

Scentbound

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Scentbound

by [stillnotimpressed](#)

Summary

When a feral alpha collapses on Shane's doorstep, instinct collides with fear. Marked by scent, drawn by something neither of them can name, they circle each other in a fragile truce that feels dangerously like fate.

or:

Shane is an omega with a complicated past, Ilya is a feral alpha who is way too obsessed with him, and what follows involves scent-marking, unresolved feelings, sexual tension, buried secrets and so much emotional damage.

Notes

Hi!

So this is the Feral Alpha Ilya fic that's been haunting my brain for a long time.

It's also the first story I've written in a while, which makes sharing it feel both exciting and a little terrifying. English is not my first language, so please forgive any clumsy wording or mistakes.

Tags and rating may change. I have an outline, but I'm also a slow-burn addict, so we'll see how well I manage to keep this story from spiraling.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

That night, when the wind changed direction, something it had kept silent for eight years whispered his name from within the forest: Shane.

Shane Hollander startled in the cottage deep in the Ottawa woods. He felt his skin prickle.

After a long, exhausting hockey season, it was finally time for a break. He was so drained that he had told his family he wanted to be alone for two weeks. He would stop by now and then, but if possible, he preferred his own company. Yuna and David, who knew how withdrawn Shane could become, had accepted this without question. And so, on the fourth day of his vacation, he sat alone by the fireplace, watching the flames.

Sometimes Shane found silence unbearably loud and needed some kind of background noise to escape his own thoughts. But in moments like this, he surrendered to the quiet, allowing his mind to wander among the thoughts he let surface. Before the chill took hold of his body, some of the memories he had decided to bury years ago had already risen to the surface. Tonight, he had no intention of pushing them back down. On the contrary, he was making an effort to recall the face that stubbornly refused to appear before his eyes.

Blue eyes. A distinctive nose. Golden skin. And that scent.

Oakmoss, leather, spice.

Earth, skin, warmth.

Strong hands, an unrivalled smile, a touch that burned.

No. He could remember certain parts of that body with startling clarity, but the face would not come.

Just as he let out a breath, the same shiver ran through him again. His heart sped up.

Oakmoss. Leather. Spice.

He was blurring imagination and reality. And it was not the first time. With a quiet ache, he looked past the window into the darkness. The nocturnal animals had already begun to roam. He saw a small wild rabbit dart away, hopping in panic. Then a scream, probably the fox chasing it. They liked to hunt at this hour. Last summer he had seen one uncomfortably close to his door.

When the rabbit finally vanished from sight, another shape appeared in his field of vision. This one was too large to be a fox or anything it might be chasing. For a moment, Shane wondered if it could be a bear, but when they had first started building this place, they had been told there were no bears in the area.

Curiosity surged through him. He rose from his chair, fixing his full attention on the distant shape. It was not difficult to keep track of it. It was moving closer. His pulse quickened. He stepped toward the window. A few trees away, nearly human-sized now, the shadow was walking to the right, toward the cottage's entrance path.

Shane moved without thinking. His heart hammered, his ears rang. It took only seconds to reach the door. Then, in a purely instinctive and foolish move, he opened it. The outdoor lights flicked on with the motion. For a brief moment he could no longer see the shape. He thought he had imagined it, that solitude had already driven him mad on the fourth day.

But no.

A few seconds later, a large figure emerged before him.

The man, clearly male, was about Shane's height, though broader, wrapped in a torn, shabby jacket. His hair fell to his shoulders, his beard just as neglected. Panic rose in Shane's chest. His first instinct should have been to retreat inside and lock the door. He was in a cottage in the middle of the forest. Aside from his family's place miles away, there was not a single other house, not even a hut, nearby. Until now, he had seen nothing but animals. So where had this man come from?

Stupidly, Shane followed his instincts. Instead of fleeing, he took a few steps forward. That allowed him to see the man a little more clearly. Hair and beard still hid most of his face. Even his age was impossible to tell. But as he drew closer, Shane noticed he was staggering. One hand was clutched over the left side of his abdomen.

Was he injured?

Something tightened painfully inside Shane.

"Hello?" he said, forcing himself steady. "Do you need help?"

The man stopped about ten steps away. He tilted his head slightly. Then, just like Rose's cat Nightmare always did, he sniffed the air.

It was not a human gesture. Shane took a step back. But then the man made a sound like a low growl. Shane could not understand what he was saying.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked.

This time the man reacted to his voice. He lifted his head. He brought both hands forward.

He took a few more steps and, in a thick, throaty voice that startled Shane, said, "Mine."

Shane waited for him to continue. Even at this distance, he still could not see the man's expression. But the rest never came. Instead, the man began to sway badly. Thinking he was about to collapse, Shane lunged forward and caught him by the arm. The man turned his chest toward him. His face hovered just inches from Shane's neck. Shane thought he felt his nose brush his hair. Nothing made sense. He did not know what to do.

Then the man pressed his nose against the exposed skin of Shane's neck.

Shane shuddered violently. He opened his mouth to protest when the man whispered again, "Mine," this time much softer.

And then he let most of his weight fall onto Shane.

Shane had no choice but to bring the half-unconscious man inside. Even though it was summer, the air had suddenly turned cold and the wind had picked up. After laying the stranger down on the wide couch in the living room, he quickly fetched a glass of water. The man had not spoken again since Shane dragged him in.

When Shane pressed the glass to his lips, the man shifted from his half-lying, half-sitting position and straightened a little. His elbows came to rest on his knees. He lifted his head. As he looked into Shane's eyes, it was as if he were trying to say something, or to understand. Shane offered the glass again. The man placed his hand over Shane's, but instead of drinking, he kept holding it. His eyes followed Shane's long, slender fingers. He laced his own fingers through them and made a strange sound Shane could not interpret.

Shane wanted to be cautious around this stranger, but ever since he had realized the man was not aggressive, he could not bring himself to push him away. So he sat quietly beside him. When he tried to pull his hand back, the man did not let go. He tightened his grip, rubbed his nose against the back of Shane's hand, then fixed him with those blue-flame eyes.

"Water," Shane said, confused. "You should drink."

The man refused to let go. A moment later, Shane felt first his lips, then the tip of his tongue against his knuckles.

"Oh my God," Shane groaned.

A heat flared in the center of his chest. His breath caught. He was frozen in place. Somehow he managed to pull himself together and set the glass down on the floor. Noticing the sudden movement, the man stopped and finally released his hand.

Now he was staring at Shane in confusion, his puppy-like blue eyes glowing in the dark.

Shane looked away. He lowered his head, fixing his gaze on a spot on the floor. The man reached out, clearly trying to take hold of Shane's chin, but the motion made him groan in pain. That was when Shane remembered the wound in his abdomen. Yes, this wild-looking stranger was injured, badly enough that he could not even speak.

Shane dropped to his knees in front of him and tried again. He extended his hand gently. "May I look?" he asked, gesturing to the side of the man's stomach.

The man accepted without hesitation. He might not have understood what Shane meant, but he had no intention of refusing his touch.

Shane first helped him out of his worn jacket, then gently lifted the long-sleeved shirt beneath it to expose the wound.

When he saw the dark red gash, he let out a quiet breath of relief. Thankfully it was not too deep, and it did not look infected. He reached for the first-aid kit he had brought with the water and got to work.

As he cleaned the wound with cotton, he could feel the man's burning gaze on the back of his neck. He barely reacted to the sting of the antiseptic, but when Shane brushed the hair away from his eyes with his other hand, the man grabbed the fabric of the couch and brought his hands up to his head.

Shane felt his cheeks burn. That simple, unintended touch had stirred something he had kept buried for years. He pushed the sensation to the back of his mind and finished what he was doing.

"All done." He forced a tense smile and prepared to stand. "Now, if you want, you can try to talk, or..."

He did not get to finish, because the man suddenly pulled him closer. Everything happened at once. Shane stumbled back toward the couch. The man caught him in his arms. He wrapped both hands around Shane's waist, and Shane's legs ended up in his lap. Then the man went back to making those sounds Shane could not understand.

Shane's eyes were wide. Between the shock of the intimate position and his fear of startling the man, he stayed still for a moment.

The man pulled him closer and buried his face against the side of Shane's neck. "Hmnh."

Shane only panicked when he felt teeth against his scent gland. His mind was screaming *No. Don't. Not that spot. Not his mark. No.*

"Mine."

Shane managed to turn his head away. "All right, that's enough," he said. "I get that you're not well, or at least I'm trying to, but stop saying that."

"Hmnh," the man growled again. "No. Mine."

Well, at least this time he had managed two words.

Shane sighed in frustration and tried to get out of the man's lap. It was harder than it should have been. The man was stronger than a first-league hockey player. When Shane finally put some distance between them, the man made a protesting sound, but it was too late. Shane moved to the armchair beside the couch. His face was on fire, his legs were trembling, and he could still feel the teeth at his scent glands.

"Please," Shane said when he found his voice. He looked everywhere except at the man. He picked up his phone from the coffee table. "I'm calling the police. I do not know if they will come right away at this hour. Maybe I should talk to my parents first. Or maybe I should take

you straight to the hospital. Why did that not occur to me? I am here like an idiot trying to patch you up myself. Of course you should go to a hospital. You could have other injuries. You could have a concussion. Oh my God. I cannot believe myself. I will call my mom first, then get the car...”

“...ane.”

Shane froze. He realized he had gone into one of his panic monologues. Then it hit him. “What?”

The man was watching him through narrowed eyes, as if he knew this side of Shane. Of course that was impossible. Shane barely showed it even to new friends. He struggled to explain it. So how could a wild, injured stranger who had appeared on his doorstep possibly...

“Shaaaane.”

Everything stopped. At that hoarse sound, Shane had no idea what to do. Had he just said his name?

“What?”

“Shane,” the man said again, a little louder but still rough. “Mine.”

When he heard his name, he felt the ground slip away beneath him. Yes, there was no mistake. This man knew who he was. But what unsettled Shane was not the name itself, it was the way it was spoken. Too familiar. Too intimate. For the first time, the man was not growling or snarling but speaking like an ordinary person, and Shane was certain he had heard that voice, that cadence, before. He did not let his thoughts drift back to those few weeks eight years ago.

With a sudden decision, he set the phone he had been gripping so tightly down on the couch.

“You know my name.” It was not a question. Of course the man could have seen him on television or online, but that seemed unlikely. Shane could not imagine this man using things like that.

The man nodded. Shane’s eyes widened.

“Yes?” It was a foolish thing to ask, but he could see the man responding more clearly now. He had to press him.

“Yes,” the man said. Then he added, softly, in a way that made something tremble inside Shane, “Shaaane.”

Blue eyes. Dark blond curls. A mole on one cheek.

No, Shane thought. It is not him.

But he did not remember enough to be sure. He had stopped trying to remember years ago. Fate must have been playing with him, delivering this man to his door tonight.

“What is your name?” Shane asked. For some reason he knew that if he asked how the man knew him, he would get no answer.

The man did not respond. Instead, he frowned, as if the effort hurt. Maybe he did not remember. Too bad, Shane thought. He had hoped that once he started getting answers, he might understand what was wrong.

“Is there someone I can call? Family, maybe? Someone who can help you?”

The man furrowed his brow. Had he not understood? Then he pointed at Shane and said, “Shane. Omega.”

Shane froze. It had been a long time since anyone had called him that. Instinctively he rubbed the scent gland at his neck. Remembering his secondary gender right now, in front of a man like this, was not good. In the heat of the moment he had not even wondered whether the stranger was an alpha or a beta, because it had to be one of the two. His mind kept rejecting the scent he had noticed when they first met, but everything about the man’s body, his movements, the way he said “omega,” all of it shouted alpha.

He shook his head, trying to tear himself out of a web of thoughts he did not want to fall into. This was going nowhere. He would not get anything useful from him. So he changed tack, glancing at the man’s disheveled state.

“All right. How about a shower? No offense, but I think you really need one.”

The man tilted his head and growled, “No.”

Shane blinked. Yes, this ragged stranger clearly understood far more than he let on.

So Shane tried a different approach. It was obvious the man’s eyes never left him. Without saying a word, Shane walked toward the bathroom on the first floor. Just as he had expected, he heard footsteps behind him. He smiled to himself. When he stopped at the door of what he used as the guest bathroom, the man halted right behind him, so close that Shane could feel his breath against the back of his neck. His skin prickled yet again.

Shane went inside, turned on the hot water in the large shower, then turned back.

“You can take your clothes off. Clean towels are here. The soap is in the shower...” He stopped himself. If he kept going, he would start rambling again.

The man was watching him intently, but when Shane moved as if to undress, he lunged forward and began lifting the hem of Shane’s shirt.

“What? No, no, not me. You,” Shane said in a rush.

A part of him could not deny how strangely endearing the gesture was. Trying to keep contact to a minimum and to avoid the man’s eyes, he turned the big man toward the shower

and mimed lifting his shirt, then pointed at the water. “To get clean.”

He was about to turn and leave when he heard that voice again.

“Shaaane.”

Shane closed his eyes. He could not seem to resist that needy tone. From that moment on, he moved on pure instinct. He turned back, helped the man out of his clothes, leaving his pants on on purpose, and nudged him under the spray.

The man made a few animal-like sounds at first, but the warmth of the water soon soothed him. His eyes, however, stayed on Shane. Shane did not insist on soap or shampoo. For now, it was enough to wash away the dust and grime. Besides, a deeper part of him was impatient to see the face hidden beneath all that hair and beard.

But when the stranger turned his back, every uneasy thought vanished.

His skin was covered in long scratches, burns, even stitches in places. Shane stared in disbelief. Most of them were clearly old. It took him a moment to realize there were similar marks on his chest as well, though fewer. Something fierce stirred inside Shane. His omega reacted with a rush of anger, a need to protect. This man, this alpha, had to be shielded from whatever had been done to him.

When he finally let out the breath he had not realized he was holding, something else hit him.

Oakmoss. Leather. Spice. That familiar scent.

If he cut his hair short and shaved off the beard, would Shane see the face he so often dreamed of, the one that vanished every time he woke?

It was not him. It could not be.

But what if he looked like him, just a little? What if Shane could feel that young alpha, the one whose scent had once marked him, this close again?

Somehow Shane made it through the rest of the evening without panicking or letting the man grow even stranger and more intimate. He wrapped him in a towel, persuaded him to eat and drink a little, and guided him upstairs. In the guest bedroom, he pulled a clean T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants from the wardrobe and laid them on the bed.

“Sleep here tonight,” he said, feeling oddly unsteady ever since he had seen the scars in the bathroom and started imagining the man beneath the hair and beard, in ways he should not have. “We will figure out what to do tomorrow.”

The man looked at the bed, then at Shane. Then he wobbled over and sat on the edge, patting the empty space beside him. “Yes.”

Shane felt his face heat all the way to his ears. Was he actually suggesting they sleep together?

“No,” Shane said firmly. “My room is across the hall. You sleep here. We will talk in the morning.”

Before the man could protest or whisper his name again, Shane left and closed the door behind him.

When he lay down in his own bed, his heart was still racing. Only then did he realize he had not done any of his usual nighttime routines. He had not even changed his clothes.

He was sure he would not be able to sleep with a stranger in his house, a wounded man who smelled familiar, knew his name, and filled him with emotions he could not untangle.

Yet about an hour later, he drifted out of a deep, uneasy doze with a soft jolt.

There was a weight against his stomach. Warmth at the back of his neck. When Shane caught the scent of oakmoss, he smiled faintly. The warmth behind him moved closer. A breath brushed the sensitive skin at his nape.

“Alpha,” Shane murmured, half asleep, nestling into that heat.

And for the first time in years, he slipped into a sleep that was deep and unbroken.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Feel free to leave a comment. Some bonds don't stay buried forever, and there are still mysteries ahead. 😊

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

“Hollander.”

When Shane turned on the ice, he found his opponent facing him. “Rozanov.”

They exchanged brief nods, both holding back the urge to smile. Shane had last faced Ilya Rozanov a year ago, in the Junior World Cup final, the match where they had beaten Russia by the narrowest of margins. Now they were sharing the same rink again, preparing for yet another final.

Rozanov was a brutal player. He enjoyed provoking his opponents, even his own teammates. To be honest, he was one of the few players Shane considered his equal. Shane liked watching him play.

During this two-week training camp, the Canadian and Russian teams would be staying in the same hotel. It was not Shane’s first major event, but he was still nervous. And excited. Beating Rozanov again and then heading into the drafts would be perfect.

“Ready?” Rozanov asked, wearing that infamous, arrogant smile.

Shane lifted one eyebrow. “To beat you? Always.”

When Rozanov laughed, Shane thought he saw his canines. For some reason, he felt the need to swallow.

“Are you here alone this time?” Rozanov asked, nodding toward the stands. “Your family letting you out on your own?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Save that humor for the real match. You might need it.”

Rozanov was not wrong. His parents had been there for every event so far. Shane was grateful, but this time he had insisted they stay home. He was eighteen now, a hockey player on the brink of the major league. He could take care of himself. Even if his mother still worried about his secondary gender, Shane refused to let it define him. So what if he was one of the only omegas in the hockey world? He proved how good he was every time he stepped on the ice.

As he skated away, he could not stop himself from glancing back once more. Rozanov glided toward the blue line without taking his eyes off him. The countdown for the scrimmage had begun.

They took their positions, circling one another like predators.

The coaches' shouted orders faded into nothing. As Shane drew a deep breath, all he could hear was the sharp scrape of his skates on the ice and Rozanov's breathing across from him.

Warm.

Dangerous.

The puck hit the ice, and they both lunged forward.

Rozanov drove his shoulder into Shane's chest, a hard but fair body check. Shane slid back but did not fall. He dug his skate into the ice, held his balance, and lifted his chin.

"Soft," Rozanov murmured as he passed him, then shot off after the puck.

Shane clenched his teeth and went after him, slamming his own shoulder into Rozanov's chest. It was his turn.

The moment of contact was not just physical.

Rozanov's scent flared all at once. Leather. Spice. There was another note beneath it, something Shane could not quite name. His stomach tightened. Heat bloomed along the inside of his thighs. His omega body reacted before his mind could stop it.

Damn it.

When Rozanov glanced back, his eyes darkened for a brief instant. As stupid as it was, Shane felt as if they were sharing the same sensation.

Rozanov's lips curved faintly. "Pretty," he rasped with that heavy Russian accent, meeting Shane's gaze.

A shiver ran through Shane. Forcing himself to focus, he scanned the rink, only to realize the puck had already gone to another player. A moment later, someone from his team was sent to the penalty box, and the scrimmage paused.

"What was that, Hollander?" Rozanov whispered, gliding in close now. "Did you just smell me?"

Shane shoved him away with his elbow. "You're imagining things," he muttered, but as he skated off, he could feel Rozanov's smile burning into his back.

Shane woke up abruptly. Sunlight spilled over his face, and cheerful birdsong drifted in from outside. Before opening his eyes, he sank deeper into the soothing warmth and peaceful stillness around him. For a moment, he considered never leaving the bed at all, but that wasn't very Shane Hollander of him.

He lifted his arms to stretch, but for some reason, he couldn't move. *What the fuck?* Then he heard a strange, low murmur right by his ear.

That was when he noticed the arm under his head and the other draped across his chest. Any other time, he would have bolted, but right now he couldn't move, pinned both by shock and by where he was.

The heat at his back intensified. Something brushed the back of his hair. Then a hardness pressed against his ass. Shane's breathing quickened. His body reacted instantly.

"Oh shit," he muttered to himself. Memories from the night before began to surface.

He had let a stranger into his home. A man he could barely communicate with, who didn't understand the concept of personal space, who followed Shane around like a duckling, who was strange and injured. He couldn't believe he'd done it. And yet his instincts kept soothing him, insisting he hadn't been wrong.

When the stranger shifted slightly behind him, Shane's morning wood made itself known. He rubbed a hand over his face and tried to slip out from under the heavy arm. He heard that low, nasal rumble again. Then he felt something wet against the back of his neck.

That was the last straw.

Shane used all his strength to wrench himself free. He turned, ready to say something, to yell at the man to stop touching him, and froze when he saw those wild eyes.

He had never seen anyone like this. The man's gaze was hypnotic, unblinking. Heat flooded Shane's body, and he shuddered as he remembered the hardness he'd felt against him.

He vaguely remembered letting the man into his bed. Why he had allowed it, he had no idea. He must have been out of his mind. Sure, he felt incredibly well rested this morning, but he refused to connect that with the stranger in front of him.

With a long sigh, he said, "I told you to stay in your own bed, but I guess that's on me. I should have known better."

He was still half-sitting on the mattress now. He glanced at the clock and started to get up.

"I should take a shower," he said, mostly to himself. Even though he'd half-washed the stranger the night before, he could still smell dirt and sweat on his own skin.

Just as he was about to stand, he felt a weight on his wrist and was suddenly yanked back down. Before he could even process what was happening, Shane was flat on his back, the feral man straddling him.

"Shower," the man repeated, to Shane's shock. "No."

He pinned Shane's wrists with his hands and trapped his legs with his own. Then, for what must have been the tenth time since last night, he pressed his lips to Shane's scent gland.

"Hey." Shane's protest didn't seem to do much. "Are you fucking scent marking me right now?"

He tried to sound angry, but his voice cracked at the end.

The man didn't answer, just let out a low rumble. As he rubbed his face against Shane's scent gland, the faint vibrations of his murmurs sent shivers through Shane's entire body.

After a moment, Shane could finally make out what he was saying over and over.

"Mine."

Shane resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He swallowed a laugh. He had truly never met anyone like this. This man, this insane stranger, the alpha who had nearly passed out the day before, was actually scent marking him. All because Shane wanted to take a shower. As reality sank in, the butterflies in his stomach went wild.

"Get off me." He tried to keep his voice firm, but he wasn't doing a great job. His omega, annoyingly, seemed to find this situation very appealing. "I'm just going to shower, okay? And maybe you should too. So let me go."

The man's head tilted slightly as he pulled away from Shane's neck. He studied Shane's face, then his throat, then his eyes again. With one thumb, he slowly caressed Shane's cheek. *Those stupid freckles*, Shane thought.

"Pretty."

His voice was hoarse, but what really made Shane panic was the way something inside his mind cracked the instant the word left the man's lips. The cold of the ice. The harsh white of the lights. The mocking curve at the corner of his opponent's mouth. They all slammed together at once, like an electric shock through his body.

Pretty, the voice in the dream had said too.

Shane held his breath. The memory slipped away as quickly as it had come, leaving only that strange tightness in his chest behind. At the same time, the man's nose drifted closer to Shane's skin, stopping right over his scent gland. His breathing was warm, slow, almost careful. There was no trace left of his earlier animalistic urgency.

Shane shivered.

"Stop that," he said, in a tone that didn't convince even himself.

This time, the man didn't press his lips to Shane's skin. He just stayed there, breathing for a long moment. His deep, steady exhale brushed against Shane's ear. Shane felt a strange pressure inside him, like something was being pulled in and out of him. His chest tightened. His heart raced.

Then the man finally pulled back.

Had he gotten what he wanted, or had he actually listened to Shane?

Just then, a vibration buzzed from the side. The stranger startled like a feral cat, his back going rigid, every muscle tensing. Shane was sure that if he'd had animal ears, they would have flattened back.

Chuckling under his breath, Shane nudged the stiff body off him. "My phone's ringing," he said, reaching toward the nightstand.

The man kept flicking his gaze between the door, Shane's face, and the phone, as if he were ready to throw himself in the way of anything that might come through.

The moment he was free, Shane grabbed the phone. When he saw his mother's name, his brows knit together automatically. Unfortunately, he didn't really have a choice but to answer. Otherwise, he'd eventually have to explain this strange man he hadn't yet figured out what to do with.

"Hello? Mom?"

Yuna's voice was cheerful. "Shane! Good morning. How are you?"

"Fine," Shane said quietly. Even though he still felt a little breathless from everything that had just happened, he managed to sound steady. "Just resting. How about you?"

"Great. Your father realized the shrimp he bought the other day are close to their expiration date, so we need to cook them soon. We're doing it tonight. Do you want to come over?"

For a moment, Shane had no idea what to say. Since he'd arrived, he'd only had dinner with his parents once; the rest of the time he'd deliberately kept to himself. This vacation was supposed to be about clearing his head. But a stranger from the forest had already derailed that plan. A stranger who was currently sitting cross-legged on his bed, watching him with rapt attention.

"Um... no. Thanks, Mom, but I don't really feel like it. I think I'll stay by myself a little longer."

He could practically feel Yuna frowning through the phone. Had she picked up on the worry in his voice already?

"Shane? Are you sure you're okay? You sound a little strange."

"I'm fine. I just woke up, that's all," he said quickly. He surprised himself with how easily the lie came.

At that exact moment, the stranger reached out and placed a hand on Shane's upper thigh, squeezing lightly, casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Shane bit back a groan. What the hell was this guy doing?

When he smacked the hand away, its owner made a low, barely audible sound.

"Is someone with you?" Yuna asked suddenly. Shane froze.

“Of course not, Mom. I told you, I’m spending two weeks completely alone. I didn’t invite anyone.” He felt like he was about to lose control as the words rushed out. He took a slow, steady breath.

“Honey... I hate to ask, but did your nightmares come back? Is that why you sound so irritable?” Yuna said, and guilt washed over him.

Ever since what had happened eight years ago, even with both medical and psychological support, he still had those vague, half-remembered nightmares. Not all of them were bad. Sometimes he woke up feeling strangely good. But there was always that unease underneath them. The unease of not remembering something he was supposed to remember. The weight of memories his mind kept rejecting. Over the years, he’d tried to escape that feeling with all kinds of prescriptions, but he always stopped eventually, and the drifting between dreams and nightmares always found its way back.

“No, Mom,” he said, making his voice firm. “I get why you’re worried, and I appreciate it, but I’m okay. Really. I’ll come by in the next few days, I promise.”

Even though he hated lying to his parents, it felt as if he had to protect this strange man and whatever secrets he carried. When he himself didn’t yet fully understand what was going on, and hadn’t decided what to do, this was the only sensible choice. Yes, it was stupid, but for now he was keeping this man hidden from both his family and the authorities.

He heard Yuna let out a relieved breath. “Alright. We’ll be waiting, then. Talk to you later, honey. Enjoy your vacation.”

Shane felt himself smile. “Talk to you later, Mom,” he said softly, and hung up.

When he looked up, a forefinger was resting at the corner of his mouth. The stranger lightly touched the place where Shane’s lips curved. Then, just as faintly, his own lips curved too. Shane stared at him, frozen. It was hard to see through all that thick beard, but the shape of his mouth was perfect, and his smile was devastatingly beautiful.

Maybe it really was time to shave that beard.

The thought came and went in an instant. Shane shook his head, as if coming up for air.

Then another sound filled the room. A rumble. Someone’s stomach was growling, but it was hard to tell whose. It could have been either of them. For some reason, that simple, bodily agreement made Shane oddly pleased.

“Well,” he said, swinging his legs off the bed, “I guess it’s breakfast time.”

He kept walking toward the bathroom when he heard movement behind him. Was he really starting to get used to this man, trailing him like a shadow?

When they stepped out of the shower, the room was thick with steam and the scent of pine soap. As Shane towel-dried his hair, he stole a glance at the man beside him. Of course, those

blue-flame eyes were already on him.

After waking up, Shane had decided he was going to wash this man properly. But for that, he'd needed a plan. The... interesting moments in bed had made one thing clear: the stranger was not going to be okay with showering alone. So the only way Shane had been able to convince him to get clean without losing his scent was by going in together. He'd tried very hard to keep everything ordinary, to not look at the body in front of him as... an extremely attractive man. But the sweat and dirt clinging to both of them had made it unavoidable.

So he had managed to wash the man, and himself, by letting the alpha scent-mark him now and then without straying into anything too intimate. He could always blame the heat of the water for the flush that had spread across his skin.

As an omega who had lived for years on medication, fragmented dreams, and buried emotions, Shane had always kept sex in the background. Even the thought of letting someone get that close made him feel like he was losing control. Shane Hollander had learned how to put his professional hockey player identity ahead of his omega one. Apart from the occasional strange look or innuendo, people barely paid attention to his secondary gender anymore. So the idea that he would get aroused by a complete stranger, a feral alpha no less, had never even crossed his mind. Luckily, he was a true expert at self-control.

He was proud of himself for managing not to focus on the solid muscles beneath his hands as he washed the alpha, or how soft his long hair became when wet, or the way his cock hardened at the slightest touch. All right, maybe when the alpha realized Shane no longer smelled like him and kept marking his neck again and again, he'd made a few sounds he wasn't proud of. Maybe he'd even moaned a little. But that was it. There really wasn't another way to wash a feral man who felt the need to mark everything.

That bath had made one more thing painfully clear: the man wasn't just injured on his upper body. Most of him was covered in wounds. And they weren't just scratches from living in the wild. Some looked as though they'd been made by something sharp, and there were stitches in several places on his back that Shane had noticed before. One of his arms was riddled with small puncture marks, too many to count. But the most disturbing thing was the tattoo on the inside of his left wrist, like a tag. It was just a number. Shane hadn't been able to read it properly in the moment, but it only strengthened the theories forming in his mind. This man wasn't just some hermit who had run off into the woods. Someone had done terrible things to him.

Now Shane noticed the alpha tugging at the sleeves of the clean T-shirt he was wearing. When the tattoo flashed into view again, Shane narrowed his eyes.

To keep himself from staring, he cleared his throat. "You look... a little less like a caveman now."

The man frowned but didn't reply. When Shane headed for the kitchen, he followed as if they were connected by an invisible thread.

Convincing him to stop hovering and sit on one of the stools by the counter was another challenge. After a few rounds of "No" and "Shaaaneee," Shane finally managed to get to the

fridge to start making food.

His mind was a mess, and he had no idea what to cook, so he decided to work with whatever he grabbed first. During hockey season, Shane followed a strict meal plan designed by his dietitian. But on this out-of-control vacation morning, pancakes felt like the right choice.

He added the blueberries he found in the fridge to the batter and whisked it some more. When he glanced up while cooking, he found the stranger watching him intently, chin propped on his hand.

Shane couldn't help but smile. "Are you hungry?"

As silly as it was, he liked being able to talk to someone while going about his day.

"Hungry," the man said. "Shane."

Shane's eyebrows shot up. His omega, which had been getting more and more annoying about everything, was practically clapping with glee inside him. *Hungry for me.*

He ignored the urge to smack himself and plated the blueberry pancakes. Then he poured two glasses of the almond-milk smoothie he'd made. When he set the food down in front of him, the alpha was distracted by a random utensil on the counter.

"Here," Shane said, standing right in front of him. "Start eating. I hope you like it."

When the man didn't move, Shane decided to take matters into his own hands. He picked up the fork and knife, cut a small piece of pancake, and held it up to the alpha's mouth.

But the man didn't open it. He just kept staring at Shane. Then he gently pushed Shane's hand back toward him. "No."

Shane blinked. What did that mean?

"You don't like it?" he tried. "Come on. Eat."

The man refused again. "No. Shane. Eat."

What?

This injured, half-starved man, who had nearly collapsed on Shane's doorstep and probably hadn't eaten in days, wanted to see *Shane* eat first?

A rush of panic and warmth flooded his chest.

"No, you eat first," he insisted instead. He really didn't want to start making ridiculous assumptions. "I know you're hungry."

The man grabbed his arm and guided the fork all the way to Shane's mouth. "Yes. Eat."

Shane shook his head, but he did it, popping the bite into his mouth and chewing quickly. It tasted fine.

“Better?” he asked, meeting the man’s eyes. “Now you eat.”

When the stranger hesitated again, Shane took another bite. Only then did the alpha finally accept the food. Shane let out a quiet breath of relief. Judging by the little noises he made while chewing, he liked it.

After a few bites, once the worst of the hunger had passed, Shane let him try to use the cutlery on his own. Secretly, he’d been afraid the man would just start shoveling everything in with his hands like some mountain savage, but his instincts proved right. The alpha struggled a little, but he seemed to know how to use modern utensils.

Then he hit a blueberry in his pancake and made a face, looking up at Shane.

Shane grinned. “Too sour? That’s a blueberry.”

“Sour,” the man repeated.

Shane picked up one of the washed blueberries from the counter and held it out. “Want to try it like this? I love them. I try to eat them every day. They’re good for your immune system and they’re delicious,” he rambled.

Instead of taking it, the man leaned forward and took the blueberry straight from between Shane’s fingers. Along with it, he sucked on Shane’s thumb, rolled it slowly over his tongue, and never once broke eye contact.

Shane’s pulse spiked, his ears went hot, and he found himself staring at the mouth around his finger and then at those eyes. This man was awakening something in him he hadn’t even remembered existed. Maybe it was because he hadn’t looked at an alpha that way in years, but his omega was losing its mind. The scent, the eyes, the way he moved, and most of all... that sense of familiarity was turning his instincts inside out. He just hoped he could resist it until he uncovered the truth.

When the alpha finally released his finger with a soft, obscene sound, Shane realized he was half hard. He cleared his throat and hurried through the rest of his food.

By the time breakfast was over, Shane felt a little more at ease. He had managed to both clean and feed a feral alpha. He wasn’t about to tell anyone what it had cost him, of course, but setting a few things right had soothed both his body and his mind, if only a little.

As Shane moved on to the dishes, the alpha was still sitting on the kitchen counter. He kept watching Shane’s every move, as if he were afraid Shane might vanish and never come back.

Shane set the first plate in the sink. Turned on the tap. The thin, metallic echo of water against ceramic sounded strangely loud in the small cabin.

His shoulders tensed without him meaning them to.

He dragged a fork over the sponge. The metal slipped from his hand for just a second and struck the porcelain.

Clack.

A soft but grating sound.

For a moment, the cottage disappeared.

A warm locker room. Damp air. The sharp mix of chlorine and sweat. A locker door slamming...

Clack.

Shane had thought he'd found the most secluded corner of the locker room. His heart still hadn't slowed; his lips burned from how hard he'd been biting them to keep from crying, he might even have drawn blood from the inside of his cheek. But none of that hurt as much as the assistant coach's words.

"You're too impulsive, Hollander. Maybe we should start playing you more defensively."

He clenched his teeth. This new assistant coach had started with the insinuations from day one. He joked around with the other players, got along with everyone, but he never missed a chance to criticize Shane. He kept implying he was "soft," that he didn't like his style of play, and every small mistake came with a threat to strip him of his title.

His captain title.

As if he actually could.

Shane knew exactly what was underneath it all. He'd faced attitudes like this before, but he hadn't expected it here, on such a professional stage, right before the last game that would decide whether he made a top team. The man was one of the many omega-haters this world had no shortage of. The kind who thought omegas had no business playing a "hard" sport like this. And for once, Shane couldn't even fully blame him. Because he couldn't get the alpha scent from the scrimmage out of his head.

Rozanov's scent.

He'd been incredible on the ice, as always but near the end of the game, Shane had felt the assistant coach's eyes on him. Afterward, he'd been called aside and accused of being "too impulsive."

Shane dragged a hand down his face and let out a slow breath. One mistake had been enough to put him back under scrutiny. What would happen if the man said something to the other coaches? Shane took his suppressants regularly. He'd never had an incident. He got along with his teammates, with the staff. So why did he feel like he was under fire?

As he spiraled in his thoughts, a sound came from the other side of the locker room. Someone was slamming a locker shut. Shane flinched.

A few seconds later, Ilya Rozanov stood in front of him, hair still damp from the shower, a black tank top and sweatpants clinging to his tall frame. His gym bag hung from one shoulder.

“Hollander,” he said, his voice deep. Then, noticing Shane’s state, he tilted his head slightly. “Something happened.”

Shane froze. As Rozanov took a few steps closer, his breathing sped up.

“It’s nothing,” he said curtly, still refusing to meet his eyes. He turned his head toward the window.

Then something happened that he never would’ve expected in a million years. Rozanov set his bag down and sat beside him on the bench. He turned fully toward Shane.

“Talk.”

Shane couldn’t help lifting his head. Like this, Rozanov looked effortlessly natural, and just as wild. He always had that untamed air about him, but with his gaze locked straight on Shane, it felt like being watched by a feral animal.

“The assistant coach,” Shane said with a sigh. “He wants to push me into a more secondary role.”

One of Rozanov’s brows lifted. “Because you’re an omega,” he said matter-of-factly.

Shane hesitated for only a second before nodding. Of course Rozanov had figured it out.

“He says I’m too impulsive,” Shane added bitterly.

Rozanov huffed a laugh. “Hollander? Impulsive?”

Shane couldn’t help laughing back. “He wants me to play more defensively.”

Rozanov’s expression sharpened. Then he said, almost jokingly, “No. My rival for second place doesn’t get to play defense.”

“Second? So you’re taking first?”

“Obviously, Hollander. Who else would? Try not to cry when I make the best team.”

“Asshole,” Shane muttered, but his lips curved despite himself.

Rozanov’s shoulder brushed against his. Shane knew he should pull away, but he didn’t.

Because the scent...

That scent again. The same as on the ice, only stronger.

His eyes fluttered shut, and his head shook faintly from side to side.

“Anyone who thinks you’re weak is blind,” Rozanov said. His accent had grown heavier, and Shane noticed his eyes were narrowed, his jaw tight.

Trying to lighten the mood, Shane said, “You’re not so bad yourself, Rozanov.”

The tension in his body was finally starting to ease. He wasn’t weak. Until a head coach decided otherwise, the assistant coach’s opinion meant nothing. He’d play the match like always. They’d see.

“But you’re still second,” Rozanov added. His shoulder was still pressed to Shane’s, the warmth of him undeniable. Shane swallowed, trying not to show it.

When he looked at Rozanov’s face, one corner of his mouth was tilted up.

The sharp clatter of the fork snapped Shane back to the present.

Something felt like it had... broken.

He lifted his head and turned around.

That face from his dreams and fragmented memories -blurred, half-seen, always hidden in shadow- did it belong to the man standing in front of him now?

The possibility he’d been forcing himself to ignore since last night crashed down on him all at once.

No.

It couldn’t be.

It wasn’t him.

He bit into the inside of his cheek, the metallic taste flooding his mouth and grounding him just a little. The air in his lungs felt heavy; the powerful scent filling his nose was almost suffocating.

Oakmoss. Leather. Spice.

The face from the past was still hazy, but one detail stood out: lips curved upward. That same smile from the locker room, from the bedroom this morning... it was there on the man in front of him now. Shane wanted to look away. He couldn’t.

His heart was responding to something he didn’t remember.

And that was what terrified him the most.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back to How to Tame Your Feral Alpha by Shane Hollander!

Had to end the chapter there but... what a surprise, huh? Everyone act surprised!

Poor Shane, going through every possible emotion at once, while our feral alpha is simply thriving in his little feral bubble.

I'm having so much fun writing this, so thank you for coming along on this wild journey. Your kudos and comments are very appreciated. Love reading all of your thoughts, theories, and reactions. 

Also, please pet, feed, bathe your local feral alpha regularly and don't forget to let him scent-mark you! 

Small disclaimer: I don't know shit about hockey beyond what I've picked up from books, so any mistakes are on me.

P.S. I changed the chapter count because we're going UP!

Come say hi to me on [twitter](#).

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Shane barely realized what he was doing before he stumbled outside. He felt so suffocated that only the rush of clean air against his face brought him back to himself. He looked at the lush green forest, the blue sky above, yet his eyes did not truly see any of it. His heart was pounding in his ears, his mind racing without pause. He forced himself to take slow, steady breaths. A moment later, a shadow fell over him, not at all unexpected.

He did not bother to look up. Thankfully, this time the stranger did not force any touch and stayed where he was. Shane was deeply grateful for that. He almost found himself searching again for that smile, for the lips hidden behind the beard, but his reason refused to follow that thought. It was not possible.

When he had experienced hallucinations like this in the past, his doctor had prescribed special medication and, above all, recommended scent therapy. He had said that breathing in the soothing pheromones of a familiar alpha could help an omega like Shane. He had not said broken, but Shane knew the word was there all the same. At first Shane had tried to get by on medication alone, but when that failed, he had turned first to his mother, and then to one of the alphas on his doctor's list. He still remembered how the scent of this strange alpha -musk, clove, patchouli- had made his stomach lurch the moment he caught it through the curtain. He had not heard a single word the doctor said after that. He had simply walked out.

So why did this man's scent not have the same effect? Had Shane finally reached the point where he could accept an unfamiliar alpha? But what could have changed? His mind was in chaos, yet his feelings were the same. Yes, he had stopped taking the medication that kept his nightmares at bay nearly three years ago and was living on regular suppressants now, but the scent of alphas in locker rooms or anywhere else had never made him feel like this. Never safe.

The man in front of him stayed just a step away, watching him without moving. Shane let out a small, hollow laugh.

"I am broken," he whispered.

The man answered, "Broken. No."

Another time, Shane might have been surprised, but now he was either getting used to it or too exhausted to care.

"Yes," he said instead. "Just look at me. I let a stranger I met yesterday into my bed, I let him scent-mark me, and on top of that..." His voice faltered. "I am broken."

When the man stepped closer, the slippers Shane had forced onto his feet brushed against Shane's. "Shane no," he said firmly.

“Shane yes,” Shane shot back, almost childishly.

With unexpected grace, the man lifted a hand and cupped Shane’s cheek. While he spoke, Shane’s eyes stayed fixed on his lips, the same lips he had just told himself not to look at.

“No. Shane broken no. Shane protect.”

For once, Shane truly did not understand. The fractured images that never left his mind fell still for a moment. He took a deep breath and leaned into the warm hand against his face.

“Stupid too,” he said weakly. “Maybe you are like this with every omega. Maybe you already have a mate. Holy fuck. Maybe you really do have a mate!”

“Mate.”

A second later, the alpha pressed his entire body against Shane. There was a very obvious hardness against him. Shane’s breath caught.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

But the alpha’s hands were already sliding under his shirt, finding bare skin. His lips traced the other side of Shane’s face.

“Mate.”

Fuck.

Shane's hands moved on their own, clutching at the fabric of the alpha's shirt. His head tilted back, exposing his throat. A soft sound escaped him, something between a gasp and a plea. The alpha's lips were at his scent gland now, warm and insistent, and Shane's body sang with it. His omega surged forward, desperate, *finally*, and for one breathless moment Shane let himself sink into it. Every nerve in his body was alight. His omega was screaming *yes, yes, this, him*, and Shane could not think past the heat flooding through him.

But somewhere beneath it all, a voice whispered: *This is wrong.*

He tried to ignore it. Instead, he moved even closer, feeling the alpha’s heartbeat against his own chest. The scent was so strong it drowned out all his other senses. At some point, Shane felt the weight of a hand on his hip. Logic seemed to have been wiped from the face of the earth. There was only this man, this alpha, his incredible scent, his body fitting against Shane’s with frightening perfection.

The alpha dampened Shane’s throat with his breath, brushing his teeth over his skin and sending sparks of electricity everywhere with his tongue. Shane did not know how a single word could undo him like this, but the alpha’s arousal was pressed clearly against his lower abdomen, and with the half-moan, half-growl he was making, he could not keep any part of his body from touching Shane’s.

Shane felt himself on the verge of losing all control. When the alpha gripped his hip tightly and let his free hand slide beneath Shane’s sweatpants, barely touching him, Shane felt

something he had almost forgotten was there: slick.

He was fully hard now, his body responding to this alpha, his breath coming in shallow gasps. As if the alpha had caught the scent, he grew even more feral. His hands were everywhere, stroking Shane's back, his stomach, even his nipples, his mouth almost devouring Shane's face as if he could not get enough of him.

Shane did not think. He just moved.

His hand shot up, fingers threading through the alpha's hair, and he pulled him down. Their mouths collided, hard and graceless, and Shane gasped into it. The alpha froze for half a second, shocked, maybe, and then he growled.

It was not a sound Shane had ever heard from a human being.

The alpha kissed him back with a hunger that bordered on violence. His tongue pushed past Shane's lips, claiming, tasting, and Shane let him. He opened his mouth wider, pressed closer, and felt the alpha's hands tighten on his hips hard enough to bruise. Good. He wanted it. He wanted all of it.

The alpha's hand slipped lower, past the waistband of Shane's sweatpants, fingertips brushing against...

Shane's eyes flew open.

No.

He shoved hard against the alpha's chest, breaking the kiss with a wet, desperate sound. His chest was heaving. His lips were swollen. He could still taste him.

"Stop," Shane choked out. "I... fuck. I can't."

Then he hurried back inside the house. Without stopping, he opened the first door he saw and slipped in, sinking down to the floor with his back pressed against the bathroom door on the first floor.

I betrayed him.

Shane pressed his palms against his eyes hard enough to see stars. *I betrayed him.* The thought was like a sharp, cold blade. *Another alpha's...* He could not even finish the sentence this time.

He dragged his hand away from his eyes and, without thinking, brought it to his neck, over his scent gland. He had known from the very beginning that he was making a mistake. He had known it would lead here, yet he had let his body, his instincts, take control. He forced himself to remember him. His face. His eyes. His nose. His lips... But his mind refused to form an image. Instead, a flood of feelings surfaced: warmth, safety, loss, anguish.

He remembered how, when he was with him, his anxiety had completely disappeared. How he had felt like he was flying on clouds, wrapped in that sensation he used to call euphoria.

The touches that were sometimes gentle, sometimes rough and demanding. The stolen, fleeting moments of happiness they had carved out for themselves. The warmth that spread through his chest when he saw him smile, and the heaviness he felt when his expression hardened.

Then the feral alpha's face came to mind. His body. His scent. Oakmoss, leather, spice. It was familiar. Too familiar. More than it should have been. But it was not the same, was it? His mind insisted it was impossible. That it only resembles him. Still, he could not help comparing them. *He* had a large, athletic build as well, yet there was something different about the feral alpha's. The frame was the same; broad shoulders, long limbs, the height nearly identical, but the weight of him was different. Not heavier, exactly. Harder. As if the years had compressed him into something denser, something that had survived things it should not have. His body had been a weapon honed by discipline. This alpha's body was a weapon forged by pain.

And *his* hands... Shane remembered gentle hands. Playful hands. Hands that knew when to hold and when to let go. This alpha's hands only knew how to hold on.

The worst days of his life came rushing back to him. Days that blurred together without a beginning or an end. Crying fits. A fever that consumed his body. Being dragged out of his room. Doctor visits. Tests, medications, therapy. He had not endured all of that for nothing, had he?

It had taken him a full month just to remember that the outside world still existed. The shock he felt when he first saw the news had been so overwhelming that for weeks, he had looked at the world as if through a veil of fog.

It had been terrible, the pain so sharp that sometimes he could still remember the hollow it had carved into his chest and think it had never truly been filled. But it was over, wasn't it? It had been eight years. Eight years of grief. Eight years of trying to be whole again.

He had survived.

And if he had survived, then he could survive this too. Whatever this was.

At that moment, he began to hear a scratching sound from the other side of the door. It was followed by a faint, broken whine.

"Shaaanee."

He shivered. The voice was thick with anguish. The door was knocked again, scratched at, and after each attempt came another pained cry.

Even through the door, Shane could feel the alpha's distress. With these spirals, he was not only hurting himself, but also the alpha who was already in a fragile state, whose story he did not even know.

He took a slow breath and pushed himself to his feet. His legs felt weak, but he forced himself to steady up. The sounds on the other side had fallen silent now. An unsettling quiet

had settled over the house. It was too quiet.

Shane's chest tightened. He reached for the door and pulled it open.

The alpha was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, his knees drawn tightly to his chest. The knuckles of the hands wrapped around his legs were stark white. He was not moving. Not growling. Just... staring. Into nothing.

His breathing was too fast, too shallow, as if he could not get enough oxygen. Shane's stomach twisted.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm here."

The alpha's gaze found him. For a second, there was nothing in them. No recognition. Just emptiness.

Then something flickered. His pupils widened. His lips parted.

"Shane," he rasped, like a prayer.

Shane reached for him, hands trembling, and wrapped his fingers around the alpha's. The alpha's body was rigid. Shane's gaze caught the blood beneath his nails first, then darted quickly to the door, to the deep claw marks gouged into it. Without wasting a second, he pulled the alpha to his feet and guided him toward the living room.

The first aid kit from yesterday was still sitting on the coffee table. Shane settled the alpha onto the wide couch and sat down beside him. Without saying a word, he took out cotton and antiseptic from the first aid kit.

The alpha watched him without blinking. Just like last night. His breathing had slowed, but his body was still tense, as if ready to lunge at any second.

"Let me see your hands," Shane said quietly.

The alpha hesitated. But after a moment, he slowly opened the fists he had been clenching in the absence of Shane's touch and held them out. Thin cuts lined his palms, some of his nails cracked and split, raw beneath.

Guilt burned in Shane's stomach as he clenched his teeth. He carefully began cleaning one of the hands. The alpha flinched again, but he did not react violently. As if he was used to pain. His eyes, a little clearer now, moved between his hands and Shane's face.

Just to be sure, Shane asked softly, "Does it hurt?"

The alpha shook his head. After thoroughly cleaning one palm, Shane moved on to the other. That was when his gaze caught on the tattoo on the alpha's wrist. The numbers that looked like a tag.

As Shane finished bandaging his hands, he made up his mind. No matter what it took, he would solve this mystery. He had to find out what had happened to this man.

After putting everything away, he grabbed his phone and opened the camera. He took a clear picture of the tattoo on the alpha's wrist, making sure every detail was visible. *A-2841*. On sudden impulse, he lifted the camera toward the man's face. At the movement, the alpha narrowed his eyes and looked at Shane with an expression that was both startled and tense. His lips parted slightly. A low, questioning sound rumbled in his chest; not a growl, but not quite words either. He tilted his head slightly to the side, like a confused animal trying to make sense of something unfamiliar. Like a puppy attempting to decide whether the vacuum cleaner was a friend or a threat.

Despite the wounds, ragged appearance, the strange behavior, the overwhelming possessiveness, the feral edge to him, Shane felt something inside him soften. He was... cute.

Shane's throat tightened. Swallowing hard, he lowered the phone and gave the alpha his full attention.

"Alright," he said in the calmest voice he could manage. "We need to talk. Or rather... I need to ask you a few things. And I want you to answer me, okay?"

"Okay."

Hearing his voice, Shane had to resist the urge to close his eyes.

"Where did you come from? Somewhere nearby?" He kept his questions simple, hoping for clear answers. But when the man only parted his lips without speaking, Shane pressed on.

"From somewhere in the forest?"

"Forest," the alpha repeated. It was impossible to tell whether it was an answer or a question.

Shane refused to be discouraged so quickly. "Do you remember anything from before? Before you came here? Before the forest?"

The alpha's brows drew together. He stared at Shane for a long moment, his lips parting as if he wanted to speak, yet no words came out.

Shane exhaled in frustration. "Anything at all. Where were you? Were you with anyone?"

This time, the answer was clear. "Yes."

Even if he had ignored the second question, Shane was relieved to get something.

"Then..." He had to be careful with this one. Holding the alpha's gaze, he softened his expression. Gently, he took the man's wrist, and brushed his fingers over the inside. "Did they do this to you? This tattoo? That someone you were with?"

It was obvious the alpha understood, because his expression began to harden. As if to soothe him, Shane stroked his thumb lightly over the numbers inked into his skin.

This time, the alpha only nodded, but even that was enough to make Shane's chest ache. He had to take several deep breaths to keep the anger rising inside him under control.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "The people there. Are they the ones who caused the injuries on your body?"

For what felt like the first time, the alpha looked away. He dipped his head slightly, staring at their joined hands. His face resembled something out of a Renaissance painting, one of those canvases where suffering was rendered in devastating clarity. Shane swallowed again.

"Bad," the alpha said simply. But that was enough. The answer was obvious.

And he was *answering*. Not just repeating words, but understanding. Responding. Something human was beginning to surface beneath the feral edge, and it made Shane's throat tighten. Because if the alpha could understand, he could also remember. And whatever he was remembering was tearing him apart.

"Did they... keep you somewhere?" Shane continued gently. "Against your will. Like a prisoner?"

The alpha's chest began to rise and fall more rapidly. With a sharp, rigid motion, he nodded.

The thought of what they might have done to him made bile climb up Shane's throat. "How long?" he asked softly. "How long were you there?"

"Long," the alpha replied.

"How did you get out?" Shane asked. "Did you escape?"

The body beneath Shane's hands grew even tenser. Though the alpha had lifted his eyes to look at him, it was clear he was not truly seeing him anymore. He was somewhere else now. Somewhere dark.

His breathing quickened further. His hands began to tremble.

"Escape," he choked out. "Run. Blood. Shane..." His voice cracked. "Forget. No. Shane. Not again."

Shane froze. *Forget?* What did that mean?

But the alpha wasn't listening anymore. His hands flew to his head, tangling his fingers into his thick curls. A low, strained sound tore from his throat.

"Hey. Hey, it's over," Shane said, heart twisting painfully. "You're safe now. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Without thinking for a second time, Shane wrapped his arms around him.

The alpha's hands immediately fisted into Shane's shirt. He dragged him fully into his lap and crushed him against his chest with desperate strength. He pressed Shane's face into his shoulder and began repeating the same word over and over, like a mantra, like a prayer.

"Mine. Mine. Mine."

“Yes. Okay,” Shane murmured.

To calm him down, he lied to himself.

But then he found himself kissing every inch of bare skin he could reach, pressing his lips there, leaving his own scent all over the alpha’s body. The alpha held him as if he might be torn away at any second, arms locked tight around him, rocking back and forth. Low, broken sounds rumbled from his chest, words Shane could not quite make out.

Shane tried to soothe him with everything he was, with his body, his presence, his scent. He stroked his hair, kissed his face, let him scent-mark him again and again, even allowed a few bruises to bloom along his neck.

The alpha’s eyes were closed now. His body had gone more still, his muscles slowly loosening with exhaustion.

I did this, Shane thought, a wave of guilt crashing over him. *I pushed him too far*.

But beneath the guilt, something else stirred. Something cold and fierce.

Someone had done this to him. Broken him so thoroughly that even a simple question could shatter him all over again.

Shane's jaw tightened.

He didn't know who. He didn't know why. But he was going to find out.

Shane continued to stroke the dark golden curls of the man resting in his lap, slow and unhurried, occasionally letting his fingertips brush against his scalp. The hair was soft beneath his touch.

When he shifted slightly and settled the man’s head more securely against his thighs, the alpha’s breathing evened out into a steady rhythm. His chest rose and fell slowly, each exhale leaving a faint warmth against Shane’s shirt.

The house felt strangely quiet. The low hum of the refrigerator drifted from afar like a distant wave, and the light filtering through the window caught in the curls, setting strands aglow with muted gold. Shane tilted his head and looked more closely. In sleep, the man’s face had softened. The stubborn line between his brows had disappeared, and his lips were parted with an almost boyish looseness.

It was the first time Shane had seen him like this.

He did not look dangerous. Not feral. Just... tired.

Shane’s thumb drifted absentmindedly down from his temple. His skin was warm, alive. The alpha did not wake, but a faint sound escaped him. Not protest. Something closer to contentment. He nuzzled slightly deeper against Shane’s leg, as if even in sleep he knew exactly where to find him.

Shane's chest tightened.

"This isn't normal," he whispered to himself, but he did not pull away.

Instead, his fingers slipped back into the curls. The tips traced small, patient circles. For a moment, he let himself stop thinking. No past. No sharp questions waiting to be asked. Just the weight of a man's head in his lap, the quiet rhythm of breath, a soft hush of peace moving through the house.

The alpha's hand had fallen loosely against Shane's hip. Unconsciously, he held onto the fabric there, fingers curling as if he feared he might disappear if he let go. Shane looked down at the large, wounded hand. The fingers were strong, scarred. Yet the grip was surprisingly gentle.

His heart skipped.

Had he touched someone like this eight years ago?

The question settled heavy in his chest, but this time it did not bring panic. Only a slow, aching warmth.

Shane leaned his head back against the couch. Still stroking the alpha's hair, he reached for his phone with his free hand. The screen lit up his face. He hesitated for a brief second and glanced down at the man asleep in his lap.

He had not woken.

His thumb hovered over the message screen. Should he write? Should he stay silent? Could he carry this growing thing alone?

The alpha let out a soft sigh and leaned more fully into him.

Shane smiled despite himself.

Then he lifted the phone slightly and tapped on Rose's name. They had dated for a few months a couple of years ago. It had been one of those rare stretches when Shane had felt braver, almost reckless enough to try. Of course, it had not worked out. It had not been a disaster, just... wrong in a quiet, undeniable way. In the end, they had both agreed they were better as friends.

Shane: Hey, Rose. How are you?

Rose: Oh my God, is this the one and only Shane Hollander? I was just starting to think a bear had eaten you or something.

Shane rolled his eyes and typed back: No bears. Just me and the forest.

Rose: That somehow sounds worse. Are you okay? You don't text unless something's up.

Shane: You're being dramatic. I check in on you sometimes, don't I?

Rose: Stop dodging and spill. What's going on?

Shane: Okay, yeah. I actually wanted to ask you something. Remember that friend of yours from school?

Rose: Which friend? Shane, specifics would help.

Shane: Fine. I watched this documentary the other day. About omegas who lost their mate. Your friend lost hers, right? Is she seeing someone now?

Rose: Emma. Yeah. She lost her mate five years ago. She's with someone now. Why?

Shane: How did she know it was... okay? To be with someone else after something like that?

Rose: It took time. A lot of therapy. She said the hardest part was feeling like she was replacing him. But eventually she realized she wasn't. She was just... moving forward. Living.

Shane: What about the pull, though? Did she ever talk about that? Like instinct.

Rose: I don't know.

Rose: Shane, why are you asking me this?

Shane: Hypothetically. Let's say someone lost someone important. And then started feeling something for someone else. Is that... is that betrayal?

Rose: No. That's called being human.

Rose: Wait. Shane. Did you meet someone?

Rose: I thought you didn't have a mate. Did you lose someone recently? I'm confused.

Shane: I'm okay. It's not about me. I just needed to hear it out loud, I guess.

Rose: ...You're terrible at lying.

Shane: See you, Rose.

Rose: Bye, Shaney. And don't think you're getting away with this. Love you.

Shane set his phone aside and let out a long breath. No matter how much he thought about it, no matter who he asked, he had the uneasy feeling he would never get a clear answer.

He lowered his gaze to the stranger sleeping soundly in his lap.

Maybe the answer was right here.

His memory might be fractured, full of gaps and sharp edges, but one thing had always been certain. He had died. His mate was gone. Shane had seen the news himself. He still remembered that evening, the moment his world had collapsed in on itself.

So this man was not him.

He could not be.

Still, when sleep finally claimed him, it was not the stranger in his lap who followed him into the dark, but the boy he had lost.

The team had just returned from dinner and were heading back to the hotel. Shane had stepped off the bus and was letting the cold air cut through the haze of the wine he had drunk when he noticed a flicker of light.

Across the street, in the small park facing the hotel, someone was lighting a cigarette.

Rozanov.

After watching his teammates file inside in a loud, laughing cluster, Shane's feet moved on their own. But as he drew closer, he saw Rozanov standing rigid, speaking sharply into his phone while dragging on his cigarette like he was fighting it.

The closer Shane got, the more of the conversation he could hear. Not that it helped. It was in Russian, and he did not understand a single word.

There were dark circles under Rozanov's eyes. His hair was disheveled, his posture tight, worn down. Shane narrowed his eyes, studying him carefully.

He had never seen him look this exhausted.

He noticed Shane just before ending the call. His eyes widened, just for a second, before something shuttered behind them. After saying one last thing into the phone, he pressed the end button with a quiet exhale.

For some reason, Shane had never wished this badly to understand Russian.

"Rozanov," Shane said, because he had no idea what else to say. "You do know smoking here is against the rules, right?"

"What's a good boy like you doing out here at this hour, Hollander?" Rozanov drawled. "Aren't you afraid the big bad wolf might eat you?"

Shane snorted. It hadn't taken long for the real Rozanov to resurface. And yet... the sadness beneath his eyes hadn't gone anywhere.

Rozanov crushed the half-finished cigarette out against the bench beside him.

Shane hesitated. He wasn't sure whether to sit down next to him or stay where he was. In the end, he chose to remain still, searching for Rozanov's gaze when it slipped away; those eyes that, for some reason, seemed even brighter in the dark.

Shane shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants, suddenly aware of the tension coiling under his skin.

Whether it was the wine or the strange, unsettling pull Rozanov always seemed to stir in him, Shane decided to stop circling and get to the point.

“Who were you talking to?”

Rozanov gave him a smile that never quite reached his eyes. “Family. Nothing important.”

“It sounded important,” Shane insisted.

“So you know Russian now?” Rozanov asked, the mockery in his tone a little forced.

Shane shook his head.

“I could teach you. And no worry, it’s always like this when I talk to them.” The words came quicker than usual, almost clipped, as if he were eager to move past the subject. But his jaw was locked tight.

Shane did not believe him. “Is everything okay?”

This time Rozanov raised his gaze fully and fixed it on him, sharp and deliberate, weighing him. Shane felt a shiver slide down his spine, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

“Why do you care, Hollander?”

Shane lifted a shoulder as if it meant nothing. “You look like shit. Just checking.”

Rozanov’s laugh was brief and edged with something bitter. “Always charming.”

The air carried the scent of snow and pine. When Shane drew in a slow breath, Rozanov’s alpha scent threaded through it. But something had changed. It felt rougher tonight, more volatile, like smoke clinging to fabric after a fire.

Then Rozanov leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees, and Shane’s attention snagged on something new.

On the arm exposed beneath his T-shirt that he choose to wear in the middle of the freezing Canadian night, small puncture marks dotted the inside of his forearm. Fresh. Some still faintly red, others bruised purple at the edges. They weren't random. They were too uniform, too deliberate. Like someone had been drawing blood. Or injecting something.

Shane’s gaze lingered on the marks a second too long. Long enough for Rozanov to notice.

Rozanov immediately lowered his arm to his side. “It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.”

“It is.” His voice was flat. Closed. Unreachable.

Shane let it drop. He had no idea what else he could do. So instead, he looked at him. Really looked at him. Not the way you looked at an opponent on the ice, calculating weaknesses and patterns. But the way you looked at someone when you were trying to memorize them. Like you might not get another chance.

Rozanov... Shane had never managed to find the right words for him. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Built like an athlete at the peak of his form. There was a coiled strength in him, a kind of effortless grace that made even stillness seem deliberate. His hair was a dark shade of gold, catching the pale spill of the streetlights. His eyes were impossibly blue, even in shadow. Sharp. Bright. Alive.

And his scent. Oakmoss, leather, spice. Despite the cold, it wrapped around Shane like a second skin, warm and steady.

But tonight something was different.

Rozanov seemed harder. Not physically. In presence. As if whatever he carried inside had compressed him into something denser, more contained. Like something that had survived things it never should have.

Shane's chest tightened.

He did not understand it. He did not understand why his omega rose to the surface every single time Rozanov was near. Why his mind insisted on distance while his body felt as though it were leaning toward him, pulled by something deeper than sense.

Rozanov tilted his head slightly and caught him staring. One brow lifted. "What?"

Shane swallowed. "Nothing. You just... look tired."

"I am." A faint, bitter curve touched Rozanov's mouth. "But that's not why you're looking at me."

Heat crept up Shane's neck. "I wasn't..."

"You were." Rozanov leaned back against the bench, stretching his legs out in front of him. "It's alright. I like it when you look at me, Shane."

Shane. Every fine hair on his body stood on end. His lips curved before he could stop them.

"Teach me," he blurted. "Russian, I mean. Even if it's just one word."

Rozanov went still. His gaze locked onto Shane's, searching for something. Shane felt heat lick up his spine, spreading under his skin.

Then he leaned forward and said, in a quiet, soft voice Shane had never heard from him before, "Moya dusha."

When Shane tried to repeat it, Rozanov sincerely laughed for the first time that night. The sound was low and unguarded. He made him try again. And again. Adjusted his

pronunciation with maddening patience until he was finally satisfied Shane had gotten it right.

“Moya dusha. What does it mean?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Rozanov said as he rose to his feet.

“Ilya,” Shane protested, and he could hardly believe the name had slipped so easily from his mouth.

“Shane,” Ilya replied in the same tone. “Come. Let’s take the long way back to the hotel.”

Shane jolted awake.

A tear had already slipped from the corner of his eye; he wiped it away with an automatic swipe of his thumb.

His heart pounded against his ribs. His breathing came uneven, shallow.

The dream, no, the memory, still burned bright behind his eyes. Too bright. He could still see Ilya leaning forward on that bench, the cigarette smoke curling into the cold night air. He could still hear his voice, low and warm against the dark.

Moya dusha.

Shane’s throat tightened painfully.

He lowered his head.

The alpha was still asleep in his lap, head resting against Shane’s thighs, breathing slow and even. Peaceful. Strands of dark gold hair caught the pale yellow light, just like they had caught the glow of the streetlamps that night.

Shane’s hand, still buried in those curls, began to tremble.

Dark gold hair. Blue eyes. Broad shoulders. Oakmoss, leather, spice.

The needle marks on his arm.

The exhaustion etched into his face.

The way he tried to hide his arms too quickly. Too defensively.

Shane’s stomach twisted.

No. It couldn’t be.

And yet his hands were already reaching for his phone.

Ilya Rozanov, he typed into the search bar, his heart lodged somewhere in his throat.

The results flooded the screen within seconds.

Young Russian Hockey Star Ilya Rozanov Reported Missing After Private Training Session

No Leads in Rozanov Case After Two Months — Family Fears the Worst

Russian Authorities Officially Declare Hockey Player Ilya Rozanov Dead in Absentia

Then he saw it. The face that he forgot. It was a professional headshot. Clean. Flawless.

Ilya in his Russian national team jersey, looking straight into the camera with that sharp, self-assured smile Shane remembered. His hair had been shorter then, carefully styled. His face smooth. There was no exhaustion in it. No shadows. Just a young alpha at the peak of his game.

But it was him.

The same blue eyes. The same strong line of his jaw. The same slight tilt at the corner of his mouth when he smiled.

Wasn't it?

Shane's hands shook so badly he nearly dropped the phone.

He looked down. At the man sleeping in his lap. At the rise and fall of his chest. *Alive*.

Chapter End Notes

* Moya dusha: my soul

Well, this was longer than I planned. Almost 6k words. Oops.

He protecc, he attacc, but most importantly, he HORNY AF.

My apologies to Ilya for making him suffer even more but it's not my fault that he's a pretty sufferer, okay?

Let me know what you think! Comments and kudos fuel this insane addiction. 😊

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

TW for this chapter: Eating disorder (loss of appetite), insomnia, medical trauma, grief, memory loss. Stay safe everyone!

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

Shane didn't believe in ghosts.

When he was a child, back in the years when he believed everything his classmates told him, there had been times he convinced himself they were real. He had even made up a few ghost stories of his own during recess, just to keep up with the others.

But once he was old enough, he understood they couldn't possibly be real. Ghosts were just stories people told themselves to make death less terrifying. To convince themselves that the people they'd lost were still out there, watching over them, waiting for them on the other side of something vast and unknowable.

Yet there had been a time when he wanted to believe.

In those first days. After the news. After learning that the Rozanov family had held a funeral with an empty coffin.

He had wanted to believe that some part of Ilya was still with him. Watching him. Waiting for him, so they could cross to the other side together.

But he couldn't. Because ghosts were not real. Death was real. Loss was real. And the void Ilya left behind was so vast it had nearly swallowed Shane whole.

So he had stopped believing. Stopped hoping. Stopped clinging to miracles that were never going to happen.

Until now.

Shane looked down at the man in his lap. At the slow rise and fall of his chest. At the hard, visible pulse beating in his throat.

His hand moved on its own. He pressed two fingers gently beneath the alpha's nose. Warm breath brushed against his skin. *In. Out. In. Out.*

Not a ghost.

His hand drifted lower, fingertips searching until they found the pulse at his neck. It jumped beneath his touch. Fast. Strong. Undeniable.

Alive.

Shane's throat closed. His vision blurred.

Because if this was not a ghost, if this was real, then it meant Ilya had been alive all this time.

Eight years.

Eight fucking years Shane had spent grieving, breaking, learning how to live with a wound that never fully sealed.

And all that time, Ilya had been somewhere. Breathing. Hurting. Surviving.

Without him.

The thought was unbearable.

Shane studied the alpha slowly, carefully, as if trying to carve every detail into his memory. The long, dark blond curls threaded between his fingers. The line of his jaw, barely visible beneath the thick beard. The steady rise and fall of his chest. Shane's own pulse was pounding so wildly he would not have been surprised if he went into cardiac arrest right there.

He did not know how long he sat like that. Checking. Again and again. Feeling the warmth of his skin. Counting heartbeats. Making sure.

Alive. Here. Real.

And yet every time he blinked, he expected the man to disappear. To dissolve into the same faceless, blurred nothingness his dreams always became.

But he did not.

The alpha remained. *Ilya* was here. With him.

Even if his mind still refused to believe it, the truth was undeniable.

He should have known the moment he caught his scent. But the shock, the grief, had sunk so deep into him that he had been unable to process the possibility that the man standing before him was his mate. It was not just the resemblance. It was the alpha's possessiveness. The way he knew his name. The instinctive protectiveness in the way he responded to Shane's reactions. The way Shane's body recognized him instantly. The ease with which they could calm each other, as if it were second nature.

Each of them a sign. And still, he had refused to believe.

Shane remembered how hopeful he had been when they said goodbye after the final game. He had been nervous and unbelievably excited to tell his family. The feeling inside him had been so new, so rare, that he could barely contain it. He had wanted to share it with someone. To say it out loud and make it more real. But when he went home, everything had unraveled into chaos so quickly that it took something far worse for the truth to finally surface: Ilya's disappearance.

When he learned Ilya was missing, it had already been days since they had last spoken. The final message had been brief. Ilya had said he was heading to the airport. The flight would be long, and the conditions in Moscow were different. Shane had told himself to give him time to rest. He had not demanded a reply.

But when a full week passed without a word, he tried calling again. The phone was completely off. Part of him whispered that maybe Ilya had changed his mind. That he regretted everything. That he had gone back to his old life and left Shane behind. But his omega rejected that completely. His instincts insisted something was wrong, and that certainty had nothing to do with insecurity. Something had happened to Ilya.

Even if most of that period existed in fragments, the news itself remained painfully clear in Shane's memory. The report said Ilya had disappeared after a private training session. Weeks had passed without contact. His family was said to be extremely concerned.

The symptoms had first begun to show then.

At first, it was the insomnia. Sometimes it lasted for days, a sleeplessness that burrowed deep into his bones. His body felt as though it were locked in a constant state of alarm. Then came the loss of appetite. He knew he was hungry, but he could not make himself eat. Even when he tried, his throat closed and his stomach turned. At the time, Shane had been too far removed from himself to recognize any of it.

Later, a doctor would call it severe mate-bond shock response. It was not uncommon in omegas, especially when the bond was newly formed.

He remembered the day he saw the news in fragments.

His phone had been in his hand. The light from the screen burned against his eyes. The headline was short and merciless: **Breaking: Russian hockey star Ilya Rozanov confirmed dead by family.**

The world had gone silent.

Everything that followed felt as though it happened underwater. Someone was saying his name from very far away. His vision kept dimming at the edges, narrowing into a thin tunnel of light. He could not draw a full breath. His heart was beating too fast, then too hard, then wrong. He remembered the sensation of falling. Of hands catching him. Of being lifted and carried somewhere. Then nothing. He opened his eyes in a hospital room.

Fluorescent lights. The sharp scent of antiseptic. An IV in his arm. Electrodes adhered to his chest. A monitor tracing the erratic rhythm of his heart in green lines that spiked and dipped

without pattern.

He remembered waking after the sedatives had worn off, his mind thick and slow, as though packed with cotton. A doctor explaining in careful, clinical language what had happened. His parents standing at the foot of the bed, faces pale and strained, waiting for him to understand. That was when he told them the truth. That Ilya had been his mate. And that he was gone.

The treatment that followed lasted months. At one point, the doctor told him that the human brain sometimes shields itself from overwhelming trauma. That it fragments memory. That it erases what it cannot metabolize. That was why there were gaps.

Whole conversations gone. Faces without context. Days that existed only as medical notes in a file. He did not remember anything about the actual funeral. He had no idea how it went. What he did remember were the nightmares. Not of Ilya's body, but of his *absence*. The empty space he'd left behind.

Even now, years later, there were moments when the pain came back just as sharp, just as unbearable, as if no time had passed at all.

Shane blinked, and the memories faded. He was back in the cottage. The alpha, *Ilya*, was still asleep.

Shane tried to remember the last time he had truly seen him.

They had been in the hotel room. The first light of morning had been spilling across his beautiful face. They had just come out of the shower. They were both still warm, skin flushed. Ilya had been radiant, buoyed by the thrill of victory and by everything they had done through the night. When it was finally time to say goodbye -really said it, without kisses or touches to distract them- Ilya had rested their foreheads together and said, "I'll see you soon. Promise."

Shane's throat tightened.

He needed to see that face again. Not in fractured pieces. Not half-hidden behind a beard that had never been there before.

He needed to see *him*.

Shane made a sudden decision and began to shake the man in his lap gently.

"Hey." He wanted to say his name, but his heart wouldn't allow it yet. "Wake up."

When he received no response after a few more seconds, impatience got the better of him and he turned the alpha's face toward himself. As he brushed the hair away from his eyes, he kept saying, "You need to wake up. We have things to do."

The alpha's eyes fluttered open with an incoherent grunt. It took him a moment to understand his surroundings and what was happening.

Still half-asleep, he managed only a questioning sound. "Hmhmh?"

But Shane had no intention of giving up. He had what felt like a very important mission now, and he wouldn't rest until it was done.

"Come on, wake up properly," he said, almost excited. With one hand he grabbed a messy lock of the alpha's hair. "Because these need to be cut."

When Ilya looked at him in surprise, Shane put on an innocent smile and ran his fingers through the beard.

"And this is definitely going too." There was no room for negotiation in his voice.

The alpha must have understood what he meant, because he rose from Shane's lap and sat cross-legged in front of him. "No."

Shane narrowed his eyes. "No? You can't be serious."

But Ilya was serious. Shane's new and rather strange behavior must have unsettled him, because he was studying him with suspicion.

"No," he repeated.

"Yes," Shane shot back.

"No."

"Yes."

After their back-and-forth went on a little longer, Shane decided to change his approach.

"Fine. If you let me cut your hair and beard, I will do something you want."

The alpha tilted his head slightly. Shane pushed all his embarrassment aside and continued, "Like, I will let you touch me."

Ilya's eyes darkened immediately. "Touch?"

"Yes." Shane swallowed. "Touch. Scent. Whatever you want."

Ilya leaned closer, gaze locked on Shane's. "Mate?"

Shane's breath caught. "Yes. Mate."

Ilya's pupils dilated. Something shifted in his expression: hunger, need, *hope*.

"Deal?" Shane asked. But instead of getting an answer, he found himself flat on his back on the couch.

The air left Shane's lungs in a rush. Ilya loomed over him, hands braced on either side of Shane's head, eyes dark and blown wide.

"Mine," Ilya growled, and then his mouth was at Shane's neck.

Shane froze for a split second when he felt the hard press of Ilya against him. *God. Already.*

He sucked in a sharp breath. His hands flew to Ilya's shoulders on instinct, but he didn't push him away. *I can't. I promised.* And it was impossible anyway when every part of him wanted this, wanted *him*.

Ilya's lips moved slowly over his scent gland, teeth grazing just enough to make Shane's body react instantly. Heat flooded through him in waves; his omega surged forward with a desperate, *yes, finally.*

"Il—" Shane caught himself. *Not yet.* "Alpha! Wait..."

But Ilya wasn't waiting. His hands slipped beneath Shane's shirt, fingers spreading over his ribs, his stomach, his chest. Warm. Possessive. Demanding.

Shane arched into the touch, a soft, helpless sound spilling from his lips before he could stop it. Ilya answered with a low, satisfied rumble and kissed him; hard and messy, teeth and tongue and desperation tangling together.

Shane kissed him back. He couldn't stop himself. His fingers tangled in Ilya's hair, pulling him closer, and Ilya groaned into his mouth.

One of Ilya's hands slid lower. When his fingers brushed the waistband of Shane's sweatpants, Shane's hips jerked involuntarily.

Oh God.

He was already slick. He could feel it, wet and undeniable, soaking through his underwear. Ilya must have caught the scent because his pupils blew wide and his breathing turned ragged.

Ilya's fingers hooked into the waistband. He paused, eyes flicking up to Shane's as if asking a question.

Shane nodded, breathless. "Yes."

Ilya yanked them down in one smooth motion, taking Shane's underwear with them.

Shane's face burned. He was completely exposed now, slick glistening on his thighs, and Ilya was staring at him like he'd never seen anything more perfect.

"Pretty," Ilya rasped, voice wrecked.

Then his mouth was on Shane's chest, lips and tongue trailing downward. He kissed his ribs, his stomach, his hip bones. Every touch left Shane trembling, his breath coming in short, desperate gasps.

Ilya's hands gripped Shane's thighs, spreading them wider. He pressed a kiss to the inside of Shane's knee, then higher, and Shane's entire body tensed.

"Alpha..." Shane's voice broke. "What are you..."

Ilya looked up at him, eyes dark and hungry. "Taste."

Before Shane could process what that meant, Ilya's mouth was on his cock.

Shane's back arched off the couch, a broken sound tearing from his throat. "Oh... *fuck*..."

Ilya's tongue dragged over him, slow and deliberate, tasting the slick that had pooled on his thighs. Then his mouth moved higher, lips wrapping around Shane, and Shane's vision whited out.

It was too much. Too hot. Too *good*.

Shane's hands flew to Ilya's hair, fingers tangling in the curls, but he didn't know if he was trying to pull him closer or push him away. His hips jerked, and Ilya's hands clamped down on his thighs -*hard*, fingers digging in deep enough to bruise- holding him in place.

The alpha wasn't gentle. He devoured Shane like he'd been starving for this, all teeth and tongue and raw need. A low growl rumbled in his chest, the vibration traveling through Shane's entire body.

"Stop!" Shane gasped. He pulled at Ilya's hair, harder this time. "Stop, please. I can't... wait..."

Ilya froze. But he didn't pull back, not immediately. His hands were still locked around Shane's thighs, his breathing ragged, pupils blown so wide there was almost no blue left. The beard, damp now with Shane's slick, pressed against Shane's skin. For half a second, Shane thought he might not stop. Thought he might just keep going, take what he wanted. Then Ilya made a low, frustrated sound and forced himself back, chest heaving.

"Shane?" His voice was wrecked. "Hurt?"

"No." Shane was panting, flushed, trembling. "No, you didn't hurt me. I just..." He swallowed hard. "Not like this."

Shane sat up, hands still shaking, and pulled Ilya up with him. "Come here."

Ilya obeyed, letting Shane guide him up onto the couch. They were face to face now, both breathing hard, and Shane could see the confusion in Ilya's eyes.

Shane's hand came up, cupping Ilya's face. *Eight years. Eight years I thought you were dead. And now you're here. Touching me. Looking at me like...*

"I want us to do this *together*."

Ilya's brow furrowed. "Together?"

Shane's hand dropped between them, fingers brushing over the hard line of Ilya through his sweatpants. Ilya's breath hitched.

"Together," Shane repeated, and then he kissed him.

Shane's hand slipped into Ilya's pants, wrapping around him, and Ilya's entire body went rigid. A guttural sound tore from his throat.

His hips bucked into Shane's fist, desperate, and his own hand shot out, gripping Shane almost too hard.

"Shane... need..."

"I know." Shane kissed him, swallowing the broken sounds spilling from his lips.

They found a rhythm together, hands moving in tandem, breaths mingling, foreheads pressed together. It was messy and uncoordinated and perfect. Ilya's movements were rough, instinct-driven, but Shane didn't care. He could feel Ilya trembling, could hear the desperate sounds falling from his lips. The alpha's hand tightened, his movements turning erratic, and Shane knew he was close. Shane was close too, heat building low in his spine, pleasure coiling tighter and tighter.

Ilya came with a broken sound, his whole body shuddering, and his teeth scraped over Shane's scent gland, just enough pressure to make Shane's vision blur. Shane followed a heartbeat later, pleasure crashing through him in waves that left him boneless and shaking. Ilya's name broke from his lips -not "alpha," not a title- *Ilya*.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. They just sat there, tangled together, chests heaving, hearts racing in sync.

Ilya's face was buried in Shane's neck, his breath warm against Shane's skin.

"Mine," Ilya murmured.

Shane's throat tightened. He ran his fingers through Ilya's hair, slow and soothing. "Yeah. Yours."

They stayed like that for a while, until Shane's breathing evened out and his hands stopped shaking. Eventually, Shane shifted.

"We should... clean up."

Ilya made a protesting sound but didn't move.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "Come on. We made a deal, remember?"

Ilya lifted his head, eyes still hazy. "Deal?"

Shane's hand moved to Ilya's hair, threading through the tangled curls. "The hair. The beard. You promised."

Ilya stared at him for a beat. Then, slowly, his lips curved.

"Deal."

When he picked up the scissors, Shane's hands were trembling. He drew in a deep breath, trying to steady himself. When he was little, he had refused to go to the barber, so his mother used to cut his hair at home instead. Watching her, he had learned quite a bit about trimming and shaping.

He heard his phone vibrating in the bedroom. After they had cleaned up together and before moving on to the makeshift barber preparations, notifications had come in one after another. But Shane had already been overwhelmed, so he had silenced the phone and left it where it was, not even bothering to look at the messages or the missed calls lighting up the screen.

Now he had the alpha seated on a chair in the bathroom, turned away from the mirror so he wouldn't see anything until it was done. So neither of them would.

His fingers slipped into autopilot. He adjusted the comb, lifted a section, and the scissors began to make soft, rhythmic snipping sounds. Focusing on the steady pattern helped him set his worries aside for the moment. Dark golden curls fell onto Ilya's shoulders, onto the tiled floor, onto Shane's hands. He worked carefully around the nape of his neck, angling the blades to keep the line clean without taking too much.

Throughout it all, Ilya remained perfectly still. Tense, body rigid, but unmoving.

"Tilt your head forward a little," Shane murmured, and Ilya obeyed instantly, lowering his chin.

For some reason, that trust made Shane's chest tighten. *He trusts me*, he thought. *I don't even know what I'm doing, and he trusts me.*

As the hair grew shorter, Shane's focus began to waver. Memories threatened to surface, flickering at the edges of his vision. It took deliberate effort to push them back and keep working. He cut it significantly shorter than it had been, though still a little longer than the version of Ilya that haunted his dreams. He softened the edges with the tips of the scissors, thinning where the curls grew too heavy, letting the shape fall naturally.

When he was finally done, he stepped in front of him and studied the result carefully. The alpha already looked younger. More like...

He didn't let himself linger on the thought.

Without delay, he squeezed a line of sharp, clean-scented shaving cream into his palm. The cool foam spread easily as he applied it to Ilya's jaw in slow, deliberate motions, feeling the firm line of his chin beneath his hand. He worked the lather evenly over his cheeks and along his throat, careful around the curve of his Adam's apple.

Then he picked up the razor and began to erase the only barrier left between them and the truth, drawing it downward in smooth, controlled strokes, clearing away the white foam inch by inch.

The razor glided downward in slow, careful strokes. Foam gathered along the blade, thick and white, and Shane rinsed it under running water before returning to Ilya's skin. Under the disappearing lather, a paler skin began to emerge. Cleaner lines. The sharp curve of his jaw. The familiar slope of his cheekbone.

Shane's pulse quickened. A small line caught his eye.

Near the edge of Ilya's chin, just beneath where the beard had been densest, there was a small scar. Not fresh, but recent enough that the skin was still pink around it.

After pausing for a moment, he resumed his work, slower now.

With each pass of the razor, more of him returned. A mole on his cheek. Shane's breath hitched. *I used to kiss that.*

His hand trembled as he moved the razor over Ilya's upper lip, revealing the full curve of it.

I know this face. I've memorized every inch of it.

He wiped away the last of the foam with a towel, fingers shaking so badly he almost dropped it.

And then there was nothing left to hide behind.

Ilya's face. Bare. Whole. *His.*

A real miracle was standing in front of him. Shane felt the nervous breakdown he had postponed for so long strike without warning. Thin tears slipped steadily from his eyes. His entire body was shaking.

He moved to stand directly in front of Ilya and began examining his face, every inch of it. With trembling fingers, he traced his cheek, his nose, his lips, his ears, his brow, the delicate curve of his eyelids, the line of his jaw.

It's you. It's really you.

Not a single word made it past his lips. The words felt lodged in his chest, trapped somewhere between breath and sound. There were only tears.

Ilya watched him with furrowed brows, concern etched deeply across his newly revealed features. Hesitantly, he placed his hand over Shane's.

"Why?" he asked, and the single word carried a thousand others beneath it.

Shane lifted his thumb to the lips that had formed that sound. He could not believe they were here, warm and alive in front of him. That they were moving. That he could hear his voice again.

"Ilya," Shane whispered. His voice came out hoarse and unsteady. His knees threatened to give way. Before they could, he let himself fall forward against Ilya, against his mate. "You're

alive. It's you. Ilya."

He could not even believe he was able to say his name again.

For a while, he did nothing but hold him. He breathed in his scent again and again, as if trying to fill his lungs with proof. Every so often, he pulled back just enough to look at his face, a face sharp and striking enough to inspire sculptors, committing every line of it to memory.

Ilya's arms came up slowly, wrapping around Shane with careful, uncertain pressure. Even if he did not fully understand what was happening, it was obvious that he could feel the intensity of Shane's emotions.

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. Immediately, Ilya leaned in and began brushing away the tears on Shane's cheeks with his lips, with his tongue, clumsy and intent.

Shane drew in a quick, deep breath and cradled Ilya's face between his palms.

"Your name," he said, his voice thick. "Your name is Ilya. Ilya Rozanov. Do you remember?"

Ilya's brows pulled together. He looked as though he were searching through something distant and fogged over. After a moment, he gave a small nod and repeated, carefully, "Ilya... Rozanov."

Warmth bloomed inside Shane's chest, fragile and bright. He brushed his thumbs over Ilya's cheekbones, never breaking eye contact.

"You were born in Russia. June 15, 1991. You played hockey. Like me. You were the best player I had ever seen."

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly, as if trying to process the unfamiliar shape of the word. "Hockey?"

"Yes. You loved it. You were incredible." His voice cracked. "And eight years ago, you disappeared. Everyone thought you were dead. And I..." He had to stop. He had to breathe. "I thought I had lost you forever."

Ilya's eyes widened. "Dead?"

"But you're alive." Shane couldn't help himself. He pressed a kiss to his forehead, then into his hair. "You found me. Somehow, you found me."

When his tears subsided enough for him to see clearly, Shane straightened and helped Ilya to his feet. He moved behind him and gently turned his face toward the mirror.

"Look. That's you."

Ilya stared at his reflection for a few seconds. His gaze traced the newly shorn hair, the clean line of his jaw, the familiar structure of his own face. But then, slowly, his focus shifted past himself. In the mirror, he found Shane instead.

Shane felt the shift the instant it happened and flinched.

“It’s okay.” He wrapped an arm around him from the side, holding him close as if he might dissolve into smoke the moment he let go. With his free hand, he touched Ilya’s freshly cut hair, smoothing it down.

Suddenly, Ilya murmured, “White room.” His voice was flat, distant. “They said... no name. Number.”

His fingers moved on their own, finding the tattoo on the inside of his wrist. Shane immediately understood what he meant.

Even though his heart was pounding in his throat, he forced himself to speak calmly. “No. That isn’t you. You’re Ilya.”

“Ilya,” his mate repeated, as if trying to convince himself. “They said forget. Forget. I...” His voice dropped lower, rougher. “No forget.”

Pain pierced through Shane’s chest like a blade. He pulled Ilya closer, holding him tightly. “No forget. You found me.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, turning fully toward him now, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck. “Found Shane.”

Hayden Pike pulled his car up to the entrance of the cottage. As he climbed the front steps, he was already cursing Shane out in his head. Not only had Shane gone days without calling his family, he had also said enough strange things to Rose to worry her into calling Hayden.

It wasn't unusual for Shane to go quiet for a while. A week, sometimes two. Hayden had learned not to push. But this time felt different. He didn't know why. It just did.

He was about to knock when he decided to try the handle first. It was still early. Shane might be asleep.

The moment he stepped inside and crossed the entryway, he froze.

Shane was asleep on the couch opposite him, turned slightly in his direction. His head rested back, lips parted just a fraction. He looked... peaceful. Content. More relaxed than Hayden had seen him in years.

And directly behind him, possessive and utterly shameless, was a man Hayden had never seen before.

He was tall. Broad. Shirtless. His dark blond hair was damp and messy. One arm was wrapped firmly around Shane’s waist. The other was tucked beneath Shane’s head like a pillow. His face was buried in Shane’s neck, and even from where Hayden stood he could see the fresh marks beginning to darken along Shane’s throat.

Hayden’s brain short-circuited.

What the actual fuck.

The man's eyes opened.

Blue. Sharp. Predatory.

They locked onto Hayden instantly. For one long, stretched, fear-soaked second, neither of them moved. Then the man's lips slowly pulled back. He was not smiling. No, he was baring his teeth. A warning.

Hayden's hands lifted automatically. "Whoa. Okay. I..."

The man tightened his hold on Shane. His free hand slid up to Shane's throat. Not choking him. Just holding. Claiming. He pressed his nose to Shane's scent gland and inhaled deeply without breaking eye contact.

Then he growled. Low. Territorial.

Hayden took an involuntary step back. "Jesus Christ."

The man continued rubbing his face along Shane's neck, jaw, hair. Leaving his scent all over him. Marking him. Again and again.

The message was unmistakable: *Back off. He's mine.*

Hayden swallowed.

"Umm, Shane," Hayden said carefully, keeping his voice low. Clearly hoping his friend would rescue him from this situation.

Instead, it had the opposite effect. The man's eyes turned even wilder, fixing on Hayden like he was contemplating tearing his throat out.

"I'm his friend," Hayden babbled, hands still raised. "So I'd appreciate it if you didn't look at me like you're about to pounce."

The man tilted his head to the side, as though considering that. Then, in a harsh voice that sounded unused, he said, "No."

Hayden blinked. *What the hell? Who the fuck is this guy? Should I be calling someone?*

But then Shane stirred. He made a soft, sleepy sound and instinctively burrowed back into the warmth behind him. His hand reached back, fingers sliding into damp hair, and he sighed in contentment.

"Mm. Ilya."

Hayden's eyebrows shot up. *Ilya?*

Shane's eyes fluttered open. Once. Twice. Then he noticed Hayden standing in the doorway and went utterly still. For a moment, he seemed to forget how to breathe.

"Shit. Hayden?"

"Hey, man." Hayden gave an awkward little wave. "Sorry for, uh... interrupting."

Within a second, Shane's face shifted from drowsy calm to pure panic. He tried to sit up, but Ilya's arm was wrapped tightly around him. As if only just remembering who he'd been sleeping with, he twisted around to glare at him.

"Hayden, what are you doing here? How did you get in?" At the same time, he struggled to shove the large alpha off him. His face had gone beet red.

"The door was open." Hayden gestured toward it helplessly. "I was worried. *We* were worried. Your mom, your dad, me, Rose..."

That was when Shane apparently remembered his phone. He finally broke free from Ilya's grip and scrambled toward the coffee table, snatching it up. He couldn't look at either of them. His face was burning.

Shane unlocked his phone with shaking fingers. When he saw nearly twenty missed calls and dozens of messages, he swore under his breath.

The oldest one was from his mother: *We're going back the city for a few days. Let's see each other when we're back. We miss you.*

After that, it was pure chaos.

His mother and father had both texted separately, asking if he was okay. The messages grew more frantic with each one, their worry bleeding through the screen. Rose had followed up on their earlier conversation with a string of questions, then her tone had shifted too, concern sharpening her words. Finally, Hayden had gotten involved, saying he had spoken to Rose and to his parents, and that since his mom and dad's trip had run long, he would stop by to check on him.

"Fuck."

He tried to piece it together. After the bathroom, after seeing Ilya's face, neither of them had spoken much. They had simply let themselves fall into the moment, focusing on grounding each other, on reassurance, on touch instead of explanation. Time must have slipped past them unnoticed.

"Shane?"

Hayden's voice pulled him back. Shane let the phone fall from his hand and lifted his head. Hayden was looking between him and the alpha now sitting on the couch, his expression caught somewhere between shock and concern.

Ilya, for his part, had finally taken his eyes off Shane. He was watching Hayden the way a wild cat watches prey. Silent. Alert. Muscles subtly coiled. The small cut on his chin cast a faint shadow in the dim light, sharpening his features into something almost feral.

Shane had no idea how to explain any of this to his friend. Where was he even supposed to start? That the mate everyone thought was dead had just reappeared? That his memory was fractured, that some things were only now beginning to surface?

He dragged a hand over his face and pushed his fingers through his hair.

Somehow, he managed to get them both properly seated. He remained standing for a moment, weighing his options. Ilya did not give him the chance to decide. He reached out, caught Shane firmly by the waist, and pulled him down beside him in a single decisive motion. Shane rolled his eyes, though at this point he was beyond being surprised by his alpha's possessive reflexes. Ilya's arm wrapped around his waist again, fingers gripping the hem of his shirt as if to anchor him there.

"So... yeah." Shane cleared his throat. "Hayden, this is Ilya. Ilya, this is my teammate and friend, Hayden Pike."

Ilya's gaze flicked briefly to Shane, as though seeking confirmation, then returned to Hayden.

After watching them for a few more seconds, Hayden let out a slow breath and leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees.

"Great," he said. "I'm happy for your new... friend, but everyone's losing their minds, Shane. You haven't contacted your parents in two days. And Rose..."

"I know," Shane cut in quickly. His shoulders tensed. "I wasn't thinking..."

"Yeah, that's obvious," Hayden muttered. He leaned in closer, gesturing toward Shane's neck. "Clearly you've been very busy."

Shane's face went an even deeper shade of red. His body went rigid.

That was all it took.

Ilya moved before Shane could even draw breath. One second he was sitting on the couch. The next, Hayden was slammed back in his chair, a hand wrapped around his throat.

"You no touch," Ilya growled. His grip was firm but not crushing, not yet. "Mine."

"I wasn't trying to touch him! Jesus!" Hayden choked out, hands flying up.

Shane was on his feet instantly, grabbing Ilya's arm. "Ilya, let go! He wasn't doing anything. He's my friend."

Something in his voice must have reached him. Ilya stared at Shane for a long moment, jaw tight. Then, slowly, he released Hayden, though the lethal look in his eyes didn't fade.

Hayden rubbed his throat, trying to steady his breathing. "How exactly am I supposed to explain this to Jackie?"

To both their surprise, Ilya spoke again. "Jackie?" he asked, tilting his head slightly. "Mate?"

Hayden stared at the man who looked like he'd just wandered out of the wilderness. Then he shook his head. "Yes, jackass. My wife."

Ilya's expression shifted. The aggression faded, replaced by something curious. He nodded slowly. "Good. You have mate. No Shane."

Hayden let out a strangled laugh. "Yeah. No Shane. Got it."

"I'm sorry," Shane said. "He doesn't mean to be aggressive. He's just... he's my mate."

The silence stretched.

Hayden stared. "Your *mate*."

"Yeah."

"You had a *mate*." Hayden's voice was flat with shock. "This whole time."

"For eight years," Shane said quietly.

Hayden sat back, processing. "I didn't even know you were bonded."

"No one did. We bonded right before he disappeared. Only my family knew. And then I thought..." His voice cracked. "Everyone thought he was dead."

Shane told him everything. The past. How Ilya had shown up three days ago, barely able to speak, covered in scars. How Shane hadn't recognized him at first. How he'd only realized yesterday when he'd seen his face. Hayden listened, pale and silent. When Shane finished, he sat back, staring at Ilya with new understanding.

"Holy shit. I remember him now." Hayden's eyes widened. "Ilya Rozanov. The Russian talent. He was all over the news when he disappeared."

"Yeah." There was a short hesitation. "I think someone kept him somewhere. I think they experimented on him," Shane blurted.

"What?" Hayden just looked at him.

"The scars. The tattoo. It's a number. A subject number, I guess." Shane's voice was tight. "He is... more alpha than human. Definitely different than he was before, so that's my wild guess." Shane let out a bitter laugh at his own choice of words. Then added: "He's been through a lot."

Hayden looked at Ilya again. At the tension in his posture. The way he tracked every movement in the room. The way his hand never left Shane.

"And he just... came back to you," Hayden said quietly.

"Yes."

"How?"

Shane looked down at his hands. "He hasn't said much. Just... that he left. That he walked. That he was following something."

Hayden's gaze flicked to Ilya. "You?"

Ilya's eyes narrowed slightly, trying to follow. After a second, he said quietly, "Smell."

The word settled heavily between them.

Hayden let out a disbelieving breath. "You're telling me he *tracked* you?"

Shane's mouth twitched, humorless. "Looks like it."

Another silence stretched, but it felt different now. Less explosive. More calculating.

"...Okay," Hayden said finally. "Then we're not calling the police. Not yet."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"If someone kept him, the last thing we should do is draw attention." Hayden leaned forward. "Think about it. If these people are still out there and they find out Ilya's alive, they might come looking. For him. For *you*."

Shane's stomach dropped. He hadn't thought of that.

Hayden rubbed his jaw. "Are you going to tell your parents?"

Shane felt his pulse quicken. "Eventually. But for now, I just need... some time, I think."

Hayden paused briefly, then gave a firm nod.

"I'll stay at the hotel in town. I'm not going anywhere until your parents get here. So you can stop looking like you're about to throw up. We'll figure this out."

That earned him another sharp look from Ilya, who instinctively drew Shane closer, one arm wrapping around him with quiet possessiveness.

"Thank you," Shane said softly.

When the door finally closed behind Hayden, the silence returned.

Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane's temple, breathing him in slowly, as if memorizing him all over again.

"Safe," he murmured.

Shane wished he believed that.

Chapter End Notes

Another long chapter! This one was a roller coaster and honestly very challenging for me, but it's finally here. We still have a lot to uncover, so fasten your seatbelts.

Thank you all so much for your kind comments. I genuinely can't believe how many of you are invested in this slightly unhinged, mystery-driven omegaverse story. Your comments and kudos truly make my day!

And yes, the rating has been changed. Some of you may have been a little too distracted by the mystery to question the lack of smut... but this is a hollanov fanfic, so it's a must.



The Hayden scene is inspired by [this crazy still](#).

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

A-2841.

That was his name. He hadn't been called anything else in a long time. Once, he had another name. He hadn't heard it for so long that sometimes he forgot it. But most of the time, he remembered. He remembered many things.

Every morning was the same.

First came the light. The curtains opened on their own, and sunlight filtered through. That was his favorite moment of the day, the instant he could see the sun and the forest beyond the window. Then came the sounds. Footsteps. After that, the scent: a muted alpha and a beta. A doctor and an assistant. He particularly disliked the alpha's suppressed scent. No matter what happened, most days followed the same pattern.

Routine was good. At least it meant predictability. In the early days, when he had first been brought here, everything had been so chaotic that he found himself constantly ready to attack. But here, in this new place, the third transfer, everything was meticulously ordered. And Ilya could feel his old defiance slowly beginning to fade.

Until that day.

He hadn't taken long to learn that the beta assistant was different from the others. She had no sharp or memorable scent. Her face, her expressions, didn't unsettle him. He didn't lower his guard completely around her, but he felt less threatened in her presence. She never forced him. Never made sudden movements. Of all the people he had encountered over time, her presence disturbed him the least.

He didn't know her name. Names had no importance in this world. But he had learned her footsteps. Each time, before entering, she paused at the threshold as if preparing herself. Sometimes she looked at him as though she were tense, or sad, and her scent confirmed it.

In the past few weeks, the way she looked at him had changed.

Not like the doctors. She didn't measure or evaluate. She simply held his gaze as if she were preparing to voice something she hadn't yet dared to say.

One evening, after the others had left, she stayed.

She stood by the door. She didn't approach. Her hands rested still at her sides as she watched him in silence for a long time. Then, very briefly, she glanced to his left. The locked cabinet on the left side of the room.

Ilya followed her gaze. He already knew what was inside. He had known from the beginning. They had taken it from his neck when he was first transferred here.

His mother's necklace.

Until then, the cold touch of it against his skin had brought him a small measure of comfort. That, too, had been taken from him.

The assistant never spoke to him directly, but she watched his movements as if to make sure he understood. Sometimes he could hear conversations from the far end of the building. No, not conversations. Arguments. The assistant protested. The way Ilya once had. The alpha doctor was stubborn. Ilya hated him most of all. Some days he had to fight the urge to let his own alpha tear him apart.

Three nights later, the door opened.

Not fully. Slightly ajar. A thin line of light slipped in from the corridor. Ilya was already awake. Whenever the lights shifted, he woke. His body adapted before his mind did.

The corridor was empty. Judging by the distant sounds, he had time. His eyes moved to the door. Then to the cabinet. There was no threatening scent in the air.

He took three steps toward the cabinet. Stopped.

Something inside him pulled toward it, the same force he felt every morning toward the window, the same nameless pull that lived in his chest.

For a long moment that felt endless, he stood between the door and the cabinet.

Then he looked at the door.

The forest was there. He had watched it every morning. Green. Moving. Alive. Different from everything inside this place. And something more. Something he couldn't see but had always felt. Faint. Incomplete. Like a word he almost knew.

He stepped away from the cabinet.

And walked out.

He crossed the long corridor quickly and reached the large metal door he had only seen on the day he arrived. There was no sound here. No scent. He listened carefully to the outside, just in case. Nothing. It was calm.

The cold struck his face the moment he stepped outside.

He hadn't felt cold in years. Not real cold. The kind that came from outside, moving through trees and carrying the world with it. He stopped just beyond the door and simply breathed.

Then the scent of sadness reached him. Regret. And a very faint, barely audible voice.

"I'm sorry. Go."

The forest was louder than he expected. Wind in the branches. Something small shifting in the brush. His body registered everything instantly. Threat assessment. Elimination. No threat. Only life.

He walked.

He didn't know for how long. Time moved differently outside. In the facility, time was measured in routines, in footsteps, in the mechanical sound of curtains opening. Here, it moved another way. Uneven. Fluid. He let it.

At some point the trees thickened, and the lights of the facility disappeared behind him. He didn't look back.

He walked until his legs told him to stop. He crouched at the base of a large tree and leaned his back against the bark. His hands were shaking. He looked at them for a moment without understanding, then let them tremble.

Somewhere behind him, the cabinet remained closed.

He inhaled.

Then the wind shifted.

It came in layers. Pine. Earth. Something damp and alive beneath the trees. As always, his body sorted through it automatically. No danger. Only forest.

And then, beneath everything else, something entirely different.

Cedar. Clean and warm, like wood left in the sun. Then a sharper, brighter note that cut through the cold. And beneath that, something deeper. Heavy. Flowing. Something that had no name in any language he possessed. It reached into his chest and found something there. Something waiting.

He went completely still.

His right hand moved without permission. His fingers opened, then closed around nothing. The ghost of weight. The ghost of another hand. He looked at his palm, unable to understand what his body was trying to tell him.

Then two words rose to the surface. From nowhere. From somewhere very old and very deep, a place the facility had never reached.

Moya dusha.

He didn't know what they meant. He didn't know what voice they belonged to. He only knew they were his. That he had said them before. That whatever waited at the edge of that scent belonged to them.

He stood.

The cabinet was still behind him. The cross was still inside, the three-barred cross he had watched through the crack of the door so many times, the shape his hands remembered even if the rest of him did not. He had walked away from it. He had chosen the door.

He was still choosing it.

And he began to walk.

Shane was talking again.

Ilya had given up trying to follow the words. They came too fast, overlapping, circling back, starting over. But the sound of them was pleasant. Low and steady, carrying that particular rhythm Ilya had come to recognize, as if Shane were not addressing someone so much as thinking out loud.

Still, the words faded into the background because Ilya was watching him instead.

Shane stood at the counter, working with his hands. Ilya didn't remember the names of most objects. Some shapes, scents, textures felt deeply familiar, and if his instincts told him something was safe, he touched it. If they warned him away, he didn't. It didn't matter right now.

What mattered was the sunlight slipping through the window and spilling along the side of Shane's face, across the clean line of his nose, the curve of his cheek. His dark hair was still messy from sleep and from running his fingers through it, falling over his forehead in a way Shane hadn't yet noticed.

Since the male beta had left, Shane hadn't stopped talking. Sometimes he frowned. Sometimes irritation flashed across his features. Sometimes he laughed quietly to himself. But he never fell silent. Because of that, Ilya had wanted to follow the beta into the forest and finish what he hadn't earlier, to punish him for the way he had made his omega smell like that.

Shane's unusual eyes were on him now.

Ilya didn't know how to name that color. Brown felt too simple. Too flat. The way they caught the light reminded him of certain kinds of trees, warm and deep, shifting in tone when he turned his head. Their shape was different too, softer at the outer corners than most of the humans he had observed here. As if they had been made to hold more light than others.

Under their intensity, Ilya forgot what he had been thinking. Forgot what he had meant to do.

There were marks on Shane's skin. Small specks scattered across his nose and the tops of his cheeks. He had seen them on his back and at the nape of his neck as well. Without realizing it, he had counted them. Studied them. His gaze kept finding them again and again, and each time something stirred inside him that hadn't surfaced in years.

He wanted to touch them again. But he didn't. Not yet. Besides, he had no choice. Shane had told him to sit across from him and wait.

Now Shane had stopped looking at him and returned to what he was doing. He spoke again occasionally. At one point he reached up to take something from a higher shelf.

Ilya's breath caught.

The muscles along Shane's side shifted clearly beneath his skin. Then he turned slightly, and Ilya saw his back, the line of his spine, the breadth of his shoulders narrowing toward his waist. Strong. Built for something demanding. Ilya's gaze drifted downward without permission. The curve of his waist. The way his shorts rested on his hips. The solid weight of his thighs when he shifted his stance.

Something tightened deep in Ilya's chest.

He already knew Shane's body. He had learned it the way he learned everything now, through scent, through proximity, through the information his instincts gathered without permission. He knew his weight. His warmth. The particular sound of his breathing when he was calm, and the way its rhythm shifted when he was not.

Yesterday had added other things to that knowledge.

His mind slipped back without warning. Shane's skin beneath his hands. The sounds he made. The wet heat of him, sharp and warm, dissolving beneath cedar and bergamot. Ilya's jaw tightened. His hands pressed harder against his knees.

Shane.

Shane's throat. Shane's thighs, that solid weight, the strength coiled inside them. The way he had fallen apart. The way he had said his name. Not alpha. Not a title. *Ilya.*

His name in Shane's mouth, breaking at the end.

He wanted him again.

Now.

His eyes followed the movement of Shane's shoulders, the muscles shifting beneath his skin, effortless and unaware. Shane didn't know he was doing it. He didn't know what Ilya endured simply by remaining on this side of the room. Every movement, every shift in his scent as it warmed, registered in Ilya's body like a command.

Come here.

Stay.

Mine.

The thought was not complicated. It never was. Shane existed, and Ilya's body answered. That simple. That inevitable. No distance felt acceptable. No touch felt sufficient. This was not new. It had been this way since the moment he found him, since that first night when Shane's scent had struck him like something physical and stopped him mid-step. And maybe even before.

He hadn't been able to leave then.

He couldn't leave now.

Shane reached again, his shirt lifting slightly, and Ilya exhaled slowly, carefully controlled. His fingers curled against his knees. The marks on Shane's back. The freckles scattered over his shoulders. The curve of his spine. All of it catalogued. Memorized. Returned to again and again.

His.

The messy dark hair. The too-fast words. The gorgeous eyes. The strength in those thighs. The sounds he made. The scent that spread when he warmed, when he wanted.

All of it.

Ilya could tear apart anything that tried to change that. Quietly. Completely. Without hesitation.

He watched Shane's hands move over the counter, thought of yesterday, and felt something settle into place inside him. Heavy. Certain. Very calm.

His omega.

His mate.

His.

"Ilya?"

At the sound of his name, Ilya's gaze dropped instantly to his lips. Shane's voice was sharp, tense. His scent confirmed it; beneath the cedar, a faint pressure seeped through, not anger, not fear, but something restrained.

"Shane."

He had learned to shape his tone like that from him. For some reason, he liked this way of speaking. It felt more like them. Like something private. He forced himself to focus.

"I'm saying I need to talk to my family."

Family. The word pressed against something deep inside him. Ilya felt a tightness stir in a buried place. His mother. His father. And something else, heavier, colder. Pain. Rigid. The weight of something unforgivable.

He set it aside for now. His omega needed him. Beneath those beautiful brown eyes lay worry and hesitation.

“I want you to meet them,” Shane said. He bit his lip unconsciously. “But honestly, I don’t know how to explain any of this.”

Ilya waited for a moment. Then, without thinking, he asked, “What do you want them to know?”

Shane stilled.

The silence stretched. Ilya didn't understand what had happened. Shane was staring at him, eyes slightly widened, lips parted. His scent shifted again, the sharp edge of anxiety giving way to something else. Surprise, perhaps?

“What?” Ilya asked. He wanted to stand, to pull his mate into his arms, to touch him somehow, but he remembered Shane’s request and remained where he was.

“Your speech is getting better,” Shane said at last. His expression softened, brightened. He placed his hands on the counter in front of Ilya. “And I don’t want to push you, but I keep wondering what you remember. What you went through.”

Ilya would have given anything to forget, to remain suspended in this moment. The temptation to take Shane somewhere quiet, somewhere no one would ever think to look, was almost overwhelming. Back to the forest he had come from, maybe to some hidden cave, and simply never leave.

He understood, more or less, what his omega wanted. But the part of him that longed to shield him from the entire world, to keep him close and known only to himself, was the one that most often prevailed.

After a while, the word left his mouth. “Others.”

Shane gave him his full attention.

Ilya didn’t truly want to speak, didn’t want to explain. It felt as though the best way to protect Shane was to keep him as far from all of it as possible. But when he saw how sincerely Shane was asking, he found he couldn’t stop himself.

“Others?” Shane repeated. “What do you mean? There were others?”

Ilya nodded reluctantly. “Different number. Same place.”

His hand moved on its own, brushing the mark on the inside of his wrist.

Shane’s hands, which had been resting on the counter, shifted to the edge. He gripped it so tightly his knuckles blanched. His scent and posture gave him away. He was trying to keep himself under control.

“How many?” he asked next, as if forcing himself to hold Ilya’s gaze. Ilya had often noticed how, in moments when his scent thickened with stress, Shane struggled not to look away.

He didn’t answer immediately. He lowered his head and looked at the number on his wrist, at the corridors it called back to mind. Identical doors. People he had never seen, only smelled.

“Don’t know,” he said at last. “Never saw. Only scent.”

Shane let out a slow breath through his nose. Then, suddenly, he crossed the space between them and took hold of Ilya’s arm, just above his left wrist.

“Ilya,” he said. His scent carried the sharp trace of charred wood now. He was angry. “I don’t know if I’ve said this before, but I’m sorry. For what you went through...”

“No.” Ilya caught him by the nape at once and pulled him close. “No sorry.”

At the same time, he released calming pheromones, brushing his fingertips along his scent gland to steady him. When Shane’s breathing finally evened out, the relentless edge of Ilya’s protective instinct eased as well.

When Shane spoke again, his voice was lower, flatter. “The place you were kept. Do you remember anything about it? A name, maybe? A location? Anything at all.”

Ilya thought of white walls. The white ceiling. The window overlooking the forest. The large metal door. The long stretch of wall beyond it, and the dirt path that ran past that. The mute scent of the alpha he had never managed to endure without hatred. And the locked cabinet.

“A name,” he said, unable to swallow it back.

Shane leaned forward, intent. “Of the place you stayed? What was it?”

Over the years, Ilya had overheard far too much. Some of the staff spoke carelessly in front of the alphas they drugged and confined, as if they were not human at all. That was how he had learned the name, though he never fully understood what it stood for.

“Apex.”

The moment the word left his mouth, the tests came rushing back. The strange machines. The needles. The medication that left a foul taste at the back of his throat.

Shane must have noticed the shift in his body, because he didn’t press any further. Still, he kept speaking as he stroked Ilya’s arm.

“I actually did some research. After Hayden left, I mean.”

At the mention of the beta, Ilya had to force himself not to growl. That male beta had stepped into his territory. He had breathed his air. He had looked at Shane for far too long, had stood too close, and carried the scent of somewhere else entirely.

And yet Shane continued as if none of it had mattered.

“The number on your wrist. I looked it up online, but nothing came up. Maybe if I combine it with the name you mentioned, I’ll be able to find something.”

But his search must have led nowhere, because a few minutes later he let out an irritated breath. He set the device he had been fiddling with down beside him, a little harder than necessary. Ilya watched it land on the cushion.

He knew what it was. Once, in another version of himself, in a life that now felt impossibly distant, he had known things like it. Shane’s fingers moved across its surface and things shifted beneath his touch. Images. Words. Sometimes sound. Ilya had observed it often enough to understand that it responded to contact. The logic behind it, however, still eluded him.

The version he remembered had been different. Heavier. The light it emitted had been another color. Without fully knowing why, he kept his hands away from this one.

After a stretch of silence, Shane muttered, almost to himself, “Maybe I should’ve searched in Russian.” Ilya lifted a brow. “But I don’t think I know enough,” Shane went on. “Even if I remember some words...”

Ilya felt a warmth spread through his chest. Something about it was familiar in a way he couldn’t place.

“*Nepravilno*,” Shane said after a second.

Ilya couldn’t stop himself from looking at those perfect lips as the word formed on them.

“I think that was the word you used the most. When you were teaching me Russian. *Wrong*. ‘Try again, Hollander.’” He delivered the last sentence in an exaggerated Russian accent and laughed softly to himself.

Then he began to speak again, his voice turned inward. His expression shifted, growing more thoughtful.

“*Moya dusha*.”

Ilya’s breath caught. Shane was now fully turned toward him, waiting with complete attention for his reaction.

The warmth in his chest sharpened into something clear and precise. Just two words, but they reached beneath everything the facility had buried, touching a place that had never disappeared.

A room. Not this one.

A place warm enough, and lasting long enough, to sink into his scent. The memory didn’t arrive in pieces, the way most things did now. It came all at once.

It had been a terrible day. One of the worst yet. His nausea had just passed, but he was still dizzy. After practice, he'd gone straight to his room without saying a word to anyone. The smells, the sounds, the movements, they were all too much. On days like this, he cursed everyone who had led him to this state, wishing he could start over. Wishing he were the kind of alpha he had always meant to be. Solid. Uncomplicated. Dedicated to hockey and nothing else. Unshakable.

When someone knocked at the door, he sat up. After practice, his teammates usually left immediately, heading into the streets of the Canadian city where they could eat and drink freely. He wasn't expecting anyone at this hour. So when he opened the door and saw Shane Hollander standing there, he couldn't hide his surprise. His senses were so scrambled he hadn't even registered the cedar, bergamot, and amber of Shane's scent.

Shane frowned the moment he saw him. "I saw you leaving practice," he said, glancing inside as if waiting to be invited. Ilya stepped aside helplessly. "Are you sick?"

Ilya hated hearing those words come out of Shane Hollander's mouth. A question like that had always seemed ridiculous before, and Shane had always pressed for an answer. Ilya had managed to deflect it every time, distract the omega, but today he didn't have the energy.

"It's nothing, Hollander. You can go."

But Shane had already stepped inside. Ilya told himself he did it to avoid lingering awkwardly in the hall, risking being seen. Yet Shane's expression was even harder now. Hands in his pockets, he stood just beyond the closed door.

Ilya took several deep breaths to steady himself. As Hollander's scent filled his nose, he felt the dizziness fade almost completely. He straightened up, squared his shoulders, and settled his expression into something that needed no explanation.

"Here for another Russian lesson, or something else?" he asked, letting that mischievous lilt creep into his tone.

Shane flushed instantly. The freckles scattered across the upper part of his face, like a constellation, turned pink. Ilya felt his teeth itch.

Getting close to Shane Hollander hadn't been part of the plan. Everything had happened too suddenly, too strangely. After witnessing each other in vulnerable moments, they had started meeting more often. Sometimes outside, in the park, or in the gym at hours when no one was around. Shane's eagerness to learn Russian had become clear. But Ilya could also sense the curiosity and desire beneath the omega's scent.

Their meetings had grown more frequent, and eventually taken on a far more physical dimension.

Each time, Ilya told himself it was under control.

Each time, he had been wrong.

There was something about Shane that made control feel, at best, like a temporary arrangement. The way he moved. The set of his shoulders when he focused. The freckles. Ilya had spent an absurd amount of time thinking about those freckles.

Today was worse than usual.

Today the filter between instinct and action had worn down to almost nothing, and Shane was standing in his room smelling like cedar and bergamot and that amber warmth that Ilya had long since stopped pretending didn't affect him, and looking at him with those eyes that never once bought the performance Ilya put on for everyone else.

"You're not fooling anyone," Shane said. His voice was low. Almost gentle.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "I don't know what you mean."

"You do."

He did. That was exactly the problem.

Shane took one step closer. Ilya's hands, hanging loosely at his sides, clenched into fists. Not with anger. With restraint.

"Shane." A warning. Mostly directed at himself.

"I know," Shane said. And still, he took another step.

Ilya had no other choice. He lunged forward and pressed his lips to Shane's. He kissed him with everything he had, plunging his tongue into his mouth, biting his lips. His alpha was letting out silent cries of triumph. This was what he needed, it seemed. His body surged with sudden, electric energy.

And Shane kissed him back.

That was what unraveled him. It wasn't the kiss itself, not the heat, not the sound Shane made against his mouth. It was the way Shane responded without hesitation, without surprise, as if he had been expecting this all along; he seemed only relieved that it had finally happened.

Ilya's hands found his waist. His jaw. The back of his neck.

Shane. Shane's mouth. Shane's hands, rising to grip the front of his shirt.

His thoughts began to shorten. He noticed it with a distant kind of awareness, like observing the air through a window; present, but not urgent. Something had taken over, something that didn't concern itself with thoughts. It knew only the closeness, the scent, the way Shane's breathing shifted, faster now, hotter, cedar melting beneath him.

He moved him backward. Shane went willingly; that in itself was another problem.

His mouth found Shane's jaw. His throat. The curve where his neck met his shoulder.

There.

Shane's shirt hit the floor first.

Ilya's hands were already in motion, tracing the lines of his shoulders, mapping the firm warmth of his chest. Shane's skin was flushed, his pretty nipples already erected. Ilya pressed his mouth to every inch he could reach; not careful, not measured. His alpha no longer knew caution.

Shane's breathing had grown shallow. His hands moved through Ilya's hair and over his shoulders, gripping and releasing in a rhythm that had nothing to do with thought.

"Ilya."

Just his name. That was all.

Ilya lifted his head. Shane was watching him; those warm brown eyes darkened, lips parted, chest rising and falling rapidly. The scent radiating from him at this distance was overwhelming. Cedar, bergamot, amber; all of it hot now, all of it saying yes.

Something inside Ilya's chest whispered "mine" with quiet force, in a way that was almost frightening.

Because it was frightening. This was what frightened him; not Shane, never Shane, but the part of himself that looked at Shane and stopped caring about consequences. That part had been getting louder. He had been pretending not to notice.

His tongue traced his teeth slowly. His eyes dropped to Shane's throat, then came back up.

"Fuck, Hollander. You can't want this," he said, his voice coming from deep in his throat.

Shane held his gaze. Didn't look away, didn't soften it, didn't give him anything to push back against. His reply was quick. "What if I do?"

Ilya went still.

"I'm going to consume you," Ilya said, a sound that was almost a growl. "When I'm done with you, no alpha will be able to look at you again."

Shane swallowed. Then he lifted his chin.

"Good," he said. Quiet. Certain. Like he had been waiting for exactly this and was simply relieved someone had finally said it out loud.

Something in Ilya's chest cracked open.

He had expected hesitation. Protest. At minimum, that careful measured look Shane wore when he was buying himself time to think. He hadn't expected this. Shane Hollander, looking at him like that, with those eyes, saying good. Challenging him. Always challenging him.

His hand moved to Shane's jaw. Tipped his face up.

"So fucking pretty."

At that, he pushed him back onto the bed. Within seconds, they were stripped of every piece of clothing. Ilya felt freer than he ever had, his omega's skin burning under his palms, his fingertips, everywhere he touched. When the slick scent rose from Shane and wound itself through his own, something in him stopped being careful entirely. His mouth found his collarbone first, then lower, then the inside of his thigh where Shane's breath stuttered and his hand tightened in Ilya's hair. He traced every line of him with lips and teeth and tongue, learning him, claiming him, and Shane let him. Not because he had no choice. Because he wanted to. That distinction was everything.

Climbing back up, he claimed Shane's lips again as his fingers trailed down his torso in slow motion. Then he found Shane's most hidden, now soaked spot. First one finger, then two slid inside. Shane's back lifted completely off the bed. The sound he let out was broken, vulnerable, the most honest thing Ilya had ever heard. His hands clenched the sheets, then found Ilya's hair again; not pulling, just gripping, needing something to hold onto.

As he devoured his omega, he also readied him, both patiently and impatiently.

Shane was coming apart beneath him.

Ilya could feel it in the way his breathing had stopped being breathing and started being something else entirely, in the way his hips kept rising despite himself, in the sounds spilling from him that he clearly wasn't trying to stop anymore.

Good.

A third finger. Shane's back left the mattress again.

"Ilya." His voice had nothing left in it but want. "I need—"

"Yes," Ilya said, barely talking now.

He withdrew his hand. Shane made a bereft sound that Ilya immediately wanted to hear again under different circumstances. He filed that away.

He moved over him. Shane's legs wrapped around his waist before he'd even settled, pulling him closer with a quiet desperation that did something irreparable to Ilya's chest.

"Look at me, please," Shane said desperately.

Ilya met his eyes.

When he pressed forward Shane exhaled slowly, completely, like he'd been holding something in for a very long time and had finally been given permission to let it go. His eyes stayed on Ilya's. His hands found his shoulders, his jaw, the back of his neck.

Holding on.

Ilya moved.

Shane's head fell back. Then he seemed to remember and brought it back up, keeping his eyes on Ilya's with visible effort, and that effort, the fact that he was choosing this, choosing to stay present and seen, undid Ilya more thoroughly than anything else had.

The rhythm built slowly at first. Then less slowly. Shane's nails found his back. His sounds had dissolved into something barely coherent, Ilya's name somewhere in the middle of all of it.

Ilya pressed his face into his neck.

Cedar. Bergamot. Amber.

His.

For a moment, Ilya felt detached from his own body, as if watching from somewhere just outside it. His alpha was in complete control. And it wanted only one thing.

Him.

He looked at Shane's face. At the flush across his cheeks, the freckles disappearing into it. At those warm brown eyes, hazy now but still holding his, still choosing to hold his, and something in Ilya's chest broke open quietly, without drama, the way things broke when they had been under pressure for a very long time.

"Moya dusha," he said, before he understood he was speaking.

Shane's breath caught.

Ilya searched his eyes. What he found there wasn't surprise. It was recognition. Like Shane had been waiting for exactly those words, in exactly that voice, and was simply relieved they had finally arrived.

His omega. His.

He buried his face in Shane's neck. His teeth traced the scent gland slowly, learning the shape of it, and Shane pressed into him, tilting his head, giving him everything without being asked.

Ilya bit down.

The sound Shane made was not pain. His grip locked around Ilya, holding him there, keeping him there, and they came apart together, and something settled between them in the aftermath, quiet and warm and entirely permanent.

Like something that had always been true.

Finally said out loud.

For a long time, neither of them moved.

Ilya's face was still pressed into the curve of Shane's neck, against the mark he had just left. He could feel Shane's pulse beneath his lips, slowing gradually, finding its way back to something steady. Shane's hand was in his hair. Moving slowly. Not asking anything.

Ilya licked the thin trickle of blood clean and let himself stay there.

Outside, the city continued without them. Inside, everything was very quiet and very still and exactly right.

After a while, Shane spoke.

"What does it mean?" His voice was low. Almost careful, like he already knew and just needed to hear it said.

Ilya lifted his head.

Shane was looking at him. His eyes were soft, the flush fading slowly from his cheeks. The mark on his throat was already darkening.

"My soul," Ilya said.

Shane held his gaze for a long moment.

Then he pulled him back down and said nothing else.

He didn't need to.

Later, when Shane's breathing had evened into sleep, Ilya lay still and looked at the ceiling.

The mind fog had been wearing off for hours. His mind was his own again, mostly, and with it came the particular clarity he had been without all evening.

He hadn't planned this.

He hadn't planned any of it. The words, the bite, none of it had been a decision so much as an inevitability he hadn't been able to outrun. His alpha had taken what it wanted and he had let it, because some part of him had wanted it too, had wanted it for longer than he was willing to examine.

But Shane...

He turned his head.

Shane was asleep against his shoulder, one hand loosely holding Ilya's bicep, as if making sure he didn't go anywhere. His expression was completely unguarded. Peaceful, in a way Ilya had never seen on him when he was awake.

The mark on his throat had darkened.

Ilya looked at it for a long time.

He should say something. Tomorrow, when Shane woke, he should explain, should give him the option to...

Shane made a small sound and pressed closer.

His fist tightened.

Ilya stopped thinking.

He pressed his mouth to the top of Shane's head and closed his eyes.

Tomorrow, maybe.

Today, he stayed.

Chapter End Notes

Our first Ilya POV! Writing him was quite a challenge since I relate to Shane more as a fellow autistic, but it was so much fun. Ilya definitely has a unique lens, so I hope you enjoyed seeing Shane through his eyes, and seeing just how much he appreciates him!

😊 I also hope those flashbacks satisfied some of your curiosity about Ilya's past.

On another note, a quick apology to native Russian speakers if I butchered the language!

I don't speak it, so Google and I are currently best friends. 😊

Massive thanks for the kudos and comments. You guys keep me going! ❤️

The pace is about to pick up from here, so tell me:

Any theories on what's coming next?

How do we feel about the POV shift? And would you like to hear Ilya's thoughts again?

Can't wait to read your thoughts! ✨

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

By the next morning, Shane was in such bad shape he almost wished he still kept a training schedule rigid enough to drown out everything else. But the season was over, the ice was hours away, and he had to stay calm -at least on the surface- so Ilya wouldn't notice.

And yet Ilya seemed to know anyway. He kept touching him, casually, deliberately, the back of his hand against Shane's arm, his shoulder against Shane's when they stood at the counter, his chin briefly on the top of Shane's head when Shane sat and Ilya didn't. And he carried a scent that made Shane's head spin; warm and grounding and terribly unfair given the circumstances.

Last night, he'd told Ilya that he had spoken to his parents, given them a brief explanation of the situation so they wouldn't arrive carrying the same shock he had, and that they would be coming here tomorrow.

Ilya had been quiet for a long moment. Then: "They know me?"

"They know of you," Shane had said carefully. "There's a difference."

Ilya had considered this. Then nodded, once, and said nothing else.

Shane had taken that as acceptance. He wasn't entirely sure it was.

Though, to be fair, he might have used their bodies a little to distract both himself and Ilya. It should have felt strange to experience emotions this intense again after so many years, yet every moment he spent with Ilya felt so natural. They were astonishingly in sync with each other, as if the eight years had been a pause, not an ending. Even so, Shane found himself having to take control at times, making sure Ilya didn't go too far.

Ilya's touch ran too hot, as if it heightened every nerve in his skin and left him oversensitive in ways that made thinking clearly considerably harder than it should have been. Which was, he told himself, exactly why he had to keep a hand on the reins. Ilya was still partly feral. Someone had to remember that. Even if that someone found it increasingly difficult.

Ilya's speech had been coming back in fragments, the way everything else seemed to; not all at once, but in quiet increments that Shane kept catching himself cataloguing. A full sentence where there had been two words before. A joke, almost, buried in something that could have been a straight answer. Yesterday he had said something so precisely, so completely Ilya, that Shane had had to look away for a moment and pretend to be very interested in the counter.

It wasn't consistent. Some hours were better than others. But there were moments -brief, unguarded- where the person Shane had spent eight years trying to forget looked back at him

from across the room, wearing the same face, carrying the same sharp edge of humor he had never quite been able to describe to anyone.

Those moments were the hardest. And the easiest. Both at once, in a way Shane had stopped trying to untangle.

He was already awake when his mother texted early in the morning to say they had set out.

Ilya was awake too. He almost always was before Shane, which Shane had stopped finding unsettling about a week ago. He was sitting at the edge of the bed, looking at the window, and when Shane's phone lit up he turned his head.

"Family," Shane said.

Ilya looked at the phone. Then at Shane. "Now?"

"Few hours."

Ilya nodded slowly, turned back to the window. Shane watched the line of his shoulders and tried to remember how to breathe normally.

The next few hours passed in the particular way that dreaded things always did; too quickly and not quickly enough.

They showered. Shane made coffee. Gave Ilya something to do with his hands so he wouldn't pace. Checked his phone twice more, then stopped checking.

At some point, a car turned onto the gravel path.

Shane walked to the door with his heart pounding in his ears. Of course, Ilya was right behind him. He hadn't left Shane's side since the car turned onto the gravel path, a quiet, solid presence that Shane had stopped pretending not to find steadying.

When he opened the door, he saw his parents.

For a few seconds, no one spoke. No one moved. The morning air came in cold and still, and Shane felt it against his face and thought distantly that he should say something, that he was the one who was supposed to know what to say here.

He didn't.

He reached for Ilya's hand instead.

"Good morning."

Yuna was the first to speak. There was still a small distance between them, and no one seemed willing to close it. Shane felt Ilya go rigid at his side. Then he stepped slightly in front of him.

Shane didn't pull him back. Not yet. He understood, he did, but he could feel his mother reading the movement with those sharp alpha eyes, cataloguing everything in the space of a second. Ilya's posture. The hand still holding Shane's. The way he had placed himself between her and her son without thinking.

Yuna didn't step back either.

For a moment, the two of them simply looked at each other. Alpha to alpha. Something passed between them that Shane couldn't fully name. It was not a challenge, not quite. Something more like an acknowledgement.

Then Yuna's gaze moved to Shane.

Whatever composure she had been holding cracked, just slightly, at the edges.

"Good morning, Mom, Dad," Shane said at last. David stood motionless beside his wife, and his omega father studied Ilya with open curiosity. "I'd like you to meet Ilya."

The name landed differently than Shane had expected. He felt Ilya's hand tighten slightly around his at the sound of it, his own name, spoken out loud, in front of strangers. Shane wondered how long it had been since anyone had said it like that. Like it belonged to him.

Yuna was the first to move. She took one step forward, then stopped, as if catching herself. Her eyes hadn't left Ilya's face.

"Ilya," she said. Just his name. Nothing else.

Ilya looked at her. Shane could feel the tension still coiled in him, the careful stillness of something that hadn't yet decided what to do. Then, slowly, some of it loosened. Not much. But enough.

David cleared his throat softly. When Shane looked at him, his father's expression was the one he knew best: quiet, steady, taking everything in without giving much back.

"It's good to meet you," David said. And he meant it. Shane could always tell when his father meant something.

Ilya said nothing. But he didn't step back.

Shane decided that was enough for now.

Shane was relieved that he'd managed to get everyone seated. Ilya was right beside him now, close enough that their knees almost touched, while his mother and father sat across from them within arm's reach.

He just had no idea how to begin the conversation.

As it turned out, he didn't have to.

"How are you feeling?" Yuna asked. She wasn't looking at just one of them. She was looking at both. She was asking how both of them were.

Surprisingly, it was Ilya who answered.

"Better," he said, his voice rough. Even though he was still sitting rigidly beside him, he had clearly forced himself to respond to Yuna. Shane wanted to pull him into his arms right there.

"Same," Shane said. Because it was true, and because he didn't trust himself to say more than that.

He felt Ilya's knee press slightly against his own. Not much. Just enough.

Yuna was quiet for a moment after Ilya spoke. Her hands were on her lap, and she wasn't looking at anyone in particular.

Then she said, "Can I ask... how did you get here?" Her voice was careful, measured, but her eyes were not. "To Shane, I mean. How did you find him?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Shane felt him shift slightly beside him, the way he did when he was deciding how much to give.

"Walked," he said finally.

"From where?"

"Forest." A pause. "Weeks."

David leaned forward almost imperceptibly. "You were in the forest for weeks? Alone?"

"Yes."

"Before that?" Yuna pressed, gently.

Ilya's hand moved to his wrist. The gesture had become so familiar to Shane that he almost didn't notice it anymore. Almost.

"Four walls," he said, almost murmuring. "Moved. Three times."

Shane turned to look at him.

He hadn't known that. Ilya had said facility before, once, briefly, and Shane had not pushed. He was regretting that now. Three times. Three different places, three different sets of walls, and Ilya had never...

"Three," Shane repeated. His voice came out quieter than he intended.

Ilya glanced at him. Something in his expression shifted; not apology, exactly. More like acknowledgement. He knew Shane hadn't known.

"Yes," he said simply.

David and Yuna exchanged a look. Shane didn't catch what passed between them. He was still looking at Ilya.

"People have been mourning you for years," David said, his gaze moving between them both. "God, they probably still are."

He meant Ilya. But Shane knew, without looking up, that his father meant him too.

At that, Ilya only shook his head. Shane felt his stomach twist. Whenever he tried to bring this up, Ilya either went quiet or changed the subject. It was impossible not to suspect the worst. Still, he knew he had to wait for the right moment. Ilya had to feel ready.

"We actually know the name of the place where he was held," Shane said. His voice came out steadier than he felt. "Apex."

The word settled into the room.

Shane found himself watching his mother without meaning to. Something had moved across her face the instant she heard it; fast and involuntary, there and almost gone. Not quite shock. Something older than shock. Recognition.

Her hands had curled into fists.

"Mom," Shane said.

Yuna lifted her head.

"You've heard that name before."

It wasn't a question.

"Yeah," Yuna said. The word came out quietly, like something she had been holding for a long time.

She didn't look at Shane when she spoke. She looked at her hands.

"It was after Ilya... disappeared. You were still in the hospital, or just out; I don't remember exactly. A company reached out. They said it was about sponsorship, performance evaluation. But the contract was strange. They wanted too much. Physical data, training records, medical history."

Shane stared at her. "You never told me."

"No." She finally looked up. "I set it aside. I thought that was enough."

"It wasn't," Shane said. Not accusing. Just stating.

"No," Yuna said again. "It wasn't. Because they came back. Multiple times. Different representatives, different angles, always the same project." Her jaw tightened. "At some point one of them tried to reach you directly. To get to you without me."

The room was very quiet.

"It never left my mind," Yuna continued, her voice dropping slightly, "I thought of that contract. I thought of it for a long time. I didn't know what it meant. I still don't know everything." She looked at Ilya now, steadily, with something in her expression that wasn't quite guilt but lived close to it. "But I should have said something. I should have said it years ago."

"And that was the company's name? Apex?" Shane asked.

"I don't know the full name." A beat. "But Apex wasn't the company. It was the name of the project."

The silence stretched for a moment after Yuna spoke.

Then David said, quietly, almost to himself: "Eighteen."

Shane looked at him.

"You were both eighteen," his father said. He wasn't looking at either of them. He was looking at the coffee table. "That's so young to lose everything."

Nobody answered. There was nothing to answer.

Ilya's jaw shifted slightly. Shane felt it more than saw it, the particular tension that meant something had landed somewhere deep and unexpected.

After a moment, Ilya said, "Yes."

Just that. But the way he said it.

David finally looked up. He met Ilya's eyes, and something passed between them; quiet and brief and entirely sufficient.

Shane looked down at his hands.

He had spent eight years being careful about how much space his grief was allowed to take up. How much was reasonable. How much was too much. Hearing his father say it out loud - so young, so much lost- made something crack open that he hadn't known was still sealed. His family had known. They had seen it all this time, in the set of his shoulders at family dinners, in the way his gaze drifted, sometimes, to the empty chair beside him. They had never said anything. Neither had he.

According to his mother, the company had reached out after Ilya disappeared. After Shane was in the hospital. After everything had already fallen apart.

He was certain of that now, because he remembered the man. Not his face, that had blurred long ago, like most things from that period. But the scent. Wrong in a way Shane's body had registered before his mind could catch up.

He had been in the hospital. One of the bad days, when the corridor lights felt too bright and the antiseptic smell had soaked into everything. The man had appeared beside him; calm, professional, saying something Shane hadn't fully heard. His voice was too even. Too practiced.

Shane had turned away.

A few minutes later, his mother had been there. And the man had gone. He had never thought about it again. There had been too much else.

Until now.

So they had known. While Shane was still learning how to breathe without Ilya, they had already been looking for him. They had come to the hospital. They had stood next to him in a corridor and tried to...

He stopped the thought there.

As Shane struggled not to drown in the questions crowding his mind, trying to grasp at any possible connection, Yuna spoke suddenly.

"I still have the contract," she said.

Shane turned to her, eyes wide.

"I think so. Somewhere in my office. I never threw it away."

Shane didn't know what to do with that. With the fact that his mother had held onto something for eight years without knowing why, the same way he had held onto grief without knowing what to do with it. Some instincts didn't need reasons.

He felt a hand close around his. Ilya. Not tight. Not urgent. Just there, warm and certain, the way he always was when Shane's scent shifted into something he couldn't control. Shane hadn't even noticed it changing.

He turned to look at him.

Ilya was watching him steadily. He hadn't followed every word. Shane could tell, the slight furrow between his brows, the careful attention of someone translating in real time. But he had followed enough. He knew something important had just happened. He knew Shane needed grounding.

"Okay?" Ilya said.

Shane almost laughed. Such a small word for such a large moment.

"No," he said honestly. "But I will be."

Ilya held his gaze for a moment longer. Then he nodded, once, and didn't let go of his hand.

After a while, his mother decided she needed tea, though it was obvious she was looking for an excuse to disperse the weight of unanswered questions in the room. Shane watched her move around the kitchen as if she owned it, opening the right cabinet on the first try, taking out four cups, switching on the kettle.

To his surprise, Ilya followed her.

After pressing a brief kiss to Shane's hair -unhurried, unbothered, as if he had been doing it for years- he took his place on the other side of the counter. His expression was tense but curious. Yuna said something to him in a low voice. Shane couldn't hear it from where he sat, but whatever it was, the sharp edge of Ilya's protectiveness softened, just slightly.

Their quiet exchanges continued. Shane watched for a moment, then decided to give them a measure of privacy and looked away.

"He's handling this better than I expected," David said.

Shane nodded. "Yeah. He is."

His father was quiet for a moment.

"So are you," he said.

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it.

"I should've told you sooner," he said finally. "When he first arrived. But it wasn't something I could explain, Dad. Feeling that it was him and still not being certain... I think I needed to understand it myself first. What I was looking at. What it meant."

David placed his hand over Shane's. That was all. It was enough.

Yuna returned with four cups of tea and sat back down beside her husband. It took Ilya a little longer to come back. For a while, he stood near the couch and looked out the window. Shane glanced that way too, but couldn't see anything outside. It didn't matter. A moment later, Ilya was back at his side.

"I'm going to go to the office and get the contract. Maybe we'll find something useful," Yuna said, taking a sip of her tea.

David turned to them. "You should come with us."

Shane was caught off guard.

Leaving the cottage hadn't crossed his mind. Not once, not seriously. He understood, distantly, that this said something about the state he'd been in, that the past few days had narrowed down to this house, this room, Ilya next to him, and everything else had simply ceased to register as real.

He looked at Ilya.

Ilya was already looking at him.

“Yes,” his mother cut in. “Let’s go together. And honestly, I think you’re at risk here. We’ll pick up Hayden from town and then leave.”

At the sound of that name, Ilya inhaled sharply through his nose and abruptly pressed his face into Shane’s neck.

As much as his omega thrilled at the gesture, Shane still murmured under his breath, “Ilya, behave.”

As they looked into each other's eyes, Shane said, "Tomorrow," to his mother.

One more day. That was all he was asking for.

Yuna and David exchanged a glance. Then they nodded and didn't push.

Beside him, Ilya's scent eased, settling back instead of pressing so insistently into the room.

By the time Yuna set her cup down on the coffee table, the decision had already been made. Tomorrow. Not today.

When David rose to his feet, Shane stood as well out of reflex, but Ilya didn't move. His sharp gaze shifted between the Hollanders and the door, measuring, assessing. Shane could feel the calculation in it; not hostility, just the particular attention of someone who had learned, over a long time, that exits mattered.

"If you sense anything wrong, call," David said quietly.

Shane nodded. "I will."

Yuna hesitated. Her eyes moved from Shane to Ilya, and for a moment she looked like she was choosing between several things she could say.

"You're not alone," she said finally. To both of them.

Ilya tilted his head slightly, as if translating the words somewhere deeper than language. Then he looked straight into her eyes.

"Protect," he said.

One word. But Yuna understood. Shane could see it in the way her expression shifted, something loosening, something settling.

"I trust you," she said. "Take good care of my son." And after a beat, she added, "You too, honey."

The room went very still.

Shane felt it move through Ilya before he saw it; that particular stillness, the kind that meant something had landed somewhere unexpected and was still finding its place. He didn't turn to look. He didn't need to.

Pride swelled warm and bright in his chest, almost painful with it.

"Always," Shane said. If only to give everyone in the room, including himself, somewhere to put the feeling.

The door clicked shut behind his parents. Shane turned the lock.

When he turned around, Ilya was already there.

He didn't say anything. He took one step forward, walked Shane back into the wall, and pressed his face into his neck. Not urgent. Not desperate. Just... *finally*.

"Too many," Ilya said, his voice muffled against Shane's skin.

Shane laughed. It came out before he could stop it; real, unexpected, the kind that loosened something in his chest he hadn't realized was still wound tight.

"I know, but you were amazing," he replied.

Ilya made a sound that wasn't quite agreement. Then he lifted his head.

What followed was not a single kiss so much as a quiet, methodical tour. His jaw first, then his cheek. The corner of his eye. His nose. Twice, for reasons that were apparently his own. Shane stood very still and let it happen, his hands loose at his sides, the wall solid at his back.

"Ilya."

Ilya kissed his other cheek. Then his forehead, with a deliberateness that felt almost ceremonial.

"What are you doing," Shane said while giggling. It didn't come out as a question.

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him. His expression was serious in the way it always was when he thought the answer was obvious.

"Yours," he said simply. As if that explained it. As if that explained everything.

Shane looked at him for a moment. The morning light was soft through the curtains. Ilya's hair was a mess and his eyes were very blue and he was looking at Shane like Shane was the only fixed point in a room that kept moving.

"Yeah," Shane said quietly. "Mine."

He brought one hand up and cupped the back of Ilya's head, and pressed his lips to his temple, and held them there.

"You did well, baby," he murmured against his hair.

Ilya went very still. The kind of still that meant something had landed.

Then, after a moment: "Your mother." A pause. "Strong."

"Yeah," Shane said.

"Smell like you." Ilya lifted his head slightly, considering this with complete seriousness. "But... sharper?"

Shane looked at him. "That is not a compliment."

"Is."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Decided, after a moment, that arguing with Ilya about what constituted a compliment was not a battle he had the energy for today.

"Come on," he said.

Ilya stood in a shadowed corner by the edge of the rink, waiting for the Canadian team to finish their drill. His eyes were locked on number 24. Watching his newly claimed mate surrounded by alphas and betas lit something dangerous beneath his skin. Because with his flawless play, his posture, his body, his face, his freckles... Shane Hollander was an irresistible omega.

And Ilya knew his teammates were aware of it too. It took all of his restraint not to step onto the ice and yank down the neck guard just to reveal the fresh mark hidden beneath it.

When the drill ended, Shane's eyes found his. Ilya tilted his head slightly, signaling for him to follow.

The storage room was small and smelled like rubber and cold metal. Outside, the scrape of blades on ice. Shane's teammates. Their scent drifting through the rink, mixing with Shane's, making something in Ilya's chest pull tight.

The moment they were inside, Ilya pushed him gently but firmly against the door and crashed their lips together. He breathed in the sharp, addictive mix of sweat and Shane's scent. A soft sound slipped from Shane's mouth beneath his lips, beneath his hand.

Ilya deepened the kiss, pressing his knee between Shane's thighs and was rewarded instantly with a breathy, "Mmhm, baby."

He was seconds away from losing himself completely when Shane shoved him back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You called me here for a reason," Shane said. "And it better be a good one."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He just looked at him -slowly, deliberately- taking in every perfect line of his face.

"Your teammates," he said.

"What about them?"

"They can smell you."

Shane blinked. "That's how scent works, Ilya."

"Don't like it."

A pause. Shane pressed two fingers to his own temple. "You pulled me off the ice because you don't like that my teammates have functioning noses."

"I want to break every single one." Ilya meant it. This was not an exaggeration. "Just for that."

Something moved across Shane's face; exasperation, mostly, but underneath it something warmer that he was clearly trying to hide. Ilya could smell it. He could always smell it.

"How did you call me?" Ilya asked smugly. "Last night."

Shane's expression shifted immediately. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"More, please—"

"Do not finish that sentence."

Shane's face had gone red. He was scrunching his nose slightly, the way he did when he was trying to look severe and not quite managing it.

"So cute," Ilya whispered.

"I'm not cute. Fuck off."

But he was. And when he got like this -bristling, scrunching his nose like an annoyed cat- he was even sweeter. It made something warm and feral curl low in Ilya's stomach. He wanted to devour him.

Ilya stepped closer. Shane didn't step back. He never did, and Ilya loved that about him more than he had words for.

"Come on," Ilya said quietly. "Moya dusha. Don't be cruel."

Shane looked at him for a long moment. The ice outside. The cold metal smell. Ilya watching him and waiting, because he had learned very quickly that Shane always got there eventually.

"Mate," Shane said. Quiet. Like something given. "My mate."

The word moved through Ilya like something electric.

He took Shane's hand and guided it, very deliberately, to the front of his pants. "Wanna mate?"

Shane's eyes went wide. He looked at the door. Back at Ilya. "You cannot be serious."

"Tonight," Ilya said instead. "Your place or mine?"

Shane's hand hadn't moved.

Ilya watched him decide.

"Mine," Shane said.

He leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth. Then he turned and walked out.

He was smiling before he reached the door.

Ilya stood in the cold storage room and watched him go and thought, with complete clarity: I am in so much trouble.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He almost didn't check it. Shane was still visible through the small window in the door, back on the ice now, moving the way he always moved; precise, unhurried, like he owned the surface.

But he checked it.

The message was from a number he didn't recognize. Three lines. A date, a location, and:

Further testing required. Performance metrics inconclusive. Attendance mandatory.

Ilya read it twice.

On the ice, Shane laughed at something one of his teammates said. The sound carried even through the door.

Ilya put his phone back in his pocket.

He didn't think about the message again for days. And when he did, it was too late.

By the time evening settled in, Shane felt noticeably calmer. There was something undeniably soothing about this house, about the domestic hours he spent with Ilya. It made him want to stay forever.

But forever wasn't an option.

Even if they could stretch this peace for one more day, he knew what was coming. All he could hope was that, through whatever followed, he would be able to protect both Ilya and himself.

As he packed a small suitcase for the two of them, he glanced at the alpha watching him from across the room. Ilya was holding the torn, weather-worn jacket he had been wearing the day they found each other again. He was studying it with a faint frown.

Shane swallowed. So little time had passed, and yet everything had changed. When he remembered Ilya's first state -feral, ragged, wounded- his chest ached sharply. He would do whatever it took to make sure Ilya never fell back into that condition again.

The more details about the company and the Apex project surfaced, the more anger simmered beneath his skin. Shane was calm by nature. Off the ice, he disliked conflict, disliked confrontation. But when he thought about what had been done to his mate...

Doctors. Tests. Experiments. Scars. A strong, young alpha. Many alphas. And Shane.

What was their main purpose? And how had they managed to operate for so many years without being exposed? He hoped his mother would uncover something useful once she reviewed the contract.

Unfortunately, his parents, Hayden, and even his own instincts were right. They couldn't stay here. If Ilya had found him by instinct and scent alone, then people with resources could find them both.

That was why, earlier that afternoon, they had all spoken on the phone and agreed to relocate to a secure house, one that belonged neither to Shane nor to his family.

After adding a few more T-shirts and pants, Shane closed the suitcase and walked over to Ilya. He took the jacket from his hands and tossed it aside.

The old garment landed on the bed, and something small and white slipped from the lining, tumbling onto the floor. Shane narrowed his eyes and bent down to pick it up. A few days ago, he had searched every pocket, every tear, hoping to find anything that might reveal where Ilya had come from. He had found nothing. Now, in his hand, was a small, handwritten note. Just a post office box number. No name. No explanation. Only a city and a number.

For a moment, Shane could only stare at it without blinking. Then he turned to Ilya.

The alpha looked just as surprised, but far calmer. When he reached out for the paper, Shane handed it over without hesitation.

"Her," Ilya said simply.

Shane searched his face for clarification. "Who?"

"Don't know name." Ilya brushed the edge of the paper with his fingertip. "Helped. Me escape."

Shane looked back at the number. The post office box was in Ottawa. The same city they were heading to. Of course it was.

He should have felt nothing but relief at finding another lead. Instead, fear coiled tight in his chest. All he could do was hope that whoever had written that note had truly meant to help.

Shane nodded and carefully tucked the note away somewhere safe. He didn't forget to take a photo of it first.

A moment later, Ilya must have sensed the spike of tension running through him, because he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist from behind.

Shane let himself lean into him for a brief second before straightening.

"Okay," he said, more to himself than to Ilya. "Tomorrow we're going somewhere new. We'll probably meet new people." He turned within Ilya's arms until they were face to face. "So we need rules."

Ilya looked at him with that particular patience of his, the look of someone who had decided to cooperate and intended to see it through. Shane chose to take that as a good sign.

"No growling at strangers," he began.

Ilya watched him, faint lines forming at the corners of his eyes, but didn't respond.

"No scent-marking in public."

At that, Ilya's lips pushed forward in a sulky pout. Shane had to physically restrain himself from kissing them. He cleared his throat instead.

"Don't think I forgot what you did to Hayden. You can't treat people like that," he added, slipping into a stern, almost teacher-like tone.

Ilya rolled his eyes and shook his head. "No. Don't like him."

Shane fought a smile. "He's one of my closest friends, Ilya. And he's helping us." When the alpha continued to look unconvinced, he added softly, "And *you're* my mate."

Ilya's eyes changed instantly. A mischievous curve tugged at his mouth. He pressed his entire body against Shane without hesitation. Shane felt the firm heat against his lower abdomen and let out a quiet groan. "Again?"

"Hmmh," Ilya murmured against his jaw.

Shane had approximately three seconds to decide whether he had the willpower for this before Ilya went still. Not the comfortable kind of still. The other kind.

Shane felt it immediately; the shift in his weight, the way his arms didn't loosen but stopped. Like something had redirected his attention entirely.

"Ilya."

Ilya didn't answer. His chin lifted slightly, almost imperceptibly, toward the window.

Shane followed his gaze. The tree line. Dark now, the last of the light gone. Nothing visible. But Ilya's jaw had tightened.

"What is it?" Shane asked, keeping his voice low.

A long pause.

"Different," Ilya said. "Outside. Smells different."

Shane looked at the window for another moment. Then he stepped back, reached for his phone, and typed a message to Hayden.

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

We're back and I hope AO3 stays strong because I can't. I'm trembling with excitement! Writing this is such a joy and I can't thank you enough for the kind comments. Y'all are the best!

I tried my best to keep this chapter from becoming a total info-dump, so I hope it didn't feel too overwhelming. It's a lot to take in, but I wanted the pacing to feel right.

Also, I'm not gonna lie... writing that family reunion really shook me. Getting everyone in the same room was a lot more emotional than I anticipated. 🥺 Seeing that the Hollanders already love their feral puppy makes me breathe a sigh of relief! Ilya saying "Protect" to Yuna... I think my heart actually melted.

And yes, another Ilya POV flashback! Writing those younger versions of them always feels so bittersweet. It's wild to see how even back then, Shane was his entire world, even if they didn't know what was coming.

I am also so incredibly proud of my baby boy Shane in this chapter. He was hit with so many triggers and overwhelming moments and he handled it all with such grace while still being Ilya's anchor. He's been carrying so much and honestly, it wouldn't be me lol.

The 'Apex' mystery is getting deeper, and I loved reading all your theories about it! Some of you are getting eerily close to the truth, while others have pointed out details even I had to double-check. 🙄 Are you right? Well, I'm not talking just yet, but the answers are coming sooner than you think!

The pace is officially picking up, so hold on tight. Who (or what) do you think Ilya smelled outside?

Can't wait to read your thoughts! ✨

A quick note: In this omegaverse, mating bites are real, but they aren't exactly visible once healed.

Hmu on [twitter](#). I share snippets there sometimes.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

Shane didn't know what had woken him.

He had been dreaming. He was certain of that. But whatever it had been slipped through his fingers like water. Only the feeling remained. A heavy pressure lodged in the center of his chest.

His body was damp with sweat. The sheets clung to his back. His breathing came in uneven pulls, as if he had been running. His heart had not yet slowed. But it wasn't just the dream. There was a restlessness. Something lodged beneath his skin, invisible but impossible to ignore.

The room was pitch dark. Apart from the cottage's usual faint wind and the soft nighttime creaks of wood settling into itself, there was no sound. The silence was normal. Too normal.

Shane pushed himself upright. He reached out blindly to his side. The bed was empty. The sheets were cold.

Now his heart truly began to pound.

He scanned the room, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. A faint silhouette stood near the window, barely distinguishable against the black. He switched on the bedside lamp.

Ilya was there.

Looking outside. Completely still. His shoulders tense, his spine rigid. As if he wasn't even breathing. The unease inside Shane finally found its shape.

He didn't call his name. Not yet.

Something held him back, some instinct he didn't have words for. He stayed where he was, on the edge of the bed, and looked.

Ilya hadn't moved. Hadn't turned at the light. Hadn't registered it at all, as far as Shane could tell. He was still facing the window, still rigid, every line of him pulled taut toward something outside.

Shane had seen Ilya still before. The careful, watchful stillness of someone paying close attention. This was different.

He stood up slowly. Crossed the room. Came around until he could see Ilya's face. He stopped.

The eyes were wrong.

His blue was impossibly blue, his pupils blown wide. His lips were stretched so tight they formed a thin, bloodless line, his jaw clenched hard enough to show the strain along its edge. His breathing was slow. Deliberate. Each inhale held a beat too long, like he was cataloguing the air itself. His hands were open at his sides. Not relaxed. Ready.

The scent hit Shane a second later, that familiar warmth completely gone, replaced by something sharp and old and entirely unfamiliar. Something that made the back of his neck prickle.

He had gone somewhere past fidgeting, past the small unconscious movements bodies make without thinking. He was utterly, completely still in a way that living things rarely managed.

Every instinct Shane had said: dangerous.

There was an uneasy feeling at his chest as he stood in the lamplight and looked at the person he loved and tried to understand what eight years had made of him.

"Ilya," he whispered carefully.

Nothing. Not even a flicker.

Shane said it again, barely a sound. "Ilya."

Still nothing. Ilya's gaze didn't move from the window. Whatever he was tracking out there, it held him completely.

Shane didn't reach out. Not yet. He stood where he was and watched Ilya's profile in the lamplight and understood, with a clarity that sat heavy in his stomach, that calling his name wasn't going to be enough.

He wasn't sure what would be.

Outside, something moved.

Shane couldn't see it. He couldn't hear it. But he saw Ilya's weight shift –almost imperceptibly, forward, like something being drawn on a wire– and knew.

Someone was out there.

He didn't move. He didn't speak. He stood in the small circle of lamplight and breathed and waited, and trusted the thing in the room with him to know what he couldn't.

After a long time, long enough that Shane's legs had gone stiff and the lamplight had started to feel very small, whatever was outside moved away.

Ilya didn't stand down immediately. The alertness held, then slowly, in increments too small to track, began to release.

Shane waited until Ilya's breathing changed. Until the hands at his sides lost their readiness.

Then he reached up and put his palm against Ilya's jaw.

Ilya went completely still. A different kind of still.

"It's me," Shane said.

The eyes moved to him. Slowly. The darkness receding, the blue coming back, really coming back, the blue he knew.

Ilya's exhale was long and unsteady. He turned his face into Shane's hand and closed his eyes. Neither of them spoke.

Shane kept his hand where it was and looked out at the dark tree line and thought: someone was out there. Someone was watching.

And Ilya had known before he did. Ilya had always known.

Shane hesitated for a second. Then, slowly, deliberately, he stepped closer.

He knew what to do. Not from reading, not from thinking; from the hours Ilya had spent pressed into his neck, from every time the tension had left his body at the first exhale of Shane's scent. He knew. He stepped closer and tilted his head, slow and deliberate, and waited.

Ilya's nostrils flared.

Then something in his face unlocked in sequence, like tumblers falling. The jaw first, then the set of his shoulders, then finally his eyes.

He leaned in.

Shane felt the exhale against his skin before anything else. Warm, unsteady. Then Ilya's nose, pressing into the curve of his neck with a gentleness that didn't match the creature he had been thirty seconds ago. He breathed in, long and slow, like someone surfacing.

Shane held very still.

"There," he said quietly. "It's me. I'm here."

Ilya made a sound that wasn't a word. Low, involuntary. His hands came up and found Shane's waist, and for a moment his grip tightened in a way that had nothing to do with comfort.

Shane felt it, that shift in the air between them, sudden and unmistakable.

"Hey," he said softly. "Not now."

A long pause.

Ilya's grip loosened. He pressed his forehead to Shane's shoulder instead and stayed there, breathing.

"Sorry," he said. The word came out rough, like it cost him something.

"Don't be," Shane said.

He meant it.

That night, neither of them managed to sleep. Shane's head throbbed, his skin prickled with a restlessness he couldn't entirely attribute to fear. A thousand different scenarios kept cycling through his mind. Every so often he couldn't stop himself from glancing at the window. He hadn't seen anything concrete. But he trusted Ilya's instincts. Someone had been out there.

One part of him was terrified out of his mind, yet another simmered like a volcano on the verge of eruption at the thought that someone might try to take him away again. If he let it, his omega would take control, charge blindly into the night, and eliminate the threat. If he let it run, it wouldn't be rational. It wouldn't be careful. His omega didn't particularly care about careful right now.

They sat like that on the bed until the first light of morning crept in. Ilya spoke even less than he had when he first arrived, answering Shane's questions with little more than low grunts. The words he'd been building back over the past weeks seemed harder to reach this morning. Shane could see him trying. He didn't push. His expression was still off somehow; not dangerous, not the creature from the window. Just absent. Like part of him hadn't fully come back yet.

When Shane touched his bare back, Ilya's first reaction was to flinch. He went still a beat after, as if catching himself. He didn't apologize. He didn't explain. He just waited, with the patience of someone who had learned to wait out their own reactions. Shane left his hand where it was.

He thought about the people who had put those marks there, going about their days somewhere. And he waited for morning, because there was nothing else to do yet. The moment the sun began to rise, he sprang into action.

He moved like he had been wound up and set loose. He went into the kitchen and quickly made a couple of sandwiches they could eat on the road. He checked every corner of the house. He packed a few extra things they might need into a bag. Then, before the morning chill had even begun to fade, he stepped out the door with Ilya.

He saw them immediately. Footprints. At the edge of the tree line, where the soil had settled overnight and held the impression of whoever had stood there. Two sets, maybe. Close together. Facing the cottage.

Shane stood very still. Ilya was already crouching beside them. He didn't touch anything. He just looked, with that particular focus that meant he was reading something Shane couldn't.

"How long were they here?" Shane asked.

Ilya studied the ground. "Not long." A pause. "Came. Looked. Left."

Came. Looked. Left.

Shane understood what that meant. They weren't there to act, not yet. They were there to confirm. To make sure.

And now they knew.

He became aware, distantly, that his hands had stopped working properly. He looked down at them. They were very still. That was the thing about this kind of anger; it didn't shake. It went quiet.

"Okay," he said.

He picked up the bag. He looked at the cottage once; the door, the window, the light still on inside.

He didn't look back again.

Shane drove.

Ilya had looked at the car for a long moment before getting in; not hesitation exactly, more like assessment. Shane had watched him clock the doors, the windows, the sightlines. Old habit. He hadn't said anything.

The first few minutes passed in silence. The road was empty this early, the trees still dark on either side. Shane kept his eyes forward and his hands steady on the wheel and told himself he was fine. He wasn't entirely fine.

The car was warm. Too warm, maybe. He hadn't noticed until they'd been driving for ten minutes and his skin had started to feel like it was two sizes too small. He turned the heat down. It didn't help.

Beside him, Ilya sat very straight. His eyes moved constantly: mirror, window, road, mirror again. Every car they passed got a full second of attention. Every turnoff. Every stretch of tree line that came too close to the road.

"Ilya."

"Mm."

"You can relax."

A pause. Ilya's eyes moved to the side mirror. Back to the road.

"No," he said simply.

Shane decided not to argue with that. Twenty minutes out, he cracked the window.

The cold air hit him immediately, sharp and clean and exactly what he needed. He exhaled.

Ilya turned to look at him.

Not a glance. A full look, slow and evaluating, the kind that started at Shane's face and didn't stop there. Shane felt it like a change in pressure.

"I'm fine," Shane said. "It's just warm in here."

Ilya said nothing. He turned back to the road. But Shane caught the way he breathed in, just once, deliberate and quiet. He knew what that meant. He rolled the window down another inch and focused very hard on driving.

The road stretched ahead. Ottawa was still two hours away. The sandwiches sat untouched on the back seat.

Shane thought about footprints on the earth. About the cottage light still on, visible from the tree line. About someone standing there in the dark, confirming.

He pressed the accelerator down slightly.

The sooner they got there, the better.

The safe house was on a quiet street three blocks from the river.

Shane had expected something more anonymous: a motel room, a basement apartment, something that looked like it was trying not to be noticed. This was a house. Narrow, two stories, dark red brick gone grey at the edges with age. A small covered porch. Two windows facing the street, curtains drawn.

Unremarkable. That was the point, he supposed.

He could hear the river if he listened, or thought he could. More likely it was traffic, distant and low. Ottawa sounded different from the cottage. Fuller. More present. Like the city was breathing just outside the window and had no intention of stopping.

Ilya had gone quiet in the last ten minutes of the drive. Not the watchful quiet of the highway, something more internal. Shane had glanced at him twice and both times found him looking out the window with an expression he couldn't read. Processing, maybe. Or just trying to.

There was a lot to process.

Hayden was waiting at the door.

Shane watched Ilya register him from the passenger seat, the slight tension that moved through his shoulders, the almost imperceptible forward shift of his weight. Eight hours ago he had been tracking something in the dark outside the cottage. He hadn't fully come down from that yet. Shane wasn't sure he had either.

"I know," Shane said quietly. "He's on our side."

Ilya looked at him. A long look, measuring. Then just grumbled. After holding Shane's gaze for another moment, he got out of the car.

Inside was better. Smaller spaces were easier; fewer entry points, easier to read. The house smelled like old wood and someone else's laundry detergent and, faintly, coffee. The ceilings were high. The floorboards creaked. A narrow staircase ran up one wall.

Ilya did a circuit of the main room without being asked. Windows first, then the back door, then the hallway. Hayden watched him do it from the kitchen doorway and said nothing.

Shane appreciated that.

He sank into the nearest chair and felt the last twenty-four hours land on him all at once.

After a while, Hayden broke the silence. "There's coffee."

Shane shook his head from where he sat, he didn't think his stomach could handle anything. This unfamiliar house was making him just as uneasy as it was making Ilya. So he supposed he should be grateful the alpha had taken it upon himself to check everything.

Hayden moved to the chair across from him and gave him a worried smile. "How was the drive?"

"Good," Shane answered without thinking. By then Ilya had finished what he was doing and was standing right beside him. When Shane felt his hand on his back, he realized he relaxed a little. Then, not wanting to be a terrible friend, he added, "How's Jackie? How did you explain things to her?"

Hayden wrapped his hands around the half-empty mug on the table. "I took Yuna's advice and didn't tell her everything. I just said there was an emergency involving you and that I'd explain it all when I got back."

By now his parents had probably already arrived at the office. Shane was waiting, with growing unease, for the moment he would see a copy of the contract.

"I'm really sorry, buddy," he murmured. "I'm putting you in a tough spot too."

Hayden was quiet for a moment. He turned his mug slowly on the table.

"You'd do the same," he said finally.

A small sound came from beside him. He glanced at Ilya, who had been standing very still through most of this exchange, his hand still on Shane's back, his eyes moving between the two of them with the careful attention of someone following a conversation in a language they almost spoke.

Then Ilya looked at Hayden. "You help Shane," he noted.

Hayden blinked.

"Good," Ilya said. And turned back to the window.

Hayden looked at Shane. Shane looked at his hands.

"High praise," Hayden mumbled, very quietly.

"Don't push it," Shane warned. But something in his chest had loosened, just slightly.

He reached into his pocket and slid the paper across the table. The P.O. box number, the city, the careful handwriting.

Hayden looked from the paper to Shane. His brows drew together slightly. "What's this?"

"The number of a P.O. box in Ottawa." Shane made sure to keep his voice steady. "We need to check what's inside."

Hayden picked up the paper and studied the handwriting. "Where did it come from?"

"It fell out of Ilya's jacket. It was hidden inside the lining."

Hayden set the paper down again, his expression thoughtful. Shane knew that look. He already knew what Hayden was going to say, but he let him say it anyway.

"I'll go," Hayden blurted, just as expected.

The answer was immediate. "No."

"Shane..."

"I said no." Shane didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. "Someone who helped Ilya escape sent this. I'm aware that whatever's in that box might not be trustworthy. It could be a trap. But my instincts are telling me I need to go. I can't send someone else."

Hayden shook his head sharply. "You're exhausted. And..." His eyes flicked briefly toward Ilya. "You can't take him into a post office in the middle of the city."

"I know that."

Of course he knew. Leaving Ilya here would have been the sensible option. But he didn't trust himself to stay away from him either.

"Then let me—"

"Hayden." Shane looked at him wearily. "I know you mean well. But you've already helped more than enough. This isn't your problem."

A deep silence followed. Hayden leaned back in his chair. He looked like he wanted to say more, but chose not to.

“Fine,” he said at last. “But I’m coming with you. I don’t know what we’re dealing with, but I’m not sending you out there alone. Either we go together, or you’re not going at all.”

Shane sighed, but nodded. “Then you’ll pick up the package. It’s better that way in case someone’s watching.”

When he looked up at Ilya, he saw him staring at Hayden with narrowed eyes. Then, as if he’d sensed it, he turned to Shane.

“Is good. I protect,” he said in a rough voice.

Shane swallowed. He only hoped there would be nothing there that required protecting from.

The city reached him through the glass this time.

It was different from the highway. The highway had been fast and open. Ilya could track things there, mark where they were, let them pass and disappear behind him. The city didn’t work like that. Buildings pressed in from both sides. Traffic slowed, stopped, then lurched forward again for reasons he couldn’t always see. People stepped in front of the car without looking.

His eyes never stopped moving.

Habit.

But it wasn’t just his eyes. He had caught it two blocks back. A warm, sweet, yeasty smell. Something baking nearby. It had vanished before he could locate the source. Before that there had been the scent of an animal. Wet fur and cold mud. A dog, he remembered. He used to love dogs. Before that, engine exhaust; sharper than the others, a different kind his mind couldn’t name but his body recorded anyway.

Each one arrived whole and uninvited.

They had done this to him at the facility. He knew that now, with the same distant awareness he had about most of the things they had done to him. They had wanted better. Sharper. More.

They had gotten it.

In the forest it had kept him alive. Every shift in the wind, every sound that didn’t belong, every scent that arrived before its source came into view. He knew things were coming long before they arrived.

Here it just ran. Everything flagged as relevant. A child crying somewhere. Third floor, maybe fourth. The clang of metal striking metal from a construction site he couldn’t see. Someone’s food. Spiced, unfamiliar, drifting from a doorway they passed too quickly.

And beneath all of it, constant, Shane.

Cedar and warmth and something else that had been pulling at him since they got in the car, surfacing through the noise every time he almost managed to stop noticing it. He kept having to...

He turned his head and looked out the window.

Now, the vehicle he had grown used to only about half an hour after they had left the woods, began to slow. Shane pulled over beside a raised, orderly curb. He let out a deep breath. Then he turned and called out to Hayden.

About five minutes later, Hayden returned with a medium-sized envelope in his hand.

Shane's face was tight with worry as he took it, his teeth pressing into the inside of his cheek. Ilya could faintly smell the trace of blood. Shane waited until Hayden had gotten back into the back seat, then looked at both of them as if expecting them to decide for him. After a moment, his attention settled entirely on Ilya.

Even before he spoke, he understood from the softness in those warm brown eyes what Shane meant. He was terrified that whatever lay inside that envelope might change their lives. And he wasn't wrong to be afraid. Ilya himself hadn't known the beta assistant had left such a note. But the scent of regret he had caught when he slipped out that door had been unmistakable. The woman had not wanted to hurt them.

Shane shook the envelope first, then felt along its surface, even lifted it to his nose before finally tearing it open. A single sheet of paper slid out. He read it in silence, and his expression changed instantly. The color rushed to his freckled cheeks, his pupils widened, and his brows shot upward.

Then he slipped his hand back into the envelope and pulled something else out.

This realization hit much harder. Because Shane knew exactly what it was. What it meant. Just as well as Ilya did.

His mouth parted slightly as his gaze moved from the small cross hanging from the chain to Ilya. A second later he held it out to him.

Ilya couldn't take his eyes off the gold chain resting in Shane's hand.

He didn't remember reaching. The chain was simply in his hand, and then it had always been in his hand, cool and impossibly light against his palm. He stared at it.

The cross was smaller than he remembered. Or his hands were bigger. Both, probably.

His mother had worn it every day. At the base of her throat, catching light on Sunday mornings, warm from her skin. He had not thought about Sunday mornings in a very long time.

He had left it behind.

Not forgotten; left. He had known exactly where it was when he went through that door. The small metal locker, third shelf, where they kept what they took from him when he arrived. But he had kept moving.

He told himself it was because there was no time. Because the door was open and every second mattered and a chain around his neck would catch on something, slow him down, get him killed.

He had told himself many things.

The metal bit into his palm.

She had gone back for it. After he left, she had opened that locker and taken it out and put it in an envelope and hidden it in a jacket lining and made sure it would find him.

He didn't know why that was the thing that undid him.

Beside him, Shane was very still. Not looking away. Not speaking.

Ilya's throat was tight in a way he hadn't felt in years.

Slowly, carefully, he put it on.

When the cold chain pressed against his skin, he felt a missing piece snap back into place. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

The city's overwhelming smells and sounds still assaulted his senses, yet this feeling—one he had thought lost forever—overpowered them all. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he saw long blonde hair, a figure long-limbed and gentle, soft eyes that had always looked at him like he was worth looking at. Ilya found himself smiling. Yes, he hadn't lost it. Somehow, they had found each other again. The chain. His mate. Both found. Both real. There was still much to reclaim, but this was a good step.

As soon as they returned to the safe house, Shane set the note on the table.

"Read it," he said. To Hayden, to the room.

The drive back had been quiet. His hands on the wheel, his eyes on the road, and underneath all of it; the note in his pocket, the image of Ilya's face when he saw the chain, the particular weight of things he hadn't said out loud yet.

He wanted to drop everything. He knew that much. Set down every single thing he was carrying and pull Ilya close and not move for a very long time.

He also recognized that necklace.

He had seen it every day, once. At every possible moment: undressing, dressing, showering, during sex, training, matches, mornings, nights. It had been as much a part of Ilya as his hands or his voice. Shane had never seen him take it off. Not once.

In his dreams, in the years after, it had always been there. A shimmer of gold against warm skin.

And someone had kept it for him.

Shane looked at the note on the table and waited for Hayden to finish reading.

"Don't trust anyone official. I'm sorry I couldn't do more," Hayden read aloud.

Shane crossed the room to where Ilya stood at the doorway and took his hand. During the drive back he had watched Ilya's free hand travel to the chain at his throat more than once, checking, confirming. Each time Shane had looked away before Ilya caught him.

Hayden set the note down. "What does this mean?" Shane could tell he also meant: *Is that all there is?*

"It means we can't trust the authorities." Shane stepped in front of his friend and placed both hands on the back of the chair.

"There isn't even a signature," Hayden pointed out.

"No."

"So we don't know who she is. No name, no way to reach her, no way to verify any of this."

"We know she helped Ilya get out," Shane said. "And we know she kept that." His eyes moved briefly to the cross at Ilya's throat. "That's not nothing."

Hayden looked at him for a moment. Then at Ilya. Then back.

"Okay," he said. The word carried more weight than it usually did; not agreement exactly, more like a decision to trust Shane's instincts even when his own were pulling in a different direction.

Shane found that oddly steadying. Hayden had always been like this. He pushed until he understood the shape of something, and then he stopped pushing.

Just then, a notification chimed on his phone. He unlocked the screen.

Found it, his mother had written. Sending now.

Below the message, a photo loaded slowly: white paper, dense text, a letterhead at the top.

Shane stared at it.

"Guys," he said quietly. "Come look at this."

While everyone stared at the screen in tense silence, the phone began to ring. Shane answered immediately and put it on speaker.

"Did it come through?" Yuna asked.

"Just now. We're looking at it." Shane's eyes moved across the letterhead. "Vantage Sports Technologies."

"That's the name on the contract, yes."

"Their website is still live," Hayden said, having already opened the laptop. "Equipment and performance technology. Clean. Professional."

"A very nice cover," Yuna said. The restraint in her voice was doing a lot of work.

Shane was already reading through the clauses. Dense, vague, the kind of language designed to mean everything and nothing at once. "These terms are almost deliberately unenforceable. No wonder you didn't sign."

"They were counting on people not reading carefully. Or not having anyone who could."

Beside him, Ilya had moved closer to the phone. He was looking at it with a particular focus; not following every word, Shane knew, but catching enough. Shane watched him from the corner of his eye.

"The clause on page two," Yuna continued. "International events. They specifically target those."

Shane found it. Read it twice.

Young athletes. High-performance environments. Extended evaluation periods.

"How many others," he said. It didn't come out as a question.

Ilya's jaw tightened.

"That's what I keep thinking," his mother said quietly.

Shane set the phone down for a moment. Not hanging up, just setting it down.

Vantage. He knew that name. Not from the contract, not from anything Ilya had told him. From somewhere older.

A banner. White and dark blue, corporate and clean, hung above a tunnel entrance at a tournament he couldn't immediately place. Then another. Rinkside, partially obscured by the boards. A logo on an equipment case in a hallway, the kind of hallway that existed in every arena he had ever played in.

They had been there. At every significant event, quiet and unremarkable and completely invisible because that was exactly what they had wanted to be.

He had skated past their logo hundreds of times. He had never once thought to look at it.

He picked the phone back up.

"I remember now." He looked at Ilya. "They were at every major tournament. Every one. I just never..."

He stopped.

Ilya was looking at him steadily.

"You couldn't have known," his mother said.

Shane didn't answer that. "Did you find anything else?"

There was a brief pause.

"Their listed operating countries. Shane." Another pause, shorter. "Take a guess."

"Russia," Shane said.

Ilya went very still.

"And Canada," Yuna added.

The room was quiet.

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya was looking at the phone.

"They were at both ends," Shane said.

"From the beginning," his mother replied.

For a moment, he couldn't hear anything except the blood pounding in his ears. His heart sped up; heat flushed through him all at once. After taking two deep breaths, he continued.

"We picked up the envelope from the P.O. box I mentioned. Inside was one of Ilya's personal belongings. And a note."

There was a short silence. Then his mother simply said, "I'm sorry, Ilya."

Ilya nodded, but then seemed to remember that she couldn't see him.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Shane let a beat pass before continuing. "The note was short. Just two lines." He picked it up from the table and read it aloud. "*Don't trust anyone official. I'm sorry I couldn't do more.*"

Another silence, longer this time.

"Don't trust anyone official," Yuna repeated slowly. Like she was turning it over.

"Yeah."

Hayden had been quiet through all of this, his eyes on his laptop screen. Now he looked up.

"Shane." His voice was careful in a way that meant he'd found something. "I pulled Ilya's public records. He was declared dead fourteen months after he disappeared."

The room went very still.

"Fourteen months," Shane said.

"For someone his age, his profile. No body, no confirmed cause of death." Hayden stopped. "This doesn't happen on its own. Someone pushed it through."

Over the speaker, his mother exhaled.

Shane looked at the note still in his hand.

Don't trust anyone official.

He hadn't needed convincing before. He needed it even less now.

It was David who broke the silence. He was listening to all of it without a word until now.

"We should go to the police," he said. Quietly, carefully, the way he said everything. "We have the contract. We have the records. We have Ilya. Surely that's enough to—"

"No."

The word came out harder than he intended. Harder than anything he'd said all day. He felt it leave him like something physical.

Hayden looked up. His mother went quiet on the line.

Shane was aware, distantly, that his hands had curled around the edge of the table. That his pulse had jumped in a way that had nothing to do with the conversation and everything to do with the last forty-eight hours and the thing building in his chest that he had not been dealing with.

He made himself breathe.

"Someone pushed through a death certificate in fourteen months," he said. His voice came out flat, controlled, which cost him more than it should have. "That's not a clerical error. That's a phone call to the right person. And whoever made that call is still working. Still reachable. Still protected." He paused. "We walk into a police station with this and we don't know who picks up the phone next."

Silence.

"Shane," his father said carefully.

"Dad. I know what you're trying to do." Something in his voice cracked, just slightly, at the edges. "But no."

Beside him, Ilya's hand found the back of his neck. Cool, steady, said nothing.

Shane closed his eyes for one second. Then he straightened.

"We do this ourselves," he said. "For now."

After Hayden left, the house felt different.

The tense silence from before, when every sound had seemed sharp and brittle, had been replaced by a quieter one that settled slowly into the space, filling the gaps between the furniture and softening the air. Shane sat on the couch, trying to focus on simple things. The feel of the fabric beneath him. The faint sound of cars passing outside.

Ilya came to sit beside him with a cup of coffee in his hand. Shane gave him a grateful smile. The simple gesture brought a few good memories with it.

Taking refuge in the warmth of the ceramic, he breathed in the bitter smell of the coffee. After a few sips, he turned his head slightly toward Ilya and studied him, tracing the lines of his distinctive features.

They did not speak for a while. Shane was not even sure there was anything left to say. Today had taken most of his words away.

Ilya's hand drifted to his throat again. The glint of the necklace caught the daylight reflecting from the window. It was an extremely small movement, almost unconscious. He was checking it. Making sure it was still there.

"Did she look like you?" Shane asked at last.

Ilya looked as if he understood what he meant. "Think so." He hesitated for a moment. "Same hair. Same eyes. More beautiful."

Shane smiled as he looked down. "I can imagine. Otherwise she wouldn't have had a son like you."

Ilya grimaced, but it did not seem to be Shane's words that caused it. Something else had crossed his mind.

Shane remembered a hotel room, years ago. Different words, but the same things underneath. He was glad the memory had come back when it was needed.

"So happy you found it," he said quietly. "Found her."

Ilya looked at him. The cross still in his palm.

Something passed between them that didn't need words.

Then Ilya said, "Did you wait?"

Shane turned it over for just a moment.

"Yeah," he said. "Not because I was sure. I didn't know anything. My head was a mess for a long time." He exhaled slowly. "But part of me knew. That it would never be anyone else."

Ilya's eyes changed. Just slightly. The warmth there was unmistakable.

"Me too," he said.

Two words. Eight long years inside them.

Shane set his coffee on the table. Ilya's scent suddenly filled every cell in his body, stealing the air from his lungs. He wanted to get up and open every window in the house, but he couldn't move. His pulse felt strange, too close to the surface. The adrenaline that had kept him upright for days was suddenly gone.

And whatever was happening would not stop.

His shoulders sagged. He tried to straighten them and failed.

Ilya seemed to notice even before he did. Shane caught the shift in him, the way he went still as if examining something. Without thinking, Shane drifted toward him, seeking the warmth, the clean scent, the comfort of him. The simple presence. He rested his forehead against Ilya's shoulder.

"Shane." That low, nasal voice again. Shane shivered.

"I'm fine," he murmured, the words barely louder than a soft, helpless whine.

Ilya's hand immediately closed around the back of his neck. The coolness of his fingers soothed the heat of Shane's skin just a little. The contact also stirred something deeper inside him. The crushing exhaustion that had filled his limbs moments ago dissolved into a pleasant haze spreading through his mind. He rubbed his face against his alpha's shoulder, then the side of his neck, smiling faintly to himself as he did.

"Easy," Ilya murmured.

For a moment Shane was surprised he even heard the word. But he did not stop. He was grateful for this wild, dizzy feeling replacing the fatigue that had seized his body moments ago.

He drew in another breath.

Probably a mistake.

Oakmoss. Leather. Spice. Strong enough now to drown out everything else.

He felt Ilya shift next to him. When Shane looked up, the alpha had taken his face between his hands and was studying him closely. Shane tried to meet his eyes, but his gaze kept slipping lower, to his throat, his mouth.

He wanted Ilya to do something. Or simply let him. His mind could not fully grasp what he wanted, but his body kept leaning toward him anyway. He tilted his head forward a little more and brushed his nose against his mate's.

Ilya gave a low sound in his throat and captured his mouth in a wet, sudden kiss.

Butterflies flooded Shane's stomach. He answered with the same hunger, parting his lips immediately and inviting Ilya's tongue inside. As the kiss deepened, he grabbed the front of Ilya's shirt and pulled him down. A moment later the alpha was fully on top of him.

The weight of him settled over Shane's body and drove away the darkness that had been pressing against his chest. Ilya's damp kisses moved to his jaw, his neck, every bit of skin the collar of his shirt left exposed. Then, before going any further, he returned to press gentler kisses to his temple, his eyes, the bridge of his nose, and finally his lips again.

Shane realized he was moaning.

He lifted his body toward him, trying to draw Ilya's weight even closer. But the alpha stopped him firmly.

When Shane began to whimper and whisper a quiet "Please," Ilya answered with a warning growl.

Ilya raised his hand slowly. Watched Shane's face. Then, with a deliberateness that made Shane's breath catch, pressed two fingers against his lips.

Shane took them instinctively.

The taste was faintly salty, warm. He closed his eyes as he drew them in, letting the simple motion soothe the restless energy humming through his body. He sucked gently, savoring it, grounding himself in the quiet rhythm of it.

For a moment it worked.

The pressure in his chest loosened. His breathing slowed. The haze in his head softened.

But then the need returned, stronger, sharper. He leaned forward, chasing more of the contact, trying to take without asking.

Ilya immediately pulled his fingers away.

"Omega," he said sharply.

The word cut through everything.

Shane stilled.

He hadn't heard it in years. Not like this, not with that particular weight behind it, that specific quality that meant both stop and I have you at the same time. His mind surfaced slowly, like something coming up through water.

Ilya's hands were on his face.

"Look at me," Ilya said.

Shane looked.

Those blue eyes, very close. Steady. Waiting.

The haze retreated.

Not all at once. In increments, the warmth pulling back to wherever it had come from, leaving him lighter and slightly embarrassed and very aware of how tightly he was still holding Ilya's shirt.

He loosened his fingers.

"Sorry," he said.

"Don't." Ilya's thumb moved across his cheekbone. Once. "Not sorry."

Shane exhaled.

They stayed like that for a moment, foreheads almost touching, Ilya's hands still framing his face, the room quiet around them.

Then Ilya's hand dropped to his chest. To the cross. His fingers closed around it.

The gesture was automatic. Shane had seen it a dozen times today. But something was different this time. The quality of the stillness that followed. He was still here. Still holding. Though the attention behind it had shifted somewhere.

He was still running his hand slowly down Shane's back. Still warm, still steady. But his eyes were somewhere else.

Not the window. Not the room.

Somewhere much further.

Shane felt himself growing quieter under the rhythm of it —the slow, automatic movement of Ilya's hand, the warmth of his chest— and understood, with a strange clarity, that Ilya was doing two things at once. Holding him here. And going somewhere else entirely.

The room was white.

Not the white of snow or paper or anything from the outside world. A different kind of white. Flat. Absolute. The kind of white that made it feel like color had simply been removed.

Ilya had stopped noticing it months ago.

He sat on the edge of a metal table while someone wrote something down nearby. He could hear the pen moving across the paper. Over time he had learned to follow sounds like that. The scratch of a pen. The steady hum of the ventilation. Footsteps passing in the hallway outside. He followed them the same way he used to track opponents on the ice. Automatically. Without thinking about it.

They had done that to him. He understood it now, at least in a distant sort of way. His hearing reaching farther than it used to. The way he could sense a room through scent before even stepping inside. Things they wanted to improve. Things they had taken apart and sharpened before giving them back to him like tools.

"Sensory readings are stable," someone said.

Not to him. They never spoke to him directly.

"Response is similar to the last session. Auditory perception continues to improve."

The pen kept moving.

Ilya stared at the wall.

The door opened.

He caught the scent before he heard the footsteps. The wrong one. That particular scent always made something in his chest tighten, though he had stopped trying to measure how long it had been happening. His body reacted before his mind did, every single time.

The doctor.

Ilya kept his eyes forward.

"Subject A-2841," the doctor said in an even, detached voice. "Turn."

Ilya turned.

The examination was quick, like it always was. Hands moved across his back, pressing lightly, checking things. The doctor spoke quietly to the person taking notes. Ilya focused on the wall in front of him. He kept his breathing steady and ignored the instinct telling him to react to the touch.

"Everything looks as expected. Scarring matches previous observations."

The pen scratched across the paper again.

Ilya had stopped reacting to phrases like that a long time ago. Matches previous observations. That was what he was now. A collection of records and measurements. Something that either improved or stayed the same.

The hands left his back.

He turned forward again without being told.

"How is the aggression control going?" someone asked.

"Partially successful. The alpha instinct still reacts strongly to physical contact. We will adjust things next time."

They talked about him the way people talked about equipment. Not cruelly. Cruelty would have required caring. It was simply the most efficient way to speak, and efficiency was the only thing that mattered in this room.

Ilya had decided early on that he preferred it this way.

The doctor left.

The wrong scent slowly faded.

The tightness in Ilya's chest eased.

Behind him, the two technicians continued writing. One of them pulled something up on a screen. The other leaned closer to look.

"Natural dominance signs are still extremely high," the first one said. "Consistent with reports from the other facilities."

"His body is recovering faster than expected too. Nearly forty percent faster than the original baseline."

"And his sense of smell?"

"Improving a lot. Better than any subject before him."

There was a pause. Papers shifting.

"So why are we not further along?"

"The bond," the other one said simply. "It interferes with everything. Aggression control, instinct responses, memory work. Every time we try to refine something, the bond gets in the way. As long as it exists, we cannot get clean results."

"And if we remove it?"

"Then we get what we came for. An alpha with stronger senses, controlled aggression, and no emotional ties to interfere." Then: "A prototype."

The first technician wrote something down.

Ilya stared at the wall.

He had heard every word.

A prototype. That was what they wanted. Not Ilya Rozanov. Not even Subject A-2841. Just the first version of something they planned to recreate. An alpha stripped of everything that made him difficult to control and improved in every way that made him useful.

And Shane was the problem.

The one thing standing between them and their perfect results.

Ilya kept his face still.

He was good at that now.

He noticed the woman standing near the door. She had been there for several minutes, holding a tray and waiting for the examination to end. She was not one of the usual staff. He had noticed her three days ago. Different energy. Different way of moving through the space. The others moved like the room belonged to them.

She moved like she was deciding something.

For a brief moment their eyes met.

She looked away first. Set the tray down. Left without saying anything.

Ilya remembered it.

The door closed.

He sat quietly on the edge of the metal table and waited for whatever would happen next, the same way he always waited. And while he waited, he did what he always did when they left him alone.

He went back.

Not far. Just enough.

A storage room. Cold air and the smell of rubber. The sound of skates moving across the ice outside the door.

He had been rebuilding the memory for months, piece by piece, the way someone rebuilds something they are afraid of losing. The angle of light through the small window in the door. The number on the jersey. The moment Shane had turned to leave, then stopped and leaned in to press a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth. One hand resting against the door. Calm. Unhurried. As if he had all the time in the world.

He had been smiling before he reached the door.

Ilya held on to that.

They had tried to take it away. Not violently. Carefully. Something in the injections made recent memories harder to hold on to. They slipped away more easily. Details blurred. Edges

softened.

Ilya noticed it happening.

So he started working harder.

Every night, or whatever counted as night in this place, he went through the memory again. The storage room. The jersey number. The kiss. The smile. He held each part carefully, like something fragile that could break if he dropped it.

He had once heard one of them say it.

"Bond memories are always the last to disappear." And after a while: "But they do disappear eventually."

Ilya had listened to that and made a decision.

No.

It was not a dramatic choice. Not angry. Just final.

No.

The door opened again.

He straightened.

The man who walked in was not the doctor and not one of the regular technicians. The room changed slightly when he entered. The two technicians shifted almost without thinking, the way people do around someone whose authority they recognize immediately.

Ilya watched him.

The man walked to the center of the room and looked at the monitors on the wall before speaking.

"Where are we with the bond suppression?"

"Some progress," one of the technicians replied. "But the subject still resists memory weakening. His alpha instincts remain strongly connected to the bond."

The man was quiet for a moment.

"The bond is the main problem," he said. "As long as it remains, the results are unreliable. The omega is the other half of the equation." A short pause. "We will need him eventually."

Then he looked directly at Ilya.

"I hear he is an exceptionally healthy omega," he continued, his voice light, almost conversational. "Strong. Talented. Honestly, he sounds like an excellent candidate."

The anger arrived before the thought did.

Ilya's lips pulled back. The sound that came out of his chest was not something he decided to make.

He was already moving when he stopped himself.

One step. Just one. But the muscles in his arms were shaking with the effort of holding the rest back, his hands fisted so tight he felt his knuckles strain. The snarl didn't fade. He couldn't make it.

The man hadn't moved.

He was still smiling. Unhurried. Like he had expected exactly this and found it useful.

"Good," he said quietly. To the technicians, not to Ilya. "Note the bond-protective response. Strongest we've recorded."

He turned and walked out.

The door closed.

Ilya stood in the middle of the room and breathed.

His hands were still shaking.

The man left.

The room returned to its usual sounds. Pen on paper. Ventilation humming. Footsteps passing in the hallway.

Ilya sat perfectly still.

They wanted Shane. He had suspected it before. Now he knew. He returned to the memory again.

The storage room. The jersey number. The slant of light. The kiss. The smile before the door.

He held on to it.

He was not going to forget.

And Shane was never going to end up here.

One way or another.

Welcome back to the longest update yet! I'm hyped to finally share this chapter with you. I also wanted to take a second to say a massive thank you for all the amazing comments, the kudos, and for sharing your excitement with me. You have no idea how much your support fuels my writing! ❤️

I'm writing this story exactly how I'd love to read it: a steady slow-burn, where the truth unfolds bit by bit, with a dash of spice on top. I really hope you're enjoying the ride as much as I am!

That was an omega drop which is similar to sub drop, yep. I read somewhere that the physical weight of another person can help soothe anxiety, and I really tried to capture that grounding sensation in the scene where they're together.

What did you think of the reveals in this chapter? Did the new info feel satisfying, or is the mystery just getting frustratingly deep? Let me know. 😈

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Shane sat at the table, watching the alpha who had been feral only a few days ago move through a set of exercises with surprising ease. It was a strange sight. Since Ilya had come back to him, Shane had not seen him like this. There was something steady and familiar in the rhythm of it, something that looked almost like calm.

He had asked once. Ilya had said he used to do this every day. Shane hadn't asked anything else after that. He understood too well what it meant to cling to a routine just to keep your mind steady. Sometimes a small, repeated action was the only thing holding everything else in place. So he left him to it.

He allowed himself a moment to enjoy the view.

His mate was shirtless, muscles tightening and releasing with every sit-up. Despite the injuries scattered across his body and the uneven haircut, the alpha was still painfully attractive; strength showing in every movement, effortless and controlled.

Shane forced his eyes back to the screen after a moment. A part of him could easily think of far more entertaining ways to spend their time together, and the thought lingered just long enough to make the corner of his mouth twitch. He made himself focus on the laptop in front of him instead. The quiet sound of Ilya moving behind him kept pulling at his concentration anyway.

On one tab of the screen, the website of Vantage Sports Technologies was open. On another, every reliable document he had managed to find about Ilya was spread across the page.

For the past half hour he had been combing through every site and every file he could locate, reading carefully and cross-checking anything that looked even slightly useful. By now he had gone through more sources than he could easily count.

In the end, he had managed to come to a few conclusions.

First, while searching Ilya's name, he had come across a photograph on an old sports archive site that he had never seen before. In it, Ilya stood beside the famous goaltender Sergei Vetrov, and next to them was a girl about their age. Curly hair, sharp features, the kind of face that photographed well. The three of them were standing close together, posing in a way that suggested an easy familiarity.

According to the caption, the girl was Sergei Vetrov's daughter, Svetlana Vetrova.

Shane opened a new tab and typed the girl's name into the search engine. Among the thousands of results that appeared, one of them led to Svetlana's Instagram profile.

When he opened it, he found a stream of carefully curated photos of the young woman. Perfect lighting, polished poses, the kind of pictures meant to be seen. And then, among them, he spotted another face he recognized.

His heart quickened as he clicked on the image. Ilya looked much younger in this photo, standing beside Svetlana and looking directly at the camera with a bright, almost boyish smile. Shane had never seen that particular smile before. Open. Unguarded. The kind that didn't know yet what it would eventually cost.

He kept scrolling.

There were more. A series of them, spread across years, always posted on the same date. In one, Ilya was alone, caught mid-laugh, head tilted back, someone's hand visible at the edge of the frame. In another he was younger still, barely recognizable, standing on a frozen lake with his skates still on. A birthday cake in one hand. In the last one he was older, closer to the age Shane remembered, and he wasn't smiling anymore, just looking at the camera with that particular stillness Shane knew too well.

The caption under each post was short. Just a date, and a single line in Russian.

Shane put it into the translator: *Still thinking of you. Miss you every day.*

He set the laptop down on the table. Then he picked it up again.

A sharp pain stabbed through his chest and caught him off guard.

Every year, on Ilya's birthday, Svetlana posted something for him. A quiet remembrance that had continued long after the world had moved on. There were photos of them as children. Others from their teenage years. Moments frozen from a life that had existed long before everything fell apart.

He told himself it was grief. For Ilya, for the years, for everything those photographs represented. That was the reasonable explanation and he was a reasonable person.

He scrolled back to the one where Ilya was laughing.

He had seen Ilya laugh before. At the camp, in the weeks they had spent close enough to let their guards down, there had been moments. He knew that laugh. But not like this; not this open, not this unaware of being watched, not this young and unguarded and completely unbothered by the world. This version of Ilya had existed long before Shane ever knew him. Svetlana had seen it. She had seen it many times, apparently, and kept every single one.

Shane closed the tab.

He opened it again almost immediately, which told him something about himself that he didn't particularly want to know.

He became aware, after a moment, that the room had gone quiet. The steady rhythm of movement behind him had stopped.

Shane didn't look up. He kept his eyes on the screen and made himself breathe evenly, the way he had learned to do in the years when keeping still was the only thing he could control.

He could feel Ilya watching him.

He didn't know how long it had been going on. Long enough, probably. Ilya had always been able to read a room through scent before anything else, and whatever Shane's was doing right now, it clearly hadn't gone unnoticed. He waited for a question that didn't come. After a moment, the quiet sound of movement resumed behind him.

Shane looked at the minimized tab.

He thought about messaging her.

She was in America. She had resources, connections. Sergei Vetrov's daughter wouldn't lack for either. And she clearly hadn't forgotten. If anyone outside this room might want to help, it was her.

Those were the reasonable arguments. He ran through them carefully.

The unreasonable one sat underneath all of them, quieter and considerably more honest: he wasn't sure he wanted to know what she would say when she found out Ilya was alive. What she would ask. Whether Ilya would want to answer.

He was aware this was not his finest moment.

He pulled the Vantage documents back up and kept reading.

The research stirred something else in him. Something he had never quite dared to look into before. Before he could stop himself, he was searching the surname Rozanov across social media platforms. Hundreds of results appeared, as expected. But this time he knew exactly what he was looking for.

In the documents Hayden had pulled, Shane had seen the names of Ilya's father and older brother. There was nothing on the father: retired long ago, apparently disappeared from public life afterward. The same was not true for the brother.

Years ago Ilya had mentioned that Alexei Rozanov was a police officer. But judging by the accounts Shane was now looking through, he had long since moved into other fields. There were a few photos of him. Not many. Enough. He was married with a daughter, though there were no pictures of them on his personal pages. Most of what he posted showed Alexei alone, standing in front of scenic backdrops with a smug confidence that made Shane's jaw tighten before he'd even registered why.

Then one image stopped him entirely.

A corporate event. Formal, polished, the kind of photograph taken because someone decided it should exist. Alexei stood among a group of suited men, posing for the camera with that same expression. And in the background, barely visible unless you were looking carefully

enough, was a logo. Shane had seen it on equipment cases, on banners above tunnel entrances, on the contract his mother had photographed and sent to his phone.

Vantage Sports Technologies.

The anger came so fast it felt physical. He became aware that his teeth were clenched, that his hands had gone tight around the laptop, that the warmth that had been building under his skin all morning had shifted into something else entirely; sharper, colder, with nowhere to go.

He sat with it for a moment.

Then he looked at the date on the photograph.

After Ilya disappeared. Long after.

Just then he appeared behind him, all warmth and solid presence. He hummed something low under his breath and pressed a kiss into Shane's hair, then another to the back of his neck, but Shane was shaking too much to understand what he was saying. Ilya must have realized something was wrong from the change in his scent and the tension in his body, because he leaned forward and looked at the laptop screen. His eyes stayed there for a long moment. The silence that followed stretched long and painful.

Shane reached back and grabbed whatever he could reach of him, his hand closing around Ilya's waist, his side, anything solid under his fingers. He hated this frozen stillness, hated the way Ilya sometimes locked up like this. Only after several long minutes did the alpha finally let out a slow breath, heavy with frustration.

"So you knew," Shane said, surprised by how steady his own voice sounded.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He straightened slowly, eyes still on the screen, the line of his shoulders pulled tight. When he finally spoke, his voice was very quiet. "Not everything."

Shane waited.

"In the beginning..." Ilya stopped. Started again, slower, reaching for words that weren't quite there. "They came to me. Said it was research. Performance. Legal." His jaw tightened. "I said yes. For family. For..." He didn't finish that sentence. "I thought... small thing. Few tests. Then done."

Shane didn't say anything.

"Alexei knew," Ilya continued. His hands had dropped to his sides, loose, like he didn't know what to do with them. "He did not know what. Not at first." He exhaled slowly. "When things got bad, I called. Once." His eyes finally moved from the screen. He looked at the wall instead, jaw working. "He did not answer."

Shane let go of his waist and closed the laptop with a thud.

He stared at it for a moment. At the logo he could no longer see but couldn't stop seeing. At Alexei's face, that smug expression, the date underneath the photograph.

I want to fucking kill him.

The thought arrived so cleanly, so completely without hesitation, that it surprised him. Not a figure of speech. Just a fact, sitting in his chest alongside the warmth and the exhaustion and eight years of everything he hadn't been allowed to be angry about until right now.

He didn't say it out loud.

For a while he did not move from his seat. When he finally thought he had calmed down enough, he turned to face Ilya. But a new awareness flared up like a spark catching dry wood. All day, even for the past few days, something had been prickling across his skin, dragging every emotion closer to the surface than it should have been.

Ilya was watching him with sharp, deliberate attention. As if he could sense the storm raging inside Shane, could feel that something was wrong, but did not understand the real reason behind it.

"When are you going to stop hiding things from me?" Shane asked. His voice trembled slightly. "I thought you forgot like I did. That you didn't know, couldn't explain it. But now it feels like you've been keeping things from me on purpose."

When Ilya chose silence again, Shane's irritation flared hotter.

"We've been living in each other's pockets for days," he continued. "I've been grateful for every piece of information I managed to pull out of you. And now I find out you've been refusing to tell me things that could actually help us."

"Shane—"

"Don't." The word came out sharper than he intended.

He stopped. His skin felt too hot. He was aware of it, the flush moving up his neck, the way his own scent had shifted in the last few minutes in ways he couldn't control. He made himself breathe.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Wanted to protect—"

That word.

Shane had heard it before. Not from this Ilya, not in this house, but in a corridor years ago after a practice he had spent a long time not thinking about.

It wasn't the first time.

Shane remembered the practice. Third week of camp, maybe the fourth. One of Ilya's teammates had said something during a drill. Shane hadn't caught all of it, just enough, just the word omega dropped like it meant lesser, like it was an explanation for something. The kind of thing people said without thinking, or while thinking very carefully.

He hadn't needed anyone to handle it for him. But Ilya had already moved.

It wasn't even a dirty hit, technically. Just precise. Just enough to make the point without drawing a whistle. The kind of thing you had to know what you were looking for to see. Shane had known what he was looking for.

Afterward, when the ice had cleared and the coaches had moved on and they were briefly, improbably alone in the corridor outside the locker rooms, Ilya had said: "I protected."

Not *I protected you*. Just: *I protected*. Like it was complete.

"I noticed," Shane had said.

"Good."

"I didn't need you to."

Ilya had looked at him. That look... not the mischievous one, not yet. The other one. Steady and very direct and slightly unnerving in the way that all of Ilya's direct attention was unnerving.

"He said—"

"I know what he said."

"Then—"

"I don't need you deciding when I need help," Shane had continued, quieter now but no less firm. "You do that on the ice and suddenly everyone is watching. And then it becomes a whole thing."

Ilya had watched him. Steady. Unapologetic.

Then: "Let them look."

Shane had stared at him. "You don't get it."

"Explain."

Shane had huffed out a breath.

"I don't want to be your cause," he had said. "Or your fight. I'm here to play."

"*Moya dusha*." And there it was, finally, the glint but softer than usual, underneath something more serious. "He will not say it again."

Shane had wanted to argue. He had the arguments ready, good ones, about autonomy and visibility and the particular exhaustion of being an omega in a sport that didn't quite know what to do with him.

He had looked at Ilya's eyes instead.

There was something there he hadn't had a name for yet. Something that had been running underneath every interaction for weeks and that he had been carefully not looking at directly. He had looked at it now, just for a second.

He had turned and walked away.

He hadn't said thank you. He also hadn't said don't do it again. Ilya had apparently taken that as permission. He hadn't been wrong.

He came back to the present.

"Protect me." Shane let out a short, humorless breath. "From what, exactly? From the truth? From being useful?" He stopped. Pressed his fingers against his eyes for a moment. He knew, somewhere underneath all of it, that this wasn't entirely fair. That Ilya had come back broken and was still putting himself back together, that the instinct to shield wasn't cruelty, that none of this was simple.

He knew all of that.

He couldn't stop.

"I'm already in this," he said. "I've been in this since the moment you showed up at my door. There is no version of this where keeping me in the dark keeps me safe. There is no safe, Ilya. Not anymore." His voice dropped. "And I needed to know. I needed—"

He stopped.

Something was making it worse and he couldn't name it. A low persistent warmth that had been building for days, sitting just beneath his anger and tangling with it until he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. His eyes were stinging. He was furious about that too.

"I'm sorry," he said finally. Quiet. "I know why you did it. I know that's not... I know." He looked at the floor. "But don't do it again."

Ilya moved to sit beside him.

He didn't say anything. He never did, not when words ran out. He just moved, steady and certain, the way he always did when Shane was coming apart at the seams. His hand found Shane's neck, warm and familiar.

Shane flinched away.

It surprised them both.

He felt it the moment it happened; the way Ilya's hand stilled in the air between them. Something crossed his face, confusion, maybe frustration, and then he said something under his breath. Low and fast, Russian, gone before Shane could catch even the shape of it. Shane's skin was still prickling where he hadn't even been touched, every nerve ending too close to the surface, too aware.

"Sorry," Shane said. He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. Not hurt, something more careful than that. His eyes moved over Shane's face, slow and deliberate, the way they did when he was reading something. Then lower, just briefly. Shane watched him inhale.

He looked away first.

Ilya said nothing. But he didn't move away either. He stayed where he was, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him. Then he stood, crossed to the window, and stood there with one hand resting at his throat where the cross sat, watching the street.

Shane turned to the laptop.

Svetlana's profile was still open.

He thought about it for exactly three seconds. Then he started typing. He hit send before he could talk himself out of it.

The argument had burned itself out sometime around midnight, the way fires do when there's nothing left to feed them. Not resolved. Just exhausted.

They had ended up on the couch without quite deciding to. Shane didn't remember how it happened. One moment he had been standing at the window where Ilya had been standing earlier, looking at the same street, and the next they were here, lying facing each other in the near-dark, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth coming off him but not touching. The lamp in the corner had been left on. Neither of them had gotten up to turn it off.

The house was very quiet.

Shane watched Ilya's face in the low light. The line of his jaw. His eyes were open. He hadn't slept either.

They hadn't spoken in a long time.

It wasn't uncomfortable, exactly. It was the particular silence of two people who have said too much and not enough, and are waiting, without admitting it, for the other one to go first.

Ilya went first.

"They tried to take you. From me," he said. Not looking at Shane. Looking at some point past his shoulder, the way he did when the words were costing him something. "That was the... point."

Shane didn't move.

"Not performance." A pause. "Not, um, data." Another pause, longer. His jaw worked. "Bond. They wanted... how it works. How to..." He stopped. His hand moved slightly, fingers curling against the cushion. "Break it."

Shane waited.

"Alpha without omega." Ilya's voice had dropped to something almost below hearing. "What happens. How long. How to... make it faster."

The room felt very still.

Shane understood, slowly, what he was being told. Not just what Apex was. What he was. What he had always been in this, from the very beginning, without knowing it.

"I was the variable," he said.

Ilya looked at him. "Yes."

"Without me the data was incomplete."

"Yes." Something moved through his expression. "They knew. About the bond. From the beginning." His fingers had gone tight against the cushion. "Someone told. I did not know. I thought... only me. Small thing."

He stopped there. Shane didn't push.

He understood the rest without being told. Why Ilya had said nothing. Why he had kept Shane at a distance, kept him in the dark, kept him out of every conversation that mattered. Not cruelty. Not control. Something Shane recognized, even now, even angry: the particular logic of someone who believes that if they can just keep the right people from knowing you exist, nothing can touch you.

It hadn't worked. It had never been going to work. But Shane understood why he had tried.

After a long moment Ilya continued. "The doctor."

Shane just looked at him.

"Wrong." Just the one word, sitting there. "Alpha. Always wrong. Others... afraid, a little. Him, no." His eyes had gone somewhere Shane couldn't follow. "Watching. Always. Writing things... not about body."

"About the bond."

Ilya said nothing. Which was its own answer.

"Did I—" Shane stopped. Started again, quieter. "Have I told you how glad I am? That you found me?" His voice had dropped to something he almost didn't recognize. "That you lasted?"

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

"Mate," he said finally. Simply. "They wanted to break it. Could not." He waited a little. "I did not break because... you were there. In my head. Every time they..." He stopped again.

His jaw tightened. "You held. So I held."

The lamp in the corner cast a thin yellow light across the room. Outside, the city moved on without them.

You held. So I held.

Shane's eyes were stinging. He was aware of it the way he had been aware of everything today; too close to the surface, too little distance between what he felt and what showed on his face. He didn't look away. He didn't try to manage it.

Ilya was watching him. He didn't say anything. He never did. He just reached out, very slowly, and tucked a strand of hair back from Shane's forehead. One careful movement. Like something he had been wanting to do for a long time and had finally decided he was allowed.

Shane exhaled.

Then he reached out and covered Ilya's hand with his own. Ilya went very still. Then, slowly, he turned his hand over and held it properly.

They stayed like that for a while. The lamp threw its thin yellow light across the room. Outside, the city moved on without them.

Eventually, Shane reached for his laptop.

The doctor's name took him forty minutes to find.

Not because it was hidden because it wasn't. That was the thing about people like this. They didn't hide. They published. They presented at conferences, sat on panels, wrote papers with careful, technical language that said everything and nothing at the same time. Performance optimization in elite athletes. Neurological response under controlled stress conditions. The psychobiology of pair bonding in high-performance environments.

Shane read the abstracts with his jaw clenched.

The name was Renner. No first name on most of the publications, just the initial: D. Renner. Affiliated with three different institutions over twelve years, none of them for very long. A visiting researcher here, a consulting position there. The kind of CV that looked impressive until you noticed the pattern: always moving, always attached to someone else's infrastructure, never building anything of his own.

Always watching. Writing things not about the body.

Shane opened another tab.

It took him another twenty minutes to find the foundation. It wasn't called anything obvious. A name that sounded like old money and older intentions, something with the word "advancement" in it, something with a crest. The kind of organization that sponsored youth hockey tournaments and university research chairs and had a very tasteful website with very little actual information on it.

Renner's name appeared once, in a footnote of a grant acknowledgment from four years ago.

Shane followed the foundation.

The board of trustees was six names long. Four of them were exactly what they looked like; lawyers, financiers, the kind of men whose money came from places no one looked at too closely. The fifth was a name Shane didn't recognize.

The sixth stopped him.

He had seen that face before. Not recently. Years ago, in the particular way you see someone when you aren't looking for them: background noise, peripheral, the kind of presence that registers without meaning to. A box seat at a game. A handshake on the ice after a playoff win, the cameras catching it, everyone smiling. The kind of man who showed up at the right moments and was photographed looking generous.

Shane stared at the screen for a long time.

He closed the laptop. Shane sat in the thin yellow light of the lamp and did not move for a while.

He had a name now. He had a chain: Renner to the foundation, the foundation to the man in the box seat, the man in the box seat to Vantage, Vantage to the facility, the facility to everything else. It was not proof. It was not anywhere close to proof.

But it was a shape. And shapes, in his experience, had a way of becoming something you could use.

Svetlana's reply was waiting for him the next day.

He read it once. Then again.

Is he really alive?

Shane set his phone down. Across the room, Ilya stood at the window, one hand resting at his throat where the cross sat, watching the street.

Shane looked at him for a long moment.

He picked the phone up twice more before he actually typed anything. Each time he put it back down. The light in the room shifted as the afternoon wore on, the shadows lengthening across the floor, and still the reply sat unfinished.

By the time he finally typed —*Yes. He's alive. I'll explain everything*— and hit send, the street outside had gone dark.

It was stupid. Probably one of the stupidest feelings he had ever had. There was no logic to it at all. He had bonded eight years ago, had spent those eight years instinctively waiting for the mate he believed was dead, and in the end he had found him again. Jealousy made no sense

in a situation like that. Why would he be jealous when every instinct in his body was already trying to pull Ilya closer, to mark and be marked, to close every distance that still existed between them?

But the ache of the years they had not been able to spend together, and the feeling that had been taking hold of every part of him for the past few days, pushed past reason.

He became aware of it slowly. The particular quality of silence that meant Ilya had stopped watching the street. He was looking at Shane. Not at the street, not at the cross. At Shane's face, that particular quality of attention that meant something had shifted in the air and he was reading it. His eyes moved once to the phone, then back up.

Something moved through his expression. Not quite surprise. The shadow of recognition.

Shane said nothing.

Ilya crossed the room.

Shane watched the phone screen until the lock icon appeared. The silence in the house felt heavy. He had just invited Svetlana into their lives, a choice that felt like a betrayal of the fragile peace they had built. He stood up, needing to move, needing to put distance between himself and the phone.

He walked toward the kitchen, his steps heavy and slightly off-balance. His skin felt too tight, a dull heat radiating from his lower back, and the air around him had begun to carry a different weight. He didn't name it. He didn't want to.

He reached the kitchen and gripped the edge of the counter, trying to ground himself.

He didn't hear Ilya move. He only felt the shift in the room. The air grew dense with the scent of oakmoss and leather, and suddenly the space behind him was occupied.

Ilya was there. Radiating a heat that felt physical, a wall of muscle and suppressed instinct.

Shane turned, his heart hammering, but Ilya didn't let him retreat. He stepped into his space, forcing Shane's spine against the hard edge of the counter. He leaned in, pressing his face into the side of Shane's neck, inhaling with a sharp and deliberate sound.

"Who," Ilya said.

Shane's breath hitched. "What?"

"Smell it." Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him. "Sharp. Guilt. Not fear." His hand came up, cupping Shane's jaw, his calloused thumb dragging slowly across Shane's lower lip. His pupils were blown wide, the blue of his eyes almost gone. "Who?"

Shane went still.

The way Ilya looked at him made it impossible to think of a clever lie. His other hand pressed flat against Shane's stomach, feeling the way the muscles jumped under his touch. Heavy and

possessive and completely immovable.

"Ilya, please," Shane whispered.

"Tell me."

That voice. That particular quality of patience, the absolute certainty underneath it that Shane would get there, that he always did, that Ilya had never once doubted it.

Ilya was watching him from inches away, hand still at his jaw, pupils still blown, waiting with that same patience that had no bottom to it. But something in his expression had shifted; the hunting edge still there, but underneath it something quieter. Like he knew, already, that Shane was almost there.

When Shane shook his head, Ilya tried a different tactic.

Shane didn't fully understand why he was being so stubborn. But he forced himself to look up.

And there it was. That familiar, mischievous glint.

His breath caught.

"Shaaane." He was both the rugged alpha who had once appeared at his door and the mate he had become. Somehow that combination felt far more dangerous. "Don't be cruel."

Shane's eyes widened.

Eight years ago, Ilya had used those exact words while trying to coax something out of him. In a cold storage room that smelled like rubber and ice, Shane's back against the door, Ilya watching him with that particular patience.

"I still can't believe how much you remember," Shane murmured, half to himself. His own mind had erased things and was only now piecing them back together. The fact that Ilya had held onto so much despite everything stung more than he expected. It made him feel as if he had wronged him somehow.

"I held them," Ilya said. His hands came up, catching Shane's face gently when it started to drop. Lifting it. "When they tried." His thumbs moved across Shane's cheekbones, very slow. "I protected them."

Shane looked at him.

He didn't say anything for a moment. Couldn't. Something had shifted in his chest, not breaking exactly, but giving way, the way ice gives way in spring, slowly and then all at once. Eight years. Ilya had spent eight years in a room holding onto a storage room, a jersey number, a laugh, and Shane had spent those same eight years convinced he was alone in his grief.

He hadn't been.

He had never been.

"Svetlana," he gasped at last. The word came out before he'd decided to say it, loose and unguarded, his thoughts too scattered to catch it in time. "Sergei Vetrov's daughter. I... she knew you. I messaged her. About... about you."

Ilya went very still.

Shane watched it happen; the way something moved through his face. Not just surprise. Recognition. His jaw tightened, a muscle flickering at the edge of it.

He knew that name.

Then Ilya buried his teeth in the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder. Not tearing, but the pressure was punishing, a sharp reminder of the power he was barely holding back.

Shane let out a sound he hadn't planned on making. His fingers dug into the muscle of Ilya's back, pulling him closer without deciding to.

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at the mark he had left. His tongue flicked out once.

Something in his expression changed.

The darkness was still there. But underneath it, something else. Quieter. The particular look of a man who had spent years convincing himself he would never see this face again and was still, every day, slightly stunned to be wrong.

"Sweet," he said quietly. His thumb moved across Shane's jaw. "My mate."

Shane's heart skipped a beat.

"You did it. For me," he said. Not an accusation. Just the fact of it.

Shane looked up at him and swallowed. "She can help."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. At the mark on his neck. At his face.

"Mine," he said. Low, certain. Not a warning. Not a claim. Something closer to: *I know what you are. I know what you do.*

Shane didn't just lean against the counter anymore; he scrambled up onto it, his legs instinctively locking around Ilya's waist. He was burning up, the heat in his core turning from a low hum to a frantic, clawing need. He buried his face in the crook of Ilya's neck, his own scent turning cloyingly sweet, thick with the pheromones of a body that had stopped trying to hide its state.

Ilya caught his thighs, his grip bruising and absolute. He dragged Shane closer until there was no space left between them. The friction was unbearable, electric, and Shane let out a jagged, needy sound that echoed off the kitchen walls. Ilya's hand moved to the nape of Shane's neck,

his fingers tangling in his hair, forcing his head back to expose the pulse point that was fluttering like a trapped bird.

Ilya leaned in, his eyes blown out and dark. He didn't kiss Shane. He trailed his lips along his jaw, his breath hot and ragged against Shane's skin. He was savoring his scent, feeding on the way Shane's body was coming apart for him.

Then, the mood in the room snapped.

Ilya went rigid. His head snapped toward the wall facing the backyard. He didn't just hear something; he felt the air shift. His nostrils flared, and he pulled back, his eyes narrowing to slits as he tasted the wind drifting in from the slightly cracked window.

His face hardened. The raw, sexual hunger in his eyes was instantly replaced by the cold, calculated focus of a predator who had just spotted an intruder on his territory.

He didn't hesitate. He pulled Shane's legs from his waist and set him down on the counter with a jarring suddenness that left Shane gasping.

He turned toward the back door. His movements had shifted, losing the steady rhythm of the morning exercises, something older and more deliberate underneath now. He moved on the balls of his feet, shoulders rolling with a fluid grace that didn't belong in a house. He looked like something that had spent years in a cage and finally realized the door was gone.

"Stay," Ilya growled. His voice was no longer soft. It was a command.

"Ilya—" Shane started. His voice came out wrong, too thin, not at all what he intended.

Ilya was already at the door.

"You don't..." Shane slid off the counter. His legs held, barely. "No, you can't just..."

Ilya turned. One look. That look.

Shane stopped.

Not because of the command. Not entirely. Because of what was underneath it, that raw, focused certainty that meant Ilya had already calculated every variable and made his decision and nothing Shane said in the next thirty seconds was going to change it.

He hated that he recognized it. He hated more that it worked.

"Five minutes," Ilya said. His eyes moved to Shane's throat, to the mark there, then back up. Something passed through his expression. "Lock the door."

Shane opened his mouth.

"Please," Ilya added.

The door closed. Shane took two steps toward it. Then it hit him.

Not gradually. Not the slow build he had been half-ignoring for days. This was something else entirely, a wave that started low in his abdomen and moved outward all at once, a cramp so sudden and so vicious that it folded him in half. He caught the counter with both hands. Barely. His knees had stopped working.

He hadn't felt this in years. He had made sure of it. The suppressants, then after... after, there had been nothing to suppress. Heat required a trigger. Heat required a body that believed, on some fundamental level, that there was someone worth burning for.

Apparently his body had updated its position on that.

He breathed through it. In. Out. The cramp ebbed slightly, enough that he could straighten, enough that he could think in something other than white.

Outside, silence. Ilya moved like he had been built for it.

Shane looked at the door. Looked at his own hands on the counter edge, gripping so hard his knuckles had gone pale. His skin was soaked. The air around him had turned thick and sweet in a way that would have embarrassed him if he had the capacity to be embarrassed right now.

He had not felt this since before. Since that first time, young and completely unprepared, Ilya's hands in his hair, Ilya's voice very low saying... but even then this had not come. Even then his body had not done this.

Another wave.

Shane's forehead dropped to the cabinet door in front of him. He made a sound he did not plan to make.

He wanted to be furious about all of this. He was furious about all of this.

He locked the door.

Then he slid down it until he was sitting on the floor, back against the wood, and waited.

Ilya paused for a moment on the narrow back step, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The yard was small. A strip of dried grass, a low fence, and the narrow alley beyond it. The river lay three blocks away. The city breathed around him, a low and constant hum made of traffic, distant voices, and the particular scent of a place that never truly fell asleep.

He catalogued it automatically. Habit.

Exhaust fumes. Damp pavement. Food left to cool two houses down. A cat somewhere along the fence line. And beneath it all, faint but steady, the river.

Then he caught it.

He went perfectly still.

The scent was extremely faint. Most people would have missed it entirely. But his nose had been sharpened far beyond anything natural, far beyond what an ordinary life would ever require. Faint did not mean hidden. The familiarity of it did not ease his chest. It tightened it. Beneath the human smell lay a sterile undertone. Clinical. The particular scent of a body that had been handled, monitored, and optimized.

The facility.

Not a memory. The present.

He stepped down from the porch without making a sound.

He moved along the fence line, staying low and close to the shadows. The evening darkness and the thin bite of cold worked in his favor. The air carried the scent cleanly, without the heavy moisture that might blur it. He followed it the way he had once followed everything in the forest. Methodically. Without rushing. Allowing the picture to assemble itself piece by piece.

One person. Male, most likely. Alpha. Moving parallel to the house rather than toward it.

Observing.

Ilya's jaw tightened.

He had come close to the house. And Shane was inside that house.

He recognized the scent. It was the same thread he had caught outside the cottage, moving parallel to the treeline, never quite approaching. He had filed it away then. He was using it now.

Something passed through him then. Not panic. Not exactly anger either. Something older than both. Something that had been moving beneath everything since the forest, even before the forest. Since the white room. Since the wrong scent of that doctor. Since the moment he had slowly begun to understand what they were trying to take from him.

He had not let them take it.

He was not about to start now.

He cut through the alley in a wide arc and positioned himself between the figure and the street. If the man tried to leave that way, he would have to pass Ilya first.

Then he waited.

He was very good at waiting. The facility had made sure of that.

The figure appeared at the mouth of the alley two minutes later. He moved carefully, professionally. Trained. Someone who knew how to stay quiet. Under other circumstances

Ilya might have respected that.

He stepped into his path.

The man stopped.

For a moment neither of them moved. The alley was narrow and the distant streetlamp cast more shadow than light. Ilya studied him.

Young. Younger than he had expected. The build was exactly what it should have been. The dense physicality of someone who had gone through the program. Muscles settled on bone in a way no gym could ever produce. But the real story was in his eyes.

Ilya had seen that look before.

He had carried it himself in the first months.

The look of someone who had been taken apart and put back together slightly wrong, and had stopped expecting anything else.

No one waiting for him. No one who mattered.

Ilya recognized that.

He recognized something else too. The way the man's nostrils flared the moment he came close enough.

He was reading him. Trying to place him.

Then the man's expression changed.

It was not fear. Something more complicated than that.

He had caught Shane's scent on him. Cedar, warmth, and something sweeter beneath it. The smell that had soaked into Ilya's skin over the last few days and would not disappear no matter how the air changed. Ilya was aware of it the way he was aware of his own heartbeat. Steady. Anchoring him to the world.

Sometimes he hated how much he needed it.

He hated the tightness in his chest whenever Shane moved too far across a room. He hated the way his eyes followed him without permission, the way his body turned toward him as if it had no other option. Eight years of distance had not loosened the bond. It had not worn thin. It had simply waited inside him like a banked coal, dim but alive, and the moment Shane had come close again it had flared back to life.

He had never asked for any of it.

He had never wanted Shane's scent to be the thing that pulled him back whenever he started to slip. He had never asked for it to become the only solid thing he could hold onto in his

worst moments.

But it had.

And this man, standing in the darkness outside the house, had smelled it on him.

Ilya stepped closer.

The man did not retreat. But he did not advance either. He stood very still while Ilya looked at him and the alley remained silent around them.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment before he spoke. Words still cost him something. He had been rebuilding them slowly, one at a time, the way you rebuild anything that has been deliberately taken apart.

"House," he said finally, then waited. "You were watching."

The man said nothing.

He studied Ilya for a long moment. His gaze moved over his face and then lower, to the collar of his shirt. The hickey Shane had pressed into his skin earlier sat just above it, dark and deliberate. Ilya made no attempt to cover it. Let him see. Let him understand what that meant, what it meant that someone had put it there and that Ilya had let them, had wanted them to.

"Mine," he said. "He is mine." The words came out rough but certain, the way they always did, the ones that never needed excavation. "You understand."

It was not a question.

The man was still studying him. His gaze moved to Ilya's face, searching, the way Ilya had seen people search before when they were trying to find the hollow place, the controlled blankness, the proof that someone was still lost inside it. He would not find it. Ilya held his gaze and waited, patient the way the facility had made him patient, though he used it differently now.

Something shifted in the man's expression.

"You got out," he said. Quiet. Not quite a question, not quite a statement.

"Yes."

The man was silent for a moment. Then: "How?"

Ilya thought about a storage room. A flushed, freckled face. A laugh he had spent years carrying carefully, the way you carry something you know you cannot afford to lose. He did not say any of that.

"Someone," he said. "Waiting."

He watched the man absorb it. The two words and what they contained. He watched him understand what it meant to have that and what it meant to not have it, and what the difference between those two things looked like standing in a cold alley at midnight.

Ilya did not tell him to leave. He did not make promises he couldn't keep. He simply stood there, and let the silence do what it needed to do.

After a long moment, the man stepped back. Then another step. He turned, and walked away toward the far end of the alley, unhurried, in the opposite direction from the house.

His hands were trembling slightly. He noticed that. A few weeks ago they would have been shaking. There was a difference, even if it was small.

Shane's scent found him before he had taken a single step. Stronger now, sharper at the edges, and Ilya did not need to think about what that meant. His chest did something that had no clean name in any language he had ever spoken.

He was already moving.

The back door was locked. He knocked once. Silence, then footsteps, uneven and hurried, and the sound of the lock turning.

The door opened.

Shane stood there, several emotions crossing his face at once, and Ilya looked at him for a single second. The sheen of sweat on his skin. The heaviness of his eyes. His parted lips, his uneven breathing, the extraordinary warmth radiating from him.

His scent, sweet and unmistakable, filling the whole doorway.

Ilya stepped inside.

Chapter End Notes

The rumours are true: The heat has arrived! 🔥

Shane became a bit of a Mr. Robot in this chapter, didn't he? I wanted to establish a few things before the storm truly hit, but the storm is already here. Between the looming danger and the heat, things are about to get a lot nastier from here on out. If you know what I mean. ;) If you've been picking up on the clues I've been dropping about the heat over the last few chapters... well, kudos to you for your sharp eyes!

Also, a little writer's note: I'm still working on finding the right balance for Ilya's speech. He's still developing and finding his voice. Some days he's more confident, and

others, the fragments take over. It's a delicate process, and I hope it feels as raw to you as it does to me.

Once again, thank you for amazing comments, kudos, bookmarks. Reading your theories, seeing you hit the mark or wander into the dark, is exactly what feeds my chaos-hungry soul lol

See you in the next one!  [twitter](#)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

There were days in the facility when he imagined something exactly like this. He didn't usually dream. He was never sure if it was because of the drugs, but his dreams tended to come to him while he was awake. In the long stretches of emptiness between controls and experiments, Ilya would find himself recalling days that felt both lived and unlived at the same time. This had always been one of them.

Ever since Ilya Rozanov had been locked within those four walls, he had clung to his strongest memories with everything he had. Since the first serious tests began and they realized his bond with Shane was a problem. Since the moment he understood they would try to take his mate from him, erase him from his mind. That was why he held onto those waking dreams so fiercely. The moments filled with the most feeling. The first time he saw Shane. That look in his eyes, equal parts admiration and challenge. The first time he calmed him, and all the times Shane had helped him in return. The first touch, the first kiss, the first time they had come together. And the mating. He would only understand much later that he had been under the influence of certain drugs at the time, but every intense feeling he had experienced had been real. He did not regret a single moment of it.

There were also the dreams that had never happened, the ones where Shane offered himself to him, warm and open. Eyes half-lidded, breath unsteady, lips parted just enough to reveal the soft pink of his tongue. His body tense, eager, perfectly built, and those warm coffee-colored eyes inviting him closer. In those dreams, Shane would smile at him once, and that would be enough for Ilya to lose himself completely. It was not as if he had experienced a heat like this before, but he could picture it with startling clarity. The way Shane's strong legs would open for him, the sheen of sweat on his skin, the sound of his name on his lips. Some nights, he would allow himself to pull those hidden dreams out from where he had buried them and linger in them for a while.

And now, it almost felt like he was inside one of them. Yet some part of his mind, sharp and unyielding, refused to let him fully surrender to it, held back by the awareness of the danger waiting just outside.

The door had barely closed behind him when Shane moved.

Not toward him. Into him. The distinction mattered, somehow. There was no hesitation in it, no negotiation, just Shane's hands finding his shirt and his face pressing into Ilya's neck and that sound, low and unplanned, that went through Ilya like something breaking open.

He stood very still.

Shane's scent was everywhere. Cedar and bergamot and underneath it that thick, syrupy sweetness that Ilya had imagined in long stretches of white nothing, that he had constructed

carefully from memory when everything else was being taken apart. He had thought he knew what it would be like.

He had been wrong.

Nothing he had built in those rooms came close to this. The actual weight of Shane against him. The actual heat of his skin. The actual sound of his breathing, uneven and close, right against Ilya's throat.

Ilya's hands came up.

Then he caught it.

Faint. At the edge of perception, drifting in from somewhere past the fence line. That sterile undertone, clinical, cold; the facility, worn into another body the way it had been worn into his.

He stepped back.

Shane made a sound of protest that did something unfortunate to Ilya's ability to think. "What..."

Shane was looking at him now. Not angry. Not confused. Just... devastated. The particular look of someone whose body has stopped being reasonable and is now deeply, personally offended by the concept of distance. His lips were parted. His eyes were dark and slightly unfocused and fixed on Ilya's face with an intensity that made it very difficult to remember what he was doing.

Part of him wanted to surrender completely. To stop calculating, stop listening, stop being the thing the facility had made him: always alert, always cataloguing, always waiting for the next thing to go wrong.

He couldn't.

Not yet. The other alpha was gone but not far. Ilya could feel it the way he felt weather coming; a pressure at the base of his skull, a low persistent awareness that had kept him alive in places where nothing else had. Shane's scent was everywhere, thick and sweet and almost tangible, and underneath it the room still carried that faint sterile thread, a reminder that the walls of this house were the only thing between them and everything outside.

Shane made a frustrated sound.

Ilya turned.

Shane had his back against the wall and his eyes half-closed and his fingers working at the hem of his shirt with the particular focus of someone who has forgotten that other people exist. He got it over his head. Dropped it. Didn't look at where it landed.

Ilya forgot what he had been thinking about.

"Cold," Shane said. Not to him. To no one. His hands moved to his own arms, restless, like his skin was bothering him, like he couldn't find a temperature that worked. "Too hot. I'm—" He stopped. His head dropped back against the wall.

Ilya watched him.

He had seen Shane uncomfortable before. He had seen him angry, exhausted, coming apart at the seams in ways he was clearly furious about. He had never seen him like this; unaware of being watched, completely inside his own body, every careful layer he had ever constructed simply gone.

When Shane's hands dropped to his waistband, Ilya moved.

He crossed the room without deciding to and caught Shane's wrist. A correction. A pause. Reasonable.

It was a mistake.

The moment his fingers closed around Shane's wrist, the heat came through like a current. His skin was burning, impossibly hot, and Shane's head snapped up and those dark eyes found his and Ilya's mouth went dry.

Shane's free hand found the back of his neck.

"Finally," Shane breathed.

His fingers threaded into Ilya's hair and pulled, and Ilya's carefully maintained perimeter collapsed entirely. He let himself be pulled. Shane made a small, satisfied sound at that, like Ilya coming closer was the only thing that had made sense in hours, and pressed his forehead against Ilya's jaw.

"Too hot," Shane muttered. "Everything is..." His grip tightened. "Don't move."

Ilya didn't move.

He stood very still and let Shane use him as an anchor and tried to remember why he had crossed the room in the first place. The wrist. The pants. Right.

"Shane."

"Mm."

"You should—"

"No." Flat. Immediate.

"I need to—"

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. His eyes were glassy and dark and fixed on Ilya's face with an intensity that made coherent thought difficult.

Then he stopped arguing entirely.

He pressed his cheek against Ilya's jaw. Slow, deliberate, dragging, and Ilya went very still. Shane did it again, the other side, his face moving against Ilya's neck with a single-minded focus that had nothing self-conscious about it. Marking. Leaving himself everywhere, on Ilya's collar, his shoulder, the side of his throat, with the unhurried certainty of someone who had decided this was simply what was happening now.

Ilya's hands stayed at his waist.

He told himself it was to keep Shane upright.

Shane made a low sound of satisfaction and moved to his chest, his cheek, his temple, working his way back up with that same slow deliberateness, and Ilya stared at the ceiling and breathed very carefully and thought about the alley, the fence line, the sterile scent that had thinned but not disappeared...

Shane bit his jaw.

Not hard. Just enough.

Ilya's grip tightened.

Shane looked up at him. Flushed, heavy-lidded, smelling of cedar and bergamot and that thick sweetness that was becoming increasingly difficult to think around. He looked at Ilya's face with those dark eyes and then he said, very quietly:

"Alpha."

Just that. One word.

Something in Ilya's chest came loose.

It was not a plea. It was not a demand. It was simply... recognition. Certainty. The particular way you name something you have always known, that has always been true, that requires no argument.

His last coherent thought dissolved.

He walked Shane backward, slowly, until his back met the wall. Shane went without resistance, tilting his chin up, and Ilya looked at him for one long moment —this version of Shane that had never existed before tonight, wrecked and open and entirely his— and felt something shift permanently in his chest.

"What do you want?" Ilya asked teasingly.

Shane looked at him. Said nothing.

"Tell me."

Nothing.

Ilya pressed his lips to Shane's throat. Barely. Just enough to feel his pulse jump. Then his jaw. The corner of his mouth. Pulled back before Shane could turn it into anything.

"You want?" he said.

Shane's breath hitched.

"This?" His hand moved. Brief, deliberate, gone.

"—yes." Barely audible. Wrenched out of him.

"More?"

Shane's head dropped back against the wall. His hands found Ilya's shirt and held on.

Ilya waited.

"Please." Just that. Quiet and unguarded and completely unlike anything Shane Hollander had ever allowed himself to sound like.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

"Look at you," he said quietly. Almost to himself. Shane's flush deepened. "So warm." His thumb moved across Shane's lower lip, slow. "Only for me. Like this."

A sound. Not a word.

"Eight years," Ilya said. His voice had dropped to something barely above hearing. "Worth it."

Shane made a broken sound and grabbed his collar.

"*Krasiviy*." Ilya's forehead dropped to his. "Beautiful."

"Ilya—" A breath. "Please."

"Mine," Ilya said.

"Yes," Shane managed. "Please. Yes."

Now Shane was trying to strip Ilya as well, his trembling hands clumsy with it. The moment Ilya caught his scent again he stopped hesitating and helped him.

He slid his thumb between Shane's lips, and Shane went quiet around it—not still, never still, still mouthing at his neck and the upper line of his chest—but quieter, more focused, like something had been given to hold onto.

The sounds the omega was making could have driven even an ordinary person to the edge. In Ilya, they stirred a darker urge, the instinct to drag him somewhere hidden, somewhere

without windows or doors, where no one could see or hear them.

He pulled his hand back and tried to catch Shane's gaze, but the omega's eyes were fully closed. His face was flushed deep red, his freckles standing out like an open invitation.

The small fragment of reason he still had left told him to drag Shane under a cold shower, to try to ease it, to make him sleep it off once the edge dulled.

But the alpha inside him knew that would never be enough. Not for his mate. Not like this.

He needed to mark every inch of him, to bring him to completion again and again. Without pause. Without delay. Until the omega was trembling, breaking, undone with pleasure. Only then would it be enough. Only then would he give him his knot, push as deep as he could, claim him in the most final way his body knew. Only then would he be satisfied.

Maybe.

He walked Shane to the bedroom.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at him and then, without ceremony, lay back and finished what he'd started with his clothes. Methodical despite everything, which was so deeply Shane that Ilya almost laughed.

He didn't laugh.

He stood at the foot of the bed and looked.

He had seen Shane on ice, all controlled power and precision, a body built for something that required both strength and grace. He had thought, in the years between, that he remembered it accurately.

He hadn't remembered this.

The long lines of him. The muscle in his thighs, his shoulders, the flat plane of his stomach. All of it flushed now, damp, utterly unhurried about being looked at. Shane who never let anyone look at anything, lying open across the sheets like he had simply stopped caring about the concept of armor.

He shifted. Let his legs fall open.

Ilya's hands had gone tight at his sides.

Shane looked at him from under heavy lids. Not quite a challenge. Not quite an invitation. Something that had given up on the distinction.

His fingers first found his already hardened, long-neglected length. He stroked himself once or twice, but judging by the soft whimpers and the restless urgency in his movements, it was not enough. Then he did something that made Ilya's entire body go rigid with a sharp, almost painful tension. He slid one of his fingers into himself, already soaked with slick, and

gathered some of that wet heat before spreading it over his own length. The sight was impossibly, irresistibly tempting. Ilya did not resist. He could not.

Ilya moved to the bed and settled easily between his mate's legs. For a moment, he let go of everything he had been holding back and kissed him. With all his hunger, all his longing, all the rough edge he had kept restrained. His own arousal was already hard and insistent, aching for any kind of friction, but for now, Ilya ignored it and focused entirely on his omega.

After devouring his lips until they turned a deep, bruised red, he trailed downward, leaving small, sharp marks along his neck and chest. He took his time with each of his already hardened nipples, drawing them into his mouth one by one. The way Shane writhed beneath him, the sounds spilling from him, pulled Ilya further and further out of himself. His alpha felt freer than it ever had before, unrestrained and absolute. Using nothing but his mouth, he brought his mate over the edge once, savoring every reaction he drew from him.

Then, when Shane managed to part his eyes even slightly, Ilya leaned back toward his face. It had only been a few minutes, yet the omega was already hard again. This time, Ilya slid his hand between his legs and gathered some of that slick warmth with his fingers, bringing it up and pressing it gently between Shane's lips.

The moment he pulled back, Shane caught him again with surprising strength and dragged him closer. The hand not tangled in his hair wrapped around Ilya's length, trying to guide him, to align him where he needed him most.

Ilya's jaw tightened hard enough to ache as he stroked through his mate's hair, over his cheek, trying to steady both of them.

"Please," Shane was moaning, over and over again. Some words came out clear, others dissolved into breathless, desperate sounds. "Inside."

Ilya swallowed with difficulty. It would have taken only a single movement for Shane to take him in. But he held himself back for just a moment longer.

The air in the room was no longer just air; it was a physical weight, thick with the scent of an omega in full, frantic bloom. Ilya felt the primitive core of his being —the part the facility had tried to hollow out, to redirect, to make into something useful for someone else— roar to life. But this time it had only one direction: His mate.

He didn't pull away from Shane's frantic grip. He leaned into it, his weight pressing Shane deep into the mattress, pinning him beneath the sheer physicality of an alpha who had been starved for eight years. Shane's legs hooked around Ilya's waist, his heels digging into the small of Ilya's back, urging, demanding, pleading for the friction to stop being a promise and start being a reality.

"Look at me," Ilya rasped, his voice a jagged, low-frequency vibration.

Shane's eyes fluttered open, dark and liquid, the pupils so dilated that the brown was just a thin, trembling ring. He was slick, his body producing a frantic amount of heat, his inner thighs shaking with the effort of staying open, staying ready.

Ilya didn't use his hands to guide himself. He used his body. He braced himself on his forearms, his muscles corded and jumping under his skin, and pressed the broad, aching head of his length against the entrance Shane had already prepared. The contact made Shane scream; a high, sharp sound of pure electricity that echoed off the bedroom walls.

"Ilya... Alpha!" Shane sobbed, his head thrashing against the pillow. "Please. Now. *Now*."

Ilya didn't give him a gentle slide. He gave him exactly what the heat demanded. He surged forward in one heavy, inexorable motion, burying himself to the hilt in the tight, pulsing wetness of his mate.

The air left Shane in a long, shattered gasp. His entire body went rigid, his toes curling, his fingers locking into the muscles of Ilya's shoulders with enough force to draw blood. He was stretched to the limit, filled completely, the knot at the base of Ilya's length already beginning to throb against his entrance.

Ilya stayed still for a heartbeat, his forehead pressed against Shane's, his breath coming in ragged, animal growls. The feeling of being *inside* —of the slick, internal heat of his omega clamping down around him in desperate, rhythmic pulses— was almost enough to break his mind.

"Shane," Ilya groaned into the hollow of Shane's throat. "My Shane. My omega. My mate. *Moya dusha*. Mine."

He began to move. It wasn't the rhythmic grace of the ice; it was the brutal, focused precision of the facility combined with the raw hunger of the forest. He pulled back until he was almost clear, teasing the sensitive, swollen entrance, before driving back in with a force that made the headboard crack against the wall.

Shane was a wreck beneath him. He was making sounds he would never remember: whimpers, growls, broken Russian words he didn't even know he knew. He was meeting every one of Ilya's thrusts, his hips bucking upward, his body trying to take even more of him than was physically possible.

The heat was peaking. The scent of cedar and bergamot had turned into something dark and primal, the smell of a bond finally, violently, snapping into place. Ilya felt the pressure building, the knot at his base swelling, demanding to be locked home.

He flipped Shane over with a sudden, jarring strength, pulling him up onto his knees. He didn't let him go. He draped himself over Shane's back, his chest flush against Shane's spine, his hands reaching around to grip Shane's hips and pull him back onto every heavy, punishing drive.

Shane's head dropped, his forehead against the sheets, his voice reduced to a rhythmic, breathless chant of Ilya's name.

Ilya reached forward, his hand finding the back of Shane's neck, his thumb tracing the old, faded scar of the bond that had never truly broken. He leaned down, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin right above the scent gland.

"Again," Ilya muttered, his voice dropping into a register that was barely human. "Putting it back. So they know."

He drove in one last time, deep and absolute, his knot locking firmly into place as he reached his limit. At the exact moment of release, Ilya buried his teeth into the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder. He didn't just bite; he left a heavy, permanent mating mark, his canines sinking into the flushed skin as Shane shrieked into the pillows, his own climax hitting him with a violence that left him sobbing.

Ilya didn't let go. He held the bite until the world stopped spinning, until the only thing left was the sound of two hearts trying to find the same rhythm again, and the heavy, unmistakable scent of a claimed omega filling the room.

The aftermath was not a cooling down; it was a different kind of burn. The heat was a hungry, cycling thing, and Ilya moved through the following hours with the tireless, focused energy of a man who finally had a purpose.

He didn't leave the bed. He didn't let Shane go.

Every time the tremors started again —the restless hitch in Shane's breathing, the way his fingers would claw blindly at the sheets— Ilya was there. He brought Shane to the edge again and again, losing count somewhere around the third time, his movements stripped of any hesitation. He was clinical in his precision but feral in his devotion.

He watched Shane's face wreck itself over and over. He used his fingers to stretch and soothe, slicking the path again and again until Shane was a sobbing, sensitive mess of nerves. Ilya tasted every inch of him, drinking the salt from his skin and the sweetness of the heat from his thighs, his tongue leaving a trail of fire that Shane couldn't escape.

In the quiet lulls between the peaks, Ilya didn't go far. He reached for the water that he brought on the nightstand, supporting the back of Shane's head with a heavy, steady palm, murmuring low, broken Russian comforts as he forced him to drink.

"Drink, *Krasiviy*," he muttered, his thumb brushing a stray tear from Shane's cheek. "Slowly."

He cleaned him with a damp cloth he'd fetched in a blur of motion, his touch surprisingly tender for hands that had been built for violence. He wiped the sweat from Shane's forehead and the slick from his thighs, only to watch the heat claim him again moments later.

Shane was barely conscious of the world outside the room. He only knew the weight of Ilya's body, the strength in his arms, and the way Ilya fed him small pieces of fruit or sips of water like he was something precious and fragile. It was a domesticity born of exhaustion and primal bonding; the alpha tending to the omega he had just marked for the world to see.

"Again?" Ilya asked, his voice a rough, dark caress as he felt Shane's hips begin to tilt upward once more, searching.

Shane couldn't even find the words. He just grabbed Ilya's wrist and pulled his hand back down, his eyes pleading.

Ilya didn't make him ask twice. He settled between Shane's legs again, his fingers finding the swollen, aching center of the heat. He worked him with a rhythmic, relentless pace, his other hand covering Shane's mouth to swallow the high, shattered cries as he drove him over the peak one more time.

By the time the sun began to bleed through the curtains, the room was silent. The air was thick, heavy with the scent of a completed bond. Shane was curled into Ilya's side, his head on Ilya's chest, his skin finally cooling. The mating mark on his neck was dark and angry, a permanent brand that hummed with the connection they had finally, violently reclaimed.

Ilya stayed awake, watching the door, one arm wrapped around Shane's waist, his fingers twitching in his sleep.

He was home. And he was never leaving again.

Shane couldn't remember the last time his mouth had felt this dry. It was as if he had spent an entire day swallowing sand. He forced his eyes open, waiting for them to adjust to the light, and then became aware of something else. Almost his entire body ached. He drew his legs together to check, and yes, every inch of him was sore.

That realization was quickly followed by another. He was naked. Completely. And there was not even a blanket covering him.

Pushing himself up slightly, he looked around.

The room was empty. The light coming through the curtains was thin and grey, morning or late afternoon, he couldn't tell. The sheets beside him were cold.

From somewhere downstairs, something clattered.

Shane sat very still.

Another sound. Something scraping against a pan. Then silence. Then what sounded like a quiet curse.

He put his face in his hands.

He stayed like that for a moment.

Then he got up.

He found the bathroom by memory.

The mirror was unkind.

He stood in front of it for a long moment, taking inventory the way he always did; methodical, starting at the top, working down. A habit from years of playing through injuries, of knowing exactly what you could tape up and skate on and what needed actual attention.

The old marks he knew. Faded now, some of them, silvered at the edges. He had stopped noticing them a long time ago.

The new one stopped him.

Not new, exactly. He knew that scar.

Eight years ago, when he had been only eighteen, it was this very bite on his neck that he had seen after sleeping with the boy he had known for two years but had only grown close to in the past few weeks. Now, with the fog in his mind finally lifting, he remembered that day far more clearly. By the time the mark had faded to near invisibility a few weeks later, Ilya had already disappeared. So everything he should have felt back then seemed to be rising to the surface now instead. Because right there, over his scent gland, was a fresh, vivid red mark.

Maybe for the first time in years, he allowed himself to touch it without hesitation. When his fingers brushed over it, the bond responded instantly. It didn't hurt. Not exactly.

There was something else entirely. A low, resonant hum that moved through his chest and settled there without asking permission. Warm. Certain. Like something that had been waiting a very long time to stop pretending it wasn't there.

Shane stood very still.

He remembered Ilya's voice. That register, barely human. *Again. Putting it back. So they know.*

His hand dropped.

He looked at his reflection for a long moment. His reflection looked back, thoroughly unconcerned with the concept of dignity.

He remembered other things too. His own voice, which was more of a problem. The way he had begged, the way he had cried out, the same words spilling from him again and again.

Deciding to ignore the flush creeping across his face, he opted to clean himself up a little. Despite everything that had happened over the past hours, despite all the evidence of it, he looked surprisingly clean. More than that, he smelled incredible. The way their scents had blended together created a kind of happiness that felt impossible to put into words.

Shane found the kitchen by following the smell of something burnt.

Ilya was standing at the stove with his back to the door. On the counter beside him sat a pan with dark edges, two plates, and a glass of water he had apparently remembered to pour. Everything Shane had ever used in this kitchen had been involved somehow —the coffee machine, the toaster, the small cutting board— all of it slightly wrong, slightly off-angle, the particular arrangement of someone who had watched carefully and then attempted.

He had watched Shane use all of these things. And then he had tried.

Shane leaned in the doorway.

Ilya turned.

And there it was.

Wide. Genuine. Almost boyish; the kind of smile that belonged to someone who had no idea yet what it would cost. Shane had seen it once in a photograph on Svetlana's Instagram, standing on a frozen lake with a birthday cake. He had thought then he would never see it in person.

He had been wrong.

"You made breakfast?" he asked.

"Tried," Ilya offered, nodding at the pan. Then, with complete sincerity: "Eggs are... somewhere."

Shane huffed under his breath and stepped closer. He glanced into the pan. The eggs had indeed gone somewhere. They had merged into a chaotic scramble with what might once have been vegetables. The toast was unevenly browned, one side too dark, the other barely touched. The fruit had been cut into pieces of wildly different sizes.

He pictured Ilya standing here, knife in hand, carefully cutting fruit for him. Something tightened painfully in his chest.

He sat down without a word.

He ate.

It was not good. Objectively. He still went back for more. Twice. Then a third time.

He was ravenous in a way that felt almost embarrassing, his body making up for lost time, for everything the heat had burned through. He ate without thinking about it, without tasting it particularly, and it was only halfway through the third helping that he noticed Ilya watching him.

Arms crossed. That expression: not quite satisfied, not quite proud, something that lived in the narrow space between the two.

"You're not eating," Shane said.

"Ate already."

Shane looked at him. Ilya looked back, steady, unhurried, the way he looked at everything.

Something warm moved through Shane's chest that he didn't examine too carefully. His alpha had stood in this kitchen and burned eggs for him and eaten the first batch alone so Shane could have the better ones, and Shane was going to let that sit exactly where it was and not say a single word about it.

He went back for a fourth helping.

"You spoke Russian. Last night," Ilya blurted. He was obviously trying to sound casual but it wasn't working well.

Shane's hand stilled. He set the fork down with care. "Did I?"

"Several times."

Shane didn't respond. He reached for his glass instead, taking a slow sip of water, buying himself time.

Ilya watched him with that familiar expression. Patient. Neutral. Entirely too controlled for someone who was clearly enjoying this. "Was good," he continued, softer now. "Your... accent."

Shane picked up his fork again, then immediately set it back down. "Thank you," he muttered.

"Better than I remember."

A warning flickered across Shane's face. "Ilya."

"You studied?" Ilya pressed, tilting his head slightly.

The silence that followed stretched, thick and unmistakable.

Shane's gaze drifted to the counter, then to his plate, then somewhere just past Ilya's shoulder. "Some," he admitted at last. His voice was quieter now. "Over the years." He hesitated, swallowing. "I didn't want to..." He trailed off, jaw tightening. "It's not important."

Ilya said nothing. He just waited.

Shane exhaled slowly. "I didn't want to forget it," he finished, almost under his breath. "What little I had."

The kitchen held that for a moment.

"You said '*yeshchy*'," Ilya said then. His voice had dropped slightly. "Several times."

Shane went very still.

Yeshchy. More. He had said more, in Russian, in Ilya's arms, with apparently excellent pronunciation.

"I see," Shane said.

"Also '*pozhaluy*sta'."

Shane closed his eyes.

Please. He had said please.

"You can stop now," Shane said.

"Your..." Ilya paused, searching. "The words you needed. Very... um. Specific."

Shane pushed his chair back slightly. "I will leave this kitchen."

"You said my name," Ilya said. "A lot."

"It was probably the heat," Shane shot back, a little too quickly.

Ilya considered that, eyes narrowing just slightly. "Yes," he agreed after a beat. "Heat Shane. I like heat Shane."

Shane looked up at him, expression flat.

"Very..." Ilya searched again, then something flickered at the corner of his mouth. "Loud."

"I will actually leave," Shane informed him, already half rising.

"Also very..." He paused again, with great deliberateness. "Um. *Please. Please, Ilya. Your knot. Fill me.*"

His impression of Shane's voice was not accurate. It was also, unfortunately, not entirely inaccurate.

"That's not—" Shane started.

He covered his face with both hands. Stayed like that for a moment.

This was the Ilya he knew from the ice. The one who could deliver a single line and skate away while the other guy was still processing what had just happened to him. Shane had been on the receiving end of it more than once. He had found it infuriating.

He was so glad to see it.

"I hate you," he muttered into his palms.

"I know," Ilya replied easily. There was no hiding the satisfaction in his voice now.

For a moment, Shane just looked at him. And thought about eight years. About white rooms. About holding onto two words in a language that was never fully his, carrying them carefully across all that time because letting them go had not been an option.

"You kept it," Ilya said quietly then. The teasing was gone. "The language. All this time."

Shane met his gaze. Didn't look away. "Yeah."

Ilya reached across the counter. His hand covered Shane's briefly. Warm. Steady. Not asking for anything. Just there.

Then Shane said, “I can’t believe I went into heat while we’re under this much threat. Did anything happen... while I was out of it?”

Ilya shook his head in quiet reassurance. “No.”

Relief loosened something tight in Shane’s chest. “And the person you followed? Who was he?”

The alpha’s nose wrinkled, a clear sign he didn’t want to get into it, but he didn’t have the luxury of avoiding it. If the threat was still close, Shane needed to know.

“Alpha,” he said at last. “Like me. A watcher, I think. To... report.”

Shane went completely still at that. They would have to move. Again. He didn’t know where, didn’t know how quickly he could find somewhere as secure as this, and underneath all of that practical calculation sat something smaller and considerably more bitter; eight years of suppressants, eight years of careful management, and his body had chosen now. Of all the possible moments. Under his breath, he cursed his own biology. If he hadn’t gone into heat at that exact moment, they could have acted sooner.

He said nothing about any of that.

Ilya was watching him. Not his face at first, but lower, the mark on his neck, still slightly raised, still tender. Then his gaze lifted again.

“You’re angry,” he observed quietly.

“I’m fine.”

“Not at me.” He tilted his head a little, studying him. “At yourself.”

Shane met his eyes. He had no answer to that, which was answer enough.

Ilya came around the counter. Not quickly. He simply closed the distance the way he always did, certain and unhurried, as if he had already decided and was allowing Shane time to catch up. His hand rose and settled at the back of Shane’s neck, warm, steady.

“Not your fault,” he murmured.

“I know that,” Shane replied, though the words came out tighter than he intended.

“Your body,” Ilya added, his thumb shifting slightly against his skin. “Not wrong. Is perfect”

Shane let out a slow breath. “I know,” he repeated, softer this time.

He didn’t pull away.

They stayed like that for a moment. The kitchen around them. The ordinary morning light. The faint burnt smell of eggs still lingering in the air.

Shane's thoughts drifted back to the watcher. Not consciously at first, more like something turning over at the back of his mind, slow and persistent. Someone had stood outside this house. Someone had waited in that alley, watched, then walked away and reported back. Which meant Vantage knew exactly where they were. Which meant running again might not solve anything, because there was nowhere left they wouldn't eventually find.

He had spent eight years being careful. Managing. Staying small.

He was so tired of staying small.

He reached for his phone.

He typed quickly, sending the same short message to three people. His mother. His father. Hayden: *We're okay. Staying where we are. Don't come.*

Yuna replied in under a minute. *Okay. Found some new documents. Will send you soon.*

David followed shortly after: *Good. Be careful.*

Hayden took longer. Four minutes. Which, for Hayden, probably meant he had read it twice and overthought it.

The reply finally came: *ok but you owe me an explanation and also breakfast*

Shane stared at the screen, a faint exhale leaving him.

"Hayden," he muttered, half to himself.

Ilya leaned slightly, reading over his shoulder. He didn't say anything at first. A quiet sound escaped him instead, something between a hum and a low breath through his nose.

"Hm."

His nostrils flared faintly. The sound was soft, but there was unmistakable disapproval in it.

Shane blinked, then the corner of his mouth lifted before he could stop it.

The reaction was absurdly... possessive. The same alpha who had just spent his heat with him, who had bitten him twice, was now reacting to a harmless message like this.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, unable to hold it back.

"Jealous?" he asked lightly, glancing at him.

Ilya's jaw shifted, not quite denying it, not quite acknowledging it either.

"Annoying beta," he muttered, eyes still on the screen.

Shane's smile widened a fraction. Something warm settled in his chest, unexpectedly soft.

The thought of the watcher returned, sharper now. Staying small had not kept Ilya safe. It had not kept either of them safe. Vantage had found them anyway, the way people like that always did, because they never stopped looking.

Maybe the answer wasn't hiding.

He didn't say it out loud. Not yet.

He set the phone down. Then picked it up again.

Svetlana.

He opened the conversation.

Svetlana's last message was still there, sitting unanswered beneath his own: *Yes. He's alive. I'll explain everything.*

He had sent it two days ago. He still had not explained anything.

His thumb hovered over the screen for a moment. He imagined her reading that message. Reading it again. Holding onto it the way you held onto something fragile, afraid it might dissolve if you looked away. For eight years she had not even known if Ilya was alive. Only silence. Only absence. And now, suddenly, three words. *He's alive.*

He typed slowly this time: *Are you somewhere private? I want to call.*

The reply came almost instantly: *I've been waiting.*

Three words. Shane felt them settle heavily in his chest.

He pictured her phone in her hand. The way she must have kept it close these past two days. The way she must have checked it again and again. Not daring to ask too much, not daring to push, just holding onto the possibility.

He looked up at Ilya.

"Svetlana," he said softly. "I'm going to call her. She needs to..." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "She needs to see you."

Something shifted across Ilya's face. It was subtle. Not resistance, not exactly. More like a stillness that ran deeper than hesitation. His gaze dropped briefly to the counter, then returned to Shane. There was something thoughtful there, something distant, like he had already gone somewhere else in his mind.

Eight years. Even in the facility, even in the worst moments, there must have been fragments he held onto. Not just Shane. Not only the bond. Pieces of a life before. A frozen lake. A birthday cake. A girl laughing too loudly beside him.

Ilya exhaled quietly through his nose. His fingers flexed once against the counter, then stilled.

“She... waited,” he said, the words careful, as if he were testing them.

“Yes,” Shane replied.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. His fingers flexed once against the counter, then stilled.

"Still," he continued. "Remember."

Shane felt that land too. Not the same as a bond. Not the same pull. But something steady. Long-rooted. The kind of connection that survived distance, silence, and grief.

"Yes," Shane said again. "She did."

“Okay,” Ilya said finally. His voice was quiet, but there was resolve in it now.

Shane dialed. The call connected.

Svetlana’s face filled the screen. She was somewhere quiet, a room lined with bookshelves behind her, warm light falling softly from the side. She looked younger than in her photographs somehow, and older at the same time. Her hair was pulled back loosely, a few strands escaping around her face. She was beautiful. Not just conventionally, but in a way sharpened by intensity, by years of holding herself together. Gorgeous, Shane found himself thinking, and then immediately felt the oddness of noticing that at all in this moment.

Her eyes went straight to him.

“Tell me,” she said. No greeting. No hesitation. Just that.

Shane told her.

Not everything. Enough. The facility, the bond, the missing years. He kept his voice steady, his tone careful. He didn’t look at Ilya, who stood just out of frame. Instead, he watched Svetlana’s face as he spoke. The way she held herself still, as if any sudden movement might shatter what she was hearing. The way her eyes flickered with each new detail, absorbing, recalibrating. This was someone who had prepared herself for news for years and still wasn’t prepared when it finally came.

When he finished, the room felt very quiet.

“He’s here,” Shane said gently. “Right now. He’s...” He hesitated. “Do you want to see him?”

Svetlana’s breath caught audibly.

“Yes,” she answered. Nothing more.

Shane looked at Ilya.

Ilya stepped into frame.

The silence that followed stretched long enough to feel almost fragile.

Svetlana's hand rose to her mouth. Her gaze moved over his face slowly, carefully, as if she were afraid that looking too quickly might make him disappear. Shane watched her take him in. The sharper lines, the scars, the exhaustion that had settled into him. And the same eyes. Unmistakably the same.

"Ilyusha," she whispered.

Something shifted in Ilya's expression. It was small, but unmistakable. Shane had never heard that name before, but he understood it instantly. The intimacy of it. The years wrapped into it. A name carried quietly through absence, through grief, worn smooth by repetition.

Ilya replied softly. Russian. Just a few words, low and rough. Shane didn't understand them, but the tone alone carried everything.

Svetlana let out a sound that hovered between a laugh and a sob.

Then she was crying. Not quietly. The kind of crying that had been held back for years and had finally found permission to exist.

Ilya watched her. His jaw tightened. His eyes brightened in a way Shane had never seen before. He said her name once. Just her name. Carefully, like something fragile.

Shane looked away.

He knew, with complete certainty, that he was witnessing something that didn't belong to him. Something older than his bond with Ilya. A different kind of tie, not instinctive, not biological, but built slowly over years of shared childhood, shared history, shared loss.

He was glad he was there.

He also understood that this moment was theirs.

He kept his eyes on the counter. And waited.

Svetlana wiped her face with the back of her hand and drew in a slow breath, trying to steady herself. When she spoke again, her eyes shifted, truly shifted, moving between Ilya and Shane instead of clinging only to one of them.

"He talked about you," she said softly.

Shane blinked, caught off guard. "About me?"

"Years ago. Before." She glanced briefly at Ilya, including him in the memory, then returned her gaze to Shane. "Not that you were bonded. He didn't say that. Just... that there was someone." Her lips curved faintly, fragile but real. "Someone special."

A quiet sound left Ilya. Not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. Shane glanced at him.

He was watching the screen with an expression Shane couldn't quite name, something layered, recognition threaded with something older, heavier. Then Ilya murmured something in Russian under his breath. Short. Only a few syllables.

Svetlana heard it. Her eyes filled again immediately.

"*Da*," she answered softly.

Shane looked between them. He didn't understand the words, but he understood the weight behind them.

"He said he wanted me to meet you," Svetlana continued, her attention returning to Shane. She swallowed. "He was very sure."

Shane didn't reply right away. He was suddenly back in a storage room. A half-hidden smile. A brief touch at the corner of his mouth. He imagined that same man years later, in a white room, holding onto fragments like that because there had been nothing else left.

"He never got the chance," Shane said at last.

Svetlana's gaze shifted to Ilya, her expression softening.

"He's getting it now."

Ilya exhaled quietly. Something eased in his shoulders. He looked from one of them to the other, like he was still adjusting to the idea that these two parts of his life, separated for so long, were finally standing in the same moment.

"Where are you?" Svetlana asked. Her voice had changed, steadier now, something practical moving beneath the emotion. "I want to come."

Shane hesitated.

He thought about the watcher in the alley. About Vantage knowing where they were. About what it meant to bring someone else into that circle.

Ilya didn't hesitate.

"Yes," he said quietly.

Svetlana's eyes moved to him immediately. Something crossed her face. Relief, perhaps, or the expression of someone who had been waiting for permission without realizing it.

"Ilya—" Shane began.

Ilya shook his head once, small but decisive. "She knows," he said, voice low. "Will be careful."

It was not exactly reassurance. More like a statement of trust already made.

Shane studied him for a moment, then looked back at the screen.

Svetlana was watching them both with sharp, quiet attention, like someone holding very still so as not to disrupt something fragile.

“It’s not without risk,” Shane said carefully. “Coming here. Being seen with us.”

“I know,” Svetlana replied.

“Vantage—”

“I know what Vantage is.” Her voice remained calm, but there was steel underneath. “My father knew people in that world. I grew up around it.” Her jaw tightened slightly. “I am not afraid of them.”

Shane held her gaze. He believed her.

“Okay,” he said.

Something shifted in her expression. Not quite relief. More like someone who had been waiting for years with folded hands and had finally been told she could move.

“Send me the address,” she said. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

The call ended. The kitchen fell silent.

Ilya kept looking at the dark screen for a moment longer. Something in his face had opened, unguarded in a way Shane rarely saw. Younger, almost. Shane reached forward and turned the phone face-down on the counter.

“She remembered,” Ilya murmured. Not really to Shane. More to himself.

Shane watched him.

He was so tired of hiding.

The thought came quietly, without drama, settling into place like something inevitable.

He picked up his coffee. It had gone cold.

“Hey,” he said.

Ilya looked up.

“Let’s go outside tonight.”

Ilya studied him for a moment. Then something shifted faintly at the corner of his mouth.

“River?” he asked.

Shane blinked. “You knew about the river?”

“Saw,” Ilya replied simply. “When outside.”

Of course he did.

“Yeah,” Shane said softly. “The river.”

Ilya nodded once. He turned back to the window, the way he always did; reading the street, cataloguing, the habit that would probably never fully leave him.

Shane watched him for a moment.

He was so tired of hiding.

Tonight, just for a few hours, he wasn't going to.

There was something incredibly freeing about stepping outside and walking, leaving everything else behind. The evening air was lightly cool, exactly the temperature Shane liked best. He had always loved weather that allowed for a thin jacket and nothing more. He had given Ilya one of his hoodies -not a Metros one, of course- and made him pull the hood up. Now they walked side by side beneath the dim lights along the river.

It felt strangely unfamiliar.

Years ago, when they had started meeting in secret, they had chosen hotel rooms or other enclosed spaces. A few times they had met in a park, but never like this. Never simply walking together. Like real partners. If they had not been living under far greater threats, he might have allowed himself time to feel the loss of that.

They reached the river without speaking.

Ilya stopped at the railing. He looked at the water for a long moment, the way he looked at everything, methodically, without rushing, letting it assemble itself. The city moved on the other side of the river, indifferent and ordinary.

Shane stopped beside him.

After a moment, Ilya's hand found his.

Not reaching. Not asking. Just there, warm and certain, fingers lacing through his with the particular ease of something that had always been true.

Shane looked down at their hands. This was a first too. Holding hands in public.

He thought about the last time he had seen Ilya. Really seen him. Not feral, not broken, not still putting himself back together. The hotel room. Morning light. Ilya's face open in a way it rarely was, lifted by the win, by everything that had happened through the night.

"I'll see you soon," Ilya had said. "Promise."

He had meant it. Shane had known he meant it.

He had not known it would be eight years.

"I used to think about this," Shane said quietly. "Walking somewhere with you. Just this. Nothing complicated."

Ilya said nothing. His thumb moved slowly across the back of Shane's hand.

"I couldn't picture your face for a long time," Shane continued. "After. My mind kept losing it. I'd try to remember and it would blur." He exhaled softly. "But I remembered your hands."

Ilya's grip tightened slightly.

"I'm sorry," he said, very quiet.

"Don't," Shane replied. "It wasn't—" He stopped, then shook his head faintly. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know." A pause. "Still."

They stood there for a while. The river moved below them, dark and unhurried.

Shane turned to look at him.

In the dim light, with the hood pulled up and the city behind him, Ilya looked almost like someone who had never been anywhere else. Someone ordinary. Someone who had simply been here all along, waiting.

"You kept your promise," Shane said.

Ilya looked at him.

"Eventually," Shane added, a small breath of a smile following the word.

Something shifted at the corner of Ilya's mouth.

"Yes," he said softly. "Eventually."

They stood there a while longer. The river moved below them, dark and unhurried. Somewhere behind them, the city went on being itself.

Ilya turned to him.

He didn't say anything. He just looked at Shane the way he sometimes did, that particular attention, slow and complete, like he was making sure of something.

Shane looked back.

Something stirred in his chest. Not the bond, not exactly, something quieter than that. Something that had been building for days without his permission. He looked at Ilya standing

there in his hoodie, the hood pushed back, the river behind him, the city lights catching the angles of his face, and thought, with sudden, irrational clarity: *I want everyone to know.*

Not strategically. Not as a move against Vantage. He just wanted to walk down a street with this man and not look over his shoulder. He wanted to sit in a restaurant and not calculate the exits. He wanted people to see Ilya the way Shane saw him right now, standing at a river in a borrowed hoodie, alive, here, his.

Eight years of careful. Eight years of small.

He was so tired of small.

Ilya shifted slightly. His shoulder bumped Shane's, not quite accidental, not quite deliberate. The particular move of someone who wanted contact and didn't quite know how to ask for it without asking.

Shane recognized it.

It was the same move Ilya had made years ago, eighteen and trying very hard to seem like he wasn't trying, bumping shoulders in a corridor outside a locker room and then looking extremely innocent.

Shane had pretended not to notice then too.

He didn't pretend now. He turned and kissed him.

Not careful. Not hidden. Right there, under the dim lights along the river, with the city moving behind them and the water below, anyone who happened to pass able to see exactly what was happening.

Ilya went still for half a second, surprised maybe, and then his hand came up to Shane's jaw and he kissed back with the particular certainty of someone who had been waiting for exactly this.

For a moment there was nothing else. No watcher, no Vantage, no eight years of everything they hadn't been allowed to have. Just this. Just the river and the cold air and Ilya's mouth, warm and unhurried, and Shane finally, finally not hiding.

He pulled back first.

Ilya let him.

They stood there for a moment, foreheads almost touching, their breath visible in the cold air.

"We should go back," Shane said.

"Yes," Ilya said.

Neither of them moved.

They walked back the same way they had come.

Ilya's hand stayed in his. Neither of them mentioned it. Neither of them let go.

The safe house appeared at the end of the street, ordinary and dark, exactly as they had left it. Ilya scanned the alley out of habit as they turned onto the path. Shane watched him do it and said nothing. Some habits didn't need fixing.

Inside, the kitchen still smelled faintly of burnt eggs. Shane locked the door behind them. Ilya moved through the rooms with that quiet efficiency: checking windows, checking locks, the same routine he ran every night. Shane watched him, noting the ease, the certainty, the quiet command he had always carried.

I want everyone to know.

The thought was still there, quieter now, but settled. Permanent. Unshakeable.

He set his phone down on the nightstand and went to bed, letting the warmth of Ilya's presence trail behind him into the dark.

He woke to his phone buzzing.

Not an alarm. The sharp, insistent vibration of too many notifications arriving at once, the kind that screamed something had happened while he was asleep. His hand reached for it automatically, almost before he fully opened his eyes.

The first message was from Rose. *oh my god shane call me*

Then Hayden. *dude it's not good u ok?*

Then his mother. That was how he knew it was serious; Yuna didn't text in lowercase, and she didn't ever leave his name dangling without punctuation. *Shane. Call me when you're up. Don't panic.*

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. Ilya was already awake beside him, propped on one elbow, watching him with that expression Shane had learned to read long ago; reading his scent first, the subtle rhythms of his body, before even his face.

Shane tapped the first link. The photograph loaded.

The river was unmistakable. Dim lights glimmered against the water. The railing caught in a particular angle Shane knew by heart. His jacket, his jaw, the bite mark at his neck; the camera had captured everything in sharp, unforgiving clarity from across the water.

Ilya's face was partially turned away, mostly hidden beneath the hood of Shane's hoodie. Deliberate or lucky, it didn't matter. The photograph wasn't about Ilya. It was about Shane.

He scrolled through the headlines.

***Metros Captain or His Alpha's Omega? Shane Hollander's Dirty Secret.
Hollander Hiding a Bond? Metro Captain's Night Out Raises Questions.
WHO IS THE ALPHA? Shane Hollander Photographed with Unknown Male, Bonding
Mark Confirmed.
Omega Hockey Player Shane Hollander: Too Bonded to Captain?
Hollander Scandal: Is Metro's Star Player Under Alpha Influence?***

He read them all. Twice. And murmured, "Fuck."

The city outside was awake, moving, talking... talking about him in the exact way he had spent eight years training himself never to let anyone.

Ilya said nothing. He read over Shane's shoulder, silent, steady.

Shane put the phone face down on the mattress. He stared at the ceiling, at the faint shadows cast by the morning light.

"Shane," Ilya said.

"I know," Shane replied.

"This is—"

"I know." He exhaled slowly. He could feel the weight of it, the truth of it, the way it pressed against the careful structure of his life. "I know what this is."

He picked the phone back up.

The photograph again. Really looked. Himself at the river. Ilya beside him. The bite mark visible at his collar. Neither of them looking anywhere but at each other.

Eight years of careful. Eight years of suppressants. Eight years of keeping the smallest things locked inside, of managed distance, of never—not once—letting anyone see anything that mattered.

He thought about *I want everyone to know*.

He thought about *staying small*.

He put the phone down again, letting the weight settle like a stone in his chest.

"They want me to hide," he said finally, quiet but resolute. "That's the whole point. Make me hide, make me look guilty for hiding, then use the hiding against me." He paused. "It's a good play."

Ilya didn't flinch. He watched him, steady and unshaken.

"So we don't hide," Shane added, the words firm, certain. Not a question.

Ilya held his gaze.

"No," he said. "We don't."

Chapter End Notes

So... that happened.

First of all, if you've made it through this 9k monster of an update, you have my whole heart. I'm fully aware this story is a very specific journey and not everyone's cup of tea, so having you here means the world to me.

A massive thank you for all the kudos, the bookmarks, and especially the comments. Your theories and reactions are what kept me going through this long writing process!

On a personal note, work has been absolutely biting my ass lately, but honestly? Coming back to this story and writing for you is the only thing that brings me peace right now.

So, brace yourselves, because the end is finally in sight. I'm not sure if it's the very next chapter, but she's definitely here... and I can't wait to show you how it all unfolds. ❤️

[twitter](#)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

A career he had given his childhood, his youth, his entire life to. Was it really meant to collapse because of a single news story? And when he actually thought about it, it was not even that much of a scandal. He had seen athletes who had done far worse. Some of them were still walking around in the same circles, still playing, still celebrated. So why was the attempt to push his omega identity in front of his professional athlete identity being treated like such a catastrophe? Shane knew the answer: Vantage.

The alpha Ilya had encountered, the one he had referred to simply as someone like him, must have reported what he saw. Instead of attacking directly and drawing attention to themselves, the company had chosen something quieter, more insidious. They had aimed at Shane. At his career. And they had done it through his omega status, using the fresh mating bite at his neck as their leverage.

Typical guilty behavior, Shane thought. They knew that trying to take Ilya back at this stage would be a major risk. So they were using this method to pressure them both at once, to silence them before either of them could move. Even knowing that, Shane's throat burned. He didn't care that people had seen him with the mating bite, with Ilya. No. If anything, that part didn't bother him at all. What burned was the implication behind it, that people were looking at his mate and deciding he must be some idiot under his alpha's control, too compromised to play a demanding sport like hockey.

Just as Shane was about to push himself up from the couch he had been sitting on for far too long, his phone started ringing from the other side of the room. The sudden sound, sharp with his lingering frustration, made him pause. Until now he had ignored every message and call except those from the people closest to him. His mother, who was also his agent, was already handling the media. Team management could wait. He hadn't decided what to say to them yet anyway.

He glanced at the display. Hayden. Thinking it might be news related to the team, he decided to answer.

A second later, Hayden appeared on screen in a video call.

"Holy shit, dude. It looks worse than in the picture."

Shane frowned for a moment, then his hand moved automatically to his neck. Of course.

"Nice to see you too, Hayden," Shane muttered, trying to keep his voice steady despite the heat rising to his face.

Hayden leaned closer to his camera, squinting at Shane like he was inspecting a crime scene. The connection glitched for half a second, freezing his face mid-grimace. "I'm just saying.

You've been missing for days, the world is on fire, and you pop up looking like you've been mauled by a wolf."

"I wouldn't say mauled," Shane countered. "Also mind you, I had already a mark. For eight years, remember? This is just..." He glanced at Ilya for a moment. He was watching him from the side. "Unexpected."

Hayden snorted, leaning back. "Unexpected? Shane, there are high-definition photos of your neck on every major sports site. The league is having a collective stroke. They're calling it the 'Omega Revelation of the decade.' You didn't just break the internet; you incinerated it."

Shane closed his eyes for a second, the reality of the leaked photos hitting him like a physical blow. He could almost see the headlines, the slow-motion replays of his press conferences, people looking for signs they had missed for eight years.

Beside him, Ilya finally moved. He didn't look at the screen; he looked at Shane, his jaw tight. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement that felt like a silent rebuke to Hayden's teasing, he hooked a finger into the collar of his own shirt and pulled it down.

There, stark against his collarbone, was the twin to Shane's mark. Fresh, bruised, and undeniable.

"Yes. Not mauled," he intervened, making a face at the last word. "More like... claimed. My mate, very claiming."

Shane totally forgot about that part and now he was remembering that exact moment.

He remembered the way his fingers had clawed into Ilya's back as the alpha's knot locked deep inside him, stretching him until he thought he'd break. He remembered the desperate, primal need to leave a mark of his own. He hadn't just let it happen; he had leaned in, his teeth sinking into the hard line of Ilya's collarbone, biting down until he tasted the salt of skin and the sharp, metallic rush of blood in his mouth. It wasn't an assault; it was an anchor. In that moment of absolute, bone-deep friction, they hadn't been an athlete and a lab subject; they had been two halves of a whole, finally fusing back together.

Shane blinked, the phantom taste of iron still lingering on his tongue. He realized he was gripping the edge of the couch so hard his knuckles were white. He looked at Ilya, only to find the alpha watching him with a dark, knowing intensity, as if he could track the exact trajectory of Shane's thoughts through the bond.

"Right. Yeah. Okay. Point taken," Hayden said, clearing his throat and breaking the spell. "Matching luggage. Got it." He looked genuinely unsettled by the sudden, heavy silence between them. "But Shane, seriously. The photos. Vantage or whoever leaked them didn't just want to out you. They wanted to make you look—I don't know—unstable? They're not calling you a victim. They're calling you compromised. Like you've traded your brain for pheromones and can't even be trusted to pick your own skates anymore, let alone play a high-stakes game."

Shane's grip tightened on the edge of the couch until his knuckles turned white. "They want to strip away my agency," he said, his voice dropping to a low. "If I'm just an omega who's 'lost his head' to a bond, they win. They turn my entire career into a cautionary tale about why our kind supposedly doesn't belong in pro sports."

Ilya moved then—a small but significant shift—leaning his shoulder heavily against Shane's. It was a silent, territorial declaration that the camera couldn't miss. A clear answer to anyone questioning who Shane belonged with, and more importantly, that he wasn't standing alone.

"Still," Hayden said, trying to puncture the mounting tension with his usual lack of filter. "The speed of this whole thing... Shane, you bonded at eighteen. You technically count as a child bride. Or groom. Whatever. You skipped the whole 'dating' part and went straight to the permanent scarring."

Shane shot him an unimpressed look. "You were twenty when you got married, Hayden. And you have kids."

"I was actually twenty-two, thank you very much."

"That's not better."

"It is absolutely better. Twenty-two is a fully developed adult. Brain finished cooking. Good decision-making. Mature—"

"You named your first child after your dog."

Hayden pointed a finger at the screen. "That dog was important to me."

"You cried when the vet told you he needed to lose weight."

"He had a thyroid issue, Shane! It was a medical crisis!" Hayden shifted his phone as a loud crash sounded in his background, followed by a high-pitched giggle. He shooed someone away without looking. "Anyway, eighteen is young. It's thinks-energy-drinks-are-a-food-group young. You basically eloped in the middle of a war zone."

"It worked," Ilya said.

The word was short, sharp, and effective. Hayden blinked, the chaos in his house momentarily forgotten. "Excuse me?"

Ilya looked at the screen for the first time. "You married later." He glanced at Hayden's collar, then back at his face. "No mark. We do. Shane has two."

Hayden's hand went automatically to his neck. "I... that's not... we just don't do the..."

Ilya hummed once and looked away.

"Wow," Hayden muttered. "Okay. He's mean. I liked him better when he was the mysterious silent type. Bring back the brooding one."

“That was never him,” Shane said, feeling a strange, protective warmth settle in his chest.

Hayden leaned back, watching the two of them with a newfound curiosity. Another child ran past him in a blur of sticky hands and pajamas. Ilya’s gaze followed the movement, his entire posture softening as he watched the kid disappear off-screen.

“Kids?” Ilya asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Hayden sighed, though his expression softened too. “Four of ‘em. It’s a total disaster zone. Pure chaos, start to finish.”

There was a small beat of silence.

“I want kids,” Ilya said.

The words landed quietly. The room seemed to shift. The hockey scandal, the leaked photos, the threat of Vantage; it all suddenly felt like background noise compared to the quiet gravity of that sentence.

Shane went very still. He didn’t look at the camera; he looked at Ilya, realizing that while he was fighting to save his past, Ilya was already building a bridge to a future Shane hadn’t even dared to dream about.

Hayden exhaled. “Okay. Real talk.” He leaned forward. “The management is acting weird,” he said, lowering his voice even though he was clearly alone. “I tried talking to a couple of the execs. GM, assistant coach. They’re not saying a word to the players. Nothing. It’s like they’ve locked the room down. I think they’re waiting for you to make the first move.”

Shane bit the inside of his cheek, eyes dropping briefly to the floor. He could picture it too clearly. The closed-door meetings. The whispers in the locker room. The way management always tried to control the narrative before it controlled them.

“My mom is handling it,” he said. “And I’m not going to make any statements that hand Vantage leverage.”

Hayden leaned closer to the camera, concern sharpening his expression. “Shane... they’re not going to drop this. You know that, right? Media’s already circling. Sponsors will start calling. The league might get involved if it blows up enough. This could get worse than you think.”

Shane knew. He knew exactly how quickly things could spiral. One headline turning into ten. Ten turning into talk shows, commentary panels, anonymous quotes from “sources inside the organization.” He also knew how teams reacted when they smelled controversy. Protect the brand. Distance the problem. Wait and see if the player survived it.

Still, he shook his head slightly. “I’m aware.”

Hayden watched him carefully. “You sound too calm.”

“I’m not calm.” Shane exhaled slowly. “I’m just not playing this by their rules.”

Even as he said it, the weight of his career pressed in on him. Years of training, of injuries, of pushing through things most people never saw. Everything he had built balanced on how this unfolded. But the decision settled in his chest all the same, firm and unyielding.

He might be worried about his career, but he was not going to let them dictate the game.

By the time he ended the call, the decision had already begun to take shape.

If he stayed quiet and kept his head down, Vantage would win. If he issued a controlled statement, careful and measured, Vantage would still win. The moment they sensed an opening, they would escalate. For now they were threatening his career, applying pressure where it hurt most, but they had already come dangerously close. There was nothing to guarantee they would stop there. Nothing to suggest they would not try to reclaim Ilya, or turn the threat into something more direct.

Their photos were already circulating. Sports outlets, gossip sites, even places that usually ignored hockey entirely. Him with an alpha. Grainy images, zoomed-in frames, speculation layered over speculation. Given that, the most effective move was not to hide. It was to confront. To put his mate in front of them. To show them, publicly and unmistakably, that the alpha they had tried to erase was alive. To stand beside him, visible and unshaken.

They owed him eight years.

The thought alone made bile rise in Shane's throat. The anger inside him felt hotter than it ever had, sharp enough to steady rather than cloud him.

His phone buzzed.

His father. One message. Clear and concise. David Hollander did not call when something could be stated directly, and he never sent multiple texts unless the situation demanded it.

I looked into the names you sent. Doug Renner appears to be something like Vantage's wild card. A doctor running experimental work through the foundation you mentioned. The other name is more important. Richard Weston. I think he's the one to focus on. You're on the right track. Keep going.

Shane bit his lower lip and read the message again.

Days earlier, when he had first come across the names, he had asked his father to dig deeper, to use every contact and old professional connection still available to him. David rarely offered encouragement unless he was confident in what he was seeing.

Now the shape had sharpened.

Renner connected the experiments. The foundation provided the cover. Weston sat higher up, positioned where decisions converged.

The target was no longer abstract.

Shane lowered the phone slowly.

If they were going to step into that world, it would be to stand in front of Richard Weston and force him to see exactly what he had helped create.

The answer, it turned out, was Svetlana.

During their next video call, Shane mentioned the names. He had barely finished when her expression changed, the shift immediate and unmistakable. She went very still, eyes narrowing as she searched her memory. She focused on one name in particular.

“Weston,” she repeated slowly. “I think he met my father through hockey. Sponsorships, charity boards, that kind of thing. They were actually close for a while. He came over to our house more than once. I remember him from that.” She hesitated. “But they stopped seeing each other eventually. Especially after my father retired.”

She swallowed, the implication landing a second later.

“Oh my God. Ilyusha... could he have seen you back then?”

Shane was still processing the connection when Ilya shook his head slightly.

“Don’t remember name,” he said, voice rough.

Shane opened his mouth, about to ask how they were supposed to find Weston in practice, when Svetlana leaned closer to the camera, sudden urgency replacing hesitation.

“Guys, you’re not going to believe this,” she said. “There’s a charity event tomorrow evening. It’s for underfunded young athletes. I’m invited.”

She paused, giving them time to follow.

“One of the sponsors is Vantage. I looked into it as soon as I saw the name.” Her eyes flicked between them. “Weston is on the guest list.”

The room fell silent for a beat.

The coincidence felt too precise to ignore.

“Where?” Shane asked without thinking.

“Toronto.” Svetlana narrowed her eyes slightly. “Shane...”

He felt Ilya before he looked at him. The familiar alpha scent deepened, oakmoss, leather, spice, sharper now, threaded with something intent. Shane resisted the pull to meet his gaze. His thoughts were already tangled, too loud to trust completely.

“Can you get me in?” he asked finally.

The scent intensified. Ilya shifted closer, their arms brushing, the contact deliberate. Shane didn’t move away.

Svetlana looked from one of them to the other, clearly trying to read what was happening in the space between them. "I think so," she said slowly. Then she added, more carefully, "But I don't know, Shane. I'm not sure this is a good idea."

He understood her concern. He was thinking the same thing.

Ilya.

He had not left Shane's side since he arrived. They had barely been apart for days, and this was not a situation where he would step back voluntarily. The question was not whether Ilya would come. It was whether he should.

He had only met a handful of people face to face. Shane's parents, both carrying traces of his scent that made them easier to tolerate. Hayden, who Ilya had accepted in his own measured way. That was all. Even during the short drive to the mailbox, Shane had noticed how rigidly alert he had been, watching everything outside, hand tightening into a fist, swallowing hard as unfamiliar movement passed too close.

Could he handle being in the same room with the man who might have played a role in his capture? With others connected to that world?

Maybe Shane was being selfish. Dragging his mate into that kind of chaos for something that was, at least partly, his own need for confrontation. His own anger.

He risked a glance.

Ilya's brows were slightly drawn, his mouth pressed into the thin line it took whenever he was tense. But his eyes held that same blue fire Shane had seen before. The look from the night he reached the door. Protective. Feral. Certain.

The decision, Shane realized, might not be his alone.

"Maybe it's time," he said quietly.

Ilya turned toward the screen.

"When do we go?" he asked Svetlana.

She studied him for a long moment. Then her gaze shifted to Shane, measuring, weighing, before returning to Ilya.

"Tomorrow evening," she said. "I'll handle the invitations. You handle him."

There was no sharpness in her tone. Just practicality. The calm certainty of someone who had already decided and was waiting for the others to align.

Shane let out a slow breath.

Ilya's hand found his on the cushion. No pressure, no tightening. Just contact. Warm. Steady. Certain.

“Okay,” Shane said.

It was the smallest word for the largest thing.

They left at first light.

Shane had spent a long time trying to convince his parents the decision was the right one. Yuna and David clearly disagreed, neither of them hiding it, but they could only push back so far against the matching determination in both Shane’s and Ilya’s expressions.

They had offered to come with them.

Shane would later swear his throat tightened in that moment. When he glanced at Ilya, he saw the same reaction mirrored there, his eyes bright, fixed on them in quiet recognition.

In the end, they agreed on a compromise. Yuna and David would travel as well and meet them at the hotel where they were supposed to rendezvous with Svetlana. They would not attend the event itself, of course, but they would be close.

Close enough to matter.

Now they were on the road again, settling into another drive that would take several hours. Nearly four, Shane had estimated.

The city skyline, still washed in the pale yellow of early morning, gradually gave way to the long, repetitive lines of the highway. Buildings thinned. Traffic stretched out. The world simplified into asphalt, distant fields, and the low hum of motion.

Ilya sat quietly beside him. Compared to their last drive, he seemed more steady, less coiled. His shoulders weren’t as rigid, his gaze not darting quite as sharply between every passing shape. He still watched the road, still tracked movement instinctively, but there was a rhythm to it now, something more controlled.

Even so, Shane couldn’t stop himself from checking on him from time to time. A quick glance. The set of his jaw. The way his hands rested, open instead of clenched. Small signs, but Shane read them all.

The road stretched ahead in long, uninterrupted lines.

After a while, Ilya shifted slightly in his seat, not restless, just adjusting, his shoulder brushing Shane’s. He didn’t move away. The contact remained, light but intentional.

“You okay?” Shane asked quietly.

A small nod. “Yes.”

But Ilya didn’t look away from the road.

Cars passed them in bursts of speed. A truck rumbled by, loud enough to make Ilya's fingers curl briefly against his thigh before relaxing again. Shane noticed. He noticed everything.

"We don't have to stay long," Shane said. "We go in. We find him. We leave."

Ilya glanced at him then. "You won't leave."

It wasn't a question.

Shane huffed softly. "I will if I have to."

"You won't," Ilya repeated, calm, certain.

Shane didn't argue.

After a moment, Ilya's hand slid across the console, resting near Shane's. Not quite touching at first, then closing the distance. The contact grounded more than it distracted.

"Too many people," Ilya said after a while.

"I know."

"Too many smells."

"I know."

A pause.

"I stay with you."

Shane swallowed. "Yeah."

The highway unspooled ahead of them, quiet and endless, the morning light growing brighter with every mile. The closer they got, the more real it felt. Not just the event. The confrontation. The moment they would step into a room full of people who had spent years deciding things about them without ever having to look them in the eye.

Shane tightened his grip on the wheel.

This time, they would look.

The hotel wasn't quite what Shane had expected. Svetlana had said a friend of a friend was part-owner, and that they would be less noticeable there. It sat in a middle-class district of Toronto, the exterior a little worn at the edges, but the moment they stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted. Clean lines, carefully maintained interiors, a retro aesthetic that felt intentional rather than outdated.

They didn't stop at the reception, just as Svetlana had warned. Shane noticed the clerk glance up briefly as they passed, but no questions followed. The place had the quiet discipline of

somewhere that understood discretion without needing to advertise it.

They moved straight toward the elevators.

Shane slipped his sunglasses off as they entered the lobby light, tucking them away. Beside him, Ilya's attention moved constantly, scanning, measuring, reading every angle of the space the way he always did. Shane took his hand without thinking.

It was becoming second nature now. Holding hands in public. In motion. In places where it should have felt wrong but didn't anymore. The warmth of Ilya's skin grounded him in a way he hadn't expected to rely on. At the same time, the faint, healing ache at his neck pulsed softly beneath his collar, a reminder of everything that had brought them here.

The elevator ride was quiet.

On the fifth floor, they stepped out into a narrow corridor lined with muted carpet and soft lighting. Room 512 was at the far end. As they walked, Shane could feel his heartbeat climbing higher with each step, pressing somewhere behind his throat.

He tried not to show it. Ilya didn't need to know how tight his chest felt, how every possibility kept replaying itself in fragments. But the truth was simple. This wasn't uncertainty anymore. This was exposure. A point where everything they had been building toward could either hold or collapse.

And that realization sat heavy in his ribs.

He glanced at Ilya. He was close, but slightly behind him.

Shane noticed that. The positioning. It had started happening more often without either of them discussing it. Ilya moved like that now in crowded spaces, half a step back, watchful. Not submissive, not distant. Protective in a way that felt instinctive rather than chosen.

It unsettled Shane more than he wanted to admit.

They stopped in front of the door.

Shane raised his fist to knock, then hesitated for just a fraction of a second. He looked at Ilya again. The alpha stood still, hood of borrowed calm over something far more alert underneath. Waiting. Not asking. Just there.

Shane exhaled once, steadying himself, and knocked.

Svetlana looked even more striking in person than she had on camera. Shane noticed it the moment she appeared in the doorway. There was a brief pause, almost a physical one, as she seemed to take them both in at once. Her breath caught so clearly it felt like it changed the air in the hall.

She smiled at Shane first, warm and immediate, but her attention didn't stay there. It slid past him, inevitably, toward the figure just behind.

Ilya.

Shane didn't want to linger in the doorway. Something about open thresholds suddenly felt unsafe, too exposed, like the world could shift its angle and take them from the side. He tightened his grip on Ilya's hand and stepped inside with him, guiding him out of the corridor and into the room where all sightlines were controlled.

Svetlana closed the door behind them.

When Shane turned back, he saw it immediately. Her eyes were already wet, tears gathering without permission, held back only by sheer will. Her lower lip trembled as she pressed it between her teeth, and Shane felt something tighten in his chest in response.

He understood that expression too well. The kind of grief that didn't arrive cleanly, but layered itself over relief until both became indistinguishable.

Svetlana spoke first in Russian.

Soft, rapid words. Familiar cadence. Something about how he looked, how unreal it was to see him standing there like this. Shane didn't catch all of it, but he didn't need to. The meaning was in her voice, not the translation.

Ilya went still.

Then something shifted in his face, subtle but unmistakable. Recognition didn't come all at once. It came in fragments. In the way his shoulders loosened by a fraction. In the way his eyes softened, even if only for a second. Shane exhaled quietly.

He thought back to the first time he had seen Ilya properly. Not the broken version. Not the feral edges or the controlled silence of survival. Just Ilya. Even then, there had been something unfinished about him, like a sentence cut off mid-thought. Now, standing here, it was different. Not fixed. Not healed. But continuing. They had come a long way.

Svetlana reached out hesitantly, stopping just short of touching Ilya's arm, as if asking permission without words. Her voice broke slightly again as she spoke in Russian once more, and this time Ilya's gaze finally met hers fully.

He didn't smile. Not yet. But he stayed.

And for Ilya, Shane realized, that alone was already a kind of answer.

Svetlana finally stepped forward, but still hesitated just before touching him, like her body remembered something her mind was still catching up to. Her fingers hovered in the air for a second too long, trembling slightly, before she let them land on his sleeve.

It was such a small contact that Shane almost missed it. But Ilya didn't.

His entire body went still in a way that wasn't defensive this time. It was recognition. Not of danger, not of strategy, but of something older than either of those things.

Svetlana's breath broke. "You're real," she said, softer now, almost disbelieving. "You're actually here."

Ilya didn't respond immediately. His gaze stayed on her hand where it rested against him, as if he was trying to understand the concept of being touched without consequence.

Then, very quietly, he answered. Just her name. Nothing else. "Sveta."

That was enough.

Something in her face collapsed. Not dramatically. Not loudly. Just a quiet surrender of control she had clearly been holding for years. She stepped forward fully then and pulled him into an embrace.

Ilya froze for half a heartbeat.

Shane felt it instantly, that internal lock engaging, the reflex to calculate, to decide, to brace. But nothing followed. No rejection. No retreat. Just stillness. Then, slowly, almost uncertainly, Ilya lifted one hand and placed it at her back. The contact was awkward at first, like a language he had almost forgotten how to speak. His fingers didn't quite know where to settle. But he stayed there anyway.

Svetlana made a sound against his shoulder, something between a laugh and a sob.

"You got even bigger," Svetlana murmured, her voice caught somewhere between laughter and tears. She leaned back just enough to really look at him, but her hands stayed on his arms, more confident now, like she was testing the reality of him through touch. "How did that even happen?"

Ilya's mouth twitched. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was close enough that something in the room eased.

"You also grew," he said in a rough voice. A pause. "Surprising."

Svetlana's face immediately crumpled into exaggerated offense. She pressed her lips together, then puffed them out dramatically. "Wow. Thank you. So emotional. So heartfelt."

That got something almost like a breath of amusement out of him. Almost.

Then, as if something in her finally caught up with the fact that Shane was standing right there, she turned toward him.

There was a beat of hesitation. Just one. Like she was recalibrating the emotional weight of the room. Then she stepped forward and pulled Shane into an awkward but sincere hug. Shane didn't resist. It wasn't the same as Ilya. It wasn't meant to be. It was careful in a different way, familiar without history in the same bones.

"Hi," Svetlana said against his shoulder, then pulled back with a small, slightly shaky smile. "So we finally meet in person."

She wiped under her eyes quickly, as if annoyed at herself for still crying, and stepped back to give herself space. A few breaths in, a few breaths out. Then she looked between them again, her expression settling into something steadier, more grounded.

“Damn,” Svetlana said, tilting her head slightly as she looked at Shane with open appraisal. “They weren’t lying when they said you’re the league’s hottest player.”

Ilya made a sound that sat somewhere between a scoff and a quiet laugh, exhaling sharply through his nose. The faintest shift of amusement passed over his face, but it was gone just as quickly, like he had allowed it out for half a second and then pulled it back in. Shane felt his cheeks heat immediately.

“Thank you,” he said, a little stiffly, then added more softly, “For everything.”

Svetlana’s attention lingered on him for a moment longer, then drifted downward without hesitation. It landed on the edge of Shane’s collar, where the mating bite was just visible beneath the fabric. Her expression changed. Not shocked exactly. More like recognition sharpening into focus. She lifted one eyebrow and looked straight at Ilya.

“Oh,” she said slowly.

The single syllable carried enough weight to shift the air in the room.

“Yeah. The famous mark,” Shane said, letting out a quiet breath as he tried to regain some composure, as if he could physically push the embarrassment back down where it came from. He cleared his throat. “Shall we?” he added, gesturing toward the seating area in the room.

Svetlana blinked once, then immediately nodded, snapping back into focus.

“Oh, right. Of course. Sorry, I got carried away,” she said quickly, waving a hand at herself as if to reset the moment. “Sit. Please, sit.” She stepped aside, motioning toward the sofa set. “I arranged this room for you. No one comes in or out. Not staff, not security, no one unless I say so.”

Her tone had shifted slightly on that last part. Less emotional now, more practical, like someone who had already started building walls around them the moment she heard their names. Shane noticed it, but didn’t comment. He just nodded once and moved further inside. Ilya followed without hesitation.

Svetlana watched them both for a second longer than necessary, her gaze briefly flicking between Shane and Ilya again, as if confirming they were still real, still here, still standing in the same space.

Then she exhaled, softer this time.

“Okay,” she said. “Now we talk.”

They did talk.

It wasn't the kind of conversation that could ever truly close an eight-year gap, but it moved them forward in fragments. Shane filled in the pieces he had never said out loud during video calls, the parts that didn't fit into short updates or controlled summaries. Svetlana listened without interrupting, only occasionally asking a quiet question, her expression tightening at points where the story bent too sharply.

Ilya spoke less. When he did, it was brief, precise, like he was carefully choosing which parts of himself were allowed to exist in words. But even that was more than Shane had seen him offer most people.

The air in the room stayed emotional, stretched thin between relief and disbelief, like none of them were fully ready to let it settle into something calmer.

At some point, Svetlana stood and poured water for all three of them, as if grounding the moment in something physical would keep it from drifting apart. And then the gala came up.

The shift was immediate.

It wasn't loud. No one announced it. It simply arrived in the conversation and changed the weight of the room.

Svetlana set her glass down first, her posture straightening slightly.

"Your suits are ready," Svetlana said, swallowing as she gestured toward the wardrobe on the side of the room. "I'll be in 520, just down the corridor. I'll get ready there too. The event starts at eight, but I was thinking we should arrive a little later."

Shane nodded once, already aligning it in his head. "Same. If we go in after eight-thirty, most people will already be inside."

"Big entrance, huh?" Svetlana said, forcing a small, tense smile.

There was a brief pause.

Svetlana's smile didn't reach her eyes this time. When she looked up, her gaze was fixed directly on Ilya.

"I heard from him," she said.

Ilya didn't look at Svetlana. He didn't look at Shane either. His gaze stayed fixed on a thin scratch in the wooden floor, as if it had suddenly become the only stable thing in the room.

"From who?" Shane asked immediately, before anyone else could speak.

Ilya looked up at him for a fraction of a second, then Svetlana answered first. "Alexei."

The name landed like something sharp and uninvited. Shane's brows drew together. He shifted his gaze to Ilya instantly, watching for a reaction. Ilya didn't give him one at first. Only a slight tightening at the corner of his jaw.

“He knows?” Ilya asked finally. His voice was flat, controlled, but there was something strained underneath it. “Me?”

Svetlana nodded once, firm. “We haven’t spoken in years. Not properly. The last time—”

She stopped herself. Shane felt the weight of that unfinished sentence anyway.

“What does he want?” Shane asked, quieter now, like he already knew he wouldn’t like the answer.

Svetlana hesitated.

“Not what I expected,” she said carefully. “He said... he wanted to make things right. Or at least try. "He's not inside anymore. Not for years. They cut him loose after a restructuring. Officially, anyway. But he still has old contacts. People who owe him things. Quiet channels."

Ilya let out a small, humorless breath.

“Make things right,” he repeated.

The words sounded wrong in his mouth. He finally looked up, and when he did, it was straight at Svetlana.

“He was there,” Ilya said. Not a question. A fact that had been sitting somewhere for years. “When they took me.”

Svetlana didn't deny it. Her eyes went still.

“He said he didn’t know everything,” she added, softer now. “He said he thought it was a standard transfer. That you were moved to another program, not—” She stopped. “When he found out what actually happened, he tried to reach me. I didn't answer for a long time.”

"Smart," Ilya said.

It wasn't a compliment. It wasn't an insult either. Just an observation.

Shane watched him carefully. Ilya's jaw was tight but his hands were still, loose against his knees. Processing, not reacting. Shane had learned to read the difference.

"Why now?" Shane asked.

Svetlana looked at him. "He saw the photos. From the river." She paused. "He recognized Ilya."

The room held that for a moment.

"He's not asking for anything," she added quickly. “He said that. Specifically. He had something; documents, internal records from before he left. He already sent them to me. No conditions. I have them.”

Ilya was quiet for a long time.

"No conditions," he said finally.

"That's what he said."

Another silence. Then Ilya exhaled, slow and controlled.

"I don't forgive him," he said. Simply, flatly, like stating a fact about the weather. "But." He stopped. Started again. "If it helps..."

"Then we take it," Shane said quietly.

Ilya looked at him.

"Yes," he said. "No forgiveness."

Shane felt some of the tightness in his chest ease. With these new documents in their hands, their position would be stronger, giving them more leverage and firmer ground to stand on.

By the time Svetlana left the room, there were still hours before the gala.

Shane remained where he was for a while, sitting in the quiet as his thoughts splintered in too many directions to follow. Eventually, he pushed himself up and went to the bathroom, splashing cold water over his face, grounding himself in something simple and physical.

He found himself thinking about Ilya. More specifically, about the way he held himself together.

Shane had always known Ilya was strong, but today it had settled into something else entirely. After everything he had endured, he still didn't look as fractured as Shane felt. Not on the surface. But Shane knew better than to trust that. Most of it was control. Deliberate, practiced control.

He had been like that even at eighteen.

Back then, with the weight of the world already pressing on his shoulders, Ilya had still managed to present something else to the outside world. Sharp humor, easy confidence, that disarming, flirtatious edge that made people underestimate him. He let others see what he chose, and very little beyond that. The rest stayed locked behind something harder, something Shane had only caught glimpses of.

He remembered those moments now with painful clarity. The rare times Ilya would go still, his attention drifting somewhere far away, his expression flattening into something rigid and unreadable. His lips would press into that same tight line Shane now understood all too well. Even then, it had meant something was wrong.

Back then, Shane had believed he could reach him. Had started to. And then they had taken him. His mate. His first love.

The thought still burned, sharp and immediate, no matter how many years had passed. If anything, it burned hotter now that he knew exactly what had been done to him. It made the anger settle deeper, more focused, harder to shake.

And then there was Alexei.

Shane lifted his head, looking at his reflection in the mirror as he tried to piece the timeline together. After the Junior World Cup final, they had parted reluctantly. Ilya had gone back to Russia, and for weeks Shane had heard nothing. Then the news came, vague and incomplete. A private training session. An incident. Disappearance.

At the time, it hadn't made sense.

Now it did. Or at least, it started to.

There were gaps in his memory from that period, things blurred or dulled by the shock of the bond snapping under pressure. He knew that now. But even through that haze, pieces were beginning to align. Ilya had said it himself. The experiments hadn't started in the facility. They had started earlier, quietly, in controlled environments. Training sessions. Observations disguised as performance tracking.

Lighter, maybe. But not harmless.

Enough to destabilize him. Enough to push him off balance at the worst possible moments. Shane remembered it now in flashes. The sudden shifts. The way Ilya could become too protective without warning, or too aggressive on the ice, crossing lines he normally held with precision. Back then it had felt like intensity. Now it felt like interference.

And Alexei had known.

More than that, he had likely been part of it. If not directly, then close enough to see exactly what was happening and choose not to stop it. Shane's jaw tightened as he stared at himself. Maybe he had even helped set it in motion. Signed off on something. Looked the other way in exchange for something else. There were too many possibilities, and none of them were acceptable.

Then he had stepped into Vantage. And now, suddenly, he was sorry.

Shane let out a quiet, humorless breath.

He understood Ilya's reaction completely. There were lines you didn't come back from, no matter how much time passed or how sincere the regret sounded after the fact. Who traded their own brother into something like that and expected forgiveness later? No one deserved it.

If Alexei had been standing in front of him right now, Shane was fairly certain he would have said something he couldn't take back. Or worse, done something he didn't regret at all.

He exhaled slowly, forcing the tension out of his shoulders.

Whatever came next, he knew one thing for certain. He was on Ilya's side. Completely.

When he returned to the room, Ilya had moved from where he'd been sitting and was now standing in front of the open wardrobe, staring at the two brand-new suits hanging inside as if they required more consideration than they should.

Shane approached him from behind, closing the distance without hesitation, and rested his chin in the hollow of Ilya's shoulder. The contact was quiet but grounding, the warmth of him easing something tight in Shane's chest.

"We still have time," he murmured, his voice low, close to his skin. "Are you okay?"

Ilya turned his head slightly before answering, angling his face toward him. His hands came to rest on Shane's waist, settling just above the curve of his hips, firm but not possessive. He held him there for a moment, as if measuring something he didn't quite put into words.

"Tense," he said simply.

Shane nodded against him, like that was exactly what he had expected.

The tension between them was a physical thing, thick and heavy, vibrating in the narrow space between the wardrobe and the bed. Ilya's hands tightened on Shane's waist, his thumbs tracing the line of his hip bones through the fabric of his shirt.

"Then stop looking at the suits," Shane whispered, his breath hot against the column of Ilya's neck. He let his hands slide up Ilya's chest, feeling the frantic, powerful thrum of the alpha's heart. "They're just armor, baby."

Shane pulled back just enough to look him in the eye, a challenge sparking in his gaze. He reached out, his fingers hooking into the waistband of Ilya's trousers, tugging him forward. "Though I think my alpha would look good in anything." He tilted his head slightly. "Or nothing at all."

Ilya's eyes darkened, the pupils blowing wide until the blue was nearly swallowed by black. The menace Shane had come to crave flickered to life; that predatory, focused stillness that made the air feel electrified.

"Careful," Ilya rumbled, his voice dropping an octave, vibrating right through Shane's bones.

"Or what?" Shane countered, tilting his head back to expose the dark, healing mark on his neck. "You'll claim me again? I think we're a bit past threats, don't you?"

Ilya didn't waste another second on words. He surged forward, his mouth crashing against Shane's in a kiss that tasted of desperation and possessive fire.

For a while, they kissed without restraint, as if the world beyond the room had ceased to exist. The storm waiting for them, everything that had been building toward the night ahead, slipped out of reach for a few stolen moments.

It wasn't hurried. It wasn't desperate.

The rhythm shifted between them naturally. At times deeper, more insistent, at times slow and almost tentative, soft enough to feel like rediscovery. They lingered there, learning each other again in small, quiet ways, tasting, memorizing, as if eight years could be undone through touch alone.

By the time Shane finally pulled back, his breath was uneven. He rested his forehead against Ilya's cheek, eyes falling shut for a second as he steadied himself. Their skin was still warm, still faintly damp, the air between them heavy but no longer suffocating.

Ilya, like he couldn't quite help himself, leaned in and pressed a brief kiss to the tip of Shane's nose.

They both smiled. Small, quiet, but real.

"Do you want to try the suits?" Shane asked after a moment, lifting his gaze to meet Ilya's.

Ilya held his eyes for a second, then gave a short nod. His thumb came up, brushing over Shane's lower lip, wiping away the last trace of moisture with an absent, almost thoughtful gesture that still managed to send a slow warmth curling through Shane's chest.

Shane exhaled softly, then reached for the garment bags Svetlana had left. He unzipped them and laid both suits out across the bed.

They were similar at first glance. Both black, both tailored, both clearly chosen with care. But the differences revealed themselves the longer he looked. One had a sharper structure, more defined shoulders, something colder in its lines. The other was cut to move, the fabric softer, catching the light differently, less rigid, more... alive.

"Of course she didn't make it easy," Shane muttered, half amused.

He picked one up, studying it briefly before stepping closer to Ilya and holding it up against him, measuring the fit with a practiced eye.

"Stand still," he said, though there was no real bite to it.

Ilya obeyed without comment, watching him instead.

Shane adjusted the jacket across his shoulders, smoothing the fabric down his chest, fingers lingering just a second longer than necessary. He stepped back, then forward again, correcting the angle, already slipping into that familiar, focused mindset that had always grounded him.

"Svetlana better have guessed right," he murmured. Then said, "Okay. You first."

Shane stepped closer and started helping Ilya out of his clothes, fingers working with practiced ease, like this was something familiar, something they had always done. Keeping it from turning into something else was... difficult.

It always was.

For a second, Shane felt himself pulled back to those first days after Ilya had come back. Back when he hadn't remembered the bond, hadn't remembered him; just a wild, half-feral stranger with sharp eyes and a body Shane couldn't stop reacting to. The confusion of it. The pull. The way it had dragged something long-buried back to the surface and refused to let it go.

He exhaled quietly, trying to stay in the present.

As he pulled Ilya's shirt up and over his head, Ilya caught his wrists and pressed Shane's hands flat against his chest, holding them there. Shane rolled his eyes like that might be enough to shake him off, but of course, it wasn't.

It never was.

Ilya tilted his head slightly, like he genuinely didn't understand the problem, and then, with one hand, let his touch drift —slow, deliberate— down Shane's back, over the curve of his waist, lower.

Shane's breath hitched before he could stop it.

"Ilya. Behave," he said, aiming for flat, getting something thinner.

"No."

Shane stilled, halfway through reaching for the button of Ilya's trousers, then lifted his head, meeting those blue eyes.

"No?"

"No."

Shane let out a short breath, something between a laugh and disbelief. "Yes," he shot back, the word sharper this time. Then, softer, a hint of a smile slipping through despite himself, "Behave."

There was a flicker of something familiar in his chest. *Déjà vu*, warm and strange.

"Be good," he added, nodding toward the suit laid out on the bed. "I want to see you in this."

Ilya didn't answer right away. His gaze dropped briefly to Shane's mouth, then back up again, something unreadable settling in his expression.

He didn't stop immediately, though. He took his time, just enough to be deliberate about it, just enough to make it a point, before finally letting Shane continue.

After tying the last knot of the tie, Shane stepped back and took his mate in properly.

The sight hit harder than he expected.

Something tightened in his throat as another image surfaced, uninvited but vivid. The last time he had seen Ilya in a suit like this. The night before the final game. Ilya had shown up at his hotel door, dressed in black, like this was nothing, like it wasn't reckless in a way that could have cost them everything. The team dinner, the risk, the secret they had somehow managed to keep intact until then.

Shane hadn't been able to look away.

Of course he hadn't.

He had dragged him inside almost immediately, urgency and want tangling together, barely giving himself time to think.

Now, standing in front of him, Ilya was broader, sharper in the edges, marked by everything he had survived. But none of it took away from him. If anything, it made him harder to look away from.

More.

"Do you remember the last time I saw you in a suit like this?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya's brows lifted for a second, then he gave a small nod. "I remember," he said. A pause, his gaze settling on Shane. "But mostly you."

Shane felt the heat rise instantly, spreading up his neck, catching at his ears. Of course he would say that.

"I fell in love with you all over again," Shane admitted before he could stop himself. The words came out softer than he intended, but no less true. "That's when I knew I'd chosen the right alpha."

Ilya closed the distance in two steps.

"No," he said.

Shane frowned faintly. "It's not a competition, Ilya."

"No." His voice was steady, certain. "Is truth." He lifted a hand, brushing his fingers lightly along Shane's jaw, like he was tracing something he already knew by heart. "I chose you. Wanted you. From first moment. Your scent. Your eyes. Your body." A slight pause, something almost like satisfaction flickering in his expression. "Freckles. I thought... perfect omega."

Shane let out a quiet breath, trying to piece it together. "You mean when we stayed at the same hotel and ended up—"

Ilya reached up and touched the edge of his ear, still warm, still betraying him.

"No. Before."

Shane's breath caught.

The previous finals.

Seventeen. That was the first time. He hadn't understood it then, not even a little. As far as he'd known, Ilya had disliked him. Maybe worse. He had been everywhere on the ice, always too close, hitting harder than necessary, driving him into the boards with a focus that had felt personal. He had even thought, at one point, that Ilya had a problem with omegas. How was he supposed to know that was —however poorly executed— flirting?

"Yes, my Shane," Ilya murmured, leaning in just enough for his voice to brush against his ear. "Now you remember." A beat. "You were mine. From then."

Shane swallowed, something warm and steady settling beneath his ribs despite everything waiting for them outside that room.

"Always," he said softly. Then, meeting his eyes, "and forever."

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Ilya stepped closer.

Not much. Just enough to close what little distance was left between them, enough for Shane to feel the shift in his presence, the heat of him, the intent. His hand came up again, slower this time, resting briefly at Shane's neck, thumb brushing just under his jaw.

Shane's breath caught. He didn't look away.

"After," he said.

The word landed between them, quiet but unmistakable.

Ilya's eyes darkened slightly, something sharp and knowing flickering there.

"After," he repeated.

The venue hosting the gala was far too lavish for a charity event. Crystal chandeliers blazed overhead, scattering light across gold-trimmed walls and polished marble floors. Every detail felt deliberate, excessive. The silverware gleamed, perfectly aligned at each setting, and the servers moved in seamless unison, dressed identically, like part of the décor rather than people. It gave the impression that far more money had gone into staging the night than would ever be raised by it.

Shane felt it settle uneasily in his chest as they stepped inside.

With Ilya at his side and Svetlana just ahead of them, guiding without drawing attention, he crossed the threshold and immediately felt the shift. The room was already crowded, voices overlapping into a low, constant hum, but it didn't stay that way for long.

Heads began to turn.

Not all at once. Not dramatically. But enough.

A glance here. A pause there. Recognition moving through the room in quiet ripples as more people noticed, looked again, lingered.

Shane resisted the instinct to tighten his grip on Ilya's arm. Forced himself to move like this was nothing. Like he belonged here. Like they both did.

This was what they had chosen. Now all that was left was to follow through.

Beside him, Ilya had gone still in a way that was anything but relaxed. The tension in him was immediate, visible if you knew where to look. His shoulders were set, muscles drawn tight beneath the clean lines of the suit, his gaze moving constantly, mapping exits, measuring distance, tracking movement. Not overwhelmed. Prepared.

Shane tilted his head slightly toward him, just enough to speak without drawing attention.

"Hey," he said quietly.

Ilya's eyes flicked to him for a fraction of a second.

Shane didn't smile. Didn't soften it. Just held his gaze, steady.

"I'm fine," Ilya replied, like he already knew what Shane was asking.

They moved further into the room.

Svetlana navigated ahead of them with the practiced ease of someone who had grown up in these spaces, smiling at faces Shane didn't recognize, exchanging brief pleasantries that revealed nothing. She was very good at this. Shane filed that away.

He kept his own expression neutral. Controlled. The version of himself he had spent eight years perfecting; the one that gave nothing away, that smiled at the right moments and deflected with practiced ease. It had always felt like armor.

Tonight it felt different. Tonight he wasn't hiding behind it. He was wearing it on purpose.

The first person to approach was a woman Shane recognized from league events, a board member whose name he couldn't immediately place. She stopped in front of them with the particular smile of someone who had decided to be the first.

"Shane Hollander," she said. Her eyes moved briefly to Ilya, then back. "I wasn't expecting to see you tonight."

"I was invited," Shane said simply.

A beat. Her smile didn't waver, but something behind it recalibrated.

"Of course." She extended a hand. "And your—"

"My mate," Shane said.

He hadn't planned it. It came out clean and flat and entirely without apology.

Beside him, Ilya said nothing. But his hand found the small of Shane's back, light and certain.

The woman blinked once. "Of course," she said again, slightly differently this time. She shook Ilya's hand. Moved on.

Shane exhaled through his nose.

"Okay?" Ilya murmured.

"Fine," Shane said. "That was the easy one."

They moved through the room in a loose formation, Svetlana always within reach but never too close. The crowd had the particular density of people who were used to being in rooms like this; unhurried, deliberate, aware of being watched without showing it.

Shane kept his eyes moving.

He had memorized the guest list as best he could from what Svetlana had been able to pull. Weston would be here, that much they knew. The question was where, and when, and whether they would reach him before anyone reached them first.

A server passed with a tray of champagne. Shane took a glass without drinking from it. Ilya didn't take one at all.

"North side," Svetlana said quietly, appearing at Shane's left shoulder without warning. "There's a cluster near the donor wall. That's usually where the hosts position themselves early in the evening."

Shane nodded once. "We circle first. Don't go straight in."

"Agreed."

Ilya said nothing. He was tracking something across the room, his gaze moving with that particular focus Shane had learned to recognize; not anxiety, not threat response. Something more deliberate than either.

"What is it?" Shane asked under his breath.

"Nothing yet," Ilya said.

That qualifier sat uneasily in Shane's chest.

They kept moving.

It was Svetlana who noticed her first.

"Shane." Her voice was very quiet. "Don't look immediately. Woman near the second pillar on the left. Grey dress, older. She's been watching you since we came in."

Shane counted three seconds before he looked.

The woman was exactly where Svetlana had said. Middle-aged, composed, almost deliberately unremarkable at first glance. She held a glass she didn't drink from, standing just outside the nearest cluster of guests, her posture careful, contained. Her attention was on them, steady and searching in a way that didn't feel accidental. Not hostile. Not curious in the ordinary way.

Something more specific than either.

She looked away the moment their eyes met.

"Her," Ilya said.

Shane turned to him slightly. "What?"

"She sent mama's necklace. Helped me escape."

Shane looked back at the pillar. The woman had moved.

"She's gone," Svetlana said.

"No," Ilya said. "Coming this way."

He was right.

She arrived without ceremony, moving through a gap in the crowd with the quiet efficiency of someone who had planned the route. Up close she was unremarkable in the specific way that felt deliberate with clothes that didn't draw attention, no jewelry, hair pulled back neatly. She stopped in front of Shane.

She didn't look at Ilya directly. Shane noticed that. The careful, practiced avoidance of someone who couldn't afford to be seen acknowledging him.

"I'm sorry," she said under her breath, eyes fixed somewhere past his shoulder. "It was the only way. The only thing I could do."

Ilya shook his head once, then again, small and controlled.

"No."

Her fingers tightened slightly around the glass.

"I tried to cover it," she went on quietly. "After you were gone. Delayed things. Misdirected where I could. It wasn't much."

Ilya's gaze flicked past her, scanning the room.

“Enough.”

She swallowed, a brief pause before she spoke again.

“If you need anything,” she said, her voice even lower now, “I’m still in a position to help. I have access. Names. Doors that are still open.”

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “Thank you.”

“We’ll reach out,” Shane added smoothly, as if it were nothing more than polite acknowledgment.

Svetlana was already stepping in, her movement natural, unobtrusive. “Come with me,” she said lightly, guiding the woman a few steps away, just far enough to disappear into the edge of another conversation.

A moment later, a number was exchanged, quick and discreet.

Ilya’s hand pressed briefly against his back, warm even through the fabric. Shane was still half-turned after Svetlana when she reappeared at his side.

“Weston,” Svetlana said under her breath.

Shane looked up.

Across the room, near the donor wall exactly where Svetlana had predicted, a group had shifted slightly, opening a gap in the arrangement of bodies.

And there he was.

Shane recognized him immediately. The conference photographs. The box seat images his father had found. The particular quality of presence that belonged to men who had spent decades being the most important person in every room they entered.

He was talking to someone, relaxed, unhurried. A glass in one hand. Smiling at something the other person had said.

Shane felt the anger arrive before he had fully processed the sight.

Beside him, Ilya had gone completely still. Not the prepared stillness from earlier. Something different. Something Shane felt more than saw; a change in the air, in the particular quality of Ilya's silence.

Shane turned to look at him. Ilya's eyes were fixed on Weston. His face was unreadable. Perfectly, carefully unreadable, in the way it only became when he was working very hard to make it so.

"Ilya," Shane said quietly. Ilya didn't respond immediately. "Ilya."

He turned. His eyes met Shane's, and for just a fraction of a second —less than that, barely a flicker —something moved through them. Recognition. Not of Shane. Of something older.

“You know him,” Shane said.

It wasn't a question.

Ilya held his gaze for a moment. Then, slowly, he looked past him again, back across the room.

“Yes,” he said.

The word was quiet. Certain. Shane felt something in his chest drop.

“How?” he asked, lower now.

Ilya's eyes stayed on Weston. Not fixed in shock, not frozen. Tracking. Measuring. The way he looked at anything that might become a threat.

“He came sometimes,” Ilya said after a moment. The words were careful, like he was sorting through fragments as he spoke. “Not often. Not like the others. He watched more.”

Shane's jaw tightened. *Watched*. Of course he had.

Ilya's brow furrowed slightly, something else surfacing.

“I remember him,” he continued. “Because he spoke about you.”

That landed harder than anything else. Shane went very still.

“About me?” he asked.

Ilya nodded once.

“He didn't use your name,” he said. “But I knew.” A faint shift in his expression, something colder now.

Shane's throat felt dry. “What did he say?”

Ilya's gaze flicked to him then. Just for a second. Enough.

“*Excellent candidate*,” he almost spat.

Across the room, Weston was still smiling, one hand resting lightly on the back of someone's chair, entirely at ease. A man in control of the room, of the narrative, of everything that happened within it. Entirely unaware.

Shane looked at him. Really looked. Not the polished version. Not the donor, not the public face. He tried to see what Ilya had seen. A man standing behind glass, observing. Deciding. He felt something hot and immediate rise in his chest.

Shane hadn't told him. He had said Vantage's upper management. He had said a name. He hadn't said this. He hadn't known Ilya would recognize the face.

"I should have told you more," Shane said, very quietly.

Ilya shook his head. Once. Small.

"Doesn't matter," he said.

"It does," Shane insisted, his voice tightening despite himself. "You walked in here blind to ___"

"No."

The word cut through cleanly. Shane stopped.

Ilya was looking at him now. Fully. No distraction, no split attention between him and the room. Just that steady, unflinching focus.

"I know what they are," Ilya continued. "I know what he is."

His gaze shifted back to Weston. The distance between them didn't seem to matter. Not really.

"Then he'll also know exactly what he's looking at," Shane said. There was a quiet edge to his voice now. He wanted him to see it. To see that despite everything he'd done to his mate, Ilya was still here, still standing.

For a moment, Ilya just stood there, eyes on Weston, the noise of the room moving around them like it belonged to another world.

"Good," he said.

Shane glanced at him. Ilya's expression hadn't changed much. Still controlled. Still contained. But there was something underneath it now. Not the chaos Shane had seen before. Not the fracture. Something colder. Something deliberate.

"He should," Ilya added. "So he understands. So he sees," he finished, quieter, but no less certain.

Shane didn't respond out loud. He didn't need to. They were thinking the same thing.

They crossed the room.

Svetlana moved first, angling toward the donor wall with the unhurried confidence of someone who belonged there. Shane followed a half step behind, Ilya at his side. The crowd parted without meaning to, the way crowds did around people who moved like they had somewhere specific to be.

Weston was still talking when they reached him.

He didn't notice them immediately. Shane used those seconds. Took in the details up close that photographs hadn't given him; the way Weston held himself, the slight cant of his head when he listened, the quality of his attention. A man who was very good at performing interest without feeling it.

Then someone in the group shifted, and Weston's gaze moved. It landed on Shane first. Recognition came quickly; the kind that happened when someone had been following a situation closely enough to have a face memorized. His expression didn't change dramatically. A slight recalibration. The smile staying in place through sheer practice.

"Shane Hollander," Weston said, his voice smooth, perfectly measured. "I wasn't expecting you tonight."

"I keep hearing that," Shane replied.

Weston's attention shifted then, almost idly, toward Ilya.

And stopped.

It was subtle. So subtle most people in the room wouldn't have noticed it. But Shane did. The fraction of a second where the ease slipped, where the calculation came too fast, too sharp. Weston's gaze didn't just land on Ilya, it caught. Recognition flickered before it could be buried, something old and unwanted surfacing behind carefully trained neutrality.

He recovered quickly. Of course he did.

"And your guest," Weston said, as if nothing had happened.

"My mate," Shane answered.

That earned him a smile.

"Of course," Weston said. "The coverage has been quite—"

"We should talk," Shane cut in. "Privately."

Weston held his gaze for a moment, weighing something. The room, the witnesses, the risk.

"I'm not sure this is the right setting for—"

"It's the setting we have," Shane said.

A pause stretched between them. Weston looked at him, then back at Ilya. The smile didn't disappear, but it changed. Thinner now. Less ornamental, more deliberate.

"Give us a moment," he said to the group around him.

They stepped away with practiced ease, conversation dissolving just enough to create space without drawing attention. But it was too late for that. People were already watching. Not openly. Not yet. But the shift had started.

Shane reached into his jacket and took out the envelope. It held everything they had managed to gather so far: Hayden's findings, his father's research, what Svetlana had uncovered, and the files Alexei had sent. Combined with what the woman inside the facility had risked to get out—the one who had helped Ilya get out—it might finally be enough. At least, Shane hoped it would be.

He watched Weston's eyes drop to it. Something changed in his face. Small. Controlled. But there

"Internal records," he said, keeping his voice level. "Financial transfers. Facility logs. Subject tracking. I know how this works."

Weston's expression didn't change, but his focus sharpened.

"Shane," he said, gently, like he was handling something fragile. "I think you're under a significant amount of stress right now. The last few weeks have clearly been difficult. For anyone in your position." His gaze slid briefly to Ilya and back, deliberate, surgical. "A newly bonded omega, navigating a very public situation. It's understandable that things might feel more urgent than they are."

Shane felt it as it happened. The narrative forming around him in real time. Emotional. Compromised. Unreliable.

He almost admired it. Almost.

"Oh, you know I'm not 'newly' bonded," Shane said. "That's an interesting response to documentation."

"I'd be happy to have my legal team review whatever you believe you have," Weston replied smoothly. "But I would encourage you to consider whether this is the moment. Whether this is the place." His voice lowered slightly, not softer but more pointed. "You've worked very hard for your career. It would be a shame to damage it further over something that could be handled more discreetly."

The threat sat there, wrapped in civility.

Before Shane could respond, Ilya moved.

Not toward Weston. Not aggressively. Just one step forward, closing the space by the smallest margin. It was enough.

Weston's eyes snapped back to him.

And this time, he didn't hide it fast enough. Recognition didn't flicker. It landed. Not fear. Not quite. But something close to it. Something that belonged to a different room, a colder one, where control had been absolute and consequences had been theoretical. That control was gone now.

Ilya looked at him.

Completely still. No visible tension, no outward threat. Just presence. Solid, undeniable.

"You remember me," he said.

It wasn't a question. Weston's jaw tightened.

"I don't know what you think you're implying—"

"You remember me. I know. I was your best—" The word caught. Just for a second. Shane felt it more than heard it, the way the bond tightened, the way something old and sharp scraped against the inside of Ilya's throat. Ilya's eyes didn't leave Weston's face. "—prototype."

The room around them had begun to shift more noticeably now. Conversations thinning, attention tilting in their direction.

Weston didn't answer.

"I remember you," Ilya said.

There was no rise in his voice. No anger. That made it worse. The words carried the weight of something that had been held in place for years, unchanged, waiting.

Shane felt it settle over the space like pressure.

"Subject A-2841," Ilya added.

The number came out clean. Deliberate. A nearby conversation stopped entirely. Weston's composure fractured for the first time. Not fully. Not publicly. But enough. His shoulders stiffened, his gaze sharpening into something less controlled, more immediate.

"I strongly suggest you lower your voice," he said.

"Why?" Ilya asked.

No hesitation. No inflection.

Just a question Weston couldn't answer without confirming everything.

That was the moment the room tipped.

Shane saw it happen. Phones appearing. People turning more openly now, no longer pretending not to listen.

He looked at Ilya. Ilya looked back. No words passed between them. None needed to. They had already made this decision long before they stepped into the room.

Shane turned back to Weston. And stopped playing along.

"His name is Ilya Rozanov," he said. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. The room was already listening. "He was a professional hockey player. He disappeared eight years ago

after an international tournament." Shane took a step forward, not aggressive, but grounding himself in the space. "He was declared dead fourteen months later. Not after years. Months. Because someone decided that was more convenient."

"That's enough," Weston said sharply.

Shane didn't stop.

"He wasn't dead," he continued. "He was held in a research facility. For eight years. Under a program funded and protected by Vantage Sports Technologies."

The name landed. Harder this time. Shane held Weston's gaze.

"You don't get to make this quiet," he said. "Not anymore."

Weston's face had changed. The polish was still there, but it no longer held the same weight. Something underneath had shifted, calculating faster now, looking for exits that weren't there.

"You're making a very serious accusation," he said. "One that will have consequences."

"I know," Shane said. A beat passed. Then, quieter: "So are you."

Silence spread outward from them, not empty but charged, the kind that came right before something irreversible.

Ilya didn't move. Didn't look away.

"I'm living proof of what they did," he said, the words forced out with raw, unfiltered force.

That was the moment it broke.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. But completely.

Weston stood there, looking at him, and for the first time since Shane had walked into the room, he looked like a man who understood he was no longer controlling the outcome.

Shane let the silence sit for a second longer. Then, evenly: "You'll be hearing from my lawyer," he said. "Soon."

No theatrics. Just inevitability. He didn't wait for an answer. He turned, and Ilya turned with him, and Svetlana fell into step beside them, and they walked back through the room the same way they had entered it; together, visible, unhidden.

The crowd parted. This time it felt different.

The night air hit them the moment they stepped outside. Cold. Clean. The kind of cold that felt earned.

Shane stopped on the steps for a moment, just breathing. Beside him, Ilya did the same. Svetlana stood slightly apart, her phone already in her hand, thumb moving. Damage control, Shane assumed, or the beginning of it.

He didn't ask. There would be time for that.

"Okay?" he said.

Ilya turned to look at him.

He considered the question seriously, the way he considered everything... fully, without performing an answer.

"Yes," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yes." A beat. "Different kind of tense."

Shane almost laughed. It came out as something quieter, something that sat between exhaustion and relief.

They took a car back to the hotel.

Nobody spoke much. Svetlana looked out the window. Ilya sat beside Shane, their shoulders pressed together, and Shane felt the warmth of him all the way through.

The city moved past the glass.

Back in the room, Shane set the jacket over the chair, loosened his tie, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Ilya stayed by the window for a while, looking out over the city, the lights stretching endlessly below like nothing had shifted, like nothing had broken open. Then he turned, crossed the room without a word, and sat down beside him.

They didn't speak.

The adrenaline hadn't left yet. It still hummed under Shane's skin, sharp and restless, but it had nowhere to go now. It settled instead, turning heavy, sinking into his bones. The night pressed in around them, thick with everything that had just happened and everything that hadn't happened yet.

It wasn't over. Not even close.

Somewhere out there, people were already talking. Watching. Deciding what this meant, what they were worth, how far it would go. By morning, it would be louder. By Monday, it would be something else entirely.

Shane exhaled slowly, staring at nothing.

Beside him, Ilya was very still. Not tense, not coiled for once; just present, solid in a way that felt almost unreal after everything that had almost taken him away.

For a long time, they just sat there.

Alive.

And waiting for whatever came next.

"What happens now?" Ilya asked.

Shane exhaled.

"Lawyer gets the originals tomorrow morning. Journalists get their copies. Mom handles the statement." He paused. "And then it's not quiet anymore."

Ilya nodded slowly.

"Not quiet," he repeated. Like he was testing the shape of it.

Shane looked at him.

"Ilya Rozanov," he said, savoring the weight of the full name.

Ilya looked at him.

"Yes," he said.

Shane reached over and took his hand.

"Thank you. For everything. For holding. For remembering. For coming back to me."

Ilya's fingers tightened around his.

"Hollander," he replied after a moment, that deep voice Shane remembered so clearly from years ago threading through the silence. Shane smiled faintly. "Thank you for waiting," he said quietly. "For not letting me go."

They sat like that for a long time. The city outside going on being itself, indifferent and bright, while the room stayed quiet and the pages sat between them and everything that came next waited patiently on the other side of tonight.

Eventually Ilya spoke.

"Shane."

"Yeah."

"Earlier." A pause. "You said after."

Shane turned to look at him.

Ilya's eyes were steady. That particular blue, the one Shane had spent eight years not letting himself think about too directly.

"Yes," Shane said.

"It is after," Ilya said.

Shane looked at him for a moment.

Then he reached up and loosened his tie the rest of the way.

"Yeah," he said. "It is."

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I am truly sorry for the long wait. So much has happened since the last chapter, and I ended up scrapping and rewriting a significant portion of this one. It has been quite a rollercoaster for me. I realized that I've become deeply immersed in this particular version of Shane and Ilya, which is probably why I took a bit longer than expected to get it just right.

But don't worry, this is not the end. There will be an epilogue! My babies truly deserve a happy ending, far away from any gloom.

I can't thank you enough for reading this far, and for all the kudos and comments. A special shout-out to those who wrote long comments, caught the details I had in mind but didn't explicitly state, and shared their theories. You've put so much soul into this story along with me! 💖

Love you all! I'm not sure exactly when the epilogue will be up, but I hope not to keep you waiting as long this time!

If you wanna cry together, my [twitter](#).

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

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

"Oh my God, Ilya, that was so good!"

Shane called out across the ice, watching his mate glide toward him on the brand new skates his parents had given him for his birthday. He blinked quickly, clearing his eyes before Ilya could see.

Seeing him on the ice again was a genuine miracle. The moment Ilya's blades had first cut into the surface, Shane had been transported eight years back. He had almost felt the impact of a young, aggressive Russian opponent charging into him deliberately, had almost heard the sound of that first collision on a different rink, a different lifetime.

Ilya's new experimentally enhanced strength and speed, combined with the talent that had never truly left him, had found their rhythm sooner than either of them had expected. The moment Shane saw the grin spreading across his face, wide and unguarded, he pushed off from the boards and struck out in the opposite direction.

Ilya's eyes sharpened immediately.

Shane laughed out loud as he heard the blades behind him, the clean, deliberate sound of someone who had decided to give chase and had absolutely no intention of losing.

He dug in harder, lengthening his stride, cutting left across center ice. Ilya matched the turn without hesitation. Shane banked right, pushing for more speed, and heard him gain anyway, effortless, infuriating, inevitable.

He made it to the far end before Ilya caught him, one arm hooking around his waist with that easy, immovable certainty, pulling him in mid-stride.

They didn't fall. Ilya never let them fall.

"Just good?" Ilya asked, from directly behind him, mouth close to his ear.

"Amazing," Shane said, slightly breathless.

"And?"

"Hot."

A pause. Shane could feel the smile without seeing it.

"Made you slick? Is my omega wet?"

"Shut the fuck up."

Ilya hummed pleasantly. "I can mate you on the ice."

Shane turned in his grip to face him. Ilya looked insufferably satisfied with himself, flushed from the cold and the skating, eyes bright in a way Shane had thought for a long time he would never see again.

"Try it," Shane said.

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"In front of all these people," Shane added, gesturing broadly at the handful of other skaters who were very pointedly minding their own business.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Ilya."

"Yes, *moya dusha*?"

"I will end you."

Ilya leaned forward and pressed a brief, deliberate kiss to the corner of his mouth. Then he released him and pushed off, gliding backward with that easy, maddening grace, watching Shane the whole time.

Shane stood on the ice and looked at him.

At the broad shoulders and the unhurried smile and the way he moved like he owned every surface he stood on.

He blinked again, faster this time.

It didn't help.

For a while longer they were just two people on the ice.

Not a famous hockey player and his mate who had come back from the dead. Not a story. Not a headline. Just Shane and Ilya, chasing each other across center ice like they had nothing more important to do, which was, Shane thought, the closest thing to true he had felt in a long time.

He didn't notice the shift right away.

It happened gradually, the way these things always did. The couple near the far boards had slowed without stopping. The woman in the stands had put her phone down. The kid in the corner had abandoned his crossovers entirely. The rink had grown quieter in the specific way that meant it hadn't actually grown quieter at all.

Shane clocked it the way he clocked everything. Quietly. Without changing his expression.

He was used to being recognized. Ottawa's golden boy, Montreal's captain, the face on the biggest billboards. He had been navigating public attention since he was nineteen years old and he knew exactly what it felt like. The particular quality of a stranger's gaze when they were trying to place him. The slight double take. The phone raised a little too casually.

This was different.

These people weren't watching Shane Hollander the hockey player. They were watching him and Ilya, together, the way you watched something you had read about and were now recalibrating in real time.

Since the night of the gala, since he had stood in front of a room full of people and said what he said and watched Weston's careful composure come apart, something had shifted in the way the world looked at him. The photos had done the rest. The ones from inside, grainy, someone's phone across a crowded room. The ones from outside, clearer, him and Ilya standing next to each other in a way that apparently required no caption.

Shane Hollander, omega. Not a rumor anymore. Not something to be managed or denied or carefully not confirmed.

He hadn't planned it exactly that way. But when he tried to locate the part of himself that was supposed to mind, it wasn't there. He had been performing a careful disappearing act for so long that the effort had become invisible even to him. Eight years of steering every conversation away from a particular edge. An entire career built inside a league full of alphas, and him moving through it like someone who had learned to take up precisely the right amount of space. Not too much. Never too much.

And then one night he had simply stopped.

The relief of it was still arriving, quiet and incremental, like a sound you'd been bracing against finally going still.

Besides.

He looked at Ilya, who was gliding toward him with that unhurried ease, flushed from the cold, wearing skates that still had the stiffness of new leather. Eight years. What those eight years had taken from Ilya and from him and from everyone who had been in that facility, everyone whose name they still didn't fully know. If visibility was the price of making sure none of it disappeared quietly into a filing cabinet somewhere, then Shane would be visible.

He had decided that.

He was still deciding it, every day, in small increments. But he had decided it.

What he was still getting used to was this: being looked at not as Shane Hollander the hockey player but as one half of something. The omega captain and his mate who came back from the dead. It was reductive and incomplete and also, in the most basic sense, true.

Ilya stopped beside him.

He had clocked the room too. Shane could tell by the slight shift in how he was holding himself, that old assessment running underneath everything. Reading exits. Reading distances. Eight years of a place with no safety and no privacy. Old habit. It would probably never fully go away.

Shane had made his peace with that.

"They are staring," Ilya said. Not a complaint. Just an observation.

"They're always staring." Shane pushed off the boards and glided toward him. "You get used to it."

Ilya considered this.

"I have..." Ilya searched for a moment, then seemed to give up on the precise word and went around it instead. "Beautiful mate. Talented. Of course they look."

Shane opened his mouth.

Closed it.

"And," Ilya added, with the particular timing of someone who had been waiting to say the second part, "he has a very sexy alpha."

Shane looked at him.

Ilya looked back. Perfectly straight-faced. Except for his eyes, which were doing something they hadn't done in a long time, something Shane had almost forgotten was possible, that specific quality of amusement that didn't ask permission and didn't apologize for itself.

There it was.

Shane had seen glimpses of it. In the kitchen, over burned eggs. On the ice, when he'd caught Shane mid-stride. In small moments that came and went before Shane could fully register them. But this was different. This was Ilya being deliberately, unhurriedly insufferable in the way that had once driven Shane absolutely insane on opposing ice, and the fact that it was back, properly back, settled somewhere in Shane's chest with a weight he hadn't been expecting.

He had missed this. He hadn't let himself know how much.

"Sexy alpha," Shane repeated.

"Yes."

"That's what you went with."

"Is accurate," Ilya said, with complete sincerity.

Shane looked away. Looked back. Made a very controlled decision not to smile.

"You're impossible," he said.

"Mm." Ilya pushed off, gliding backward with that easy, maddening grace, watching Shane the whole time. "But very sexy."

Shane rolled his eyes and pushed off after him, mostly to have something to do with his body other than stand there being unreasonably glad about all of this.

He didn't examine it too closely. He had learned that some things were better received than analyzed.

They were halfway through another lazy loop when Shane felt it before he saw it. A shift in the air. Something small approaching without the usual adult calculation.

He turned.

A girl. Small. Maybe six or seven. Hockey helmet still on, one skate turned slightly inward, moving toward them with the specific fearlessness of a child who had not yet learned that approaching strangers required permission.

She stopped directly in front of Ilya and looked up at him.

Ilya looked down.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Then the girl pointed at his skates.

"Those are new," she said.

"Yes." Ilya looked down at them too, as if confirming. "Gift."

"Who gave them to you?"

"My..." He paused. "Family."

The girl seemed to find this satisfactory. She pushed off slightly, did a small unsteady circle, came back. "I'm learning backwards," she announced.

"Hard," Ilya agreed.

"Do you know how?"

"Yes."

"Can you show me?"

Shane watched Ilya's entire face do something it didn't do with adults. The wariness dropped out of it. Not gone, exactly, just set aside, the way you set something down when your hands were full of something better.

"Okay," Ilya said.

He showed her. Slowly, in pieces, the way he'd clearly figured out worked better than full demonstrations. The girl fell once, got up without being asked, tried again. Ilya waited. Didn't rush her. Didn't look anywhere else.

Shane stayed where he was.

After a few minutes the girl looked over at him properly for the first time. Her eyes went a little wider.

"You're Shane Hollander."

"I am."

She looked between them. The particular arithmetic of a child who was putting something together. "Do you know each other?"

"Yes," Shane said.

"How?"

Ilya glanced at Shane. Shane glanced at Ilya.

"He is my mate," Ilya said. Simple. Factual. The way he said most things.

The girl's eyes went wider. She turned to Shane. "Is that true?"

"That's true," Shane said.

She looked at Ilya again, then back at Shane, then at their hands, which were not touching, then at their faces, as if checking for some visible confirmation. Then she nodded, satisfied, and turned back to Ilya.

"Okay. Show me again."

Ilya showed her again.

Shane watched them and felt that new unnamed thing move through his chest again. Wider this time.

He made himself look away.

When the girl's mother finally called her from the boards, she skated off with a wave that was mostly directed at Ilya. Ilya raised a hand. Watched her go.

Then he turned to Shane.

"I want one," he said.

Shane closed his eyes.

"Ilya."

"Small. Like that." He gestured vaguely in the direction the girl had gone. "Good age."

"We've talked about this."

They had. More than once. Ilya brought it up the way he brought up most things he had decided he wanted: without urgency, without drama, at completely unpredictable intervals, as if he had all the time in the world and was simply keeping the subject warm.

Shane did not have all the time in the world. Shane had a contract situation that was technically unresolved, a front office with at least two people in it whose reactions to the gala he was still quietly monitoring, a mother who was working through seventeen different angles of the legal question simultaneously, and a mate who was not yet officially alive on paper in any country.

He also had a doctor's appointment next Thursday, which he had not mentioned to Ilya, and a folder of bloodwork results that used words like stabilizing and still monitoring and we'll reassess in three months.

Years of suppressants. Eight years of a body that had learned to run on something close to empty. The doctor had been careful and measured and kind about all of it, and Shane had sat in that office and nodded and taken the information apart the way he took apart everything, methodically, and then driven home and not said a word.

His hormones were still not where they should be. He knew this. It was being handled.

He did not think about it more than necessary.

"My contract situation is not resolved," he said, pushing off because standing still during this conversation felt like a structural disadvantage. "The team wants to keep me but there are people in that front office who—" He stopped. Chose words carefully. "It's complicated. Mom and I are still working through it."

Ilya fell into pace beside him.

"And you," Shane added, gesturing vaguely at the general situation. "You don't even have a legal identity yet. We are nowhere near—"

"I know," Ilya said.

He said it simply, without defensiveness, the way he said most things he had already made his peace with. Then he glided closer, close enough that his voice dropped below anything the nearest skaters could catch, and stopped them both with a hand at Shane's waist.

"But I will keep trying," he said.

Shane looked at him.

"Trying," Shane repeated.

"Mm." Ilya's expression was entirely composed. His eyes were not. "Very hard. Very often. As many times as necessary."

"That's not—" Shane started.

"For science," Ilya added.

Shane closed his eyes briefly.

This was, he knew, mostly performance. Ilya understood the situation. He had been there for the appointment scheduling, for the careful conversations, for the particular quiet that settled over Shane sometimes when he thought he wasn't being watched. Ilya always noticed. He never said anything that wasn't asked for.

But this, the relentless low-grade campaign of cheerful optimism delivered mostly through insinuation, this Ilya had apparently decided was his contribution.

Shane had chosen not to find it annoying.

He had mostly succeeded.

"You are enjoying this," Shane said.

"Little bit," Ilya agreed, without remorse.

"The situation is genuinely complicated."

"Yes." Ilya tilted his head. "But we are very compatible. Medically."

Shane pushed off.

"I'm leaving," he announced.

"Also," Ilya called after him, loud enough now, unhurried, "very good technique—"

"I will end you," Shane said once again, without turning around.

Behind him, he heard Ilya's blades. Following. Steady and patient.

And underneath everything, quiet enough that Shane could almost pretend he hadn't heard it, a sound he was still getting used to.

Ilya, laughing.

By the time they left the rink and started walking toward the car, the late afternoon sun had softened into something warm and golden against their skin. The cold from the ice still clung faintly to Shane's cheeks, mixing strangely with the lingering heat of exertion and laughter.

As they crossed the parking lot, Shane found himself thinking, not for the first time, about how many ordinary things Ilya still had to relearn. Or maybe learn for the first time entirely. Driving, for example. Ilya still avoided it whenever possible, shoulders subtly tightening

every time Shane handed him the keys or suggested an empty parking lot for practice. Which was ridiculous, honestly, considering what Shane had learned from Svetlana. Apparently, back in Russia, Ilya and she had used to sneak their fathers' cars out late at night and race them through empty streets like idiots with a death wish.

"There was snow," Ilya had said flatly when Shane stared at him in horror. "More fun."

Shane still wasn't over that information.

There were countless things like that. Tiny gaps where entire years should have been. Technology, crowds, grocery stores at midnight, automatic checkouts, the fact that people barely used cash anymore. Some things frustrated Ilya immediately. Others fascinated him in complete silence until Shane realized, hours later, that his mate had been carefully observing every detail the entire time.

But more than anything else, Ilya liked being alone with Shane.

He had admitted it the weekend after the charity gala, after the knot in their lives had finally started to loosen and the people responsible for those lost years had begun, one by one, to face consequences that could no longer be buried. The world still felt unstable sometimes, still too loud and too aware of them, but the constant sense of pursuit had eased enough for both of them to breathe.

Or at least try.

Ilya had gone too many years without normal human contact. Without casual touch. Without softness that wasn't conditional or monitored or taken away again. Shane understood that now in ways he hadn't fully grasped at eighteen, when all he had known was wanting him constantly and not understanding why the distance hurt so much.

That was part of why Shane kept pushing therapy, even when it clearly exhausted Ilya to even consider it. So far, he had managed to convince him to go exactly twice.

When Ilya dug his heels in about something, flashes of the feral stranger Shane had first found in the woods came back with startling clarity. The stubborn silence. The narrowed eyes. The way he folded his arms and visibly refused to cooperate with his entire body. It would have been more intimidating if Shane hadn't already learned that underneath all of it was a deeply unfair amount of dramatics.

The pouting alone was weaponized.

"You are manipulating me," Shane informed him once after a forty-minute argument about therapy.

"Maybe," Ilya had replied calmly, without even looking guilty about it.

But at least things were getting better. Partially, anyway.

And honestly, most days Shane preferred being wrapped up in his alpha's arms over the endless official meetings, interviews, legal paperwork, and the constant low-grade anxiety

about the future that still followed them everywhere. The world had finally stopped trying to erase Ilya, only to immediately become obsessed with him instead. Some days it felt like trading one kind of suffocation for another.

They were nearing the car when a phone started ringing.

Shane instinctively reached for his own pocket before realizing the sound wasn't coming from him. A second later, Ilya stopped walking and awkwardly pulled his phone from his jacket instead.

His new phone.

That was still strange too.

For someone who had spent eight years almost entirely cut off from ordinary life, smartphones seemed to offend Ilya on a spiritual level. He distrusted autocorrect, hated voice messages, and held the device like it might explode if he pressed the wrong thing. Shane had caught him glaring suspiciously at a food delivery app two nights ago like it had personally insulted him.

Now Ilya stared at the screen for several seconds, visibly trying to process it, before lifting his eyes toward Shane with a questioning look.

Shane leaned slightly to peek at the caller ID and immediately snorted.

"Answer it," he said. "She's been trying to get you to pick up for three days."

Ilya narrowed his eyes faintly, like this was somehow Shane's fault, then dragged his thumb across the screen with an unnecessarily aggressive motion. He lifted the phone to his ear a second too late.

There was a pause.

Then Yuna Hollander's voice exploded loudly enough for Shane to hear from two feet away.

"Ilya! Finally. Do you know how many times I called you?"

Ilya grimaced slightly and pulled the phone farther from his ear.

"Four," he answered after a beat.

"Six."

"Hmm."

Shane bit down hard on a laugh as they resumed walking toward the car.

It still caught him off guard sometimes, these tiny absurdly normal moments. His mother calling Ilya just to complain that he never answered his phone. Ilya standing in a parking lot

listening with visible endurance while Yuna updated him about a recipe she wanted him to try and whether David was overworking himself again.

Domesticity had arrived in their lives in the strangest possible shape.

“Yes,” Ilya said after another pause, voice low and patient in the way he only ever was with a handful of people. “Shane makes me wear sunscreen.”

Shane nearly choked.

“Traitor,” he muttered.

Ilya’s mouth twitched.

On the other end of the call, Yuna sounded delighted. “Good. Someone has to keep you alive.”

The warmth in Shane’s chest arrived so suddenly it almost hurt.

He unlocked the car first while Ilya was still listening to Yuna talk. The moment his own phone buzzed in his pocket, he glanced down automatically, expecting another media request or a message from Hayden.

Instead, his stomach tightened.

It was from A. Rozanov.

Shane stared at the screen for a second too long.

Of course Alexei had eventually found his work email.

Over the past few weeks, he had tried reaching them through nearly every possible channel. Messages through Svetlana. Through lawyers. Through burner accounts that Shane immediately blocked. Sometimes long paragraphs. Sometimes just a single sentence asking if Ilya was safe.

Shane still hadn’t answered a single one.

He looked up automatically. Ilya had gone quiet mid-call.

Not visibly tense. Not outwardly reactive. If someone else had been looking at him, they probably wouldn’t have noticed anything at all. But Shane saw the slight stillness that entered his posture, the near-imperceptible tightening in his jaw.

And then the swallow. Small. Sharp. Unavoidable.

Yuna was still speaking on the other end, oblivious.

Ilya’s eyes met Shane’s briefly. He knew. Of course he knew.

Shane waited until the call ended before speaking.

“Alexei emailed me,” he said quietly.

Ilya lowered the phone from his ear.

For a moment, his expression didn’t change at all.

Then his gaze drifted somewhere past Shane’s shoulder, distant for half a heartbeat.

“What does he want?” he asked.

His voice was steady. Too steady.

Shane suddenly hated Alexei Rozanov all over again.

“As usual,” Shane said quietly. “He wants to talk. Just once.”

Ilya stood there for a moment without answering.

The silence that settled between them felt strangely heavy, unfinished somehow, like something standing just outside the edges of the conversation waiting to be acknowledged. Then Ilya looked away first, jaw tightening faintly before he spoke in a rough, low voice.

“Whatever you are doing now,” he said, “keep doing it.” A beat. “Ignore him.”

Shane studied him for a second longer but didn’t push. He knew better by now. Some wounds only showed themselves when they chose to, and trying to force them open usually made Ilya retreat further into himself.

So he nodded once.

“Okay.”

Ilya exhaled quietly through his nose, shoulders loosening by a fraction, and reached for the passenger door.

That became the shape of things, in the months that followed.

Not healing exactly. Healing implied something cleaner than reality. Something with a finish line.

This was slower than that. Stranger. Full of pauses and setbacks and tiny moments that felt enormous for reasons neither of them could fully explain.

Several months had passed since the night everything stopped being secret.

Vantage was still collapsing in public, slow and ugly, the kind of downfall that dragged more bodies into the light every week.

Lawsuits multiplied. Investigations spread. Names surfaced one after another in headlines that grew uglier every week. Some executives resigned before charges could reach them. Others didn’t move fast enough. Every few days Shane’s phone lit up with another article,

another statement, another former employee suddenly remembering they had a conscience after all.

He stopped reading most of it.

The important part was that Ilya existed now in a way the world couldn't erase again. The rest would take time. So they built a life around the waiting.

Sometimes it looked almost embarrassingly normal.

Grocery shopping at eleven at night because fewer people recognized them that late. Ilya silently judging every item Shane put into the cart until Shane threatened to ban him from choosing snacks forever. Long drives with music playing too low while Ilya stared out the window like he still couldn't quite believe he was allowed to go wherever he wanted.

Once, Shane found him standing motionless in the middle of the kitchen at two in the morning, refrigerator door hanging open, eyes distant and unfocused. Shane didn't ask what was wrong. He simply crossed the room, shut the fridge, and pressed himself quietly against Ilya's back until the tension slowly left his body.

Another time, Ilya froze in a crowded store when someone dropped a metal tray nearby. Not dramatically. Most people wouldn't even have noticed it. But Shane saw the instant stillness that took him over. The sharpness that entered his face. The way his breathing changed. So Shane reached over and took his hand without a word. Ilya squeezed back hard enough to hurt. Neither of them mentioned it afterward.

At night, things were sometimes worse.

There were still nights Shane woke to the feeling of the mattress shifting beside him, only to find Ilya sitting upright in the dark, breathing too carefully, eyes fixed somewhere Shane couldn't see.

The first few times, Shane tried asking questions. That never worked. Now he simply reached for him.

Sometimes Ilya let himself be pulled close immediately, burying his face against Shane's throat with a quiet, exhausted sound that never failed to break something inside Shane's chest. Scent-marking him over and over again until his breath turns steady. Other nights he needed a few minutes first, sitting there in silence while Shane stayed awake beside him, waiting.

Always waiting.

Eventually, Ilya would lie back down.

Eventually, sleep returned.

And then there were the moments that surprised Shane most of all. The good ones. The ones that arrived so suddenly they almost felt unreal.

Ilya laughing openly at something stupid Hayden said over video call. Arguing with Yuna about seasoning like he'd been part of the family his entire life. Learning how to use streaming services with the intense concentration of someone dismantling a bomb.

Living.

Just... living.

Sometimes Shane caught himself watching him from across a room and felt that same sharp ache he'd felt the first day on the ice again.

Not grief this time.

Something far more dangerous.

Hope.

The light of the early morning filtered through the curtains in thin pale needles but Shane didn't need his eyes to know where he was.

He knew by the scent. It was the first thing that reached him every morning, the heavy grounding presence of oakmoss, leather, and warm spice.

Shane stirred slowly, his consciousness drifting up through layers of warm hazy exhaustion. He felt heavy and his muscles were humming with the familiar afterglow of the night before. He was still loose and the slick was already starting to pool, a honeyed heat that made everything feel fluid and ready. Ilya was flush against him, one heavy arm draped over Shane's waist, his hand splayed flat across Shane's stomach in a grip that was as much a claim as it was a caress.

The hardness pressing into the crack of Shane's ass was unmistakable. Ilya wasn't inside yet. He was just riding the curve of him, his cock thick and insistent as it slid through the mess of Shane's slick. With every slow heavy thrust against his skin, Ilya was spreading that heat, painting Shane's thighs and the base of his spine with the evidence of how badly his omega wanted him.

Shane let out a low shaky breath, sinking back into the contact. He felt the friction of Ilya's length dragging over his entrance, the slick making a wet rhythmic sound that filled the quiet room.

"Mmm, good morning," Shane murmured, his voice a sleep-roughened friction.

In response, Ilya's grip tightened. He buried his face in the crook of Shane's neck, his nose dragging slowly across the sensitive skin of Shane's scent gland. He took a deep shuddering inhale, as if drinking him.

"You are so wet for me already," Ilya rasped into his skin, his voice thick with sleep and hunger. "I can feel you dripping. You want your alpha so badly."

"You're the one doing all the work," Shane whispered, his back arching as Ilya's cock caught against the sensitive nub of his opening. "Just get it over with, you prick."

Ilya let out a low vibrating hum that Shane felt all the way down his spine. He didn't rush. He liked the friction too much, liked the way Shane's body reacted to the tease. He continued the slow rhythmic humping, his cock sliding through the slick, marking Shane's skin with heat and pressure.

"I like the way you feel," Ilya mired, his voice dropping to a pained growl. "I like knowing that I made you this way. My omega. So soft and ready for me."

Shane turned in the circle of his arms, his movements fluid and practiced. He was met with Ilya's eyes, dark and focused, the pupils blown wide until the blue was just a thin jagged rim. Ilya reached down, his fingers finding the entrance that was already weeping for him, stretching Shane just enough to make him hiss.

"Now, Ilya," Shane pleaded, his fingers tangling in the sheets. "Please."

Ilya didn't make him ask again. He shifted, pinning Shane's legs back and settling between them with that easy immovable certainty. He guided the head of his cock against the wet heat of Shane's entrance and pushed.

He went in all at once, a slow inexorable slide that filled Shane to the brink. Shane's eyes snapped shut and he let out a choked sound, his inner walls clenching around the intrusion, welcoming the familiar stretch.

"God," Shane gasped, his head lolling back. "Alpha."

"There," Ilya whispered, his forehead resting against Shane's as he began to move, deep and steady. "I am here. You are full of me now. Just where you belong."

Shane pulled him down, his legs locking around Ilya's waist, welcoming the weight and the heat and the beautiful inevitable rhythm of them belonging to each other.

The rhythm became a steady, punishing grind. Ilya was moving with a focus that bordered on hypnotic, his large hands hooked under Shane's thighs to keep him pinned, driving deep enough to make Shane's vision blur.

With every thrust, the scent of oakmoss and leather seemed to thicken in the air, clashing and merging with Shane's frantic bergamot and amber.

"You take me so good," Ilya rasped, his voice a low vibration that Shane felt in his very bones. "Your body is made for me. It clenches so tight. Like it's trying to swallow me whole."

Shane's breath hitched. Amidst the haze of pleasure, a small, lucid part of his brain flickered with surprise. He remembered the Ilya of the early days; the feral, silent man in the woods who spoke mostly in huffs, sharp growls, and the desperate, broken repetition of Shane's

name. Back then, Ilya had been a creature of pure instinct, expressing his need through the grip of his hands and the weight of his body.

Now, listening to him weave these words together, hearing the way he weaponized the language to drive Shane closer to the edge, was staggering. The man had spent years in a silent cage, yet here he was, articulating his hunger with a devastating, deliberate precision.

"Where did you learn to talk like that?" Shane managed to choke out, his head thrashing against the pillow.

Ilya leaned down, his teeth grazing the shell of Shane's ear. "I listen to you. In the dark. I listen to what makes your heart beat faster. I learn everything about you, my Shane. Every word."

He let out a sharp, guttural sound as his pace shifted, becoming faster, more urgent. Shane could feel the change in him; the way his internal temperature was spiking, the way the muscles in his back were turning to granite. The base of Ilya's cock began to swell, the familiar, terrifying pressure of the knot starting to expand right where Shane was most sensitive.

"Ilya... wait..."

"No waiting," Ilya groaned, his fingers digging into the mattress as he delivered three final, devastating lunges.

The knot caught. It locked them together with a brutal finality. Shane's back arched off the bed, a high, thin sound escaping his throat as his internal walls spasmed around the bulge, milking him even as Ilya let out a long, ragged roar against his neck. The heat was overwhelming, a flood of alpha seed filling him to the point of aching.

They stayed like that for a long time, both of them panting, the only sound in the room the wet, sticky slide of their skin as the tension slowly ebbed away.

Eventually, Ilya collapsed forward, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck, his weight heavy and comforting. He began to scent Shane again, soft nips and long, dragging licks against his collarbone, marking him one last time.

Shane blinked at the ceiling, his legs still trembling where they were draped over Ilya's broad back. He felt like he'd been run over by a freight train: a very sexy, Russian freight train.

"I hate you," Shane muttered, though there was no heat in it.

Ilya hummed, a smug, vibrating sound. "Liar."

"I'm serious," Shane said, trying to find the strength to push Ilya's shoulder, though his arm felt like lead. "At this rate, forget the rink. I won't even be able to lift my arm to get a glass of water today. My contract is up in the air, the world is watching us, and you've turned my legs into jelly."

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at Shane, a devastatingly satisfied smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were still a little hazy, still dark with the remnants of the knot.

"I told you," Ilya said, his voice dropping into that low, unhurried cadence he'd used with the girl on the ice. "I said I will keep trying. Very hard. Very often."

Shane groaned. "Ilya."

"Is accurate," Ilya added, pressing a final, lingering kiss to the corner of Shane's mouth. "I am just doing what I said."

Half an hour later, Shane sat at the kitchen table with the kind of exaggerated caution that suggested every vertebrate in his spine had been individually rearranged. He was sore, his legs felt like overcooked noodles, and his backside was humming with a dull, persistent heat that no amount of cool shower water could quite soothe.

It had taken a monumental effort—and a very focused, very thorough blowjob—to convince Ilya to leave his poor omega alone in the shower and actually get dressed.

Shane leaned his chin on his palm, looking pointedly grumpy, though the effect was ruined by the soft, satisfied glow in his eyes. Across from him, Ilya was moving around the kitchen with a domestic fluidity that still felt like a hard-won miracle.

"If I miss a single pass at practice today, I'm telling the coach it's your fault," Shane muttered, shifting slightly on the chair. "I might just tell the media too," he continued, shifting again to find a spot on the chair that didn't throb. "'Hollander's performance hindered by over-enthusiastic mate.' Why not? We're in the news every other day anyway, we might as well give them something consistent to talk about."

Shane leaned back, his expression darkening slightly. "Besides, it's better than the alternative. Some of the guys are still looking at me like I'm a different person. Like they're still trying to decide if I'm going to go into heat right there on the bench or if I'm still the same captain who can bench-press them into next week."

Ilya didn't even look up from the stove, his broad shoulders stretching the fabric of his t-shirt. "You will not miss pass," Ilya said, his voice still carrying that low, post-knot rasp. "I have made sure your muscles are warm. Very flexible now. And let them look. They're just jealous."

"Sure," Shane snorted.

"But those riverside photos? Where we kiss after the mating? Your mark was very visible. I liked those. Very hot."

Shane choked slightly. "Ilya, those were leaked specifically to ruin my career. To show everyone the 'shameful' mark on my neck. They were close-ups of my pulse point for God's sake."

"I have seen all of them," Ilya said. "The moment I learned how to download images, I saved them. High quality. The way your skin looks under my mark... it is very good material for when I am alone."

Shane stared at him, halfway between horrified and amused. "Material? You're using corporate espionage photos as... jerk-off material?"

"Is my mate," Ilya shrugged, perfectly straight-faced as he sat down. "The mark faded, though. Maybe I should bite you again. Right now. Just to be sure the camera sees it clearly next time."

"Not happening," Shane said, he reached out to snag a piece of toast from a plate. "I genuinely consider taking that phone away from you. You were safer when you didn't know how the internet worked."

"Is too late," Ilya noted, sliding a small dish of jam toward Shane. But then, the playfulness in his eyes vanished, replaced by a sudden, razor-sharp stillness. He looked at Shane, really looked at him. "Do you want me to frighten them?"

Shane paused. "What?"

"Your teammates. The ones who look at you like you are weak." Ilya's voice had gone cold, dropping into a register that reminded Shane of the man he'd found in front of his cottage. "The rumors are already there. They say I am not normal."

It was true. The side of the experiments that hadn't fully come to light yet terrified most people. They thought Ilya had been turned into some kind of killing machine, and the terrifying thing was... they weren't entirely wrong. "I can end their careers," Ilya added. "Or more."

The air in the kitchen suddenly felt heavy, charged with the pheromones of an alpha who wasn't joking. Shane looked at Ilya's hands; large, scarred, and capable of a level of violence that most people couldn't even comprehend. With the enhancements Vantage had forced on him, Ilya was, for all intents and purposes, a living weapon.

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't need anything like that," Shane said, his voice steady even as his heart hammered against his ribs. "You're not scaring anyone, and you're certainly not ending anyone. We're trying to be *normal*, remember?"

Ilya watched him for a long beat, his pupils slowly contracting as he reeled the intensity back in. The tension bled out of his shoulders, replaced by that unhurried ease. "Normal," he repeated, almost to himself. "Yes. I forgot. You are the captain. You handle the children."

He set a steaming bowl in front of Shane with a quiet sort of pride. It was thick, hearty, and smelled faintly of toasted nuts and cream.

"*Kasha*," Ilya announced, sitting down and sliding a small dish of jam toward Shane. "Buckwheat. My mother... she made it every morning when I was small. Svetlana reminded me of the proportions over the phone yesterday."

Shane felt a sharp, sweet ache in his chest. Hearing Ilya mention his mother so casually — treating a memory like a recipe instead of a wound— was a victory Shane never took for granted. He looked down at the bowl, then up at Ilya.

The collar of Ilya's shirt was pulled slightly wide, and Shane's eyes caught on the glint of the cross hanging from a thin chain around his neck. It rested against the pulse point of Ilya's throat, rising and falling with his steady breathing. It was a quiet anchor to the past, a piece of his identity that he was finally allowed to wear in the light.

"It smells amazing," Shane said, his voice softening, the fake grumpiness melting away.

He took a bite. It was warm, earthy, and filling; exactly what he needed to ground himself.

"Sveta says I should put more butter," Ilya noted, watching Shane's expression with focused intensity. "But I think you prefer it like this. Not too heavy."

"It's perfect," Shane said, reaching across the table to squeeze Ilya's hand.

Ilya caught his fingers, his grip firm and warm, the leather-and-spice scent of him still clinging to Shane's skin even after the shower. Ilya's eyes drifted down to Shane's collarbone, where a faint, dark bruise was already starting to bloom from his teeth.

"You need energy," Ilya said, his thumb grazing Shane's knuckles. "For the ice. And for tonight."

Shane groaned, though he didn't pull his hand away. "Ilya. My contract. My career. My dignity."

Ilya just smiled with that rare, unguarded smile that made him look younger and infinitely more dangerous. "I told you, Shane. I will keep trying. For science."

Shane sighed, leaning back and shaking his head. "You really are getting too good at English. Who taught you to be this insufferable?"

"I have very good teacher," Ilya said, bringing Shane's hand to his lips and kissing the knuckles with a slow, deliberate heat. "The best."

Shane knew something was wrong the moment he stepped through the door.

Not from a sound. The opposite. A specific kind of stillness that didn't belong to an empty apartment.

And the scent.

Ilya's scent, thicker than usual, heavier, the kind that happened when he was somewhere far inside himself and hadn't noticed he'd gone.

Shane came in with his coat still on, keys in hand, the particular exhaustion of three hours in a lawyer's office sitting somewhere behind his eyes. The meeting had gone the way these

meetings always went lately. Carefully. With a lot of words that meant not yet.

The apartment was dark except for the blue-white flicker coming from the living room.

He almost called out.

Didn't.

Something in the quality of that scent stopped him in the doorway.

Ilya was on the couch. Not sitting exactly. More like he had been sitting and had gradually stopped moving without noticing. His elbows were on his knees, his hands loose between them, his eyes fixed on the screen with the particular quality of someone who had stopped processing what they were seeing several minutes ago.

Shane looked at the television.

The chyron at the bottom of the screen read: VANTAGE SPORTS FACILITY
DISCOVERED OUTSIDE OTTAWA. MULTIPLE SUBJECTS RECOVERED.
INVESTIGATION ONGOING.

The anchor was speaking. Shane caught fragments.

...remote location approximately forty kilometers from the city... authorities confirming the site has been active for nearly a decade... former employees of Vantage Sports Technologies cited as key sources, alongside testimony from an unnamed internal whistleblower whose cooperation with investigators proved instrumental in locating...

Shane set his keys down on the table by the door. Quietly.

He crossed the room and sat beside Ilya on the couch.

Ilya didn't look at him.

On screen, an aerial shot now. Dense forest. A building half-hidden by trees, surrounded by vehicles with government plates. It looked ordinary from above. That was the worst part somehow. It looked like nothing.

Shane watched Ilya watch it.

His jaw was tight. Not the dramatic tension of someone about to break. The other kind. The kind that came from having learned, over a very long time, how to hold things that had no business being held.

The sound on the television was low. The anchor's voice continued underneath everything, careful and measured, the particular register of someone delivering information they understood to be enormous without fully understanding why.

...Richard Weston, former senior director, remains in custody pending formal charges. Doug Renner, lead researcher on what internal documents are now calling Project Apex, has

entered into cooperation with federal prosecutors...

Ilya's hands tightened briefly between his knees.

Then loosened.

Shane didn't say anything. He reached over and put his hand over Ilya's. Ilya turned his palm up without looking away from the screen. Held on.

They stayed like that.

The aerial shot gave way to a press conference. A federal official at a podium, reading from a statement. Words like unprecedented and ongoing and justice in a voice that managed to make all three sound like paperwork.

Ilya made a sound. Low. Not quite a word.

Shane waited.

"Did they find all of them?" Ilya asked.

His voice was steady. That particular steadiness that cost something.

"I don't know yet," Shane said.

Ilya nodded once. Slowly. His eyes didn't move from the screen.

The press conference continued. Shane watched the side of Ilya's face instead. The way the light from the television moved across it. The slight movement in his throat when he swallowed.

Outside the facility, the reporter was saying, investigators found evidence consistent with long-term occupation by multiple individuals. The full scope of the program is still being determined.

Multiple individuals.

Shane thought about "Four walls. Moved. Three times." Thought about the way Ilya had said it, flat and factual, like reading from a document that had nothing to do with him.

He tightened his grip on Ilya's hand.

Ilya didn't look at him. But his thumb moved once across the back of Shane's hand. Back and forth. Slow.

The television kept going.

At some point, Ilya reached forward with his free hand and turned it off.

The room went quiet.

Neither of them moved.

Then Ilya said, very quietly, "Is it close to the... cottage?"

He said the last word like he had been searching for it for a long time and had only just managed to catch it.

Shane swallowed and turned toward him fully.

"It must be," he said softly. "Somewhere near it."

Ilya nodded once, eyes fixed on the dark television screen now reflecting only fragments of the room back at them. His voice had gone distant in that familiar way, careful and detached at the same time, like he was handling the memory piece by piece so it wouldn't cut too deep all at once.

"I remember walking," he said slowly. "Toward your scent." A pause. "I walked for... long time. Slept outside. Then walked again." His brow tightened faintly, frustration flickering through him. "Nights were cold. I remember cold."

Shane's chest tightened so sharply he almost winced. He suddenly understood that the facility really had been even closer than they'd thought. Part of him had already guessed it from the fact that Ilya had managed to reach the cottage on foot, but hearing it out loud, seeing the shape of that truth settle into place, hurt in a completely different way.

He couldn't stop the images that rose in his mind. Ilya alone in the woods. Cold. Starving. Half-conscious and still walking anyway, guided by nothing except instinct and the faint pull of their bond. Shane felt the familiar weight settle heavily in his chest again, that helpless fury he carried whenever he imagined those missing years too clearly.

But this wasn't the moment to fall apart with him.

So he stayed where he was. Just stayed.

Ilya exhaled slowly through his nose. His shoulders dropped a fraction, the held tension bleeding out in increments. He leaned back against the couch. After a moment, he pulled Shane with him, tucking him against his side with that easy, wordless certainty.

Shane let himself be moved.

Above them, the ceiling disappeared into shadow. Outside, the city kept going in its ordinary rhythm, headlights moving through the streets below, distant sirens cutting through the night every now and then. The world continued as if nothing had happened at all, while the two of them sat in the aftermath of something neither of them fully knew how to name.

Eventually Ilya spoke again.

"The woman," he said quietly. "Who helped me. Whistle... whistleblower."

"Yeah," Shane said.

"She is safe?"

Shane thought about a middle-aged woman in a crowded gala, setting a tray down, looking away first. Filing it away.

"She's safe," he said.

Ilya nodded.

That seemed to ease something in him.

They stayed there for a long time after that, wrapped in darkness and silence, neither of them trying to force conversation. They didn't need to. The city breathed beyond the windows, distant and indifferent, while the apartment held the two of them quietly in place.

And somewhere beneath the exhaustion, beneath the grief and the relief and the lingering shock of seeing proof that it had all been real, another thought slowly began to surface in Shane's mind.

If the facility had been found, maybe the cottage was finally safe again.

The thought settled carefully inside him, fragile enough that he didn't say it out loud yet. He wasn't ready to risk ruining it. But he could already picture it with painful clarity anyway: the lake at dusk, the cold wooden dock beneath their feet, Ilya stretched beside him in silence while the trees moved in the wind around them. No reporters. No lawyers. No security teams. Just the two of them in the place that had somehow led Ilya back to him in the first place.

For so long, the cottage had felt almost unreal to Shane, like something suspended outside the worst years of his life. A strange, isolated little miracle hidden in the woods. The place where grief had finally broken open and turned into something living again.

Without meaning to, he leaned a little closer into Ilya's side.

Maybe someday soon, they could go back there together. Not to hide this time. Just to exist.

At some point, without either of them consciously deciding to, the night simply passed around them there on the couch.

The next Sunday, they ended up at Hayden's house almost by accident.

Shane had stopped pretending Hayden's texts were optional weeks ago. Apparently, "Come over before Jade and Ruby start thinking you kidnapped Ilya forever" counted as emotional blackmail now.

Not that Shane minded much.

The moment they stepped through the front door, Ruby launched herself directly at Ilya with the absolute fearlessness only small children possessed.

“Ilya!” she yelled.

Ilya barely had time to brace before catching her automatically against his chest. Jade appeared a second later, much more dignified at the ancient age of eight, though not dignified enough to stop herself from grabbing onto his arm.

“You promised hide and seek,” she accused.

“I remember,” Ilya said solemnly.

Shane watched, already feeling his chest go warm in that embarrassing, helpless way Ilya still caused on a daily basis.

It had taken the girls less than two visits to become completely obsessed with him.

And Ilya, traitor that he was, adored them right back.

Maybe adored was too restrained a word. He turned into something else around children. Softer without seeming aware of it. Patient in ways that still surprised Shane considering the terrifying level of aggression he remained capable of elsewhere. The girls climbed him like he was playground equipment, demanded piggyback rides, made him sit through tea parties he clearly did not understand, and somehow always convinced him to participate in games that ended with all three of them sprinting through the backyard at full speed.

Right now, Ruby was attempting to tie pink ribbons into his now longer curls while Jade explained the “rules” of whatever game they had invented.

Ilya listened with complete seriousness.

Shane leaned against the kitchen counter, coffee in hand, trying not to laugh as Ilya nodded gravely at instructions involving magical ice dragons.

“He’s like a giant puppy,” Hayden muttered beside him.

Shane snorted into his mug. “You’re saying that like it’s new information.”

Outside, Ruby shrieked victoriously as Ilya scooped both girls up at once despite their dramatic protests. He carried them across the yard like they weighed absolutely nothing while Jade demanded to be “rescued” from invisible enemies.

Hayden watched for a second before his expression shifted slightly.

“The news the other night,” he said more quietly. “You guys okay?”

Shane’s smile faded a little.

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. “Mostly. It’s just... a lot.”

That felt inadequate somehow.

A lot was lawyers and statements and interviews and federal investigations. A lot was waking up some mornings and remembering that the whole world knew now. A lot was watching Ilya relearn ordinary life while still carrying eight years of damage inside him like something stitched beneath the skin.

Hayden nodded like he understood anyway.

“What happens now?”

Shane exhaled slowly and looked out toward the yard again. Ilya had Ruby hanging upside down over one shoulder while Jade tried to climb onto his back. He looked absurdly content about it.

“We’re figuring things out,” Shane admitted. “The identity stuff is a nightmare.”

Hayden grimaced sympathetically.

“Yeah, I can imagine.”

“He’s technically still a Russian citizen. Legally, most of his records are a mess. Some of them still list him as dead.” Shane rubbed tiredly at his jaw. “Canada’s cooperating because of the investigation, but long term...” He shrugged. “There’ll probably be immigration issues. Residency. Citizenship eventually.”

“And he wants to stay here?”

Shane looked at him like the answer should’ve been obvious.

Hayden lifted both hands immediately. “Okay, stupid question.”

A small silence settled between them.

Then Hayden glanced sideways at him.

“So marry him.”

Shane nearly choked on his coffee.

“What?”

Hayden looked completely unbothered by Shane’s reaction. “I’m serious. Half your legal problems disappear immediately.”

Shane stared at him.

Outside, Ruby was now wearing Ilya’s baseball cap crookedly backwards while ordering him to “guard the castle.”

“I mean,” Hayden continued casually, “you’re already disgustingly bonded. Pretty sure the man would kill someone if you asked politely.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it again.

Because the problem was that Hayden wasn’t wrong.

Marriage had crossed Shane’s mind more than once lately. Especially during meetings with lawyers and government officials where everything somehow came down to paperwork and next of kin and legal protections and technicalities Shane had never cared about before.

It made sense. Too much sense, honestly. And maybe that was exactly why part of him resisted it.

“I want to marry him,” Shane admitted quietly after a moment. “That’s not the issue.”

Hayden’s expression softened a fraction.

“But?”

Shane watched Ilya duck as Ruby attempted to place another ribbon in his hair.

“But I don’t want it to become another survival decision.” His fingers tightened slightly around the mug. “After everything that happened to him... to us...” He shook his head. “I don’t know. Signing papers because immigration law says it’s convenient feels wrong somehow.”

Hayden was quiet for a moment after that.

Then, surprisingly gently, he said, “Those things don’t cancel each other out, you know.”

Shane looked at him.

“You can marry him because you love him and because the system’s a disaster,” Hayden said with a shrug. “Both can be true.”

Across the yard, Ilya suddenly looked toward the kitchen window. Like he’d felt Shane staring.

Their eyes met instantly.

And just like always, something in Shane settled. Immediate. Instinctive.

Ilya’s expression changed slightly when he saw him watching. Softer around the edges. Warmer. Then Ruby yelled something incomprehensible and dragged his attention away again.

Shane smiled before he could stop himself.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, mostly to himself this time. “Maybe.”

Ilya came back inside first.

The back door opened with a soft thud and a rush of cold air, followed immediately by Ruby's triumphant squeal as she clung to his neck like she'd conquered something significant. Jade followed more calmly, though she was still bouncing with contained excitement, cheeks flushed from running.

"I demand refreshments," Jade announced seriously, like she was hosting a royal court.

Ilya, still carrying Ruby on his hip and now wearing at least three pink ribbons tangled into his curls, nodded with grave sincerity. "A reasonable request."

Shane almost laughed into his coffee again.

Hayden, leaning against the counter beside him, muttered, "I cannot believe that man used to be terrifying."

"Still is," Shane said automatically.

"Mm," Hayden hummed. "Sure. Terrifying. Right now he looks like a daycare employee who lost a bet."

As if on cue, Ilya turned his head slightly and fixed Hayden with a look.

Not threatening. Not even sharp. Just... mildly offended.

Hayden raised his hands. "I take it back. Extremely intimidating."

The back door opened again before Ilya could respond.

"Okay," Jackie announced as she stepped inside, balancing a tray in one hand and a warm dish towel over the other arm, "if anyone asks, I did not hear a single man comparing my house to a battlefield or a daycare."

She set the tray down on the kitchen island with practiced ease. On it: a golden-brown carrot cake, still faintly steaming, and a cluster of small glasses filled with something citrusy and sparkling.

Ruby gasped. "Cake."

Jade narrowed her eyes. "Is it poisoned?"

Jackie leaned down slightly, completely unfazed. "Only emotionally. Eat at your own risk."

That earned her immediate approval.

Shane watched as Hayden straightened a little when Jackie brushed past him, their shoulders meeting in that quiet, familiar way that came from years of existing in the same space without having to announce it.

“Homemade cocktails,” Hayden said, sounding mildly impressed.

Jackie pointed a finger at him. “Mocktails. You are not allowed to romanticize my lemonade into criminal activity.”

“I would never,” Hayden said, far too quickly.

Ilya, meanwhile, had set Ruby down and was now carefully untangling a ribbon from his own curls with the patience of a man defusing a bomb. He glanced at Jackie once she turned toward him.

And then, like it was the most natural thing in the world, he crossed the space between them.

Shane didn’t even have time to register the movement before Ilya’s hand slid to the back of his neck and pulled him in.

The kiss was brief, easy, unhurried. Familiar in a way that didn’t ask permission from anyone in the room.

When Ilya pulled back, his thumb lingered once against Shane’s jaw before dropping away like it had never been anything else.

Shane exhaled slowly into his coffee like nothing had happened.

Ruby made a delighted sound. “Again!”

Jade shook her head. “They are doing it like punctuation.”

Jackie blinked once, then smiled. “You two are very sweet.”

Hayden immediately made a disgusted noise and looked away on principle. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that.”

“You saw it,” Ilya said calmly.

“I did,” Hayden admitted, “against my will.”

Jackie laughed softly, clearly entertained, and reached for her glass.

Then she tilted her head slightly.

“You said you’d tell me more about your first meeting,” she said, looking at Hayden, but her curiosity clearly included both of them now. “The dramatic one.”

Hayden groaned. “Do we have to—”

“I can,” Ilya said, cutting in smoothly.

Shane looked at him immediately. “No.”

Ilya ignored him.

“We were on the couch,” Ilya began.

“Already hate this,” Hayden muttered.

Shane pointed at him. “Don’t encourage him.”

Ilya continued, completely unbothered. “Shane was asleep. I was not.”

Jackie leaned in slightly, intrigued. “Okay...”

“I was watching the room,” Ilya added simply. “It was unfamiliar.”

Ruby and Jade, sensing story time, immediately abandoned their positions near the cake.

Shane sighed. “This is how misinformation starts.”

Hayden gestured at Ilya. “Please, continue your criminal testimony.”

Ilya glanced at him once, then back to Jackie.

“Then he came in,” Ilya said.

Hayden raised a hand. “Hi, yes, I am ‘he.’”

Ilya nodded. “He was loud.”

“I opened a door,” Hayden corrected.

“You startled the house,” Ilya said.

Jackie snorted quietly into her drink.

Hayden pointed at him. “You were in full ‘don’t breathe near my couch’ mode.”

“I was assessing threat levels,” Ilya replied.

“And I was the said threat?” Hayden asked.

“Yes,” Ilya said.

Shane pressed a hand to his forehead. “I regret all of this.”

Jackie was openly smiling now. “And what happened when you saw him?”

Ilya paused just slightly.

Then, very matter-of-fact: “He looked at me.” A beat. “And I considered breaking his neck.”

Hayden lifted both hands. “There it is!”

Ruby gasped. Jade whispered, “That is extreme.”

Jackie laughed. “Okay, I need the full version of this story later.”

Ilya nodded once. “Then I decided against it.”

Shane leaned closer, dryly. “Character development.”

Ilya continued, as if that wasn’t the punchline at all.

“Then I heard Shane breathe,” he said. His tone shifted slightly, less playful now. “Checked if he was safe.”

Jackie softened a little at that, just in the eyes.

Hayden immediately cut in. “No! He was literally mauling Shane’s neck in front of me.” He pointed vaguely at Ilya, offended all over again. “Okay, kids, living room. Go.”

Ruby and Jade were already halfway gone, still listening.

“And?” Jackie prompted anyway, completely ignoring her own husband’s warning.

Hayden sighed like he’d been forced to relive a war crime.

“You were too close to him,” Ilya argued.

“Remember the bruises on my neck?” Hayden turned to Jackie. “Yeah, those.”

Jackie blinked, confused for a second. “The ones you said you got playing football with your friends?”

Hayden stared at her. “I did not say that.”

“You don’t play football,” Shane cut in casually.

Hayden pointed to all of them. “This is exactly what I mean. Nobody here is reliable.”

Ilya, unbothered, added: “He was fine.”

Hayden immediately shot back: “I was not fine.”

Then Shane muttered, “You’re still talking about it. So you were fine enough.”

That landed exactly as badly for Hayden as it sounded, and perfectly for everyone else.

As Shane watched his friends, the kids, and Ilya moving around the kitchen, he felt his chest warm in a way that was almost overwhelming.

Maybe, just maybe, Hayden had been right about one thing.

The bed was warm, damp, and the alpha behind him was like a furnace. Shane pressed his back closer, resisting the urge to grind against the hard lines of Ilya’s body. Every bone in his

frame seemed to ache; a mixture of today's brutal match and the feverish activity of the night. He shifted slightly, pulling a discarded blanket over his bare hips. It wasn't just the ache between his legs that held his attention; it was the steady, rhythmic throb of the mark on his neck.

The mating bite was a few weeks old now, the wound was finally healing, but it pulsed with a life of its own whenever Ilya was this close.

Sometimes, Shane still couldn't wrap his head around it. That he had mated with this man: his fiercest rival, the one person who knew exactly how to get under his skin on and off the ice. But the more he saw of Ilya, the more he peered beneath that sharp, mocking exterior to the softness hidden underneath, the more he felt himself slipping. He was falling in love with him, a little more every day. He hadn't said it yet. It was too early, wasn't it?

He lay there for a while, wondering what he would tell his parents when he went home tomorrow. But soon, his thoughts drifted to the months they would have to spend apart, and his chest tightened. He had grown addicted to this; to the proximity, to the shared breath in the dark.

Ilya was going back to Russia. They hadn't settled all the details, but the plan was clear: Ilya would return as the "Number One Draft Pick" and take the top prize directly from Shane. Or, as Ilya had put it in his gravelly, arrogant drawl, "I will eat my mate's slick as a desert and get drunk in his scent."

Ilya said things like that sometimes. Filthy, beautiful things that made Shane's blood sing.

"You are thinking too loud," Ilya murmured, his voice thick with sleep and that raw, alpha possessiveness that always made Shane shiver.

"Just thinking about tomorrow," Shane whispered, turning his head just enough to catch the ghost of a smile on Ilya's lips. "About you leaving."

Ilya's grip tightened. He didn't say "I'll be back soon." He didn't offer the easy comfort Shane was looking for. Instead, he just breathed him in, deep and desperate, as if he were trying to memorize the very molecular structure of Shane's scent.

"Don't think for a second that you can escape me," Ilya said, his voice dropping into a low, solemn register that felt less like a promise and more like a vow. "No matter what happens... as your rival, as your alpha..." Shane gave him a playful nudge with his elbow at that, but Ilya didn't laugh. He just pulled him closer. "...and as your mate, I will find you. I am yours now, Hollander. Don't you dare forget it."

Shane turned in the circle of Ilya's arms, his heart thudding a frantic, happy rhythm against his ribs. "God, you're so dramatic," he whispered, though he was already reaching up to cup Ilya's face. "I'm not going anywhere, Ilya."

Ilya didn't answer with words. He leaned down, his mouth crashing into Shane's with a sudden, bruising hunger. It wasn't the lazy kiss Shane had expected; it was a desperate claim, a frantic attempt to fuse their souls together. Shane met him with equal fervor; his fingers

tangling in the damp hair at the nape of Ilya's neck, pulling him closer until their teeth clashed and their breath was a shared, jagged thing.

In the middle of the kiss, against the corner of Shane's mouth, Ilya murmured something in a low, gravelly Russian.

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

The words were soft, vibrating against Shane's skin like a secret. Shane pulled back just an inch, his eyes dazed, his lips swollen and red. "What was that? More Russian trash talk?"

Ilya's expression was unreadable, his eyes dark with a grief Shane was too young to recognize. He just traced the line of Shane's jaw with a trembling thumb. "Yes," Ilya lied quietly. "Very bad words. You don't want to know."

Shane laughed, breathless and utterly enamored, and dragged him back down for another kiss, letting the sound of the unknown language melt away into the heat of the moment. He didn't care what the words meant; he had the man.

At the time, Shane thought they were just being dramatic teenagers, caught up in the crushing intensity of a new bond. He didn't know it was the last time he would feel those arms around him for eight years. He didn't know that while he was dreaming of their future, the men in the dark suits were already checking their watches, waiting for the sun to rise so they could take his world away.

"Call the second you get there," David said. Concern practically radiated from him.

After hugging Ilya one last time, Yuna turned to Shane and pointed a warning finger at both of them. "And if you don't, we're showing up immediately."

"And this time," David added dryly, "we won't bother checking whether you're busy first."

"Oh my God, dad, that was *one time*," Shane groaned. "Also, *you* were supposed to knock."

"We weren't even doing anything," Ilya cut in helpfully. "We were tame."

Shane turned toward him slowly, deeply suspicious. At this point, Ilya seemed to learn increasingly impossible English words purely to make his life harder.

"Tame?" Shane repeated.

"Yes," Ilya said confidently.

David made a strangled sound.

"I personally would not describe 'half naked on the kitchen counter' as tame," he muttered.

Shane felt heat rush across his entire face. They had only been kissing, honestly. Granted, they'd been kissing against the kitchen counter, and thankfully neither of his parents had been

standing at an angle that revealed where Ilya's hand had wandered.

"Okay. Go already," his mother said quickly, waving them toward the door. "But don't forget what we said!"

"Don't worry," Shane assured her. "Everything's completely safe now."

Yuna nodded, but even after all the investigations, the security sweeps, and every other precaution imaginable, she still didn't look fully convinced.

Honestly, she had every right to be. That same small thread of doubt still lived somewhere deep inside Shane too.

"Yes, don't worry, *mama*," Ilya said easily. "I'll take care of him."

Shane rolled his eyes on instinct, even as the corner of his mouth betrayed him by curling upward. Seeing Ilya like this with his parents —comfortable, teasing, warm— did something unbearable to his chest.

"We'll see who's taking care of who," Shane muttered as they headed toward the car.

Ilya immediately caught up to him, slinging an arm over his shoulders and tugging his omega against his side. Then, before Shane could react, Ilya dragged his tongue all the way across his cheek.

Shane jolted violently. "Ilya!"

Behind them, he could hear both his parents immediately break into helpless laughter.

This car ride was anything but quiet. It was packed with music —Ilya had recently discovered an aggressive appreciation for Bad Bunny and was determined to make the entire province hear it— and filled with the kind of idle, easy chatter they hadn't been allowed to have for years.

"Sveta said she is coming to Montreal during the week," Ilya said between tracks, leaning his head back against the headrest.

"Great news," Shane said, keeping his eyes on the highway. "This week is going to be brutal with practice anyway. I can hand you over to her with a clear conscience."

Ilya let out a dry, mocking snort. "Like I need a babysitter."

"Don't you?" Shane teased, a small smirk playing on his lips.

"Fine. Then maybe I will ask her to take me to those clubs she mentioned last time."

Shane flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror, then back to the road. "What?"

"She said there are very good clubs in Montreal. Apparently, I used to like clubbing. According to Sveta."

Shane frowned, his grip tightening slightly on the steering wheel. "When you two were together back then... you weren't even legal."

Ilya scoffed. "You think that stopped us?"

Shane narrowed his eyes, suddenly finding it a lot harder to focus on the road. "Are you actually going?"

He could feel Ilya's sharp, intense gaze burning into the side of his face. "Should I go?"

"If you want to..."

"I am asking if *you* want me to go, Shane."

Shane let the silence stretch for a beat, filtering through the sudden, hot spike of irritation in his chest. Then, his voice dropped into a flat, uncompromising line. "No."

At that, Ilya let out a long, satisfied breath, the tension leaving his massive frame. "Okay."

"That's it? Just *okay*?"

"Yes," Ilya said, a slow, maddening smile creeping onto his face. "But you could say more. You could say, '*I don't want you to go because I don't want you dancing with someone else, or getting drunk with someone else.*' For example."

Shane slammed on the brakes. The tires shrieked against the asphalt as the car jerked to a violent, abrupt halt on the shoulder of the road. Before the engine could even settle into an idle, Shane turned completely in his seat to face Ilya.

"If you're going to dance with someone, you'll dance with me," Shane snapped, his voice rough, all the playful banter entirely evaporated.

Genuine surprise flickered across Ilya's face, his pupils dilating in the dim light of the dashboard. "But you said you hated dancing."

Shane didn't care. He reached across the console, his fingers hooking hard into the collar of Ilya's jacket, hauling the alpha forward until there wasn't an inch of air left between them. He stared straight into Ilya's dark eyes, his pheromones flaring; sharp, possessive, and thick with a warning.

"I am not letting other people scent-mark you in some crowded club," Shane growled, his thumb pressing hard against Ilya's jawline. "If I have to, I will dance with you. And I will bite you right in front of everyone so they know exactly who you belong to."

A low, ragged sound tore from the back of Ilya's throat.

"*Blyat*," Ilya groaned, his jaw tightening under Shane's grip. "Why would I care about anyone else when I have the most beautiful, terrifying omega in the universe?"

Shane didn't give him a chance to finish. He crashed their mouths together in a kiss that was bruising, heavy, and frantic with sudden, suffocating heat.

The cottage had a distinct beauty to it at this time of the year. The air was considerably colder than it had been when they left, and the summer greens had faded into deeper, muted tones, but it possessed a quiet charm nonetheless. The forest road they had driven down was still breathtaking, lined with trees that seemed to breathe a crisp, refreshing life into the morning.

When Shane parked the car and they stepped out together, they both paused, taking in their surroundings. Shane's eyes drifted toward the spot near the front door; the place where they had once frantically searched for footprints, realizing someone had been watching them through the night. He remembered the cold spike of panic that had hollowed out his chest back then. Now, everything looked perfectly peaceful, beautifully isolated.

The two-day getaway they had fought so hard for was finally within reach.

They hauled the groceries inside —enough supplies to last them well past their two days— and set them down. Shane had hired a service to deep-clean the place beforehand since it had been locked up for months, but the rooms still carried that faint, musty scent of a house that had been left to sleep.

Leaving the bags on the counter, Shane walked over to Ilya, who was standing quietly in front of the unlit fireplace. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's waist from behind, pressing his cheek against his broad back.

"What are you thinking?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya didn't move away, but his large hands came down to cover Shane's over his stomach, his thumb tracing a slow line across Shane's knuckles. He took a deep, grounding breath, his chest expanding against Shane's front.

"Thinking it does not smell like danger anymore," Ilya murmured, his deep voice vibrating against Shane's collarbone. "Just smells... fuggy. And like you."

Shane let out a soft huff, tightening his arms around Ilya's waist. "Like me? Really?"

"Yes," Ilya said, turning his head slightly so his cheek brushed against Shane's hair. "Is deep in the wood, maybe. In the floors. Even when it is empty, you are here."

Shane kept quiet for a moment, letting the words settle. He couldn't smell himself—to him, the cottage just smelled like old cedar, clean linen, and dust— but he constantly forgot that Ilya didn't experience the world the way normal people did. Ilya's senses were sharper, altered, and tuned entirely to the frequency of his mate. This cottage wasn't just a building to him; it was the place where he had finally found his anchor.

"Sometimes," Ilya added, his voice dropping into that low, unhurried register, "I miss that house in Ottawa. The one where we stayed for few days."

Shane immediately knew exactly what he was referring to. A flush of heat crept up his neck. "Because that's where I had my heat."

"Should have had it here," Ilya said, entirely serious as he turned around in Shane's embrace to look at him. "The layout is better. More options."

Shane laughed, giving Ilya a playful, warning shove against his chest. "You are incorrigible. But please, I'd like to hear your options."

Ilya didn't skip a beat. His face remained perfectly calm, his blue eyes fixed on Shane with the analytical precision of a coach reviewing game tape. He tilted his head toward the back of the cottage.

"Stairs," Ilya said flatly, his voice dropping into that rough, heavy register. "Wood is thick. Good grip. I hold you against railing, completely off floor. Your scent gets trapped in narrow hallway. Very intense."

Shane's laughter caught in his throat. A sudden, tight heat bloomed in his stomach. "Ilya—"

"And large window in the guest bedroom," Ilya continued, stepping closer until his thighs brushed hard against Shane's. "One overlooking lake. I want to press you face-first against glass when it is freezing outside. People across water should see nothing but fog your breath leaves on pane while I am inside you."

"There is no one across the water," Shane choked out, his voice losing its breath, his fingers curling into the fabric of Ilya's shirt just to steady himself. "It's a private lake."

"Even better," Ilya murmured. His hand slid down from Shane's waist, his large palm firmly cupping the back of Shane's thigh and lifting it an inch off the floor. "Then we use dock. In middle of night. Cold enough that you shake, Hollander, and only way to stay warm is take all of me. Over and over. Until wood creaks louder than frogs."

Shane swallowed hard, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The sheer, shameless confidence in Ilya's words—the fact that his mind had been running through these exact, filthy scenarios during the entire drive—was doing dangerous things to Shane's omega instincts.

But Shane wasn't just going to stand there and let himself be overwhelmed. A slow, wicked spark lit up in his chest. He leaned up, his lips brushing right against the corner of Ilya's mouth, his own grip tightening on Ilya's shirt.

"The dock actually isn't a bad idea," Shane whispered, a small, breathless smirk playing on his lips. "But we're not waiting for the middle of the night. And if we go out there, you're the one who's going to be on your back on that freezing wood, Rozanov. Let's see how much of a furnace you really are when I'm the one taking what I want."

Ilya's pupils blew wide, his entire body going completely still as Shane's words registered. The growl that tore from the alpha's chest this time wasn't just possessive; it was starved.

"I am furnace," Ilya whispered back, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin right below Shane's ear, his grip on Shane's thigh turning bruisingly tight. "Try me."

After a long, exhausting tour of the cottage —where some promises had been kept, and others had been aggressively modified— evening finally settled over the lake. They were sitting outside by the crackling fire, the heavy heat of the flames cutting through the sharp chill of the night air. Apart from the occasional call of nocturnal animals and the soft rustle of the wind through the pines, a peaceful, grounding silence wrapped around them.

Ilya was lying stretched out on the bench, his head resting heavy in Shane's lap. Shane's fingers were tangled in Ilya's hair, slowly tracing patterns against his scalp, watching the orange glow of the fire dance across the sharp angles of his mate's face. Ilya's eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even. He looked entirely defenseless.

The silence between them lasted a long time. It wasn't the heavy, defensive silence of the past few months; it was open, soft, and entirely safe.

"Marry me," Shane said.

He didn't build up to it. He didn't clear his throat or change his tone. He just said it into the quiet night, his fingers never stopping their slow, rhythmic motion through Ilya's hair.

Ilya didn't move. For a few seconds, Shane thought he might have fallen asleep. Then, slowly, Ilya's eyelashes fluttered open, his blue eyes reflecting the dying embers of the fire. He didn't look shocked. He just looked up at Shane, searching his face with that intense, unfiltered focus.

"The lawyer said things will move fast now," Shane continued softly, leaning down slightly. "They're going to start sorting through your status. Your records. And if you marry me, we can push for citizenship properly. Legally. Permanently."

His fingers caught briefly in Ilya's hair before continuing their slow, rhythmic motion again.

"I want you here," Shane admitted, his voice dropping quieter now, raw with a vulnerability he couldn't hide. "I want you safe. I want..." He exhaled shakily, staring into the dancing orange flames. "I want you to be my husband so no one can ever look at some file somewhere and decide they can take you away from me again."

Silence.

It fell between them instantly, but it wasn't empty. It was dense, heavy with the weight of everything they had survived. Shane felt the shift in Ilya immediately; the way his massive frame went entirely still, the way his thoughts seemed to crowd behind his closed eyes all at once.

Doubt crept cold and sharp into Shane's chest, hollowing him out.

Had he said it wrong? Did it sound too practical? Too legal? Like a strategy meeting instead of a confession? God, did Ilya think he was only proposing because it was a convenient way

to settle the immigration lawyers?

Shane opened his mouth, his heart hammering against his ribs as he desperately tried to pull the words back, to fix it.

“I didn’t mean just for the citizenship, Ilya, I—”

“You are already mine,” Ilya said quietly.

The words cut straight through the frantic noise in Shane's head, silencing him instantly.

Ilya pushed himself up slowly, the bench creaking underneath his weight. He moved until he was sitting right in front of him, so close that Shane could feel the furnace-like heat radiating off his body even through their thick layers of clothing.

“And I am yours,” Ilya continued. His voice was low, rough, and carried that absolute, unshakeable certainty that always made Shane’s omega instincts settle. “Government papers do not change that.”

One of his hands slid up against Shane’s jaw, his rough thumb brushing slowly, possessively across his cheek to wipe away the tension there.

“But...” A small, almost amused smile touched the corner of his mouth, the firelight catching the sharp lines of his face. “I would enjoy proving it to them. Again and again.”

Shane let out a startled, breathless laugh, the cold knot of panic in his chest evaporating into the night air. “Ilya—”

“Yes,” Ilya said simply.

No hesitation. No fear of the future. Just the pure, unfiltered truth of a man who had already given his soul away eight years ago.

“Yes. We get married.”

Shane didn't say anything else. He just leaned forward, burying his face in the crook of Ilya’s neck, his arms wrapping tight around the alpha’s shoulders. Ilya pulled him into his lap, his hold crushing, desperate, and solid all at once. They held each other like that for a long time, the heat of the fire washing over them, the quiet rustle of the forest shielding them from the rest of the world. When Shane finally pulled back slightly, his eyes were bright, swimming with tears he didn't care to hide. Ilya’s own eyes were wet, catching the orange glow of the embers.

Shane traced the line of Ilya’s jaw, his thumb brushing away a stray bit of moisture.

“I know it's early,” Shane murmured, his voice thick but gentle. “And you don't have to decide anything right now. But... have you thought at all about what you want to do? Next?”

Ilya looked away, his gaze drifting toward the dark, unmoving surface of the lake. He took a slow breath, his chest expanding against Shane's.

"I don't know," Ilya admitted quietly. The raw honesty of it hit Shane hard; this wasn't the arrogant, eighteen-year-old hockey player with a scripted future anymore. This was a man staring at a blank canvas. "Maybe... maybe I try hockey again."

"You don't have to force yourself to do anything, Ilya," Shane said immediately, squeezing his hand. "If you want to try again, we'll get you the best trainers in the world. But if you don't? You can do whatever you want. You could go to school. You could try something completely different. The world is open to you now. You have time."

Ilya tilted his head up, seriously considering the words. They talked about it for a few minutes in soft, quiet murmurs, tossing out ideas that felt impossibly light, until Ilya's expression slowly shifted.

The quiet returned, heavier this time. Ilya looked back down at his own large, scarred palms.

"What about *mama*?" Ilya asked.

The words were so small, so fragile, that they almost broke in the air. He looked up at Shane, his eyes wide and completely bare. "Will I... will I be able to go see her?"

A sharp, suffocating ache tightened in Shane's throat. He had thought about this, of course he had, but hearing Ilya ask it shattered him. Shane swallowed hard, his fingers sliding up to cradle the back of Ilya's head, pulling their foreheads together.

"We will find a way," Shane promised fiercely, his own tears finally slipping down his cheeks. "The citizenship, the passport... we are going to use every legal shield we can build. I will take you to her, Ilya. We will go together, and you can talk to her, and tell her everything. I promise you. I won't let anyone stop us."

Ilya let out a long, shaky exhale against Shane's mouth, his entire body shuddering with a relief that had been eight years in the making. He didn't have a grand speech to give. Instead, he just breathed out three quiet, heavy words into the space between their lips.

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

Shane's breath hitched.

This time... Shane understood it.

"I love you too," Shane whispered, his voice trembling as he pressed his lips to Ilya's. "Always."

He pulled back just an inch, staring into the beautiful eyes of his mate, a bittersweet smile touching his lips as a sudden memory flashed through his mind: a dark hotel room, a stinging mark on his neck, and a desperate, bruising kiss before the world fell apart.

"You said that to me back then, didn't you?" Shane asked softly. "The night before you left. In the hotel room."

Ilya looked at him, his gaze unblinking, profound, and utterly devoted. He didn't deny it. He just leaned up, his rough thumb tracing the permanent, faded scar of the mating bite on Shane's neck.

"Since that night," Ilya whispered, his rough English dropping all the barriers. "Never stopped. Not for one second."

Shane closed his eyes, letting the final pieces of the past fall into place. Ilya had loved him through the dark, through the facility, through every agonizing mile of the forest. And as Ilya pulled him down into a deep, slow kiss that tasted like the warmth of the fire and the promise of a quiet tomorrow, Shane knew the forest was finally empty.

They were home.

Chapter End Notes

****Adele voice**** This is the end...

We started at the cottage, and we are ending at the cottage.

And yes, we have finally reached the end. I truly hope I gave this version of Shane and Ilya the happy ending they so deeply deserved. Some stories require endings like this, where not everything is crystal clear, where even the characters themselves don't fully know what their future holds, but they are utterly, beautifully happy in the present. I think this was definitely one of those stories.

What started as a sudden, fleeting thought in my head, *"What if Ilya was a feral alpha, and even though they mated years ago, they only remembered each other by their scents?"*, somehow made its way all the way here. It turned into a whole novella.

I want to thank each and every one of you for accompanying me on this journey. Even if I couldn't reply to them all, I read every single one of your comments. Reading the thoughts of people who dived just as deep into this world as I did, people who got excited about this story even though it might not be everyone's cup of tea, was my greatest support during some really difficult times while writing this.

They still have a long road ahead of them, a lot of healing to do, and a trip to Russia to plan. But for tonight, the fire is warm, the forest is quiet, and they are finally home.

Please drop your thoughts in the comments one last time, I'd love to hear from you. I don't know if or when I'll return to this universe, but this was my very first Hollanov fic, and it will always hold a uniquely special place in my heart.

If you'd like to check out my other stories, feel free to take a look at my profile.

Thank you for reading, for screaming in the comments, and for loving them with me.
Until next time. ❤️

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