinks he's signed a multi-year contract with the Lions.

It's Ilya's turn to tap his fingers against the table. Some newly created part of him wants to tell Hollander the truth. Start with *My mother is dead*, and work from there.

But if she were alive, I think she would be disappointed, yes.

But if she were alive, he probably wouldn't have signed with Switzerland over a Russian team. If his mother were alive, he thinks, maybe he would never have gone to the MLH in the first place. But this is a hypothetical, one he tries not to think of too often. He has always been a son meant to leave the shadow of his father; he's never had to find out if he could be a son who left his mother's arms as well.

Is his father disappointed that Ilya is not playing for a Moscow team? Maybe. It depends on what his father has remembered. Some days, the MLH is not in a lockout. Some days, Ilya is a boy again, only out at practice and inexcusably late returning home. Some days, Grigori does not have a second son at all, nor does he recognize his first.

"Is...complicated," Ilya finally tells Shane. The lie feels heavy on his tongue, but it's not really a lie. Technically. It is just a weak response. "My family is complicated, sometimes," he says when he can't swallow against the urge to add something else. To give Shane something in return. Some shred of honesty.

"Oh," Shane says. Ilya thinks he should feel relieved; at least it isn't a fucking question about what *complicated* means.

He waits for the relief to come, but it doesn't.

Shane blinks at him again, something considering and weighted in his eyes that wasn't there before. "I guess the most important part is that *we're* not disappointed," Shane says like he's deciding this for the both of them. "That we're here. Right? I like Zürich."

Ilya doesn't know what his face is doing. He feels hot and pinned down under the sudden intensity of Shane's eyes, so he looks away and pulls out another cigarette. He doesn't even fucking want another cigarette. He just wants something to do with his hands.

"I like Zürich also," he says after he's lit it and brought it to his lips.

"Yeah?" Shane asks. He sounds quietly pleased. Ilya knows he'll be smiling if Ilya looks over at him, so he doesn't. One of the things you learn if you live with devastation at your doorstep long enough is what's survivable and what must be outrun at all costs. The way Shane smiles at him sometimes, crinkled eyes and exposed teeth and a scrunched up nose—this afternoon, that feels like it falls wholly into the second category.

Ilya grunts and taps his cigarette onto the ashtray, which is the kind of dismissal Shane must recognize after four weeks living with him, because he unhooks their feet and stands up with a stretch.

"I was thinking chicken for dinner," he says.

"You are always thinking chicken for dinner," Ilya points out, glancing up at Shane and then away. It is late enough in the afternoon that people with regular schedules are getting off work now, bustling home. No one looks up at them; no one takes any notice of them at all.

Maybe Shane sees this too and the anonymity makes him feel brave, or maybe he's just feeling especially cruel today. Either way, he runs his fingers over the back of Ilya's neck, right at the edge of his hairline.

"It's still a few hours til then though," Shane murmurs, suggestion dripping heavy from off his lips. He tugs once, gentle, at one of Ilya's curls, and then he steps away, steps back towards the door to their living room. "So you've got time to finish that cigarette if you want, Rozanov."

"Maybe I do," Ilya replies, pointedly tapping it against the rim of the ashtray. "Unless you have a better offer, Hollander?"

He hears the door slide open and Shane's footsteps retreat inside. A moment later, something soft and familiar hits the back of his head, looping over his shoulder. He gropes at it instinctively.

His black sweater. And, tangled within it, Shane's shirt.

It is a very convincing argument.

And Ilya lets himself think, just once, privately and quietly, that he probably loves Zürich.

Probably, he falls in love with Zürich a little more each day.

It's the sort of devastating he isn't sure he knows how to survive.

Chapter End Notes

like i said....6k into the final chapter so i'm really really hoping to get the rest written up and have it out tomorrow :) these guys need to say they love each other STAT. it is the only cure for this level of wet cat pathetic

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

it's finished!! can't believe it <3 also can't believe that i focused so much time and effort on writing this that now i'm accidentally rooting for the men's hockey switzerland team at the olympics lol like that's the country where home economics ilya and shane fell in love!!! go roman josi go nashville predators etc etc

while i was editing this fic i realized how awful i'd be at writing a social media fic where basically the entire fic is people saying things. most of my heated rivalry fics are in fact long drawn out scenarios of people trying to desperately NOT say things even while they're very much hoping the other person is going to spontaneously gain the ability to read minds. while also knowing that that would be their nightmare scenario. anyway thats all to say i got curious and this chapter is 11k but if you take out everything other than the dialogue it's 1k LOL idk what that means but it's certainly a. fact.

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

March, 2016.

Shane watches the video. Then he buys a plane ticket.

Or, he buys the plane ticket and then he watches the video. Or, he watches the video and he buys the plane ticket simultaneously, one on his phone and the other on his iPad.

The order of events doesn't really matter; he was always going to buy the plane ticket to Boston. Three days after Ilya calls from California, Shane's run out of reasons not to. So he checks the Raiders' schedule, makes sure they're set to be in Boston for at least the weekend, and then he buys the plane ticket.

And somewhere in there, he watches the video.

It's not everywhere or anything, but it's easy to find. Enough people are talking about it that it's easy to find. And when Shane sees it—he sort of understands. More than he did before. Why Ilya was so fucking stressed.

It's not a disaster or a PR problem or something that can't be walked back or honestly even the worst thing Ilya's ever been caught saying on tape. The club's crowded, the audio muffled and hard to hear in places. A girl's holding the camera, looking for a story. One of Ilya's teammates beckons him over when she asks about the lockout. Asks Ilya if he had fun in Europe, eyebrows waggling. Gets a hand on Ilya's shoulder and turns back to the girl, bright-eyed and drunk. Tells her the whole team's pretty sure this one here got a girlfriend back in Europe. He shakes Ilya's shoulder, grins between the camera and his captain. Pretty sure he's

missing her something awful lately, if the way he's been running them into the ice is any indication.

Oh, *really*? The girl who might be a fan who might be a reporter who might just be the nosiest woman in all of California says. Where were you again? Sweden?

Switzerland, Ilya says. He's at least tipsy. Shane knows it by the potholes in his voice and the look on his face. He's quiet though. In Zürich, the few times Shane saw him drunk, he was never so quiet or so contained.

The video's not the best quality, but Shane doesn't need it to be clear to get a read on Ilya's face. He looks tired, worn thin. He looks like he's just been knocked out of the playoffs in the first round, not like his team's just won in overtime against one of the top seeds in the Western Conference.

Wow, Switzerland, the girl says. With Shane Hollander, right?

Yes, Ilya says. Yes, with Shane.

Wow, the girl says again. Did Shane ever meet your girlfriend, Ilya?

And Ilya ducks his head down and smiles like there's a secret he's keeping safe and careful, locked away behind his teeth. No.

It's a stupid fucking answer, because it confirms that Ilya had a girlfriend in Europe, which he fucking didn't, and it implies that no matter what they've been saying, Ilya and Shane were never friendly enough for Shane to meet Ilya's fictional girlfriend. It implies more to the fucking story. Leaves more questions to be asked.

Of course the girl holding the camera asks them, and of course Ilya's fucking teammate just stands there grinning.

Do you miss it? The girl asks. Switzerland?

Yes, Ilya says. Of course.

He has a drink in his hand, something clear, mostly ice. There are shadows under his eyes and his hair looks limp in the shit lighting of the club, but no one's there to take care of him. Not his stupid teammate, not the girl with the camera.

What do you miss most? The girl asks, but the song changes and the club somehow gets louder.

What?

WHAT DO YOU MISS MOST ABOUT LIVING IN SWITZERLAND WITH SHANE HOLLANDER?

YES, THAT! I MISS IT.

NO, WHAT DO YOU MISS MOST?

THAT, ALL OF IT.

And no one is fucking—doing anything. No one is putting their arms around Ilya and pulling him away, no one is pushing their thumb into the divot between his eyebrows to smooth it out, no one is petting through his hair and demanding he drink water.

Shane watches it and feels strangely betrayed. He would never have let Ilya go back to Boston if he knew that no one would be taking care of him there. It's an uncharitable thought, Shane recognizes that. As if Shane could have stopped Ilya from getting on the plane.

They hadn't even shared a taxi to the airport.

But Christ, the video makes his blood boil, every time he watches it.

All of it, Ilya says and the camera is closer now, in his face so it picks up every word, every micro-expression that Ilya usually keeps such a tight hold on.

NAME ONE THING, the girl says because she wants a story no one else has. DO YOU MISS YOUR GIRLFRIEND, ILYA?

He talks in his sleep, Ilya says, and he smiles down at the floor. His eyes look glazed, distant, thousands of miles away. He looks tender, soft-hearted in the middle of this stupid California club.

And—that's the part. That's the moment where Shane understands the panic Ilya had felt when he called him from his hotel room. The video isn't—incriminating, necessarily, except for all the ways it is because Ilya Rozanov never looks like that. Fond. Gentle. Young and vulnerable and—and—

WHAT? SHANE HOLLANDER DOES? WHAT DOES HE SAY? The girl asks because she's a fucking idiot who apparently doesn't realize she's already gotten her scoop and it's spread out all over Ilya's face for anyone with eyes to see.

But then the expression is wiped clean off Ilya's face between one second and the next. It's like for the first fucking time, he recognizes the camera in front of him and his eyes shutter closed and his lips press into a thin line. *Nothing*, he says tightly, quiet now, even though the microphone doesn't miss a word. *Is private*.

Which is objectively maybe the worst thing he could say because that means there *is* a story there. People love knowing things. There's nothing they love more than clawing the truth out of someone who doesn't want to give it. Hunter-savenger instinct, maybe.

Shane watches Ilya realize this on his iPad screen, because his lips go white-tight for a moment, and then he's adding, too quickly, too loudly, HE SLEEPS ON COUCH BEFORE GAMES, IS HOCKEY PLAYER SUPERSTITION. TALKS ABOUT GOALS AND BAD REFS MOSTLY. HAHA.

It's not enough. It's too much. It's too clumsy. Ilya doesn't even say bye, doesn't say anything else to the girl at all before he turns away from her and pushes his way through the crowd. The video keeps going for a few seconds more, Ilya's teammate shrugging down at the girl like he's just as confused and entertained as she must be.

But Shane doesn't need any more stolen footage to know what happens next. He already knows what happens afterwards. He remembers every second of the call. The way Ilya had said, *I can fix this, please, just let me fix this for you* and the way he'd said *Is not important, what I want*.

Shane watches the video eight times before his plane even starts boarding. He keeps it paused on that one still frame of Ilya's face the entire flight, trying to put a name to the emotion in Ilya's eyes.

He can't.

When he lands, he has five missed calls from Hayden and about a dozen texts from his parents. He'd told the coaches to mark him as a healthy scratch for tonight's game in Ottawa. Cited a family emergency. He's never once in his life been a healthy scratch for a hockey game, so the coaches had grumbled and acquiesced, probably weighing the odds of beating Ottawa without Shane in the lineup and deciding they had a pretty fucking high chance.

He thumbs out an excuse to his mom, something she won't believe but will probably tide her over for at least a night, which is all he needs.

He doesn't call Hayden.

He calls Jonas instead. It's not late in Switzerland yet, solidly in the late afternoon, but that's prime hockey player naptime, so Shane isn't even sure if his old captain is going to pick up until he does.

Fifteen minutes of what may just be the most awkward phone conversation of Shane's life later, he has the address to Ilya's Boston residence, lifted quasi-legally from his Swiss League separations paperwork.

It's not until Shane's standing at Ilya's door with his fingers hovering above the doorbell that he lets himself think about what he's doing. He doesn't even know if Ilya's home. It's ten in the morning, he's pretty sure the Raiders have an off-day, but what if Ilya didn't sleep at home last night?

Worse, what if he has company over? His Russian friend's friend. Someone else. What if he has the whole of the Boston Raiders in his house, a—a mandatory team bonding sort of early morning get-together?

Shane doesn't know because Shane hadn't asked.

Shane's never done something like this in his fucking life. For good reason, because he can think of one hundred ways this is going to go wrong, a thousand ways he's going to end up—bruised or devastated.

You can turn around, a not small part of him whispers. *No one but the security cameras Rozanov probably doesn't even check will know.*

And—there's comfort in that, Shane thinks. Comfort in the idea that this is still in his control, in his hands. He can walk away. He can still turn around.

He rings the doorbell instead.

He can turn tail and run away. He can board another plane and let it take him miles and miles away from Ilya Rozanov. Fuck, he could walk the entire way back to Montreal, and it won't change anything. He'd still have to live with not knowing, and he doesn't think he can anymore.

No one opens the door. Not Ilya, not Ilya's Russian friend, not Ilya's Russian friend's friend, not even Cliff Marleau. Shane waits maybe a minute, maybe five, maybe ten, and then he rings the doorbell again.

And then again, just in case he did it wrong the first two times. Then again, just because four is a nicer number than three. But then, really, five is a much better number than four, objectively, so he goes to press his index finger against the button again but before he can, the door in front of him is ripped open.

"Yes, hello, *what do you want?*" Ilya is snarling, rubbing at his closed eyes with the heel of his palm. His hair is a mess of lopsided curls and a pair of loose shorts sits precariously on his hips, low enough to show off the *V* of his Adonis belt muscles. The only other piece of clothing he's wearing is an unzipped hoodie, hanging haphazardly off one shoulder.

He looks beautiful. Mostly still asleep, but achingly beautiful all the same.

"I can—come back, later. If you want," Shane hears himself say, and he watches the way Ilya stiffens all over at the sound of his voice. Suddenly, he's being pinned in place by the intensity in Ilya's eyes. He doesn't look half-asleep anymore.

"What the fuck," says Ilya.

"Uh, hey," Shane says, and he stuffs his hands in his pockets because he isn't sure he can trust himself not to do something stupid like reach for Ilya and dig into the cut muscles framing his hips. He adds, very reasonably, "I can wait here if you wanna go—put on clothes or something first."

"What the fuck," says Ilya.

"Um," Shane says. He hadn't let himself think much about this part, which he's realizing now was a mistake. "Sorry. It's your house, you can—wear whatever you want. That was rude, look, sorry, can I come in?"

Ilya's eyebrows raise and his hand tightens on the edge of the door for a moment before he steps back. Steps to the side. Lets Shane in.

“You are supposed to be in Ottawa,” Ilya tells him after he’s closed the door and flipped the lock.

Maybe Shane should feel trapped by that, but he doesn’t. He’s too busy staring back at Ilya and trying to memorize all the small changes that have stolen across his face since the last time he saw it in person, back at the very beginning of January.

Oh, their teams have played against each other this season, once in February and once at the beginning of March, but Ilya hadn’t flown to Montreal for the game in March because of a concussion scare, and they hadn’t had time to see each other after the game in February. As soon as the buzzer sounded, the Metros were up in the air again to fly to North Carolina.

Ilya looks the same, really, except for all the ways he doesn’t. His hair is longer. The shadows beneath his eyes haven’t really gone away either. It turns out they’re real, too, not just the result of shitty video lighting.

He’s not wearing socks, which makes sense because he’s only barely wearing clothes at all. But it hits Shane in the gut anyway, the sight of Ilya’s bare toes curling into the short hairs of the rug in his entryway.

“Why are you not in Ottawa,” Ilya asks. It’s really more of a demand, and when Shane glances up at him, he’s glaring back, arms crossed. He’s still standing in between Shane and the door though, which Shane thinks—means something. It has to mean something.

“Family emergency,” Shane says, waving his hand. He wants to touch him, but he doesn’t think he’ll be able to stop if he starts. They’ve never really been good at stopping. It’d taken a whole hockey organization to separate them before, and even then Shane has spent the last three months aching with the loss. Wrestling with the love and the way it stubbornly persisted.

Ilya’s arms loosen and he takes a small step forward. “Is everything okay?” he asks, and his eyes sweep the length of Shane’s body and then back up, like he can find the problem just by looking at him. “Your family? Your parents?”

“Yeah,” Shane says quickly. “Yeah, no, everything’s good.” Then, maybe a bit too proudly, he adds, “I lied to my coaches.”

Ilya blinks at him and then rubs his hands over his face and through his hair. “*Mne nuzhen kofe*,” he mutters, along with a handful of curse words Shane vaguely recognizes. He shakes his head and looks back at Shane with this sort of helpless expression that Shane definitely recognizes from their months in Zürich. “I can make you tea if you want,” he says, and he gestures down the entryway hallway. “Through there.”

Shane nods and kicks off his shoes, forcing himself to turn away from Ilya even though all he wants to do is keep looking at him. It’s probably best that they don’t hug. Or kiss. Knowing that doesn’t change how much Shane *wants* it though. It’s just—it’s been so long. It’s been ages.

But instead, he makes himself walk down the hall until it opens up into the main room of Ilya's place. It's nice, objectively, an open-aired floor plan that blends entryway with kitchen with dining room with living room all at once. The ceiling is high, and the whole place feels made of windows and sleek modern stone accents.

It couldn't feel more different from their little house in Zürich, but then this is the home Ilya chose for himself. He was just assigned the one in Switzerland.

"This is a nice place," he tells Ilya, even though he hates it a little bit for not being the place he's familiar with, even though he knows that's not really fair.

When Ilya doesn't reply immediately, Shane twists to look at him over his shoulder, checking to make sure he hasn't said something wrong, but Ilya's not right behind him like he thought he'd be. He's still by the door.

He's standing where he was a minute ago. He's looking at Shane's shoes, toed off in the middle of Ilya's entryway.

Shit, Shane hadn't meant to do that. It's an annoying habit he's had since he was a kid, but at least something that's mostly acceptable in his own house. His mom gives him grief for it; his dad mutters about how he's going to break his hip one of these days tripping over Shane's laces; Ilya was never shy about bitching at him for leaving his Reeboks in their hallway, but they've all sort of just learned to live with it and Shane's never actually spent much time trying to force himself to change. It's just a small thing. He needs to take his shoes off to walk into the house, so he takes them off. Doesn't matter where he puts them, he just needs them off.

It's just a habit, one that has followed Shane from Ottawa to Montreal to Switzerland. But he doesn't do it when he's over at Hayden and Jackie's for dinner. He doesn't do it when he's a guest in someone else's home.

He'd just—forgotten, for a second. Seeing Ilya in person, in front of him, it'd made him forget.

This isn't his home; he's just a guest.

"Shit, sorry," Shane says, feeling his face flush red with mortification as he doubles back to the hallway. He leans down and grabs the shoes by their collars at the back. "Where should I —"

Ilya cuts him off with his mouth, pushing him up against the glass wall next to the door and kissing him quiet. His lips are insistent, desperate almost, and Shane's dropping the shoes at their feet in a heartbeat so he can twist his hands into the fabric of Ilya's hoodie and kiss him back.

This is what he's been missing. This is what he's needed. It feels so good it's unfair, *unreal*. Ilya's hand is on his jaw, tugging him exactly where he wants him and biting at his mouth like he's angry only to lick over the small hurt like he's sorry, and it's exactly perfect and everything Shane's been craving since January.

He knows he's making little sounds, small embarrassing noises that Ilya swallows down like they're honey. He knows he's got a hand in Ilya's hair, pawing through his curls and trying to pull him closer even though he's already so close, thigh pushed between Shane's legs and strong arms bracketing him against the window.

"No, c'me back," Shane hears himself gasp the moment Ilya separates their mouths. He's going to be embarrassed later, probably. But right now he's just an addict, and Ilya's lips are spit-wet and kiss-red and the only thing Shane's spent months craving.

"Fuck," Ilya mutters, followed by a string of Russian words Shane has no hope in understanding. His hand tightens on Shane's chin and jaw, pushes his head up so he can look at him.

Shane has always loved the way Ilya looks at him, like he's hungry for something only Shane can give him and like he knows already he's going to get what he wants.

And he's always fucking right, because Shane would give Ilya literally anything he wants, which—

Oh, yeah.

He turns his head away when Ilya tries to kiss him again and pushes weakly at his chest to get a little bit of space between them. It's not what he wants, really, but—they need it. Shane came here to talk. Shane wants to talk.

They're not going to talk if he lets Ilya kiss him again because kissing will lead to Ilya picking him up and taking him into his bedroom and that'll lead pretty immediately to sex. And Shane knows how that ends.

"Ilya, wait, we gotta, I wanna..." Shane protests when Ilya presses back into him and kisses along the tendons of his neck. It's a weak fucking protest though.

Ilya nips at the line of his jaw, hands falling to rest on his waist and pull him closer. "What do you want, *solnyshko*," he murmurs, rucking up Shane's shirt until he can get to bare skin. His fingers brush up and along the lines of Shane's abs, feather-light and teasing, and it feels so good.

He lets out a sound, breathless and weak, and Ilya's thumb trails up to rub at his nipple for a moment, nail pressing against the bud before sliding away. "Hm?" Ilya hums, nosing back along Shane's jaw until he can run his teeth over his earlobe. There's no pressure, no bite. Just the promise of one. "You came all this way, *kotenok*, I will give you whatever you want. Is only polite."

"Yeah?" Shane asks, and he thumps his head back against the windowpane hard enough to hurt. A second later, Ilya's hand is there, between his skull and the glass, scratching his fingers gently through his hair. Maybe it's the slight pain of the hit or maybe it's the inherent sweetness of the touch. Either way, Shane gets it together enough to say, only a little bit shaky with nerves. "I wanna talk."

“What,” Ilya says, which isn’t a *no*. It’s not an enthusiastic *yes*, but it’s not a *no*.

So that’s something, at least.

“Make me tea,” Shane says, leaning forward until he can rest his forehead on Ilya’s shoulder. “And let’s talk. I wanna—I have questions.”

“You lied to your coaches about a family emergency and flew here from Montreal to ask me questions,” Ilya says slowly, like he is trying to make the words make sense. “Hollander, is your phone broken?”

Shane flushes and wriggles his way out of Ilya’s loose embrace. “I thought you’d hang up,” he replies, and it’s half-challenge, half-admittance. Ilya’s eyebrows raise and his face flashes through several emotions that Shane has no hope of reading before they’re gone.

“Okay,” Ilya says finally, all challenge, and he takes several steps away from Shane and raises his arms up, hands splayed outward and head tilted slightly. “I am listening.”

It makes Shane huff, familiar annoyance rushing over him. Ilya thinks he’s overreacting, probably. That he’s being absurd. He probably is. He lied to his coaches for this. He’s never in his life been a healthy scratch for a hockey game, not even when he was twelve years old and just doing baby stuff, but he is now. So he could come here.

He feels a little reckless with it, a little insane. A part of him can’t believe he’s here, standing in Ilya Rozanov’s entryway. Looking at him. It’s been so fucking long.

Suddenly, he can’t wait for Ilya to make him tea first; he doesn’t want to wait until they’re seated at his table even though that’s probably the polite thing to do. They’ve never really been polite though.

So he says, haltingly, “I asked you, on the phone. What you wanted. And you didn’t tell me.”

His throat feels dry and his tongue feels too big. He’d practiced what he wanted to say on the plane, trying to write a script to stick to, except you wouldn’t be able to tell with how it sounds coming out of his mouth.

“Oh?” Ilya asks, and he starts wandering down the hall towards his living room. He sounds unbothered, unconcerned, and Shane thinks he’d buy it if it weren’t for how straight his back is and how purposeful his every step feels. “I do not remember this question.”

Shane trails after him automatically, hands stuffed into his pockets so he can’t tug at his knuckles til they pop. “Yeah, well,” he mutters, mostly to himself. “With how drunk you sounded, that’s not much of a fucking surprise.”

Ilya sends him a baleful look over his shoulder before he throws himself down onto his couch, sprawling out on it with his arm extended along the backrest and his legs splayed open. “This is new for me,” he says, waving a hand between them. “No hook-up has ever flown so far just to bitch at me face-to-face.”

It's like a slap to the cheek, one Ilya delivers with clear eyes and a flexing jaw. It's a reminder to Shane, and he means it to be. *Know your place.*

But Shane saw the video. Shane picked up when Ilya called. And more importantly, Shane lived with Ilya for four months—he knows how he gets. When he feels cornered, unprepared. Caged.

Shane has shown up without invitation, invaded Ilya's house and forced him into a conversation that's going to fucking suck, probably, and Ilya is lashing out because that's the only defense he's ever become fluent in. Shane understands.

But that doesn't mean it doesn't fucking hurt, the callousness in Ilya's tone. The way he's looking at Shane, no softness in his face at all. *Hook-up.* Like that's all he is, even after Zürich.

"You said it didn't matter what you wanted," Shane says after taking a steadying breath. He doesn't want to engage because if he lets Ilya prod him into a fight, he'll probably start screaming and then they'll go nowhere. "And I want to know why."

"Why," Ilya repeats. His eyebrows fly up again. "What do you mean *why*."

The first steadying breath didn't really work, so Shane crosses his arms tight over his chest and tries another. "Why doesn't it matter what you want? Cause—it matters to me. It's always mattered, but you—every time, you ask me what I want, what I'd like, but you never let me do the same."

Ilya blinks, and maybe Shane's managed to throw the both of them off balance because it sounds genuine when he says, "Is impossible. What I want. Of course it does not matter. You can't give it to me."

The words sting. Salt in the wound. Ilya doesn't think Shane can give him what he wants. Okay. Okay. Theoretically survivable, but right now it just burns.

He must not hide his instinctive wince fast enough though, because Ilya adds quickly, hand tightening into a fist on the couch cushion, "No one can give it to me. Is *impossible*, Shane."

"What is it?" Shane asks, and his voice cracks. It's not the momentous demand he'd imagined and practiced on the plane. *Ilya Rozanov, please for the love of everything holy and all the sweet morning kisses you gave me in Zürich, can you just tell me what the fuck you want?*

It's not that at all. He sounds fucking pathetic, voice breathy and aching.

Ilya shakes his head once, sharply. A refusal, but he doesn't turn away from him. He can't take his eyes off him.

"Ilya, please," Shane says, and he's begging, like, officially, which is so fucking mortifying. "What do you want?"

It's the entire reason he's here. Why he bought the plane ticket. Why he watched the video. Why he picked up the phone when Ilya called a few days ago. Why he's watched Ilya's interviews so often that he has all of his answers better memorized than he has his own scripts.

He's just trying to figure out what Ilya wants because he can't give it to him until he does. He can't meet Ilya halfway if Ilya refuses to move an inch, and so Shane has flown five hundred miles to try and make him. He doesn't know what else to do. He doesn't know what's left.

He'd fly back to Zürich if he had to, if he thought it would help. But it wouldn't—he's already considered it. But Zürich's just a city the way Montreal is, the way Boston is. Pretty, cold at times and sunny at others, filled to the brim with the same mix of tourists and locals and students and transplants that every city has.

Everything that made Zürich special is sitting in front of Shane now, shaking his head and looking at Shane like he's begging him to shut up. Like he's scared what'll happen if he doesn't.

"Ilya," Shane says again, and he wants to climb into Ilya's lap but he doesn't think that'll solve anything. He wants to get on his knees, make it so Ilya's looking down at him instead of the other way around, but that could be misconstrued, probably. He wants to sit next to him on the couch, but he wants to keep his distance too. Give Ilya space. He's already invaded his house, he can let him keep his couch for fuck's sake.

The muscle in Ilya's jaw flexes as he stares up at Shane. He shakes his head again; it's not a *no*. It's something more powerless than that.

"Don't, Shane," he says. The exposed nerve in his voice is a harsh contrast to the way he's still lounging over his couch. Maybe he thinks if he doesn't move at all, Shane won't see him. Fight, flight, freeze, fawn. Of course Ilya would try all of them, like a checklist, until he finds one that works.

But Shane isn't going to let him go this time.

He's been wandering around his life like he's a stranger in it since January, thinking no one would ever understand the tangled mess of agony in his chest even if he found the words to tell them. But—Ilya knows, maybe. He thinks Ilya would understand. He thinks Ilya might be the only person who *can* understand, that maybe Ilya's missed him just as much as he's missed Ilya.

If he leaves now, if lets himself get distracted, get pulled in and under the rising tide that is Ilya Rozanov, then nothing is going to change. Either he'll go back to Montreal or he'll fall into Ilya's bed and then go back to Montreal, and either way, he's going to wake up tomorrow morning or the morning after that or the morning after that feeling just as alone as he's felt for the past three months.

So he can't leave and he can't give in, even though a part of him wants to when he sees Ilya's pleading eyes. But he can't. He needs Ilya to answer the fucking question. He needs Ilya to

tell him what he wants, so Shane can tell him that he wants it too. That they want the same thing, because Shane thinks they want the same thing.

He just—it's selfish of him. It's weak and he's supposed to be braver than this, *better* than this, but he just needs Ilya to take that step forward first. It's unfair, he knows.

Shane *wants* to be able to do it, for what it's worth. Shane *wants* to be able to get on his knees and reach out and clasp Ilya's hand and tell him he loves him. That he's been a fucking wreck without him. That he needs him in his life again because he knows how it feels now to fall asleep and know Ilya will be beside him when he wakes up, and he tried to give that feeling up when the plane left Switzerland, but it's stuck to his heart. Like a tattoo or a scar, or at least a very stubborn piece of gum.

But he can't. Know thyself and all of that shit. He doesn't have it in him to take the plunge first. He wants to tangle his fingers together with Ilya's and let him pull him under.

He tries again, inwardly clawing at his stomach until he can find a few words that aren't *I love you*, but probably mean something similar. "I can't—keep doing this, Ilya," he says, shaky and weak. He tries to gesture between the two of them, but his hand is too limp. "If I don't know. I've been a fucking wreck and I just—I need to know."

Ilya shifts on the couch, leaning forward with his hands clasped between his knees. His knuckles are white, like he's holding himself back and Shane wishes he'd stop that. If it's—anger or irritation, it'd be so much better to just let it out. Shane can take it.

And if it's—fear or something, that makes Ilya's lips press together and his jaw tremble like that, then can't Ilya see Shane is also afraid?

"Okay, *solnyshko*, okay," Ilya says, and he hasn't moved an inch more, still holding himself tightly together. But his tone is softer. Shane recognizes it because Ilya's used it before with him, after losses and late nights and tense phone calls with his parents from their balcony in Zürich. "Please don't—you win, okay, don't..."

"I'm not doing anything," Shane snaps, crossing his arms tighter against his chest, mostly so he can't swipe at his face to make sure he's not, like, crying or anything. That'd be even more embarrassing.

Ilya opens his mouth, hesitates, then closes it. He drops his head a bit, unclasps his hands so he can rake one through his curls before he looks back up at him, nostrils flaring with the force of his exhale. He looks frustrated, on the edge of angry still, but his eyes are the same they've been since he opened the door. No, since before that. Since the New Year. Since Zürich.

Since before that, maybe.

"I have a question," Ilya tells him.

Shane blinks. It's not what he expected him to say. And anyway, "Too fucking bad. I asked mine first."

That makes Ilya roll his eyes, head tilting back with the motion like Shane's really fucking testing him here. "*Tch*," he clicks his tongue against his teeth before returning Shane's frown with one of his own. "I answer yours but only if you answer mine first."

Fine. "Fine."

Ilya nods, self-satisfied maybe, and he's such a fucking asshole and Shane loves him so much it hurts to be even two meters away from him. He doesn't know how he'll survive five hundred miles again. It'll be like square one all over again, like the cold chill of January following him into April.

"When is your return flight?"

The question is random enough and sudden enough that it startles Shane out of his head immediately. He's giving an answer before he can think about it: "Tomorrow afternoon. Boarding starts fifteen past one."

Ilya nods again, but there's something different now, around his eyes. He leans back into the couch and doesn't say anything else.

"The fuck, Rozanov?" bursts out of Shane before he can bite his tongue or think it through. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Is everything," Ilya snaps back, lurching forward and onto his feet. Suddenly, he sounds just as tossed against the rocks and scraped raw as Shane feels. Maybe that should make Shane want to show him mercy. It doesn't.

"How the fuck is my return—"

"Is what makes it impossible!" Ilya raises his voice, cuts clear over Shane even though it looks like it costs him to do it. Maybe the whole thing costs him something. The conversation, the questions, the visit. "You want to know what I want, Shane? Is to have you with no expiration date! No return ticket, no foot out the door—" he cuts himself off with a jerk of his head, dragging his hands through his hair in agitation.

It makes him look wild, a little bit. Shane doesn't think he could look away, even if he wanted to. Even if it were the kind thing to do.

"Do you see now why it does not matter?" Ilya says finally, fingers rubbing over his lips as his shoulder slump. "You leave. You always have to leave."

The accusation makes Shane splutter. It's fucking rich, *dirty fucking pool*, coming from *Ilya Rozanov*. "*I leave? I always leave, what the fuck, Rozanov, that's not how I'd fucking put it if we're keeping score here—*"

That's not how Shane remembers any of their nights together. All Ilya does is leave. Outside of hockey, it's the thing he's fucking best at. Even all the way back to their first time together, summer before rookie year. He'd still been seeing fucking stars when Ilya'd gotten out of bed and started putting his clothes back on.

But Rozanov scowls, stubborn, caged, caught and seconds away from lashing out with sharpened claws. “Hayden Pike calls you to say the lockout is over, and you cannot book tickets back to Montreal fast enough! You go for walk, call your mother, come back and pack, like it is—”

“I had to!” Shane shouts, even though he doesn’t want to be shouting at Ilya at all. It’s just that he grew up in locker rooms; sometimes, still, even when he tries to be better, volume is the first emotion he reaches for. “What the fuck was I supposed to do, Ilya? They wanted us back, the lockout ended!”

“You wouldn’t even look at me,” Ilya says, and it’s suddenly so quiet that Shane almost misses it entirely.

He doesn’t though, and it hits him in the chest before he can even think about defending himself from the blow. He must make some kind of noise, because Ilya’s face twists like he’s the one in pain, and he moves forward automatically, hand raising in the air between them.

“Is not—the lock out ended,” Ilya says, slow and like it costs him to admit. “And we had contracts. Have contracts. And lives, here. Is not—it is no one’s fault. We had everything but choices, I think. In the end.”

He’s not looking at Shane anymore though, gaze dropping to the side. Away. Avoidant, the way he usually never is. Something he must have learned from Shane, maybe.

So Shane swallows around nothing and says, shakily, “I had to leave, Ilya.”

“I *know*, that is what I’m saying, is impossible—”

“No, wait,” Shane holds up his hand but he lowers his voice. It’s mostly to keep it from cracking too obviously, but it’s also because he doesn’t want to run the risk of yelling again. Not at Ilya. Never at Ilya. “Not—back to Montreal,” he says. “Well that too. I guess, I mean. I know. That too. But I had to leave, after the call. I couldn’t—”

I couldn’t watch you go instead.

One of us had to leave first.

I couldn’t watch you pack.

I didn’t even go anywhere, if I’m being honest. I just sat down in the neighbor’s doorway and cried until I couldn’t breathe and then forced my lungs to keep moving until I could again. I know we had dinner reservations for that night. I’ve spent the last three months wondering if you canceled them or if they’re still waiting for us to show up. I’m still waiting for this loss to feel light enough to carry, and sometimes it does, when I click with the team and we net a win and hockey feels like it used to, but then I get home and the lights are off and this stupid New Yorker poster is hanging by my door and every time I see it I wonder if you left it up on the wall for me to take or if you just didn’t care what happened to it.

Getting on that plane was the hardest thing I've ever done, bar fucking none. I haven't felt that breathless and dizzy since I went through the VO-2 max testing at the Combine. The only thing that made me do it was knowing you'd probably already boarded your own plane, so don't fucking talk to me about leaving, Ilya, because maybe you think I left first this time but you left most. All the times before that. Over and over again until I learned how to do it from you.

Maybe it's not fair to think. Maybe it's worse to think it and not say it though. To keep half of himself tucked carefully away from Ilya's eyes when he's flown out here with no warning just to try and claw Ilya's vulnerable parts out into the open.

When he doesn't continue, Ilya takes another small step towards him anyway. "I know you couldn't," he says, and it feels like it's supposed to be soothing. Walk them back away from the edge of the argument brewing between them. "I am not mad at you, *solnyshko*. Is not—that was months ago now. Is just the first thing I could think of to explain what I meant, when I say what I want is impossible. It is. It always has been. If you did not have a return ticket, I would. Or a bus to catch. Or a game to play somewhere else."

It's the truth, but it stings all the same. It's just the truth, and maybe that's what makes it hurt so fucking much. There's no pretense, there's no other side to it. Ilya isn't mad at Shane for leaving, for not being able to stay. In Zürich in January, in Boston tomorrow.

He's just disappointed, maybe. He just wishes it were different, maybe. But he knows it isn't, and he's been waiting for Shane to realize that. *What I want is impossible*, he's been saying, all this time. *So it doesn't matter*.

Does that mean what Shane wants doesn't matter either, if he wants the same thing? Does that mean that the love—the aching agony of it, the persistence and the longing, that that doesn't matter? How can it? Maybe in Zürich, it did, when they lived together, in each other's pockets.

But they're not in Zürich anymore, and they can't go back either. There's always going to be another plane to catch.

What can Shane say in the face of that, really? He didn't prepare a script for if Ilya wanted him and it didn't change anything.

I miss you. I miss Zürich. I even miss the smell of your fucking cigarettes. I even miss the shit you'd give me for the way I chopped up tomatoes and never knew what to put on when you asked me to play music and how I fell asleep during every movie we watched together. I miss the way you'd wake me up on the couch afterwards. You'd always drag your fingers through my hair first, rub your thumb across my lips. Was I talking in my sleep then, too? You told the whole world I did that, but you didn't tell them what I said. Would you tell me? Would you tell me what I said?

"Shane," Ilya says. Just that, just his name.

But Shane can't take it right now, can't pretend it doesn't feel like too much. Even that, even *Shane*, is a reminder of Zürich now. Before, he was always just Hollander to Ilya. How can

that not matter? How can something change so irrevocably and it not matter?

“Please don’t cry,” Ilya says and he sounds like he’s the one about to lose it. Shane shakes his head against the noise. Can’t let himself think about it. Can’t think about anything else anyway.

It is impossible, and Ilya means you staying with me, even if I want that.

And what that really means, what Shane hears is: *It’s impossible for us to be together. Even if you want that.*

And so he just—he needs a fucking moment.

He shakes his head again but not about anything specifically, and then he turns away from Ilya, tries to get a bit of distance between them.

Okay, okay.

Maybe they can go back to what they were before Zürich. Shane didn’t say anything, not with his words, not really. He didn’t say *I love you*. He didn’t say *please can we be together please Ilya please it’s all I want I miss you*.

They can walk it back. Ilya can be Rozanov again. Shane can be Hollander. The love will go away or it’ll at least shrink into itself, get quiet and careful, like how a dog that’s been kicked over and over and over and over again learns not to even approach the dinner table.

Okay, okay.

Okay.

Shane squeezes his eyes shut and rubs his hands over his face. Not hard, but the pressure is nice. It’s something else to focus on.

When he blinks back to himself again, it’s because Ilya’s chest is pressed against his back and his arms are wrapped around his waist and Shane’s body has been aching for this exact thing since the last time he had it. He melts back against him instinctively, and Ilya’s arms tighten in response. He shifts; he holds him up. His chin is on Shane’s shoulder and he’s murmuring something Shane can’t understand through the ringing in his ears. Maybe it’s Russian. Maybe it’s English, and Shane is just way more fucked up than he thinks he is.

But even his panic and the buzzing in his brain feels easier to manage because Ilya has his arms on him, Ilya’s lips are pressed up against the skin of his neck and he’s here and Shane’s here and it doesn’t feel so fucking impossible right now and—

And Ilya’s kitchen is yellow.

Shane has to blink straight in front of him a couple of times to make his eyes focus, but the color doesn’t fade. It’s not something he’s imagining or anything, not his weird brain superimposing the memory of their house in Zürich over Ilya’s place in Boston.

He's not doing that. Ilya's kitchen, the parts of it that aren't white marble and chrome, is mustardy, puke-yellow. Same as Zürich, but here. In Boston. Impossibly so.

Shane's not one of those hockey players who have to wear the same socks to every game or only cut up their dinner with two forks before they skate out on ice. He's not superstitious, not like Hayden can get, not like Drapeau is.

But he doesn't really believe in coincidences either. No hockey player does, not really. Not down deep where all their beliefs tend to live. Lightning doesn't fucking strike twice. No one's going out and just randomly choosing the most awful, stomach-churning color of yellow they can find to paint their kitchen unless it means something. Once is just an unfortunate event. Twice automatically means something else.

Shane doesn't know if he can be objective about what Ilya's ugly yellow kitchen means, not when it feels like he's swallowed a balloon that's steadily inflating inside of his guts. Not when he has Ilya himself pressed up along his back, hands cupping his waist like he's something to be held and handled with care.

Fuck, Shane doesn't want anything more in the world than he wants Ilya to hold him and never let him go. But Ilya's never going to do that. He's never going to ask Shane not to get on the plane. He's never going to grab at his hand and stop him from leaving the house. He's always going to let him go, because he thinks that's what Shane wants or what Shane needs, and so he's going to do it for him and pretend it's easy, and then he's going to—to paint his kitchen yellow and get drunk in a noisy, sticky Californian club and tell everyone but Shane that he misses him.

When Shane had forced himself off the neighbor's stoop, back in Zürich, after the lockout ended and all the rubble of it had begun to settle in his brain, he'd realized he didn't even have the keys to the door. He'd run out without them. But when he'd tried the door, it'd been unlocked. Every light in the house was off, and the door to Ilya's bedroom had been shut tight.

But the front door had been left unlocked. So Shane could come back.

"I love you," Shane tells the kitchen cabinets. "I'm in love with you."

Ilya stills behind him. Even the feeling of his breath hitting the side of Shane's neck stops for a moment. For an age.

Shane nods, decisive about it now that he's thrown himself off the edge of the precipice he's been skirting around for ages. The fear in his stomach isn't there—or if it is, it's small. Ignorable. Manageable. Ilya doesn't need to say anything back. Ilya doesn't need to say anything at all.

He's already said it. Shane just wasn't paying attention. Or maybe Shane was just on a different radio frequency, and he's just tuning in now, and everything sounds so much clearer.

No one likes that shade of yellow unless they love something else more.

No one leaves the front door of their home unlocked unless they want someone else to come in. No one's ever put up with Shane leaving his shoes around the doorway except for the people who love him the most.

Shane turns around in Ilya's arms so he can look at him. His eyes are wet, but Ilya's are too. He looks struck dumb.

Underneath it though, he looks young. Young and hopeful and so in love that Shane feels sort of shitty for making him wait. For not telling him sooner, the moment he knocked on his door in Boston. Before that. The moment Hayden told him the lockout was over. Before that. When they snuck away from the party a minute before the New Year and kissed in Jonas' bathroom until they were sure 2016 had arrived. Before that. When Ilya tripped him on the ice in practice and Shane had wacked him on the knee with his stick and they'd both been sent into the penalty box together, even though it was a fucking practice, and Ilya had squirted his water bottle right in Shane's face and then waggled his eyebrows like a little fucking kid.

Before that. He should have told him before that, even. That very first time Ilya had stormed into their kitchen, brandishing one of Shane's shoes and telling him that there was no point in trying to kill him since they were officially on the same team for the foreseeable future. Shane should have gotten up from the couch, taken his face in his hands, kissed him on the forehead and told him he loved him.

Even if he didn't yet, back then. He should have known it was inevitable. And what the fuck kind of chance does *impossible* have when it's up against *inevitable*?

"Shane," Ilya whispers and his voice shakes like he's got a whole earthquake trapped in his chest. "You...are you serious? Are you sure?"

"I am," Shane says and then he laughs because he's never been more sure of anything in his life. "I really fucking am, Ilya."

Ilya blinks at him and then he starts to smile. It's small at first, like he can't believe it, a newborn colt kind of smile like its trying to find its balance. It grows the longer Shane looks at him though. Smile to grin to beam to miniature sun, right there and blinding on Ilya's face.

"I love you too," he says and his hands cup Shane's cheeks, rubbing along the creases of his laughter lines. "*Solnyshko*, I love you so much, it is—I don't—but I, Shane, you have to know, I love—*Shane, solnyshko, ya lyublyu tebya, ya lyublyu tebya*. So much, I do not have the words, but I do."

"I don't need the words," Shane whispers because it's true and he can finally give Ilya the kind of honesty that doesn't contain snarled teeth. "I just want..."

He trails off. Wants and needs are complicated, sometimes.

"What?" Ilya asks, eyes darting in between Shane's. His hands are still cupping his face, soft and worshipful. Like he'll give him anything in the world if he just asks.

It's not going to be easy. Loving Ilya but not being with him all the time isn't going to be a walk in the park, not even when he knows Ilya loves him too. They can't go back to Zürich. They can never go back to Zürich, where it was easy and bright and complicated in different, novel ways.

That doesn't mean they can't go forward though.

And there's no way loving Ilya and being loved by him in return is going to be harder than missing him. Missing him the way he has since January has been awful. Missing him was—Shane can't do that again. It was the hardest thing he's ever done, except for maybe leaving him in the first place.

But Shane doesn't need to say all of that right now. Not when Ilya's looking at him, torn open and beautiful and trusting and there, in the flesh. Waiting for him and loving him all the while.

"Just want you to paint your fucking kitchen again, Rozanov," Shane says and maybe Ilya really does love him as much as Shane loves him, because he doesn't even make fun of him for how choked up and raspy his voice sounds. "That's the worst fucking color I've ever fucking seen."

Ilya stares at him for a moment and then he tugs him forward. Shane thinks he's about to be kissed, but Ilya pulls his head down instead, pressing him into a hug that's so tight Shane almost has it in him to worry about his ribs. He thinks, probably, he'll still feel this embrace tomorrow afternoon when he's boarding the plane back to Montreal. He thinks, probably, that's the point.

"I don't know, is growing on me," Ilya murmurs into his hair, and Shane must really love Ilya the way he thinks he does, because he doesn't say anything about the way he can feel Ilya's tears soaking into his scalp.

"That's not a no," Shane points out, mumbling the words directly to Ilya's pulse. Beneath him, Ilya begins to shake—for a moment, Shane's worried that he's sobbing, but then he adjusts his grip on him and his mouth moves along his hairline, and suddenly Shane can hear his laughter.

Okay, okay.

That's okay then. Really, actually this time. It's okay.

September, 2015.

Ilya hears the door close decisively before the usual struggle with the lock begins. You have to twist it shut and then pull the entire handle mechanism up to get it to engage; Hollander has yet to figure this out despite how many times Ilya has tried to show him in the past week.

A few quiet curses later, there's the jangle of metal hitting wood: Hollander has discarded his keys on the side table next to the door. Then—one thump followed closely by another. Hollander has kicked off his shoes.

Ilya focuses his attention on the cutting board in front of him just in time to catch Hollander skulking from the hallway to the foot of the stairs. The layout of the first floor of this house is convenient, in some ways. To get to the stairs leading up to the two bedrooms, you have to cut through the edge of the living room which is also the dining area and the kitchen.

So even though Hollander has his hood pulled over his head and his shoulders pulled up to his chin, a clear *Please Don't Notice Me*, it's rather impossible not to unless Ilya is turned the other way, feeling particularly kind, and not prone to noticing Shane Hollander wherever he is no matter how far away from him he is.

Ilya is none of these things though, so he clears his throat before Hollander can even clear the edge of the couch. "Hollander," he says, and Hollander freezes, caught.

"Rozanov, hey," Hollander tells him, turning around with the most awkward little wave Ilya's ever seen. He must know it too, because he stuffs both his hands into his pockets immediately afterwards. "It's been a long day, so I'm just gonna head to my room—"

"I need help, please," Ilya interrupts, and Hollander blinks at him.

"What?"

"Help, please," Ilya repeats, beckoning him forward. He has thought about this more than he'll ever admit. As far as he can tell, Hollander is feeling out-of-place and insecure regarding their new arrangement. Ilya can understand this. He can even sympathize. It's not an easy adjustment, going from being hockey rivals to housemates within the span of a few weeks. And all the information Ilya has managed to gather about Hollander points to the fact that he isn't really known for his adaptability.

Flexibility, sure. Ilya can attest to that. But ability to weather and adjust to different circumstances, deviate and reconstruct plans and redefine relationships on the fly? This is hard for anyone. It is hard for Hollander, Ilya thinks.

They have lived together for a week now, and Hollander has spent most of that time in his room. And maybe Ilya should let him adjust at his own pace, but that is easier said than done. Especially because they're still sleeping together, every night since Shane moved in, two days after Ilya arrived.

That first night, Shane had *texted* him to see if he wanted to hook up. As if he didn't live just down the hall. And then, the night after that, he'd *texted* him again, probably because it worked the first time. It is really rather cute, but it is a little bit inconvenient in ways Ilya feels but cannot name. Hollander is two doors away from him now. Permanently. They do not have to text each other to schedule sex. They can just knock.

And—Ilya has been thinking. It is also a little inconvenient that Hollander comes to his room, they fuck, and then he leaves. Ilya isn't sure he appreciates this, even though he'd been the

one to kick Hollander out that first night.

He's thought about it since. A lot. Hollander has said his room is not as nice as Ilya's, and Ilya likes the idea of Hollander falling asleep beside him. Not forever or anything. But he's never had morning sex with Hollander, and he thinks it would be nice. But it would require Hollander to sleep next to him.

"Help with what?" Hollander asks, standing at the edge of the kitchen island and looking over the mess of groceries Ilya has yet to put away. "Translation?"

"Close," Ilya says, pushing a cutting board and six Roma tomatoes towards him. "I need these chopped. Recipe calls for tomatoes crushed."

Hollander blinks down at the board and then up at Ilya, eyebrows furrowing. "Wait, but if the recipe calls for them crushed...?"

"I have seen how you chop tomatoes, Hollander," Ilya says, flashing him a smirk before he focuses back on his own pile of shallots. "Is close enough to crushed for my recipe."

Hollander blinks again. "Asshole," he says, but he relaxes a little bit. He rolls up his sleeves anyway and starts chopping Ilya's Roma tomatoes.

Good boy.

It's important, Ilya has decided, for Hollander to feel both useful and comfortable in this house. He's been fine on the ice with Ilya at practice, chirping him and tapping his helmet in celebration after a won scrimmage, laughing with him at one of the other players in the locker room. He seems to know what to do with sudden changes on the ice, which makes sense if Ilya thinks about it. Hollander is an exceptional hockey player, and hockey is known to be a sport full of line changes and sudden pivots and blink-and-you-miss-it action. Of course Hollander has made himself get used to the idea of Ilya being part of his team before he has relaxed into the idea of Ilya being a part of his house.

"Thank you," Ilya tells him as he finishes peeling another shallot.

"Oh, uh, sure," Hollander says, and his shoulders fly back up to his ears. Alright. Hollander is not used to Ilya being polite, and it has put him on edge again. "No problem."

Ilya stares down at his shallots. No shallot has ever minced into finer pieces, he thinks, as he starts to chop. "So, Hollander," he says.

It is probably too soon, too sudden, but Ilya had only bought so many fucking Roma tomatoes. Hollander has almost cut them all into a pile of mutilated pulp by now. Frankly, Ilya has no idea how he does it. He'd ask, but he has more pressing concerns at the moment.

"I was thinking," he says when he can see from the corner of his eye that Hollander's knife has slowed. "You said your room has a very bad draft, yes?"

Ilya had had to look up what that word meant; he'd only known it in the context of ice hockey and civilian/military relations.

"Yeah," Shane says, and his voice is a bit higher than normal. The knife is moving faster again.

"So maybe you should stay in my room tonight," Ilya says, staring at the cutting board. He shrugs, long and languid and like he does not care one way or another what Hollander thinks about this offer. "Is much less drafty. Very *insulated*."

Shane is silent for a moment. "And—you'd, what, take my room? Out of the kindness of your heart, Rozanov?"

Ilya has to take a very deep breath. This fucking idiot. He clicks his tongue and glances up to find Hollander already looking at him. "And sleep in arctic temperatures? No. Freezing to death at night would be very bad for hockey—and we are on a team now, Hollander. Both of us need to make sure we keep ourselves in top condition for good hockey."

"I, uh...I guess that's true," Hollander agrees. "Yeah, makes sense, Rozanov. Good thinking."

When Ilya risks another look at him, his eyes are back on the board, but there's a pleased smile lingering at the corners of his lips.

"That is good, with the tomatoes," Ilya tells him, watching his shoulders carefully. "Thank you."

Hollander doesn't tense. If anything, he relaxes further into the kitchen counter in front of him, setting down his knife and turning his face up to smile at Ilya. "Cool," he says. "Well, I should probably—"

"Only one problem with them," Ilya says and Hollander blinks. His eyebrows furrow like he's offended on behalf of his mutilated tomatoes. "Is too many. Double what the recipe says I need."

"I just cut what you gave me," Hollander protests, and Ilya shrugs, *what can you do? This is out of my hands*.

"I will have to make more of everything," he says, and he watches the way Hollander's face pinches like he wants to argue.

"Whatever," Hollander says, petulant. "So you can have leftovers for lunch tomorrow."

Ilya closes his eyes for a moment so he doesn't roll them. "There is too much," he says flatly. "Eat dinner with me."

Hollander pauses. "What?"

"You cut too many tomatoes. Only fair you help me eat them all."

“I—” Hollander looks at Ilya and then around the kitchen. His face is flushed. They don’t do this. They fight against each other for the puck on the ice and they have sex in hotel rooms afterwards. They don’t have dinner together.

But they share a house now. Things are different between them. And Ilya—Ilya *wants*.

“Okay,” Hollander says, quietly, like maybe he wants just as much as Ilya does. He fidgets by his cutting board of tomatoes. “Yeah, okay. Um. Is there anything I can help with then? For dinner?”

“No,” Ilya replies quickly, snatching the board of tomatoes away from Hollander and turning to place it on the counter behind him just so Hollander can’t see the relief spreading across his face. Shane is going to stay.

This is going to be the best penne alla vodka Ilya has ever fucking made in his life.

“Just sit there,” he says when he turns back around and picks up his knife, gesturing to the barstool. “Look pretty. Tell me about your day.”

“My day?” Hollander repeats incredulously even as he folds himself into the chair. “What do you need to hear about my day for, you were there for it.”

Ilya shrugs. If he is lucky, Hollander will never understand how greedy Ilya is, at his very core. “I was there for, eh, six hours of it. Tell me about the rest.”

He has been ever since he was a child. Greedy. Always so desperate for more. For everything. He does not want Hollander to stow himself away in his room and only come out for hockey practice and rushed sex in Ilya’s bed. Not when he thinks he could have more. Have Hollander in the mornings beside him under the covers. In the late afternoons sitting next to him on the couch with one of those stupid crossword puzzle books in his lap. In the evenings, just like this, perched at the kitchen counter across from him. Sitting there, looking pretty, telling him about his day.

Hollander starts speaking slowly, like he thinks at any moment Ilya is going to call the joke, mock him for something or another. But eventually, when all Ilya does is hum in the right places and ask a clarifying question about something, Shane relaxes. His voice speeds up and he punctuates the conclusion of a story with his hands before he jumps into the next one. Someone asked him for directions today, he tells Ilya, and he isn’t sure if that means he looks like a local or if he just looks approachable. They’d spoken French even though most people in this part of Switzerland apparently spoke German, which was nice because Shane could speak French back to them, but they had trouble understanding his French, which was offensive because Shane’s French was perfectly understandable.

Ilya hums and nods and asks about the differences between the French spoken in Canada and the French spoken in parts of Switzerland, and he can feel himself relaxing into the hum of conversation too. He hadn’t even realized his shoulders were stiff in the first place.

He tries to remember the last time his kitchen felt loud, alive and bright and warm, but he can’t. It has been—years, maybe. Since someone sat with him while he cooked. Maybe it has

never happened, and it is just one of those dream-memories, things you think of and want so desperately your mind tries to convince you that you've already had it once, long ago, and you've just partially forgotten.

Hollander grins at him, says, *Well, so there are different slang words, obviously, and the pronunciation changes depending on the region and....*

And Ilya nods and hums and feels his own lips tug up into a smile that has nothing to do with the conversation and everything to do with the sudden weightless feeling in his chest.

He has always been very greedy, but he thinks—even if this only happens the once, maybe it will be enough. Maybe men like him do not get to have something as soft and warm as this more than once, and he thinks he can learn to live with that if it's true.

When it is time to go back to Boston after the MLH gets its shit together, and he has to unlock his house and turn on the lights and no one is there to greet him and no one is there to smile at him and mangle his tomatoes and make faces when he pours them a generous taste of the liquor he bought for the pasta sauce and the only company he has will be the music he plays too loudly—it will be enough to have had this before and still have the memory of it.

If he is very, very careful now, if he lets himself linger in this moment and memorize its every facet, savor it and sip it like good vodka, then, he thinks, once will probably be enough.

Chapter End Notes

the ugly mustardy puke yellow is NOT the color ilya wears to their wedding. shane manages to talk him down to using it only for table napkins but then shane surprises him by wearing a pocket square of the same color which he has to give him during the ceremony anyway because ilya starts crying. ilya tells everyone afterwards that he only started crying because he noticed that shane was wearing this pocket square that was the ugliest color of yellow he's ever seen, but no one believes him. ilya never repaints the kitchen; shane never actually wants him to.

(imo it's all very hudson williams saying ilya was able to say he loved shane first because shane metaphorically built him a place where he felt comfortable and safe saying it, except in this fic shane says it first because ilya literally painted him a literal house)

(the idea of writing an extra chapter of more zürich scenes is a little tempting i'm ngl, but i don't think that's in the cards for this fic i am sad to say. if only because this shane would hate the idea of giving away more pieces of their house in zürich to us, the audience. i mean, he didn't even want you to know about the shoes)

End Notes

sombr voice: how can we go back to being long distance low commitment casual fuck buddies when we just shared a whole-ass house

[**edit to add:** now with an absolutely amazing and show stopping podfic that's been linked in the 'works inspired by this one' section!! literally sunsandships did such a wonderful job narrating this story, i love it so much and i'm just blown away by their talent (and also their willingness to look past what i am sure were many typos in this fic)]

[**edit to add (2):** now with another abosutely amazing and show stopping podfic that's also been linked in the works inspired by this one secton!! amanita_fierce & cottagepodfics have made an incredible piece of art to go along with this story, i adore literally everything about it and have become obsessed]

Works inspired by this one

[Cover for home economics by anon](#) by [fabulae](#)

[Podfic] [home economics](#) by [sunsandships](#)

[Podfic] [home economics](#) by [Amanita_Fierce](#), [cottagepodfics](#)

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