change, like the sky

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/79643536.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Rose Landry, Yuna Hollander, David Hollander, Svetlana Vetrova, Hayden Pike, Jackie Pike, Montreal Voyageurs | Montreal Metros Team Ensemble (Game Changers), Boston Bears | Boston Raiders Team Ensemble (Game Changers), Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort, Angst with a Happy Ending, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Autistic Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Needs a Hug, Hurt Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug, Protective Ilya Rozanov, Soft Ilya Rozanov, Anxious Shane Hollander, Suicide Attempt, Not intentional attempt, Accidents, Shane Hollander is outed, Shane Hollander Is Bad at Feelings, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Autism, Self-Harm, Post-Episode: s01e06 The Cottage (Heated Rivalry), Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Shane Hollander Whump
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-16 Completed: 2026-03-16 Words: 43,264 Chapters: 5/5

change, like the sky

by cupocoffee

Summary

He doesn’t mean for it to happen that way. He sees the asphalt before he reaches it.

He thinks, *Ilya.*

He doesn’t remember much after that.

-

SHANE HOLLANDER, CAPTAIN OF MONTREAL METROS, FOUND UNRESPONSIVE AFTER FALLING FROM APARTMENT BALCONY
The incident occurred mere hours after rumors of the hockey star’s sexuality started circulating, stemming from an online video of a private conversation between the young captain and actress Rose Landry. There is no update on his current status after being moved to…

Or, Shane gets outed and accidentally hurts himself, the world thinks he's tried to end his life, and Ilya struggles to come to terms with mortality in more than one sense of the word.

Notes

hi sorry. please mind the tags (MIND THE TAGS).

this takes place post-cottage. i know there weren't any balconies (im pretty sure) shown on screen at shane's apartment, so pretend there is one somewhere. to make it clear, shane did not actually attempt; it was an accident. but the timing is what makes the whole world, including ilya, think otherwise. happy ending!

and a loving, endless thank you to cloudrecess for helping me with russian. language is such a pivotal and central part of our experience loving and understanding the world around us: it was extremely important for me to get ilya's words (and irina's) right because of it, but i knew i got some stuff wrong...until cloudrecess! so thank you thank you <33

Chapter 1: Shane

8:36 p.m.

The last few moments of clarity Shane has are absurdly simple—a collection of matter-of-fact assessments of the situation.

He thinks, *I should not have done that.*

And, *Dizzy—chest and throat is tight. Can't breathe properly.*

And, *Fuck, losing balance*.

And, *Shit.*

He tips over the balcony's edge and feels gravity shift under him, legs flying away from the ground, and it's nearly the same sensation of getting checked hard enough to careen straight into the ice. Except this time, he's not wearing a helmet. And he's not mid-game. There aren't loud boos, or cheers, or the slick rush of adrenaline that shoots through his body.

It's quiet. It was around 8 p.m. the last time he checked the time, and it's calm, other than the ambient sounds of the city somewhere below him.

He doesn't mean for it to happen that way. He sees the asphalt before he reaches it.

He thinks, *Ilya.*

He doesn't remember much after that.

-

5:30 p.m.

The video leaks while Shane is taking a shower.

It's a snippet of some kind of conversation he was having with Rose. It was a nice night out, and Rose was in Montreal for filming. They'd reserved a private corner away from prying eyes. The restaurant was loud enough for any conversation to melt into the cacophony of a Friday night, and their seats were separated from other tables enough to the point where Shane had let his guard down completely.

It had been fun. They were having fun.

In the video, Shane is wearing a simple hoodie, and Rose is wearing a comfortable sweater. They're laughing at something Shane said about how crazy the entertainment industry seems in comparison to sports.

Rose raises an eyebrow. Her face is grainy in the darker lighting of the restaurant, but she still looks beautiful on camera—she's meant to be a star. She says, "That's because the whole industry is, like, a shit ton of gay theater kids, and the whole word thinks it's the coolest thing *ever*."

The audio is grainy, but there are subtitles. It's also good enough to the point where Shane will later imagine the person recording had been using a mic to try and pick up the conversation from wherever they had been hiding.

"I guess." Shane takes a sip of ginger ale. He looks relaxed and comfortable and in his own skin.

Rose leans forward. "And sports is gay, too! I mean, a bunch of shirtless guys sweating on each other? Come on."

"There's shirtless guys sweating in any industry."

"Like where?"

"I don't know, military?"

"Military?" Rose laughs, bright and loud, before slapping a hand over her mouth. Her eyes twinkle mischievously. "I bet *you'd* like that."

"I think I'm happy where I am."

"What, shirtless-guys-in-sports-land?"

"No." He thinks. He's thinking of Ilya in the shower, shirtless, looking over at him with a teasing smile and hunger in his eyes. "Well, maybe for one shirtless guy, but—"

"Oh my God, who? Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess." Rose starts tapping her manicured fingers on the table, eyes staring up at the ceiling in concentration.

Shane laughs a little. He puts his hand over hers without hesitating, shaking it. "Rose, you—"

"Ugh, Shane, tell me!" Rose throws her head back in faux exasperation. "I don't know any other gay guy in the league other than you."

"There was literally *just* a huge event, I don't know if you saw? With Scott Hunter?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't count—"

"Cause he's fifty-six? Rose. That's really mean; old guys get to be gay, too."

Rose laughs in delight, nose scrunched up. Shane grins at her while shaking his head. They're having fun. It's a fun conversation between friends. Then, after a beat of comfortable silence, Shane looks up—

Straight to the camera.

The video cuts there.

He'd thought someone had been taking a picture of them. Paparazzi. It happened all the time. But now, staring at the video, he almost laughs. This is ridiculous, horrifying, absurd. He wants to die. He wants to call Ilya. He wants to call Rose. He wants to call his parents—no, the fuck he doesn't. He wants to throw his phone out the window.

Plausible deniability, he tells himself for one dizzyingly brief, beautiful moment. He almost convinces himself.

Then the phone calls start pouring in, with the emails, the messages, the DMs, the comments, the tags. He ends up throwing his phone at the wall, half out of a sudden burst of rage and half at a feeling of panic rising to his throat.

He hasn't felt this scared in a long, long time. He feels his beating heart and rushing thoughts fizzle out into a suffocating, eerie, still quiet that envelops him.

-

7:15 p.m.

Shane, to be fair, does his due diligence to not disappear and never return.

Years later, when hindsight becomes less raw and grating but thoughtful and mellow, he will think back to this moment and think that he handled it the best way he could have, but most definitely not as healthily as he should have.

He will be kind to himself and acknowledge to his therapist that yes, nothing had been his fault at that moment, that yes, he had been scared and alone and reacted in the only ways he could. But he would also be firm, acknowledge that yes, he shouldn't have completely shut everyone out, that yes, he had been panicking, that yes, he was learning better coping strategies instead of checking out of his body whenever something unexpected occurred.

Now, though, around two hours after being outed to the world through a recorded conversation of him hanging out with his best friend, he thinks about how he'd like to vanish.

He doesn't even realize how long it's been since he saw that video. He only realizes once he lifts his head and winces at the ache in his neck, the rush of blood diverting back to the rest of his body. He's been hunched over on his couch, pressed as close to the cushions as he can, head between knees, breathing quickly and quietly. His face is sticky from drying snot and tears he hadn't even known were falling.

It's silent in his apartment. The lights are off. For that, he's grateful. He doesn't know what to do.

Fuck.

He doesn't know what to do. He feels his nails digging into his palms from how hard he's clenching his fists. He can almost hear his mom telling him that he's hurting himself.

His mom.

His heart starts beating again, too fast. He clutches his chest to try and grab onto his breathing that has finally calmed enough to actually draw breath. He feels like his lungs are trying to fly away from him. Shit, shit, shit. He grips his hair and tugs, eyes widening.

He still hasn't called anybody back. He knows people are waiting for him—scared for him—and trying to reach him. He knows his parents are driving back from their well-deserved trip up North. He knows Hayden, visiting relatives out west with Jackie and the kids for off-season, has been dialing him nonstop for the past hour. He knows Rose is texting him, calling him, apologizing for something out of her control. He knows the press is going wild, jumping on the chance for the headline of the century. He knows his team is trying to reach him, trying to get a statement, a confirmation, something to put together to get out to the public.

He knows Ilya is texting him, spamming him, calling, facetiming, leaving voicemails. He knows he's on his way right now, on a flight from Boston, to come see him.

His phone flashes, silent. There's an ugly crack on his screen from throwing it earlier. He thinks vaguely to replace it soon; it was old, anyway.

Lily: *i am waiting for the flight*

Lily: *fastest they could book, i'm sorry for being late*

Lily: *stupid fucking promo video for fucking raiders I should be there with you right now*

CALL FROM: LILY

Lily: *shane pick up please*

CALL FROM: LILY

Lily: *shane, please tell me you are not alone right now*

God, he wants to hear his voice. The wish funnels straight to Shane's abdomen like a bullet, constricts his insides. He scrabbles off the couch and slides onto the floor, in front of his coffee table, head against the cold glass while staring at his phone. He reaches out gingerly and puts his hands atop his phone. He feels tears forming in his eyes again.

He imagines calling Ilya, hearing his soothing voice. He could so easily be convinced that everything's okay, that everything will be okay. He could nod silently when Ilya calms him, promising him that Ilya will come and Shane won't be alone. Maybe then he'd feel better and finally think about what to do, how to navigate this. Come out or deny, stay quiet or put out a statement.

He could also tell Ilya that he's okay. God. Shane knows he's worried sick right now, worried and scared and anxious and enraged.

He should call.

Lily: *shane, you do not have to say anything. please just pick up*

CALL FROM: LILY

He picks up.

"*Shane—you are okay? Where are you?"*

Shane opens his mouth. He wants to say that he's okay, that he's at the apartment.

But he can't. His voice won't work, and his fingers won't cooperate when he considers messaging Ilya what he can't say. He squeezes his eyes shut, presses his cheek harder into the glass.

"*Moy lyubimyy,*" Ilya breathes. Shane lets out a small hiccup of a breath. "*Is not fair that this happened to you. I'm sorry.*"

He's sorry, too. He forces a garbled, choked hum of acknowledgement, desperate to let Ilya know he's listening. He presses his cheek harder into the glass.

The cold soothes him, momentarily. He presses his cheek harder still and hears the legs creak. He lifts his head, drops it back onto the surface. The impact sends a bright flash of pain, but it brings him back, pulls him away from the messy spiral of *what-do-I-do's* grabbing Shane's brain and shaking it around.

"*Shane, what was that?*" Ilya asks.

Shane does it again.

"*Shane, if you are hitting something, do not. Stop.*"

He does it again. He knows he shouldn't—he hasn't hit his head like this since he was a child—but the repetitive motion and the pain gives him something to hold onto, something real to do and feel, something controllable.

"*Shane, stop.*" Ilya's voice is strong, loud. It cuts through Shane's muddled thoughts and he stops, blinking and uncomprehending. His mind buzzes with half-formed thoughts falling away into a growing void that he can't control.

"*Please don't hurt yourself. You—I will be there in less than four hours, da? No, three hours. Three hours, and I will be with you. Do not hurt yourself.*" Ilya pleads, and Shane feels guilt so deep in his bones he doesn't know what to do with himself. He brings the heel of his palms to his eyes and presses as hard as he can. He cries silently, breathing rapid.

God, he wishes Ilya was here. He wishes he was here. He wishes he was here.

"…here," Shane whispers. Can't bring the full sentence to form in his mouth.

Ilya seems to understand, though, like he always does. "*Me too. I will be there soon. Soon, understand?*" Then, "*I am boarding. I will buy WiFi—be on call with you.*"

Calls aren't allowed on airlines, Shane thinks distantly. That's what gets him to speak again, to let Ilya know.

"No calls on flight, Ilya," Shane whispers. He dislodges his palms from his eyes but keeps them closed. *I wish you were here*.

He hears an exhale of relief on Ilya's end. Shane would smile if he had the energy to.

"*Okay. Okay, fine, no calls on stupid plane. I will hang up when it goes up, hm? Stay here with me until then. Then I will be with you soon.*"

Did anyone recognize you? What excuse did you tell the others to fly back so early? Did you call my mom and dad?

Ilya reads his mind. "*I will let Yuna know I called you. Is okay? If I do this?*"

Yes. He nods. Forces out a tiny sound of affirmation. He presses his cheek against the glass again.

"*Okay. This is good. There is empty seat next to me. You are my lucky charm; I will call you before every flight from now, before I sit in tiny ass airplane with tiny seat.*"

Ilya talks for a bit. Shane lets it wash over him, his voice smoothing his insides, the cool glass anchoring him to the world. He can feel that he's rocking back and forth and feels almost stupid—he's not ten anymore, he shouldn't be doing that—but it keeps the frantic buzz of reoccurring adrenaline at bay.

"*Plane taking off now. The flight attendant looking at me funny; I have to go now. I will see you soon, Shane. Do not hurt yourself, please. I will see you soon. I love you. I love you. Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

Okay. Shane nods. Hums out a response. He'll try not to. He loves him too.

Ilya hangs up. The surge of adrenaline and fear grabs him again almost comedically fast. He bangs his head against the table.

He sees his phone light up with another call from his mom. He stares at it, hitting his head against the glass, until it dies. Later, they will find blood on the coffee table lining the cracks. They will have to replace the entire thing.

Ten minutes later, he abruptly stops banging his head. There's a wetness to his temple that he didn't notice before. He sits up. Something—he doesn't know what it is, maybe just the awareness of blood on his head, or something—but something floods his brain and quiets his thoughts.

He needs to handle this.

Scandals are part of hockey, he remembers somebody saying. He doesn't remember who, and it doesn't matter, because it's true. Isn't it? Scandals happen all the time. This is no different. He just needs to do damage control, figure out the general reaction of him being gay, either

deny but with a gracious amount of support to the queer community or confirm and deal with whatever the fuck that will look like when he decides.

Deal with losing his entire career, maybe, his meaning to live. Everything he's given. Everything's he's ever lived for.

He walks to the bathroom with half the mind to patch up his bleeding head. He calls his parents.

They pick up so fast Shane barely has the time to prepare himself.

"*Shane, baby, oh my God, thank God—Shane, Ilya told us that he called you just now, just—we're just over an hour out; baby, are you okay?*" His mom's voice washes over him, and it's almost too much, too loud. Shane pulls the phone away from his ear and grimaces, heart starting to pound again, breathing shallow, blood wet on his head. He looks into the mirror he's standing in front of and watches as his anxious expression starts to shift, harden.

It's like when he's on the ice. He stops all thoughts and focuses his entire being into what he knows to do. He can feel himself detach from his body, float away into a mind-numbing bliss of pure instinct as habit takes over.

"Hi, mom," he says, voice measured. "Sorry for not calling. I was a little overwhelmed."

"*Baby*," his mom breathes. There's an odd lilt to her voice, an emotion Shane can't identify.

"I think we need to figure out what happens next."

-

8:20 p.m.

He doesn't feel lighter after the call, but he feels a bit more collected. Collected enough to think that this sucks, he wants everything to fade away, his head hurts and is pounding, and he needs something to get out of his own mind.

Tylenol, maybe. Then a drink.

He hates drinking. It tastes awful and makes him lose absolute control over himself and makes him drift in an aimless haze until the hangover comes crashing down.

Shit, that almost sounds appealing. He'll take it.

There's a bottle of vodka that he's kept in his pantry, of a Russian variety. He doesn't know the actual brand but knows Ilya had complimented it during an inconspicuous night out at the bar—and Shane had asked the bartender, before leaving, what the brand was, and the bartender had just given him the bottle.

He misses Ilya.

God, he misses Ilya.

He wants to call him, but he knows he's on the flight now. He'll be here soon.

He grabs the vodka and pours it into a mug. He takes the Tylenol with the alcohol thinks, *I shouldn't be doing that*, grimaces, and swallows anyway.

Fuck, that's awful. It also burns as it travels down his throat into his stomach, and the burn forces him back into his body, grounds him. He drinks again, and again.

He thinks that Ilya would be furious at him drinking this much, this fast, this strong, with medicine. He thinks that he'd understand, though, and besides, who the fuck *cares*?

Who cares?

Shane wants to drink. He wants to get away, so he'll fucking do that.

It's an uncharacteristic bout of anger directed at nobody in particular except himself. He smiles deprecatingly into the cup and drinks. Pours another cup because fuck it, *fuck* it. Who cares.

Ilya does. His parents do. His friends do. He pushes those thoughts away.

Who fucking cares. He's going to get drunk out of his mind and forget about all of this for a while, until Ilya comes home and is there to help him down, or…something.

Yeah. He takes another swig. Fuck this. Fuck.

At some point, Shane's leaning against the window leading to the balcony. He's drunk quicker than he thought he'd be and, deliriously, he realizes it's because he never drinks—he's a…a lightweight.

He giggles to himself at that. Lightweight. Stupid word. He's heavy; he's an athlete.

An athlete. Will he still be an athlete after this? Or will Montreal kick him, the fans shun him, the league turn away? Will he be protected, or will all of the locker room talks, ill-intentioned chirps on the ice, raging comments all coalesce into the reality he lives in, where he won't be ever looked at the same again? Will his friends spit at him? Colleagues refuse to look at him?

How will Shane keep Ilya safe if he's not an athlete anymore? If the brands drop him, and he doesn't make a lot of money? How will he keep Ilya in Canada during the summer? Will Ilya want to stay with Shane if he's kicked out of the league? Will he be too boring now, honest-to-God? Ilya deserves more than that. He deserves…

The apartment feels suffocating. Shane pushes out onto the balcony, swaying, and grips the bars of the railing that come up to his waist. He leans over it, head in his hands.

The cool air rustles his air and he feels like he can breathe a bit. He tries—one, two, three, four…

He sees himself sitting alone at an empty rink, stick and skates on the floor. He imagines watching Montreal win the cup without him. He feels like throwing up. His chest constricts

and his mouth waters and he wants to start crying, screaming, jumping up and down, punching something—shit, he doesn't know.

Oh, fuck, he's going to throw up.

He shoots up, gasping, and the sudden movement and blood rush makes the word spin.

The last few moments of clarity Shane has are absurdly simple—a collection of matter-of-fact assessments of the situation.

He thinks, *I should not have done that.*

And, *Dizzy—chest and throat is tight. Can't breathe properly.*

And, *Fuck, losing balance*.

And, *Shit.*

-

9:30 p.m.

SHANE HOLLANDER, CAPTAIN OF MONTREAL METROS, FOUND UNRESPONSIVE AFTER FALLING FROM APARTMENT BALCONY

The incident occurred mere hours after rumors of the hockey star's sexuality started circulating, stemming from an online video of a private conversation between the young captain and actress Rose Landry. There is no update on his current status after being moved to…

Chapter 2: Ilya

Chapter Summary

Ilya's reckoning.

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicide, violence, intubation, etc. Also medical inaccuracy. man idk what actual terminologies are sorry. russian translations at the end of chap! NO AI USED EVER PLEASEEE oh my god i love em-dashes i cant believe i have to say this FUCK GENAI

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They tell him that by the time Yuna and David pulled into the driveway, there were already police and an ambulance cordoned off by a small crowd of onlookers. Curious eyes piercing the flashing miasma of red-blue lights, stupid fucking cameras *everywhere*, and Shane's body —no, not "body," that sounds clinical, that sounds *cold;* it's just Shane, just Shane—on a stretcher being pushed with a kind of intensity Ilya could only imagine as the one he saw years and years ago outside of his own home.

They don't tell him what Shane looked like on the way to the hospital.

"*They'll let you through,*" Yuna gasps past breath-hitching sobs. Ilya hears David in the background, voice uncharacteristically frantic and panicked and that just puts another shock through Ilya's system. "*We're in—God, Ilya. We're in the waiting room. They took him in—they took him in for—God! What? David, what? Oh, my God—*"

"I am on my way," Ilya says. Yuna is saying something in rapid succession and Ilya can't keep up, fuck him. He can't keep up with the English Yuna speaks, like it's some kind of language he has never heard before. She uses medical terminology or—or something, keeps saying things and then *Shane, Shane, he's—Shane,* and between the sobs and the slurred-sobbed-heaved vowels and consonants clacking together like a broken cog, he can't figure out what she's saying.

Or maybe Ilya's just not processing language in general, because he doesn't feel like he's in his body right now.

He fell off his balcony, Yuna had cried. She had been the one to pick up on Shane's phone, right after Ilya called getting off the plane. *He was on the ground, right under his balcony.*

“I’m in taxi right now—I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” Ilya says. He doesn’t really notice until he looks down at the phone that Yuna has hung up—or maybe he did. He doesn’t know. He sounds far away from himself. He feels cold, all over, bone-deep, feels like both throwing up and punching the taxi window clean through to still his trembling fingers.

He fell off his balcony.

He imagines Shane, standing on the balcony, hair lightly moving under the breeze. He imagines his hands curled around the safety rails. He imagines him looking back at Ilya with a small smile—the one he reserves for him, and him only—and imagines his softly glowing brown eyes meet his own.

He imagines Shane shaking his head. He imagines him saying, “I’m sorry, Ilya,” then turning away. He imagines Shane looking down at the ground below and back at Ilya, once, smile still there, before pushing himself over the edge.

The feeling of a butcher’s cleaver slicing cleanly into his back, pulling out his spine, nervous system firing off every single bit of fear he can muster, slams into him.

His hand flies up to grip the pendant around his neck.

He glances up at the rearview mirror. His mama’s eyes catch his, behind the taxi driver. She stares at him with knowing, blue eyes and he gasps so loudly he makes the driver jump. Then he blinks, and it’s just him looking back at himself—no Mama, just his wide eyes. They’re blue and red (like the cop cars) and disgustingly wet (like the blood).

No.

He fell off his balcony.

He wouldn’t have done that.

He was on the ground, right under his balcony.

No, no, no.

His mama on the bed, eyes wide and empty.

He fell off his balcony.

Mama. No. Shane, he wouldn’t—no, no, Mama, *pozhaluysta*. Ilya puts both hands over his mouth, leans back into his seat as far as he can go. Fuck, please. Not his Shane, not—he couldn’t have. He wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do that.

He sees Shane on the ground, on the cold, uncaring asphalt. He sees blood pooling under him, arms bent at the wrong angle, leg twisted. Head lolling unnaturally to one side, mouth lightly ajar, freckles covered in popped vessels.

He fell off his balcony.

He wouldn’t do that. Would he?

Shane stares at him, pleading, eyes wide and wet and beautiful, mouth lightly ajar and moving to say something Ilya can’t hear, until it shutters into a blank sheen of nothing. Of a window that goes nowhere. His love, his soul. *Dusha moya.*

He fell off his balcony.

Ilya sits in the taxi and thinks that this is, perhaps, the most scared he’s ever felt.

-

Svetlana calls him multiple, multiple times. He can't bring himself to pick up. He'll throw up if he does.

He sees her as a child, trying to hug him after Mama’s funeral. Frizzy hair tickling his cheek. He'd pushed her away, shouted at her to leave him alone. He hadn't let her get too close. He'd only gone to apologize once he had calmed himself down and bottled everything up into a neat chest deep inside his heart, sealing his mama away for a long, long time.

CALL FROM: SVETLANA DEL REY

svetlana del rey: *ilya.*

Ilya turns his phone off for the remainder of the ride.

Nothing's changed much.

-

He remembers distinctly that he hadn’t cried when he found Mama that day.

No, he hadn’t. At least not at first. He had instead called out for her once, at the doorway, then again, next to her bed. She’d been facing the door when he pushed it open gingerly. He’d thought that she was taking a nap while he was at hockey practice.

When she didn’t wake up to wipe the dried spit and tears and snot away from her mouth, Ilya had crawled into bed with her. He’d wiped away the mess for her with his sleeve, curled into her chest and moved her uncharacteristically cold hands to drape over his shoulders, and took a nap. He’d stayed until Alexei pulled him away, shouting, crying.

“Why are you crying?” He’d asked.

Alexei slammed the door shut, eyes wide. “*Ilyushka*,” he’d whispered.

That’s when Ilya had started crying. Alexei had silently embraced him. That was the last time they ever held each other, and the last time Ilya saw his mama.

-

"*Ilyusha,*" he hears Mama whisper. She runs her manicured hands through his curls affectionately and softly, palms warm, fingers steady. "*Moy synochek, vstavay.*"

-

Ilya doesn't remember asking where Shane is. He only comes to himself when he's running down the corridor, taking a hard right, and standing at the end of the waiting area outside of where Shane is being held hostage. Where he is unconscious under sharp instruments and blaring lights that surely will make him cranky when he wakes up.

He pants loudly, heart racing, face flushed. Yuna and David are huddled together in the corner—they're standing, likely unable to find it in themselves to sit, not yet—shaking lightly.

David notices Ilya first.

"Ilya, son," he says. He looks horrible. He looks fucking horrible. There are tears all over, and his pale skin is splotchy.

Yuna looks up, too, and her watery eyes look so much like Shane's it takes Ilya's breath away.

"I got here as fast as I could," Ilya tries to say. He tries, but his voice shakes and he rubs his mouth with trembling fingers and fuck.

David opens an arm, the other one still around Yuna who just stares at Ilya in a destroyed sadness. He invites Ilya into their intimate bubble.

Ilya stumbles into them. They all hug each other. Who is holding who up? Ilya can't tell. It doesn't matter.

"It's—it's been around three hours," Yuna whispers. Ilya feels her hands, first digging into his shoulders, soften.

She starts to rub Ilya's back.

"You were in his emergency contacts," Yuna continues, like this is important for Ilya to know, like this is vital. "You were in his emergency contacts. You were there."

You were on his mind, always, she is saying. *Always*.

"He is on mine," Ilya mumbles back, because it seems right.

A pause. Then, softly, Yuna's breath stutters again. "I'm so sorry, honey. They're…the police are looking into it, to see if…if there was someone, or something, but—" Yuna stops talking.

Ilya's heart starts racing erratically.

"Nothing. There's…there was—God. They've ruled out any foul play," David finishes for her. He sounds defeated and deflated, empty, punched.

Foul play. “Foul play?” Ilya asks. “This means…what this mean?”

He knows what it means.

“Nobody pushed him,” David responds.

Shane looks back at him, once, still smiling. *I’m sorry.*

Ilya feels David’s hands move to grab Ilya’s neck and squeezes comfortingly, tenderly, fatherly and sure, and something cracks in Ilya’s chest clean in half.

-

NHL UPDATES @stayupdatednhl

Shane Hollander reportedly undergoing surgery in critical condition after falling off his apartment balcony. Article link

Montreal Metros @NHLMetros

We are currently keeping in touch with Shane’s family, who ask for privacy during this time. Updates will be made in accordance with their wishes. Our thoughts and prayers are with our captain. #HollanderStrong

NHL @NHL

The NHL’s thoughts and prayers are with @NHLMetros’ Shane Hollander. #HollanderStrong

Boston Raiders @NHLRaiders

The Raiders send our love and support to Shane Hollander. #HollanderStrong

shane lover 101 @hollerathollander

articles are saying he fell off his balcony??? right after that horrible leak of privacy??? praying that it’s not what it looks like #hollanderstrong

ryan b @hockryanb

So…is nobody going to talk about the elephant in the room?

- **cinderblock @cindy1201**: me when i can’t read the room man shut the fuck up

Above the Board @aboveboardpodcast

It’s not looking good for Shane Hollander in…more than one sense of the word. Still hoping for good news at the end of this. #HollanderStrong

gamechanger @game_changer81

guys I don’t want to speculate but this really doesn’t sound like an accident

- **shaniac @yiwjf091**: i hate baseless rumors but the timing of this…this is what happens when we let homophobia and bigotry run rampant </3 #hollanderstrong

Pop Updates @popnewsupdates

Salacious leaked conversation between #ShaneHollander and #RoseLandry going viral on Twitter! [Video]

- **Duly @dulynoted1:** Why is twt still up??? Genuinely take this down if you have any decency at all! Good lord!!!!

laraunt tilly @land.overup

Everyone speculating are MISSING THE POINT ohhhh my god you people are so annoying!!!! He's in crit condition and all yall can think about is whether Shane's gay??

holly molly @tinkher_bellee

are the @NHLMetros gonna address what news dropped before this happened. and how they were silent about protecting shane from rumors the entire time.

hollander up @hollander1up10

I'm genuinely so heartbroken. My thoughts go out to his parents and friends. #Hollanderstrong

sbslp @slotplot32

Is this actually an attempt or

-

When the surgeon leaves the operating room, Ilya has been floating in an aimless haze for hours.

He shoots up from the shoddily cushioned seat, adrenaline soaring and pumping blood into his head. He sees Yuna and David next to him but can barely see them from the corner of his eye.

He grips his pendant.

"My name is Esther Jeong," the surgeon—Dr. Jeong—says. She snaps off her gloves and balls up it, dark circles under her eyes. "Mr. Hollander is stable, for now."

A gasp from Yuna and David. They're relieved, but Ilya sees the way the surgeon holds herself; he recognizes tenseness anywhere, knows wariness like a cousin, consternation like the neighborhoods of his childhood town. This isn't good news. It's not. He swallows, hard.

"But? There is a 'but' to this, da?" He asks. He runs a hand through his hair and tugs at the end. Fuck.

She looks over at him, and there's a look of faint recognition in her look. Vaguely, he realizes that if the surgeon recognizes Ilya, she's recognized Shane, too. She's looking at how wrecked Ilya is, how he is part of the crowd, how he was an emergency contact.

She knows, he thinks. But Ilya finds that he doesn't care. He doesn't care at all. He was probably recognized outside, anyway, even if this specific area is cordoned off. He doesn't care. Would Shane?

Does Shane?

Can Shane?

Dr. Jeong nods, and it breaks him out of his suffocating thoughts. "There were some complications midway through, which is why the surgery went so long—his lungs were damaged from the fall, and some other internal ruptures alongside fractures, including his spine—but he's been stabilized for now."

Internal rupture—ruptures, like holes? Lungs damaged? Is his breathing impaired? Fractured spine? Fracture means broken, no?

Too many words that mean too many things. Ilya blinks uncomprehendingly, eye twitching. "So—so what? So he is okay? Or no?" He feels like throwing up at the last question. Nausea hits him so strong he almost doubles over.

"He's stable for now," Dr. Jeong repeats. "That's the best we can give you. I won't sugarcoat it for you folks—he's not doing great. He's a young man and an athlete, so we have tentative optimism that he'll be able to fight the long fight, but there's no guarantee."

"Guarantee of what?" Yuna demands. She steps forward, grabbing the surgeon's hands. "Of what? Is—is my baby going to wake up? What's going on?"

"Yuna," David murmurs, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"There's no guarantee he'll wake up," Dr. Jeong says, and at this, she seems genuinely sorrowful. "His body is under extreme stress. And if he does, we have no real way of knowing how bad his brain has been damaged from the fall."

Brain damage. Brain damage? Ilya hasn't even considered that. His mouth falls open silently.

She continues on. "Outwardly, he had fracture to his skull—but to put it simply, he seems to have avoided the worst of it. He might have protected his head before impact. But we'll only know for sure if he wakes up.

If he wakes up. *If,* not when. Ilya puts his hands on his hips, tries to breathe deeply but finds that he can't, not really. He leans forward, eyes wide, breathing starting to grow shallower and faster. He has to sit down. He has to—he has to sit.

He sits. His hands, trembling, starts to shake. He squeezes them into fists. His knuckles go whiter than a spirit's.

The others continue to speak, but Ilya can't hear them. They sound like they're in an ocean far away; they sound submerged, or just distant, like they're in another room or building entirely. Ilya scrubs his face. He scratches his cheek on accident.

He can't breathe properly. He lightly rubs his chest.

Lungs were damaged from the fall.

His own lungs fail to inflate. His eyes grow wide, just a bit.

Nearly a decade of hiding their love. Nobody knows except for the people in the room. Nobody knows that it's not Shane Hollander that's had his lungs damaged, his spine fractured, his head broken. That's Ilya's beloved that's had his lungs damaged, his spine fractured, his head broken. That's Ilya's heart, his soul, his—his—

"Ilya, breathe," he hears Shane say softly.

Ilya jerks so hard he hits his own jaw. He looks around wildly—he knows, he knows, he knows Shane isn't there, not really—but it still hurts when he doesn't see Shane. It's just Yuna who looks wrecked and David who looks wrecked and Dr. Jeong who looks sad and…

His mama looks back at him from the other side of the waiting area. She's wearing the same dress she was wearing when Ilya found her back then, with the same lipstick, the same eyeshadow, the same jewelry. A familiar golden pendant swings from her neck as she shifts and leans forward, towards Ilya. Spit dribbles down the side of her chin but she wipes it away with a handkerchief.

"*Iluysha,*" she whispers. "*Dyshi.*"

He gasps in a deep breath and a sob accompanies it like a familiar friend. It's as if he's broken a dam—the sobs come one after another and soon, he's sobbing in front of God and Shane's beautiful family and the surgeon and he can't stop. He doesn't register that David and Yuna have rushed to him until he feels their arms wrapping around him, joining him in his cries.

The three of them hold each other and sob. It's warm, like Shane always is, and it's loud. Shared pain and grief. Ilya hasn't shared grief since before his mama, since before Shane took it upon himself to share it for the both of them.

Grief. Heavy and strong. Ilya cries for Mama. He cries for Shane.

Shane. Fuck. His beautiful brown eyes and lips and freckles and heart and kindness and love. His love. *Moy lyubimyy*.

Shane. In Ilya's mind, he looks at him with warm eyes that crinkle with a smile.

-

Later, Ilya stands in front of a vending machine, drained.

Shane is placed in the ICU to be monitored, because his state is “fragile,” because he needs to be “kept” on a Frankenstein-like state of various medical instruments Ilya will look up later when he has his head back in the game. Whatever the fuck that means.

Only two people are allowed at a time in the room. Ilya leaves Yuna and David in front of the doors without a word because of course his parents should see him first. He doesn’t stop walking even when he hears David calling out for him, doesn’t stop until he turns the corner. It still rips something away from Ilya, every step he takes. He just walks, aimless, until he arrives at the vending machine.

There are water bottles. Water for Yuna and David.

“And yourself,” Shane snips. “You haven’t had anything to drink for how long?”

Ilya bangs his forehead on the glass of the machine gently. It lands with a dull *thud.* Fuck him. He’s already hearing ghosts.

Ghosts. No. That implies that—fuck.

Ilya wants to punch the vending machine, and he does. The loud rattle reverberates throughout hall. A bottle of water he didn’t pay for springs out of place and topples down for him to collect. Ilya stares at it dumbly, incredulously, knuckles throbbing.

His phone buzzes in his pocket once. Then twice. Then thrice, then a succession—someone’s calling him. He pulls it out as he leans down to grab the bottle of water.

CALL FROM: MARLEY

He really, really doesn’t want to pick up.

But he left Boston without saying anything to anybody. Shit. Marlow’s probably worried, like a good friend, and Ilya is evidently not a good friend because he’s forgotten about his—or anybody else’s, for that matter—existence.

He picks up before he can overthink it. He says, “Hello?” and he sounds like he’s been grinded into a fine powder, then sculpted into a facsimile of himself.

“*Jesus, Roz, you sound fucking horrible. You okay?*”

No, he is fucking *not* okay. A random geyser of anger erupts out of Ilya’s heart and he pulls the phone away from his ear to blink back frustrated tears. He walks over to the nearest corner and leans heavily onto it, tucks his chin onto his chest and crosses his arms. He holds himself like a stupid kid. His phone hangs precariously between his cheek and shoulder. He hopes it falls and cracks and breaks so he doesn’t have to call anybody ever again.

“Yes, I’m okay,” Ilya responds. He sounds minutely better than he did a second ago. “Sorry for leaving without saying anything. Is unexpected.”

“*Yeah, no shit. What happened?*”

He thinks: *My heart got taken out of my ribcage. It's being shaken around in the fist of death. I miss my mama. I want Shane. Why did he do that? Did he do that on purpose? Did he—is it that easy to leave me? No, that's not right. I shouldn't say that.*

"Friend got into accident. I was, eh, what you say? Emergency contact."

"*Fuck. Friend didn't have anyone else?*"

He did, but that doesn't matter. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut. He would have ran across the continent to get to Shane if he had to. "Friend did, but I was worried."

"*Wait, so where are you? Is your friend okay? You coming back later?*"

"Not okay, no. I am in hospital, you hear that? My voice is fucking echoing? No, friend is not okay. I am in—" Ilya pauses.

If he says Montreal, Marlow's going to know damn well who this "friend" is. And if he figures out its that "Montreal girl" that he always teases Ilya about, he's going to think about the fact that just mere hours ago in Montreal, one Shane Hollander was transported to a hospital. There's no way he doesn't know about it. And he's going to hear how wrecked Ilya is, and…

"Ilya," Shane says, a warning in his voice.

Shane, Ilya thinks, and, *Fuck.*

"I'm in Montreal," Ilya says.

There is a long silence. Ilya feels so tired. He closes his eyes. He apologizes to Shane.

"*You…*" Another pause.

"*Fuck, Ilya. Is this about Hollander?*" Marlow's voice is soft. Too soft. Ilya wants to throttle something. Ilya didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't—tenderness. He braces himself like he's gearing up to fight, uncrosses his arms, considers either hanging up or start yelling.

Instead, he *thunks* his head against the wall and mutters, "Yes." He's so tired. He is so, so tired, and tired of hiding everything, of thinking about which words to use how and when and where.

Nearly a decade of this. It was okay before, when Shane would look at him with lively eyes and laugh silently, pink-faced and panting, at Ilya picking up a call from coach mid-blow, when Shane was rubbing his stomach and mouthing, "*Hang up, hang up, come on, Ilya*."

Now, though, he's tired. So tired.

"*Roz—*"

"If you say anything to anybody, I will fly back to Boston to kill you, Marlow," Ilya says, and it's a fact. He will. He knows Marlow knows that he's serious. "I will kill you. So do not—"

"*Roz, who the fuck do you think I am? I don't—I won't say anything to anyone. Nothing, alright?*"

Ilya lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. He slumps against the wall and feels again, again, and again, like crying. "Okay. Thank you. I am tired, and I am angry, and I am scared. I don't have other things to say."

"*I don't know your…well, I don't know what's up with you and him, but—shit, Roz. I'm sorry. I saw the news.*"

"Good for you."

"*I won't say anything, I swear. So take care of yourself. I'll make up some bullshit excuse, like you found out you had a hidden son—*"

Ilya laughs a little at that. The sound is so foreign, and the relief of laughing is so jarring he has to stand up straighter, put a hand over his mouth. He feels tears in the corner of his eyes.

"Hidden son?" Ilya repeats.

Light laughter. "*Man, whatever the fuck—okay. Don't worry, okay? Take care of yourself. I mean it*."

"Okay." Ilya breathes deeply with lungs that are unscarred. "Okay. Thank you, Cliff. I will…" He frowns. He can't promise that he'll message him, so he doesn't. He instead says, "I'm hanging up now. I am tired."

He hangs up.

He's alone again. He crumples onto the ground. He cries silently, facing away from the rest of the world. He calls for his mama in his head.

-

"*Ilyusha,*" his mama sings. She pulls him into her arms, swaying him back-and-forth, singing. She tickles his side, and Ilya giggles. He pretends to sleep harder—maybe she won't notice he giggled. Her dress is soft under his cheeks and he rubs against it.

His mama laughs a beautiful laugh. It sounds like wind chimes. She runs a warm hand over his face, cups forehead, and kisses it. "*Ilyusha, moy zaychik—Ilyusha, vstavay.*"

-

"Ilya," Yuna murmurs, "Wake up, honey."

Ilya opens his eyes to Yuna crouching next to him. His breath hitches at the fondness he sees in her brown eyes, the kindness, the utter acceptance. He doesn't mean to lean into her, but he does—and she embraces him without a second's worth of hesitation. She starts swaying him back-and-forth.

Do mothers know always, anything? Do they share their love? Does it flow through each of them, make them aware of how to show love how it's needed for others who need it?

"You fell asleep in the hallway," Yuna says into his temple. He feels her hands rubbing his back in firm, circular strokes. "We were looking for you."

"I'm sorry," he replies, and he sounds so childish, like a little baby.

"No, don't be. You needed that sleep."

Sleep. How long has he been asleep? How long has he been—he sits up and pulls away to search Yuna's face, her tired, kind, motherly face.

"Shane," he says—it isn't a question, or a statement. Something in between.

"Do you want to see him?" she asks.

"Is he—"

"Stable," she says, nodding. "He's stable. He's on a ventilator right now. It—have you been in an intensive care unit before, Ilya?"

Intensive care. He hasn't, not really. He wasn't there when mama was taken away, or when his father died. He doesn't like hospitals. He shakes his head.

"It's intense," she explains. "Obviously. It's in the name." Then she smiles a little bit, and Ilya smiles back helplessly.

"I will prepare myself, like before game, da?" He tries for casual, only manages a voice crack instead.

Yuna brushes his curls back carefully, away from his face. Ilya wants to cry again. He's so tired of crying.

"It's going to look scary, honey," she murmurs. "But it's all helping keep Shane alive, okay? So don't be too scared."

"It is just Shane."

Yuna smiles at him genuinely, then, golden beam of sunlight that is so reminiscent of Shane's smile Ilya has to look away for a moment to gather himself. She follows his eyes, gets him to look at her directly, and he nods. At what? He doesn't know. He just does.

"It's just Shane," Yuna agrees.

She helps him up and keeps an arm around him. "David's going to get us some food. I'm going to deal with press. Those sons of bitches aren't letting up." There's a flash of anger on her face that ebbs quickly away into weariness. "They want a statement, at the very least."

A statement on his health? On his sexuality? Or the other thing?

“Do you think,” Ilya starts, then falters.

The atmosphere shifts. They both slow and stop walking, not too far from where Shane’s unit is. Yuna doesn’t look at Ilya, and Ilya doesn’t look at Yuna. They just stand together, arms around each other tightly, palpable fear in the air.

“Do I think what?” Yuna asks softly.

He doesn’t want to say it. He doesn’t want to ask. He regrets opening his mouth. He looks up at the ceiling like it will give him an answer, then at the ground, like that’ll do something different.

Shane. He sees him on the balcony, hands gripping the bars. He looks back at Ilya, once, but this time, he’s not smiling.

“Would he?” Ilya manages. He regrets the words as soon as it leaves him. No, fuck. He wouldn’t. He *wouldn’t*, he knows that. He *knows* that.

Right?

Yuna drops her arm and steps back. Ilya is about to apologize, about to cry again, about to say I’m sorry—I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry I said that. I won’t say that again, please don’t be mad, please don’t be sad—I didn’t mean to. He turns his head with stinging eyes and quivering lips.

“I’m—”

“My aunt,” Yuna cuts him off, and she doesn’t look mad. Ilya falters again. Always faltering. “My aunt was one of the bravest women I’ve known. She was a trailblazer—Yumiko. She was my mother’s older sister.”

Ilya doesn’t understand. His expression must say what he is thinking, because Yuna puts a hand on Ilya’s arm and *squeezes*.

“She was the bravest, the strongest woman I’ve known. She kept my mother fed, then me. She was the one who encouraged I try hockey, even though she knew I couldn’t go pro.” She steps forward and puts her hands on his face, and Ilya leans into them. His eyes search hers, back-and-forth, confused, scared, but also relieved, because—

“Ilya, she was—she is the strongest, most beautiful, stunning, bravest woman I will ever know. But she died young—forty-one—by a noose. She hung herself.” Yuna gasps out a sob and Ilya shakes his head.

It’s nonsensical, all of this, but Ilya gets it. He understands. He *understands*.

“If Shane—if Shane…if it wasn’t an accident—God, as a mother, Ilya, as a *mother*…” She puts a hand over her mouth. He shakes his head again, because no, no, and hugs her. He squeezes her close and selfishly buries his face into her shoulder and he feels like a kid again.

“As a mother—how do I live with myself? Oh, God, how do I live with myself? How do I—but Ilya, if he did—if he would, you *know*, Ilya, honey, it’s not your—it’s none of our fault, it’s not Shane’s, it’s not—” She chokes off with another shuddering sob. He shakes his head vigorously, starting to cry again, again and again—“You understand? Do you understand?”

“Da, *ya ponimayu*.” He nods. He doesn’t know exactly what she’s saying and won’t ever, not really, but this? The emotion of it, the feeling of it, the—the everything, he gets it. He understands.

“Ilya—”

“My mama,” Ilya cries, and this is the first time since he spoke with Shane about her that he’s telling anybody about her, and it’s almost freeing. It’s almost freeing. “My mama—she—”

“Oh, honey,” Yuna breathes.

He feels her fingers in his hair, stroking the back of his head, rubbing his back, swaying back-and-forth and he swears he can smell his mama’s old perfume, feel the cold press of her necklace against his cheek. His mama.

Yuna doesn’t say, “I’m sorry,” or anything else. She just holds him.

“You are strong,” Ilya whispers. Stronger than he will ever be. Strong enough to reveal herself, to comfort her own son’s boyfriend while she grieves, too, strong enough to let it sit, to face all the possibilities, strong enough to embrace Ilya like her own child, strong enough to think about what this might all mean, strong enough to handle the larger world so soon after theirs collapsed.

Strong enough to be a mother.

Yuna looks up at him with knowing eyes. She gifts him with a mother’s smile. Ilya feels like he is eight again, out of his depth but safe, protected.

“Ilya, baby, you are, too.”

-

Shane is hidden away from Ilya in a cocoon of casts and tubes, machines that beep incessantly. His mouth is forced open with a—a ventilator, they tell him, that helps him breathe. It looks so uncomfortable, so violating. Forced down his throat and nose or—something like that. Fuck. Ilya almost cries at the thought.

(Later, much later, Ilya will tell Shane that the tube that had been down his nose is called the nasogastric tube, and the one down his windpipe is called the endotracheal tube. Shane will look at Ilya with bright eyes and a silly smile and ask if he’s a doctor now, if he’s studied medicine while he was out. And Ilya will finally be able to laugh about it.)

He sits next to Shane. The sound of forced air—entering, leaving Shane’s body—and the beeping of his heart keeps him as grounded as he can be.

Ilya looks at Shane, past the bandages and casts and tubes and machines, and sees his freckles blended with ruptured blood vessels, his soft lashes that remain deathly still on his cheekbones. His bruised nose.

He's beautiful, his Shane. He is still beautiful. He's still Shane.

"*Moy lyubimyy*," Ilya says out loud. He reaches out with shaking hands, floundering without a place to go, before seeing Shane's left hand that is still free, untouched. One of his fingernails has been cut down to the cuticle. He has a thumb cast.

He holds Shane's hand. And it's warm.

Ilya falls forward, head on the bed, and cries. He doesn't have tears left to shed but he damn well tries.

He tries not to dwell on it, not really, never. But he can't help it. He rubs his thumb against Shane's palm, limp and unresponsive, and sees him again on his balcony.

He fell off his balcony.

"Did you fall off the balcony, Shane?" Ilya asks as quietly as he can. His chest tightens at the question. "Was it an accident?"

Or did you mean it?

"When my…" He doesn't know why he's starting to tell the story. He doesn't know anything at all, nothing. He hasn't told Shane this before. He wishes he had, because then, maybe, *maybe*, Shane wouldn't have—fuck.

"When Mama…when she accidentally—" No. He starts over. "When Mama killed herself—" he flinches saying it out loud, but he continues—"I didn't know why she would have done it. It made no sense to me. Is like—like puzzle, like *New Yorker* puzzle that you like, boring little Shane, the puzzle…is like puzzle, but I know the final image now, because I saw box, you know? I know what it's supposed to look like, I knew why Mama did—that, like picture, but…but when I try to put it together, actually piece it together like puzzle—little me, little Ilya, I don't—didn't—know why."

He's not making any sense. English is…it's harder when he's emotional. He knows. But he wants Shane to understand him, wants him to *know* what he's saying, not just feel it. So he'll try.

(Later, much later, Shane will learn Russian. He'll say that he thinks he heard Ilya speaking before, that he had been speaking in English. Shane will shyly admit that he wants Ilya to be able to talk to him in Russian and be understood, like Shane talks to him in English and is understood. Ilya will kiss him, and Shane will break away with a squawk, telling him that they need to finish meal prepping first.)

"Because, Shane fucking Hollander, I knew she was sad. She was so funny, so beautiful, but so sad, I knew this. So her dying was—no, made sense, like picture. But I keep putting the

puzzle pieces together, da? And I think that, when I put these things together, I keep asking myself, 'Mama, was it so easy to leave me?' I would sleep in bed, alone. I would cry, 'Mama, what about me? Mama, *pochemu ty menya ostavila?* You love me. Why did you leave me?'"

He presses his face into the bed. Shane doesn't respond.

"Am I easy to leave behind?" Ilya squeezes past his wire-tight throat. "Am I easy to leave behind?"

In the corner of his eye sits his mother, looking at him with sad eyes filled with love. She shakes her head. Her curly hair bounces with the movement. She is beautiful. She says, "*Nikogda. Ilyusha, nikogda.*"

It's not fair, Ilya knows. That wasn't what his mama meant or thought. He knows…he thinks, he likes to think, that Mama's sadness was so big, so consuming, but she stayed as long as she could despite the sadness taking her *because* of Ilya. That she hung on as long as she could, fought tooth and nail to stay with Ilya despite it. That when she died, she hadn't left Ilya, no. She had instead stayed as long as she could.

"Stay," Ilya begs to Shane. "Stay for as long as you can, with me. *Pozhaluysta*. Fight this—this thing. If you have same sadness like Mama, let me help you. I have sadness, too, we can —we can do it together, Shane. *Ostan'sya*. Stay."

Shane doesn't say anything.

Ilya falls asleep at his side.

-

In Ilya's dream, Shane looks at him, hands curled around the bars of the balcony's edge. The wind brushes his hair back and he looks beautiful and ethereal. The city lights reflect off of him, and his eyes look honey-gold. He's wearing a black suit, a matching black tie.

He turns around, facing Ilya, and smiles.

"Shane," Ilya says, stepping forward.

Shane steps back. Ilya stops moving, heart racing, eyes wide.

"Don't," Ilya begs. "Stay."

And Shane stares at him with his golden eyes, conveying something Ilya can't understand. He smooths his suit jacket. Then he turns around again, leans forward to look over the edge. Ilya steps forward with a sob.

Shane looks back at Ilya, still smiling, and says, "Ilya."

His voice is shaking.

-

Ilya wakes up to Shane’s body spasming, machines blaring. Everything happens so fast—Ilya jumps up, watching as Shane coughs and coughs and splutters, eyes rolling, blood dribbling down his chin. It’s horrible. It’s horrible to look at, and Ilya doesn’t know what to do—he yells out for help, but doctors rush in before he finishes yelling, and Ilya is pushed out. The doors shut in front of Ilya’s face and he just stands there. He stands in a growing numbness of perpetual despair and fear, in front of Shane’s room.

He doesn’t know what to do. Where is Yuna and David? How long had he been asleep? What time is it? He looks down at his phone and sees countless notifications—among them a statement from Yuna that has been shared publicly—and grimaces.

In his daze, Ilya fails to realize that just moments before, Shane’s hand had moved, just a smidgen, to curl around his own.

Chapter End Notes

i did try to at least triple-check examples to line up the correct terminology in russian, but if i got some stuff wrong, know that i do not speak russian but ilya does—he probably said it right

EDIT: thanks to cloudrecess, ilya DID say it right!

pozhaluysta: please
dusha moya: my soul
moy synochek: my boy
vstavay: wake up
dyshi: breathe
moy lyubimyy: my love
moy zaychik: my bunny
ya ponimayu: i understand
pochemu ty menya ostavila: why did you leave me
nikogda: never
ostan’sya: stay

more svet and hayden(!) will be in coming chapters trust. this one, though, needed to be contained for ilya to really feel everything (cliff was to give ilya a reminder that the outside world still exists, but ilya ends the call without really any commitment. it doesn't matter to him right now. his world is only shane; it'll be a bit before he can extend it further out again)

see you soon! thank you for reading!

Chapter 3: Shane & Ilya

Chapter Summary

> Unconscious musings, elations, despair, and then--

Chapter Notes

> tw: same things as before (gore, intubation, general despair), but also a singular slur (f slur) during shane's pov. also, medical inaccuracies, though some of it is informed by my experience, so maybe not too inaccurate? check end notes for russian translations + more thoughts please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SHANE

At ten years old, Shane knew pretty well that he wasn't going to live a happy life.

That's a bit dramatic.

No. He knew pretty well that he wasn't going to live the *happiest* life—that was more accurate. It wasn't a bad thing. His life had already been laid out before him, both informed by his mom and himself and the world, and he liked it. It was a solid plan. There wasn't any sky-high aspirations or dreams that other children often engaged in—it was a plan that Shane knew would work because he knew what he was good and bad at already, and so he would stick with the plan. He liked the assuredness that came with knowing exactly what his life would be like. Uncertainty always scared him.

So he knew that he wasn't going to live the *happiest* life, but he knew he was going to live a full and successful one.

He would maximize his life, raise his worth to the highest level, and die knowing he had done everything correctly. He'd become a terrific hockey player—so good that his race, his sexuality, or anything else wouldn't matter—and he knew he could do it, because he was good at hockey. He was fucking stellar at it. He'd be number one for the draft, become captain, lead his team to multiple trophies, and play until he either died mid-game or retired. He'd find a nice girl midway, too; maybe she'd have the same interests as him and like her own space, and marriage would be like living with your best friend. They would have a kid or two and raise them together. If he didn't die on the ice.

If he didn't die on the ice, he'd die in bed surrounded by family, mourned by fans, hailed as a trailblazer, an example of life lived *right*—proof of his legacy.

Or he'd die on the ice. Or die alone, old and shriveled up.

In the grand scheme of things, he muses in a floaty haze, Shane has thought about dying a lot since he was a child.

He tries to recall now if he thought about dying or being dead as often as it feels like he did, or if he came close to it. He uses his fingers to count, because his head is a little sluggish right now for some reason. His neck itches. He clears his throat.

1. When he was ten, he fell off the monkey bars and sprained his wrist. It hadn't been a big, terrible thing, but Shane had imagined that if he'd fallen wrong, he could have hit his head on the rock that was jutting out of the corner of one of the poles. Would he have felt the pain before dying?
    - *Yes, something supplies him. Yes, you would have.*
2. When he was twelve, he tripped on the ice and someone's blade nicked his arm, right under his throat. The blood dripped onto ice slowly, and his mom, tears in her eyes, had told him to always protect his head, then bring his body together to protect the rest of it until he was sure it was safe. He had imagined what it would be like if the blades hit his

throat—would he bleed out slowly? Or would he die instantly? What did suffocation feel like?
    - *Feels bad. Can't breathe. Can somebody get this fucking thing out of his throat? What is that?*
3. When he was sixteen, he had been a witness to a very bad car crash. A few seconds earlier and it would have been Shane who got hit directly by a car running the red light. He still remembers the distinct screeching of tires and the bone-shaking sound of impact. The driver who ran red had died on impact, if he remembers correctly, and he recalls wondering what it would have felt like to be hit like that. Would the world remember him? A teenaged pedestrian struck by a raging lunatic? A boy with prospects, gone in an instant?
    - *Bone-shaking sound of impact. A sickening crunch. Fu—uck, that hurts. That hurts. Fuck that hurts. He can't feel anything but it hurts, somehow. Mom, help, mom, mom, help, mommy—*
4. This one, he didn't tell Ilya or anybody, but at 19, Shane had passed out in a locker room bathroom from a dizzy spell. A migraine, or maybe just a cold that manifested in a headache. He'd stood up too fast after reaching down to grab a shampoo bottle he dropped, then tipped over. He'd woken up a few minutes later with a bump on his head. How funny would have that been if he had died then? Naked in the locker room shower after practice, water still running. Blood pooling underneath him from a fractured skull, taken down the drain in swirling technicolor.
    - *Is not funny, Hollander*, *Ilya would probably say. Shane should apologize. ("Should" apologize? For what?)*
5. He didn't tell anyone this either, but at 23, Shane had a really bad—meltdown, is the word, but he's never really felt comfortable using it. It sounds so juvenile (it isn't, but it still doesn't stop Shane from feeling that way). Just a few minor things that spiraled into a horrible day. He hadn't had one that bad since he was a child. It ended with Shane shattering a cup he dropped—cut his foot pretty bad. He remembers, as he swabbed the cut, ears ringing and jaws clenched tight to try and not shatter the lightbulb above him that kept buzzing, thinking that dying wouldn't be so bad in the moment. At least it'd be quiet. At least he wouldn't have to feel like he was being choked inside-out for things that shouldn't matter.
    - *It's not quiet. He hears things, feels things. Somebody yells at him and asks if he can hear them. He can, but he can't speak. He can't move. He can only cry, but he doesn't think he's even crying. No, he's not. He's not even awake. He's not even—*
6. At 25, Shane, looking at a sunset alone from his apartment, imagined that sleeping for a long time would be great. Every ounce of tiredness he had accumulated during the busy season was catching up to him on that particular day. He'd stood up and gone to wash his hand, and while washing, stared at the running water. God, he was tired. He could sleep forever. He wanted to sleep forever. Was death like sleeping? He didn't know.
    - *It isn't like sleeping; not really, anyway.*
7. At 27, Shane had another really bad meltdown. He'd been outed to the public—cornered and scared—and he didn't know what to do. He'd ended up taking Tylenol (for the splitting headache after banging his head against the coffee table until he bled), then drank a lot of vodka. He'd been thinking about what being outed meant—would he lose hockey forever? His life that he had been building, everything he had given, his entire reason he'd been living, his only Plan A in life, taken from him before he could

build up the courage to give it up? He'd thought that maybe, in the moment, dying would be easier than that. Than giving up hockey, giving up his life, giving up—

- *Dying wouldn't be easier. He doesn't want to die. He wants to keep playing hockey. He wants to watch his parents grow old. He wants to be Hayden's fifty children's godfather. He wants to make more friends, tell Rose it's okay, prove that his being gay doesn't change anything to the world. He wants to love Ilya. Privately at first, then one day, publicly. Ilya, he thinks as he falls. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—*

-

Shane always has a ritual, of sorts, he likes to undertake after games.

He will go home, shower again (the locker room showers get the grime off, and the home shower gets the outside air off), microwave his perfectly portioned and balanced meal, and rewatch the game's match to analyze his plays. Then he'll do the dishes, change into his pajamas, read around three to five chapters of his book, check his phone (did Ilya text?), and go to sleep. When there's no game, it's similar—except hockey is replaced by running and the gym, and the analysis extends to previous season games to refresh his memory.

When this flow is broken, he gets a little agitated. He thinks he was a little agitated the day that video leaked. Probably a little bit more than agitated.

He feels himself tip over the edge of the balcony.

For a brief moment, Shane can admit an odd freeness to the feeling of falling, of gravity shifting. Just for a singular moment, he feels as light as he felt when he was six years old on the ice for the first time. Skating across the public rink had felt like freedom. Nothing could stop him except himself. His hair was out of his face and his lungs were filled with the crispness of the rink.

So yeah, there is a freeness to it. He feels like he's flying across the ice again, limitless, able to do anything, the future big and endless and soaring. And for that singular, weightless moment, he wonders if this is what death might be like.

Is death freeing? Does it feel like flying? Is that why Shane's always thought about it since he was a child? Had it never been about morbid curiosity, but an instinctual knowledge he was chasing?

And as he feels that freedom, naturally, unintelligibly, he wishes to share it with Ilya.

Ilya.

He thinks of him now, suspended right before hitting the asphalt and surely dying. He must be dead now, head cracked clean open and body shattered. There's no way he survives this fall. He fell from pretty high up, he's drunk, and he can't careen his body to try and protect himself—however that would work. All he has time to do is try and tuck his head so it isn't the first thing to hit the ground.

He almost smiles.

He leaves behind his loved ones and a tainted legacy, one where people will think he's killed himself because he's a faggot. No one will remember him for his hockey, or who he was. They'll only remember him as the man who flung himself off a building because he was too scared to admit that he was gay to a world that would forget about him soon enough. No one will remember Shane for being Shane.

And Shane won't be able to say that he didn't kill himself. That he has a lot left in him to give, to achieve. He's always thought about death but he's never wanted it for himself. He's never…

The asphalt. He feels, in a split-second understanding, a solid wall that slams into his body. The weight of it takes his breath away, and he knows that everything has gone wrong internally. There's a kind of pain that radiates from *everywhere* in an indescribable uproar that he can't make sense of it. He can't process it. He doesn't have time to feel anything past that, though—his brain, kindly, decides to shut off operations before his nerves have time to catch up with the impact.

So he's dying, then, in just a second. And nobody will know anything at all, and he won't get to explain anything ever again.

God, he doesn't want to die.

He keeps his eyes open, he's pretty sure, because he wants to see Ilya.

This is unfair.

Nobody will remember him for himself anymore. What a horrible, sad way to go. He's going to be the famous sports player who killed himself. Nobody's going to remember Shane for Shane.

Not even Ilya.

-

"Shane," a kind-sounding woman murmurs. Manicured fingernails scratch his scalp, then rub affectionately like a mother. He calms. He can feel that his mouth is open. He's drooling.

The voice hums. A hand wipes the drool away. "*Seychas ne vremya. Ostat'sya*—with *Ilyusha*, da? No…no go. Stay."

Okay, he wants to say, because he will. Why wouldn't he?

He feels a little delirious.

& ILYA

The second day arrives in a quiet creep of fog against the sun.

Ilya wakes to the sound of steady beeping and the *whoosh* of the ventilator. His neck hurts, his back aches, his legs are cramped, his head hurts, his mouth is dry, and he fucking hates the hospital. He woke up too many times to nurses and doctors entering the room to check on Shane, on his vitals, then leave. Every time, he's had to stop himself from asking, "Is he okay? Is he going to be okay? Will he wake up?" *Will he stay?*

He sits up from the reclining chair and doesn't look at Shane—not immediately, no, no. He has to collect himself, to brace himself. He'd pulled up the chair as close to Shane as he was allowed to; he can see the outline of Shane's unmoving form in his periphery.

Yesterday was horrible. Last night was horrible. Shane had a—seizure, or something, last night. Internally…something wrong—bah. Ilya scrubs his face furiously. Too many words, too much English far removed from casual, day-to-day use. Medical terms, professional jargon, long-winding sentences that fizzle out into nothing. Nothing he could really understand. He could only *feel* it, the urgency.

"When you speak Russian," Shane says, "That's how it is for me."

Ilya turns his head slowly.

Shane remains in his white casket of sanitized machinery and sheets and clothes and casts. Against the neutral colors of the empty-blank hospital, his black hair and freckles are startlingly vibrant. His eyes would be, too, but Ilya can't see them because they're closed and Shane isn't awake and fuck. Ilya shuts his own eyes again at the thought.

"I *feel* what you're saying, but I don't understand it," he hears Shane continue after a pause. "That sounds stupid—stop laughing, asshole. I'm serious. Does that make sense?"

He's not laughing. It's not funny. He nods.

Ridiculously, he remembers the first conference he and Shane did together as rookies years ago. Shane's foot pressed against his as he answered a question Ilya didn't understand for him. Shane's look of reassurance, of comfort, and of respect, of dignity. Usually, English escaping Ilya made him feel stupid and dumb. Like a child. But Shane never made him feel that way—never, ever—just understood that this was not Ilya's native tongue. It was just a fact to Shane, like it was a fact that Ilya had blond hair. Never demeaning or mocking.

Always kind. Always knowing how Ilya is feeling, taking his feelings and his fears into consideration. Trying, at least, even if Shane isn't good at immediately understanding meanings past what is said out loud.

That makes Ilya pause. He frowns. Has Ilya done that for Shane? Has he tried like that for him, to understand him past what is said?

He fell off his balcony.

He thinks of the sadness his mama had. How hard his father had been on her. Had Ilya done for her what Shane does for Ilya? Had he ever tried to understand her, past what she simply said?

He hears Mama hum her disapproval and click her tongue. "*Ostanovis', pozhaluysta. Ty byl rebyonkom*," his mama says firmly.

God, what a mess he is. Ilya almost laughs. He sits at the edge of the reclining chair and leans forward to grab Shane's hand again. It's still warm.

He'll try from now on. He will try his best. He will try hard enough to make up for the times he didn't. All the times he made Shane sad, made him hurt, made him cry—he will make Shane happy, make him comfortable, make him laugh tenfold. He will make Shane happy enough to forget that he might be sad. He will chase the sadness away. He will do what Shane has done for him. He will help Shane stay.

If he wakes up.

Ilya squeezes Shane's hand softly. Just once.

"Shane," Ilya whispers.

The ventilator breathes for him. A deep *whoosh* in, a deep *whoosh* out.

"Shane," Ilya whispers again. He shakes Shane's hand a little—can't jostle too hard, because his wrist is restrained to the bed—and squeezes again. "Shane, sweetheart. *Vstavay*."

In his mind, Shane stands on the balcony. He doesn't look back. He contemplates silently, hands still around the bar, and lets Ilya watch with his heart in his throat.

-

Ilya only leaves Shane's side when he hears a commotion outside. He recognizes the voice before he can even register it fully.

"—okay?" A man asks too loudly.

A woman shushes him, and Ilya hears Yuna's quiet voice rise and fall in a cadence that suggests familiarity. He hears the low rumble of David's voice, too, tired, and Ilya glances down at his phone to see it is just now nearing 7 a.m.

Too early for this shit.

He glances over at Shane, then at the door. Leaving Shane's side feels like betrayal, but he knows Shane would…he'd want him to go and talk to the man outside. What does Ilya even say, and how does he explain why he's even here? He doesn't know. He doesn't know a lot of things. Ilya runs a hand over his face and finally stands.

He lets go of Shane's hand, turning away. He grits his teeth to do it. He forces himself not to look back because he'd stay if he did.

"Be nice to him," he hears Shane call out from behind him. "Ilya—"

He opens the door.

"Pike," Ilya says tiredly, closing it.

Silence descends like an anchor to the waters. Ilya runs a hand over his face to give himself a few seconds to adjust his expression, school his emotions. Fuck, he doesn't want to do this. He is tired.

He knows he looks like shit. He didn't wash or shower or anything since Boston—and despite it being just yesterday, it feels like a lifetime ago. He feels light stubble already sharpening its thistle at him angrily.

"What the fuck is Rozanov doing here?" Hayden Pike asks with a genuinely confused expression on his face. Jackie, his wife, looks at Ilya, then back at Shane's door, at Pike, and Ilya sees the realization dawn on her face.

"Hold on," Jackie says. Her eyes are wide. "Boston Lily."

"What the fuck does she have to do with anything?" Pike demands.

A pause. Then, unwittingly, Ilya laughs *loud*.

He covers his face as he does, not hearing the startled protest from Pike or the words of explanation from Yuna and David. He stifles his laughter as to not disturb any other possible patients on the floor but can't stop his shaking shoulders. He presses his hand tightly to his mouth, grin on his face, tears in the corner of his eyes. He feels insane. He must look insane, because Yuna glances over at him with a concerned expression on her face.

"Why is he laughing?" Pike asks, pointing. Ilya kind of feels bad—almost—at how lost he looks, how scared.

Scared.

The last of his laughter leaves him hollowed out, like someone carved a Shane-shaped hole into his heart and scooped it out.

"Don't be mean," Shane chides. Ilya can hear faint amusement in his voice. "He's worried about me."

You never told him—he doesn't know. Are you okay with me saying anything? Ilya wants to ask out loud, but that is certain to make him look absolutely insane.

Pike looks at him, then at Yuna and David, over at Jackie. He can see the slow, rusty cogs in the stupid man's head finally starting to turn.

“Pike, I am tired and sad, so I am not going to be mean. Shane would kick me if I am mean.” Ilya takes a step forward, intending to speak again, but Yuna turns to him. She doesn’t even open her arms, but Ilya sees her shoulders shift and he immediately embraces her. He shrinks himself to fit into her narrower frame. He feels David’s hand on his arm squeeze once before letting go.

God. He’s still tired. He’s more tired than yesterday, tired enough to mellow him out. Tired enough to not care that fucking Pike is seeing him this way, this weak, this vulnerable.

“When did you both get here?” Ilya mumbles.

“Just now, honey. We let Hayden come in. He’s—”

“Yes, I know Pike. Bad at hockey—”

“What the fuck did you say?”

“—and Shane’s best friend, da?”

Silence again.

He detaches himself from Yuna, who rubs his cheek—wiping away a tear he didn’t know he’d just shed because he’s always crying now, feeling stupid and inevitable—before giving him a small smile.

“We brought you breakfast,” David says. He looks better than yesterday but Ilya sees the tiredness clinging to him, too, like dew on a swaying leaf.

“And some clothes. We found some of yours in Shane’s apartment,” Yuna adds.

His apartment.

Ilya blinks.

He fell off his balcony.

Shane’s apartment. He sees Shane, sitting at his couch alone, crying. He sees him stumble towards the balcony. He sees—

He feels cold all over again. He crosses his arms and brings his body tighter to himself, feeling suddenly very, very nauseous.

“I think I will use bathroom first,” Ilya says quietly. “While you visit Shane. This okay?”

He sees Pike watching him with wide, searching eyes. His face his red and hair a mess, and Ilya sees the prominent eyebags under his stupid fucking stare, the light puffiness. He’s been crying, too. Worried sick about Shane, probably, worried and scared like they are. Jackie watches the both of them almost passively, thinking, and Ilya knows that she’s already organized everything inside of her head and made a conclusion. Motherly instinct or…or whatever, probably. She’s smarter than Pike is, that’s for sure.

“She’s always been perceptive,” Shane comments from somewhere behind him. “I’m surprised she didn’t put it together sooner.”

Did you want her to?

Ilya glances over at Pike again, sees his stupid doe-eyes finally focus, then furrow, as if he’s really struggling to use his brain properly. Ilya wonders if he does that often, if Shane’s *best friend*, the one that is supposed to know everything about Shane, is finally figuring out what the fuck has been going on with Shane and who he’s been talking to this entire time.

Best fucking friend. He practiced and ate and slept and played with Shane for months and months, side-by-side with him, every fucking day. Shane’s best fucking friend, always next to him, and didn’t know about Shane. Didn’t know that Shane was…that he was—that he had been thinking about—

You didn’t either, he thinks, betraying himself. He feels sick again. His stomach twists. He needs to—get out of here, just for now. There is suddenly too many people looking at him, too many emotions to handle. He needs a quiet moment. He needs Shane.

“Don’t be mean to him, please,” Shane murmurs. “And don’t be mean to yourself, either.”

Ilya balls his fists tightly.

“Sorry. Bathroom,” Ilya repeats.

“Yes—we can catch up after,” Jackie says.

Ilya blinks.

“Here, take the clothes. There’s toiletries, too.” Yuna hands Ilya paper bag, one of the ones Shane always keeps in his supply closet just in case he ever needs it. He has so many he hasn’t used dating years back. Ilya had always thought it was overkill. *You are trying to start takeout company with these bags?* he’d ask, and Shane would throw something at him with a laugh and yell back, *Fuck off, Rozanov.*

He wonders if the bag smells like Shane. If the clothes do.

“Okay,” he says faintly. “Thank you. I see you soon.”

He might as well be fleeing the way he rushes past all of them.

-

The clothes smell like Shane. He buries his face into it and inhales deeply. It smells clean, fresh, warm, like Shane. It smells like Shane. Ilya hiccups.

-

When Ilya leaves the bathroom feeling more alert and cleaner, he is greeted by Pike leaning against the wall outside. He has his arms crossed and his chin down, but his posture is

obviously suggesting that he has been waiting for Ilya, that he's been standing there silently the entire time.

Fucking Pike. Ilya looks up at the ceiling, God give him the strength, and looks back at Pike.

"Did you see him?" Ilya asks gruffly. He clears his throat.

Pike startles. Ilya feels his eye twitch.

"Yeah, I, uh. Jackie and I were allowed inside. He's…" Pike shudders. There's a downward slant to his lips, and his eyes are bright and red.

Ilya sighs. He juts his chin towards a bench down the corridor. Their footsteps sync in a desolate *clack-clack-clack* on the cold hospital floor. Ilya sits down heavily and leans forward, elbows on his knees, and rests his head on his folded hands.

"You and Shane," Pike starts after a long bout of silence, "You're…what, you're friends?"

Boston Lily. Just friends, apparently. Ilya wants to throttle him. "What do you fucking think?"

Pike puts his hands up in surrender. "Hey, fuck you. I don't—I didn't even know that Shane was…that he was gay until the fucking video, okay?"

"What, you don't like that he is gay? You have problem?"

"*Fuck* no, I don't have a problem with that!" Pike points a finger at Ilya, as if daring him to say something about that. There's a tiny, tiny part of Ilya that relaxes. So he's not homophobic. Good. Shane doesn't—if he was—if he *is* friends with a homophobic man, Ilya wouldn't know what to do.

"Okay. Good."

"Don't—a lot of this shit is news, okay? I didn't know that he was gay, fuck me, let alone that he was friends with *you*. Give me a fucking break."

That makes Ilya angry all over again. A stream of narrow fury slices through his carefully calibrated calm. He lifts his head to glare at Pike, lips curling. He feels an ugly thing in his chest.

"What *did* you know, Pike? Best fucking friend of Shane Hollander, da? Some fucking best friend you are. Don't know he is gay, don't know that he is with me, don't know he is—"

"*With* you?"

They both stare at each other, breathing heavily. Pike looks like he's been punched straight across the face. Ilya wipes his mouth before sitting back up, opting to lean against the wall with a sigh. Pike is sitting straight up. His fists are balled, but not in a way that suggests he'll start swinging.

“Ilya,” Shane says lovingly.

“Jackie figured it out,” Ilya mutters.

“Figured out—”

“Yes, Pike. Shane and I are together, okay? We are in love. I am here because I am his boyfriend, you understand? Best fucking friend—never fucking put it together.”

It’s quiet again for a blissful while. Ilya, at some point while staring at Pike, has closed his eyes. He doesn’t realize that he’s started to doze off until he feels Pike shift and stand. The man starts to pace back-and-forth and Ilya feels like he wants to go deep into a slumber he won’t return from—not until Shane comes back up with him.

“How long?” Pike finally asks. His voice is tight.

Ilya opens his eyes again. “How long what?”

“How long have you been…you’re his boyfriend.” Pike runs his hands through his hair once, twice, thrice, then turns away, turns back, looks down the corridor, back at Ilya. “You’re his —Shane’s dating Ilya Rozanov, from the fucking Boston Raiders. You—you hate each other!”

“Fuck you, Pike,” Ilya snarls. He stands up, too, and stalks forward. He points his finger and jabs it into Pike’s shoulder, making him jerk back a step. “Fuck you, Pike. Fuck you. *Ty tupoy pizdets*. You know how fucking scared Shane was to say? You know how scared he was every day? And you never—never figure it out, leave Shane to have to be scared. Fuck you. We do not hate each other—we *never* hated each other, *nikogda.* Fuck you for being best friend and making Shane stay scared. Fuck you. So scared he fall—” he breaks off with a deep breath.

At that, Pike looks stunned.

Ilya removes his finger from Pike’s shoulder. He’s panting, tears in the corner of his eyes *again*. When will he ever stop crying? He wipes at his eyes furiously and turns to stalk back to the bench.

“I'll go back. I’m sorry. I’m tired, and you are not helping,” he says with the flattest voice he can muster. He doesn’t want to sound like he will start sobbing—not to fucking Pike. He grabs the paper bag with tight fists and moves to leave, to go back to Shane, to the room with machines and noises and Shane’s deathly still body.

“I’m sorry,” Pike calls out. “Fuck. I’m sorry, okay? Jesus.”

Ilya turns his head, just a little, to see Pike with his hand on his head. He’s blinking rapidly like he’s trying not to cry. His bottom lip wobbles like a stupid fucking kid and Ilya knows—he *knows*—that Pike is genuine.

All the anger and the fight leaves Ilya’s body.

He's not being fair. Or…he's being more dickish than he needs to be.

"Asshole," Shane says playfully. Then, tenderly, "Nobody else knows you're really a softy, though."

Pike steps forward. He crosses his arms again, lips pursed, then nods like he's made up his mind on something. "I'm sorry. I just…you're right. I didn't notice until it was—until all this happened, and it *is* my fault to an extent. I should have been there—"

"It isn't your fault, Pike," Ilya cuts in. He scrubs his face. "I'm sorry I say things like that. I'm…we're both worried, about Shane. About…"

Pike looks at him, and Ilya knows he's thinking about it. About whether Shane fell off the balcony, or if he—fuck.

If he jumped off.

He sees Mama leaning against the wall. She's trying to light a cigarette but sees Ilya looking and quickly puts it away, sheepish smile on her face. A dribble of spit rolls down her chin again, and she wipes it away. "*Ilyusha*," she says in lieu of greeting. She's still in the same dress, same makeup, same hair, same pendant, same everything. Stuck in time.

Will Shane remain stuck in time?

Ilya closes his eyes. "We have been—"

"Don't be gross," Shane calls from behind.

"—seeing each other since rookie season," Ilya finishes. He opens his eyes again, watches as Pike processes, then gasps, then scratches his head.

Then, in the stupidest voice ever, Pike asks, "You've known him longer than I have?" There's a look of faint betrayal in his eyes as he says it, a childish and boyish kind of jealousy. Like he's a kid who's now realizing that his best friend has been known by another before he was even in the picture. The kind of look you'd see on a ten-year-old boy who glances at his friend, then another, and asks, "You know that guy?"

Ilya sees Shane, seventeen, holding his hand out for a handshake. Boyish grin, childish chirps. The start of a relationship that would become Ilya's everything. A promise of forever without even knowing.

Ilya cracks a smile without meaning to.

"Yes," he agrees. "I guess I have, Pike."

Shane, seventeen, freckles and smile. He shoves his hands into his pockets. He laughs and turns away.

"So fuck you," Ilya adds for good measure.

Pike splutters. Ilya feels lighter than he did a few moments ago. He laughs.

-

Later, David pulls Ilya aside as Yuna steps out to send Pike and Jackie off.

“Yes?” Ilya asks.

He’s anxious—David has a serious look on his face, a tired kind of turn to his eyes despite the kindness. His strong hand comes up to grip Ilya’s shoulder, comforting but foreboding.

“Ilya, I think it’s right for you to know this,” David says. His voice his quiet but steady. “When the police investigated Shane’s apartment, they found alcohol.”

A beat.

“And pills.”

Ilya feels cold.

“It was Tylenol,” David adds hurriedly. “So maybe it was…” He squeezes his eyes shut. “There was blood on the coffee table, too. Cracked. I don’t—”

“He was hitting his head,” Ilya breathes. His gaze moves from David’s eyes to behind him, at the white, sanitary hospital wall.

Please don’t hurt yourself, Ilya had said. Shane had hummed. He’d stopped hitting his head. Fuck. Ilya should have—he shouldn’t have hung up, should have stayed on call, should have —

“Shane used to do that when he was young,” David murmurs.

Ilya looks back at him. David’s eyes are red, glistening, but calm. It calms Ilya in return, just a bit, and Ilya breathes. He didn’t realize he had stopped.

“If he got overwhelmed, he’d—hit himself. Or hit something. I asked why he did that one time, and he said that it made him feel like he was real. I don’t know. He said it felt like he was still there, if he did that.” A pause. Then David looks at Ilya with a firm expression on his face.

“I didn’t tell you all of this to be drawing conclusions,” he says, and his voice is steel. “I told you because you deserve to know what Yuna and I know.”

David’s expression cracks.

“We still don’t know what happened, Ilya. We have…we have our thoughts. We have the context. But only Shane knows what happened, and he’s going to tell us when he wakes up.”

Ilya nods, just barely. His mind racing.

“Don’t fill in the gaps yourself.” David shakes Ilya once, and it snaps Ilya out of it. He blinks in surprise. “That’s not fair to Shane—drawing your own conclusions. Give him a chance to fill it in, son. Don’t fill it in for him.”

Behind David stands Ilya’s mama, who tilts her head with a small, small smile.

Ilya thinks of himself, twelve years old, crying alone in bed. Wondering if his mama left him—if she didn’t love him enough. He remembers growing up and thinking that he hadn’t been enough. Mama had left because Ilya hadn’t been enough. Because she had been so sad, and it was so consuming. Even if she had stayed for as long as she could have, she had left in the end. Ilya hadn’t been enough. It was easiest to think that way.

Mama tuts. She swats her hand at him. She looks beautiful.

“Don’t fill it in for him, okay?” David says again, searching Ilya’s face.

Don’t fill it in for her, either.

Ilya nods. David reaches up and wipes a tear from his cheek, pats it once, smiling at Ilya with warmth. And the warmth? That’s all Shane. So that’s where he gets it from.

His mama nods her approval. “*Slushay yego vnimatel’no, Ilyusha,*” she says. “*On umny paren*.”

Then, with a small laugh, “*Vrode menya*, *da? Kak tvoya Mama*.”

-

Yuna and David insist that Ilya at the very least stretches his legs. They rub his cheek, stroke his hair, fuss over him not eating properly. Ilya lets them with a faint smile and a pool of magma pouring out from his heart.

“Just go down the street to eat lunch,” David suggests. “And breathe some fresh air.”

Just breathe without having to look at Shane like…like that.

Ilya imagines walking down the street. He imagines seeing people who are living their life normally. He imagines people laughing around him, complaining about their loved ones, talking about work and school. Living so normally, as if Ilya’s own life has been put to an abrupt stop, like he’s not stuck in time.

Stuck in time like his mama. Like Shane.

“No, I want to stay,” Ilya protests.

Yuna looks at him pointedly.

He is helpless against Shane’s parents. Especially Yuna, whose stubbornness is the origin of Shane’s own. She does a little furrow with her eyebrows and it is so distinctly *Shane* it slams into Ilya with no mercy. He looks up at the ceiling to look away.

“Okay,” Ilya agrees weakly. “Just lunch.”

Ilya makes them swear, up and down, to text and call him (both, he insists, do both, please, do both) if something happens while he is out eating lunch at the shitty restaurant down the street. Any update at all. If Shane even breathes differently, if his lashes flutter, if his lips twitch. Anything at all.

They agree with a sad, small smile.

He has a dumb hat, sunglasses, and a loose-fitting jacket thrown haphazardly onto his sluggish body as a measly disguise. It works, though. He is not recognized. Maybe it’s the fact that he is so hunched and so tired, so anxious and unsure. He feels nothing like how he usually presents himself to the public. He’s too tired.

While eating the most mediocre burger of his life, Ilya reads Yuna’s statement. She’s made it through the Metro’s Twitter. He puts the burger down.

Montreal Metros @NHLMetros

Captain Shane Hollander’s parents have requested we share this statement. Our thoughts and prayers, as always, remain with them. #HollanderStrong

We would like to extend our gratitude to everybody who has wished us strength and Shane a healthy recovery. Your words of encouragement are not lost to us, and it certainly will not be lost to Shane.

Shane is currently stable but still in critical condition. He is being cared for by wonderful and skilled medical professionals for whom we will eternally be grateful for. While we wish to keep the public, especially the fans who make Shane who he is today, informed, we won’t be able to update every single change that occurs. We ask that you all extend your grace and patience to us as we navigate this time of worry in private.

We are also aware that there are many questions surrounding Shane’s accident. We understand that these questions are born from concern for Shane. However, as parents, we believe it is only right that our son is the one to answer those questions on his own time. We are acutely aware that rumors swell and grow as time passes, but we do not wish to say something that Shane has not agreed to say, as he is his own person with his own agency.

We ask that everyone respect this wish we impart as parents. We also ask that people refrain from undue speculation or rumor, as this only causes harm.

We pray that we will be able to update you all with good news soon. In the meantime, we would like to thank the Metros for their understanding, the fans for all of your heartfelt wishes, and everyone who is currently thinking about, caring for, and praying for our beloved son.

Thank you,

The Hollanders

“Real professional, huh?” Shane asks. There’s a smile in his voice—Ilya could recognize it anywhere. He’d recognize it in life, in death. Anywhere.

In his mind, Shane leans against the railing of the balcony. He glances over his shoulder at Ilya, and his eye is glinting—he’s smiling. What is he smiling at? Ilya wants to know. He wants to be next to him. He wants to be with him.

God, he misses him. He misses Shane so much it’s driving him crazy. His chest tightens.

Ilya stares at the screen for a long, long time. He clicks on the hashtag without thinking, then immediately shuts his phone off before the Tweets load.

Fuck. He can’t deal with that right now.

He puts the phone down and finishes his mediocre burger. He listens to the chatter of patrons sitting near him, who talk about taxes, who talk about daycare, who talk about their annoying husband, their perfect weekend. They talk about normal things and normal life.

Normal life.

Shane cooking his boring recipes in Ilya’s kitchen. Ilya hugging him from behind and kissing his neck, purposefully wet, and Shane’s snort—half-aroused, half-annoyed—washing over him. Shane’s coy smile as he glances back at Ilya and leans into him. His sweet, sweet eyes looking into Ilya’s own, brown and honey and loving.

He feels sick.

Ilya pays and leaves. He goes back to the hospital, where Shane is, where he stays in his slumber. Where he stays stuck in time.

-

The visits keep coming.

This time it’s Rose Landry, Shane’s ex-girlfriend, the woman from the video. Ilya doesn’t know how to feel, if he even can. He’s jealous, then petrified that he’s jealous, then angry that he’s jealous, then sad. He wants to avoid her. He wants to tell her that it isn’t her fault. He wants to blame her for everything and immediately wants to hit something because he knows it’s not.

It’s not her fault. It’s not. He knows Shane loves her. He knows she’s one of the very, very few people that *knew*, that he could bare his soul to.

“She’s one of my closest friends,” Shane tells Ilya as he walks down to the lobby. “Be nice, Rozanov.”

She’s crying before he even sees her.

They look at each other for a moment of silence. Rose Landry, despite her puffy eyes, is stunning. She’s fucking beautiful, and she’s one of Shane’s closest friends, and Ilya knows

from the way she looks at him that she's figured it all out.

Shirtless-guys-in-sports-land.

Oh my God, who? Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess.

Surprise, Ilya thinks dryly.

"Oh my God," Rose whispers.

Ilya stands there for a moment in silence. He realizes that he doesn't really know how to start the conversation. What does he even say? Hi, sorry that your best friend got outed from being videotaped with you in public? Hi, yeah, I'm Shane's boyfriend? Hi, I was in love with Shane while you were dating him? Hi, sorry that your ex-boyfriend and best friend and my love, *dusha moya*, is in the ICU with machines sticking out of every single opening his frail body has? Hi, sorry that he…that he fell off the balcony? *Did you fall off the balcony? Or did you jump, Shane? Shane?*

His non-ending thoughts are cut short when Rose rushes forward. She flings her arms around him and pulls him close. Her perfect hair tickles his nose. He blinks, startled, hands suspended mid-air.

"I'm so, so sorry," Rose cries, "I can't even imagine—oh my God. I'm so sorry."

Sorry for the video leaking? Sorry for having watched her be so openly in a relationship with Shane while he could never even dream of that? Sorry for the fact that Shane had to hide Ilya from everyone, keep himself hidden from everyone? Sorry that she didn't realize sooner? Sorry for what?

Maybe everything, from the way Rose sounds.

All of the small bits of jealousy, the nights of wishing that it could have been *him* kissing Shane in front of the camera, wishing it could have been *him* wearing Shane's uniform, *him* who danced with him at the club, *him* who went on harmless restaurant dates, *him* who held Shane's hand walking down the street and got photographed, washes away.

Fuck him. Fuck everything. Rose hugs him tighter and doesn't let him go.

He misses Shane.

"It's okay," Ilya manages. He hugs her back.

"I'm so sorry," Rose repeats, and fuck.

"It's okay," Ilya repeats back.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

They hug for a while, until Rose lets go and crinkles her nose and says that her mascara is all over Ilya's shoulder, until Ilya manages to smile and tell her that she still looks like a fucking movie star—all Hollywood and shit—until Rose pushes him lightly and tells him to shut up.

-

Night comes quietly. The moon is beautiful—Shane would have commented on it. He would have taken a picture, frowned at it, then deleted it because *it doesn't look like that in real life.* And as Ilya stares out of the window with a cereal bar, he thinks that he should let Sveta know he is alive.

He doesn't know what to say, though. He doesn't know what to say most of the time now. He feels stupid and childish. He doesn't finish the cereal bar.

He thinks about when he was fourteen, on the second anniversary of Mama's death. Sveta had visited him at the grave and sat with him in silence. She hadn't asked any questions, poked or prodded. She had just put an arm around him and sat with him. Let him sit in his sadness, his grief, his anger, and stayed with him until he'd been the one to lean onto her shoulder.

Fuck. Ilya rubs his eyes.

Maybe just a text.

Ilya: *I am okay.*

svetlana del rey: *You're not.*

Ilya: *okay I am not.*

svetlana del rey: *Ya ponimayu, ya ne dura.*

Ilya: *im sorry for not texting.*

svetlana del rey: *Ya ponyala.*

Ilya: *im still sorry*

svetlana del rey: *Do you want to call? Or is text better?*

Ilya: *I don't think I can*

svetlana del rey: *Gde ty spal i chto yel?*

Ilya: *bol'nitsa i vsyo*

svetlana del rey: *Ilya, I'm sorry that happened. Don't need to call but you need to eat and sleep. Call me when you can. Ya vsegda budu zdes'.*

Ilya bites his lip when he feels it quiver. He shuts his eyes and leans against the wall, breathing shakily. He can imagine Sveta's worried expression, her soft hands on his neck. Sturdy as a rock.

"You should call her," Shane says quietly, softly, sweetly.

He really, really can't. Not now.

"Later, then," Shane relents.

Later, when Shane wakes up. When everything comes back to life. When time starts ticking again. When everything else other than Shane becomes real again. When Ilya doesn't feel like he's going to disappear.

Ilya: *ok. spasibo sveta*

svetlana del rey: Of course. *Ya lyublyu tebya, balda.*

-

Things get worse before they get better. Maybe that is life. Maybe that is death, making its play to try and claim. Ilya wants to crawl out of his skin.

At some point in the daze of the sanitized hospital and the hypnotic droning of rhythmic machinery, Shane starts to cough.

For just the briefest, the softest moment, Ilya thinks that Shane has woken up. He jumps up with his heart in his throat beating so fast that he doesn't know what to do and rushes forward.

Except he doesn't stop coughing, and his heart monitor starts to go crazy, and the doctors flood the room again and Ilya is once again asked to leave.

He stares at his hands as he waits outside. He waits and waits, barely recognizing that Yuna and David are there with him—always with him now, he knows—and wonders if this is Shane fighting to stay, or trying to go.

He fell off the balcony.

Please stay. Ilya grips his hair. Please stay. *Ostan'sya. Ostan'sya. Vstavay. Vstavay.*

"Ilya," Shane whispers.

Shane, he thinks wildly. *Don't fucking leave me. Please don't leave me.*

Later, they say that Shane has suffered tension pneumothorax from the combination of a weakened lung and the intubation. Ilya doesn't know what the fuck that means. He wants to punch something. He doesn't, instead asks what that means, *what does that mean?* They say that it's a collapsed lung, that air got trapped between his chest wall and lung and made it

collapse. Collapse, like a fucking building or something. He searches it up on his phone and sees a diagram—an illustration of a collapsed lung. Ilya feels sick.

The same day, not long after, Yuna and David come back from following up with Dr. Jeong. They look horrible.

Ilya doesn't know how much more bad news he can take, but he doesn't say that. He instead gently grasps Yuna's hand when she cries, hesitantly squeezes David's arm before letting go. He doesn't ask anything for a while until Yuna sits Ilya down outside the ICU, water bottle in hand.

"They don't know if Shane will be able to play again," Yuna says.

That punches Ilya clean through. He grips his pendant.

"They don't…there's—he's responsive to certain parts of the body, but not his left leg, and barely his right. There's—they won't know for sure until he wakes up, but…"

There is never a place for Shane, Ilya knows, that he can fly other than the ice. There are places he can be free—the cottage, Ilya's house, maybe—but nowhere that he can fly like he can on the ice. Where he can fly like a bird, unrestrained from anything else, where he can yell and scream and cry and laugh without a single worry in the world, where he can fucking *soar*.

Ilya imagines Shane without that. Without the ice. Without hockey.

He sees Shane on the balcony, wondering whether he'll have a career in hockey after being outed. He sees the fear and the anxiety, the spiral of anger and self-hatred, the numb buzz of realizing that everything he's built his life up for might be for naught. He sees the realization strike him down, the flash of lightning blinding him from everything else worth living for in the world.

He sees Shane tipping over the edge.

The doctors have told Yuna and David that Shane's fractured spine might make it so that he has partial paralysis. They said he might be able to walk again, that maybe physical therapy might make it so that he could use both his legs, but they won't know until Shane is awake to properly assess it.

They said that Shane was *lucky*, that his fall was bad but it could have been *worse*, like that makes it different, like it's supposed to make the fact that Shane might not walk—that he might not *skate*—better.

There is nothing Ilya can say to that. There's just a pit of tar that's been beginning to build that grows by the hour, grows and grows and grows. A sadness, strikingly looming, starts to blossom from it.

"Ilya," he hears Shane say weakly. "Ilya, baby. It's going to be okay."

God, Ilya's losing it.

He kind of is. He’s losing it. He stays in that state of loss, deep and impenetrable, for the next few days.

& SHANE

When he was younger, Shane hated swimming.

The feeling of water itself—the texture of it, the way it gripped and clung to him and weighed everything down once outside of it—made him squirm. He hated it. He hated not being in complete control of his body, and the water, with its weird texture and weight, impeded it. So he hated swimming, he hated getting his feet wet, he hated the pool and the beach and baths.

"You still need to learn how to swim," his mom said sternly. "What's going to happen if you ever fall into water, Shane? How are you going to get out?"

So he learned the basics of swimming. He hated it the entire time, but he learned, because he was good at that. He was good at learning. Despite it being in water, swimming was still a sport. Shane was good at sports. So he swam. He learned the basic forms. He waded around the water until his mom finally let him stop taking lessons.

And now, suspended in molasses, Shane starts to wade.

He doesn't know how long he's been there. When he hit the asphalt, he must have sunk into it. He must have dipped past the surface and been swallowed by it. He must be underground right now, buried alive, maybe, or encased in the asphalt, right under his balcony.

Wherever he is, he doesn't want to be there anymore. He can't breathe properly. He tries swallowing but it feels like swallowing lead. He tries to breathe deeply but something catches and he hacks and coughs, tries to thump his chest but can't move his arms.

He tries to kick his legs to propel him, but they remain stuck in the molasses. They move sluggishly and slowly, almost as if they're detached from him.

Despair follows him closely.

But fuck it, if Shane isn't stubborn. He grits his teeth and kicks again, starts thrashing. He keeps at it until he can feel himself start to move, *move*—away from where he is.

Away from the asphalt. He collects himself, his broken body, piece-by-piece. He gathers them in his arms and puts himself back together again, like he's learned to do, like he knows to do. He adjusts his body and thinks that this—the struggle, the burst of adrenaline—is just like hockey. And he knows how to play. He's good at it. He's good at hockey, and he loves it.

He loves it. He loves hockey. He loves the rush of wind, the freedom of skating, the victories that come with being *good* at it. He loves winning. He loves living for it. He loves living.

He breathes in deep, once, elated.

He wants to live.

Oh, how he wants to live.

So he'll fucking live.

Asphalt and broken bones and death and everything, *everything,* be damned. He'll fucking live. He'll deal with everything that comes from living. He'll deal with the fear and the anxiety and despair if it means living.

He kicks and kicks, claws his way out of the dark.

He imagines Ilya, who must be devastated. Who must be so hurt and fuck, Shane needs to—he has to let Ilya know that he'd never—he doesn't ever want to stay away from him. He wants to be with him for the rest of his life. He wants to be next to him, wants to stay with him forever. He doesn't care if he has to—

He doesn't care if he has to give up hockey for it. His heart cracks and stutters at the admission but he knows deep in his soul that it's true. It is *true*. And isn't that an admission? Isn't that fucking insane? His life's work, his entire reason for living, his plan in life has hard pivoted because of one man, of some guy with blond hair and blue eyes and the most beautiful soul he's ever seen.

He could do it. He could give up hockey for Ilya.

Fuck it.

He *will* give up hockey for Ilya if he has to. He will in a heartbeat if it means being with Ilya, loving him, holding him. Kissing his beautiful face every day, waking up in his loving embrace, laughing with him and crying with him. He'll give anything.

And to give anything, he needs to be alive.

He continues to kick, to struggle, to choke.

He's going to live. He will. He's going to.

He thinks, *Fuck—get me out of here.*

He thinks, *Let me out.*

He thinks, *God, I want to live.*

He thinks, *Let me live. Let me live.*

He thinks, *Ilya*.

He opens his eyes.

& ILYA

The earliest morning of the fifth day, Ilya, coming back from the bathroom, shuts the door softly. He drops his hand. He is tired but has been the past few days. He's been nothing but tired, nothing but quiet. Suspended in molasses, is what he thinks some people would describe it. Stuck in time.

Stuck in time with Shane.

"*Ilyusha*," his mama says.

Stuck in time with his mama, too.

"*Ilyusha*," his mama says again, louder. "*Smotri*."

Ilya looks up and sees Mama, bright-eyed and smiling. She points towards Shane's bed.

He turns before his mind catches up with his movement.

Warm, foggy brown eyes meet his own.

And the hospital room, so cold and so monotonous and bland and scary and heavy and dark and empty and sanitized and horrible and terrible, is suddenly lit up by a thousand suns, by fireflies in every corner, by a sunrise so breathtaking Ilya gasps loud enough for it to be heard above the machines.

Shane looks back at him with unfocused but opened eyes. He blinks sluggishly—mismatched, left one before his right—but his eyes never leave Ilya's. His hand twitches. His mouth moves around the tube, and sound—beautiful, beautiful, so fucking beautiful it takes Ilya's breath away—pushes past in a scratchy croak.

"…ya," Shane wheezes.

It's the most beautiful thing Ilya's ever heard.

"Shane," Ilya whispers.

Shane's lip twitches, quirking up just a bit, barely noticeable, but it's the most gorgeous thing Ilya's ever seen in his life. God, he's beautiful. He's beautiful. He's so beautiful. *Moy lyubimyy.*

Ilya scrambles forward and trips on his own feet, knocked to his knees. He skids to a halt against Shane's bed, grabs his hand and holds it to his cheek, eyes wide and blurry from tears and he's hiccupping and sobbing and crying and he feels Shane's hand shift lightly to brush against the tears and fuck, he's missed him, he's *missed* him so much, he's missed him so much, so fucking much—he can barely breathe, can barely breathe—

"Shane, you stayed," Ilya cries.

His crying must be loud enough to be heard outside.

The door flings open, and Yuna and David’s voices fill the room with his own.

Shane breathes with the ventilator.

A *whoosh* in, a *whoosh* out—and Ilya, for the first time in five days, and what feels like for the first time since he found Mama’s body, since he left Russia, since he started playing hockey, since anything at all—

Breathes.

Chapter End Notes

translations! thank you to cloudrecess again

Seychas ne vremya. Ostat'sya: not now/now is not the time, stay
Ostanovis’, pozhaluysta. Ty byl rebyonkom: stop, please. you were (just) a child
Ty tupoy pizdets: you fucking idiot/you're so fucking stupid/you stupid fucker
nikogda: never
Slushay yego vnimatel’no: listen to him/listen to what he says
On umny paren: he's a smart guy
Vrode menya, da? Kak tvoya Mama: like me, yes? like your mama
dusha moya: my soul
Ya ponimayu, ya ne dura: i know, i'm not stupid
Ya ponyal: Ya ponyala
Gde ty spal i chto yel?: where did you sleep and what did you eat?
bol’nitsa i vsyo: hospital and that's all
Ya vsegda budu zdes': i will always be here
spasibo: thank you
Ya lyublyu tebya, balda: i love you, idiot (affectionate)
Vstavay: wake up
Ostan'sya: stay
Moy lyubimyy: my love/my dear

hiii thank you all for reading and for the endless love and support. truly makes writing so fun and satisfying.

i also wanted to kind of elaborate that a lot of ilya's and shane's perspectives and views on death and suicide are, of course because i'm writing it, informed by my experiences, BUT most of it is written in the way i think these characters would process it. so please don't take everything one-to-one with what you think is the healthiest/"correct" (if there is one) way to think about all of these topics; this is what i think these two boys would think, and it's just one interpretation of these characters out of millions that exist!

for all the US northeastern folk out there, i hope you stay warm and safe! praying power doesn't go out on my end so fingers crossed. more to come soon! thank you so much for reading!

Chapter 4: Ilya & Shane

Chapter Summary

Shane wakes up. Now what?

Chapter Notes

hi yall! sorry for the lack of update; very busy time for me but here is a long ahh chapter as an apology. medical inaccuracies everywhere if you're a healthcare worker look away

tw talk of suicide, medical description, etc. etc. translations + more thoughts at the end as always!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ILYA

Shane is taken off of his mechanical ventilation (Ilya asks, for the hundredth and thousandth time, what the fancy fucking medical term this means) not too long after he becomes fully lucid again. He's moved out of the ICU the day after, because he's stable and strong and recovering relatively well.

They do not speak about his fucked up spine, or his legs that are weaker than a newborn. Not for a while, anyway. Not until they think about and speak about everything else.

But before that, before the uncertain future of Shane's career takes on the mantle of anxiety that's been saturating the sanitized hospital air for the past five days, before he's able to remain lucid for more than a few minutes at a time, Shane opens his eyes for the first time in five days. And Ilya feels like he's sobbed out something that has been lodged in his chest—something that's been clinging to the deepest recesses of his heart and constricting it with a vicious, anxious fear. His face is still cupped gently by Shane's warm, broad hand, and it feels like the only thing keeping Ilya from floating away, emptied and lighter than he's ever felt.

Shane's index finger twitches against Ilya's cheek. He lifts his head with blurred vision, tears and snot and spit strewn across his face, and sees Shane regarding him with his beautiful brown eyes that droop lower, then lower.

He lets out a small noise—a burst of light to Ilya's ears—and lightly gags.

Fuck. The fucking intubation.

"Shane, do not try to speak," Ilya rushes. He sounds wrecked and awful, but he knows it's the most animated he's been in a while. His hand gingerly reaches out and dares to brush against Shane's freckles. His fingers tremble.

He sees Shane lean into it, barely noticeable. Ilya could sob again.

"Relax. You are…there is tube in your throat. Helps you breathe."

Shane's brows furrow. His eyes droop further, sluggish. He winces.

The doctor comes into the room with Yuna and David, who rush forward towards their son. Ilya prepares himself to move away to give them space, but they simply crowd around him, envelop him as they do with Shane. It's a flurry of love that Ilya realizes *he* is part of now—forever will be, if they'll have him. He is sandwiched between Shane and his parents and is conjoined with the reunion of family. He laughs as they do—they laugh with tears in their eyes and shaky, loving, uncertain, hopeful smiles on their faces.

"Shane, baby, oh, my little boy," Yuna breathes. She rubs his wrist, his arm, any skin that is not bruised (barely any). She touches him like it's the first time she's holding him again for the first time.

“Thank God,” David whispers. He pulls Yuna towards him and puts a hand on Shane’s arm, then Ilya’s. “God.”

God, indeed. Ilya dares to lean back and press himself into the Hollanders. They hold him close.

Shane’s eyes roam slowly up to Yuna’s face, then to David, back to Ilya, back to Yuna. He stares.

He regards all of them in a sluggish kind of look that conveys nothing, except a faint recognition. He looks out of it, which makes sense, but the lack of…anything, it sends a spike of fear through Ilya. He leans closer, nose nearly brushing against Shane’s side, and watches with rapt attention as Shane’s eyes move again, slowly, to Ilya’s. Ilya sees his lips twitch—does he want to say something? His pupils are so wide and blown. A thin string of drool dribbles down his chin and Ilya quickly wipes it away.

Shane stares at him, but his gaze is starting to stutter, and it’s slowly looking like his focus is waning. Ilya can see that his consciousness is already fading. Leaching out of him one-by-one and for an abrupt, ridiculous moment, fear surges and overtakes him.

For a brief second, Ilya sees Mama, her empty eyes. The spit and foam on her chin.

Ilya feels cold.

He leans forward, grabs at Shane’s hand again, desperate, whispers, “No, no, *vstavay*, don’t leave me. Please.”

He sees Shane’s hazy, unfocused eyes, honey and glorious, focus again—try to focus on Ilya—and blink.

“*Veroyatno, on prosto ustal*,” Mama says, stepping into Ilya’s frame of view. He glances up at her with quivering lips and sees her wiping her mouth. She stops in front of Shane and looks down at him with an emotion he can’t understand etched into her slight frown.

Tired. God. Ilya’s tired, too. Tired of being scared. Tired of the uncertainty.

The doctor, who has let them have this moment of greeting (Ilya will, later, thank him for it, and the doctor will simply nod with a professional smile), clears his throat lightly. It startles Ilya—he forgot he was there at all. He’s a middle-aged man, gray-haired and a calm force of assuredness, and his measured tone and neutral voice forces Ilya out of his sudden anxiety. He stutters a breath.

“Mr. Hollander, can you understand me?” The doctor asks.

Shane’s eyes stay fixed on Ilya for a second longer before it slides away to land on the doctor. He blinks. Ilya feels Shane’s finger twitch, and he looks down, looks back at Shane and over at the doctor.

“You understand Mr. Doctor?” Ilya asks softly.

Another twitch, more prominent.

“He is speaking with his fingers,” Ilya says.

The doctor nods. “Alright. My name is Dr. Johan—are you aware of where you are right now?”

Shane just stares. His hand remains still. Ilya bends his neck to kiss his knuckles gently.

“You’re currently at the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal, Mr. Hollander. The hospital. Do you recognize the hospital?”

A light twitch. Ilya gasps in a sharp breath. He glances over at Dr. Johan and nods for Shane.

“Okay, that’s good. Mr. Hollander, you were in a serious accident—do you remember that?”

No response. Instead, Shane just gives a blank stare. Ilya’s heart skips a beat. He sees Yuna and David in the corner of his eye tense as well. The energy in the room shifts.

“Do you remember what happened?” Dr. Johan prods.

Another blank stare. His hands don’t move. Ilya’s heart starts to pick up in pace.

“Do you recognize everybody here?”

A beat.

Shane’s eyelids, still slightly open, have dropped enough to the point where his eyes are barely visible now. The ventilator *whooshes*. His heart monitor is steady. Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand once, tilting his head—no response. He bites his lip.

“Is he…is he asleep again?” Yuna asks.

“Was he lucid?” David adds. “Was he even lucid?”

Dr. Johan walks forward and Ilya is forced to let go of Shane’s hand, forced away from Shane and his warmth, forced back into the hospital room’s sterile white-cold, as Shane is checked.

He sees Mama leaning over Shane. She reaches out and moves her hands like she is trying to brush hair out of his face. It’s striking in a way Ilya has not realized until this moment.

His mama, leaning over Shane, the love of his life. Her taking in his face, her slender fingers trying to soothe him like she soothed Ilya so many times. She looks concerned, looks curious, looks like *Mama*. “Shane,” she says, and it’s the first time Ilya has heard her say Shane’s name.

Ilya stares for just a moment more, just a beat more, until he can’t bear to look at the scene (this fantasy he has dreamt of for himself—he has always wished, since he started to love Shane, that she could have met him, that she could have held him, that she could have laughed with him). He shuts his eyes and *thunks* his head against the wall.

Fuck.

Dr. Johan hums lightly. “It’s expected that he won’t immediately be completely lucid; he’s heavily medicated. This is a good sign, though—he was responsive and knew where he was.”

He tells them that Shane may have more moments of lucidity, and it’d be good to try and keep him up for longer increments and ask questions. They say they’ll try SATs (no, it is not the standardized test Americans take, Dr. Johan confirms when Ilya stares at him quizzically), see how he responds, to try and lower dosage. Not too much, though. He’s still in a lot of pain—from the fall. Too much stress would be bad for Shane.

Fucking—*increments. Lucidity. SATs. Standardized.* Big, fancy words from big, fancy doctor and he’s too tired and sleep-deprived to be translating in his head while focusing on Shane at the same time. Ilya wants to stomp his foot like a little kid or something, wants to punch the wall. He wants to…God, he doesn’t know. There’s a mix of feelings in his stomach that bubbles and boils like some ugly fucking soup and he shakes his head to try and clear it. He feels restless.

The doctor says some more medical shit that Ilya tries and fails to pick up, then leaves. Yuna and David and Ilya stand together without doing much except staring at Shane, whose eyes are completely shut again. They stand there until David leads Yuna into the hall, looks back at Ilya to follow.

They step out. And as soon as they do, Ilya says quietly, “He did not answer if he remembers what happen.”

They all consider this, the three of them, like this is a team huddle before a game. Like they are strategizing, like something huge is about to happen and they need to be ready for anything. Like there is some kind of a momentous play that is in the works before the biggest game of their lives.

Something huge. Something big, something heavy. Shane remembering everything. Shane remembering that he has been outed to the world. Shane remembering the fall, and everything before. Having to think of everything after. And him remembering whether he fell off the balcony, or if he…

The reality of it all crashes back down on Ilya, and he has to brace himself on his knees to stay upright.

Yuna rubs his back, a worried expression on her face, but doesn’t comment. It’s understood that everyone here, in this huddle, knows exactly what the shared silence of the moment is for. And for that, Ilya is grateful.

“Just one thing at a time,” Yuna says more herself than anybody else.

“Yeah—let’s focus on getting Shane completely lucid for now,” David responds, putting a hand on Ilya’s shoulder and squeezing. The weight of both of their warm hands brings Ilya down, just a bit, back to earth, and he breathes. He says it so assuredly and calmly that it has Ilya agreeing, nodding his head, feeling comforted. Feeling sure.

Team huddle. They share the moment and sit in it together.

Then, after a long moment's silence, "I'll…should I put out a statement now? Or wait until he can give input?" Yuna asks, and it's back to business. Ilya forces away his growing daze.

"You know the media better than me," David says. He smiles a little, and Yuna smiles back helplessly.

"Would people try to…to get into hospital if we say Shane is awake?" Ilya asks, and Yuna nods in consideration, eyes sharp. "For—I don't know. For quote, pictures, or something?"

"They already know what hospital we're in. We've had journalists at the counter trying to find out what floor and room," Yuna says.

Ilya feels his eye twitch. "How often this happening? I did not realize." He was too busy sticking next to Shane and letting the Hollanders figure the rest of the world out, he's realizing. Guilt rises to his throat.

"Less often than the first day," David answers.

"I'm sorry. I should have…I don't know."

"Don't be sorry, son. You were taking care of Shane in one way; we were in another."

Ilya deflates. He nods.

David pats his back. "Besides, I think they got the memo that we're not budging on the whole 'privacy' part."

"And we won't budge now. Fuck them." Yuna clears her throat and shakes her arms, her legs, like she's about to go enter the rink. Her expression is all Shane and Ilya is hit with another burst of emotion—he misses him already. He always misses him. "I'll put out a statement that he's woken up, but nothing more. And make it clear that we're not doing *any* additional media appearances or comments—nobody here, no acquaintances, nothing. Nada. I have a few contacts I can poke to break the news first."

And what if people start asking more explicit questions? What if they start getting aggressive for answers on Shane's sexuality? Will the Metros be prepared to handle that, too? And what about Shane and his broken spine? They know he fell from a high place—are they already speculating about his health in the long-term?

And what about how the world seems pretty fucking convinced that Shane tried to kill himself?

What if Shane *did* try to…

Ilya bites down on his tongue.

Stupid thoughts that get him nowhere. He doesn't want to think about that right now—not when Shane has finally breached the surface of whatever unconscious fight he's been

swimming in. He instead thinks about Shane's beautiful eyes, brown and honey and gold, meeting his. How the entire world became brighter again, as if the sun had finally started to peek past the curtains. He thinks about Shane's hand cupping Ilya's cheek, about his fingers twitching in response to his voice.

"It is nice seeing him again," Ilya murmurs.

Because it's true. Even with all of this uncertainty, this fear, this—this anxiety, it was nice to see Shane again. Nice to see him alive, with his brown eyes, with his twitching fingers. With recognition in his eyes, with focus.

With life.

Yuna and David smile at that. They nod. Ilya knows they know what he means.

"It is," Yuna agrees. "It really is."

Ilya smiles back before dropping his gaze. He stares at the hospital tiles and realizes he's gotten so used to the smell and the sound and the view of this hall, of Shane's room, of this sterile hospital, that he can't imagine being somewhere else. He imagines flying back to Boston, and the mere thought of the airport makes him shudder.

He knows that people are most definitely talking about Ilya's absence now. Maybe not the public—they're off-season, so it's not like they're missing him on the ice—but the team, definitely, and maybe some rumors have started to leak past it anyhow.

Are people questioning where he is? Was he recognized at all, despite barely ever leaving Shane's side? At the restaurant the other day? Are people putting the puzzle pieces together?

Yuna suddenly pats Ilya's cheek. He blinks.

"Just give it more time, Ilya," she says, and it appears she has been saying something just now that Ilya has completely tuned out of. He licks his chapped lips and presses his palm against his leg to steady himself. He pretends he's been following and nods.

She sighs, then mutters, "Just more time. It'll work out in the end. Always does."

Yes. More time. Okay. Right. More time.

Time, moving forward again.

Shane not stuck in it, like his Mama is.

Okay. Give him more time. Ilya can do that—shit, he can do that forever. He can wait and wait for Shane if it means he's not stuck in it. He'll wait.

"Okay. That's—okay. I'm gonna go make some calls," Yuna says. She says it like a conclusion to a meeting.

“And I’m getting some food for everybody. I can call Hayden and other friends to let them know, if—”

“That’d be great, honey.”

Unspoken agreement: And Ilya is staying with Shane.

The huddle breaks. Yuna starts calling immediately and lightly jogs to the elevator with David following, the both of them looking back at Ilya. He waves them off.

Silence again.

Ilya scrubs his face with his hands.

Then he goes back to Shane, who is still again like he’s been for the past five days. He’s there on the bed like he hadn’t just woken up mere minutes ago. Ilya puts a hand on Shane’s face, his arm, his hand, and sits. He rests his head on the bed.

The day moves so slow and sluggishly it has Ilya wanting to pull his hair out.

It’s been like this the past five days, but Shane waking up has put Ilya off-kilter. The monotony of waiting being broken has shaken Ilya in a way that makes him feel impatient and restless. He wants Shane to wake up again, and the word *again* just reinforces the feeling. He—fuck, he wants to see Shane open his eyes *again*, he wants him to cup Ilya’s cheek *again*, he wants Shane to stare at Ilya, unfocused or not, and stare and stare at him *again* and he doesn’t ever want Shane to go away again.

Come back, Ilya thinks. *Come back.*

-

Shane doesn’t wake up again until after the sun sets.

& SHANE

He's a morning person. Or he thinks he is. That's the thing about Shane: He's always liked mornings more than nights, and maybe that's why he's always been disinterested in everything associated with late-night things like clubbing and partying and drinking. He's done all of them, obviously, but that was more out of fitting in than actual enjoyment. The very few times he's enjoyed it were usually either with Rose or with Ilya.

And now, mornings, something Shane has already always preferred—he can be productive, in the quiet of an undisturbed crisp of air, before everyone else wakes up and starts saturating the world with noise and technicolor mess that he doesn't like—is sometimes shared with Ilya. Sometimes, when they have the time, he can wake up early and hear the birds chirping and Ilya breathing. Feel his warm skin wrapped around his own, his broad chest lifting and falling from soft breath, his curly hair pressed against the side of Shane's face.

So fuck it. He's a morning person. He likes waking up early. He likes waking up next to Ilya, who will always wake up not long after him and immediately say something corny or stupid just to see Shane laugh or smile as greeting. Sometimes, Shane will already be smiling, and Ilya won't need to say anything to get that greeting—he'll just press closer to Shane.

He likes mornings. He likes waking up next to Ilya.

He likes waking up next to Ilya.

He likes waking up.

He likes…

Wake up.

He opens his eyes. Ilya is asleep next to him, but not in bed with him. He's sitting, body folded, head resting on the bed right next to Shane, hand loosely atop Shane's own.

Fuck, his head hurts. There's a light on the ceiling that Shane would ask to turn off, but the words really escape him somehow. He's parched. He…

Where is he?

Why is Ilya not…ugh. He closes his eyes again and tries to groan, instead makes a choked-out sound that catches. He coughs a little and finds that it really isn't comfortable to do that. What is in his throat? What…

-

…know when the next game…there's fifty-two notifications about the All-Stars…

-

…oh, hi mom, he wants to say, but he doesn't really. He sees his mom on the phone in the corner of the room, and he stares at her and thinks wow, my mom. Yeah, I can understand… oh. Hospital. Sure. Must have gotten injured mid-game. My mom is…so where…

-

…falling like there's a cliff right there. Careening down and deep. Albatross can lock their wings, did you know? They drift and sleep as they're flying, they don't fall, not really…

-

…hi Ilya. I know you. Are you…

-

…kind of like, you know, if you went fishing, it'd be a waiting game. There was this show I used to watch, and they talked about it like…yeah, hi, doctor. Mister doctor. That's really bright. Tap my finger—yeah, I can do that. Tap, tap…do you remember anything? Do you like television? Sometimes, I watch these dumb shows…

-

…hi, I like your nails. My friend, Rose, she's really into nails, too. Always changes it for…

-

…could do that. Hat tricks aren't shit if you don't skate to the beat again. Something about gliding is like when you hydroplane if you're not careful. I'd like to skate next season, what kind of dumb question…

-

…down the side of the building, and the pipes are really old. Maybe the rattling was the rat instead of the body, how about that? Instead of the body being…

-

…in a diagonal, you know? Push forward instead of down and you'll probably get a better boost, but sometimes the pressure *down* instead up is necessary to really get past it. And the pressure, when applied down, really fucking hurts, and it's like…

-

…and that's about…no.

He snaps his eyes open, startled by absolutely nothing.

Oh.

The sound of air fills whatever room Shane is in. *Whoosh.* His lungs move with it. *Whoosh.*

He opens his eyes again and frowns—when did he close them? Then he opens them again—when the hell did he close them? He squints to keep them open and finally scrutinize his surroundings.

The curtains are drawn; white and cheap. Those aren't his curtains.

Morning? Maybe? Is it morning? Shane can't tell.

But he turns his head a little—ow—and Ilya's looking at him, and his blue eyes are so wide and beautiful, and he has some dark circles under them, and he has a pretty thick stubble going on. Shane touches it with shaky fingers that feel disconnected from his body before dropping it. Ow. That hurt something in his shoulder and back.

Ilya, he tries to say. Because hi, Ilya. *Hi baby. Hey. Hey. Why are you crying? Stop. Hey. Come here.*

"Shane," Ilya whispers. He whispers, but his voice somehow ricochets off the walls—and what boring walls they are, they're just white and kind of boring—and shoots straight through Shane's skull with razor-precision and he winces from it. Ow. Wow. He's not even being loud. Why does he *feel* loud?

Shane tries for hi, gets no further than a tiny noise in the back of his throat.

"How are you feeling?" Ilya continues, and the more he speaks, the less it feels like he's drilling a hole in Shane's head. Ilya reaches out to rub his cheek. Oh, that's nice.

There's a beat of nothing before Shane realizes he's supposed to say something. Does he even know how to talk? He's not sure. Isn't that something he can do pretty well? What is he saying? Of course he can talk. He's old enough to do that. Okay, he can do that.

"…'kay," Shane manages. Boom. Perfect answer.

Ilya nods. A tear rolls down his cheek and tries to fall off of his chin, and Shane is about to reach out to catch it before the words (*you're falling off the balcony*) suddenly grab him and slams him into the wall (*asphalt*) and his eyes widen (*this isn't fair*) and he jerks (*fuck, that hurts, ow, ow, ow, mom, mom, mommy, help*) and Ilya is suddenly standing, moving forward and running his hands all over Shane's body (*he has to be dead; no way he survived the fall*) and saying, "Shane, Shane, please, *moy lyubimyy,* is okay—okay now. You're good. You're okay."

He hears incessant beeping, but Ilya draws nearer and his lips press onto the corner of Shane's open mouth. Ilya kisses him tenderly.

Tender. Ilya's all tender and soft and sweet and Shane has missed him. He missed him.

The beeping starts to slow. Shane realizes he's started to breathe erratically, but there's a weird feeling of his lungs contracting and deflating steadily without him really trying to do that, and his ribs hurt, and his body really fucking hurts, and oh, man.

It all comes back to him.

And he sees Ilya, who looks so wrecked and so devasted, so scared. And he thinks oh, no. Oh no. No, no. That's…

He fell of the balcony, drunk, hours after he got outed.

Oh, he feels sick. He feels scared. He's…he wants to…he's…

No. He blinks and tries to fight the fog that keeps taking over him at bay. Ilya's still standing, still leaning forward and so close to Shane's face he wants to kiss him but he can't. Because he's…

Hospital. He's in the hospital. Of course. And he's on a ventilator? Maybe? A tube down his throat—the thought doesn't alarm him, so maybe he's drugged, too, fuck—and a shit ton of stuff all over his body.

Oh.

He's not dead.

The ventilator goes *whoosh*.

He's not dead.

Oh, man, he's not dead.

He survived the fall. He—

"Ilya," Shane forces past the tube and dry mouth. Because he needs to let Ilya know that…he needs—

"Shane, do not try to speak, the intubation—"

I didn't jump, Shane tries to say, but it's dry and garbled and Ilya can't understand him, it's obvious from the way he doesn't react and just tries to get Shane not to talk. And since when did Ilya know the word *intubation*? How long has Shane been here?

"I go get doctor," Ilya says, "If you…Shane. God." He breathes in, breath stuttering, and kisses Shane's face again and leaves behind tears pressed into his face. Shane leans into it and wants to kiss back. He wants to pull Ilya in his arms, but it's coming back to him—lucidity, maybe that's what it is. Because he finally realizes that he's in a cast in a lot of places, and everything hurts, but the hurt is muted—drugs.

"How are you? You recognize me?" Ilya asks. He sounds nervous.

Nervous. For what? Of course he recognizes Ilya. Shane nods.

Ilya lets out a sharp breath and slumps. "Okay. That is good. You…you remember things? Your head okay?"

Yes. Shane nods. Yes, his head is okay. He covered his head before he sunk into the asphalt.

When he fell.

The memory trudges up, up, up, but before Shane can grasp onto it and recall it in full detail, Ilya leans forward to kiss him again, and Shane smiles.

“Fuck. I missed you, Shane.”

I missed you too.

“I…fuck.” He reaches above Shane and presses something. Maybe calling a nurse? The doctor? Something like that. Shane blinks and Christ, the fog is pulling at him again. He’s so tired, so fast, within a blink, within a second. It’s like he’s walking on sand and it suddenly swallows him (*like the asphalt*) with no warning.

He can feel his eyelids droop. He doesn’t want to sleep but he’s so tired.

“Sleep, if you want to,” Ilya urges gently. He’s so handsome, his Ilya, so beautiful. Shane lets his narrowed eyes roam Ilya’s face, takes in his gauntness and tiredness, and feels a pain that’s not from the injuries he’s surely sustained from the fall blossom from the deepest part of his chest.

“I love you,” Ilya says.

I love you too, Shane wants to say back. He instead nods (tries to), hopes he gets the meaning across and knows that he does. Ilya smiles at him, and it’s the rising sun.

There’s still something in his eyes, though. Shane doesn’t know what that something is. It nags at him. He feels like he should know what it is. Didn’t he have something to say to… didn’t he want to say something to Ilya? Why is…what is that expression he’s making? He doesn’t know what it is.

He does, actually.

He knows it’s…fuck, he’s tired.

He’s getting really tired.

There’s a brief lapse in memory. Did he fall asleep? Shane is fairly sure the doctor walks into the room at some point during the lapse, because at some undetermined point, the doctor is looking at him with focused eyes. Did he fall asleep *again?* Because he feels Ilya’s hand close around his and opens his eyes *again* (when did he close his eyes?) and meets shiny blue.

“Ilya,” Shane tries. It’s recognizable enough; it makes Ilya smile at him. Lovely Ilya. He’s so lovely. So handsome. Lovely Ilya. He missed him.

The doctor starts talking. It sounds like he’s underwater, but Shane strains to listen and comprehend what he’s saying. He’s good at swimming. He’s good at…ugh, he tries to stay afloat. He answers a few simple questions, trying his best not to fall asleep midway through,

and doesn't really think about things other than that. He knows he has a lot to think about but can't really recall what they are. He will soon, when he's less out of it.

Ilya holds his hand. Shane squeezes back with everything he can muster. It's the last bit of strength he can push out before his body decides for him that they've had enough.

Right before unconsciousness takes him, he remembers that he didn't tell Ilya that he didn't jump.

He didn't jump.

Ilya, he thinks.

He falls asleep.

-

They take him off the ventilator at some point in the haze of nonexistent time. He's vaguely aware of some form of conversation occurring around him—voices, some he recognizes, some foreign—talk about something concerning conditions that are stable. Or…oh. They're talking about him.

"He's making remarkable progress in terms of recovery," someone says. "What we'll be doing is something we call an SBT."

More words. Shane sluggishly blinks. His back itches but he can't really move his arm meaningfully. Is his left arm in a brace? Something's wrapped tightly around his torso. He can't move his legs that well. He stares at nothing in particular. God, he's drugged up. Is he? Or is he just tired? He thinks he can feel things better—and oh, that's not that great, actually, because he can feel these dull aches everywhere in his body and *Jesus* those lights are really bright. Can somebody turn the light off? It's—"bright," Shane tries to say. It comes out more like an aborted cough.

Ilya is there. He immediately slides into Shane's view, concern clear in his beautiful eyes. His stubble is still there, but he looks less tired than before. How long ago was before?

"…and they're trials, essentially, to lower dosage and ease him back into…"

Trials. Trial runs for…practice. How long has Shane been out? He hasn't gone this long without at the very least exercising before. He would like to get a skate in, too, just so he doesn't really…

"Mr. Hollander?"

Shane looks up. The doctor from before looks at him with piercing eyes, and the look makes Shane feel more alert and awake.

Yeah. Okay.

“We’re going to remove your intubation,” he continues. “It’s going to be a little uncomfortable. I’m going to ask you to cough when I say to. Do you understand?”

Yeah. Sure. The…tube, down his throat. Ventilation. He’s being taken off it. And cough if he needs to. That makes sense. Coughing to expel it—yeah. He nods, winces when something creaks in the back of his neck.

“…monitoring for around an hour to see how you do, and if you do well, we’ll assess and see…”

Jesus, it’s bright in here. Shane squints against the light, feeling a bit of a headache coming on. Are hospitals usually this bright? He’s been in them before, but it feels…

“Alright. Are you ready Mr. Hollander?”

Oh, yeah. Shane nods and looks at the doctor again.

They move him to sit upright, and Shane feels a throbbing kind of pain somewhere in his ribs. He scrunches his face at it. The position is kind of nice, though, as he sees Ilya—still next to him, eyes wide with fear (why is he scared?)—and mom in the corner, arms folded. He considers waving at them but thinks that maybe this isn’t the time for…whatever.

All of the half-wandering and floaty feeling that Shane’s been wading in is instantaneously sucked out of his entire body the moment they start pulling the tube out of his throat. He gags very loudly, tears pricking the corner of his eye, and instinctively swings one of his hands up to try and push whoever’s tugging away.

“Cough, Shane,” the doctor says sharply.

He can do that. *Fuck*, it’s easy to do. Shane coughs once, twice, gagging in between, and feels the tube finally dislodge.

“Shane,” Ilya breathes. He gently rubs Shane’s chest and makes little *shh shh* sounds as Shane tries to catch his breath. His throat feels raw and scratchy and fucked as he does, but his heavy breathing and residual coughing is apparently a good thing; he sees the doctor nodding in the corner of his eye.

“Hurts,” Shane croaks. He sounds like he’s been pushed through a meat grinder. He slumps—or tries, the thing around his torso (a cast, it’s a fucking cast) forces him into a specific posture—and feels his head loll back onto the bed.

He hears the doctor saying something to Yuna, but he barely pays any mind. He hears the doctor leaving the room, and the sound of the door and the sudden burst of different-temperature air makes his eye twitch.

He only now feels that there’s a brace around his neck. And his right arm. And his left leg, and he’s bandaged up like a mummy. His left hand’s thumb is in a cast. He sees bruises all over visible skin and feels how oily his scalp is. He hears his breathing, all raspy and loud.

Loud. He thinks that the sirens were loud.

Sirens? Was he even awake for that after he fell? Or is he making up memories?

Because he fell. *Off the balcony*. Fell off the balcony. He fell off the balcony. He was pretty high up. How did he not die? He tries to recall what happened right up to it, right after…no, the video. With Rose.

Oh, shit. The fucking video.

He was outed. What the hell has been happening?

"Have…put out a—" he coughs, winces when he does when his ribs creak in his chest. He rubs it.

"What?" Ilya asks. He leans closer and reaches out. He brushes hair out of Shane's face.

"Statement?" Shane tries. He clears his throat and feels tears pricking his eyes from the raw pain of speaking.

"Do not speak too much," Ilya says sweetly, but there's a tone of begging that Shane can't properly understand. "We have situation under control, da?" Ilya glances over at Yuna, who is now at the foot of the bed and leaning over. She has tears in her eyes, but no frantic rush or surprise. Shane knows he's been in and out of lucidity—and yes, he remembers waking up to her and saying hello.

So his being awake isn't new. He frowns. So how long was he actually out for?

Yuna puts a hand gingerly on his leg cast. "Yes, we have the media under control for now. Statements have been put out—"

"What statements?" Another cough. He has to stop talking if it's going to hurt this much.

"Rumors and speculations discouraged. We made it 100 percent clear that you'll be the one to address them—if you do at all. We put out that you woke up yesterday but let them know that was all we were giving them for now."

How long was I out? Shane clears his throat to try and say it, fails. Ilya squeezes his hand and shakes his head again, a bit frantic, curls bouncing, and leans forward to kiss Shane on his cheekbone.

That calms him embarrassingly fast. Shane blinks at Ilya and thinks that he loves him.

Wow. He loves Ilya so much. He's missed Ilya. He wanted to see him. He'd wanted to see him after he hung up, after Shane cracked his coffee table and called his parents. After that…

He'd been drinking.

The memory strikes him clean. He'd been drinking vodka with Tylenol. Alone. And drank until he got drunk. Then went to the balcony, and…

He didn't jump off.

Time to tell them that. He should. He should say that and make it clear, and now it's obvious why Ilya's so oddly desperate, why his mom's being so careful. They think he jumped. They think he tried to kill himself.

They think he tried to *kill himself*. That he chose suicide in the face of being outed. That's not true, though—he didn't want to kill himself, he just kind of…

He recalls reading a book on the psychology of sports. There was a section about athletes often having no personal sense of danger, and how some bordered into passive suicidal ideation—something about some forms of ideation being hidden under the guise of risk-taking with sports.

Shane had been drunk. He'd been scared. He'd thought dying would be easier than facing the world.

Shane feels a little sick. He licks his lips.

He didn't jump on purpose, though. But he was thinking about death to an extent. He thought it might be easier. Did that count as ideation? Or was that just being human? He's suddenly unsure.

He's overthinking this. He's not overthinking this. He is. He isn't. The light is buzzing loudly, and the sounds of machinery around him suddenly feel like shapes pressing into his skin. The casts trapping him into his own body feel suffocating. He wants to kick his blankets off but can't move his legs—only his right leg jerks mildly.

A bit too mild, given that Shane just tried to kick the blanket off of him. He tries again.

Mild jerk.

Oh. What the hell?

He attempts to move his leg again and feels the distinct lack of anything. His leg is supposed to be halfway up in the air right now; at least, that's what Shane is intending, but the most it does is tense. He tenses so hard he grits his teeth, and that gets the leg up maybe half a centimeter off the mattress. He hears his heart rate increasing.

"Shane?" Ilya asks.

What the hell.

It feels like there's an invisible block placed over his leg, but the weight of that block is lost to Shane. There's…it's just a weird absence. It feels like he's not fully in control of his legs—and he feels panic rising at that. He's never *not* had perfect control over his limbs. This isn't—that's not right.

"Shane," Ilya says, noticing his sudden focus. Shane sees Ilya glance over at his leg, too, and he sees Ilya's face do a weird flip and he immediately knows, somehow. His gut churns and the light is really, *really* loud and bright.

“Turn the light off, please,” Shane whispers.

“What?” Yuna asks this time, and Ilya immediately shoots up and runs to the light switch to hit it. Sunlight still enters through the windows and Shane can still see but Jesus, fuck, that buzzing is finally gone. Finally gone. Finally gone…

Okay. His left leg is in cast. His right leg, though…why is—

The cast around his torso. Back. It’s supporting his back, which means spine. His spine? From the jump—no, the fall, of course. He must have injured his spine.

Spine injury. Doesn’t that usually…

“…lead to paralysis,” Shane whispers, barely audible, and oh, fuck.

Really bad falls or hits. There are some people who get paralyzed from injury.

Shane fell from really high.

Spine fracture.

Unfair. This is unfair. Isn’t it? He fell off the balcony (or did you jump, or did you fall, or did you jump, or did you—) and injured his spine, his body, and is he paralyzed now, or something? Did he lose control of his legs? He has to skate, though. He has to skate. It doesn’t matter if Montreal kicks him for being gay (it matters a lot, it matters *a lot*, the thought of Montreal kicking him makes him want to throw up or throw something else), he just needs to be able to skate, he can start over somewhere else (no he can’t)—

He’s gay. Fuck. Everyone knows it now. What has the public been saying? Do people think he tried to kill himself for being gay (they absolutely do, who is he kidding)? It’s—he really needs these casts off. It’s getting on his skin and he can feel each inch of the encasing on every single pore on his body and can somebody *please* get this shit off of him? He’s going to lose his fucking mind—why the hell is there—ow, his chest, and—his chest, ow, chest, fuck, this isn’t fair, this isn’t *fair*—he doesn’t—

—and his mind empties into a black hole of an abyss and he stops thinking for a second, just floats in an incomprehensible nightmare of a space that he hates being in but he can’t really find a way out right now—

“—breathe, sweetheart, Shane, Shane!”

A cool hand lands on his forehead. A pinpoint beacon of cool snaps everything spiraling into that one place of contact and Shane breathes, deep, and his lungs expand and his ribs ache with it but he gets the breath he needs and—

“Out, okay. That’s good. Shane, *dyshi,* sweetheart. Good, okay, Shane. Breathe.”

Shane screws his eyes shut. He barely feels the sob until it escapes him in a betrayal. He tries to push his forehead harder onto the cool hand—he needs the pressure—and sucks in another

shaky breath again when the hand presses for him. It grounds him, or starts to, and only when Shane takes another few deep, shaky, painful breaths does he realizes it's Ilya's hand.

Ilya.

God. Ilya. Shane wants to start screaming or yelling or *something*. His legs…is this temporary? Can he walk again? Can he skate again? Can he even compete? If he does, will he have a team to compete with? How will he protect Ilya? Will Ilya want to even stay with someone who can't play with him anymore? Will Shane be too boring?

How long has he been out?

What have people been saying?

Everybody knows now. It's only a matter of Shane saying yes. Even if he denies, nobody will believe him. They already think he tried to kill himself for it.

Christ he's tired.

"I'm sorry," Ilya is saying softly. He keeps his hand on Shane's forehead, pressing down, while his other rubs his cheek soothingly. "I'm sorry."

For what? He didn't do anything.

He feels Ilya shifting, and feels his lips against the corner of Shane's chapped ones. The kiss lingers for a moment more before receding, and Shane finally opens his eyes.

Ilya's crying. The rim of his eyes are a bright red, and they're puffy, and his lips are downturned and Shane lifts his good arm weakly to press at them to try and get him to stop frowning. He sees his mom in the back, too, crying, though she's stepping out. Is she getting his dad? Speaking to the doctor? He's not sure. He's not sure of anything. He doesn't know anything.

"I'm sorry," Ilya repeats. He lowers his head and presses his forehead against Shane's knuckle, kisses him there. It's so gentle and kind it makes Shane close his eyes again. He feels a stray tear fall and Ilya is there to catch it.

He's always there to catch Shane.

"You will get better," Ilya says, and he sounds so assured it almost convinces Shane. Almost. "And we will deal with public together. You will recover, and I will kick your ass on the ice again."

Shane smiles weakly. He opens his eyes again (again, and again; he'll always open his eyes for Ilya) and rakes his gaze over Ilya's handsome face, scrutinizes every single mole and wrinkle and pore and feature and drinks him in, his Ilya. He's missed him.

"Such an asshole," Shane murmurs. He says it mostly to see Ilya smile, and he gets a smile. It warms Shane's insides.

But.

What if Ilya is wrong?

What if he can't get back on the ice again?

What if he can't skate?

He'd rather die than never skate again. Is a life without hockey worth one living?

He's so tired. He closes his eyes again, weight of Ilya's hand keeping him calmer than the growing tangled web of anxious fear and despair feels in his stomach.

He doesn't know if he could survive without hockey.

He doesn't know if…

Will Ilya even…

"What if I don't get better?" Shane asks after a long, long lapse of silence.

What if I never skate again? What if I never get to get on the ice again? What if I can't do anything that made you like me? What if I don't ever go back to who I was before? What if I never fly again? What if I have to give up the one thing I've lived for before I even get the chance to fight for it? My life revolves around it—it's always revolved around it. What does it mean if core of a machine fails? Will the Earth continue to exist if the sun is extinguished? What do I do?

He expects there to be more silence. He expects Ilya to keep thinking, to mull on that. He expects to have to steel himself to accept any answer Ilya gives. He expects that maybe this might be it, right after this. Maybe Ilya will realize that the future is too bleak and too shrouded in uncertainty. He's been through so much, his beautiful Ilya. He deserves certainty. He deserves…

Yet there is no silence, no hesitation.

"Then I will take care of you, like you take care of me," Ilya says resolutely. "And I will stay with you. We will build life together. We can stay connected to hockey even if you don't play, no? Everybody retire at some point. Just early then, da? You're the smart one, with big mind and plans—you can figure out plan."

Shane wants to cry. His chin wobbles. Ilya barrels on, undeterred, but his eyes are bright too and he knows Ilya is holding back his own tears.

"Hollander, you are all that matters, *moya dusha*. Fuck NHL and fuck everybody. I only need you. I will be with you no matter what."

How can he say these things so simply? It rolls off his tongue like water (Shane is good at swimming). The words wash over Shane and God, he's crying again. He presses into Ilya's

hand more and more, brings up a hand weakly to tug Ilya forward until he's close enough for Shane to kiss.

They kiss properly for the first time in a while. Shane is always struck by how their noses slot against each other so perfectly, the way the slope of Ilya's lips tucks itself over Shane's like it was always meant to be there. They kiss, crying onto one another, tears mixing to wash everything unimportant away.

It's just them.

Shane pulls back just enough for their lips to part. The space between them feels small enough to be contained just between them, locked and only visible to Shane and the love of his life.

"I'm sorry," Shane whispers.

"No," Ilya says, shaking his head. He presses his forehead against Shane's, replacing the hand. Shane feels Ilya's hands come up and hold his face. "No. I love you, understand? *You*, Shane Hollander. I love *you*. *Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

Shane thinks that, during his time under the asphalt—when he was still wading in molasses, stuck in time and dark and nothing—he was thinking about Ilya.

Always.

And he thinks that he had already come to a conclusion about hockey. He remembers—he remembers. Didn't he say he could give up hockey if it meant being with Ilya? That he *would* give it up if it meant staying with Ilya, living with him? Breathing with him? Fuck everything else; all he needed was Ilya. That's what he thought, wasn't it?

Being alive to kiss him like this, touch him like this, love him like this?

Shane nods. Yes. That sounds right. Yes. *Yes.* Always. Always. He swears. He swears silently. He can give up hockey—he can't give up everything as long as Ilya's there.

A forgone conclusion.

"I love you," Shane says with as much strength he can muster. Voice still raspy and throat still raw. "I love you."

He falls asleep not long after, lulled by Ilya's presence.

But fuck, he forgets again.

He forgets to tell Ilya that…

& ILYA

There is still much uncertainty about Shane's current state, apparently. Still. Good news follows the extubation—Ilya says, "ex—what?" and the doctor kindly puts the word on his phone—in that Shane is strong enough to breathe on his own. It's a matter of monitoring his condition and making sure his bones and muscles heal properly.

A day after the extubation, Shane is moved to a private room outside of the ICU. It's monumental. It's glorious. Shane is stable enough to not be in critical care. He's not in critical condition. He's stable and alive and breathing by himself and the broken bones and muscle and everything are stitching together slowly but surely.

And Ilya stands in the hall, hands in his pocket, phone on silent, facing the doctor while Yuna and David sort through two duffle bags for dry shampoo.

"He'll be monitored for longer and most likely be cleared to be discharged," Dr. Johan says. "And then it'll be up to you all—physical therapy, home. He could technically stay longer, but—"

"What about legs? He will walk again?" Ilya asks.

Dr. Johan considers this. Then, with a sigh, "Walk, maybe. His nerves haven't been damaged to the point of complete paralysis."

Okay. Ilya nods. That's good. That makes sense. He saw Shane moving them a little—even the one in the cast had jostled when Shane focused. He saw it himself.

"And skate? Will he skate? Play hockey again? You know this, or no?"

At that, there's a long pause. Too long. Then the doctor takes his glasses off. Not good. Ilya folds his arms to his chest.

Fuck.

"I think it'd be wise to set realistic expectations," he says, the gentlest he's sounded. "I understand that a career-ending prognosis is the last thing Mr. Hollander would want to hear, but this was a grave injury we're talking about."

He sees Yuna and David, mid-rustle, look up. Dead silence.

"I see." Ilya resolutely *does not* want to see. He wants to rip something apart.

"But," Dr. Johan pauses and puts his glasses back on. "There's nothing saying he can't train through physical therapy to try and recover what he can. I don't think a close-ended conclusion is helpful at this time."

It's an elaborate sentence. Ilya parses each word carefully, thoughtfully, and catalogues each to search through the mental dictionary of fancy English he's stacked up through years of

living in Boston. Normally, Ilya would have called this kind of carefully worded nonsense a load of bullshit. But right now, in the hospital, so soon after Shane has made good progress, so early in the stages of life that Shane has found again, Ilya thinks it's okay to feel comforted by it.

So he nods. He says thank you, everything polite, and helps Yuna and David find the shampoo. He watches as Yuna checks her phone and frowns, hurry down the hall to pick up a call. David gives Ilya a tired but brighter smile than the ones he's had the past few days and tells him to go back to Shane, that he knows Ilya's itching to go sit next to him. Ilya ducks his head, feeling stupid and bashful, and David chuckles.

He does want to go back and sit next to Shane. Shane, who looks more alive (alive, alive, alive) by the second, who has stayed (with Ilya) awake for longer increments of time (that moves forward, not stuck).

So he does. He goes inside again, back to Shane, who has been looking out the window. Ilya watches quietly as Shane stares into Montreal's streets and wonders what he's thinking. He watches still as Shane turns his head lightly, brown eyes reflecting the sunlight like a glowing lake under the sunset, and smiles at Ilya despite looking exhausted.

He's so beautiful. He's gorgeous, his Shane.

Yet there is still, deep in Ilya's chest, a nagging question he can't escape.

Mama steps into Ilya's frame of view towards the window. She presses her palm against the glass, looking out, and wipes away a dribble of drool. She glances over at Ilya and smiles.

Shane and Mama, close to each other, both look out at Ilya.

He wants to ask.

Fear overtakes him.

It's been officially declared an accident. Shane had answered questions before being moved out of the ICU—he said that he had fallen off of the balcony, that it was an accident. They'd done a psychological assessment, or something like that, in private, and Shane had told Ilya they'd been asking if he was depressed, and Shane had resolutely said no, he was not. He'd said he wasn't depressed and confirmed again—both in front of others and by himself—that he'd just fallen. It had been an accident.

An accident. He said it slowly, like he was being thoughtful about it. But Ilya knew—nobody else caught it—he'd said it after a slight hesitance.

He'd said it with hesitation, Ilya knew. He knew. He knew it was hesitation, and not thoughtfulness. It was *hesitation.* He *knows,* because he knows Shane. And Shane had hesitated.

He'd fucking hesitated.

He'd *hesitated*, and that scared Ilya so much he had to leave the room and run to the bathroom, cover his mouth to hold back nausea.

He'd hesitated.

Did you fall? Or did you jump?

Mama watches him silently.

Was it actually an accident, or did you just say that to make everyone feel better?

Does he even want to know the answer?

"Ilya," Shane calls out quietly. "What's wrong?" Ilya realizes he's been staring and standing stupidly at the door.

Shane's voice is still scratchy and Ilya steps forward to go to him, to sit back down next to him and hold his hand, to drink him and his living body and opened eyes and scratchy voice and tired smile in and revel in it, but he doesn't. He stands stupidly near the door, staring at Shane, not knowing how to breach the subject.

He's bad at this, this whole talking-vulnerably-and-honestly business. It's a whole skill, he's learned. It's strategy to be able to be honest but word things carefully as to not hurt the other person. He's learned this by watching Shane, who is good at it when he wants to be (or he thinks).

He's bad at this. Shit. What does he say? He knows how to strategize in games. He knows tact on the ice. But here? In front of Shane? In the hospital? Days of agony, of despair, of uncertainty?

What the hell does he say?

"Ilya," Shane says again, and his brows are furrowed. "

"Nothing," Ilya responds. He winces at how fucking awful he is at convincing Shane.

Shane stares at him unimpressed. It's endearing. It's Shane. It's Shane, and he says, "Tell me what's wrong."

Maybe it's a subconscious thing, the way Ilya can't deny Shane anything. He'd give anything to Shane. He'd do anything for Shane. Anything, anytime. Everything. So does what Shane tells him to do—he gives what he has. And what he has is a blunt statement that he immediately regrets.

"People think you killed yourself," Ilya blurts out.

Shane flinches at the words, like Ilya has thrown something at him. Something sharp and pointed. Ilya stares at him, blood roaring in his ears, and waits for—something. A reaction. A denial.

Nothing. Shane just stares at Ilya, then the wall behind Ilya like there's something important written on it and he doesn't say anything, just sits, breathing.

"They think you tried to kill yourself because of the video," Ilya adds, feeling weirdly desperate for some reason. He fidgets with his hands. "Because you are gay."

It's mean. He's being mean. He's reminding Shane of everything bad that led up to the fall but Ilya can't bring himself to care because he just—needs something. *Something.* Say something. Say anything.

Nothing.

"Is it…Is not true, da? Or…" Ilya wipes at his mouth, eyes darting around everywhere—to Mama, who is leaning against the window and looking down, wiping at her own mouth—and then to Shane, who *finally* shifts his eyes to look up at Ilya again.

They stare at each other like that for what feels like eternity.

"I—" Shane cuts himself off. He blinks.

Ilya swallows around the lump in his throat, the rising *thump-thump-thump* of his heart. Shane looks at him with shining eyes—all glowing and wet and beautiful—with his mouth open.

Say something, Ilya wishes desperately and silently. *Say no. Say yes. Anything*.

Shane opens his mouth, closes it again. There's a tiny furrow to his brow and a twitch to his lashes and Ilya knows he's thinking about something that Ilya won't be privy to. He won't be privy to a lot of things about Shane—he hides, just like Ilya hides, and it kills him. It *kills* him. Does it kill Shane, too? Does it suffocate him? Does it drive him insane?

"I didn't—" Shane stops. His voice is still raspy and rough. He coughs and puts a hand up to stop Ilya when he takes a step forward on instinct. "I'm okay."

"You are not," Ilya shoots back, and he feels angry. Why does he feel angry? There's an ugly feeling wrapping around him and he tries to push it away. Fuck.

"Ilya—"

"Hollander, you almost died. They found you on the ground with—your spine was broken, you know? Your fucking lung was—there was hole, or something—"

"Ilya, can—"

"You ruptured organs and shit. You were unconscious for five fucking days, and then barely awake for two! You're not okay! You're not—and now you can't say if—did—"

"Baby, it's—"

“—you mean to—I don’t even know if—because now I am scared that you would do that and you would actually—that you would leave me, Shane, I’m fucking—"

“Can I—”

“—everybody think you tried to kill yourself, but I didn’t think that. I didn’t—fuck, maybe I did! Maybe I did, but you fell off balcony after drinking, Shane, fucking *drinking* with fucking *pills*, how—”

“That wasn’t—”

“—am I supposed to think? Huh? What am I supposed to think—you try to kill yourself after —didn’t even say goodbye, didn’t—I’m—you would leave me like that? Would you do that? You can’t stay? You wanted to leave, or—"

“*Ilya*.”

Ilya is heaving, both of his hands in his hair, eyes wide open and crying. God, he’s so pathetic. He’s been shouting—he can feel how hoarse his throat is.

Shane stares at Ilya, too, wide-eyed. He’s also crying. There are tears in the corner of his eyes and his lashes flutter. His hands twitch.

What a fucking guy Ilya is, yelling at his hospital bed-ridden boyfriend because of how sad *he* feels about the situation, like it’s not Shane being confronted with the reality of everything that’s happened so far. Shane might not walk again, might not *play* again. He’s been outed, he’s been cornered, humiliated, hurt, and here is Ilya yelling at him because he feels sad. What a fucking kind man he is. How patient and loving he’s being right now. He abruptly remembers his father, who would yell at Mama all the damn fucking time even if she was sad, even if she was so tired.

Tired. Shane, trying not to cry, looks tired.

But what about me? A petulant little voice says in Ilya’s head. *I’m tired, too.*

“I’m sorry,” Ilya manages. He wipes his face off while turning away. “Is not…I did not mean —"

“No,” Shane replies. There’s a sharpness to his voice. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut, but Shane says, “No, you don’t do that.”

And softer, “Can you look at me, please?”

God. Ilya could never refuse Shane. Even now. Even with his sprinting pulse and roiling emotions that he can’t sort out. He could never deny Shane anything. He loves him. God. Ilya turns to look at him.

“Don’t apologize,” Shane continues. He rubs his chest like he’s soothing a muscle ache, and Ilya knows it’s his lungs, his ribs, and Ilya wants to run over and rub it for him, kiss him

okay. But he doesn't. He stares at Shane, who is trying to string together words like a delicate puzzle—like the boring fucking *New Yorker* puzzle—and wants to scream.

Mama, in the corner of the room, watches them both silently. She looks like she is holding her breath for something, waiting.

Ilya and Mama, together in suffocation, in wait. They watch Shane, who blinks and blinks, thinking. Then finally, Shane sighs.

"I was thinking about death," he says carefully, "But I wasn't thinking about dying."

A pause.

Then, incredulous, Ilya wants to shout, *What the fuck does that mean?* He throws his hands up—*what* does that mean? What kind of poetic bullshit is that supposed to be? What the fuck does—fuck. He wants to be mean. He wants to—he doesn't know. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know why he's so mad, why he's so…

He can feel his lip quiver and fuck. He's not even mad. He's not mad. He's scared. He's *scared*. He's so scared.

He's so fucking scared that Shane is going to say that he did try to kill himself, that he's regretful it didn't work, or that he's glad he didn't die but he really did want to die back then and that he *tried* to die. That he didn't want to stay, no, he meant it, his trying to leave—Ilya's scared that Shane's going to say that he meant to jump off the balcony and die that night and he's not going to be able to do anything about that, because what's thought of had been thought of and Shane already did it, even if it failed, because in the end isn't that what Shane's done? He's tried to kill himself? Tried to die, like Mama? Leave Ilya behind and leave him with the body to curl up with again in the cold, crying? Asking why did you leave? Shane, *pochemu ty menya ostavila?* Why did you leave? Why did you leave—

"Hey," Shane says so softly, so softly and sweetly and gently and kind and loving and warmly and Ilya looks up with his shaking hands and trembling lips and sees Shane lift his hand weakly.

"Hey," Shane repeats again.

The tips of his fingers visibly twitch and jerk, uncoordinated and tense, and his arm starts to shake from the strain of lifting it. But he keeps it resolutely up, resolutely stretched towards Ilya.

Come here, Shane begs silently. *Come here, please.*

And Ilya can't deny Shane, ever. Never.

Ilya goes to him.

He reaches for Shane's hand. Shane pulls Ilya with a sudden and sharp tug that Ilya doesn't expect. Ilya tips forward and falls onto the bed—it's only instinct that makes him land right next to Shane as opposed to on top of his fragile body. Ilya opens his mouth to say—

something, to chide him, to tell him to be careful, to ask if he's stupid, his eyes wide with a burst of adrenaline, but Shane puts a warm hand on Ilya's cheek and then around the back of his head and pulls until Ilya's face is on his chest.

He ends up cradled. He breathes Shane in, breath stuttering, and finally stills himself.

There's a soft sigh from Shane—and a soft sigh from Mama. Ilya blinks back tears that he knows will fall again to join the others on his cheek.

Shane's heart is steady. *Thump-thump-thump.* Alive and kicking.

"I didn't try to kill myself," Shane says. And he says it like a conclusion, like he's saying *that's that.* It's dry and so simple, so to-the-point, so *Shane.* His voice rumbles and reverberates through Ilya's skull, his body, his fingers, his feet, his torso, his heart. "I didn't. I wouldn't do that. Not to…I wouldn't leave you. I won't. I don't think I'm capable of even thinking about doing that. I didn't try to kill myself."

"But you fell," Ilya whispers. Almost whines. He is acting like a child.

"I did fall. It was an accident. Ilya, you have to believe me, okay?" And he pulls back, just a bit, and Ilya looks up and he sees Shane looking at him with the same expression he wears when he's about to go onto the ice and dominate. It's resolute. "You have to believe me, because it's true. I was scared out of my fucking mind, then I got drunk. I went out to the balcony to get some air. It was stupid—I shouldn't have been there alone, but I was drunk, okay? And I fell because I stood up too fast and I got dizzy."

He hears Shane take in a rattling breath, so strained and so tired. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut. The thrumming of anxiety refuses to let go of him.

He feels Shane's finger brush over his closed eyes. It's loving—an absentminded loving motion that makes Ilya's heart dance and flutter. "I was scared, but I didn't jump. I wanted to see you. I knew if I waited for a bit, you'd come home, and it wouldn't be so bad."

I wanted to see you.

Shane kisses his forehead, feather-light, and Ilya shudders. "I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't jump. Please believe me. It's true. It's fucking true. I didn't jump. I was waiting for you. I wanted to see you."

God. Relief. It's euphoric. It passes through Ilya in waves.

Still.

Doubt clings to him like a stain.

"I thought you…" Ilya presses his forehead into Shane's sternum. He has half the mind to be gentle but he needs to be close right now. He wants to melt into Shane's body; he wants to be part of him. He wants to become Shane's blood, mend himself to every single sinew that holds Shane together. He wants to wrap around his heart and stay there to feel the beat of it

forever. He never wants to let go. He wishes he could sink into him. “I thought you wanted to leave.”

I thought you wanted to leave me.

He feels Shane shaking his head. Small movements hampered by the cast, but he still does it, then says, “No. Never.”

A pause. Then, so, so sure and solid but quiet, just for Ilya to hear: “I wanted to stay.”

Ilya still holds his breath. He waits for the ball to drop, for the “but” to come.

It doesn’t.

Ilya sobs.

Shane just holds Ilya against his chest, his bruised and battered ribs and weak lungs and still-beating heart, and stays. He stays warm and alive and beautiful, holding Ilya, and Ilya moves his arms to gingerly drape around Shane’s body as carefully as he can. He feels Shane’s body under him, battered but alive, warm and warm and warm. And he stays.

He stays.

He inhales, then exhales.

He hears Shane do the same.

Still here.

-

In his dream, Ilya sees Mama sitting on the dock behind the cottage.

She’s wearing a beautiful dress that compliments her eyes. Her hair sways with the light breeze and she looks so beautiful, his mama. She looks back at him with a smile and she beckons him closer, like she always does in his dream.

He walks forward. He sits next to her, and she puts an arm around him, and he leans against her shoulder.

She’s cold. Ilya closes his eyes. He knew she would be.

“*Velikolepno, da?*” She asks, sweeping her arms across the water.

“*Da,* Mama,” Ilya murmurs.

Same script.

She comments on how beautiful it is. She asks how he’s doing, and he says he’s doing okay. She asks if hockey is still fun, and he says it is. She asks if he’s eating, if he’s drinking, if he’s taking care of himself. Ilya says yes to everything. Then she asks if Ilya is still mad at her,

and Ilya says no, because he's never been mad at her. Never, ever, ever. Then she smiles, and says she knows he's seeing someone. And Ilya will say that yes, he is. And he'll say, with as much sincerity and wistfulness as he can muster, that he wishes she could say hi to Shane, that he wishes she could meet him, because she would love him.

Then the conversation ends, and Ilya wakes up.

It follows the script up to her saying she knows he's seeing someone. Then, after Ilya says yes, he is, and that he wishes she could say hi to Shane, that he wishes she could meet him, because she would love him—

Mama laughs, shakes him. Ilya blinks and lifts his head to look at her, confused, but a weird feeling of unexpected joy filling his chest. She's never laughed like this in his dream before.

"*Ya vstretila yego, Ilyusha,*" she tells him, like this is something normal, something real. "Shane—*on ochen' mily. K tomu zhe, krasavets*." She strokes his face with a hand, grinning, and her hand is warm.

Ilya feels his heart expand. He grabs her hand, eyes wide. They're still warm. He hasn't felt her warmth since he was twelve, since before she died, before she killed herself.

"Mama," Ilya breathes.

"*Ty schastliv, zaychik*?" She asks. At this, she grabs his face with both of her hands and pulls him close. She searches his eyes with hers, alive and sparkling and God, how beautiful her eyes are, how did Ilya forget? How did Ilya forget how she looked when she was alive, when she was living and full of it? How her eyes would crinkle in laughter, glow with starlight in joy?

"*Ochen' schastliv,*" he whispers.

"*Khorosho.*" She kisses his nose, then his forehead and Ilya leans into it. He slumps forward and she catches him, his mama, and hugs him tight. He rests his face in the crook of her neck and he feels her pendant digging into his face and he feels that he's crying more than he realizes.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu, Ilyusha.*" She sways him back-and-forth, hugs him tighter. "*Ya khotela ostat'sya.*"

"*Pochemu ty ne ostalas'*, Mama?"

"*Solnishko, ya pytalas'. Ty dlya menya vsyo. Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

"Mama—"

"*Bud' schastliv pozhaluysta c* Shane, *da?*" She runs her manicured nails through his hair gently, lovingly, and Ilya closes his eyes, feels and somehow knows that this will be one of the last times he sees his mama like this. Maybe she will visit again as memory, as hopes, as wishes, as *dreams*, but not like this. Not for a while.

He knows.

And for the first time since he was twelve, he's not too afraid of what that might mean. What it might mean to be happy, to be sad, to be angry, to love, to breathe, and to *live* without feeling so scared of seeing what happened to his mama happen again. What it might mean to live while learning to let go of the guilt he's carried with him so long, because—

"*Ty ne vinovat. Nikogda. Ya tebya lyublyu. Pozhaluysta, Ilyusha, bud' schastliv.*"

"*Ya tebya lyublyu,* Mama."

"*Moy prekrasny syn. Ya tebya lyublyu. Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

She holds him for a bit more, just until her rocking and her humming—she used to hum for him, he remembers, hum him a lullaby—starts to lull him to sleep, to slumber. He takes a nap, curled up in her chest, feeling her warm body pressed against his.

Then he wakes up and sees Shane, his blooming, beautiful smile, and feels his warm hands running through his hair.

Ilya's neck aches from the shitty hospital pillow and the shitty hospital bed. Still. He can't find it in himself to be too mad. His head has been lolling to the side, close to Shane, close enough for him to reach out and touch.

Shane looks good. He looks handsome, looks stronger.

"Good morning," Shane murmurs.

"Good morning. I love you," Ilya whispers. He sits up and stretches—hears many things crack and snap into place, and he sees Shane in the corner of his eye scrunch his nose at the noises—and it endears Ilya so much he surges forward to kiss him. Shane's lips are all gentle and soft. He's still smiling. Ilya smiles back and their teeth clack. They part—just barely, just enough to see each other—and chuckle.

And into their little space they've carved together, Shane quietly, shyly, says, "I love you too. *Ya tebya lyublyu*."

Ilya's chest swells.

Ilya kisses him again, and again, and Shane gives and gives back. They fold into each other under the sunlight, warm and alive. There are birds tweeting outside like this is some beautiful movie and maybe it is. Maybe life is more beautiful than movies sometimes. It's more beautiful now, where Shane's thumb is stroking Ilya's jaw and Ilya's head is on Shane's chest, slotting there like he was always meant to be in his arms.

It's just the two of them. Just the two of them together.

Loving each other.

In the sunlight.

Alive.

-

A phone call, then two. Then three.

Shane quietly asks Ilya if he thinks that anything will be normal ever again.

The rest of the world catches up to them too fast, too quick.

Chapter End Notes

translations (and, again, thank you cloudrecess <3)

vstavay: stay
Veroyatno, on prosto ustal: he's probably just tired
moy lyubimyy: my love
dyshi: breathe
moya dusha: my soul
Ya tebya lyublyu: i love you
Velikolepno, da: gorgeous/beautiful, yes?
Ya vstretila yego: i met him
on ochen' mily: he's very cute
K tomu zhe, krasavets: he's also a handsome man/a looker
Ty schastliv, zaychik: are you happy bunny?
Ochen' schastliv: very happy
Khorosho: good
Ya khotela ostat’sya: i wanted to stay
Pochemu ty ne ostalas’: why didn't you?
Solnishko, ya pytalas'. Ty dlya menya vsyo: honey/sunshine, i tried. you were everything to me. i love you
Bud' schastliv pozhaluysta c Shane: please be happy, with shane
Ty ne vinovat. Nikogda: it's not your fault. never
Pozhaluysta, Ilyusha, bud' schastliv: Please, Ilya, be happy
Moy prekrasny syn: my beautiful son

hiiiiiiii guys. i think for this chapter i wanted to focus mainly on (1) shane realizing what it means to potentially have to give up hockey and (2) how ilya was finally facing his fears of abandonment and grief through confronting shane's emotions and his as a mirror.

by the way, i know there's apprehension (career-ending injury???) but pleaseee know this is a happy ending. i personally believe stories where struggle and the wish to live are rewarded are a lot more impactful and radical than stories where people lose despite the perseverance.

i kind of relate heavily to shane in a sense. a lot of self-worth is built on what you're good at, and to someone like shane (marginalized, neurodivergent, loving, kind, empathetic, deeply feeling), losing what you're good at and what brings your family and friends joy genuinely might feel like the very foundation of your identity being taken. yet when you have someone you love so dearly next to you who makes you realize you're more than just your talents, that they love you for *you* and not anything else, that fear can be overcome. ilya is that anchor for shane. shane's realizing he doesn't need to be at peak and perfect for people to want him around; ilya's not leaving, even if everything shane thinks he's worth is gone and dust.

as for ilya, i think he equates his grief for his mother as grief for her leaving his side at such a young age. nuance is lost to you when you're young, and the emotions you feel at that age stick with you. even if ilya logically knew that his mother didn't "leave" him in the sense of abandoning him, it still *felt* like it because she wasn't around anymore. he's scared of vulnerable, genuine attachment because he thinks the people he truly bares his soul to will leave, just like how his mother (the only person he was a child with and who he was honest with) left. so seeing shane say no, i'm not leaving (in any way, shape or form) and i'll fight to be with you was as impactful to him as it was for shane to hear ilya say no, i'm not leaving, i'm staying with you forever. they compliment each other perfectly and i am going to tear my hair out!!

anyhow. i was rambling! btw apologies for adding another chapter; i've realized i can't really wrap this up as i'd want with just this chapter. i'll see you soon! stay warm and safe!

Chapter 5: Shane & Ilya

Chapter Summary

Recovery and what comes after.

Chapter Notes

tw: homophobia, depression, and things that have been referenced throughout this fic

this is almost an epilogue-y chapter. a lot of fluff, a bit more contemplation, and a preview of what's to come. thank you for the constant support and love; this was so much fun to write and completely self-indulgent, so it was amazing and humbling to see how many people connected with it. i love these boys so much and want to write more for them, so please keep an eye out for that if you're interested! much love to you all, and if there's a takeaway from this fic, i'd want it to be:

good things can happen, and do happen. and things can get better, and will get better. and "better" might not be what you originally imagined for yourself, but it's still something that can exist as a reality for you so keep going, keep pushing, and keep fighting. life is frustrating and complex but it's also filled with beauty and love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SHANE

Shane Hollander @official_hollander

DRAFT: Hello. This is Shane Hollander. You might have already heard that I am well on the road to recovery, and I wanted to confirm this fact. I'm awake, I'm lucid, and I'm recovering.

Firstly, I'd like to thank everyone who has been waiting for me as I recovered from the accident. Your support and care mean a lot to me, more than you all could know. Thank you to all the medical staff who helped me every step of the way. Thank you to my family, friends, and team for being by my side during this time.

Secondly, I would like to end speculation regarding the accident I was involved with. What was reported in media was true: I fell off my apartment balcony in an accident. While my injuries were initially life-threatening, I was quickly stabilized. I am grateful to say that I have recovered enough to the point of taking the next steps towards physical therapy.

And that's the next part: I did injure my spine, but we are optimistic that with physical therapy, I'll be able to recover much of my mobility. Hockey is everything to me, and I have more to give. I'll be working hard to get back on the ice to give you all more games, more wins, and more trophies. Thank you to the Metros for being the best team I could have ever wished for during this new journey I'm embarking on.

Third, I would like to address rumors regarding my sexuality. While

Shane stops typing. He frowns at the screen. His head already hurts—he's been looking at his laptop for an entirety of thirty minutes, and it's already getting to him. His glasses rest precariously on his face. A throbbing pain starting from the base of his neck is radiating up to his temples. He's typing with one hand, and he keeps pressing the space bar on accident because of his thumb cast. There's an itch in his leg that he can't reach or get. The sheets are a bit too scratchy. The bed is creaking with every shift. God, he wants to take off his casts.

He starts typing again, gritting his teeth.

Third, I would like to address rumors regarding my sexuality. While it is unfortunate that somebody would invade the privacy of me and my friend, what's out there is already out there, and I have no interest in denying that fact. It is true that I'm

Shane blinks. He backspaces.

It is not true that I'm

Okay. He takes a shuddering breath. Okay.

It is true that I'm gay.

He taps his fingers and frowns. Why is he even addressing this part anyway? He doesn't even need to acknowledge this—it'd be easier for everybody, now that he thinks about it. Let it fizzle out, drowned by the news that he's awake and alive. He deletes most of the statement and only leaves it up to third paragraph, then deletes the second—why would he address the speculation that he tried to, well—no, is that important? He brings it back, deletes it again. He opens another window and starts a new page.

Hello. This is Shane Hollander. Firstly, I'd like to thank everyone who

He takes his glasses off. They squeeze his temples a bit too tight. He runs a hand across the bandage wrapped around his head and is reminded of how restricting it feels and scowls.

I guess I'm gay?

Hello. This is Shane Hollander. Yes, I'm gay.

Hello. This is Shane Hollander. I'd like to thank everyone

He deletes everything.

It's almost funny. He would laugh if it wasn't a statement going out to the public, binding him to a label that is not seen as just a part of him but the entirety of him. If it wasn't going to most likely make him lose all the respect he's built up as captain, as a star player, as a prodigy.

Would Montreal drop him? He doesn't think they would be outright about it even if they wanted to, but he damn well knows his team wouldn't respect him anymore. Every single homophobic joke, remark, slur thrown around—they weren't meant in light-hearted jest. That shit was real. It was real and targeted and pointed, and they were all unknowingly pointed at Shane. At Ilya. At others like them.

Hello. This is Shane Hollander. I hate

He closes the screen.

Ilya enters the room looking pissed off at the same moment.

"Are you okay?" Shane asks, frustration fizzling into worry. He holds his hand out and Ilya rushes forward to take it—it's such a subconsciously sweet act that Ilya does whenever Shane holds his hand out; Ilya always starts to walk faster—before settling on the chair next to Shane's bed. Ilya nods as he dips his head forward to rest it gingerly on Shane's arm.

"What's wrong?" Shane murmurs. He wishes his other arm wasn't in a cast; he wants to run his fingers through Ilya's hair and stroke his back.

"Stupid fucking teammate want me in Boston for birthday," Ilya says, voice muffled.

Oh.

"Whose birthday?"

“Carmichael.”

“You two close?”

“Uh, yes. We are teammates, Hollander.”

Shane feels his lips quirk up. “Yeah, obviously. That’s not what I’m asking, asshole.” He pulls his hand away from Ilya to get him to raise his head—it works—and flicks his nose. Ilya scrunches his face and pretends to bite Shane’s finger. He laughs lightly, watches as Ilya’s tight expression lighten as well.

The moment passes. Shane looks at Ilya who looks at him. His handsome boyfriend, so loving and so kind, who has been in this hospital, in Montreal, for the past week. Who has been unable to do anything or see anybody because of Shane—stuck in place, joining Shane in wading in this weird purgatory of nothingness he feels like he’s trapped in. He feels a tug of guilt in his stomach.

Why does Ilya need his life to be put on hold just because Shane’s is? This whole situation isn’t Ilya’s fault. It’s because Shane is a pussy.

He glances at the laptop, where he can’t even write that he’s gay in a pre-written statement *draft* without feeling his heart rate pick up.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“You should go, Ilya,” Shane says softly.

Please don’t go. Shane pushes the thought away.

Ilya stares at him—his eyes do that…thing, where his eyes dart back-and-forth across Shane’s face, looking for something, thinking about something. Shane tries his best to look neutral.

“You want me to?” Ilya asks.

Fuck no, Shane doesn’t want him to. His chest tightens at the thought alone, of Shane recovering, putting out statement after statement, being discharged, being unable to do anything until he’s well enough to start physical therapy, tackling what it means if he can’t recover enough or in time, how the Metros and his teammates will react to his being gay, how he’ll navigate anything at all—without Ilya next to him. Without Ilya stroking his cheek, kissing the corner of his lips, holding him gingerly and carefully, smiling and loving him right next to him.

But fuck it, that’s selfish. Ilya deserves to enjoy the time of his life. He’s still young—he’ll be a free agent in just a matter of weeks. He can do whatever he wants, and he should be able to without being tied down with Shane who can’t skate, can’t walk, can’t even face his own sexuality without feeling like a scared little boy.

“You shouldn’t have to put your life on hold because of me,” Shane responds after what he knows is an unnaturally prolonged silence.

“Is not on hold. Not even season, no? I would be spending time with you right now even if nothing happened.” Ilya takes Shane’s hand. He squeezes lightly and bores his eyes into Shane’s, and Jesus. Ilya’s eyes are always so bright and direct—it’s like he’s looking straight into Shane’s brain, piercing his very being. He has to glance away to collect himself before managing to meet them again.

“Yeah, but you’re missing time to spend with friends, and…” His head still hurts a bit. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“Are you in pain?” Ilya asks, leaning forward in concern.

“No, no. Just a headache. From looking at the screen. I shouldn’t be doing that.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” Ilya reaches forward and rubs Shane’s temples, soft circles that loosen the strain. Shane melts into his hands. “Bad Shane. You shouldn’t be doing that. Is big no-no. Doctor is going to, what, give you spanking or something?”

Shane feels his nose twitch. “Ugh. Gross. Shut up.”

Ilya laughs. Shane opens his eyes to catch the laugh—he never wants to miss them. Ilya’s face lights up with it, the morning sun, a blooming flower, all of the poetic stuff Shane used to not understand. He leans towards Ilya and gets rewarded with a sweet, chaste kiss.

“I do not need to go,” Ilya says, softer and quieter, face close to Shane’s. His eyes rake over him and he strokes Shane’s cheek with a thumb. “I like being here with you. Any time with you is good to me. I’m not missing anything.”

“People are going to wonder.” People *are* wondering, most likely. Where is Ilya? Why has his disappearance matched Shane’s accident? Has Ilya been spotted in Montreal? If the team speculates? Shane doesn’t know if he’s okay with that—he doesn’t know anything, really. He’s completely out of his depth.

He tries to be logical. So what if he comes out as gay? Cat’s already out of the bag. The damage has not only been done but has torn through Shane’s name already. So his team won’t respect him. Okay, they already didn’t in the beginning because of his race, what makes this so different? (Everything’s fucking different. This is different. He’s built up that respect by being perfect; this is a sledgehammer to his carefully maintained image.) No, but maybe he could utilize it instead? Make it a benefit to his career?

He can almost hear his mom talk about it: *This would be a great opportunity for brands willing to take the leap to be trailblazers in representation. The golden boy of hockey is gay? June is just waiting for them to capitalize on. The pride collection would be something for the books. Besides, the Metros can champion themselves as the most progressive and forward-thinking team in the NHL. I mean, come on, it’s Captain Shane Hollander we’re talking about, not—*

“Shane?” Ilya pats Shane’s cheek. He blinks out of whatever train of thought he hopped onto without realizing.

There's a mild look of concern that lingers on Ilya's face ever since Shane woke up. It's mellowed out, with the crease between his brows and downward furl of his lips softening enough to not be noticeable by the common eye, but Shane is not common. He doesn't know what the look means exactly, but he knows Ilya. He knows Ilya like he knows the sky is blue—well, the sky isn't blue sometimes, but that's just weather phenomenon, and—he's losing his train of thought again.

Shane closes his eyes and leans against Ilya's warm palm. Shane's always tired, and Ilya's always concerned.

And Shane hasn't made a statement yet. And he knows that once he does, that'll be it.

He thinks about never playing hockey again, for one reason or another.

"Sorry," Shane murmurs. "Just tired."

"Do not be sorry."

He is, though. For being cowardly. For not being able to face reality. For not being able to just *say it*, to say it and confirm it and deal with the fallout. He'd said he would to himself, hadn't he? His hypocrisy makes him feel a guilt that churns, starts to boil. It's extended to Ilya. Ilya, who has stayed with him and will stay with him throughout this whole thing, patient and kind and loving and concerned. Ilya, risking his own reputation and career by being with Shane and staying with him.

Risking his reputation. Shane doesn't know how Ilya feels about that. He knows he had to keep it a secret because of Russia, but Ilya has expressed so openly that he doesn't want to go back and has no plan to. Would it not matter, then? Does Ilya agonize about being found out ("found out," like their relationship is something bad, something disgusting—Shane hates himself for thinking about it that way) like Shane does? Or is this just Shane being a pussy again?

Shane imagines an announcement that both confirms his sexuality and also his relationship to Ilya. He thinks about their image, their branding, their media appearance, their history. The NHL. The remarks from locker room talks. The comments. How their history will be rewritten. The world.

It scares him so much it takes his breath away. He can't do anything about that fear right now; it feels like it would consume him and make him do things he'd regret.

(*Like falling off a building*, he reminds himself. He doesn't say that.)

So he just says, "I'm sorry," again. And Ilya looks at him with concern, with confusion. With unbridled affection that Shane apparently wants to keep hidden from the world.

"For what?"

"Just…I am."

"Do not be."

But he is. He is. He is. He is. It makes him sick.

-

Shane Hollander @official_hollander

Hello. This is Shane Hollander. You might have already heard that I am well on the road to recovery, and I wanted to confirm this fact. I'm awake, I'm lucid, and I'm recovering.

I'd like to thank everyone who has been supporting me throughout this time. Thank you to all the medical staff who helped me every step of the way. Thank you to my family, friends, and team for being by my side. And thank you to all my fans; your love means more than you will ever know.

I am grateful to say that I've recovered enough to be taking the next steps towards physical therapy. We are optimistic that with time, I'll be able to get back out on the ice. I'll be working hard to give you all more games, more wins, and more trophies. Thank you to the Metros for being the best team I could have ever wished for during this new journey I'm embarking on.

I hope to come back with good news. Thank you all again.

- Shane

NHL UPDATES @stayupdatednhl

Reposted @official_hollander Shane Hollander released a statement confirming that he's awake and preparing to undergo physical therapy.

Montreal Metros @NHLMetros

Reposted @official_hollander Unbelievably proud of our captain! We're with you every step of the way #HollanderStrong

NHL @NHL

Reposted @official_hollander Hockey's golden boy on the road to recovery #HollanderStrong

laraunt tilly @land.overup

OMG HES AWAKE!!!

laylaaa @laylabeanie91

I hope he isn't gay! Would be so disappointing to hear

cinderblock @cindy1201

praying he has a good recovery; i read it was a spine injury hopefully he can skate again

holly molly @tinkher_bellee

so happy to see good news…but are we really going to just brush past it?

benjamin d12 @12d_benny

Dawg how long is it gonna be until he's back on the ice?

shaniac @yiwjf091

yall better behave >:(

- **racer** @laowrace0: I'm curious if he will address the rumors.

ryan b @hockryanb

Did he try to kill himself or what?

- **UMackyU** @mackralo43: I would to if I was gay lol

Pop Updates @popnewsupdates

#ShaneHollander reportedly awake…but people are starting to ask the tricky questions [Article link]

shane lover 101 @holleratholland er

Reposted @official_hollander im just so happy he's awake oh my god

-

The last night before being discharged, Shane stares at the hospital ceiling. His hair has finally been washed after losing the bandages. The worst of the bruises are at the stage of being more visible—healing, but uglier. Purple-black-yellow-green blooms on his skin. Looks like mold. He feels ugly.

It isn't in a—not like an attractiveness thing. He just feels ugly. He doesn't know how else to put it. Everything feels wrong. The better he gets, the worse he feels, and he knows it's because he's more aware of what's lacking now. He's lost a lot of muscle, and his head hurts way too easily. The casts aren't like ridiculous cylinder blocks around his body now, but they're still strapping him into his own body in a way that makes him feel a little bit insane.

He hasn't had the proper amount of protein he needs. His diet is all off. He was craving high-caloric junk food and sweets before, more delirious than really thinking, but now all he can think about is how much sugar he's ingested with little to no movement. He licks his teeth and knows they're clean—he *knows*—but still feels like they're a bit dirty. God. He hasn't worked out in a while. His legs look skinnier than before, atrophying, and he knows that they are because he's been looking at them every day.

One good thing: He can still shuffle his legs, just a bit, a tiny bit more than he could when he first woke up for real. He's been doing non-strenuous exercises that he can manage, and it seems to be helping somewhat. It's a good sign.

One bad thing: There are too many bad things, he can't really keep track of all of them right now.

One worst thing: Ilya is still with him, sacrificing his own time to exercise, train, hang out with friends and teams, and relax. He's instead stuck taking care of Shane.

He doesn't want to cry, so he doesn't. He just stares at the ceiling and silently wishes that he hadn't drank that day, hadn't checked his phone, hadn't joked around like that in public, hadn't hung out with Rose. No, that's unfair to Rose. This was entirely his fault for not being careful.

His fault. *His* stupid fucking fault, all because his dumb ass couldn't be careful like he always, *always* is in public. Fuck him. He got too comfortable with himself (too comfortable being loved, being himself) and it landed him here, staring at the hospital ceiling, skin crawling with maggots that are composed entirely of a guilt that chews through him.

He knows it's an illogical route to take. Wrong conclusions. Doesn't matter. He still feels it all.

Ilya shifts in his sleep. Shane blinks, looks over.

Ilya sleeps with his hospital-given cot—rickety and old, so uncomfortable—pushed right up next to Shane's bed. His hand is on Shane's chest and resting across his heart. His breathing is steady, calming, grounding, and his lips twitch like he's mouthing something.

His beautiful Ilya. He looks almost boyish in his sleep, without the mellowed concern that still, *still* is present whenever he looks at Shane. It makes him feel loved. It makes him feel gross. Shane reaches out with his good hand, the cast much more compact now, and carefully brushes Ilya's mole, his lips, before pulling it away.

He loves him. Shane loves Ilya so much it makes his chest ache, and it's not his ribs. No, that's all just emotion, just the chemicals pumping. He loves him. He doesn't know what to do with himself. Will Ilya stay with Shane even if he can't skate again?

He asks himself that every day. Every day. It's such a stupid thought to have but he can't help it. Will Ilya even like him? Shane's boring to begin with; what is he without hockey? Ilya says none of that matters as long as he has Shane, but how true is that? How true is anybody in this world? People lie all the time to make other people feel better. Shane's made aware of that too acutely throughout his life.

God. All of the groundbreaking progress of his trust in Ilya's love and trust in his own future regresses as he recovers. It's not fair to Ilya and not fair to his parents and not fair to himself to think that way.

Not fair.

He feels his face twist. Shit, no, no—he doesn't want to cry. The molten lava pushes against his throat. Needles prick his eyes. *Stop, please*, he thinks.

He tries to breathe quietly and deeply, instead produces a shaky hiccup. He wants to throw something. Why is he crying? He can't control it, like he can't control anything about his private life, can't control his image, his body. His body betrays him again, like his legs are betraying him, like his mind is betraying him, like the world betrayed him. Like how his efforts, everything he's poured into hockey, betrayed him.

Everything he's ever worked for down the drain, all because somebody recorded him joking about being gay. How fucking dumb is that? How stupid? It should be trivial, it shouldn't matter, but it does. It matters so fucking much he knows it's going to topple his career. It doesn't matter if he recovers his ability to skate within a blink of an eye—nothing's going to matter anymore.

And even if he does recover, he's not going to be as good as he was. Even if he gets back to top-league status, it's going to take a while, and by then, new prodigies—white, straight, not riddled with trauma and issues—will emerge to replace him. Who is going to wait for him? How long is it going to take?

He presses his hand over his mouth and tries not to cry too loud. Ilya's *right there*, finally sleeping after a long day of doing shit to make Shane comfortable. He doesn't want to wake Ilya.

That thought just makes the tears come faster. He squeezes his eyes shut and turns his head away to try and throw the sound away. He wishes the sobs making his shoulders jerk would pour out of his eyes, his nose, his ears, melt away into the covers and sink into the ground (into the asphalt) and never return.

God. This is so fucking stupid. This is so fucking stupid. This is—

"Shane," Ilya whispers. His warm hand moves to gently tap at his stubbled chin.

Here's the script Shane should follow.

- He should say, "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."
- Ilya should say, "You are crying."
- Shane should say, "Sorry, nightmare."
- Ilya should say, "Is okay. Just a dream, da?"
- Shane should respond, "Yeah. It's okay—just, you know."
- Ilya should shift to carefully arrange themselves so they're as close as they can get, and Ilya should either rub his chest or smooth his hair as Shane pretends the nightmare (his life, everything right now) is subsiding. Then they both should fall asleep and never talk about it again.

He's ready. He swallows hard to open his mouth. "Sorry, I—"

"It's okay to cry," Ilya says before Shane can finish his sentence.

Ilya shuffles closer, close enough where his hair tickles Shane's temple and chest presses lightly against Shane's good side. His hand doesn't pull Shane to look at him—it just stays on Shane's chin, stroking, feather-light, feather soft. "I did that a lot when you were asleep, and before, lot of times throughout life. Mama cried too, a lot. Is okay."

Shane snaps his mouth shut. He can feel his lips wobbling. He should say something.

"Shit sucks ass," Ilya says, and Shane chokes out a laugh that just bleeds into a loud sob, so loud and sharp it makes Shane flinch. He presses his hands against his mouth, hard, but feels Ilya's fingers gently wrap around it and lightly tug. "Not fair to you. This is shit situation, and you are hurt. Is okay to cry."

"Not really," Shane tries to say, because it isn't. It really isn't. He's not a child anymore. He can handle this logically, rationally, and not be so emotional. He's grown enough to be doing that. Bad things happen to people all the time. He's…there's really—

"I cry all the fucking time, Hollander," Ilya says, and he presses a kiss to Shane's wet cheek, lets go of Shane's hand to cup his other cheek and apply enough pressure to suggest he turn his face. "I cried in front of you already. You're the one who let me know is okay." He kisses his cheek again.

"It's just me," Ilya adds, impossibly soft. "Just me. You can cry. Is okay. Only I know this, like only you knew about my family situation, okay? We keep secrets together."

He pulls again. Shane finally acquiesces. He turns his head, just a bit. His throat burns from trying and failing to hold back the sobs, and his chest is heaving. He can't see clearly from the tears, but he doesn't need to see to know Ilya is looking at him with that mellow concern—it's love, that's what it is. It's fucking love. It's just another form of love that Ilya gives him so graciously without expecting anything in return. Ilya's looking at him with love and Shane doesn't know what to do with it because it's so intense, sometimes, the way Ilya looks at him. And it's only intense because it's what Shane feels; it's intense because it's a mirror.

"What if I can't?" Shane cries. He doesn't know exactly what he's referring to. A lot of things. Nothing at all. He's being loud, but he doesn't register that he is directly. "What if—fuck, Ilya. I don't…"

"Then we figure it out together," Ilya says resolutely. He presses his face to Shane's, despite the gross tears and snot and spit Shane has to be releasing. "Like I say before."

"What if we can't?"

"We will. We will."

"I can't."

"I am with you."

"What if you aren't?" *What if you leave? What if I can't do the things that made you love me? What if I'm nothing like I was before? What if I change too much and you can't recognize*

me? What if you can't recognize me now?

"I will *always* be with you." Shane feels Ilya catch his tears (he always catches Shane) and wipe them away, away, away, his lips pressing kisses onto his face. "Always. *Navsegda.* My Shane."

"I'm scared." An admission that rips itself out from Shane without his permission. It's too much, too vulnerable, too real, too raw. He wants to grab the words and take it back. But Ilya catches it, like he catches everything, and holds it.

"Me, too," Ilya says, "I'm scared too. But I'm not so scared anymore because I know you are going to be here, you know?"

Shane dips his head in agreement, still crying, still unseeing. He loves Ilya so much it hurts him, but it doesn't scare him—Ilya's right. He imagines Ilya staying by his side, forever, despite it all. Despite it all. Maybe in spite of it all—maybe that's the kind of love they share now.

"I can't give you anything anymore," Shane rasps. The sobs, from exertion and tiredness, soften. He feels almost dizzy. "There's nothing I can give you. What can I give you now? What do I give you?"

Ilya pulls his head away. Ilya rubs the tears from Shane's eyes and he opens them after, sees Ilya's face better. He watches Ilya's blue eyes search his face. He looks perplexed and confused, like Shane has spoken in a language he doesn't understand. His hands don't stop wiping away Shane's despair.

"You do not need to *give* me," Ilya says. "You—Shane. Shane, you are everything to me. I don't need fucking anything—*Mne nuzhen tol'ko ty*." He kisses Shane again and it lingers. Shane cries into Ilya's lips and he drinks it all in—shares it. He pulls back.

"I don't need anything else, you understand? Only you. Only ever you. Fuck hockey, fuck stupid NHL, nothing else—*tol'ko ty*. Just you."

Just you. Ilya stares at Shane and Shane stares at Ilya, and Shane thinks that he loves Ilya more than he can ever love anything else. He loves Ilya. He doesn't want Ilya to ever leave. He doesn't want Ilya to leave.

He wants Ilya to stay with him forever.

Forever, a scary notion. Something so abstract and big. Shane has never liked using the word in a literal sense—it always scared him, like a lot of things scared him. "Forever" could mean anything to anybody. It was fickle with how unquantifiable it was. It could shift and change, differ from context to context, highly volatile but too hopeful. He never liked the word. But with Ilya—

It isn't too scary.

He wants Ilya to stay with him forever.

Forever and ever and ever, into the future, throughout his life, beyond it.

So he says, “Stay with me.”

Ilya nods almost frantically. There are tears in his eyes, too, and look at them both crying. Shane’s abruptly reminded of the first time Ilya said he loved Shane, and the first time Shane said it back. It was kind of like this.

“Forever, please,” Shane adds. He feels pathetic, but Ilya nods and kisses him again like it’s the best thing Shane’s ever said. So Shane kisses back and whispers, “Don’t ever leave.”

Ilya nods. “Okay. Okay. I will never. You do not leave me, either. Never.”

“Okay.”

“Is okay to cry, okay? Okay to be sad. I am sad, too. We can be sad together. We can be happy together, too. I am happy with you. My Shane.”

“Okay. Me too.”

“I love you,” Ilya says into his skin.

“I love you, too.”

“We will figure it out.”

“Okay.”

“Is okay.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“Marry me.” It slips out of Shane easily. He says it like he’s breathing.

Ilya’s mouth hangs open.

For a moment, it’s completely silent aside from Shane’s heaving breaths. They stare at each other in the dark room. Ilya looks at Shane like he’s hung every single star in the night sky, like he’s placed every grain of sand on the beaches. Like he’s the only person in the world to exist. Like he’s created the heavens and the earth.

His hand has stilled completely.

For a faltering, anxiety-filled split-second, Shane feels fear. Shit. Was that too sudden? Too fast? Too presumptuous? “I mean—”

“Yes,” Ilya rushes.

Time starts ticking forward again.

He sounds scared, as if Shane will take it back. He scrambles to sit up and leans closer. He's nodding. His face crumples entirely, and Shane grabs his arm instinctively.

Ilya continues to nod. "Yes. Yes. I will fucking marry you. I will do that. We will be married, please. I will marry you. Please marry me."

Every single "yes" wedges into Shane's ribcage and burrows deep, carves out a home in the shape of Ilya's name and face and voice and smell and love. His crying hasn't completely stopped but he feels his lips curl up and *yes*, *yes*, *yes*, Ilya said yes like it was obvious, like it was a fact that Ilya did want to marry Shane and it *is* a fact. He wants to stay with Shane forever. He wants to set it into stone, into a legal bind, into a symbolic forever, into a declaration—maybe one day a public one—concrete and solid stone, stronger than asphalt will ever be, and be married to Shane.

And Shane wants that, too. He wants it so bad it takes his breath away. Shane reaches out for Ilya, eyes wide, face still wet, and Ilya comes to him like a bee to a flower.

"Yes," Shane says, too, gasping, and now he's crying again for a different reason and it feels cathartic. It feels like he's washing himself. Is this why people lean on religion? The whole idea of being reborn—he gets it, a little. Baptized. Ilya folds in him but keeps his head up, stares at Shane, crying his own mess, as Shane says, "Yes. Marry me. Let's get married. I love you. I love you so fucking much. Please stay with me forever. I'll stay, too. I'll stay."

"Okay," Ilya whispers. "Okay. Okay. Yes. *Ya tebya lyublyu*. Okay."

"*Ya tebya lyublyu*," Shane says back as earnestly as he can. His pronunciation still sucks but Ilya just looks more enamored, so he counts it as a win. It's always a win with Ilya around. Every single triumph shared with him. Every single hardship, too, but together, they can figure it out.

They kiss. Their tears meld into one. Shane doesn't know where he begins and Ilya ends. He wishes that he could be like this forever, interlinked with Ilya, indiscernible. One with him in every single way that matters. Together. Scary future be damned—if he has this, if he has Ilya, he'll deal with it. He'll figure it out.

They'll figure it out.

& ILYA

Beautiful, sunny day outside. The weather's warm as can be. Somebody recognizes Ilya when he is buying groceries.

Ilya doesn't think much of it in the immediate sense—there's a gasp, a young boy who asks if he's Ilya. Ilya says yes, takes a picture, leaves.

Then it dawns on him that he is in Montreal. Has been, for a bit. He stops walking briefly, puzzling over this. He's gotten so comfortable here that he's stopped thinking about it. It's been a few weeks since Shane was discharged—they're staying together (*together,* a thrilling, wonderful word) in a property Shane bought a few years ago, close to the hospital and rehab. His Mr. Real Estate.

They didn't go back to the old apartment in the end. Shane had tried, once, with Ilya. Ilya had pushed Shane's wheelchair into the living room with a missing coffee table, and after a few moments of quiet contemplation, Shane had asked to leave with a shaky voice. Ilya was quick to push Shane out.

All the memories that had been built with the dust in that apartment—good and bad—were heavy with a sheen of regret. They both knew without saying that they could build new memories while they did their best to grapple with what they had left there in the apartment that night.

Maybe they'd come back one day and be able to recall them with ease. Maybe it'd be like an old scrapbook to flip back on. For now, though, that was on hold.

"I don't like looking at the window," Shane had said after they got back in the car. "Sorry. That's stupid."

"Fuck no, it is not stupid," Ilya replied immediately.

A pause. Then Shane, tapping his fingers on his lap, said, "I have another place—I was, uh. I was planning on renting it out, but—"

"Then we stay there."

"You're staying?"

Ilya, in the middle of starting the car, had stopped to stare at Shane. "Shane."

"What?"

"We are getting married, no? I want to stay with you while you are fucking recovering."

Shane had smiled then, a loose kind of smile that made Ilya's inside feel all gooey. "Okay," he said softly, leaning back.

The smile had lasted the entire ride. That was the last time they saw the apartment, though the missing coffee table, cracked and stained with Shane's blood, and the couch, once holding Shane's shaking body after the video leak, and the asphalt below the low balcony rails, would be with them for a long, long time. Long past Shane's recovery.

That was that.

And Ilya's been here for about a month now.

All the while, Shane has suggested Ilya go back multiple times. He's a free agent. There will be people who want to talk to him. He has business to take care of. His teammates probably miss him. He has friends back in Boston—did Ilya text Svetlana? Is his property being taken care of? Is he okay with people asking him hard questions? It would be easier if he went back. Has he talked to his teammates yet? Who is he signing with? Has he discussed that?

"I want to be closer to you," Ilya had said, shrugging over a bowl of rabbit food (it's *salad*, Shane said), "I have decided already. I sign with Ottawa."

Shane had been sitting on the couch, reclining, legs propped up gently onto Ilya's lap. He'd been looking up at the ceiling to rest his eyes, but they snapped over to Ilya's so fast with so much shock it had Ilya's eyebrows flying up to his hairline.

"Ottawa?" Shane said it with such disbelief, bordering on disdain, that it made Ilya bellow with laughter. "What—Ottawa? Ilya, there are so many other—"

"You are the one who suggested Ottawa before!" Ilya exclaimed, pointing his fork at Shane. "Why are you acting like this is breaking news?"

"I—it was like, one team out of four others I suggested! Ilya."

"Shane. It is close to Montreal, close to your parents, to you and the mansion—"

"It's a cottage—"

"—and whatever. Is already decided. I am becoming Centaur."

"A *Centaur*—Ilya…"

"Blah blah, I cannot hear you, somebody is covering my ears."

"You're so childish."

"I am eating rabbit food; chewing too loud, oh sorry, are you saying something?"

"Fuck off. Ilya, you're in your prime—listen." Shane had shifted, grimacing while sitting up, and grabbed Ilya's wrist before Ilya could stop Shane from moving. He raked over Ilya's face with searching eyes. "You don't need to give up your career for me. I'm serious. You can… there are so many other good teams that would be scrambling for you. You'd still get that passport. You'd still be in Canada. You don't…"

“Canada is fucking huge, Hollander.” Ilya took Shane’s hand in his own and squeezed, smiling softly. Because of course Shane was worried about Ilya’s career, his prospects.

Shane worries about Ilya all the time, like Ilya worries about him, and the concern on Shane’s face always warms him because it’s just for *him,* for Ilya, and nobody else.

“I know that.”

“Playing hockey is fun to me. Is career. I’m good at it. I know this. But,” and Ilya used both his hands to squeeze Shane’s, “You are more important to me than hockey, okay?”

Shane blinked at him, and his pretty freckles flushed, and Ilya saw his eyes started to well. His beautiful Shane. Ilya smiled like an idiot—always does with Shane. God, he is so sappy—Shane makes him like that, become all sappy and soft and nice.

“*Ty vsegda byl*,” he heard Mama say from somewhere behind him.

Ilya rubbed Shane’s knee. “Besides. I don’t care if I play in shit fuck team. What, I hog all the money and become star player there? I will make Ottawa win cups and become legend.”

“Very egotistical, Mr. Rozanov.” Shane was looking at Ilya with so much love, though, humored affection.

“I am good enough to carry entire fucking team. I don’t need to be in Boston for that.”

“Fuck off.”

“What? You know this true.”

“You’re full of it.”

Ilya had gasped for dramatics but ended up choking on a stray piece of lettuce. The conversation had ended with Shane slapping his back with far too much strength for someone who was in recovery and laughing, laughing, a chiming and full sound that Ilya wanted to hear forever. He’d make Shane laugh like that always, to the best of his abilities.

And that had been that.

And he’d called Marlow, explained that he was staying in Montreal for longer, and told him to tell the rest of the team that Ilya was in Russia or something. Ilya did that a lot anyway—he’d go to Russia, or travel, or whatever. His team wasn’t going to miss him as much as Shane thought they would, as much as Ilya had originally assumed. Nothing was wrong.

And Ilya’s been here for about a month now.

And he was spotted. In Montreal. And confirmed with a picture.

He loads the groceries into the trunk—Shane’s car, really ugly but practical, yes, Ilya can admit—and turns on the radio. Listens to some music he thinks is kind of boring, kind of bland, before pulling up to the hospital where Shane will be pushed out from a wheelchair.

Ilya and Shane's parents had went with him for the first few sessions. Shane had requested they didn't come after a few, though.

"Let me do this, please," Shane had said. "It's just…I want to do it without…you know."

Ilya didn't really know, didn't really understand, but Shane had asked. So he said yes, okay, and trusted Shane's decision. But as a compromise, he came to pick Shane up.

If he really thinks about it, it was a miracle that nobody had recognized Ilya or took pictures of him up until this point. Almost every day, he got out of the car to help Shane get in, folded up the wheelchair to put it in the trunk, usually said hi to the person who had accompanied Shane out. He was in public a lot, and his disguises had shrunk until it was usually down to just a hat or sunglasses.

If he *really* thinks about it, Shane hadn't really fretted over Ilya being caught, either. He'd never told Ilya to wear that hat, or sunglasses, or to stay in the car, or anything at all. He'd just smile and say, sincerely, "Thank you."

Huh.

Ilya gets out of the car when he sees Shane exit the doors.

Beautiful Shane. Ilya can tell he had been sweating, but he still had a blanket covering him. He gets cold really easily these days, his Shane. Even in the summer warmth. It's okay—Ilya can warm him. He stands by the car and leans against it, watches silently until they get closer.

Shane has a blank but calm expression on his face. Not a lot of people out. Not enough to scare Shane, anyway—they use the back entrance rather than the front doors. He sees Shane blink rapidly before turning his head, slightly, then moving it back. Ilya knows he's tired and fighting sleep. The thought that he can read Shane like this, so openly and easily, thrills him. He will help Shane into bed and nap with him once they get home, then.

"*On tebya ishchet*," his mama says. She's in the car, head resting against the window rolled down.

Ilya is, too. Always. Anywhere.

He walks briskly to meet him midway. He says hello and thank you to the worker who pushed Shane out—they know each other at this point—then takes the handles.

Pushing Shane's wheelchair is intimate. It feels like trust. Shane letting Ilya help him like this, so close to him, vulnerable.

"Hey, you," Shane says, looking up.

"Hi," Ilya responds. Leans down quickly to kiss him before Shane can object. Then, a bit quieter, "Somebody recognized me. Took picture. I didn't think about it." Then, haltingly and questioningly, "I'm sorry."

Shane doesn't say anything as Ilya opens the car door, supports him as he pulls himself into the car. Ilya doesn't have to do much to help him into the car these days—most of the work is done by Shane. He's getting stronger by the day, recovering his strength again. His legs are still in progress with recovery, but this is okay. It really is. Shane agrees with Ilya in his quiet way of his. Most nights aren't interrupted by sudden bouts of frustration or tears from Shane anymore, and Ilya doesn't dream about Shane on the balcony as much. Things are getting better.

They are getting better.

Ilya puts the wheelchair in the trunk and shuts it. His hands linger. He stares at the metal beneath his palms before tapping it once, then finally getting into the driver's seat. He doesn't look at Shane.

He starts the engine. He turns the radio down to the level Shane finds enjoyable and changes the channel to a classic one, so Shane doesn't feel irritated by the loud noises of pop while he dozes. He adjusts the rearview mirror, puts a hand on the stick, and pulls out of the driveway to head back home (and it is home now, the apartment, the cottage; wherever Shane is means home now, and isn't that thrilling?) in silence.

He doesn't know why he isn't looking at Shane, but he also knows the silence is there for a reason. He feels anxious, almost. Nervous.

Does Shane care if their relationship is revealed to the public? He didn't really care about Ilya picking him up or being in public with him. But that doesn't mean he's okay with their relationship being so open and out there. He's already been outed once against his will, and he's just now coming to terms with that. He hasn't outright said it, but everyone knows it. His silence about the subject is an answer to all of the invasive questions being asked in its own right, like how this silence is saying something as well.

What is it saying, though? Ilya feels his anxiety grow into a prickling and nagging fear. God. Did he just out Shane again? Is that what he just did? What if Shane *wasn't* okay with it, and *did* care, and Ilya was just reading his lack of cautiousness wrong? Shane's preoccupied by literally learning to walk again—he probably didn't even have the mental capacity to be caring about that. The caution was supposed to be Ilya's responsibility, not Shane.

He thinks about the video. It feels like forever ago that it happened, but it's never far from his mind. He thinks about Shane being outed, the fall, the days of stomach-curdling fear waiting for Shane to wake.

He grips the stick, hard. Knuckles whitening. He thinks about the balcony. He sees Shane there, leaning against it, staring down at the asphalt.

He feels Shane's hand cover his and smooth over his fingers.

Ilya realizes he's been holding his breath. He breathes deeply. Releases a tension he hasn't noticed building.

"I think," Shane begins. He pauses, then clears his throat.

Ilya swallows.

“I think it’s crazy that you hadn’t been recognized yet,” Shane continues.

“Yes.”

“And I think that it’s okay that you were. To me.”

Oh.

Ilya takes in another deep breath. It feels easier.

“I don’t know. Are you—are you okay with that?” Shane asks. Ilya glances over at Shane and sees he’s looking at Ilya with concern so pure and sweet it makes him falter.

Shane is worried about *Ilya*? About their relationship being public? After all of this? He’s still worried about Ilya, and Ilya’s reputation, and his career? Over Shane, who is arguably the one dealing with more?

“It’s…people know that I’m gay. Not a secret anymore.” Shane shrugs. “I don’t know. I know I haven’t addressed it publicly, but—”

“You do not need to do that.”

“—I know. But yeah. People know I’m gay. I’m also trying to learn to walk again because I fell off a building. I don’t know what I’m trying to say.” Shane rubs his eyes and leans back, but his beautiful, honeyed eyes don’t stay away from Ilya’s for too long. “I’ve done enough already for career-ending things. I don’t…I think people knowing I’m with you isn’t—ugh. You get it though, right? Am I making any sense?”

Yes. Ilya thinks so. He nods. Comparatively speaking, maybe, is what Shane is trying to say. That with everything that has happened so far, their relationship wouldn’t be anything new or surprising—okay, maybe still new and surprising, but it would just be part of the growing revelations the world is having already, not an entirely new thing that would split Shane’s pristine image in half. Ilya blinks, mind racing, then nods again, because—

Because letting the world know that Ilya is with Shane, loving him, taking care of him as Shane takes care of him, is such a blindingly beautiful thought that takes Ilya off guard. He’s never really dwelled on it for long—he’s thought about it, of course, wanted to, yes, but never really considered it a reality to be happening for a while. But he’d wanted it. God, he’d wanted it. He’d wanted to hold Shane in public freely, kiss him without fear. Wanted the whole world to know he loved Shane Hollander so, so much.

And now it might happen. And Shane is okay with it happening now, not when he is retired. He is okay with that.

“You are okay with this?” Ilya asks, just to make sure. To double check. Because he doesn’t want Shane to go through what he went through again. It might turn the hockey world upside down again, and it likely will. It might make people talk again, talk *more*, talk more

disgustingly, more negatively. It might make Shane's career more confusing and more scrutinized. It might make everything worse.

Shane is quiet for a bit. Ilya knows he's thinking—has that furrow of his brows. It's just the mild droning of the engine, the sound of the wheels against the road, the classical music.

"As long as you're here, yeah. I'm okay." Shane's hand squeezes. "I don't know. If me being gay wasn't enough, maybe this would be the thing to make Montreal drop me or…you know." He pauses, squeezes Ilya's hand again. "But this isn't your fault, or anything, you know that, right?"

Oh. Ilya blinks, wetting his lips.

"Yes, I think. I—"

"You were never something to hide," Shane pushes on, and that just makes Ilya fall silent again. "I wasn't…this wasn't about hiding you. I wasn't ashamed of you or our relationship. I just wasn't ready for what it meant to the public. I didn't want them looking at us like that, okay? It was a privacy thing, I think. I wasn't ashamed of us. Of you."

And Shane is calming something Ilya didn't even know he had been subconsciously mulling about. Stupidly, it makes Ilya feel tears prick in the corner of his eyes.

He knows logically Shane wasn't ashamed, but Ilya realizes he's been scared that Shane secretly was. Ilya is so proud, so amazed, to be Shane's boyfriend, his—fiancé, now. They have promised marriage to each other. They will be together. Shane loves him enough to marry him. But that was between *them*, between just Ilya and Shane. Ilya wondered if Shane would ever want to let others know. He wondered if Shane, if and when he did let others know, would be hesitant, would be scared, would downplay it. Would Shane be as happy about their relationship? Would he want to show off their love, make it known? Would he want people to know Ilya is his, as Ilya wants people to know Shane is? That they are each other's person, forever?

He thinks about forever, about what that means. He thinks about his mama and his father, about how he was so scared of a mean and ugly love like that, about how that couldn't have been love—not when he and Shane share something with the same name that is so, so different. Their love chases the sad away, doesn't reel it in. Their love is beautiful. Complicated and complex but pretty and bright and something real.

"I love you. I'm not ashamed of that." Shane continues to look at him and he's staring into Ilya's soul. "I think…I'm okay with the public knowing." Then, quieter, "I want them to know. I want to not be so scared about everything anymore."

Ilya brings Shane's hand to his lips, presses a kiss there. He glances back and forth, from the road to Shane, and feels his lips split into a grin. He can't help it.

"Okay," Ilya says.

"Okay," Shane responds.

The drive home is easy, loving, warm.

-

They confirm their relationship to the public once the picture is released. It's a mixed bag. The bigotry and hatred is loud, but the love and support—despite the shock—also pours in. They get calls from almost everybody and anybody, and for some, they explain, for others, they hang up on.

Ilya posts a selfie of him and Shane after the public reveal on Instagram.

It's one of them on the dock together, under the sunrise. Shane's head is against Ilya's shoulder, eyes halfway closed, and Ilya is resting his cheek on Shane's head. It skyrockets to the most liked post Ilya has on his page, and it's one he will cherish forever. Shane and Ilya read the comments together until Ilya turns off the phone and throws it onto the ottoman with a dramatic sigh. Shane shakes his head with a smile.

-

Ilya says goodbye to Boston and his team. He confirms his departure. They're surprisingly cordial and understanding, and, remarkably, accepting of his relationship with Shane. There are some who are awkward, most likely going to be spouting bigotry as soon as the call is over, but most of them are okay. They're good people. He knows Marlow's going to beat his ass for not telling him before.

He gets on Facetime with them, promises all of them drinks, laughs. Reminisces.

Things are getting better.

-

He signs with Ottawa. The hockey world goes insane.

-

svetlana del rey: *OTTAWA?*

Ilya: *[gif of dancing cockroach]*

svetlana del rey: *[disliked this attachment]*

-

Shane takes a few steps without any help from anyone one evening. His expression is one he wears on the ice: All poise, focus, strategy, willpower. He's calm and collected and neatly sits himself down onto the couch, his crutches across the room.

Ilya nearly knocks the table over after slamming his hand onto it on accident while raising them. Shane laughs, loud and unrestrained, boisterous and bright, as Ilya dramatically nurses

his hand. Ilya flops onto the couch and demands Shane kiss it better, to which he earns a shove, then a kiss on the hand, then mouth.

Things are getting better.

-

Ilya still gets sad sometimes. The sadness he got from Mama—he knows he got it from her—weighs him down, grapples him, fights him, like it did with her. Sometimes, it beats him and forces him to stay in bed, stuck to the covers, unable to do anything. Sometimes it is mellow enough for him to pretend it doesn't exist. Sometimes it is silent to the point Ilya forgets he has it—but it always comes back, somehow, someway. Sometimes it's triggered by something concrete, like an anniversary date, a headline, a memory, a dream, sometimes it's just random and unpredictable.

It makes it hard for him to help Shane, to be happy with him. He doesn't like letting Shane know because of it. He has so much to be happy for—it doesn't make sense the sadness is still here. But Shane has learned to read these kinds of days, where the sadness is too heavy for Ilya to do anything about it, like Ilya has learned to read when Shane is overwhelmed and shutting down quietly. And Shane doesn't point it out or make it obvious when he does read them; he just makes sure Ilya is comfortable as best as he can. Stays near him but doesn't suffocate him.

They take care of each other like that. Ilya is cared for like that. It's new, it's scary, it's wonderful, and once these kinds of days pass, it makes Ilya feel so much love in his heart he doesn't know what to do with it.

One day, when Shane comes back from physical therapy, he suggests Ilya goes to therapy himself.

"The brain is part of your body," Shane says. "There's nothing wrong with taking care of it."

"Is different," Ilya protests, because he doesn't know what that means. He doesn't know what it would mean to talk to somebody about the sadness other than Shane. It's all he has known. It came from Mama, and it is with him now. It's been with him for so long. What can talking to a stranger do to help him with it? Will just talking do anything? What will that do to help it? To manage it? He doesn't want to take medicine or anything—it still scares him, the idea of taking something like his mama did. He still sees her spit, her pale skin, her wide eyes.

"Maybe. But I get therapy, too, you know. It's just a different form."

The therapy is helping Shane, but Ilya doesn't know if it will help him. What if the sadness doesn't go away, even after the therapy? What if it stays with him forever? Will the sadness follow Ilya and weigh him down until the end? Will Shane grow tired of it, weary of it? Like father grew tired of Mama's sadness?

"You think I need therapy?" Ilya asks after a moment's silence. "I need to be fixed?"

Shane looks so offended at the question that Ilya bites his lip.

"I don't think you need to be fixed," Shane says, "Because there's nothing to fix. I just want you to be happy, okay? And if there's a way to help with that, I want you—I want us—to consider it."

Nothing to fix. Ilya stares at the ground, unsure. "But I am happy," Ilya whispers.

At that, Shane pulls Ilya to him. Ilya goes.

"I'm happy, too," Shane says. "I'm happy with you. But you know this isn't about that. I've been reading about it, you know."

"Reading about what?"

"Depression." Shane shrugs when Ilya looks up at him. He looks a little sheepish but ultimately earnest, loving, open, trusting. "It's not...it's not just being sad. It's an illness. It's like having a cold."

"Like having a cold," Ilya repeats, doubtful.

"Not in the way that, like...it just means that it isn't your fault, or it's something that's happening because of *you*, okay? Look, I suck at this. But a therapist could explain it in a way that makes sense." Then, after a long pause, "A Russian one, maybe. So you can just talk without, you know."

"So I can speak Russian."

"I want to be someone like that for you," Shane admits. "Where you can speak without having to think about it so much. But I'm not there yet. So yeah. Maybe a Russian therapist."

"You are already more than enough for me," Ilya says.

"Yeah." Shane smiles, kisses his nose. "I know. You are too. But I'm not a therapist."

Later that night, Ilya hugs Shane as close as he can to him, mindful of the braces.

“What if I do therapy, but I don’t get better?” Ilya asks quietly. He nuzzles his face into Shane’s neck and stays there. “What if the sadness is still here?”

“I’ll take care of you,” Shane replies. Calm. Assured. Matter-of-fact. “Like you take care of me.”

“This is burden I don’t want you to have.”

“We’re getting married. I want to burden things with you.”

“You should not have to.”

“You burdened yourself with me. The injury. Everything.”

“This is different.”

“It’s not, Ilya.” Shane presses a kiss to Ilya’s forehead, then brings his hand up to press against his cheek. “I love you. We share things together now, okay? I don’t care if it’s a burden. I want to shoulder that with you. That's the whole point of this. Even if it’s hard, I want to be with you. I want to struggle *with* you. Okay? I want to be part of your life. It’s not always going to be happy, and that’s okay. As long as we get through it together.”

Fucking Shane, making Ilya cry again. He nods a little, sniffles into bare skin, presses a kiss there. He feels more than sees Shane huff a small, affectionate laugh.

“Stupid Hollander. Stop making me cry.”

“It’s okay to cry.”

“Oh, so now you get to say it to me, da?”

“Yeah, cause it’s true, asshole.”

They laugh. It jostles Ilya, makes his cheek press onto the golden chain around Shane’s neck, the same one as Ilya’s. Makes the sound of the ring clink against the pendant.

Yeah.

Okay.

“I love you,” Shane says. “Nothing is going to change that. Nothing.”

Okay.

Ilya nods, curls closer. Closer. Wants to curl close enough to be absorbed by Shane.

“I love you, too." Then, "I will think about this. About therapy.”

“Alright.” Shane kisses Ilya’s forehead again. "And...and it's okay, if you don't want to, okay? That's your decision. I just want you to be as happy as you can be, because you deserve that."

Ilya presses closer. Impossibly close. He wishes their skin would fuse together.

"Okay," he whispers.

Things are getting better.

-

“I want to have a proper wedding,” Shane says during dinner one day.

Ilya puts his spoon down.

“Once I can skate again,” he adds.

“We can do that.”

Shane eyes Ilya. “By proper, I don’t mean huge. You know that, right?”

Ilya nods. He folds his hands together conspiratorially. “Yes. Of course. No big crowd, no big venue, no club, no personal DJ, no big clown party, no magic show, that kind of thing?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Okay. Maybe a mid-size venue. A DJ can be there, I guess. But no huge crowd.”

“No huge crowd.”

“No huge crowd.” Shane puts his own spoon down and points at Ilya. “No huge—Ilya, stop smiling. I’m serious. You’re not inviting random people to the wedding.”

“Okay.”

“Ilya, don’t send invites to random celebrities. No Rihanna—don’t smile. I’m fucking serious.”

“Okay!”

“Ilya.”

“Shane.”

They write a list of people they want to invite. Shane shoves Ilya when he presents Shane his list of 263 people he knows with a note in the margin allowing plus ones, alongside a tiny list of ten of Ilya’s favorite celebrities. Ilya rolls around like he got knocked over, kicking his legs in the air, and Shane grabs them and tells Ilya to shut up with a laugh.

They shrink the list down to 100, then 60, then 50, then 30. They sit side-by-side, both of Shane’s arms and hands free of casts, and bicker about whether to send an invite to Scott Hunter.

“He is old and ugly,” Ilya declares. “I don’t want old and ugly people at wedding.”

“Didn’t you admit he inspired you to come to the cottage that summer?”

“No, I never said that. You are lying.”

“Ilya. We don’t even know if he’ll come—it’s a courtesy thing.”

“What this word, ‘courtesy’? I don’t know what that mean.”

“Oh my God. Shut the fuck up, you *do*.”

Ilya does. He gets another shove. His heart swells the entire time.

& SHANE

A year passes. Then a few months. And then—

Shane steps onto the ice again.

It's a long, long journey to get there.

A lot of things happen leading up to it. Shane doesn't sign with the Metros again. He joins Ottawa, instead, with Ilya. It's a shake-up, but it's also not unexpected. His injury and absence from the ice have dropped his performance significantly—even without everything, without his being gay or his relationship to Ilya, his sloppier performance would have been drag, a slog, a dent in their high-ranking streak. Even if he did bring up his performance to be as good as he was before, it would take time. And by then, he'd be past the age people would consider his prime. There would be new prodigies, new players that could easily take Shane's place. He'd be pushed out sooner or later. He chooses to leave on his own terms.

"They are not doing good without you there right now, anyway," Ilya had pointed out. "They lose to Ottawa. Worst fucking team ever. You can do better."

"*You're* Ottawa. And I'm about to join."

"Oh, I forgot. Best fucking team ever."

When Shane first brought up joining Ottawa, Hayden had been devastated, but he understood. Even now, though Hayden doesn't say it, there's an unspoken air of relief about it. Shane knows without confirming that the team had not taken Shane's sexuality or relationship positively. He knows by the way nobody really checked in on him—not really. A message from a few of them that had been friendly with Shane, curt texts hoping he recovered well. The only ones who remained connected were just Hayden and, later, JJ. Nobody else.

It hurt for a while. Shane doesn't deny that. But it didn't surprise him.

His being out did end up toppling the career he built with Montreal. His original fears came to fruition. The respect he had built up through so much discipline and sacrifice disappeared in an instant. They had only kept him around, officially, and supported him in his recovery, because he had been gravely injured. It would be a bad look to immediately drop or turn away from an injured player.

But he doesn't really care about that anymore. Or maybe he does, but he's just found other, more important things to be happy about, to be grateful about, to base his life on.

He just wants to be on the ice again, skate again, with Ilya. He doesn't care where it is. He doesn't care how bad he is at it. For the first time, he truly, truly doesn't care.

As long as he's with Ilya, he doesn't care.

And so Shane, in the locker room, tapes his hockey stick like he used to. Puts on his gear calmly, one-by-one, counting each of them. Tightens everything the way he used to. Listens to Ilya—the captain, his handsome captain—give a speech that riles everyone up, makes them shout, slap their sticks together and on the ground, storm out. He doesn't single Shane out for the speech or act different, and Shane thanks him silently for it. Shane isn't in the mood for spotlights or attention.

He just wants to skate. His blood buzzes beneath his skin for it. It's all he can think about. He's been in rinks before this game, practicing again, but this is the first game he's back for. The headlines had been flashy and loud, the response from the crowd and public louder. He thinks about it as he makes his way, with his new team who slap his back or knock their helmets with his, to the ice.

Ilya shouts something, and the rest of the players rush onto the ice. He stays long enough to watch them go, then knocks his helmet into Shane's before gliding out onto the ice himself. And that knock is what makes Shane come fully into his body again.

He feels the cold crispness of the ice. He hears the screams, the shouts of the crowd, feels the rumbling energy of the stadium grow and swell. He hears music, loud announcements, drums. His name ringing out, the screams becoming deafening. It all falls away when he moves and pushes himself out onto solid ground.

The roar of the crowd is replaced with the rushing of blood. The solidity under Shane's skate is like the sky. He glides out into the open void and feels himself start to smile—then grin almost manically.

The match starts. And it's not the greatest Shane's played—he's rusty, even if he'd been training again before this game—and makes sloppy plays. He does things that he would never have done before, strains to make plays that he would have done with his eyes closed. But Ilya grins at him, looks fucking insane as he does, and Shane thinks that it's okay.

The press flocks him once the game is over—it's 3-2, Centaurs win—and Shane gives out measured responses he's been rehearsing in the bathroom. He lets them take their pictures. He shuts down personal questions. He goes back to the locker room and joins in on the loud cheers and celebrations.

He thinks, *Things are getting better.*

And, *They will continue to.*

Ilya puts his arms around Shane's shoulder, beaming.

Shane thinks, *I love you.*

And, *We're okay.*

Shane learns to soar again. He flies. And Ilya is with him the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

translations! (thank you thank you cloudrecess!!!)
navsegda: forever
mne nuzhen tol'ko ty: you are all that I need
tol'ko ty: only you
ya tebya lyublyu: i love you
Ty vsegda byl: you always have been
on tebya ishchet: he's looking for you
thank you so much for reading! on shane's recovery, i kind of based it on myself lmao i was also paralyzed for a while but recovered in what doctors kind of deemed miraculously fast and almost full. i still have side effects from that time of my life, but i'm completely healthy otherwise. miracles do happen (and by miracles, i mean hard work, determination, training, and the beautiful help of medical professionals and family and friends supporting you), and i think these two folks deserve miracles.

i did want to point out, once again, that a lot of interpretations on disability, recovery, mental health, marriage, etc. that shane and ilya process are what i think *they* would think. while a lot of it is infused by personal experience, it's ultimately a character study, so please do not take their words and thoughts as the pinnacle of philosophical ponderings because they are most definitely not.

this fic was so fun and honestly reminded me how much i love writing. thank you to everybody who's been supporting and following this story. i read every single comment, and though i might be late to respond/might miss some, please know i read ALL OF THEM! ALL of them, without fail. thank you endlessly. thank you for making my day, my week, my month. and thank you all for inspiring me to keep writing. love yall!

stay tuned for more hollanov. much love!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!