

Second Chances

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Second Chances

by [TylerReed](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov's life takes an unexpected turn when a deadly plane crash in 2021 takes his life, right after a fight with his long-time partner, Shane Hollander. Though instead of the afterlife, Ilya is sent back to December 2008, just before his NHL career began, on the very day that he first met Shane. He finds himself in a familiar world, with knowledge of both the future and knowledge of the man he loves and the friends he holds dear.

As Ilya navigates this new reality, he rebuilds his relationship with Shane, who is still finding his path in both hockey and his identity as a gay man. With their rivalry blossoming into a different experience than the one Ilya experienced the first time around, the two face challenges around acceptance, family pressures, and the struggles of being openly gay and lovers in the sports world. Throughout their journey, Ilya contemplates his first life, cherishes the present, and strives to alter the course of their futures (and the futures of their friends) for the better.

Or, Ilya Rozanov discovers first hand what the butterfly effect is, and how it can drastically alter the future.

Chapter 1: The Second Chance

January 2021

The game against Tampa Bay had been nothing short of a disaster. Missed shots, empty follow-throughs, and lines that had the coordination of a kindergartener.

Not that Ilya Rozanov thought it would have been any different.

They were the Ottawa Centaurs, after all. The worst team in the NHL, for as long as anyone could remember.

Despite Ilya's best attempts at routing the team to a better place, no matter where they went, bad habits and poor players couldn't be changed overnight. He felt like a failure as a Captain, unable to coordinate them better. Maybe in a few years they'd have some kind of "oomph", but that was a far ways off.

So, of course his mood was awful. How could it not be? He'd gone from leading a Stanley Cup winning team to a team that would struggle against the best Junior teams.

Didn't Shane know that?

Why did he have to pick that day, of all days, to be such a bitch to him?

Lily: *Had terrible game, you probably saw. How about we catch dinner when I land? Need to tell you all about their fuck ups.*

Jane: *How about I cook at home? I'd rather people not get the wrong idea with us at a bistro. What would you like? My treat.*

"Wrong idea?"

A flash of heat flared behind Ilya's eyes.

Lily: *What do you mean wrong idea? We have been dating for years. You're out as a gay man. I'm out as bisexual.*

Jane: *Please don't start this again. You know why we can't be dating each other in public.*

Ilya bit hard on his tongue, resisting the urge to scream in the middle of the plane. Deep down, the resentment had started to grow in his heart. Over him giving up everything so they could be closer and Shane just pushing them further apart, year after year. All out of his stupid obsession with hockey and the "perception" of strangers that neither of them had ever met before.

Tonight, his shitty mood, wasn't helping things.

Lily: *No, I don't know. This is bullshit. We can't go to dinner together now?! Why. Explain this to me. Treat me like I'm child, because I do not understand.*

Jane: *We've talked about this. It's not the right time. For either of us. Why do you have to bring this up so much? We're together. Isn't that enough? I'm out. You're out. Who has to know we're dating each other? That just makes everything so complicated. I don't want the press involved in our private lives and we don't want people thinking we're fixing games for each other.*

The glow of Ilya's phone carved harsh light across his face in the dimmed cabin. Around him, half the Ottawa roster slept in their seats, headphones in, mouths slack. The plane hummed, creating a horrible white noise that irritated him further. Ilya's jaw ached from clenching back a yell.

He read the message again. His thumbs struck the screen with a reply like he wanted to crack it.

Lily: *It's never the right time for you. When is the right time for world to know we love each other? When can I hold my boyfriend's hand in public? When can I kiss you outside the house without getting a flinch of fear? When can we be happy like Scott Hunter and Kip? Tell me. I mark on calendar. Then I stop bugging you about it.*

Three dots appeared, then disappeared, and soon appeared again. Ilya stared at them, his knee bouncing against the seat in front of him until Luca shifted and grumbled at him. He forced himself still.

Jane: *You know what's at stake. For both of us. Scott got lucky with Kip. We might not. Not everyone is chill with this stuff. Not even the Voyagers are all okay with me. They've been sending emails about "comfort levels" in showers. I don't even know if just being "out" is going to be safe for me forever and my career here.*

Ilya exhaled through his nose. He forced himself to look outside the cabin window and try to calm himself. Unfortunately, the only thing he saw was thirty thousand feet of black nothing between him and the ground. Not even the moon deigned to show itself that night. Unmoved by the pitch black darkness, Ilya huffed and started attacking his phone's messaging app again.

Lily: *I know what's at stake. I've known for a long time. I just don't care anymore. I'm tired of waiting. What is there to lose?*

Jane: *That's easy to say when you're not the captain of Montreal. I could lose everything.*

Lily: *Right. Because I have nothing to lose either. I'm the captain of Ottawa.*

Jane: *Like that's anything impressive?*

Ilya's ears, face, and chest burned. "*You motherfucker...*" he grumbled, under his breath.

Ilya only became the captain of Ottawa, the team of fucking failures, to be closer to Shane. So they wouldn't have to only see each other 3 or 4 times a year, 5 if they were lucky, and instead live just a few hours away from each other. He'd given up being the Captain of Boston, and a multi-million dollar contract to become a free agent up in the boonies. For Shane.

"*You don't even appreciate me, do you?*" Ilya spat.

The dots came rolling back in, faster than ever.

Jane: *That's not what I meant.*

Lily: *That's exactly what you meant. **Fuck you.***

He locked the phone and pressed it face-down against his thigh. The leather seat creaked as he shifted his weight. Outside, greying clouds scrolled past like dirty cotton, backlit by a moon he couldn't see. Three minutes before the next ping. He wondered how many times "Mr. Perfect" had to re-write his words before he was satisfied. He picked the phone back up.

Jane: *Can we please talk about this in person? I'll drive to Ottawa this weekend. I want to see your face when we talk about stuff like this. I don't know how to reply to you when I can't see you.*

Lily: *So we can have the same conversation we had in June, March and last December at your Parents house? So we'll go nowhere again? Waste of my time. Don't bother coming.*

Jane: *No, so we can actually talk instead of doing whatever this text chain is.*

Lily: *I feel like this is only honest conversation we've ever had.*

The plane jolted. Turbulence. Minor. Nobody stirred except the flight attendant, who grabbed the back of a headrest and held on until it passed. Ilya didn't notice any of it at all. A few people grumbled about being woken up.

Jane: *That's not fair and you know it.*

Lily: *Fair. You want to talk about fair? I sit in a different arena every night and I cannot even say your name in passing or you bitch about it. I score a winning goal and the first person I want to call is the one person I have to pretend doesn't matter to me. I gave up my whole career for you, an you called that "not impressive". You want to tell me what's fair? What's fair is that I am the only one who gave up anything for us. You just take and take and give nothing in return.*

A long pause before the bubbles started back up. Too long. Ilya watched the timestamp creep. One minute. Two. Then, before long, five.

Jane: *Look, I'm sorry. I'm scared. All the time. I love you. Please know that I love you.*

The words blurred. Ilya blinked away tears and they sharpened again, neat white text against the blue bubble, and he hated how small the words looked on his screen. How contained.

Love in a text message, sent from a dark bedroom in Montreal where Shane Hollander lay alone because being alone was safer than being known.

Lily: *If you meant it, you'd say it where someone could hear. How do I know it's not just lie?*

Jane: *You're being cruel.*

Lily: *No. I'm being tired.*

Jane: *Maybe you're tired of me, then. Maybe get someone who's going at your pace and who doesn't have to deal with nagging all the time.*

Ilya's stomach dropped.

Lily: *Don't do that*

Jane: *Maybe that's what this is really about. Maybe you want us to be over with. Maybe you've met some guy on the Centaurs. I hear it's a fruit salad over there. You're awfully chummy with that Luca kid. Trading me in for a younger model already?*

Ilya missed as the plane started to rattle all around him. All he could see was the fire in his reflection on the phone.

Lily: *Fuck you. I would never cheat and you know that.*

Jane: *If this is too hard for you, to be with me, then just say it. Say you want us to be over. Go be with someone else. Go be out and open like you want. Nobody's stopping you.*

His fingers hovered. The cabin rattled again, harder this time. The seatbelt sign chimed on, and the captain's voice crackled something about descent and weather. Ilya didn't hear any of it.

Lily: *Maybe you're right. Maybe I am tired of hiding like something is wrong with us. Maybe I am tired of the man I love being ashamed of me. Ashamed of us.*

Lily: *Maybe I'm tired of being your secret*

Lily: *Maybe I really am done.*

Lily: *Maybe I wish I could do this all over again and not have knife plunged in heart day after day, year over year.*

Lily: *Sometimes, you are more painful than time I walked in on my mother dead on the ground.*

Lily: *At least with mother, I had closure and could grieve.*

Lily: *With you, I have nothing but pain.*

Lily: *I wish I never met you.*

He hit send. The read receipt appeared instantly. Shane saw it. Ilya, immediately, clenched his chest as guilt rippled over him. He'd gone too far. He'd been too angry. Shane had been right, they shouldn't have done this over text. He immediately tried to type an apology.

At least, he tried to anyway.

The plane lurched sideways, like it was getting checked by the boards. Ilya's phone flew out of his hand and crashed against the wall on the opposite side of the plane.

Before the screams of the other passengers rose, Ilya saw the flash. A fiery burst erupted from the engine just outside his window, streaking the night sky with jagged lines of orange and red. Then came the monstrous bang of the wing getting detached from the plane, a sound that seemed to crack the air itself. Panic swept through the cabin, as another shearing sound of metal tearing from every direction at the plane's edges drowned out the noise from the Captain's intercom.

Oxygen masks tumbled from overhead. Passengers grabbed at them, eyes wide and mouths frantic as they wrestled to secure the lifelines to their faces, as if it would do any good in this situation. Chaos erupted in a chorus of shouts, cries, and desperate prayers.

Ilya's own breath came and went in short, sharp bursts. His name rippled through his mind. Maybe it was Luca, calling for help. Maybe Wyatt. For certain, it wasn't his own voice he heard. Hell, maybe it was Shane's, distorted and distant, trying to call him back.

Pressure built in his skull as they continued to plummet, a squeezing band around his temples that made his eyes feel like they'd pop any second. He unbuckled his belt with clumsy fingers, eyes darting to find his phone.

"I have to find it. I have to apologize. I have to tell him I love him. One last time." A few simple thoughts, probably the last ones he'd ever have in his life.

It was there, screen up, clattering against the aisle. Unmistakable. Shane's picture was the wallpaper. Shane was smiling, on the barbeque, making his 8 burgers because he couldn't ever use basic math to half a recipe. That had been a wonderful day at the cottage. Probably the best day of his long, painful life.

The world shifted beneath him, a dizzying tilt as each second brought the passengers and the plane closer to the ground.

He clambered to his feet amidst the chaos, grabbing onto seats for stability, legs unsteady as he moved against the other passengers screaming, parents holding their children and crying, his teammates with a thousand yard stare as they all realized what was happening.

Ilya didn't care. His gaze locked onto his phone.

A lurch forward, a stumble, and he had it back in his hands as he fell against the floor of the plane. The screen flared to life with his touch.

One message displayed, a reply to Ilya's last messages, with Shane's name above it like an anchor. A long message.

He swiped quick, fingers a blur, unlocking the phone with sweat-slick hands, but understanding the words, from the lack of oxygen, felt distant, like trying to grasp smoke. His vision tunneled, dark around the edges, the pressure clawing deeper, unrelenting. He couldn't read it. None of it.

Before he could type 8 simple letters, one last time he could finally say how he really felt...

Impact.

The world upended.

Ilya's phone slipped again, force wrenching it away once and for all before he could hit send.

Darkness rushed from the corners of his vision, as a burning pain coated his body and he felt himself get launched somewhere into the sky. Pain shot through his body as metal pierced through him, and the smell of jet fuel covered his senses.

Pain.

Burning.

Regret.

Those were the last things Ilya Rozanov felt before his death at the age of 30.

December 2008

Cold bit through Ilya's thick black jacket and the beanie covering his head. Wind whipped across his face, breaking him free of the daze clouding his mind. His lungs pulled in air, real air, frigid and clean, mixed with the familiar flavor of tobacco, and he coughed, the cigarette between his fingers nearly tumbling to the pavement.

Ilya blinked.

He wasn't on the plane. He wasn't hurt. He wasn't bleeding. He wasn't burning.

"Wait. I'm alive?" Ilya thought.

No, that wasn't possible. He'd felt the impact. He'd felt his body breaking. The fire that consumed him. The end. Him and all the other souls on that plane.

Yet, his body felt alive enough: the burn of cold on his cheeks, the rough texture of a back door his shoulder blades, the weight of his boots on solid ground.

He straightened himself, and something felt wrong immediately. He was off-balance. Too light, like he'd skipped leg and arm day for 10 years straight.

Ilya looked down.

His hands were smaller. Leaner. The fingers gripping the cigarette looked like they belonged to someone else, someone younger, someone who hadn't spent a decade gripping hockey sticks and lifting weights.

"What the fuck..."

His voice cracked. Not the deep rasp he'd grown used to, but something higher. Unsteady.

Panic spiked through his chest. He patted himself down, jacket, jeans, work out sneakers he hadn't worn in years. Everything was big on him.

The street around him sharpened into focus. Low buildings. A faded banner strung between lampposts that read:

Welcome to the 2008 World Junior Championship.

Ilya knew, immediately, where he was. The familiar back alley. The smell. The date. The banner.

Regina.

"No. Is not possible."

Ilya's breath came faster. He fumbled for his phone, yanking it from his pocket with clumsy fingers. An old model, still in full Russian. The screen lit up when he flipped it open.

Wait.

A flip phone. *Ancient.*

The wallpaper showed a blurry photo he'd taken with the piss poor camera, a picture of a picture, of his mother, her arm slung around his shoulders, both of them grinning when he was still a boy and he was playing in his first game.

He turned the phone, angling the screen to catch his reflection in the black glass. Ilya gasped.

In the reflection, he saw himself like he used to be at eighteen. Right before he got drafted to Boston. First pick. Right after Russia crushed the World Junior Championship.

Gone was the ghost of the man he'd become. This Ilya had a soft jaw. No scars. Eyes wide and bright, not yet worn down by years of contract negotiations, media scrutiny over trading to Ottawa, and sleepless nights spent wondering if he and Shane Hollander would ever be together.

Shane.

The name hit like a punch to the ribs. Ilya staggered back against the wall, the cigarette almost slipping from his fingers.

This wasn't heaven. It couldn't be. Heaven wouldn't feel this cold, this real, this cruel. No, this was real life. Right? Or was this hell? Was he being punished? He felt like he deserved it, after his dying message probably...

"Uh... Ilya Rozanov?"

The voice came from his left. Soft, naive, and unmistakable.

Ilya's head snapped up.

Shane Hollander stood three feet away, hands shoved into the pockets of his oversized jacket that dwarfed his Team Canada white hoodie. His black hair was hidden beneath a dull green beanie. Barely an adult, just like Ilya. The face was more terrified than he remembered, smooth and serious, brown eyes narrowed in that same disapproving way they'd show a thousand times over the next decade.

"Shane... " Ilya muttered, in disbelief. He wanted to hug him, wanted to break down and cry and apologize for all the terrible things they'd fought about. "You're here. Shane, you're... You're here."

"You okay, man? You look, uh... A little choked up." Shane asked, shirking away from Ilya, unsure of how to deal with his display of emotion.

"*Oh.*"

This Shane didn't know him. Not yet. Not the way Ilya knew him.

"I mean..." Ilya struggled to keep his hold on reality. What the hell was happening right now? Why had he died? Why had the plane crashed? Why was he here now, of all places? Was the other people on the plane back wandering around in 2008?

"Sorry, sorry. Uh, English. Not so good." Ilya lied, hoping it made any kind of sense.

"It's fine, man. Oh, uh... I don't know if you know this, but smoking's not allowed within fifty feet of the arena," Shane continued, nodding toward the building behind Ilya. "Rules."

Ilya stared. His throat closed up, every word he'd ever spoken to Shane Hollander, every argument, every confession, every desperate *I love you*, said either in passing or in the midst of their passionate lovemaking clogged his airway until he couldn't breathe. "Right. Right.

Smoking." He put out the cigarette and threw it in the snow nearby. "Bad habit. Should stop. You're right"

Shane's brow furrowed. "You okay?"

Shane's gaze dropped to the cigarette smoldering in the snow, then back to Ilya's face. "Uh, anyway... You're an awesome player to watch. I wanted to introduce myself. Just wanted to meet you and wish you good luck in the tournament."

Ilya nodded, because what else could he do? He shook Shane's hand, awkwardly. He forgot how anxious his love could be in these early days. Back when...

"We were rivals."

Ilya stiffened, tried to think back to the first time they'd ever met, and cleared his throat. "Uh... Good luck to you too. You are... Nice. That's appreciated. Though Team Russia is going is probably going to win. Team Canada struggles with their guardsmen. Goalie is nursing injury that you all lie about. You'll play hard, try to outscore to make up for it, but... We will win. In final."

Shane paused, slack-jawed as he turned around, and scoffed. "Yeah, yeah, that's... Not happening." Then he shook his head. "How did you... Never mind. Good luck Rozanov."

"Good luck Shane," Ilya said, catching himself. "I mean Hollander. Good luck Hollander."

Ilya watched him go, heart hammering so hard it hurt.

"What the fuck is happening."

Chapter 2: Fresh Start

December 2008 - January 2009

Of all the things that made Ilya know for certain he wasn't dreaming and that this wasn't some kind of joke... It had been the smell. The rink in Regina smelled the same.

Ice, sweat, rubber, and the tang of cold air cycling through old dust-covered industrial vents. A scent so nostalgic that he could have remembered it anywhere. After all, that rink is where his old life finally began.

Ilya sat in the locker room, lacing up his skates.

Three days had passed since the alley with Shane. He'd woken up in a shared hotel room with old teammates whose names he'd almost forgotten after an eternity apart, their faces young and naive, and so stupidly youthful in all they said and did. He had a great time reliving these glory days with them, and made a few suggestions to each of them about not "overdoing" party drugs. He'd lost a lot of them in the future to that.

For a while, even among the revelry, Ilya still pondered if he'd lost his mind. Maybe his first life had been a long dream, and this second life was the real one.

The WJHC games proved otherwise.

Ilya's body moved like it always had, better, even. Muscle memory from a decade of professional hockey compressed into an eighteen-year-old frame who wasn't as beaten down and tired. Every shift, every play, every decision came from instinct honed by years that hadn't happened yet.

"Fucking hell Rozanov, where are you pulling this out of? Ass?" One of his coaches said.

"Perhaps you aren't embarrassed after all. Your bring pride to Mother Russia. This fire you have. Splendid!" Grigori, his father, had told him.

Ilya flinched when Grigori clapped him on the shoulder. He held his tongue, struggling with the fact his old man was alive again, too. The Colonel would have a few more years before Alzheimer's would start affecting him. 8 years until his eventual death. Ilya wouldn't be there for him for the worst of it, if nothing changed. Years of suffering that would ultimately destroy his relationship with Andrei, his brother, over. A death with no resolution in their family's lingering, cold, bitter relationship.

"Thank you, father." Ilya said. What else could he say? Nothing. At least not right then. Not until he knew more about this second life he'd been given.

Aside from his father, the scouts noticed his talent immediately.

After the second game in the championship, a man in a Boston cap pulled him aside, eyes bright with hunger.

"You play like a veteran, kid. Like you've been doing this for ten years."

Ilya had smiled, shrugged, mumbled something about good coaching.

The man handed him a card. "We'll be watching."

Now, sitting in the locker room before the final, Ilya's hands trembled as he yanked the laces tight.

Russia versus Canada. The game he'd already lived through once, the game that had launched his career. Made him first draft pick of his rookie year.

The game where he'd first truly faced Shane Hollander.

His stomach churned.

Shane.

He wondered where *his* Shane was. Or, if his Shane even existed anymore. What was the laws of time travel in this crazy world? Was it like the movie Back to the Future? The Time Machine? Or is he in some crazy parallel world and he left behind a pretty corpse where he came from and a grieving loved one? He wished Wyatt, the Ottawa goalie, was there, the dork had seen every movie and comic book in world, twice over and talked about them like they were his real passion. *"He would have known."*

"Rozanov!"

Coach Petrov barked from the doorway, face stern beneath his grey mustache. "Get head in the game. You have thousand mile stare!"

"Da," Ilya muttered.

Around him, his teammates psyched themselves up, slapping pads, shouting in Russian, a few of them already drunk on vodka thinking they'd already won with Ilya on their side.

Ilya pulled on his jersey, the red fabric settling over his shoulders like an old friend.

"I've done this before. I can do it again."

Except this time, Shane would be out there. Not a stranger that Ilya had just met. Young Shane. Eighteen-year-old Shane who didn't know him, who'd never kissed him, who'd never told him he loved him in the dark.

A Shane who'd never broken his heart.

The tunnel to the ice stretched before them, the roar of the crowd building like an orchestra ready to unleash their song. Ilya's skates hit the ice, and the cold air struck his face.

He circled the net, warming up, eyes scanning the opposite end where Team Canada took their own warm-up shots. White jerseys with red maple leaves.

There he was.

Shane. Number 24. One of the best prospects in the world of hockey, with some of the highest hockey IQ in the league. In all honesty, Ilya knew even with their gap in experience, Shane would still be a terror on the ice.

Lean and focused, Shane corralled a puck and fired it at the net during his warmups. Canada's goalie missed it, wincing in pain and Shane skated past, tapping his stick against the post in that exact way Ilya had seen him do a thousand times.

Ilya's chest tightened.

The whistle blew. The game was on.

Players lined up for the anthem. Ilya stood at attention, hand over his heart, but his eyes drifted across the red line.

Shane stood straight, jaw set, eyes forward. Serious and determined to prove he was worthy of the number one draft pick. Something he'd worked his whole life towards.

"Beautiful."

The anthem ended. Players scattered to their benches. Ilya skated to center ice for the opening faceoff, and there across from him stood Shane, stick in hand, brown eyes locked on the ref's hand and the puck.

Ilya's pulse hammered in his ears.

The ref raised the puck. "Good luck, gentlemen."

Shane's eyes flicked up, just for a second, meeting Ilya's.

Ilya's throat closed. All the words he'd wanted to say, all the apologies he'd died with, struggled to come up. He opened his mouth, and something different came out.

"Let's make our teams proud, Hollander. No regrets."

Shane blinked, surprise flashing across his face before it settled back into focus. Ilya could tell what Shane was thinking: *"Where was 'Rozanov', the rough player who got under everyone's skin and was universally hated?"*

Caught off guard, Shane got his focus back. "Yeah. Let's. No regrets."

The puck dropped.

Ilya gave Team Canada no mercy. He knew Shane would hate mercy. Would hate being handed a win. That was the kind of man his lover, his partner, his rival had always been. So,

Ilya gave the man everything he had and then some.

Every stride carried years of experience, every pass threaded through gaps he'd learned to see in split seconds. When the Canadian defender stepped up to check him, Ilya spun away, stick-handling through the rink like he was a professional figure skater.

Shane chased him hard, stick extended, trying to disrupt the play, but Ilya had been here before, knew Shane's tells, the way he favored his left side, the split-second hesitation before he committed to a hit.

Ilya cut right, and Shane stumbled, stick swiping at empty air.

The Russian crowd roared.

First period, Ilya set up two goals for his team. Second period, he scored one himself, roofing a backhander past the goalie's glove. Third period, he shut down every Canadian rush, reading the plays before they ever developed.

Shane fought back with everything he had. Scraped for loose pucks, threw his body into corners, tried to match Ilya's pace. Sadly, it wasn't enough. To Shane's credit, he did manage to score two goals, genuinely getting past both Team Russia and Ilya himself. Every bit as impressive as the legends said.

When the final buzzer sounded, the scoreboard read 5-2.

Russia had won.

Ilya's teammates mobbed him, shouting, pounding his helmet. The arena erupted, red jerseys flooding the ice. Team Canada were like ghosts, none angrier than Shane, who couldn't even look up from the ice.

Somewhere, the Russian anthem started playing.

Yet, Ilya's eyes found Shane.

Shane stood near center ice, stick resting against his knees, chest heaving. Sweat dripped down his temple. His expression was unreadable, disappointment, exhaustion, but something deeper.

Their eyes met across the celebration.

Shane straightened, skated over.

Ilya's breath caught.

Shane extended his glove. "Good game. You called it, man. Fuck, I... I never played a game like that before. You kicked my ass. I... I've got a long fucking way to go, I guess. That was... That was humbling."

Ilya took Shane's hand and shook. The contact sent electricity up his arm.

"You played a good game. Lot to learn. Still, brilliant head. If you had team that supported you right, you might have had chance."

Shane's grip tightened, just a fraction. "Not a chance Rozanov. You're better than anyone thinks. A lot better. Your team barely helped. That was all you on the ice, man. That was a 1 V 9 kind of game, and you carried your team."

"You gave good fight, still."

"Not good enough. There goes my draft pick dreams." Shane glanced down, then back up, jaw working like he was chewing over something difficult. "Hey, uh... this might sound weird, but would you want to talk hockey sometime? Like, actually talk. I feel like I could learn something from watching you. You know... Talk shop?"

Ilya's heart stopped.

"You... want to talk? With me?"

"Yeah." Shane's cheeks flushed pink, whether from exertion or embarrassment, Ilya couldn't tell. "I mean, if that's cool. I know we're supposed to be rivals or whatever, but... I don't know. Feels like it'd be a waste not to pick your brain a bit. I need to know how you caught my left side weakness and knew how to dip every time I almost hit you."

Ilya stared. This... This wasn't supposed to happen. Shane had never asked Ilya's opinions on hockey before, at least not until they'd started dating. Had the game been that much of a blow to Shane's ego?

"I'd like that," Ilya said, shaking through his daze.

Shane's face brightened. "Yeah? Cool. Uh, how do I...?"

"Phone number," Ilya said quickly. I get it to you after Team and I clean up, phone is in locker. Text me. I'll be coming to North America soon to play. Could use hockey friend to get through the crazy."

Shane smiled. A real smile. One that Ilya hadn't seen for a long time in his first life. "Hockey friend. Yeah. I'll text you."

"Good."

"Good."

They stood there for a beat too long, the noise of the crowd and the celebration fading into background static.

Then Shane pulled back, waved off Ilya, and skated toward his team.

Ilya watched him go, heart pounding so hard he thought it might crack his ribs.

"I will have his number. He will have mine. We're starting over."

The weight of it settled over him. This isn't how it went the first time. Was it... Better? Or worse? Had he just put them into the "friend zone" or would this mean something deeper? Ilya didn't know.

Somewhere in the chaos, his coach shoved a trophy into his hands. He almost dropped it, his attention a thousand miles away from anything around him.

June 2009

Shane arrived at the Marriot Hotel in Los Angeles about a day earlier than the NHL draft being held at the Peacock Theatre. Partially because he the idea of nervously pacing back home in Ottawa for another day would literally kill him, and partially so he could have plenty of time to arrive, adjust, and scope out his surroundings.

Oh, and because his mother, Yuna, was going feral on his behalf and dealing with all the needless "talking" and "PR" that these kinds of events demanded as his manager. Shane didn't have the social skills necessary to handle that, and everyone knew it. Right now, he assumed, Yuna was working on correcting the sportscasters and announcers for the draft who kept calling him "the Asian kid" and was working on correcting that to just "Shane". Or she was strangling Reebok for a sneaker deal. Either was plausible.

The first day he'd spent neatly ironing and hanging up his tuxedo for the event, mapping out the short walk to the theatre, and double checking all of the events he'd be required to attend and memorizing their start and end times.

Depending on how the draft went, he'd either be heading to Boston or Montreal. Though, if he were being honest, he knew deep down he was going to Montreal. Boston was picking Ilya, hands down. They'd be morons otherwise.

The second day, he kept his focus just on the draft announcers and kept pacing back and forth, waiting for the event to start that evening.

The hotel television murmured in the background. Shane had left it on for white noise while he paced, but now a particular voice cut through his distraction.

"...sources close to the Boston organization are reporting significant friction between management and Ilya Rozanov's camp."

Shane's head snapped toward the screen.

The sportscaster, a middle-aged man with silver temples and an expensive suit, leaned forward at his desk. Behind him, footage played of Ilya at the World Juniors, stick-handling through defenders like they were traffic cones at a baby's first skating lesson.

"According to our insider, Rozanov made some inflammatory comments during a trip to Boston, on Boston's dime. Specifically, he allegedly told Boston's GM that he 'wasn't interested in playing for a 'pussy American team' and that he 'had other options worth exploring.'"

Shane's stomach dropped.

"What the fuck?" Shane covered his mouth and turned up the TV.

The co-host, a woman with sharp delivery, shook her head. *"Not the smartest play for an eighteen-year-old prospect, Bob. Especially one who's supposed to go first overall. From what I'm hearing, Rozanov might have just relegated himself to 3rd or lower pick with the golden child of hockey, Shane Hollander, all but a cinch for Montreal's pick at #2."*

"Exactly, Jennifer. Word is that Boston's brass didn't appreciate the attitude, and they do not appreciate disrespect of themselves or their home country. They're questioning his maturity, his willingness to be coached. Some are even suggesting they might pass on him entirely and go with a local player from their hometown, instead and bring back some pride to Boston."

Shane's mouth went dry.

"That would be unprecedented," Jennifer continued. *"Rozanov's been the consensus number one for months, but if he's already burning bridges before he's even drafted? That's a massive red flag. Teams don't want drama and that sounds like exactly what Rozanov is."*

"Right. Rozanov might have just talked himself out of millions."

Shane's phone buzzed against the hotel nightstand. When "Ilya" flashed up on the top, he turned off the TV and checked it immediately.

Ilya: *Where are you staying? Want to meet before draft. Catch up in person rather than over text.*

Shane grabbed the phone, thumbs moving before his brain caught up.

Shane: *What the fuck did you do in Boston?*

Ilya: *Eh, long story. I'll tell later. Not a big deal.*

Shane: *Bullshit.*

Ilya: *Is not bullshit! Seriously, not a big deal. I did not want to play for Boston anyway. They are boring team and playing in America is not what I want.*

Shane: *How pissed was your dad? Like, he didn't get violent with you did he?*

Ilya: *I am "disowned" for now and my brother is laughing ass off, but it is not a big deal, father is dramatic. When the money starts coming in, he'll change his tune. He always did.*

Ilya: Do not worry about me, I am fine. I know certain where I am going and I will be happy there. Probably. Frustrating, but happy.

Ilya: Like I said, we'll talk later about nonsense, is not important. Hotel room?

Shane stared at the message, as his chest started making that "complicated" feeling again. Six months of texts, late-night calls about hockey strategy, arguments about the next Stanley Cup prospects and Ilya had become...what?

Friend?

No.

That wasn't the right word. Ilya was the only person Shane could talk to without editing himself first. He could just spit out "word vomit" as his dad liked to call it, for the better part of an hour, and Ilya would just listen to it all. Not passive listening, either. He contributed to a conversation. That made Ilya the only person who didn't make him feel like he was performing. Not even his parents did that for him.

Shane: *1410*

Ilya: *Great. Be there soon. Care if I get ready in your room? Flight was a bitch.*

Shane: *Yeah, of course. See you soon.*

Shane, a big smile on his face, yanked open his own garment bag. Inside was his charcoal grey with a slim cut that made him look older than eighteen. Professional. Draft-ready. "It dresses up your personality when you get that vacant stare in your eyes." his mom had joked. He didn't laugh.

His phone buzzed again.

Ilya: *May I borrow tie? I forgot mine like idiot. You have extra?*

Shane: *Got three. Dad packed them.*

Ilya: *Your dad is smart man. See you soon, Hollander.*

Shane's face heated for no reason. He grabbed the ties, shoved them in his pocket, checked his hair in the mirror. Still looked like he'd slept on it wrong, which he had, because he'd barely slept at all.

Fifty-three minutes later, after Shane had gotten himself dressed, sans his suit jacket, the door knocked.

Shane crossed the room in three strides and opened the door.

Ilya stood in the hallway, garment bag slung over one shoulder, duffel in the other hand. His hair stuck up at odd angles, dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his T-shirt had a coffee stain near the collar.

"You look like shit," Shane said.

"Flight delayed. Sat on runway for two hours. Swear that did not happen last time, stupid fucking butterflies." Ilya pushed past him into the room, dropped his bags on the spare bed. "Fucking nightmare. Can I shower? Running behind."

"Yeah, go ahead."

Ilya was already halfway to the bathroom, peeling off his shirt as he walked. Shane caught a glimpse of bare shoulders, the curve of his spine, before the door shut with a click.

The water turned on.

Shane stood frozen, staring at the closed door.

His brain stuttered. Old feelings he'd shunted away long ago, back when he first realized his "preferences" were starting to bubble up. He pictured what was on the other side of that door.

"Stop it, dude." Shane told himself.

He turned away, busied himself straightening the ties on the desk. Navy, burgundy, charcoal. All perfectly acceptable. Professional. He laid them out in a neat row, smoothed imaginary wrinkles. Surely one of them would work for Ilya.

The shower shut off a few minutes later.

Shane's pulse kicked up. He tried to sit on the edge of the bed. No, bad, that had implications. He went to the chair in the corner. No, wait, his legs were splayed, that said something else entirely. He tried leaning against the wall next. Yeah. That was the right move. Very ordinary. Normal people leaned, right?

Steam billowed out when the door opened. Ilya emerged, towel slung low on his hips, water still beading on his chest and dripping from his hair. He ran a hand through the wet strands, slicking them back.

"Much better," Ilya said, grinning. "Feel like human again."

Shane's mouth went dry and memorized every last detail that he could before turning away.

Ilya crossed to his garment bag, unzipped it, pulled out dress pants and a white shirt. He turned, dropped the towel and dried off the last bits of water.

Shane's face caught fire as Ilya bare ass cheeks were right there, out in the open, bouncing as he fiddled with his bags. When Ilya turned, Shane saw "it" swing, half-hard, and bigger than he'd ever imagined. He whipped around, stared at the wall and **nothing else**.

"What?" Ilya's voice carried amusement. "You have never been in locker room before?"

"That's different."

"How?"

Shane didn't have an answer for that. His brain had stopped working somewhere around the dropped towel and the first bounce.

Behind him, fabric rustled. A belt buckled. Shoes tapped against carpet.

"Okay, you can look now. I am acceptable person. Cock is put away."

Shane turned.

Ilya stood fully dressed, shirt tucked in, pants pressed, but his collar hung open. He held up the three ties Shane had laid out for him.

"Which one?"

"Uh." Shane's voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "Navy. Goes well with your eyes."

Ilya's grin widened. "Matches my eyes? You notice my eyes, Hollander?"

"Shut up." Shane snatched the tie from Ilya's hand. "Do you know how to tie one? Or should I help you?"

"Not really." Ilya had a curve of a smile on his face and Shane didn't know why.

"Christ." Shane stepped closer, looped the tie around Ilya's neck. "How have you survived eighteen years?"

"Charm and good looks."

Shane snorted, focused on the tie. His hands moved through the familiar motions he'd memorized time and again to perfection. Over, under, through the loop, but his fingers felt clumsy, too aware of how close Ilya stood, how he could feel the heat radiating off him and smell the fresh scent of the hotel soap.

Ilya's breath ghosted across Shane's forehead.

"You are very serious about ties," Ilya murmured.

"Someone has to be."

Shane pulled the knot tight, smoothed the fabric down Ilya's chest. His hand lingered a second too long.

Their eyes met.

Something shifted in Ilya's expression, something Shane couldn't name, something that made his stomach flutter.

"There," Shane said, stepping back fast. "Done."

Ilya touched the tie, fingers brushing where Shane's had been. "Perfect. Thank you, Hollander."

"Anytime."

Shane turned away, grabbed his jacket off the chair, shrugged into it with jerky movements. His face burned. His hands shook.

"What the hell is wrong with me?"

"Ready?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah." Shane's voice came out rougher than intended. "Let's go."

They walked through the hotel lobby, out into the Los Angeles heat as the sun started to set in the distance. The venue loomed three blocks away at the theatre. Other draft prospects clustered on the sidewalk, nervous energy crackling through the air.

Shane's phone buzzed. He pulled it out.

Mom: *Good luck, sweetheart. We're so proud of you. Meet you after the event is over! Love you!*

He smiled, typed a response and kept walking.

The sidewalk blurred beneath his feet, the buildings, the people. Everything felt...familiar. Like he'd walked this exact path before, said these exact words.

Déjà vu slammed into him.

Shane stopped. The world tilted, edges going soft. He'd been here. Done this. Right?

No. No, he hadn't. Not like this anyway.

He'd never walked to this draft with Ilya beside him, except...except some other time, he'd been alone. Hadn't he? Alone and angry. Pissed off, even. He'd walked alone, back straight, jaw set, ready to face whatever team called his name.

No. He'd been wanting Boston. He'd wanted to be picked first.

His hands started trembling. Why was he so angry? No, better question... Why was he... Grieving?

"Shane?" Ilya's voice came from far away. "You okay?"

Shane looked down at his phone. The screen glowed, except the message wasn't from his mom anymore. Words scrolled across it, cruel and sharp, from some stranger named Lily.

Lily: *I wish I never met you.*

His vision blurred. The words repeated, over and over, burning into his retinas. Pain lanced through his chest, grief so profound it buckled his knees and he almost fell over on the ground.

"Shane!" Ilya grabbed his arm, steadied him before he slammed face first into the LA pavement. "What's wrong?"

Shane blinked. The message vanished. His mom's text reappeared, innocuous and loving.

"I..." His voice cracked. "I don't know. I just...I felt like..."

"Like what?"

"Nothing. Just..." Shane shook his head, trying to clear it. "Just weird. Probably nerves."

"Probably." Ilya didn't sound convinced.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. The venue swallowed them, security checks and credentials, ushers directing them toward the seating area. Other prospects filled the rows, all of them in suits, all of them vibrating with anticipation.

Shane found his assigned seat. Ilya's was three rows back.

"This is bullshit," Ilya muttered. "We sit together."

"That's not how it works."

"I don't care." Ilya grabbed his chair, dragged it forward, and wedged it next to Shane's. Other prospects stared, but Ilya ignored them, settling in like he owned the place.

Shane's chest loosened. "You're going to get in trouble."

"Let them try." Ilya's knee pressed against Shane's. "Better? Steady your nerves?"

"Yeah." Shane's hands still trembled, but less now. "Better."

The lights dimmed. A voice boomed through the speakers, welcoming everyone to the 2009 NHL Draft.

Shane barely heard it. All he could focus on was the warmth of Ilya beside him, solid and real, anchoring him to this moment. Then, he shifted his chair closer, just an inch, just enough that their shoulders touched.

Ilya glanced over, eyebrow raised.

Shane didn't look away. "Thanks. For sitting with me."

"Of course." Ilya's voice dropped, quiet enough that only Shane could hear. "Where else would I be?"

June 2009

The announcer's voice cut through the Los Angeles Peacock theatre, sharp and professional.

"With the first overall pick in the 2009 NHL Draft, the Boston Bears select... from Charlestown, Massachusetts... Tyler McKinnon."

Scattered applause rippled through the crowd. Confusion flickered across faces in the audience. A few scouts leaned together, whispering behind cupped hands.

Ilya exhaled slow through his nose. His knee bounced against Shane's.

"Who the fuck is Tyler McKinnon?" someone muttered two rows back.

"Boston's biggest mistake in NHL history, thanks to Rozanov's mouth."

Shane's head whipped toward Ilya. "They didn't pick you."

"No." Ilya's mouth curved. "They did not."

"But..."

"Is fine."

"But..."

"Is fine. I knew. This is what I wanted."

Shane nodded, gripping Ilya's knee.

"With the second overall pick," the announcer continued, "the Montreal Voyageurs select... from Ottawa, Ontario... Shane Hollander."

The theatre erupted. Real applause this time, loud and sustained. Shane's name echoed through the speakers.

Shane stood, legs shaky. His brain lagged three seconds behind his body. Ilya's hand found his elbow, squeezed once.

"Go," Ilya said. "They're waiting."

Shane stumbled toward the aisle, climbed the steps to the stage. Lights blinded him. Camera flashes strobed across his vision. Someone handed him a jersey, blue and white with the Voyageurs logo dead center. Number 24. *Hollander* stitched across the shoulders.

He held it up. Smiled at the cameras. Shook hands with men in expensive suits whose names he forgot the second they spoke. Shane's parents stood in the family rows, his mom wiping tears, his dad grinning so wide it looked painful.

Shane descended the stairs, jersey clutched against his chest, and found his seat.

Ilya waited, expression unreadable.

The draft continued. Third pick. Fourth. Fifth. Names Shane didn't recognize, teams he barely registered.

Sixth pick.

Seventh.

Eighth.

"With the ninth overall pick, the Ottawa Centaurs select... from Moscow, Russia... *Ilya Rozanov*."

Ilya stood. No hesitation. No shock.

Shane grabbed his wrist. "**Ninth**? Jesus Christ, Ilya. What did you do when you went to talk to teams?!"

"Is fine."

"It's not fine. You should've been first!"

Ilya pulled free, gentle but firm. "I'm where I need to be."

He walked to the stage, shoulders back, stride confident. The applause felt thinner than it had for Shane, polite but restrained. A few people in the crowd exchanged glances, eyebrows raised.

"Ninth pick. Rozanov to Ottawa. What a fall from grace. There goes any hope for the Russian having any success in his rookie years."

The jersey they handed him was black and red, the Centaurs logo emblazoned across the front. Ilya held it up, smiled wide for the cameras like he'd just won the lottery.

Shane watched from his seat, throat tight. The crowd murmured around him, speculation buzzing like static.

"Ottawa? That's a death sentence."

"Kid talked himself out of millions."

"Boston dodged a bullet."

"Hell, Ottawa might win a game this year."

Ilya returned, settled back into his chair like nothing had happened.

Shane leaned close. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"Ninth pick. Ottawa. Look it's my hometown, but I know they suck. They've sucked for like 20 years." Shane's hands twisted the Voyageurs jersey in his lap. "You don't have to stay there. Free agency in two years. Get a good manager, negotiate a trade. You can fix this and get back on track. There are so many great places that will take you. Just watch your mouth, maybe get a PR person, my mom knows a ton of people that can-"

Ilya's gaze held steady. "I don't mind."

"You don't..." Shane stopped. "What?"

"I'm where I need to be." Ilya's fingers drummed against his knee, a rhythm Shane didn't recognize. "Ottawa is good. Is fine. That is where I must be."

"How is Ottawa *fine*? They're the worst team in the league. You can do so much better, dude."

"Maybe." Ilya shrugged. "Is close to Montreal, yes? Hour flight. Maybe two hour drive if traffic is shit."

Shane's brain stalled. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Means we can see each other." Ilya's voice dropped, just enough that Shane had to lean in to hear. "Hang out. Like you said before. Talk hockey. Be friends."

Something in Shane's chest loosened and tightened all at once. "I... You..." His brain melted. Clearly, Shane was trying to put together a puzzle, but didn't have but half the pieces and the box with the puzzle's picture was missing.

Still, to Ilya's surprise. Shane nodded, and laughed. "Yeah. Yeah, we could do that. Least I can do to lift your spirits."

"Good."

"Good."

They sat in silence while the draft rolled on. Tenth pick. Eleventh. Names blurred together.

Ilya thought the night was over, that they'd stand, shake hands, go their separate ways to whatever team functions waited. He'd made plans to catch Shane in the gym that night, and see where it took him. Last time it had-

Then Shane shifted, cleared his throat and broke Ilya's train of thought.

"You want to celebrate tomorrow? Tonight we're both busy, and I'm going to want to go to bed early, but... Tomorrow we're free, right?" The question came out casual, but Shane's fingers tapped faster against his knee. "Get dinner or something. Just us. Catch up and keep arguing over the Stanley Cup this year?"

Ilya's pulse kicked up. "Dinner?"

"Is that weird? I didn't think it was weird, but it might be weird." Shane's jaw worked. "We just got drafted. We're friends, right? We should celebrate, I think. ...but if you have a family thing or don't want to..."

"No." Ilya cut him off. "No family thing. Family did not even come. Dinner sounds great."

Shane's face split into a grin, wide and genuine and so bright it made Ilya's chest ache. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Ilya smiled back, unable to stop himself. "Definitely yeah."

Around them, the draft continued. More names. More jerseys. More futures and more millions decided in thirty-second increments, but Ilya barely noticed. He stared at Shane, that grin still plastered across his face, and thought about tomorrow.

About dinner. A new adventure he'd never had before.

Chapter 3: The Butterfly Wings Flapping

June 2009

The Lumberyard, a modern, overpriced bistro, cast warm shadows from their ambient lighting across the white tablecloth and dark cherry table. There were tons of people around, people much richer and fancier than Shane was, all talking in low, hushed tones. He swore he saw celebrity actress Rose Landry off in the corner, looking bored with some musical theatre guy.

Not that Shane cared about any of that. No, he wasn't thinking at all about his new million dollar contract, not the sponsorship with Reebok his mother snagged, and definitely not all the pictures of the condos his father had helped him look for in Montreal.

All he could think about was Ilya. That goofy smile on his face when he got picked by Ottawa, like he'd planned the whole thing out in advance. How happy he was.

"I'll be close." Those words haunted Shane. Equal parts good and bad.

Shane adjusted his tie for the third time, fingers fumbling with the silk knot he'd perfected that morning. Around the table,, silverware clinked against porcelain, and somewhere a violin played something classical that Shane couldn't name.

He felt overdressed. The charcoal suit felt stiff across his shoulders, the collar too tight, the jacket too formal. What had he been thinking? Why'd he go so hard?

Across the table, Ilya looked relaxed in dark slacks, a white button-up with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, and the navy tie Shane had picked for him yesterday. ("I'm keeping it," Ilya had joked. Shane didn't object.) No jacket. Hair neat and styled.

Shane's stomach twisted. They looked like a couple on their first date.

"Wrong message. This is sending the wrong message. He's going to get weirded out and never talk to me again."

The waiter approached, pen poised. Shane ordered the first thing his eyes landed on that was moderately healthy, salmon, steamed vegetables, water, and barely registered Ilya's choice beyond "steak, rare" and potatoes.

When the waiter left, silence settled between them.

Ilya leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming against the table. "You look nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"Your tie is crooked."

Shane's hand shot to his collar and he nearly panicked. It wasn't crooked. Not at all. Ilya grinned.

"Is joke. Tie is perfect. Like always."

Shane dropped his hand, heat crawling up his neck. "You're an asshole."

"Yes." Ilya's grin widened. "...but you like me anyway."

Shane opened his mouth, but promptly closed it. His brain scrambled for something safe, something that wouldn't betray the feelings churning in his chest. His face froze, he knew he was giving "the look" that his mother always warned him about. The one that made people "off put" by him.

"I like that you're honest." Shane finally settled on. He bit his tongue. "You're easy to understand. Not everyone is."

"Honest..." Ilya muttered.

Shane watched Ilya's expression shift, the teasing edge fading. He looked serious for once.

"You okay?"

Ilya sat forward, elbows on the table, fingers laced together. "Shane. There is something I should tell you. So that I am being honest with you and with self."

Shane's pulse kicked up. "Okay?"

"Is important. About me. I think, given our friendship, you should know." Ilya's gaze held steady, no hesitation, no shame. "I am bisexual."

The word hung between them.

Shane's breath caught. His fingers tightened around the water glass in front of him, knuckles white against the condensation. His thoughts started to race.

"Did he really just say that? Did Ilya, in public, just admit to being bisexual?"

"No, this has to be a joke, right?"

"Nobody, not in this league would ever just blurt something like that out."

"Right?"

"I have been with men and women both, in my life," Ilya continued, voice low enough that only Shane could hear. "For honesty though... I fancy men much more, I enjoy their strength and their masculinity and how it feels when we fuck. So, there is good chance that during my career, I will be with a man. There is chance I might be caught and it becomes known... You know, paparazzi." He paused. "I wanted to be honest with my friend. For him to know

everything. If you are uncomfortable with me, or if you want to distance yourself from that kind of image, I would understand."

Shane stared, quiet for way too many beats, but Ilya just waited for him to think it all through, like he always did. The restaurant sounds faded to white noise. All he could hear was his own heartbeat hammering against his ribs, all he could see was Ilya sitting across from him, vulnerable and open and *real*.

He'd never been around someone who was gay. Or Bi. Or anything. Never had a conversation and never had to say any of it aloud before.

Ilya was bi. Ilya liked guys. Ilya knew... Exactly how Shane felt. Probably.

Say something. Say anything.

Say **IT**.

Words tangled on Shane's tongue. The truth.

"I'm gay, I've known since I was young, I've never told anyone, and I'm terrified someone will find out. I'm scared of disappointing my parents, their only son being weirder than he already was. I hate myself because I don't feel normal on a good day, and adding "gay" on top of all of that just... Breaks me."

"I want to be me. I want to be loved. I want to love."

"I want to fuck. I want sex. I want intimacy. I want to be held. I want to be pinned down. I want to suck cock and do all the things I fantasize about but know I can never have."

Shane gulped, hard.

"Tell him. Just tell him."

Ilya waited, patient, fingers still laced together.

Shane swallowed. "I'm cool with it."

Ilya's grinned. That toothy, dorky smile that lit up his face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Shane forced a smile, hating himself for not being as strong as Ilya. "Doesn't bother me. Who you're with is your business."

"Thank you." Ilya's voice softened. "Means a lot. Really."

The waiter returned with their meals, setting plates down with practiced efficiency. Shane stared at his salmon, stomach churning too hard to eat.

"Coward. You're such a fucking coward."

Ilya, for what it was worth, looked happy. He cut into his steak and launched into a story about his situation in Boston. How he'd intentionally pissed off the GM with his "pussy team" comment, because, in Ilya's own words, "Boston hockey team is full of stubborn people. You have to make it their idea to do something, otherwise they drag in their heels."

Shane laughed in the right places, nodded when appropriate, but his mind stayed stuck three sentences back.

Ilya likes guys.

The thought repeated on a loop, sinking deeper each time.

Ilya likes guys. Ilya's bisexual. Ilya could... He might...

Shane stabbed a piece of salmon, chewed without tasting. Across from him, Ilya gestured while he talked, animated and bright, and Shane couldn't stop the smile pulling at his mouth.

He likes guys.

Something warm and terrifying unfurled in Shane's chest, spreading through his ribs like sunlight breaking through clouds.

He likes guys, and he told me. He trusted me.

Ilya paused mid-sentence, fork halfway to his mouth. "What?"

"What?"

"You are smiling like idiot."

Shane's face heated. "No, I'm not."

"You are." Ilya pointed his fork at him. "Big stupid smile. What is funny?"

"Nothing. Just... you." Shane's smile widened despite himself. "That's all."

Ilya studied him for a long moment, something unreadable flickering across his expression. Then he grinned back, wild and genuine. "Good. I am hilarious."

They ate, conversation flowing easier now. Hockey stats, terrible hotel room stories, speculation about their upcoming rookie seasons. Shane relaxed into his chair, tie loosened, jacket draped over the back of his seat.

Across from him, Ilya laughed at something Shane said, head tipped back, throat exposed, and Shane's chest felt too full, too tight, like his ribs couldn't contain everything building inside.

He likes guys.

That thought wouldn't leave Shane's face for the rest of the night.

Or, for the next 12 months for that matter.

July 2009

Shane: *First day of training camp tomorrow. Nervous as hell.*

Ilya: *You will be fine. You are Shane Hollander. Best prospect Montreal has seen in years. Superstar!*

Shane: *That's the problem. What if I'm not as good as they think? What if I disappoint them?*

Ilya: *Then you work harder. Simple.*

Shane: *Easy for you to say.*

Ilya: *Is easy for me to say because I know you. You do not quit. Ever. This is your superpower.*

Shane: *You think?*

Ilya: *I know. Go take your place as hockey celebrity. ;)*

September 2009

Ilya: *Played first preseason game tonight. We lost 6-2, I scored only goals. Rest of team played like they were skating through mud. Our goalie is terrible.*

Shane: *Sorry man. That sucks.*

Ilya: *Is fine. New coach is good though. Brandon Wiebe. Just retired from AHL. Very different from other coaches. Patient. Kind, even. Weird.*

Shane: *Kind? In hockey?*

Ilya: *I know! Is like alien. He actually asks how we are feeling. Not just "are you hurt" but "are you okay mentally." Very strange. I like it.*

Shane: *That's actually really cool.*

Ilya: *Team culture is different too. Players go to each other's houses. Hang out at tavern after games. Monk's, in the Glebe. Even after losses. Especially after losses. So much drinking. More drinking than Russia!*

Shane: *Wait, you guys socialize? Like, voluntarily?*

Ilya: *Yes! Is nice. Makes losing less terrible. Though we lose a lot, so might be survival mechanism.*

Shane: *The only person I socialize with on the team is Hayden, you know, my buddy? But... he's currently chasing this girl, Jackie, around, so he's busy.*

Ilya: *Want I come visit on next break? We can check our calendars for matching day?*

Shane: *Please. You can stay at my place. Don't worry about a hotel. My condo is small, but I'm thinking of expanding soon.*

Ilya: *Sounds perfect.*

October 2009

Shane: *Hat trick tonight against Toronto. Felt fucking amazing. Dallas Kent can suck my dick.*

Ilya: *SAW IT! You were beautiful out there. That backhand on second goal? Poetry.*

Shane: *Thanks. Means a lot.*

Ilya: *Montreal is going places. You have real team. Chemistry is there. Give it year or two, you'll be in playoffs for sure.*

Shane: *You think?*

Ilya: *I know. I bet you win Stanley Cup. Maybe 2 or 3 for them. :)*

Shane: *Yeah, right. Maybe 1 when I'm in my thirties.*

Ilya: *Stranger things have happened, my friend. Stranger things.*

November 2009

Ilya: *Another loss. 4-1. I am starting to understand why Ottawa is worst team in league. We just throw away games on bad plays. Zero hockey IQ.*

Shane: *How bad is it?*

Ilya: *Bad. But also... not as bad as I thought? Players are trying. They care. Just not very good yet. Wiebe says we are "building foundation." I think foundation is made of cardboard, but I appreciate optimism.*

Shane: *At least you've got a good coach.*

Ilya: *Yes. He is treasure. Today he told me I played "with heart" even though we lost. No other coach has said that to me before.*

Shane: *That's cool.*

Shane: *When are you going to stop holding back, though?*

Ilya: *Pardon?*

Shane: *Don't play dumb with me. You aren't playing at half your skill. I know you, man. Even my mom is saying you're holding back.*

Ilya: *Long story. Time is not right. Soon, though. Soon will be time.*

Shane: *You're obsessed with time, dude.*

Shane: *Have you thought about living in the present?*

Ilya: *Every day.*

December 2009

Shane: *Mom's driving me crazy about interviews. She wants me to do three more this week on top of practice. Then she's talking about a new brand deal with me and a protein bar company. I don't even like their product!*

Ilya: *Tell her no.*

Shane: *I can't just tell her no.*

Ilya: *Why not?*

Shane: *Because she's my mom. She's doing this for me. She gave up her career to manage mine. She got me where I am today. I owe her. I'm her only son, and she's got a lot riding with*

me.

Ilya: *You owe her happiness, not exhaustion. There is difference. No mother wants son to suffer. She just doesn't know it's too much. You don't tell her, she won't know.*

Shane: *I don't want to disappoint her. Ever. I think that's one of my biggest fears, you know. Her, one day just looking at me like everyone else does when I drone on too long about random shit, or sit there with my resting bitch face.*

Ilya: *Shane. Listen to me. Yuna Hollander would love her son no matter what. Even if he played baseball and played for the fucking Mets, this I know.*

Shane: *That's... really specific.*

Ilya: *Is terrible team. Like Ottawa, but baseball. Point is, your mother loves YOU. Not Shane Hollander the hockey player. Just Shane.*

Shane: *How do you know that?*

Ilya: *Because I see how she looks at you. Like you are most important thing in world. Not your stats. You.*

Shane: *Maybe...*

Ilya: *No maybe. Is fact. You could ask her yourself.*

Shane: *I'll think about it.*

Shane: *By the way, do you have plans for Christmas?*

Shane: *If you'd like, you can come over. I'm staying with my folks, but they won't mind you're here. I just asked them. They're okay with it. They're excited to finally meet you, actually. I tell them the crazy shit you text me sometimes.*

Shane: *Mom said you have to tell us hockey gossip though, or you sleep outside. She's kidding, I think.*

Ilya: *I would love nothing more. I am honored for first real Christmas in Canada to be with you. :)*

February 2010

Ilya: *We won tonight! Actual good feeling win. 3-2 against Florida. Entire team went to Monk's and got drunk. Many cried happy tears. We sang until we couldn't sing anymore.*

Shane: *Congrats! That's huge!*

Ilya: *Is first win I have seen in weeks. Felt like Stanley Cup.*

Shane: *You deserve it.*

Shane: *Celebrate your win with anyone special?*

Ilya: *Ha! No. Not yet found that special someone.*

Shane: *You could just hook up with someone random. Nothing wrong with that. Sex is nice, you know? Not that I would know, but like...*

Shane: *I imagine it's nice.*

Ilya: *It is big deal for me. I had my fun with sex as playboy before. I want something more. I want a lover. One that is with me forever and ever.*

Shane: *Ew.*

Shane: *Why do you have to say it like that? Lover sounds so gross.*

Ilya: *>:(*

Ilya: *Is romantic!*

Shane: *Whatever you say, man.*

April 2010

Shane: *Playoffs start next week. I'm terrified. I think I'm going to throw up.*

Ilya: *You will be magnificent.*

Shane: *You don't know that.*

Ilya: *Yes I do. I have watched you play for year now. You are ready.*

Shane: *You're always so sure of everything.*

Ilya: *I see into future. I know all. ;)*

Shane: *You're ridiculous.*

May 2010

Ilya: *Congratulations on making next round of playoffs! Knew you would. Cup is right within reach! :)*

Shane: *Thanks.*

Shane: *The nerves are getting to me. The team keeps expecting me to carry them, but they look at me like some trophy boy and still don't talk to me. They look angry at me. I guess they're jealous? Or just expect me to be their golden boy? You know, of the contract, and the sponsorships, and my stats?*

Shane: *Wish you were here. :(*

Ilya: *Do you want me to be?*

Shane: *Yeah.*

Ilya: *Getting in car right now. Be there in few hours.*

Shane: *Seriously?*

Ilya: *Of course. Ottawa shit bed before playoffs even started, I have nothing else to do. Rather be with bosom buddy :)*

Ilya: *But you pay for my ticket to each game? Rich successful superstar? Tickets for all those games get expensive and I but simple peon compared to your grandeur. ;)*

Shane: *Your english is too good for someone who just learned it a few years ago. >_>*

Shane: *Who uses "grandeur"?*

Shane: *You're like an old man.*

Ilya: *:(*

Shane: *I'll get you tickets, no problem.*

Shane: *You know the condo code.*

Shane: *Let yourself in when you get here. Even if I'm asleep.*

Shane: *Couch is free. Or if you want to crash in bed with me, it's cool. It's a King, big enough for two.*

Shane: *Thank you. For everything.*

Ilya: *See you soon.*

June 2010 (Montreal)

The Voyagers arena roared, a wall of sound that crashed over Ilya, louder than anything he remembered. His throat burned from screaming, hands raw from clapping, heart hammering against his ribs as the clock ticked down the third period.

Tonight was Game 7 of the series. Winner would move on to the Stanley Cup finals.

Four minutes left. Montreal down 4-3. New York clogging the zone, playing defense like their lives depended on it.

Beside him, Yuna Hollander gripped the stadium seat, knuckles white, eyes locked on the ice where her son battled for a loose puck in the corner.

"Come on, Shane!" she screamed, voice cracking. "Come on! You can do it! Kick their asses! No survivors!"

Ilya leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Shane dug the puck free, passed it to Hayden Pike, who fumbled the reception. New York intercepted, dumped it back into Montreal's zone.

"Fuck," Ilya muttered.

Shane chased it down again, stick extended, legs pumping.

Yuna grabbed Ilya's arm. "He's exhausted. Why isn't the coach pulling him off? What the hell is that asshole thinking!?"

Ilya watched Shane's stride, the slight drag in his left skate, the way his shoulders hunched just a fraction too much. Burned out. Running on fumes and sheer stubbornness.

"Because Shane won't let them. He thinks weight of world is on his shoulders," Ilya said. "He'll play until collapse. Team thinks he is superstar. They run him ragged."

Yuna's grip tightened. "That's what I'm afraid of. Shane, baby... Don't do this to yourself. Take a break. Don't hurt yourself..."

Three minutes left.

Shane recovered the puck, carried it up ice, weaved through two defenders. His shot went wide, clanging off the post. The arena groaned.

"*So close!*" Yuna shouted, hands pressed to her face.

Ilya's chest ached. He'd watched Shane play dozens of games over the past year, but this one felt different. Heavier. Like the weight of every expectation, every doubt, every whispered comparison to Ilya's own career pressed down on Shane's shoulders.

Two minutes.

New York maintained possession, cycling the puck along the boards, eating clock. Montreal's defense scrambled, but Shane fought harder, stealing the puck and firing it toward the net after a swift shift. The goalie caught it and stopped the play right in its tracks.

Faceoff.

Shane lined up, face red, sweat dripping from his chin. The puck dropped. He won it, passed to Pike down the line, who shot high. New York saved it.

One minute thirty.

"He's playing more than anyone else," Yuna said, voice tight. "Why? Why isn't anyone helping him!?"

Ilya glanced down the bench where Montreal's coach stood, arms crossed, face grim. The other players looked tired, defeated already, like they'd accepted the loss before the clock hit zero. Shane was the only one still trying.

"They're scared," Ilya said. "They think Shane can do it alone."

"He can't." Yuna's voice broke. "He's still a boy. He shouldn't have to carry this by himself. Where the fuck are the grown ass men who should be running their asses off!?"

Ilya's throat closed. He wanted to jump the glass, skate out there, take some of the weight off Shane's shoulders. He couldn't. All he could do was watch.

One minute.

Shane took another shift, barely thirty seconds of rest. His legs shook when he pushed off, but he still moved faster than half the team. He stole the puck from New York's defense, broke toward the net.

"Yes!" Yuna screamed. "Yes, Shane! Go!"

Ilya stood, hands gripping the seat in front of him. "*Come on. Come on.*"

Shane cut left, deked right. The goalie committed. Shane pulled back for the shot.

A defender clipped his skate.

Shane stumbled and fell.

The puck slid free.

New York recovered it, passed it up ice.

"No!" Yuna's voice shattered.

Ilya's stomach dropped.

Shane scrambled to his feet, chased the play, but he couldn't catch up. New York's forward hit the blue line, fired a pass across to his teammate.

One-timer.

The puck rocketed past Montreal's goalie.

Red light. Goal horn.

5-3. New York.

Forty seconds left.

The arena fell silent, a vacuum of sound that hurt worse than the roar. On the ice, Shane stopped skating. He bent forward, hands on his knees, helmet hanging low.

The clock ticked down.

Thirty seconds.

Twenty.

Montreal pulled their goalie, sent out an extra attacker. Shane stayed on the ice, barely standing, but he didn't quit.

Ten seconds.

A final desperate push. Shane took a shot from the blue line. It sailed wide.

Buzzer.

Game over.

Montreal lost.

Shane stayed on the ice, motionless. His teammates skated toward the bench, heads down, defeated, while New York screamed in glory, they'd be moving on to the Stanley Cup finals.

Shane didn't move, at first.

Then, slowly, he dropped to his knees.

Yuna gasped.

Shane ripped off his helmet, slammed it against the ice. Once. Twice. Three times. The crack of plastic against frozen surface echoed through the silent arena.

"Oh no," Yuna whispered. "Oh, Shane..."

Ilya's chest constricted. He watched Shane's shoulders shake, watched him pound his helmet down again, watched the man he loved break apart for the whole country to see.

Yuna stood, fumbling for her purse. "I need to get down there. I need..."

"He won't want you to see him like this," Ilya said quietly, putting an arm out to stop her.

She turned, eyes wet. "He's my son."

"I know." Ilya swallowed hard. "But he'll hate himself more if you see him cry. Or if he sees you cry. He'll think... He disappointed you. Let him grieve. Let him have his moment. He'll come back to us."

Yuna stared at him, something shifting in her expression. She sank back into her seat, hands trembling. She took a deep breath. "You're right."

On the ice, Shane finally stood. He gathered his helmet, skated toward the tunnel with his head down, shoulders hunched.

The crowd offered scattered applause, sympathetic and hollow.

Yuna wiped her eyes. "Thank you. For being here. For being his friend."

"Of course."

"He doesn't have many, you know." She glanced at Ilya, smile sad. "Friends. Just Hayden Pike back in juniors, and even that was... difficult. Shane struggles with people. Always has."

"He's good with me," Ilya said.

"I've noticed." Yuna's gaze sharpened. "He talks about you constantly. Ilya this, Ilya that. I've never seen him so... animated about another person."

Heat crept up Ilya's neck. "He's important to me too."

"Important." Yuna repeated the word slowly, like she was testing its weight. Her eyes searched his face, lingering on the flush in his cheeks, the way his hands twisted together.

Ilya forced himself to meet her gaze. "**Very** important."

Understanding flickered across Yuna's expression. Her mouth parted slightly, but before she could speak, New York started up another rousing round of applause and celebration, drowning out her words.

June 2010 (Montreal Locker Rooms)

Steam coiled around Shane in the Montreal locker room, thick and suffocating. He stood beneath the spray of the team showers, water hammering his back, clothes long shed and forgotten.

The roar of the arena celebrating New York's victory had faded.. The team had cleared out hours ago, defeated, exhausted, already moving on to the post-season.

He hadn't moved on. Shane considered drowning himself in the shower, but the idea of anything but his feet touching the locker room floor was disgusting.

His breath hitched, a raw, broken sob swallowed by the white noise of the shower. A droplet traced a path down his jaw, indistinguishable from the hot tear he wiped away

The sting in his ribs wasn't from the collision on the ice. It was the phantom weight of the Stanley Cup he couldn't lift that year.

The dream he'd had all year flashed behind his eyes: the polished silver gleaming under the arena lights, the crowd's roar turned ecstatic, and then *him*. Ilya, in the front row, standing, clapping, his face lit with pride. Getting invited onto the ice with the rest of the families and partners. Shane crossing the distance in a single heartbeat, skates still on, wrapping his arms around Ilya, pulling him close, kissing him hard and deep, lips and tongue and breathless joy, finally, *finally* out, free, loved.

A fantasy.

A Stanley Cup winner, of course, could be gay. Right? That was allowed? If he was the best, he could have what he wanted and nobody would care? I mean, who's going to treat a star athlete at the top of his game bad, gay or straight?

Most importantly, his mom might be disappointed in a gay son, but she'd be proud of a champion. The bad would cancel out with the good, and he could still be her son. He could still be Shane. She'd still love him. Right?

Yet... All of that was gone, now. A dead dream.

Shane let out another choked sob. He'd spent a year building to this moment, fueled by Ilya's texts, his visits, his steady constant comfort and belief. "*You'll make it. You're ready.*" Ilya's presence on every off-day they could manager, the easy way they fell into each other's rhythms, the way Shane's chest *ached* when Ilya grinned at him from the stands or across a restaurant table or out on the pond fishing, or playing soccer at the park...

...that meant everything.

More than the contracts, more than the goals, more than the approval he craved from coaches or fans. Ilya had become his anchor. The only one who understood Shane, the only one Shane wanted to be with, night or day.

...and now, because he'd failed, because he couldn't move forward... He'd have to spend another year hiding. Because this season proved nothing. He felt hollowed out, worthless. How could he claim love when he was nothing but a loser? A disappointment. To the team, to the city, to his mother's ambitions... To Ilya. He didn't deserve happiness. He didn't deserve to be gay. Not yet. He wasn't good enough.

Footsteps splashed across the wet tiles.

Shane flinched, water sluicing over his face and he tried to cut off his crying. He didn't didn't turn when the other body got close to his own. He kept his face to the stream, shoulders tense, water running down the curve of his spine. Shane tried to think up some excuse to leave.

"You need a shower buddy?" Ilya's voice cut through the steam, calm, almost light.

Shane caught his breath.

The shower's warmth shifted as Ilya stepped into the spray. Shane kept his eyes down, fixed on the grey tile, the water swirling towards the drain. Yet, he couldn't stop his body from seeing. He felt Ilya's presence, the heat radiating from his bare skin. The water ran in rivulets down a powerful back, over broad shoulders, a beautiful waist. Shane's gaze flickered, drawn against his will to the hard plane of Ilya's chest, the dark trail of hair leading lower, the firm lines of his thighs. He stared at Ilya's manhood, which was currently being lathered up, semi-erect from the first few tugs. The sight of him, so unashamed, so *real*, sent a jolt through Shane's core, hot and terrifying.

They stood like that, side by side, the only sound the drumming water and their synchronized breathing.

"You played well," Ilya said finally, his voice low, cutting through the spray. "Very well."

Shane snorted, a wet, broken sound. "I lost."

"You did not lose. Your team lost because your team gave up when things got tough. There is no I in team. All were responsible for loss," Ilya countered, turning slightly. His eyes, intense, met Shane's. "In the second period. Before the third. They saw you carrying them, so they stopped running. They stopped *trying*. They expected you to be a God. But you are not God, Shane. You are human. A brilliant, hardworking human, but still human." He took a half-step closer. "You will learn from loss. They will learn from loss, or so I hope. Next year, it will be different. We are young. Many more chances for Stanley Cup. You'll be fine. I know this for fact."

Shane just stared. Words couldn't form. All he could see was Ilya, glorious and naked, water sheening his skin, his gaze holding Shane's, steady and sure.

Heat, not from the water, flooded Shane's body. It started in his gut, spread outwards, a pressure building behind his ribs until he thought he might fracture.

Because how dare Ilya Rozanov... How dare he know what to say...

Shane pushed off the wall. His legs felt wobbly, unsteady. He took one step towards Ilya, then another. Close enough to feel the heat of his body, close enough to count the water beads on his collarbone and to see the flecks of amber in his hazel eyes.

His heart wasn't just beating. It was *dying*. It was *shattering*.

It was begging to be born.

"I can't wait any longer. Not for a stupid cup. I... I can't."

"I love you," the words tore out of him, raw and desperate, scraping his throat. They hung in the steam, louder than the falling water. "I love you, Ilya." A breath, ragged and sharp. "I'm gay, too. Gay and I love you." I like guys. I like guys, like you.

Another breath, shattering. "I've been in love with you since that first game in Regina. Since the first moment I saw you." The dam broke. "I wanted to win this. I wanted to win for you. I wanted to make it real, to kiss you in front of everyone, to finally *have* it. To win so I could be ME and shut everyone else up. ...but I failed. I'm a loser. I don't deserve... They'll be... Mom..." His voice cracked, thick with tears.

Ilya didn't hesitate.

He closed the distance in a heartbeat. His hands, calloused and strong, framed Shane's face, thumbs brushing the wet tracks on his cheeks. "Don't finish that sentence," he breathed, his own voice thick. "You fool. You deserve all the happiness in the world. ...and then some. Here. Let me prove it to you, my love." Ilya kissed him.

No. Kiss wasn't quite right.

Ilya claimed him, and Shane was a year overdue wanting to be claimed.

A collision of lips and tongues, breath and heat in equal measure, and years of unspoken yearning. Shane gasped into it, his hands flying to Ilya's biceps, clinging to the hard muscle, anchoring himself as the world, the shower, the loss, everything...

The kiss was overwhelming relief. Like he was finally whole. Like someone finally saw him, ALL of him, in his naked truth.

Slowly, Ilya drew back, but kept his forehead pressed to Shane's, their breaths mingling in the humid air. Shane's eyes fluttered open, his cheeks flushed, his lips tingling.

Ilya smiled, soft and breathtaking. "I love you too," he murmured. "I loved you... Before I even met you."

"That's cheating."

"I know. I'm big cheat."

Shane's breath hitched again. A weak, wobbly smile touched his lips. He leaned into Ilya's touch, a shiver running through him that had nothing to do with the water cooling. "Not here. This place sucks," he whispered, his voice barely a breath. He pulled back just enough to look up, his eyes wide, hopeful, seeking. "My place? For... You know?"

Ilya's thumb traced his bottom lip. Another kiss, softer this time, a promise sealed. "Wonderful," he said, his voice a low rumble filled with warmth.

June 2010 (Shane Hollander's Personal Condo)

The condo's blinds were drawn, thin slivers of early morning light cutting across rumpled sheets and discarded clothes. The air still held the musk of sweat and sex, settling over the room, both familiar and new to Ilya at the same time.

Ilya lay on his back, one arm flung wide, the other curled beneath his head. Shane was pressed against his side, half on top of him, breathing slow and deep. A faint sheen of sweat glistened on his shoulder, rising and falling with each breath. One leg was tangled over Ilya's, skin sticking in the heat.

Ilya didn't move. He listened to Shane's breath, felt the steady thump of his heart against his ribs. He could've stayed there forever.

A low chuckle escaped him.

Shane stirred, nuzzling closer, his lips brushing Ilya's collarbone. "What's so funny?"

"Everything," Ilya said, voice rough with sleep and satisfaction. He shifted, drawing Shane tighter against him. "You. Me. This."

Shane lifted his head, propping himself on one elbow. His hair was a mess, his eyes still hazy, but his gaze was sharp. "What about it?"

Ilya traced the line of Shane's jaw with his thumb. "I thought I'd never have this again. Thought I would die with your voice in my head and your name on my lips. I laugh because otherwise I would cry."

Shane's expression softened. He kissed Ilya's thumb. "You've got me now."

"I know." Ilya exhaled, long and slow. "So what do we do next?"

Shane dropped back to the pillow, arm slung over Ilya's chest. "Mom's got this photo shoot for me with a gear company. Tomorrow. Then I'm free."

"I'll tag along."

Shane turned his head, a small, tired smile tugging at his lips. "You better."

Ilya grinned, pressing a kiss to the top of Shane's head. The weight of it, this moment, this man, this second chance, settled deep in his chest.

He wouldn't waste it.

Not this time.

Chapter 4: A Weight Lifted Early

June 2010 (Shane Hollander's Personal Condo)

Shane drifted the very next morning.

Not quite asleep, not quite awake. The kind of dream-like state where the edges of reality blurred, where Ilya's warmth pressed against his side felt both real and like a dream all at once.

As his dazed, his mind started to dream. An eerie dream. Like he'd already lived these moments pass by once before. *Deja vu*.

In the first dream, he watched his father's car pulled away from the curb of a house on the lake that he didn't recognize. Shane stood in the driveway, frozen, watching the taillights disappear around the corner. David's face through the window, pale and shocked, mouth set in a hard line. Not angry. Shocked. Disappointed. Disgusted, maybe. He'd never seen that look on his father's face. He never wanted to.

Shane's chest caved in and he shifted under the covers of his bed.

The dream changed, as the scene bled into the next without warning.

His mother was sitting in the kitchen of their summer home. Back straight, expression unreadable. She didn't say anything. Just looked at him, looked *through* him, then turned and walked out the door.

Her footsteps echoed down the hall, each step a knife in his heart.

Shane tried to follow, but his legs wouldn't move. His voice caught in his throat, strangled by something heavy and wrong.

The door clicked shut behind Yuna.

Silence pressed down like a physical weight, crushing his ribs, squeezing the air from his lungs.

They know. They saw. They hate me.

Nausea rolled through his gut. The kind that made his mouth water, his throat tighten. He doubled over, gasping, but no air came.

"They're leaving. Everyone's leaving. I'm going to be alone. Everyone hates me. My life is over. I have nobody. Nothing."

The walls of his childhood summer home closed in on him, shrinking, suffocating until his mind went light and he had to double over just to breath.

Shane jerked awake.

His eyes snapped open, he let out a scared gasp, chest heaving, sweat slicking his skin. The condo ceiling came into focus above him, familiar and safe, but his heart hammered against his ribs like it wanted to break free.

"Whoa, hey." Ilya's voice, low and steady, cut through the panic. His hand found Shane's shoulder, warm and grounding. "You're okay. You're here."

Shane sucked in a breath, sharp and ragged. His hands trembled where they gripped the sheets. "I..."

"Bad dream?" Ilya shifted closer, propping himself on one elbow. His hair stuck up at odd angles, face creased with sleep, but his eyes were alert, focused entirely on Shane.

Shane nodded, throat too tight for words. The images clung to him, visceral and wrong. His father's car and the shocked expression. His mother's back and her refusal to face him. The silence. God, the silence was the worst.

Ilya's thumb stroked gentle circles on Shane's shoulder. "What did you see?"

"I... I don't know. It was weird." Shane's voice cracked. He swallowed hard, tried again. "I... Was at our summer lakehouse, I think. The one I always went to in my childhood. Dad drove away from some different house and looked sacred of me. Mom was in the kitchen and couldn't look me in the eye. It was like... Like a nightmare."

Ilya's expression softened. He sat up fully, pulling Shane with him until they were facing each other in the tangle of sheets. "Shane..."

"It felt real." Shane's hands shook as he pressed them to his face. "God, it felt so real. Like they... Like the knew I was..."

"You haven't lost them. You will never lose them."

"...but I will." Shane dropped his hands, meeting Ilya's gaze. "When they find out. When everyone finds out. They'll..." He shook. Violently.

"They won't leave you." Ilya's voice carried absolute certainty. His hands found Shane's, threading their fingers together. "Your parents love you. I've seen it. Your mother screams herself hoarse at your games. Your father drove six hours to watch you play in juniors. They gave you everything. They love you, Shane. No matter what."

"That was before they knew I was..."

"Gay?" Ilya squeezed his hands. "You think your mother doesn't suspect? You think your father hasn't noticed?"

Shane stared. "What?"

"Shane." Ilya's mouth curved, gentle and knowing. "You talk about me constantly. You light up when I text. You invited me to stay at your home for Christmas. Your mother looked at me yesterday like she could see straight through to my soul. I think they have... Inkling."

Heat crawled up Shane's neck. "She... she couldn't know. I've been careful. My whole life."

"Maybe." Ilya brought Shane's knuckles to his lips, pressed a kiss there. "Or maybe she knows exactly who you are, and she's waiting for you to trust her enough to tell her yourself. Maybe... She doesn't know how to handle that. Maybe neither of your parents do. Maybe they're scared. Maybe they worry about offending you. It doesn't matter that. They love you. Just as much as I do."

Shane's chest tightened. "You don't know that."

"I know your mother loves you." Ilya's voice dropped, fierce and sure. "I know your father would walk through fire for you. I know that nothing, *nothing* you could tell them would change that."

"...but the dream..."

"Was just a dream." Ilya pulled Shane closer, wrapping his arms around him until Shane's face pressed against his bare chest. "Not real. Not your future. Just fear talking. I swear to you, Shane. On my mother's grave."

Shane's breath shuddered out. He clung to Ilya, fingers digging into warm skin, grounding himself in the steady thump of Ilya's heartbeat beneath his ear.

"I'm scared," Shane whispered.

"I know."

"What if you're wrong? What if they..."

"Then you'll have me." Ilya's hand cupped the back of Shane's head, fingers threading through his hair. "Always. No matter what. Even if the whole world turns away, you'll still have me. I will never leave you. Never. Not unless... The world rips me away from you."

The weight in Shane's chest eased, just a fraction. Just enough to breathe.

He tilted his head back, meeting Ilya's gaze. "Promise?"

"Promise." Ilya smiled, soft and devastating. "Now get some beauty rest. You have photo shoot in few hours, and you still look a bit sex-drunk from last night. We should have stopped after fourth round. Your greed knows no bounds, my love."

A wet laugh bubbled up Shane's throat. "Asshole."

"Your asshole."

"Yeah." Shane settled back against Ilya's chest, letting the warmth and steady rhythm lull him. "Mine."

June 2010 (Montreal Bell Centre Arena)

The Montreal Bell Centre ice rink gleamed under the photography lights lined up, stark blinding white against the black boards. Shane stood at center ice, shirtless, in full bottom hockey gear minus his gloves, stick in hand, CCM logo plastered across every visible surface. The photographer circled like a shark, camera clicking in rapid succession.

"Good, good. Now turn slightly left. Chin up. Perfect."

Ilya watched from the stands, three rows back, arms folded across the seat in front of him. Shane looked professional, polished. He struggled keeping a genuine smile, but he'd gotten better at it over the last year.

These days, Shane was the face of major brands, especially after his stats and performance in his rookie year, even without a cup win. His posture was perfect, expression focused but approachable. The kind of shot that would end up on billboards and magazine spreads and make the hockey gear a fortune with kids that wanted to grow up and be Canada's golden boy.

Ilya smiled. While he would have preferred the old history, with him and Shane doing the ad together, he knew he'd missed his chance back in 2010. Nobody wanted him, and that was fine. He'd already had his chance at the glorious playboy life the last time around. This time, he was happy to start the domestic life early.

"Ilya? Shane managed to corral you here too? Getting your butt here from Ottawa wasn't enough for him?"

He turned.

David Hollander descended the steps, casual in jeans and a button-down, greying hair slightly disheveled like he'd run his hands through it one too many times that morning. He extended his hand when he reached Ilya's row, a wide grin on his face..

"Mr. Hollander." Ilya stood, shook his hand firmly. "Good to see you again."

"David, please, we've been over this. We got drunk on New Year's together and sang bad karaoke, you're practically family." He gestured to the empty seat beside Ilya. "Mind if I sit?"

"Of course not."

They settled in, both watching Shane adjust his stance for another shot. The photographer called for a prop change, someone rushed out with a different stick.

"He looks good out there," David said.

"He does."

"A lot more natural than last year."

"Much more."

There was a brief silence, as David started wringing his hands together.

"Did I hear right? You flew in from Ottawa to see Shane's games and stick around with him after the loss?"

"Drove, actually. Two hours. Not so bad. I would fly, but planes give me... Heebie jeebies. Only take them when I absolutely have to."

David nodded, gaze still fixed on his son. "That's good. The drive, I mean. You guys can see each other a lot easier that way."

"Yes. Is nice."

Silence stretched between them, not uncomfortable, just weighted. Ilya felt David studying him from the corner of his eye.

"Yuna and I talked last night," David said finally. "After the game."

Ilya's pulse kicked up. "Oh?"

"She mentioned something interesting." David shifted in his seat, turning slightly toward Ilya. "Said she got the impression that Shane is... very important to you. **Very** important, she said."

The words hung in the air.

Ilya swallowed, chose his response carefully. "Shane is most important person in my life. Has been for long time now."

David's expression didn't change, but something flickered in his eyes. Understanding, maybe. Or confirmation of what he already suspected was the "truth"..

"Is there more to this than just friendship?" The question came quiet, direct. No judgment in it, just a father seeking truth.

Ilya's hands tightened where they rested on the seat back. Every instinct screamed to deflect, to protect Shane, to keep the secret locked away where it was safe.

Yet, David's gaze held steady. He waited for a response. Ilya was a bad liar to the Hollander parents, and no amount of time travel would ever make that easier. In his mind, he was still awkwardly standing in front of them in his Boston t-shirt at the cottage, hiding behind Shane.

"That is something you should discuss with Shane," Ilya said carefully. "Is not my place to speak for him. All I can say is... Shane is **very** important to me. Like you said. Most important."

David exhaled, slow and measured. He rubbed his face with both hands, then dropped them to his lap. When he looked back at Ilya, his eyes were red-rimmed.

"That's... that's what I thought." His voice cracked slightly. "Yuna suspected. I think... I think we both did, on some level. Just didn't want to assume. Shit. We... We dropped the ball on this one. Poor kid."

Ilya said nothing.

"As long as he's happy." David's throat worked. "That's all Yuna and I care about. That our boy is happy. Loved. Safe." He looked directly at Ilya. "We agree on that. Both of us."

Something in Ilya's chest loosened. "He is. All of those things. Happy. Loved. Safe. I swear to you."

"I believe you." David wiped at his eyes quickly, cleared his throat. "He's lucky to have you. Someone who sees him. Really sees him. Not everyone can get past his... Bluntness."

"I am the lucky one. Make no mistake," Ilya said quietly.

David smiled, watery but genuine. "Still... would you do something for me? For Yuna and I both?"

"Anything."

"Push him to talk to us. When he's ready." David's hands twisted together. "I know my son. He struggles with opening up, always has. Gets stuck in his own head, convinced he's disappointing everyone around him the second he doesn't meet his own crazy expectations. ...but he's not. He could never disappoint us." His voice broke again. "Just... help him understand that. Please."

Ilya nodded, throat tight. "I will. No pushing. I won't ever push him. Not again, not in this lifetime, but... I'll talk to him to talk to you."

"Thank you."

On the ice, Shane laughed at something the photographer said, the sound carrying up through the empty arena. David's face softened watching him, pride and love written clearly across his features.

"He deserves to be free," David murmured. "To live his life without fear. Without hiding."

"He will be," Ilya said. "One day. When he's ready. I'll make sure of it."

"...and when the league tries to eat him alive?"

Ilya turned to meet David's gaze. "Then I will fucking eat them right back."

David met his eyes, held them. "**Good.**"

July 2010 (NHL Awards, Las Vegas)

The Las Vegas theatre, host of that year's NHL awards, throbbed with voices, a packed house of hockey royalty from across North America, packed shoulder to shoulder, smelling of expensive perfumes and champagne. Crystal chandeliers threw fractured light across tuxedos and gowns, across faces Ilya recognized from highlight reels, Stanley Cup celebrations, and from the dear friendships he made in his first life.

Seeing Scott Hutner, off in the corner and drinking his weight in booze from misery and loneliness, sent a deep rumbling in Ilya's chest. The urge to go and hug the man's neck and throw him at a sad smoothie barista was overwhelming.

"No. Now is not time. Act normal. I do this as planned. No rushing. Keep the time as same as possible." Ilya thought to himself, knowing damn well he'd already changed the future many times over, and probably fucked a lot of things up with the stupid "butterflies".

Ilya tugged at his bow tie, the silk strangling his throat. Beside him, Shane sat rigid, hands folded on the table, jaw tight enough to crack teeth. His tux fit perfectly, tailored to every line of his frame, but he wore it like armor.

Across the table, Yuna glowed in a brilliant gold dress, pearls at her throat. David had cleaned up as well in his own well-tailored tux, as he leaned toward Yuna, whispering something that made her smile.

The announcer's voice cut through the noise. "...and now, the award for Rookie of the Year."

Shane's knee bounced once against Ilya's under the table. Ilya pressed back.

"The nominees are..."

Names echoed through the speakers. Shane's among them. Ilya watched his face stay blank, professional, but his fingers tightened against his thigh.

"...and the winner is... Shane Hollander, Montreal Voyageurs!"

The theatre erupted. Applause crashed over them like a wave. Yuna's hands flew to her mouth, tears already spilling. David shot to his feet, clapping hard enough to hurt. Ilya slapped his hand on Shane's shoulder.

Shane blinked like he'd misheard.

"Go!" Ilya murmured, nudging his shoulder. "They're waiting."

Shane stood on autopilot, legs carrying him toward the stage while his brain lagged behind. The crowd rose around him, a sea of standing bodies, and then the chant started.

"ROOK! ROOK! ROOK!"

The sound built, thunderous, shaking the rafters. Veterans Ilya had watched play for years in both his past and present life joined in, grinning, fists pumping. Shane climbed the stairs, accepted the glass plaque from the presenter, held it up with both hands.

The cameras flashed, blinding white bursts. Shane's mouth moved, probably saying thank you, probably hitting all the right notes he'd rehearsed with Yuna for an acceptance peace. Ilya couldn't hear any of it over the roar or from the pride he felt blooming in his chest.

When Shane returned, plaque clutched against his chest, he sank into his chair, bright red and struggling to catch his breath.

Ilya leaned close. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Shane's voice came out flat, distant. His eyes tracked the room, cataloging exits, escape routes.

The awards dragged on. More categories, more speeches, more polite applause. Shane's leg resumed its bounce, faster now, heel tapping against the floor in a rhythm only he could hear.

Yuna reached across the table, squeezed his hand. "So proud of you, sweetheart."

Shane managed a smile. It didn't reach his eyes.

Two hours later, the theatre doors opened onto the after-party. Music spilled into the hallway, bass thumping through the walls. Bodies pressed together inside, drinks flowing, laughter too loud to be genuine.

Shane stopped in the doorway.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah. Fine." Shane's gaze swept the room, caught on the crush of people, the cameras still flashing in corners, the scouts and agents and sponsors circling like sharks. "Just... a lot."

Ilya studied the tension in Shane's shoulders, the way his hand gripped the plaque like a shield. "Want to do a quick round? Say hello, shake hands, then get somewhere more our style?"

Shane's exhale came sharp with relief. "God, yes."

"Your parents okay with that?"

Shane turned to Yuna and David, who'd followed them out. "You guys mind if we bail early? I'll play nice for a bit, shake hands, you know, I just... had a lot today."

"Of course not." Yuna kissed his cheek, careful not to smudge him with makeup. "Go. Have fun. You earned it."

David clapped his shoulder. "We'll see you tomorrow for brunch."

They waded into the party, Ilya leading with Shane half a step behind. The crowd parted for them, congratulations thrown from all sides. Shane nodded, smiled, said thank you on repeat until the words lost meaning.

Thirty minutes later, the crowd closed in tighter. Congratulations blurred together from faces Shane barely registered. Agents pressed business cards into his palm. Scouts asked about his offseason training plans.

Ilya stayed close, a constant presence at Shane's elbow.

"That's Rozanov, right?" A voice cut through, loud and carrying. "Ottawa's pick?"

They turned. A cluster of scouts stood near the champagne fountain, glasses in hand, ties loosened.

The two probably thought they were whispering, but their drunkenness meant they were doing nothing but.

"Hell of a fall from grace." The man, grey-haired with a Colorado pin on his lapel, shook his head. "First overall to ninth. **Ouch.**"

His companion, younger, laughed. "Heard he tanked the Boston interview on purpose. Called them a 'pussy team' or something."

"Language," the older scout muttered, but his grin said he agreed.

"Still." A third voice joined, a woman with sharp eyes and a Toronto badge. "You have to admit the kid is talented. He raised the Ottawa stats single-handedly this year. He's got talent..."

Ilya's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Shane's hand found his elbow, squeezed once.

"Although," the woman continued, voice dropping to a stage whisper that carried anyway, "There's talk he did it all on purpose. Pissing off Boston, making nice with Ottawa... All to stay close to Montreal."

The Colorado scout snorted. "Why the hell would he do that?"

"Friends with Hollander, apparently." She gestured with her glass toward Shane. "They've been thick as thieves since World Juniors. They go to each other's games. Makes sense, since

they're both the brightest players in their generation. Some people think Rozanov's even holding back in Ottawa, planning to get traded to Montreal once his rookie contract's up with everyone thinking he's just second rate, nobody making a fuss of it, and then, BAM, multi-million contract and one hell of a team to show for it. Inside job."

The younger scout leaned in. "That's pretty smart, actually. Tank your draft stock, get picked by a garbage team, coast for two years, then demand a trade to your buddy's team. A buddy who's Rookie of the Year. Montreal gets a first-overall talent without anyone ever noticing and they have one hell of a good season. Not to mention all the under the table agreements that go on with sponsors."

"If it's true," the woman said, "it's brilliant. Unethical as hell, but brilliant."

Shane's grip on Ilya's elbow turned white-knuckled.

Ilya pulled free, gentle but firm. He stepped forward, smile easy, eyes hard.

"Is very creative theory," he said, voice loud, to carry, so they could all hear him. "Wrong, but creative."

The scouts turned, surprise flickering across their faces, realizing how loudly they'd been gossiping.

"I'm not holding back," Ilya continued. "I'm playing my best. Ottawa is just... Ottawa. We'll get better. Takes time. Good team."

The Boston scout raised his glass. "Sure, kid. Whatever you say."

Ilya's smile didn't waver.

Shane's face burned angrily as they pushed through the doors into the hallway and leaving the event. The noise cut off, replaced by the muffled bass from the party.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

"They think you're throwing games." Shane's voice came tight, furious. "They think you're using Ottawa as a stepping stone. They're calling you unethical, and all you did was just... Smile?!"

"Let them think what they want. They're scouts, what the fuck do I care about them?"

"It's bullshit."

"Is gossip from drunks." Ilya shrugged. "Means nothing."

Shane stared at him. "Doesn't it bother you?"

Ilya's expression softened. He reached up, tucked a strand of hair behind Shane's ear. "Only thing that bothers me is that you're upset."

Shane's throat worked. "I just... I don't want people thinking you're dirty. Because you're not. You're... You're so much more than that.."

"Then we prove them wrong. Takes time to prove wrong in this league, but is possible. I have seen before, and I will see again." Ilya's thumb traced Shane's jaw. "Simple."

"Yeah." Shane exhaled, shoulders dropping. "Simple."

"Come on," Ilya said finally. "Let's get out of here."

They said their goodbyes, fought back through the crowd toward the exit. The Vegas heat hit them like a wall when they stepped outside, dry and thick even at night.

July 2010 (Las Vegas Hotel Lobby)

Their hotel lobby gleamed with polished marble and brass fixtures. Morning light filtered through floor-to-ceiling windows, catching on crystal vases filled with white orchids. The place smelt of morning booze, overcooked hashbrowns, and the shampoo that he and Ilya shared together in the shower just a few hours ago.

Shane sat across from Ilya at a corner table with his parents, tucked away from the main dining area where reporters from last night's event might lurk, both of them with plates piled high from the complimentary buffet. He'd worked up an appetite after their "activities" in the shared hotel room.

Yuna set down her coffee cup, the porcelain clicking against the saucer. "So what are you boys planning for the off-season? Any exciting adventures?"

Shane glanced at Ilya, who was spreading jam on toast. "I'm going to show Ilya around Montreal properly. Tourist stuff. Maybe hit up some of the museums, Old Montreal, that kind of thing."

"That sounds lovely." Yuna's smile widened. "Your father and I could recommend some..."

"We're good, Mom." Shane's fingers drummed against his water glass. "Figured we'd just... explore. See what we find."

David leaned back in his chair. "What about you, Ilya? No plans to head back to Russia? Or even Ottawa?"

Ilya shook his head. "My father and brother and I are still not on speaking terms, so I have no desire. Working on my Canadian citizenship, so every day spent here counts towards my goals. As for Ottawa... Well, most of Centaurs team is gone for season break, too. Wives, girlfriends, families. Everyone scattered. Might as well hang around here."

"You're both welcome at our summer lake house anytime," David offered. "We'll be there most of July. We'd love to have you both."

"Thank you. Is generous." Ilya met Shane's eyes across the table. "Though I think Shane and I might do our own camping trip. Get away from cities for a bit."

Shane nodded, warming to the idea. "Yeah, actually. That sounds perfect. Been meaning to check out some of the provincial parks."

Yuna tilted her head, studying them both. "Just the two of you? Out in the wilderness? Alone and unsupervised?" A gentle smile crossed her face.

Heat crept up Shane's neck. His mind flashed back to the conversation he and Ilya had a month prior. David's knowing look, the careful way he'd asked about their friendship.

"They really do suspect. They know something's different."

Shane forced himself to meet his mother's gaze. "Yeah. Just us. Ilya's never really done the whole Canadian camping thing. Figured I'd show him proper wilderness, not just the sanitized resort version."

"I see." Yuna's expression stayed neutral, but something flickered in her eyes. Understanding, maybe. Or acceptance.

The silence stretched.

David cleared his throat. "Well, camping's good. Builds character. Just remember to pack proper gear. Weather can turn nasty even in summer."

"We will. I'll make sure to prepare backup plans for everything." Shane grabbed his fork, attacked his eggs. Anything to avoid the weight of his parents' combined attention.

Ilya continued spreading jam far beyond what jam should be spread for. "I am also thinking about real estate. Maybe buy place in Montreal area. Ottawa is fine for now, but..." He shrugged. "Future planning. Or I be landlord."

"Smart move." David nodded. "Market's decent right now. Shane's been looking too, haven't you?"

"Yeah." Shane swallowed his mouthful. "Nothing serious yet. Just browsing listings, getting a feel for what's out there. Mom's been sending me options. I like the idea of real estate. Need to start thinking of a career past hockey, and there's a lot of money to be made."

"Lots of options," Yuna said. "Though you keep dismissing all my suggestions."

"Because they're all downtown high-rises. I want something with space. Maybe a yard."

Ilya's foot pressed against Shane's under the table. Light pressure, barely there, but Shane felt it like a brand.

"What kind of space?" Yuna asked.

Shane's throat went dry. He thought about the future he wanted, the one he could barely admit to himself. A place big enough for two. Room to breathe. Privacy. A yard for a dog. Maybe a cat. Extra rooms for... If children were ever in the mix.

"Just... somewhere quiet. Away from the crowds."

"Makes sense." David cut into his pancakes. "You've got years of noise ahead of you. Good to have a retreat."

Ilya set down his knife. "Same for me. I like idea of house, not apartment. Somewhere to..." He paused, choosing words carefully. "Build life."

Yuna's gaze sharpened. She looked between them, eyes tracking the small space separating their chairs, the way Shane's posture had shifted to angle toward Ilya, the ghost of a smile playing at Ilya's mouth.

Shane's pulse kicked up.

"She sees it. God, she sees everything."

...but Yuna just picked up her coffee again. "Well, you're both young. Plenty of time to figure out what you want. There's no rush. You should both take your time, and when you're ready to... Commit, I suppose, just know we'll be there for you. To help you navigate what comes next."

The knot in Shane's chest loosened a fraction.

Then... *The damn deja vu again.*

Though this time, it wasn't a vision and was more like a feeling. Like a phantom pair of arms wrapping around his shoulders and hugging him tightly. His mother's arms.

"You have nothing to apologize for..."

"Look at me... Look at me..."

"I'm sorry that I made you feel like you couldn't tell me."

"Please forgive me."

"I love you."

Shane's hands trembled against the white tablecloth. The phantom embrace faded, but the warmth lingered, settling deep in his chest.

He looked at his mother. For a brief moment, she looked almost a decade older, and a decade sadder in that light, with softly graying hair. Then, in a flash, she was herself again.

Yuna met his gaze, coffee cup paused halfway to her lips. Waiting, but never pressing or pushing.

"Mom." His voice cracked. He cleared his throat, tried again, and cracked it once more.
"Dad."

David set down his fork. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Shane's fingers twisted together. "I just... there's something I need to tell you. Both of you."

Ilya's foot pressed harder against his under the table, grounding and supporting him.

Yuna lowered her cup slowly. "Okay."

Shane's chest constricted. thirty seconds. A minute. Almost two before he was able to speak. They all waited for him as the words stuck in his throat, heavy and terrifying, but he forced them out anyway.

"I'm gay."

Silence.

The restaurant around them hadn't stopped for a second, with people still laughing and talking, the buffet getting raided, and the clink of forks against plates. Though, at their table? Time stopped.

Shane plowed forward before he lost his nerve. "Ilya and I... We've been officially together since the last game of the season against New York. Since the loss, but I've had feelings for him since Regina. We texted basically every day from Regina until he came out to Montreal to support me in the playoffs. Since then, he hasn't left my side. He's been there for me through the worst days of my life." His voice gained strength. "I love him. I'm in love with him. I have been for a long time."

Yuna's eyes glistened. She reached across the table, hand extended.

Shane took it, fingers shaking. "I'm sorry... I know I never really tried with a girl, but I know that I... I know this is me, I promise you. I promise it's not a phase, it's not a..."

"Oh, sweetheart." Her voice broke. She stood, moved around the table, pulled Shane into her arms. "You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing. Not a thing in the world."

Shane's throat closed. He buried his face in her shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of jasmine and home. Her hug was genuine. Just as much as her words. Relief flooded Shane's body.

"She still loves me..."

"I'm so happy you found someone as good as Ilya," Yuna murmured. "Someone who sees you. Who loves you. That's all I ever wanted for you. To have someone as good to you as David is to me," She pulled back, cupped his face in both hands. "I love you Shane. I will never stop loving you. I'm so proud of the man you're becoming, and..." She stopped, unable to finish the words, but Shane understood as they embraced again.

David stood, crossed to them. His hand landed on Shane's shoulder, squeezed. "I'm proud of you, son."

Shane looked up, vision blurred. "You... you are?"

"Hell yes I am." David's voice roughened. "Takes real courage to be honest with yourself. To choose love over fear. Especially in hockey and sports." He glanced at Ilya. "You picked well. I approve."

Ilya rose, moved to Shane's side. His hand found the small of Shane's back. "I will love him forever," he said quietly. "Until my dying day. I swear this to you both."

Yuna pulled Ilya into the embrace. David joined them. The four of them stood there in the corner of the hotel restaurant, wrapped around each other, while other diners, already drunk on morning mimosas, barely paid them any mind.

Shane's breath hitched. A sob escaped, then another. Relief flooded through him, overwhelming and bright.

"It's like..." He struggled for words. "I can finally breathe."

"Then breathe," Yuna whispered. "Breathe the fresh air as much as you want."

Chapter 5: The New Revelation

August 2011

Ilya: *How's pre-season treating you?*

Shane: *Exhausting. New conditioning coach is brutal. Pretty sure he's trying to kill us. I miss summer camping. Even when the tent collapsed and we got rained on and slept in the mud. I miss it. :(*

Ilya: *Training will make you better! You are tough, you can handle this, my love. :)*

Shane: *Easy for you to say. You're not doing suicide drills until you puke.*

Ilya: *I am doing worse. Brandon has us doing team building exercises. Yesterday we had to compliment each other for hour straight as we went around in circle. HOUR. I ran out of nice things to say after ten minutes. Had to start lying.*

Shane: *That's kind of sweet though.*

Ilya: *Is torture.*

Shane: *Your team is soft.*

Ilya: *My team has FEELINGS. There is difference. When they become good, they will be good AND have FEELINGS. Then you join us because we will be best team in league and worthy of you.*

Shane: *Whatever helps you sleep at night.*

Ilya: *You help me sleep at night. ;)*

Shane: *Gross.*

Ilya: *You love it.*

Shane: *...maybe.*

September 2011

Shane: *Mom's been asking questions.*

Ilya: *What kind of questions?*

Shane: *About us. When we're going to tell the team. The league. She keeps saying "when you're ready" but I can tell she wants to know when that'll be. I think she wants to get ahead of everything. I also think she wants to get us rainbow sponsorships. >_>*

Ilya: *What did you tell her?*

Shane: *That I don't know. That I'm not ready to deal with it, because I'm still dealing with the fact that I'm out to them. That I'm enjoying the peace I have right now. Just being gay, finally, is nice. I don't want all the publicity that comes with it. Is that bad?*

Ilya: *No. Is honest. You should always be honest.*

Shane: *You're not mad?*

Ilya: *Why would I be mad?*

Shane: *Because I'm still hiding. Because we can't just... be us. In public. We've still got our feet in the closet.*

Ilya: *Shane. Listen to me. I am not mad. I will never be mad about this. You take whatever time you need. No pressure from me. Ever. I learned hard way what it means to be impatient a long time ago.*

Shane: *But what if I'm never ready? What if years pass and I'm still too scared?*

Ilya: *Then we deal with it. Together. I chose you. I chose this. I knew what I was signing up for.*

Shane: *I don't deserve you.*

Ilya: *Shut up. You deserve everything.*

October 2011

Ilya: *THREE WINS. THREE GAMES. IN A ROW. ON OPENING WEEK! THEY CAN BE TAUGHT SHANE, THEY CAN BE TAUGHT! OUR PRE-SEASON TRAINING WAS NOT IN VAIN!*

Shane: *Congrats. Want me to order you a banner? Ottawa wins more than one consecutive game in a row for the first time in ever? ;)*

Ilya: *Shut up. This is big deal for us. >:(We are GOOD this year.*

Shane: *Sorry, couldn't help it. ;) Besides, you've always been good, Ilya. You could have made that happen last year.*

Ilya: *Truth is, I wanted team to get better before I gave my all. One player does not make team. Creates bad expectations. All must learn and grow, or none.*

Ilya: *Not anymore, though. Team has learned good skills, got fundamentals under Wiebe both mental and physical, and I'm helping fill in the gaps and teaching them where they lack. Our draft this year was solid, we get excellent goalie. We're going to be best team in league.*

Shane: *Best team in the league? Ottawa? Really?*

Ilya: *Yes. Really. You'll see. We're building something special here. Something worth being proud of.*

Shane: *Are you trying to recruit me or something?*

Ilya: *Maybe. Is it working?*

Shane: *If Ottawa ever gets as good as Montreal... I'd go free agent the second my contract was over. I'd love to be part of a new winning legacy. With you. <3*

Ilya: *You mean that?*

Shane: *Yeah. I mean it.*

Ilya: *Then I better start playing even harder.*

November 2011

Shane: *Hayden's been weird lately. I think since he married Jackie he's gotten some brain cells. Or Jackie is feeding him social cues to pick up. I don't like it. :(*

Ilya: *Weird how?*

Shane: *Asking about my personal life. Who I'm dating. If there's anyone special. He knows I don't talk about that stuff. Why'd he got to start bringing it up now?*

Ilya: *What did you say?*

Shane: *That I'm focused on hockey. He didn't buy it.*

Ilya: *Do you think he suspects?*

Shane: *Maybe? I don't know. He keeps making these comments about how I'm different now. Happier.*

Ilya: *You ARE happier.*

Shane: *I know. That's the problem. People are noticing.*

Ilya: *Is not problem. Is good thing.*

Shane: *Easy for you to say. You're not the one fielding questions.*

Ilya: *I get questions too. Team asks why I visit Montreal so much. Why I smile at phone when you text. Why I leave immediately after games to drive two hours. There are whispers.*

Shane: *What do you tell them?*

Ilya: *That I have friend there. Very good friend. They accept it.*

Shane: *Do they really?*

Ilya: *Yes. Because is truth. You ARE very good friend. Also happens you are love of my life, but they don't need to know that part yet.*

Shane: *Yet.*

Ilya: *Yet. One day, when you're ready, we tell them. Until then, we keep doing what we're doing.*

Shane: *I want to tell them. I do.*

Ilya: *Scared. I know. Is okay to be scared.*

Shane: *You're never scared.*

Ilya: *I'm terrified every day. Of losing you. Of saying wrong thing. Of world finding out before you're ready and ruining everything we've built. I'm scared of you having broken heart.*

Shane: *Really?*

Ilya: *Really. But I'm more scared of NOT being with you. So I push fear aside and focus on what matters. You.*

Shane: *I love you.*

Ilya: *I love you too. Always.*

December 2011

Ilya: *Christmas at your parents' house again this year?*

Shane: *If you want. They'd love to have you.*

Ilya: *I want. Nowhere else I'd rather be.*

Shane: *Mom's already planning the menu. She's making your favorite.*

Ilya: *The roast with potatoes?*

Shane: *And the pie. Apple, right?*

Ilya: *Your mother is saint.*

Shane: *She really likes you.*

Ilya: *Good. Because I'm not going anywhere.*

Shane: *Promise?*

Ilya: *Promise. You're stuck with me forever.*

Shane: *Good.*

Ilya: *What do you want for Christmas?*

Shane: *Remember what we did during our time off after the Ottawa game where we creamed you? When you used the fuzzy handcuffs and gagged me with your you-know-what? ;)*

Ilya: *Oh. You sure you want that? Would be difficult to unwrap in front of your parents. If you insist, I'll just take off all your clothes, wrap you up in red ribbon and leave you under tree for all to see my beautiful, sexy man. :)*

Shane: *Don't ever say anything sexy in the same sentence with my parents or I will leave you.*

Ilya: *Yes Sir.*

February 2012

Shane: *Montreal GM is asking if I want to bring a date to the charity gala next month. I get the feeling it's not optional. That or they don't trust me in social situations alone. :(*

Ilya: *What did you say?*

Shane: *That I'd think about it.*

Ilya: *Do you want to bring someone?*

Shane: *I want to bring you.*

Ilya: *Then bring me.*

Shane: *As what? My friend? My boyfriend?*

Ilya: *As whatever you're comfortable with. I don't care what we call it. I just want to be there with you. Any time with you is good time.*

Shane: *People will talk. People already talk because we show up for each other's games when we can. They call us "Hockey Buddies" and think we're best friends.*

Ilya: *Let them. We are best friends. Very best friends, with special benefits. :)*

Shane: *You make it sound so easy. It's frustrating, sometimes, you know? You're always so... Easygoing. Like you've done all this before.*

Ilya: *Is easy. You invite me. I come. We have good time. End of story.*

Shane: *What if they figure it out? What if someone asks what our relationship is? I don't want to lie. Not about you.*

Ilya: *Then they figure it out. We deal with it together. Or you can invite lady friend, like actress you met, Miss Rose, and make them happy. I would trust you with her. She is nice lady, but I'd ask you make sure she knows you are taken.*

Shane: *You're too patient with me.*

Ilya: *No such thing as too patient when it comes to you.*

March 2012 (Montreal)

The hotel ballroom entrance gleamed with spotlights and white marble. Ilya tugged at his tie, navy silk (stolen from Shane years ago) perfectly straight. Beside him, Shane adjusted his cufflinks for the third time, jaw tight beneath the forced smile he'd practiced in the mirror.

Their suits matched without coordinating. Both charcoal grey, both tailored that showed their impressive figures. Ilya's tie matched Shane's pocket square. Anyone paying attention would notice.

"Ready?" Shane's voice came quiet.

"Born ready."

They crossed the threshold together. The venue sprawled before them, crystal chandeliers throwing fractured light across tables draped in white linen. Hockey bigwigs filled the space, from high profile players, coaches, executives, owners, all dressed to impress and deep into champagne or other expensive booze.

A reporter materialized before they'd taken five steps. Young guy, eager face, recorder thrust forward.

"Shane Hollander!" He grinned like he'd won the lottery. "Everyone already knows who your plus-one is for tonight, your longtime friend since World Juniors, but care to comment on why you'd bring him over anyone else? We hear that you and actress Rose Landry got quite close during a fundraising event a few months back." He gestured at Ilya with his free hand.

Ilya watched Shane's expression smooth into something pleasant and practiced.

"Brought one of my biggest fans and dearest friends with me tonight." Shane's delivery came easy, rehearsed. "Ilya and I don't get much time together with our schedules unless we're playing each other. Figured this was a good excuse."

The reporter's grin widened. He turned to Ilya. "How does it feel being best friends with Shane Hollander? Montreal's golden boy and the 2011 Rookie of the Year?"

Ilya let his mouth curve. "Is great honor. Shane makes me better player. Better person." He clapped Shane's shoulder. "Lucky to have him."

"We make each other better." Shane added, with a surprised look on his face as the words left his lips. "That's what... Good rivals do, you know?"

"You two are quite the pair. The 'Hockey Buddies,' as people call you." The reporter leaned in conspiratorially. "Any truth to the rumors you're planning a trade to Montreal using Shane as your inside man?"

"Rumors are just rumors," Ilya said. "I am happy in Ottawa. Our record this year is impeccable, and we are in top fourth of teams this year. We will surprise everyone soon with performance in playoffs. This I promise you."

"Sure, sure." The reporter waved them through, clearly not believing a word about Ottawa. "Have a great night, gentlemen."

They moved past him into the ballroom proper.

The space opened up, vast and overwhelming. Round tables circled a dance floor that nobody had touched yet. A string quartet played something classical from a raised platform. Servers in black vests circulated with champagne flutes and hors d'oeuvres.

Shane's hand found the small of Ilya's back, pressure light and fleeting, gone before anyone could clock it.

"That wasn't so bad," Shane murmured.

"Was easy." Ilya scanned the crowd, cataloging faces. Montreal's management clustered near the bar. Ottawa's owners held court at a corner table. "Told you it would be."

"You tell me a lot of things."

"All true."

Shane's mouth twitched. "Conceited."

"Accurate."

They found their assigned table near the center. Name cards marked their seats, Shane's between the Montreal GM and a league executive, Ilya's next to a sports journalist and an Ottawa executive.

Ilya pulled out Shane's chair. The gesture earned them a few glances, but nobody said anything.

"Thanks," Shane said, sitting.

Ilya settled beside him, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched. Close enough that Shane's cologne cut through the ambient perfume and champagne.

Though... Ilya's mind drifted. Here they were, just about to head into the playoff season, and... He was nervous. More nervous than he'd ever been.

Ottawa's record stood at something he'd never imagined possible this early into this second life. Fourteen wins above last year's total at this point in the season. Brandon's patient coaching combined with Ilya's veteran instincts and brutal guidance as the team's Captain had built something solid. The younger players absorbed everything he taught them, hungry for knowledge, eager to prove themselves. The veterans, not willing to go out of their careers outdone by Ilya, had put their whole back into it.

They could make the playoffs this year. Not just scrape in as underdogs, but actually compete. If Ilya pushed harder, if he gave everything, he knew there was a chance they could take the cup. Do the impossible and go from zeros in the league to the reigning champions.

His gaze slid sideways to Shane, who listened politely to the NHL rep droning about league expansion and asking Shane's opinion on "inclusivity" with the Asian audience. Shane's profile stayed perfectly neutral, professional mask firmly in place.

The memory hit Ilya sharp and sudden.

Shane's face twisted in anguish, tears streaming as Montreal's management cornered him in an office after he came out with "stipulations" of him being gay. Worse words came from his fellow players, who'd made complaints to management about "comfort levels" in showers and locker rooms. Then, the commissioner himself, Croswell. Who'd all but insisted Shane go back into the closet, *or else*. The words had carved something out of Shane that never fully healed. It built a fear that forever changed his love, and that no amount of love had been able to heal. At least, as far as Ilya knew, he wasn't able to see the end of his first lifetime's story.

Except that hadn't happened yet.

Might never happen.

Ilya wasn't hated in this timeline, not as he had been in the old one. They were seen as "best friends", so that would also change the narrative. Hell, this timeline had already shifted in countless small ways he'd never been able to predict.

Shane had come out to his parents earlier, with less trauma and more support all around. Maybe Montreal would be the same way.

...but Ilya couldn't count on that. Couldn't assume Montreal would handle Shane's eventual revelation with grace just because other things had changed. No, he wouldn't gamble like that. Never.

So he'd built a safety net. His "plan" for this second lifetime.

Ilya made Ottawa into something worth joining. Created a team culture where Shane could thrive as a gay man, could be himself, could have both hockey and happiness without choosing between them.

The other people from Ilya's old life floated through his thoughts. Players who'd suffered under cruel coaches, been traded like commodities, burned out young and bitter. Troy, Ryan, Luca, Harris, and all the rest of his former teammates on Ottawa in the past. If he could give

them something better here, something kinder, then maybe this second chance meant more than just saving himself and Shane. Maybe he could save the league itself.

Because if the best damn team in the league, with multiple Stanley Cups under their belt, and the best players of the generation, was a fruit salad, they couldn't exactly be anti-gay, could they?

Ottawa could be that place. Weibe was already making it open and accepting. Ilya and Shane could give them the skill and recognition.

"It will work... It has to." Ilya thought to himself.

The Montreal executive, one of the team's General Managers, settled into the chair on Shane's other side, greeting him with the blunt nod and a glare towards Ilya.

An Ottawa executive took the remaining seat at their table, nodding at Ilya. "Hell of a season you're having, Rozanov."

"Team effort," Ilya said. "We all work hard."

"Humble too. Didn't expect that from a Russian star. Always thought you'd be angrier and meaner, you know? From what I'm here, you're a kitten."

Ilya's smile stayed pleasant despite the casual prejudice. "Always full of surprises."

Shane's hand appeared briefly on Ilya's knee under the table, pressure firm and reassuring before withdrawing. Nobody noticed. Nobody ever did.

The servers began distributing salads, and conversation shifted to safer topics. Hockey stats. Trade rumors.

Ilya participated when required, laughed at appropriate moments, played his role perfectly, but underneath it all, the weight of two timelines pressed against his chest.

Because the future was coming, and he was struggling to predict it.

The wait staff cleared their salads, replaced them with entrées. Steam rose from Shane's grilled chicken and Ilya's steak.

The Ottawa executive cut into his own steak, knife scraping porcelain.

"League's changing," the Montreal GM said, voice carrying across the table. "Faster game now. More skill-based. Got to have a hockey IQ or you're doomed. Explains why we're having such issues this year. Except for Hollander and maybe Pike, we're struggling teaching that."

The Ottawa executive nodded. "Agreed. It's been a struggle in Ottawa, but Rozanov has helped out plenty in that regard. Toughened up our boys, too. That, combined with Weibe's coaching, we're a great unit this year."

Montreal's GM chuckled. "Yeah, but... Well, no offense to Ottawa, but maybe you'd be even better off not taking everything Weibe talks about into practice."

Ilya froze. He glanced over at the GM. Then, in terror, he realized he'd seen that man before. Among the many of the managers that had beaten Shane down with a verbal assault.

"Like what?" Shane's voice came measured, polite.

"Team culture." Montreal's GM dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "Locker room dynamics. Brotherhood. That kind of thing."

Ilya's fork paused halfway to his mouth.

"I don't know what you mean..." the Ottawa executive said, shaking his head. "Perhaps we should move onto another topic, and...."

Montreal's GM leaned back. "I'm saying you can't have guys worrying about... outside influences."

Shane's jaw tightened. "What kind of influences?"

"You know." The GM waved his hand. "Political stuff. Social agendas. Keep it about hockey. Some things don't belong in the sport," He took a long drink. "Take this whole Pride Night trend. Rainbow tape. Unnecessary. We're here to play hockey, not make f*****s feel like they belong with real men."

Ilya set down his fork, careful and deliberate.

Shane's knuckles whitened around his knife.

"I mean, imagine." Montreal's GM laughed, sharp and ugly. "Some guy prancing around the locker room, checking out his teammates in the shower, making them feel uncomfortable or doing worse and assaulting them. Can't have that. Ruins team chemistry." A little drunk by that point, he snorted. "Like any gay man could survive hockey culture anyway. Too soft. This is a man's game. Not for the faint of heart or the limp-wristed." A loud, barking laugh followed.

Ottawa's executive, as well as most of the table, didn't laugh along.

Shane's face flushed red.

Ilya turned toward him, surprised by the rage building behind Shane's eyes. Not fear. Not shame.

Pure anger.

"Excuse me?" Shane's voice cut through the conversation like a blade.

The Montreal GM blinked. "What?"

"You just said gay men can't play hockey." Shane set down his silverware, each piece landing with precision. "That they're too soft."

"Well, I mean..." The GM shifted. "It's just biology. Hockey requires..."

"What exactly does it require?" Shane's voice stayed level, deadly. "Because one of the best player in this league is gay. He loves a man. He's sitting right here. He's been carrying your sad excuse of a team for almost two years as they sit on the bench and scratch their asses. A gay man who's rookie contract is about to be up."

Silence crashed across the table.

None more surprised than Ilya.

Because never, in his long life, did he think Shane would have ever come out of the closet to the league. Not this fast. Not this early. In the old life... Nothing short of being outed, forcibly, had made Shane even admit they were dating.

The GM's face went pale.

Ilya, finally brought back to reality, reached out, grabbed Shane's hand and gripped it, tight. He took a deep breath, smiled, and worked to support his boyfriend. "Though I'm not gay, I am bisexual. I also love a man. I love Shane. I've loved Shane for a long time. I'd say... I am not weak or "limp wristed" either. Unless you wish to say to my face, yes?"

The GM was stone cold sober in an instant, scrambling to find words to speak or how to handle this newly formed PR nightmare.

"...and you know what else?" Shane pushed his chair back, stood. "You want to talk about soft?" Shane's hands trembled, but his voice stayed steady. "I've played through broken ribs. Concussions. Separated shoulder. All while listening to executives like you drone on about traditions and brotherhood while you treat your players like commodities and sit on your ass counting money or backseat coaching when you don't know a damn thing about the game."

Ilya rose, moved to Shane's side. Pride swelled in his chest.

"I'm done being calm," Shane continued. "Done pretending this is acceptable. You want to know what ruins team chemistry? Executives who think homophobia is just 'locker room talk.' Players too scared to be themselves because of dinosaurs like you. That's why we leave. That's why we don't fight for you."

The Montreal GM stood, chuckling nervously. "Shane, I think you're overreacting... Why don't we lower our voices, and..."

"Sit down." Shane's voice cracked like a whip, and the GM was back in his seat in an instant. "You've talked enough. Shut up, finish your drink, and text your boss about how you lost Shane fucking Hollander from Montreal."

Ilya's hand found the small of Shane's back.

Shane's gaze swept the table. Other diners had turned, conversations dying. He grabbed Ilya's hand, laced their fingers together.

"I will **NEVER** play for you again." Shane spat. "Come on," Shane said. "Let's dance."

Ilya followed, heart hammering. They crossed the floor toward the empty dance space. The string quartet had transitioned to something slower, a waltz that filled the cavernous room.

"Shane," Ilya murmured. "You don't have to..."

"I want to." Shane pulled him close, one hand settling at Ilya's waist, the other gripping his palm. "I'm so tired of them. Of all of them."

They began to sway, slow circles across polished wood. Around them, whispers erupted. Cameras appeared. Flashes flickered.

Shane didn't flinch.

"They're such idiots," he said, voice low enough that only Ilya could hear.

"Shane." Ilya pulled him closer, felt Shane's breath against his throat. "You need to calm down."

"No." Shane's grip tightened. "I'm done being calm. Done carrying Montreal and taking their disrespect. Done hiding who I am. The best years of my life has been because of you and my parents know I'm gay. So why shouldn't the best years of my hockey career follow the same logic?"

The music swelled.

Strings soared. They turned together, perfectly matched.

"I love you," Shane whispered. "...and I'm done pretending I don't."

The song built toward its crescendo. Shane's eyes locked on Ilya's, fierce and certain.

Then he leaned in.

Their lips met in the center of the ballroom, surrounded by hockey's elite, by executives and coaches and players. The kiss was soft at first, tentative, then deeper.

Ilya's hands cupped Shane's face, thumbs brushing his cheekbones.

Camera flashes exploded around them, a strobe of white light.

Click. Click. Click.

Shane broke away, breathing hard. His eyes searched Ilya's face. "I'm sorry. I should've asked...."

"Don't apologize." Ilya kissed him again, brief and fierce. "Never apologize for this."

The ballroom had gone silent. Every eye fixed on them. Shane's chest heaved, face flushed, but he didn't let go of Ilya's hand.

"There," Shane said, voice carrying across the stunned crowd. "Now everyone knows."

Shane's feet moved without thought, Ilya's hand warm and solid in his.

The ballroom doors swung wide, spilling them into the hotel corridor. Behind them, voices erupted, questions shouted, chairs scraping, the rapid-fire click of camera shutters

A reporter lunged forward, microphone thrust out. *"Shane! Are you confirming that you are..."*

Another cut in. *"Ilya, what does this mean for your homeland..."*

"...just came out together..."

"...Montreal's GM would not give a response..."

Their voices blurred together, a wall of noise that pressed against Shane's skull. He didn't hear them. *Couldn't*. His mind had gone somewhere else entirely.

"I mean, imagine. Some guy prancing around the locker room, checking out his teammates in the shower..."

"As if I'm attracted to all men. As if we'd want half of those gross guys on the team... Please." Shane thought.

The Montreal GM's voice echoed in his head, but it wasn't just his voice anymore. Others layered over it, familiar and wrong.

Somehow, he knew these words were from some other place. Some other time, even. A different Ilya.

Shane's vision flickered. The hotel corridor stretched before him, but superimposed over it was another place, a locker room. His locker room. Except the faces were harder, older. Teammates who looked at him like he'd betrayed them. Like he was... Different. Like he wasn't worth anything.

Shane's chest tightened. He stumbled, but Ilya's grip kept him upright.

The memory, no, not memory, something else, shifted.

A television screen in a sports bar. Angry text messages firing back and forth. Frustration, and anger, and embarrassment all spiraling into a tear-stained cell phone. Grainy footage of a plane spiraling down, black smoke trailing behind it like a funeral shroud. The sound cut out, but he could read the ticker at the bottom.

BREAKING: Ottawa Centaurs and passengers on Flight 626 crashes. No survivors.

Laughter erupted around him. Montreal jerseys. His teammates, from this other time and this other place, after a game, except they weren't really his teammates anymore, were they? They'd made that clear in whatever realm they were in.

"Ding dong, The Russian's dead!" They called out, in a sing-song tune.

The words hit like a physical blow. Shane's knees buckled. His heart shattered into pieces so small he'd never find them all. On a phone, Shane could only see one final message.

Lily: I wish I never met you.

Pain.

Grief.

Rage.

Regret.

All of it swirled together until he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything.

All those feelings had fueled his outrage that night. Those visions played in his head while the Montreal GM spouted his garbage.

Shane hadn't been able to get that terrifying thought out of his head, or stop hating himself.

He "remembered" himself begging, over, and over, and over again to get a second chance. Praying to whatever gods existed out there that if he had a second chance to make things right, he wouldn't fuck it up the next time around.

"Please... Please don't take him away from me. He's all I have. He's the only reason I get up in the morning. Without him, I'm nothing. Without him, nothing has meaning. I didn't meant to say those things. I was angry. I was scared. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I didn't..."

"Shane!"

Ilya's voice cut through the chaos. Shane gasped, dragging air into lungs that felt too small. The vision dissolved. The hotel corridor snapped back into focus, white walls, fanciful fixtures, reporters crowding close with their cameras and questions.

"I..." Shane's voice cracked. He swallowed hard, tried again. "I'm gay."

The reporters fell silent.

Shane straightened, pulling his shoulders back. Ilya's hand remained steady in his, an anchor in the storm. "Ilya and I are dating. Have been for a while now."

Cameras flashed. Recorders thrust closer.

A reporter in the front opened his mouth, probably to ask how long, or when it started, or what Montreal thought about it all, but Shane cut him off.

"...and I'll only hear someone's opinion on what that means for hockey if they're a better player than me and Ilya." His gaze swept the crowd, cold and unflinching. "Anyone here fit that description?"

Silence.

"Didn't think so."

Chapter 6: The Ripple

March 2012 (Breaking Sports New)

The television in the sports bars across North America all cut off from their scheduled games at the same time.

On screen, an ESPN panel segment cut to a desk where the host, a broad-shouldered man with silver hair named Greg Holt, leaned forward with a serious expression, like he were about to announce D-Day for the United States.

"We're interrupting our scheduled segment to bring you what is, without question, the most significant story to come out of the NHL this decade. Tonight, at the Montreal Voyageurs charity gala, Shane Hollander of the Montreal Voyageurs, Rookie of the Year, alongside Ilya Rozanov of the Ottawa Centaurs confirmed to reporters that they are in a relationship. Both men are out of their respective closets, while playing at the highest level the league has seen in a generation."

His co-host, a woman named Diane Park with a blonde bob, cut in.

"Greg, to put this in context for anyone who doesn't understand what a seismic shift this is, the NHL has had gay players before, but exclusively after retirement only. After the skates come off, after the contracts dry up, after there's nothing left to lose. Wayne Briggs came out in 2003, four years after his last game. Marcus Delin in 2007, two years post-retirement. In the history of the sport there has never been an openly gay or bi hockey player in the league. Every single time, the conversation was the same: 'I couldn't say anything while I was playing. I was too scared. The culture wouldn't allow it.' I feared for my sponsorships, my family, and my loved ones."

"Exactly." Holt straightened his tie. "What Hollander and Rozanov did tonight is categorically different. These aren't retired players looking back on their careers with hindsight. These are two of the most talented active players in the league with a long career ahead of them. Hollander has a Rookie of the Year award. Rozanov has single-handedly dragged the Ottawa Centaurs into legitimate playoff contention this season and many claim he's a sleeper star that could win a Stanley Cup single-handedly. They are at the peak of their careers, and they chose tonight to let the world know that they are in love and dared anyone to take that from them."

"Now," Diane continued, "we also have to address the elephant in the room, because it's already all over our phones. Shane Hollander is currently at war with Montreal. We have an eyewitness who confirmed Hollander told Montreal admin 'I will NEVER play for you again.' Which, has got to be devastating for Montreal's playoff chances to lose their biggest investment from the draft two years back."

Holt nodded, grave. *"War might not strong enough of a word, Diane. Hollander made clear tonight he will not return to the Voyageurs. Word from inside Montreal, however, is that they have no intentions of simply letting him walk. His contract runs through the rest of this*

season, and the organization is not, we're told, willing to grant a release or facilitate a trade on Hollander's terms, and are reportedly threatening other teams with renegotiating all other pending trades. Their only way to concede is if Hollander brings them to the playoffs and brings them a Stanley Cup. Lawyers from both camps were apparently already on the phone within the hour of tonight's announcement, led by Shane's own mother and manager, Yuna Hollander, who claims that Montreal's GM acted in what amounted to "harassment" at tonight's dinner and is threatening to sue Montreal for damages, utilizing a legal team well known for winning these kinds of fights."

"For now, thought, it's an almost impossible legal battle unless one side backs down, and blood is going to be drawn for sure," Diane said. "Montreal needs their star player. Hollander is their future franchise. Without him, they're a mid-table team fighting for a wildcard spot. Releasing him, or worse, trading him to a rival at a loss, is a PR and financial disaster on top of everything else tonight has already handed them."

"...and yet keeping him against his will," Holt said, "After their GM made the comments he apparently made tonight, is its own catastrophe. Can you imagine what it would be like to try and coach someone who doesn't respect your team or your organization?"

Diane looked directly into the camera.

"Whatever happens with the contract dispute, the story here is bigger than one team or these playoffs. Two openly gay men, active NHL players, in a relationship, standing in front of cameras and daring the league to blink first and tell them the peak of their talent can't stand at the top, when they've been running circles around veterans for two years now."

"The league," Holt added quietly, "has never blinked at the right moment before."

"No," Diane agreed. "It hasn't."

March 2012 (Manhattan, New York)

The Manhattan bar was three drunken customers deep at the counter and loud with the rowdy kind of crowd that packed itself on a weeknight, when nobody had anything better to do and life was too sad or too hard to stay home alone with your own thoughts.

Scott Hunter sat at the far end, away from the worst of the noise, a bottle of Coors sweating in his hand and the nerves of the upcoming playoffs getting the best of him.

He watched the screen, trying to catch the latest score on the game, when he realized a different kind of special was on.

Diane Park's voice cut through the din. *"Two openly gay men, active NHL players, in a relationship, standing in front of cameras and daring the league to blink first..."*

Scott's bottle hit the floor the moment he saw Hollander and Rosanov kissing. The bottle exploded against the hardwood in a spray of glass and foam, and the two guys beside him flinched.

Scott didn't move, not even from the explosion of booze. His chest had locked up somewhere around the word *"out" or "in a relationship"*, and hadn't unlocked since. His lungs struggled to find air and he felt light-headed. He pressed his knuckles against his sternum and breathed through his nose, slow and deliberate, the way his trainer had taught him to man up and get through panic attacks.

On screen, a photograph appeared. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, side by side in the middle of a hotel ballroom. Not hiding. Not angled away from each other so they didn't give off *"the gay vibe"*. Standing square, Hollander's jaw set like granite, Rozanov's arm pressed against his shoulder. Looking defiantly at the camera.

Scott's vision blurred at the edges.

He'd wanted that.

He'd wanted exactly that for so long it had become a kind of background noise, a *"problem"* he'd learned to live around, like tinnitus.

He was twenty-four years old and he'd spent almost half of those years playing this exact game, finding ways to describe his lack of a love life in ways that weren't quite lies, laughing along at the right moments when a *"gay joke"* landed in the locker room and, steering conversations away from the cliff's edge.

...and these two kids, barely past their rookie seasons, probably too young to even drink in the US, had just walked straight off the edge and into the unknown.

The headache arrived without warning, a spike behind his left eye that made him wince. It came with something strange. A feeling, like a word on the tip of his tongue, something *important*, something he was supposed to remember, a face he almost knew. It pressed against the inside of his skull and then dissolved before he could catch it.

He stood, steadying himself against the bar stool, and started toward the back hallway.

He made it four steps before he walked directly into someone.

Beer hit him like a cold wave, chest, collar, the full front of his flannel, and he heard a sharp intake of breath and then a flood of words.

"Oh God. Oh, I'm so sorry, that was completely, please don't tell Danny, he's my manager and I'm already on thin ice and I've got like three jobs right now because NYU doesn't fund itself and I swear I'll get you another one, on the house, whatever you were drinking..."

Scott looked at the offending party.

He was tall, brown-haired, with hazel eyes gone wide with anxiety, an empty tray clutched against his chest like a shield. He was still talking, but Scott had stopped processing the

words.

Something in his chest fluttered. Like relief. Like belonging. Like everything was going to be okay.

"Hey." Scott put a hand up. "It's fine."

"It's really not, your shirt is..."

"Kip." Scott had read the server's name tag without thinking.

Kip stopped. "Yeah?"

Scott glanced once at the television. Hollander and Rozanov, still on screen. Still standing there. He turned back.

"Would you want to get dinner sometime?"

Kip stared, blankly for a moment. Then the anxiety drained out of his face and something warmer moved in to replace it, colour rising along his jaw.

"Yeah. Uh, yeah, of course, uh..."

"Scott. Scott Hunter."

"That sounds great." Kip pulled his order pad from his apron, tore off a clean strip, and wrote his number down. For a brief moment, he seemed to realize how odd of a request that was.

"Have... Have we met before? Because I don't usually just give my number to complete strangers. I... I don't even really usually tell people at work I'm... You know..."

"No. We haven't" Scott took the paper. "...but it feels right."

Kip smiled. "It does, doesn't it?"

March 2012 (Toronto)

The hotel room for their Junior Hockey away game smelled like stale pizza and those weird protein bars Dallas insisted on eating before bed. Troy Barrett sat on the edge of his mattress, TV remote forgotten in his lap, staring at the television mounted on the opposite wall.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov filled the screen. Together. Out. In front of cameras and God and everyone. Kissing.

Hollander and Rozanov had been his idols. Hollander, Canada's golden boy and the kind of player Troy wanted to be, and Rozanov, who'd done a miracle in Ottawa and was the best

damn hockey player Troy ever saw.

Hell, they'd been the idols of everyone on his Junior team that year. There wasn't a sixteen-year old among his teams that didn't know those two.

His chest made it hard to breathe in the moment.

"They're gay. They're gay and they play in the NHL."

The thought repeated itself, a slamming up against his skull. He'd grown up watching hockey, dreaming about the draft, imagining himself skating for Montreal or Toronto or wherever would take him. He'd also grown up knowing, courtesy of his old man, that the only guys who "made it" were guys who talked about which bitch had the best rack or tightest cunt, or brag about their "body count" that guys like Dallas seemed to wrack up naturally.

To which... Troy couldn't even bear to even look at a woman naked. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't "like" what he saw.

"...but I can put on a hell of an act."

Half of the reason he acted the way he did was because he wanted to be like his heroes. Because he thought that was how a man was supposed to be. That "feelings" that weren't manly, like crying, or being gay, should be locked up and pushed way down.

Except here they were. Shane Hollander, Rookie of the Year, and Ilya Rozanov, the guy everyone said could carry a franchise on his back.

Not hiding.

"Can you believe this shit?" Dallas Kent sprawled across the other bed, blonde hair still wet from the shower, expression twisted into something ugly. "Two f**s making out on live TV. What's next, Pride flags on the ice and we gotta wear rainbow skirts?"

Troy's hands tightened around the remote until the plastic creaked. Dallas was his "friend" because Troy's dad and their hockey coach had paired them together. The dynamic duo, with Dallas as the start Center, and Troy as his wing. His "lackey" as the guys joked about in the locker room.

Dallas kept going. "Hollander's career is over. No way Montreal or any self-respecting team keeps him after this, and Rozanov? Guy's gonna get his ass beat in the locker room, or sent back to Russia and hung from a rope, I guarantee it. You can't be that level of homo and expect to survive. I wonder which one's the bitch? Bet it's Hollander. Those Asian dudes are always like 90% f** anyway. It's why God gave them small cocks, because they don't do anything with 'em." Laughter. Loud. Annoying. The kind of laugh that Troy would have normally joined in on, or at least given a high five to. You know, to fit in.

This time, the words scraped against Troy's ribs like sandpaper.

On screen, Hollander stood with his shoulders back, chin raised, Rozanov close enough their arms touched. They looked... free. Happy.

"I mean, it's disgusting," Dallas continued. "Two dudes? Rubbing their dicks together or shoving it right up their ass? Makes me want to puke just thinking about it. Coach should talk to the team tomorrow, make sure everyone knows we don't tolerate that queer shit. Hell, why don't you and I tell them what the score is? I'll hype them up, and you come in and-"

"Shut the fuck up."

Dallas stopped mid-sentence. "What?"

Troy turned to face him, blood pounding in his ears. "I said shut the fuck up. Either go bunk with one of the other guys or I'll tell Coach about all those hookups you've been having on the road. You know, 'the bitches' who were clean so you didn't need a condom for? The kind of shit that almost got you benched?"

Dallas's face went white, then red. "Dude, we've bunked for months now. I thought you were cool. What's the deal with you?"

"You're annoying." Troy stood, crossing the room to the door. He yanked it open, cold hallway air rushing in. "...and you're a piece of shit. I don't want to deal with you anymore. Listening to you go on and on about this crap is annoying. They're the best hockey players in the world AND they're gay. Big fucking deal."

"Troy, come on, I was just..."

"Get out."

Dallas grabbed his phone and shoes, face twisted with confusion and anger. "You're being really psycho right now. You one of those f*****s, too? Want me to tell the team to watch out in the showers so Troy doesn't fuck them?"

"Dallas, you're a douche who brings everyone down and I'm so sick of hearing it day and night. Remember what Hollander said? You can have an opinion when you're as good as him. Until then..." Troy's voice cracked slightly. "...stay in your lane, man."

"So you are, aren't you. You're a..."

"I know you're on 'roids, Dallas. I know they're in your bag, and I know you took some before the last game. You better shut the fuck up before Coach asks for a random piss test and you get shunted back home and miss out on the draft. You tell anyone I'm gay before I do, and I'll fucking end your career before it even starts, man. If I go down, I'm taking you with me."

A threat. Troy meant it that way.

Dallas left, shoulder checking him on the way out. "Pussy." he mumbled.

Troy closed the door and leaned against it, heart hammering.

On the television, the anchors continued their analysis. Hollander and Rozanov's photograph remained on screen.

Troy slid down to the carpet, knees pulled to his chest, and let himself imagine it. Coming out. Standing in front of cameras. Not pretending anymore.

Maybe one day.

Maybe if they could do it, he could too.

Not right now. Now with his current team.

...but someday. He knew, someday, deep down that somewhere was waiting for him. A place with brothers who'd accept him, exactly as he was.

March 2012 (Long Island, New York)

The house on Long Island was quiet. An unfortunate quiet that came when two people stopped filling the silence with conversation, because the silence was preferred.

Eric Bennett sat in the armchair beside the fireplace, a glass of sparkling water on the side table and a book face-down in his lap that he hadn't touched in forty minutes.

Holly was on the sofa across from him, feet tucked beneath her, a glass of red wine in one hand and her phone in the other, half-watching whatever channel the television had drifted to after the game.

Then the ESPN panel cut in, and the photograph appeared on screen.

Eric went very still.

Holly lowered her phone.

The anchor's voice filled the room. *"...Rozanov, who sources confirm is bisexual, alongside Shane Hollander, confirming to reporters tonight that the two are in a relationship..."*

Bisexual.

The word landed somewhere beneath Eric's sternum and didn't move. A word he hadn't thought of in years.

He'd known about Hollander and Rozanov the way you knew about players you'd faced across the ice. He'd watched Rozanov dismantle Admirals defence in an early-season game that year and thought, distantly, that the kid was extraordinary, and probably the best damn player in the league, playing well beyond his years. He hadn't thought about him much beyond that.

Yet, now he watched the photograph on screen, the two of them standing shoulder to shoulder in a Montreal ballroom, not hiding, not vague, just *there*, and something in his chest settled. A heavy, aching kind of pain he didn't know he'd feel again in his lifetime. The kind that came from watching someone else do the thing you'd spent years convincing yourself was impossible, or dangerous, or not worth the cost.

"Settling is easier."

Rozanov was twenty-one years old and bisexual and standing next to the man he loved in front of cameras.

Eric was thirty-four and hadn't told a single person the truth about himself in his entire life.

He looked at Holly.

She was still watching the screen, her wine glass held loosely, expression unreadable. The light caught the angle of her jaw, the small tired lines around her eyes that hadn't been there five years ago. She was beautiful. She had always been beautiful. He had loved her, genuinely, back when he was twenty-four, and he had believed, the way young men believed things, that love would be enough to build a life on.

Something deep within him knew he needed to ask something.

"Holly."

She turned.

"Are you happy?"

The question sat between them. Holly held his gaze for a long moment, and something shifted in her expression. She was relieved.

"No." Her voice was gentle. "I haven't felt close to you in a long time, Eric." She glanced at the television and back at him. "Does this have something to do with that?"

"Yes."

Holly nodded slowly, like he'd confirmed something she'd already filed away in a drawer somewhere and never quite thrown out.

"I had a feeling." She set her wine glass down on the coffee table, deliberate and quiet. "Not about anything specific. Just... a feeling that there was a part of you I'd never reached." She looked at him directly. "Gay?"

"Bi."

"Ah. That makes more sense. When we did have a spark, you were... Magnificent." Holly shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She let out a long sigh. "Did you ever-"

"No. Too afraid. Hollander and Rozanov have if rought now, but back when I was their age? Hell, you could get beat to death."

"Not even when we were together?"

"Never. I would never cheat."

"I figured as much." Holly nodded along. She took a deep breath and exhaled. "I think we should get divorced. I... I was going to give it another year or so, but... I think... We should both be happy. I think we should both try and explore ourselves. Instead of whatever the hell we have right now where we're both miserable and... Could be happier somewhere else."

The word should have hit harder. Instead it felt like setting down something heavy he'd been carrying up a very long flight of stairs.

"I think so too."

He crossed the room and sat beside her on the sofa, taking her hand in both of his. He pressed his lips to her knuckles.

"I did love you."

"I know you did." Holly squeezed his hand, eyes bright but steady. "...but sometimes love isn't the whole story, is it?" She glanced at the screen again, at the two young men who'd chosen otherwise. "Sometimes there's more to life than just the straight and narrow."

March 2012 (Pittsburgh, PA Airport)

The airport smelled like fried food, dirty feet, and floor cleaner. An unfortunate misery of smells that Ryan Price had experienced too many times by now. Between team games, moving residences, and a lifetime of travel, combined with the anxiety that always came with each flight, the Pittsburgh Airport was just his latest living hell.

On the topic of moving residences while flying, its own personal hell, he counted four, now. Four different teams. Four different airports for his "new beginning". Four sets of cardboard boxes shipped to whatever furnished apartment the organization had arranged, because there was no point in buying furniture you'd leave behind in eight months, and Eric's closet amounted to the same 5 outfits by now, he'd learned to steal from the team merchandise and toss them on his way out by then.

Pittsburgh's terminal was busy even at this hour, businessmen with rolling luggage cutting through clusters of families, a woman arguing into her phone near the gate. Ryan moved through all of it like a ship through water, people parting instinctively around his six-foot-seven frame without ever looking up to see why.

Nobody from the Penguins had come to meet him.

He hadn't expected them to. Philadelphia hadn't sent anyone either, when he'd arrived there two seasons back. Or Carolina before that. You didn't send a welcoming committee for the guy whose job was to absorb punishment and distribute it. You just left a key card at the front desk and a practice schedule under the door.

"Just stand there and take it." That was Ryan's lot in life.

Philadelphia's trainer had shaken his hand on his last day. That was the closest thing to a send-off he'd gotten. Nobody else had said much. A few guys nodded. Dmitri, the Flyers' left winger, had looked up from his phone long enough to say "good luck, man" in a tone that suggested he'd already forgotten Ryan's name.

Ryan had dropped a hint, once, around Christmas that he might like to be included more. He'd mentioned, offhand, while a group of them were watching a movie in the hotel common room on a road trip, that he'd spent the holidays alone because "there wasn't really anyone waiting at home." Sokolov had said that was rough. Someone else had passed the popcorn. That was the end of it.

When Ryan decided to try and find someone to wait for him at home, to try and start dating, was when he tried dropping a different kind of hint. A chance to test the waters.

The season before that, in Carolina, he'd been even more direct. He'd mentioned, to the guy he bunked with on road trips, a veteran defenceman named Caulfield, that he'd downloaded an app. A dating app. He'd let the phone screen be visible long enough for Caulfield to clock the interface, the obvious orange and black design of it, or the fact that the profiles showing were all men.

Caulfield had "looked" for all of half a second, to play nice, and then looked away. He said "nice, those bitches are hot", and then asked if Ryan wanted the remote because he needed some shuteye.

Ryan had said sure.

They'd watched whatever game was on.

"Worthless. I'm just... Worthless." Ryan finally accepted. He quit talking to teammates after that, and just stayed in the corner and beat the shit out of whoever tried to get to the wings or center. That was what he was good for. That was the only time he ever felt human contact.

"It's better than nothing."

He rolled his duffel strap higher on his shoulder and followed the signs toward the terminal bar. He needed somewhere to sit that wasn't a gate chair, and something strong to dull the pain radiating through his shoulder.

The bar was half-full, screens mounted along the back wall cycling between late scores and a news ticker. Ryan folded himself onto a stool at the far end, ducking slightly out of habit so

his head didn't clip the low-hanging light above him.

The bartender, a young woman who didn't blink at his size, took his order that he managed to stumble out and moved off.

Ryan pulled out his phone.

One message. The Penguins' equipment manager, confirming tomorrow's practice time and the address of his temporary accommodation. He replied with a thumbs up and set the phone face-down on the bar.

On the screen above the bottles, something shifted. The game score disappeared. A news panel replaced it, two anchors at a desk, and behind them, a photograph.

Ryan looked up.

"...Rozanov and Hollander, confirming to reporters tonight that the two are in a relationship. Both men are out, both currently active in the NHL..."

The bartender set his whiskey down.

Ryan stared at the screen.

He knew both of them.

Not personally, but professionally. Rozanov was the reason Ottawa was suddenly a team worth watching, and Hollander was the kind of player you spent all week studying tape on to learn his patterns and then spent the game trying not to admire his honed talent. Ryan had faced Montreal twice this season. Hollander had a way of reading a play three seconds before it happened that made defending him feel like a waste of time and they should just all pack it up and go home.

"...first openly gay players in NHL history..."

Ryan's mouth curved. Just slightly.

He pressed his lips together, but the smile didn't quite disappear.

"First. Right."

He'd mentioned it in Philadelphia. He'd mentioned it in Carolina. He'd dropped the app, left the door cracked one time he hooked up with a guy, done everything short of wearing a rainbow flag around his neck, and both teams had collectively decided it was none of their business, which was another way of saying his life wasn't interesting enough to care about.

The smile faded into something quieter.

On screen, Hollander and Rozanov stood together in the photograph. Shoulder to shoulder, the way people stood when they'd stopped pretending there was space between them.

Hollander looked like he'd just dared the room to say something. Rozanov's expression was softer. Proud.

The way Rozanov looked at Hollander... A flash. A feeling. Something he hadn't thought about in a long time.

Ryan thought about the ferry.

He didn't let himself do it often, but the moment, with Rozanov and Hollander, made it hard not to.

It had been a summer evening, early August, the year Ryan was seventeen and on his billet. Fabian, the son of the family Ryan had lived with in his Junior years, had performed at the conservatory that afternoon, something classical on the violin that Ryan couldn't have named but had sat through completely still for, awestruck, which was not something Ryan did easily.

Fabian had always been so... Sophisticated and glamorous. Like a priceless work of art you only saw once in a life. Beautiful, and attractive in ways that made Ryan first start to question his sexuality.

The ferry that night smelled like engine oil and lake water, carrying them back across to the island where Fabian's family lived, and the moon had gone high over the water.

Fabian had been talking about the piece, still wired from the performance, gesturing with both hands, his bow tie loosened and hanging open around his collar. Ryan had been watching him instead of the water.

At some point Fabian had stopped talking and looked at him, and Ryan had felt his chest burn with a warmth that made him want to jump into Fabian's arms and crush him with a hug. Smother him with a kiss. Tell him how goddamn talented and beautiful and wonder he was, all at once.

He hadn't jumped.

He'd looked back at the water instead. Said something forgettable about the sunset. Fabian had laughed at whatever it was, shoulder bumping against Ryan's arm, and Ryan had spent the rest of the crossing staring at the shoreline and cataloguing the exact feeling of that contact like it was evidence of something.

He hadn't spoken to Fabian seriously, other than the occasional birthday hello or message on Facebook, in eight years.

Not because of a fight. Not because anything bad had happened. Just because Ryan moved cities and Fabian was out and proud, part of the Toronto queer scene, and Ryan knew how much Fabian hated hockey and that the NHL and the queer scene just never mixed.

Ryan picked up his phone.

He opened his contacts. Scrolled past teammates, trainers, agents, equipment managers from many different organizations. Found the number he'd never deleted, which said something

about him, he supposed.

Fabian Salah.

He typed slowly, deleting twice before he settled on something simple.

Ryan: *Hey. Haven't talked in a while. It's Ryan. Would you want to catch up sometime? No pressure if not.*

He hit send before he could talk himself out of it.

The screen on the bar above him still showed the photograph. Hollander and Rozanov, not hiding, not performing. Just there.

Ryan set his phone down, wrapped both hands around his glass, and **hoped**.

March 2012 (Montreal, Shane's Condo)

Three days passed since the Gala event. Three days of hearing the entire hockey world speculate on their relationship, their futures, and their love life.

Plenty of support game swarming in, of course, from the LGBT+ community, and even from entire teams (God bless Ottawa's social media team who'd already started the "Love is Love" campaign and coming out in support of Ilya and Shane), and a handful of sponsors promising to bring on board more LGBT+ marketing ideas.

...but it was always met with opposition. Ilya knew better than to think they'd have their "happily ever after". Because the world just didn't work like that.

Like a loud mouth suit on the news talking about keeping "the gays out", or a hate post online painting Shane and Ilya as some kind of sexual deviants dangerous to have on TV for the youths, or an online petition to remove Shane's Rookie of the Year award, and of course... Death threats. Those had been taken seriously, and a few assholes had even been arrested, but had turned out to just be drunk hockey fans who'd gotten six beers deep and were probably in their own closet.

"How the fuck did Scott Hunter do this last time?" Ilya thought to himself.

Ilya lay on his back in Shane's bed, staring at the ceiling, one arm curled beneath his head and the other wrapped around Shane's shoulders. Shane hadn't moved in an hour. His breathing

had finally evened out, slow and shallow against Ilya's chest, but even in sleep his jaw stayed tight, like he was still bracing for impact.

The bedroom was dark. Thin white streetlight pressed through the curtains and cut through the pitch black of the night. Somewhere outside, a car passed by.

Ilya didn't sleep.

He hadn't slept properly in three days. Neither had Shane, not really. He'd doze for an hour, then his phone would buzz, another call from his lawyers, another update from Yuna, another voice message from some Montreal executive trying a softer approach (sponsorship deals and promises of LGBT+ Montreal Nights) after the hard one (threatening Shane's career and ice time) hadn't worked, and Shane would lie there in the dark reading his phone screen with that hollow expression that made something in Ilya's chest curl up and die.

Earlier that afternoon had been the worst.

Shane had cried properly, finally, just leaking out of him while he stared at the wall and Ilya pressed a hand flat against his back and said nothing, because there was nothing useful to say. Because the lawyers weren't optimistic. That was the short version.

Montreal held the contract. Montreal held all the leverage. ...and Montreal, despite the PR catastrophe unfolding in real time across every sports network on the continent for their GM's very publicized homophobia, seemed content to let Shane bleed rather than concede anything. They wanted Shane to keep playing for them. Not because they wanted to make things right, but because they needed Shane, or they were up a shit creek in a few months.

Ilya pulled him closer. Shane stirred, exhaled, settled again.

Ottawa owners had texted Ilya on the first day. *Take whatever time you need. We've got it covered, you just be with your boyfriend right now.* Weibe's message had come separately, just: *We're here. No rush.* All of the players had either called or texted, announced their support, and a few had even shared with Ilya that they, too, were part of the LGBT, but had been too afraid to admit it until then.

To Ilya's immense surprise, Ottawa had won without him. They'd dedicated the game to him and Shane and sent them pictures and well-wishes after the win.

By contrast, Montreal had called Shane six times before 8 AM that day before

Get the fuck back on the ice and quit being such a whiny bitch, the team captain had said on the third voicemail, and Ilya had listened to Shane play it back twice with that empty look before putting the phone face-down on the nightstand. The owners sent threats. A few offered "bribes" by other, less obvious names. The team? Well, Pike, naturally, was on Shane's side and was giving them all the insider knowledge they could have hoped for, and which players could be trusted and which ones couldn't be trusted.

Ilya breathed through his nose and stared at the ceiling.

He'd changed everything, and right now he didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Ilya knew that now in a way that sat differently than before. Gone was his triumphant confidence in knowing how to "fix everything" and now it was replaced with a harsh break to reality.

Scott Hunter was supposed to do this. Scott, in five years, with Kip beside him and a Stanley Cup already in hand, standing on the highest possible ground before he jumped. That was how it was supposed to go. The league would have been more prepared, had more time to adjust with society, and after Scott's coming out, the damns would break and so many good things would happen and his "family" would have come together in Ottawa like they did before.

Ilya teared up, thinking about his old team. Thinking about all the friends, all the fun times, all the drunken adventures at Kingfisher.

"I ruined it. I hurt people. This is my fault."

Scott Hunter's moment would have been shaped perfectly, built up, inevitable.

Instead, it was Shane, furious and shaking at a charity dinner at twenty-one years old, with no Cup, no armor, on a contract that he'd been shackled to, just a "Rookie of the Year" award and everything still left to lose.

Sure, Ilya had built a better Ottawa. He'd loved Shane better, earlier. He hadn't broken his love's heart like he'd done in the past. The Hollander family was better off than it was before. He'd done everything right, or everything he could think of.

Yet, still...Shane had still walked straight off the edge of a cliff on instinct, on anger, on some reason Shane couldn't fully explain and wasn't comfortable talking other than "they mocked you after you were gone". Which, Ilya didn't understand.

Ilya hadn't planned for this. He didn't know what came next.

Shane shifted. His hand, which had been loose against Ilya's ribs, curled into a fist, fingers gathering a fold of the blanket.

Ilya pressed his lips to the top of Shane's head. Held them there. Shane's hair was unwashed, warm, and smelled like sleep and the last traces of his shampoo from two days ago.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Ilya thought, for the first time in this second life.

Every decision in this life had been built on memory, on knowing how the first one had unraveled. He'd used that knowledge like a map. Now the map was gone, and the road beneath his feet was something he'd never walked before.

Shane's breathing changed. He wasn't asleep anymore.

Neither of them spoke. Ilya kept his arm around Shane's shoulders. Shane kept his fist curled against the blanket. The streetlight moved as a cloud shifted outside.

Then, very quietly: "The attorneys think Montreal's going to force me to play."

"I know."

"They said there's no legal ground strong enough before the playoffs start. Even if my mom sues them for harassment to try and fight back, it's an empty threat." Shane's voice came flat, scraped clean of whatever emotion had been in it last night. "Nothing would happen in time."

Ilya said nothing.

"So I'll have to put on that jersey." Shane swallowed. Ilya felt it, the movement against his chest. "After everything. I'll have to skate out for them. I'll have to... Give them a win. Do my best. Because otherwise, I'd be in even worse of a contract violation and they can use THAT to make things even harder on me or fuck me over. I'm just... A puppet for them."

"Yes." There was no point softening it.

Shane was quiet for a long moment. "I hate them."

"I know."

"Ilya. Don't let go of me. Okay? Just... Don't let go. Not until I have to... Put on that goddamn uniform." Shane tilted his head back enough to look up at him in the dark. His eyes were dry now, just tired, with the particular exhaustion that came after you'd run out of tears.

Ilya held him tighter, one hand spread flat between his shoulder blades, and felt the slow, unsteady rhythm of Shane's breathing work its way back toward something steadier.

He had no plan past this room and whispering soft assurances that he hoped would come true. Ilya held on anyway.

Chapter 7: The New Tomorrow

March 2012 (Montreal Bell Centre, Executive Boardroom)

The boardroom in Montreal smelled like furniture polish and money. That particular blend of leather conditioner for the chairs that cost more than Shane's first bedroom, fresh coffee brewing that nobody was drinking because they all had ordered from somewhere up the street, and whatever chemical they used to keep the mahogany conference table gleaming. The smell made Shane uncomfortable, knowing this place probably saw more cold cruelty than anywhere else in the league.

Shane sat at one end of that table, back straight, hands flat on the wood grain, fingers steepled. To his left, Yuna Hollander in a charcoal blazer, her reading glasses perched on her nose, a legal pad covered in her handwriting angled away from the Montreal executives across the table.

To his right, Marc-André Bouchard and Lisa Chen, his legal counsel, each with matching leather folios open before them, with just as many notes as his mother had made.

Across the table sat five people Shane didn't care to learn the names of, aside from the one he already knew.

Jean-Pierre Lavore, Montreal's Director of Hockey Operations, occupied the center chair. He was a thin man with silver-rimmed glasses and the kind of farmer's tan that came from winter vacations in Barbados. Flanking him: two lawyers, a VP of brand management, and someone from the NHL league office whose presence alone told Shane this meeting had been escalated well past the team level.

Nobody had shaken hands. Nobody wanted to, for various reasons, some more cruel than others.

Lavore cleared his throat. He slid a folder emblazoned with the Voyager's logo across the table's polished surface, the heavy stock paper hissing against wood as it glided toward Shane.

"We'd like to start this meeting by expressing, sincerely, how valued you are to this organization, Shane. Truly, you are one of our best and brightest. It's no secret that you have the highest hockey IQ in the entire league, and the kind of passion and drive to make yourself into the best player possible."

Shane didn't touch the folder.

Yuna reached for it instead. She flipped it open, adjusted her glasses, and began reading, as the attorneys starting skimming their own copies of the document..

Lavore kept talking. "What happened at the gala was inexcusable. We want to be very clear about that. The comments made by our General Manager do not reflect the values of the

Montreal Voyageurs as a whole, and we have already begun an internal review process that will..."

"You're firing him." Lisa Chen didn't look up from her own copy of the document, which Montreal's legal team had couriered to her office the previous evening.

Lavore paused. Adjusted his glasses. "Effective immediately upon the signing of this agreement, and assuming that Shane wants him gone, yes. He will be terminated, with cause. Furthermore, we will express to all other agencies out there that he is not to be hired."

Shane watched his mother's eyes move across the page. Her expression stayed neutral, but her pen had stopped moving, which meant something on that page had caught her attention.

"The terms," Lavore continued, gesturing to the folder. "We are asking for a two-year contract extension. The maximum annual value permissible under the current Collective Bargaining Agreement. Full no-movement clause, naturally, because we want your talent to really shine here, which means you would remain a Voyager. Signing bonus. Performance incentives structured in your favor."

Shane leaned forward. "How much?"

Lavore's lawyer, a woman with cropped grey hair, answered without blinking. "Fourteen point eight million per year. Signing bonus of three million. Performance bonuses capped at an additional two million annually. We would also pay damages for the issue at the Gala and work with you on Montreal sponsorships. Total potential value: thirty-nine point six million over two years."

The number landed in the room like a dropped weight.

Shane didn't need to look at his mother or the attorneys to know the weight of that number. He'd be the first or second highest paid NHL player, by far, and right out of his rookie season. This was the kind of money that players like him dreamed for.

Marc-André's pen stopped. Lisa glanced sideways at Shane. Even Yuna's composure cracked, just a fraction, her eyes widening behind her glasses before she controlled it.

Shane didn't react.

Lavore pressed forward, sensing the silence as an opening. "Additionally. A private training room, fully outfitted to your specifications. Your own changing area, separate from the main locker room, for your personal comfort and safety in case there is any friction between you and the players. We want you to feel protected here."

"The captaincy," the VP of brand management added. She was younger than the rest, polished, with the careful enthusiasm of someone who'd been coached on exactly what to say. "We'd like to offer you the captain's C moving forward. Immediate effect. We understand that the former captain has been rough with you since your coming out, and we are willing to trade him out to put you in his place."

Yuna set down the folder. Her pen tapped twice against her legal pad. "You're offering him everything. Everything a player could ever want."

"We're offering him what he deserves," Lavore said. "What we should have offered from the beginning if he weren't a rookie. Shane is the future of this franchise. We failed him, and we want to make it right. We're committed to making everyone here happy."

Shane studied Lavore's face. The practiced sincerity. The careful expression of his body, open, non-threatening, the way a negotiation coach taught you to sit when you needed something desperately from someone who held all the power.

"Can I ask a question?" Shane's voice came out flat. Quiet.

Lavore brightened. "Of course."

"Would I be allowed to be a gay man in this organization?"

The question dropped the temperature in the room by ten degrees.

Lavore's smile held, but stiffened at the corners. "Absolutely. Shane, we fully support..."

"Would I be allowed to speak my mind? Freely? About who I am and what matters to me? Would I be allowed to kiss my boyfriend on the ice after a game? Could I post on social media about us on the beach? When reporters ask me awkward questions about who tops or who bottoms, when I make a joke, are you going to be all over me?"

A beat. Lavore's gaze flicked to his lawyers, just for a half-second, before returning. "Of course. With... naturally, some limitations. To ensure the brand stays on target."

Shane's fingers curled against the table. "What limitations?"

The VP of brand management shifted in her chair. She pulled a separate document from her own folder, slid it across. "Nothing unreasonable. Standard brand alignment provisions. For example, certain displays of affection, between yourself and Mr. Rozanov, would be preferred to take place off camera. Away from team events, media days, that sort of thing. For everyone's comfort."

Shane stared at her. "Everyone's comfort."

"The team's comfort," she corrected, though the correction made it worse. "Additionally, any public statements regarding LGBT policies, advocacy positions, political endorsements, those would need to go through our legal and communications teams for approval before being made. Just to ensure consistency of messaging. A lot of our sponsors are sensitive about certain words and phrases. Surely, you understand."

The room held its breath.

Yuna's pen had gone still. Marc-André's jaw tightened. Lisa was already writing.

Shane looked down at his hands, still spread flat against the table. He studied them the way he studied tape before a game, methodical, thorough, every detail catalogued and filed.

Then he looked up.

"So I can be gay," Shane said slowly, "As long as nobody has to see it or hear about it."

"That's not..."

"...and I can speak my mind, as long as your lawyers write the words for me first and it's not too "spicy" for your sponsors, even though it's basic civil rights."

Lavore leaned forward. "Shane, these are standard provisions. Every player in every organization has brand guidelines. This isn't anything..."

"This isn't about brand guidelines." Shane's voice didn't rise. It dropped, which was worse. "You want to pay me nearly forty million dollars to go back in the closet and smile about it, so you can keep the only good thing your team has going for a little longer. Until you can find a way to kick me to the curb when you've got a better draft position and talent waiting."

"That is a gross mischaracterization of..."

"Is it?" Shane pulled the contract toward him for the first time. He flipped to the page the VP had referenced, ran his finger down the clause. "'Public displays of romantic affection involving same-sex partners shall be limited to non-team, non-media environments.' That's the language. I'm reading it correctly, right, Lisa?"

"Word for word," Lisa confirmed.

"...and here." Shane flipped another page. "All public commentary regarding LGBTQ+ issues, policies, or advocacy shall require prior written approval from the Voyageurs Communications and Legal departments, with a minimum review period of seventy-two hours.' **Seventy-two hours.** Three days to decide if my own words about my own life are acceptable to your brand. Which, I'm betting, based on who your fucking GM was, is not going to ever be on my side of things."

Lavore opened his mouth.

Shane closed the folder. Pushed it back across the table.

"There's no deal. I pass. Hard no."

The words landed with finality.

Lavore's composure fractured. He looked at his lawyers. They looked at the league representative, who hadn't spoken once and whose expression suggested he'd been expecting this outcome.

"Shane." Lavore spread his hands, palms up. "Be reasonable. This is the most generous offer we can legally make. We are bending over backwards to accommodate..."

"You're not accommodating me. You're buying my silence and putting a bow on it so your team doesn't go into the gutter for the next five years. Because you fucked up so bad, you're willing to pay and smile to the gay guy because he's your only hope."

Yuna gathered her legal pad. Marc-André closed his folio with a crisp snap.

Lavore's voice hardened. "If you refuse to sign, your current contract remains in effect. We are not releasing you. If you refuse to play, we pursue breach. If you play and deliberately underperform, we pursue damages. Our legal team is prepared to..."

"Sue me?" Shane pushed his chair back and stood. The chair legs scraped against the floor, a sharp sound that made the VP flinch. "For what? Throwing games? I don't have to throw a game to lose in a Montreal jersey."

Lavore's face went red. "Excuse me?"

Shane buttoned his jacket. One button. Precise. "You're a third-rate team with a fourth-rate management. I've been carrying this franchise since the day I was drafted. Without me, you don't make the playoffs. You don't sell out arenas. You don't get the TV deal you're banking on for next year." He looked at each of them in turn, every executive, every lawyer, the silent league representative. "I don't need to throw anything. I just need to stop caring and giving it my best, and you just gave me every reason to. I'll play, just as good as anyone else on the team, which is shit, and you can't sue me for playing on your team's own level. I'm a rookie, remember? Rookies fuck up. Rookies lose it under pressure. Rookies don't usually play better than their shitty Captain. So expect me to play just like a Voyager should. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He turned. Walked toward the door.

"Shane..." Lavore half-rose from his seat.

Shane didn't stop. Yuna fell into step beside him, heels clicking against the polished floor. Marc-André and Lisa followed, closing ranks behind them.

Shane's hand found the door handle. He paused, just long enough to look back over his shoulder.

"Fire your GM or don't. None of it matters if you can't look me in the eye and tell me I'm equal. Not 'equal with limitations.' Not 'equal pending legal review.' Equal." His jaw worked once. "You can't do that. So we're done."

He opened the door and walked out.

The corridor stretched long and quiet ahead of him, fluorescent lights humming overhead. Shane's pulse hammered in his ears. His hands shook at his sides, adrenaline flooding his system now that the performance was over.

Yuna's hand found his elbow. She didn't speak. Just walked beside him, matching his stride, her grip steady and warm.

They made it past the security checkpoint, past the media room, past the glass cases displaying decades of Montreal history, before Shane's legs started to give. He slowed. Stopped. Pressed one hand against the wall and breathed.

"Forty million dollars," he said, mostly to himself.

Yuna squeezed his arm. "Money with conditions isn't money. It's a leash. There's more important things than money. You did the right thing, honey, I'm so proud of you."

Shane closed his eyes. Opened them. The corridor still stretched ahead, leading toward the parking garage, toward his car, toward whatever came next.

"Yeah." He straightened. Kept walking. "I did."

April 2012 (Montreal Bell Centre)

The equipment room sat three corridors from the main locker room, between a storage cage full of spare sticks and a boiler that groaned like a dying engine. Shane had found the janitor's closet by accident, following the wrong hallway after entering through the press entrance to avoid the cluster of cameras that had started gathering outside the players' entrance.

It smelled like industrial cleaner and rubber mop heads. A single bare bulb hung from the ceiling, casting everything in flat yellow light. A metal shelf held cleaning supplies, a stack of folded towels that weren't for players, and a cardboard box of miscellaneous hardware that nobody had gotten around to sorting.

Shane dressed in there.

He'd asked the equipment manager for his gear an hour before the rest of the team arrived. The man, a quiet veteran named Paul who'd worked for Montreal for twenty-two years and whose expression gave nothing away, had handed everything over without a word. Shane had thanked him.

Now Shane sat on an overturned crate, shin guards on, socks pulled up, jersey draped across his knees but not yet on. The blue and white of it caught the bare bulb light. *Hollander* across the shoulders. Number 24 on the chest.

He turned it over in his hands.

His phone buzzed against the shelf behind him.

Ilya: *Are you there yet?*

Shane: *Getting dressed. Found a closet.*

Ilya: *A closet.*

Shane: *The irony isn't lost on me.*

A pause. Three dots.

Ilya: *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Shane. For all of this.*

Shane stared at the screen. He set the jersey on his knee and typed back.

Shane: *This isn't your fault.*

Ilya: *It is. I should have done more. I could have done more. Been smarter. Given you more time. I pushed without knowing I was pushing.*

Shane: *You didn't push me. I pushed myself.*

Ilya: *I should have protected you better. I knew what they were like and I let you walk into that team with them and I thought, maybe this time it will be different, maybe this time they will just be decent human beings, and they were not, they were exactly what they always were, and you paid for my optimism.*

The apologies kept coming, one after the other, each one pressing against the screen like he couldn't stop himself.

Ilya: *I should have said something at the gala before you did. Taken it from you. Put it on me. Made me the martyr.*

Ilya: *I should have been louder about Ottawa's support earlier so you had somewhere to land before you jumped.*

Ilya: *I should have kept my mouth shut at the awards in Vegas when those scouts were talking. It put us on their radar.*

Ilya: *I should have done so much more. I am fool. Stupid, stupid, dumb fucking bear.*

The dots stopped.

Shane: *Stop.*

Shane: *None of that is true. I made every choice I made. Me. You can't carry that. I won't let you.*

Ilya: *You are wearing a jersey you hate in a closet because of me.*

Shane looked at the jersey in his lap. The stitching on the crest was perfect. Voyageurs blue, clean and bright.

Shane: *I'm wearing a jersey I hate in a closet because Lavore doesn't understand what equal means. That's not you.*

A long pause.

Ilya: *I love you.*

Shane: *I know. I love you too. We'll figure the rest out later. Okay?*

Ilya: *Okay.*

Shane: *Don't grab me after the game if we lose. I won't be good company.*

Ilya: *I will take you home after the game whether you win or lose and will show you how loved you are. That is least I can do, my love. I'll be in the stands. Ottawa let me have one more day, but after tonight, I have to go back to the games. I'm sorry.*

Shane's mouth pulled at one corner into a soft smile. He set the phone down.

He picked up the jersey. Pulled it over his head. Worked his arms through, smoothed the front flat, felt the familiar weight of the fabric settle across his shoulders.

The crest faced outward.

He stared at the shelf of cleaning supplies for a moment, the lemon-scented detergent and the stack of grey mop heads, and breathed.

Then he stood, gathered the rest of his gear, and walked out of the closet and into the Bell Centre tunnels.

Shane's skates were on, blades covered with guards that clicked against the cement floor with each step. He turned a corner, found the tunnel mouth that opened to the ice, and stopped.

The rink stretched beyond the boards, its surface freshly cut, catching the arena light in long white bands. The stands were filling, blue and white scattered everywhere, a crowd that didn't know and wouldn't care and would cheer his name in thirty minutes without understanding any of what it cost him.

Shane sat down on the floor.

Not on a bench. Not against the wall. He just folded his legs and lowered himself onto the concrete, back against the tunnel wall, elbows on his knees, helmet resting between his feet.

His chest had been tightening for the last twenty minutes. Since he'd walked past the main locker room and heard voices inside, the normal pre-game noise of tape and sticks and someone's music playing too loud, knowing he wasn't welcomed in his own locker room anymore.

He'd closed it without going in.

He pressed his knuckles against his sternum and tried to breathe past the weight pressing down on it.

"In. Out."

His vision narrowed at the edges. The tunnel walls closed.

"In."

Footsteps behind him. He didn't look up.

A body lowered itself onto the concrete beside him. Shane felt the warmth of it before he registered the face, and then Hayden Pike was sitting next to him on the tunnel floor in full gear, shoulder pads taking up most of the corridor, stick laid across his lap.

Hayden didn't say anything immediately. He sat the way he'd always sat next to Shane since they were fourteen-year-olds in Ottawa, taking up too much space and not apologizing for it. A wall of blonde hair and green eyes and complete, uncomplicated loyalty. Ride or die.

"Hey." Hayden's voice came quiet. "I'm sorry this shit happened."

Shane's breath stuttered. He caught it, reigned it in, pressed his knuckles harder against his ribs.

"I mean it." Hayden's elbow bumped his. "All of it. The GM at the gala. The contract. The whole thing. It's garbage. They should have let you go, man. This... This is bullshit."

Shane nodded once, jaw working. "Yeah."

He could feel the air fight to get into his lungs. The tunnel walls pulsed. His vision started to fragment at the edges, that particular brightness that came before everything got worse.

More footsteps.

Three of them, measured and deliberate, the click of skate guards on cement. Shane didn't look up. He kept his knuckles against his chest and tried to keep his breathing from becoming something audible.

The steps stopped in front of him.

He looked up.

Three Montreal Voyageurs stood in the tunnel mouth. He knew their faces, knew their numbers, knew their stats. What he didn't know was why they were here and not in the locker room with the rest of the team.

Dominic Vaillancourt, right wing, twenty-four, drafted two years before Shane. He'd barely spoken to Shane since October. He crouched and placed one hand on Shane's left shoulder pad. The weight of it was gentle and deliberate.

Behind him, Matteo Ferrara, center, twenty-six, one of the veteran leaders in the room, pressed his palm to Shane's right shoulder pad without a word.

The third, Aleksei Volkov, defense, twenty-three, sat down on Shane's other side with a clean drop, knee touching Shane's.

None of them spoke for a moment. Shane's breathing was still wrong, too shallow, catching on the way in.

Hayden broke it first. "You're not alone out there. You hear me?"

"We've got your back," Dominic said. "For whatever's left of this season. Every game."

Shane looked at him. "Why?"

Dominic's hand stayed on his shoulder pad. He held Shane's gaze without flinching. "Because I'm gay. Been gay since I was sixteen and scared to death of it."

Matteo's grip tightened on Shane's other shoulder. "Bisexual. I've known since university. My wife knows. My family doesn't." He exhaled. "Watching you walk out of that boardroom and not sign? I've been trying to grow that kind of spine for six years."

Shane stared at them. Then he looked at Aleksei.

Aleksei shrugged with one shoulder. "Bi also. Different situation. I have a boyfriend nobody on this team knows about." His expression stayed flat and private, but something underneath it had gone open. "I thought I was the only one for a long time. I guess I wasn't."

The tightness in Shane's chest didn't disappear, but something shifted in it, some of the compression easing, like a hand had loosened its grip.

Hayden leaned his shoulder into Shane's from the other side. "...and I'm here because we're friends. Been friends since we were fourteen and you drove me insane with your tape study sessions over every practice and your incredibly boring diet." He paused. "Also because I'm not staying either. None of us are. We all told the Voyagers to suck our cocks."

Shane turned to look at him.

Hayden met his eyes directly. "Free agency. End of season. I've been talking to Jackie about it. This place..." He shook his head. "It's not good for either of us. Or our future kids. We both know what kind of team we want to be on and we know the kind of place we want our kids to be around. All of us are aiming, eventually, for the same spot. Might get a little competitive, too, to be honest."

The unsaid part sat in the air between them, plain as anything.

Ottawa.

Shane's throat closed. He pressed his lips together and breathed through his nose, four counts in, four counts out, until the tunnel walls stopped moving.

"I don't know if I can get through sixty minutes in this jersey," he said. Voice low. Honest.

"You don't have to get through sixty minutes," Dominic said. "Just get through the next shift. Then the one after that. That's all."

Matteo gave his shoulder pad a single, firm press. "We carry what we can carry."

"...but if you'd like to get in on a plan... We've got an idea." Aleksei said, with a devilish grin.

Behind them, the sound of the rest of the Voyageurs team came from the locker room corridor, sticks tapping, voices overlapping, the stomp of skate guards on concrete. The team was coming out.

Shane heard the shift in the sound when they turned the corner and saw the five of them on the floor, the way the noise thinned and the footsteps slowed. He didn't look up. He felt it, the silence that meant people were exchanging awkward glances.

Dominic stood first. Not away from Shane. He turned and faced the approaching team, planting himself squarely between them and the wall.

Matteo rose beside him. Then Aleksei.

Hayden pushed himself upright and stood alongside the three of them, four skaters shoulder to shoulder in the tunnel mouth, a clear and uncomplicated line.

Shane got to his feet.

He picked up his helmet, pulled it on, clicked the chin strap. His hands had steadied. His breath moved without catching.

The rest of the Voyageurs reached the tunnel. They saw him. The silence went on a beat too long.

Shane walked forward.

Dominic fell into step at his left. Matteo at his right. Aleksei and Hayden moved in behind them, and the five of them hit the ice as one unit, blades finding the surface in a clean, cold rush of sound.

The crowd erupted.

Shane bent into his first stride and didn't look back. "So what's your plan?" he asked, turning to the Voyagers who still had his back.

Dominic reached into his pocket, pulling out a small roll of rainbow colored tape. "Management won't let us be us? Well, then we take it back by force. In a way they can't fucking stop."

Ilya had arrived ninety minutes before puck drop and found a seat in the lower bowl, center ice, three rows back from the glass. He'd bought a regular ticket under a false name, paid cash, worn a dark cap pulled low and a civilian jacket with no team markings. Shane had it rough enough that night, he didn't need Ilya making his life any harder than he already had.

The usher had looked at him twice and then looked away, which was either excellent discretion or proof that nobody expected Ilya Rozanov to buy a hundred-dollar seat among regular people.

He sat with his hands on his knees and watched the ice get resurfaced.

The Zamboni made its slow loops. The crowd filled in around him, blue and white everywhere, the particular noise of a building coming to life. Ilya sat in the middle of it and felt the guilt sitting on his chest like a stone he'd been carrying since the gala, since the boardroom meeting Shane had described in careful, measured language that told Ilya exactly how much Shane was leaving out to protect him from worrying.

He pulled out his phone.

The iPhone 4, an upgrade he'd gotten back in June, still felt slightly too sleek and too light in his hands compared to what he was used to, and yet also a useless piece of antiquated junk that wouldn't have TikTok for god knows how long. He unlocked it, not because he needed to check anything, but because looking at the screen was easier than watching the corridor where Shane would eventually appear.

He opened ESPN. He waited for more of the usual "bad news" to come out about them, or to see the latest interview that his father had given in Russia, claiming "Ilya is dead to me, dead to motherland, and dead to world."

The banner at the top of the page stopped his breath.

BREAKING: Scott Hunter of the New York Admirals announces he is gay in an open letter published this morning. First active NHL in America to announce, after Canadian players Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov come out of closet.

Ilya sat up straighter.

He tapped the article.

Read the first three paragraphs, then read them again. The letter was measured and plainspoken, the way someone wrote when they'd been revising a thing in their head for a very long time. Hunter thanked his teammates, the organization, his mother. The letter didn't mention Ilya or Shane by name, but the final paragraph didn't need to. *The courage I've seen from others in this league reminded me that I had my own to find, and I hope that in me acting, others may find their courage as I have.*

Ilya pressed his thumb to the home button and sat back.

Three of them. Three active NHL players in the span of a month.

His phone buzzed.

Then twice more in quick succession.

The first text was from Cam, one of Ottawa's defensemen, a group message to what appeared to be most of the roster.

Cam: Did anyone just see Eric Bennett? Admirals goalie. He just held a press conference in New York, right after Hunter came out, announced divorce and came out as bi. Said he and his ex-wife wants to pursue a happier life. This is wild.

Cam: Apparently he and his wife are both fine about it and support each other which, very classy, but also, holy shit.

Grant: This is the fourth NHL player in like thirty days. You think maybe some of us could come out too?

Cam: Maybe. :)

Ilya's mouth pulled sideways.

Bennett. Ilya knew him closely in the last lifetime and had always been friendly with the guy, and he knew him by reputation in this lifetime, the way everyone in the league knew the Admirals' goalie, impeccable playstyle, infuriating to score on, that disciplined clean-living thing that other players found slightly unnerving. He'd never put anything together about Bennett personally. Which was, he supposed, exactly how Bennett had intended it. Still, it was incredible that such a hockey legend, a veteran in his prime, would come out now, of all times. Eric wouldn't come out, in the last lifetime, until after Scott.

Another buzz. Different contact this time. Yannick, Ottawa's backup goalie, who communicated almost exclusively in links with minimal context.

Yannick: watch this

A URL.

Ilya tapped it.

It loaded slowly on the arena's Wi-Fi, the video buffering twice before resolving into a press room somewhere, the kind with a narrow table and a media backdrop and too much institutional lighting. A man sat behind the microphone who required no introduction, mostly because he was the size of a refrigerator and had the kind of face that suggested the refrigerator had been in several fights and won them all.

Ryan Price.

Ilya recognized him immediately. Everyone in the league recognized Ryan Price. You didn't forget a man that size, or the particular stillness he carried, like a large animal that had learned to move very carefully through small spaces to avoid breaking them. Ilya had gotten in a fight with Price once. Key word **once**. Once was fucking enough. The bears in Russia would have a hard time with a guy like Ryan.

In the old life, Ryan had been on Boston's the year Ilya took the Stanley Cup. Ilya had always liked the man, their group's "Gentle Giant".

Price leaned into the microphone. His voice came out low and deliberate.

"I've been out since 2010," Price said. "Gay. I told my teammates on every team I've been on. Most of them just..." A pause. A small movement at the corner of his mouth that might have been amusement, might have been something older than that. "Didn't care enough to know what to do with it. So I'll say it clearly, publicly, because apparently now is the time for that." He sat back in his chair. The chair made a sound of protest. "If anyone in this league, any player, any fan, any person, has a problem with gay people in hockey?" His dark eyes found the camera with an ease that suggested he'd been looking at difficult things head-on his entire life. "Like the fans say... ***Pay the Price***. I fucking dare you."

Someone off-camera asked a follow-up question Ilya couldn't quite hear.

Price's expression didn't shift. "I just said what I said."

Ilya pressed pause. He stared at the frozen frame, Price's enormous hands flat on the table in front of him, that particular quality of absolute physical confidence that had nothing to do with aggression and everything to do with a man who had decided he was done being quiet.

Ilya let out a breath that had been sitting in his chest for the better part of an hour.

The arena lights shifted. The crowd noise swelled. Ilya looked up.

The ice was filling.

Both teams came through their respective tunnels, and Ilya found Shane in the first few seconds. Shane hit the ice and immediately bent into a wide arc, building speed in the warm-up loop, head up, shoulders back.

The crowd's reaction was complicated. Cheers, but uneven, pockets of noise with gaps in them. A few boos, not many but audible, the kind that carried further than they should in a quiet arena. Shane didn't react to any of it. He kept his head up and his line clean and his face completely neutral in the way that cost him, Ilya knew, considerably more than it looked like from the outside.

Then Ilya's eyes dropped to the sticks.

Four of them. Scattered across the Montreal warm-up, not clustered together, but present. Rainbow tape, bright and deliberate, wrapped around the shaft ends just below the knob. Not everyone. Four players. No wait, and Hayden Pike, whose stick caught the light as he turned into a drill and flashed the same colors unmistakably.

Ilya sat forward in his seat. He could see Montreal's team pissed at the display, and coaches yelling, but none of those with the tape seemed to care. "THEN BENCH YOUR FIRST LINE AND LOSE THE GAME OR SHUT THE FUCK UP, WE'RE NOT TAKING THE TAPE OFF!" one of the four, Dominik, a Voyager's veteran and one of the few good members on the team, screamed, loud enough for the whole arena to hear.

None of them were benched. In fact, the coaches look terrified. Management, right behind the team, seemed to be on their phones and making tons of calls. They looked terrified.

The first period started. He watched the lines cycle and almost immediately saw the pattern emerge, the thing Shane was doing that looked like ordinary play from the upper bowl but was, from three rows back, entirely readable.

Every time the puck came to Shane, it went to one of two places. Either inside the goal, or to a stick with rainbow on it.

Tight. Controlled. A pocket of five players operating with the kind of synchronized precision that took months to develop on a line, not days.

Anyone on the Voyagers who didn't have that tape? They might as well have been invisible on the ice, because they got zero puck time. They'd get subbed in and ghosted within seconds. They'd call for a pass, get ignored, and have to wait to get cycled out.

Two goals came before the buzzer. They came from the puck cycling through the same small constellation of rainbow players, defenders wrong-footed, Shane finding the space to thread a pass that shouldn't have had room to exist and slamming a goal in. The second goal went in off a Dominic rebound, Shane's pass having drawn two defenders far enough out of position that he had open ice six feet from the net.

The period ended 2-0. All of the points came from the rainbow players.

Ilya understood, immediately, what was going on.

"They're taking the team over. They're taking it back. By winning and scoring as a united, front."

The intermission buzzer faded, and the Bell Centre filled back in. Ilya watched the ice crew clear their equipment, the Zamboni cleaning things up.

The PA system crackled.

The arena announcer's voice, the same one that had been calling Montreal games for a decade and had the experience of someone who understood exactly what a crowd needed to hear, came through the speakers with unusual deliberateness.

"Ladies and gentlemen, before the start of the second period, a brief note on tonight's scoring summary."

A pause.

Calculated.

The crowd settled.

"Both goals scored by the Montreal Voyageurs in the first period were assisted or scored by players who identify as members of the LGBT+ community or who are allies to the cause. In connection with tonight's game, the following statement has been submitted to this arena and to all accredited media by Dominic Vaillancourt, on behalf of himself and his teammates who identify as members of the LGBT community. Knowing that this is going to get me fired, I want everyone to know it has been an honor to announce for you all these years. I do this for my daughter, Anna, in memory of her life she wasn't allowed to live."

Ilya went very still in his seat.

Around him, the crowd noise dropped to a murmur, then to something close to silence. People stopped walking. A vendor two rows up paused mid-transaction.

The announcer cleared his throat and read the statement.

"We have been invisible for a long time. Invisible in locker rooms, invisible in contracts, invisible in the institutions that asked us to give everything and offer nothing honest in return.

Because we have been invisible for so long, we no longer recognize those who would push us back into the closet as players or part of our "team".

Montreal's management has refused to release us from this organization and keeps Shane Hollander here against his will. So let tonight serve as notice: for the remainder of this season, fans and management can expect exactly this.

We see each other. We play for each other. We will find victory, because that's who we are. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or any of our brothers and sisters out there fighting like we are, we are strong, and we are united. We aren't invisible. We have been and always will be here, being the best at what we do, even if you can't see it.

Those who aren't with us, those who would try and make us invisible or silent, won't see the puck between now and the end of the playoff season. So, know that when the Stanley Cup is won this year, and when we take this year's win, it was won on the sweat, backs, and blood of the LGBT+ and allied members of the Voyagers. Not management, not the coaches, and not the players who deny us. This win, this cup, is ours and ours alone."

Ilya sat in his plastic seat while the crowd churned around him during the intermission, and felt something loosen in his chest that had been wound tight for weeks.

He thought about what Shane's season had looked like the first time. The isolation.

The teammates who'd treated him like a trophy to be carried rather than a person to play beside.

The way Shane had absorbed every loss personally, as though each one confirmed something he already feared about himself.

The gala had not existed in the first timeline. The public coming-out had not existed. The boardroom with Lavore and his thirty-nine million dollars worth of conditional equality had not existed.

None of this had existed.

Shane, in the first timeline, had been quietly suffocating in that Montreal jersey for over a decade before a plane went down somewhere over the Atlantic.

Ilya looked at the ice, freshly cut again, pale and clean under the arena light.

A different timeline. A different season. Different choices, rippling outward in directions Ilya hadn't anticipated and couldn't predict and had certainly not engineered.

Scott Hunter somewhere in New York reading whatever response was already flooding his inbox. Eric Bennett standing in a press room, choosing his own life at the age of thirty-four. Ryan Price sitting behind a microphone and daring the entire league to disagree with his existence.

Plenty of young kids out there, like Troy and Luca, getting the courage to be themselves.

...and five hockey sticks with rainbow tape, belonging to men who had sat down on a tunnel floor with Shane Hollander and then stood up again and said *we've got your back*.

Ilya had spent weeks carrying the guilt like it was load-bearing, like removing it would collapse something important. The guilt over the gala, over the boardroom, over every choice that had led Shane to dress in a janitor's closet before a game for a team that underpaid its courage.

He looked at the ice.

Then he looked at his phone, at the paused video of Ryan Price, at the ESPN headline still open in another tab, at Cam's group message still generating responses from Ottawa players who were, collectively, losing their minds about the last thirty days of professional hockey history and a few of them talking about drafting their own coming out statements.

The guilt didn't go.

A grin started at the corner of his mouth, the real kind, the one he had no control over, showing all his teeth as he started to laugh, cry, and sob, all at once.

"Everything is going to be alright."

That night, Montreal won 4-1.

All four points were scored by those with Rainbow sticks.

By the end of the third period, two more sticks and the Voyager Goalie's helmet were wrapped in Rainbow Tape. An ally, a bisexual, and a gay joined Shane's shadow team that night, when Shane would become the unofficial Captain of.

Chapter 8: The Weapon

ESPN SPECIAL REPORT: THE RAINBOW AVENGERS DOMINATE STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS

By Greg Holt and Diane Park | April 2012

In what sports veterans are already calling the most significant moment in professional sports history, the so-called "Rainbow Avengers", five Montreal Voyageurs players who pledged to play exclusively with each other for the remainder of the season, joined by four more of their colleges in the last week, have transformed the landscape of professional hockey in less than three weeks.

Shane Hollander, Dominic Vaillancourt, Matteo Ferrara, Aleksei Volkov, and Hayden Pike have posted a combined plus-minus of +40 since their public declaration, and with their new brothers and allies, we can only expect that figure to grow. Montreal has won eight consecutive games to end their season, breaking what many thought was a cursed season for the mid-ranked team. The now 9-man "Avengers" accounted for every goal and block during that streak.

Yet, the story extends far beyond Montreal's ice in what many are calling the "Broken Door" movement, referring to many of these players breaking free from their closet doors..

Ryan Price, the Pittsburgh enforcer who came out days after Hollander's gala announcement, has become an unlikely symbol of the movement's breadth. "I didn't know a gay guy could take a hit like that," admitted Toronto sports radio host Chuck Morrison, who previously questioned whether LGBT+ players belonged in professional hockey. "I mean, the guy's six-foot-seven. I didn't know 'gay' came in Ryan Price size and I sure as hell aren't going to question his masculinity."

The comment, widely shared across social media, encapsulates the cognitive dissonance plaguing traditional hockey culture as dozens of active NHL players have come out in record numbers. Scott Hunter (New York), Eric Bennett (Long Island), and even Troy Barrett (one of the man talented Junior prospects) represent just a fraction of the sixty-three professional and junior hockey players who have publicly disclosed their sexuality since early March.

"We've been here the whole time," Bennett said during his press conference. "You just weren't looking."

The NHL has responded with a hastily assembled diversity initiative and mandatory sensitivity training, though critics note the league's silence on Montreal's treatment of Hollander, who remains contractually bound to a team whose management offered him nearly 40 million dollars to stay quiet, go back in the closet, and remain on the team.

The Stanley Cup Playoffs begin tonight, with unprecedented attention focused on LGBT+ players across the league, and seeing how they stack up against heterosexual players. While in our humble opinion, sexual orientation provides no benefit one way or another in the world

of hockey, there are many who wonder if this movement's passion is going to push certain players, who have a lot to lose, into better performance.

Montreal enters as the Atlantic Division's second seed, while Ottawa, bolstered by Ilya Rozanov's continued dominance and a roster culture described as "aggressively supportive", secured their first playoff since before 2000.

Las Vegas oddsmakers have adjusted their projections three times in two weeks. Montreal, previously given 12-1 odds to win the Cup, now sits at 5-1. Ottawa has moved from 50-1 to 15-1, the largest single-season shift in sports betting history.

...but the numbers tell only part of the story.

Arenas across North America have reported record merchandise sales for players who've come out, with Hollander, Hunter, Rozanov, and Price jerseys outselling every other player combined. Pride flags have appeared in stands from Boston to Vancouver. Youth hockey enrollment has spiked in major metropolitan areas.

"My son asked if he could still play hockey even though he likes boys," one hockey dad posted on social media. "I told him Shane Hollander is the best player in the league. So yeah, kid. You can play hockey. I'm starting to think the "gay gene" makes for good hockey players and maybe my son will have a little bit of an advantage! Seems like all the best players are gay, bi, or allied! (He laughs, clearly making a joke.)"

The playoffs begin tonight with all eyes on Montreal and Ottawa on opposite ends of the bracket, on Shane Hollander, who changed everything at a charity gala, and Ilya Rozanov, who followed him out of the closet and into history.

The world waits to see what unfolds next.

April 2012

The Ottawa locker room felt both old and new to Ilya at the same time whenever he walked inside. The same in 2012 as it had been in 2018 in his old life, almost down to the same scent of cleaner and the organization of the locker spaces.

Though it was certainly different in that it wasn't filled with the old friends he'd made in his last life. He missed Boodram and his constant discussion of barbequing, Dykstra even with his horrible taste in music, Hayes who knew how to actually block a goal, and the new kid, Haas, with all his stupid talent and fanboy crushing, who'd be barely 12 years old in the current lifetime.

While he wondered if they'd all managed to find their way back home to the centaurs, he took a deep breath and turned his gaze to the news on the wall.

The television mounted in the corner cycled through highlights. Ilya watched his own face appear on screen, younger than he felt, standing beside Shane at that gala the night of their kiss.

Then Scott Hunter's and Eric Bennett's. highlighted moments from a recent interview, both of them wrapping their arms around each other in solidarity, and Scott talking about his "special someone", Kip, who he was inviting to the next home game in Scott's seats.

Then Ryan Price, enormous and unflinching, daring the league to come at him, and a more recent video of him attending an orchestral concert in a suit and tie, his arms around a short guy who looked like a performer, the two of them pausing for a brief kiss.

The ticker at the bottom kept updating. *Thirty-nine active NHL players have now publicly identified as gay or bisexual in letters to management.*

Thirty-nine.

Ilya couldn't believe it. Not in this lifetime or the last one, it just didn't seem possible. How could his gaydar have failed that much in the last lifetime?

Cam appeared in the doorway, phone in hand, grin splitting his face. "Did you see this?! One of the upcoming Junior stars, Troy Barrett? Son of Curtis Barrett?"

Ilya looked up and froze. "Junior player? Toronto prospect?"

Cam nodded. "Just came out. Sixteen years old. Posted a video on YouTube saying he watched you and Shane at the gala and decided he was done hiding." Cam held up his phone, showed Ilya the thumbnail. A kid with brown hair and nervous eyes sitting in front of a

camera, saying things Ilya never expected a mini-Troy to ever have the courage to say. "Kid's got guts."

"Sure does," Ilya smiled, proudly. He'd need to find time to reach out. Make damn sure Troy was okay, especially with his ass of an old man.

Grant pushed past Cam into the room, already half-dressed. "My cousin texted me. He's in college, plays for McGill. Says two guys on his team came out this morning."

"It's spreading," Yannick said from his stall, pulling on his chest protector. "Like wildfire."

Ilya's chest tightened. He thought about Troy, about Luca, about every kid who'd been watching and waiting for permission they shouldn't have needed.

His phone buzzed. A group message from the Centaurs' PR team.

NHL has issued a statement. Commissioner Croswell is holding a press conference at 3 PM.

Ilya opened the link and his teammates gathered around him to watch.

The statement was brief, carefully worded, the kind of language that had been through six drafts and three legal reviews. *The National Hockey League is committed to creating an inclusive environment for all players, regardless of sexual orientation. We are working with teams to develop policies and support systems to ensure every athlete feels safe and valued, regardless if they are straight or a member of LGBT+ community. We ask for patience as we navigate this new landscape together. We know we won't get it right the first time around, but when we make mistakes, we're going to be sure to correct them. At the end of the day, hockey is about hard work and determination. Sexual orientation does not determine one's worth, talent, or place in any organization, that much has been made clear.*

Ilya read it twice. Closed his phone.

"New landscape," he muttered. That definitely wasn't the Croswell he knew. "*Sexual orientation does not determine one's worth...*" he said, even quieter.

Cam dropped onto the bench beside him. "You good?"

"Yeah." Ilya looked at the television again. Thirty-nine players. The number kept climbing. "Just... processing."

"You started something."

"Shane started it."

"You both did." Cam's expression sobered. "You know that, right? You and Shane. You didn't just come out. You blew the door off the closet for everyone else."

Ilya's throat closed. He nodded once.

Around the room, the rest of the team filtered in. Conversation bubbled, energy high despite the nerves. Practice didn't start for another forty minutes, but nobody seemed in a hurry to leave the locker room.

They were smiling. All of them.

The door opened again, ten minutes later. Coach Brandon Wiebe stepped through, clipboard in hand, whistle around his neck. The room didn't quiet immediately, which was typical for this team. Brandon never demanded silence. He just waited until people noticed him.

Eventually they did.

Brandon set his clipboard on the equipment trunk. He looked around the room, meeting eyes, his expression calm and serious in the way that meant he'd thought carefully about what he was about to say.

"Alright." His voice carried without shouting. "Before we get to today's practice, I want to talk about what's happening in this league right now."

The room settled.

"Thirty-nine players," Brandon continued. "That we know of. Across every team. Veterans, rookies, superstars, fourth-liners. Gay, bisexual, some still figuring it out. Every single one of them looked at what happened in Montreal three weeks ago and decided they were done waiting."

He paused.

"Some of you in this room have come out publicly. Some haven't. That's your choice, and it'll stay your choice. What I want you to understand is that this team, this organization, supports you. Period. No conditions. No asterisks."

Grant shifted in his stall. Cam's jaw tightened.

Brandon's gaze found Ilya. "Our captain went to Montreal to support the man he loves during one of the hardest moments of his life. He stood by Shane Hollander while the entire league watched. He didn't flinch."

Ilya's chest constricted.

"That's the standard," Brandon said. "That's what we do here. We show up for each other. We protect our own. We don't leave anyone behind."

The room stayed silent.

"Now." Brandon picked up his clipboard. "We have our first playoff game in three days. We've worked our asses off all season to get here. We've built something real. Something worth fighting for."

He looked around the room again, slower this time.

"I believe in every single one of you. I believe in this team. I believe we can do something special this year." His voice roughened slightly. "...but only if we're together. Only if we trust each other. Only if we remember why we're here. Because at the end of the day, we're all brothers in this game. We're a unit. We're a family."

He stepped back. "That's all. Get your gear on. Practice starts in thirty."

Nobody moved immediately.

Then Cam stood. He crossed to the center of the room, looked at Ilya. "Captain. You got something to say?"

Ilya blinked. He hadn't planned on speaking. Brandon had said everything that needed saying.

...but the team was looking at him now. Waiting.

He stood slowly.

The words didn't come easily at first. He thought about Shane, about the gala, about the boardroom meeting and the janitor's closet and the five hockey sticks with rainbow tape. He thought about Scott Hunter and Eric Bennett and Ryan Price. He thought about Troy Barrett, sixteen years old, posting a video because he'd watched two hockey players kiss and decided it was safe to exist.

"I came from Russia," Ilya said finally. "Different country. Different culture. Very different ideas about who gets to be who." He paused. "I spent a lot of years hiding. Not because I was ashamed. Because I was scared. Scared of losing hockey. Losing family. Losing everything I worked for."

His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Then I met Shane. I fell in love. Real love. The kind that makes you stupid and brave and terrified all at once." A few quiet laughs from the room. "I thought I could keep it separate. Hockey here, love there. Two different lives."

He shook his head.

"...but you can't do that. You can't split yourself in half and expect to be whole. I tried. Shane tried. We both tried for too long."

Grant leaned forward in his stall, listening.

"What I learned," Ilya continued, "Is that the future is not something you wait for. It's something you build. With your choices. With your courage. With the people you stand beside. You can't do that with fear. You can't do that with hiding. It doesn't work. It just makes you... Bitter and angry. Makes you say and do things you regret for rest of your life."

He looked at Cam, then Yannick, then around the room.

"This team? You are my future. Not just because we play good hockey, though we do." A grin pulled at his mouth. "...but because you showed up. For me. For Shane. For everyone watching who needed to see that it was possible."

His voice steadied.

"In three days, we play our first playoff game. Some people will say we don't belong here. That Ottawa can't win. That we're too soft, too young, too different, too much of a fruit salad as they say." He straightened. "Let them say it. We know who we are. We know what we've built."

Silence held.

"So I ask you this." Ilya met each pair of eyes in the room. "No regrets. When we step on that ice, when we face whoever comes at us, we do it without regrets. We play for each other. We play for everyone who's watching. We play because this is *our time* and no one can take it from us."

He paused.

"Live your life so that when you die... You don't fumble on ground trying to make things right. That's all I ask."

Cam stood. He crossed to Ilya, stuck out his hand. Ilya shook it. Grant stood next. Then Yannick. Then the rest of them, one by one, until the entire team was on their feet.

Brandon watched from the doorway, arms crossed, the smallest smile pulling at his mouth.

"Alright," he said finally. "Let's get to work."

The team moved. Gear pulled on, sticks grabbed, the familiar pre-practice rhythm taking over.

Ilya caught Brandon's eye as he headed toward the tunnel.

Brandon nodded once. Just that. Nothing more needed.

Ilya followed his team onto the ice.

June 2012

Shane's lungs burned. The Rainbow Avengers, the secret Montreal Team who'd taken over the Voyagers, were exhausted. Even after gaining a few extra players, trying to make their plan of only working together still sucked when you had so few lines to actually utilize.

The coaches had given up long since that point at trying to have any control over the team, saying they weren't going to be helping a bunch of "rainbow fairies", and sat out in consolidation with the other Voyagers who didn't want to participate on "a gay team". Most of them didn't even dress for games anymore.

Two minutes left in the third period. This was Game 5. One more win and they were in the Finals.

Florida controlled possession in their defensive zone, cycling the puck along the boards whilst Montreal scrambled to break through.

Shane tracked the movement from center ice, reading the play three passes ahead. Dominic battled for position in the corner. Matteo held the blue line. Hayden covered the slot.

The Rainbow Avengers worked like a single organism now. Two months of playing exclusively with each other had forged something Montreal's full roster never achieved, near-perfect synchronization built on genuine trust and a burning desire to say "fuck you" to management.

Florida's defenseman fired a clearing attempt up the boards. Shane jumped the pass, intercepting at the line. He crossed into the offensive zone, drawing two defenders toward him.

Dominic broke free along the far boards.

Shane feathered a pass through. The puck landed perfectly on Dominic's tape. He one-touched it back to Matteo at the point.

Matteo wound up for the shot, then dropped it to Aleksei instead.

The Florida goalie shifted, committing to the angle.

Shane drove hard to the net, stick on the ice. Aleksei threaded the pass through three sets of legs.

The puck arrived. Shane redirected it top shelf before the goalie could react.

Red light. The goal horn blasted through the Bell Centre.

Shane's stick flew from his hands. Dominic crashed into him first, then Matteo, then Aleksei, then Hayden, and at last, the rest of their few numbers. The group of them collided in a tangle of rainbow-taped sticks and shouting voices.

"Fucking beauty!"

"That's how you do it!"

Shane couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Just felt the weight of them, the joy of them, the relief flooding through his chest.

They'd done it. Just a little longer and they advanced to the finals.

The rest of the period blurred past. Florida pulled their goalie for the extra attacker, launched everything they had at Montreal's net. The Rainbow Avengers held the line. When the final buzzer sounded, Shane dropped to his knees on the ice.

Series over. On to the next round.

Hayden hauled Shane to his feet, grinning so wide his face looked ready to split. "You beautiful bastard."

Shane laughed. The sound felt foreign in his throat, like he'd forgotten how.

The handshake line formed. Florida's captain gripped Shane's glove hard. "Hell of a game."

"You too."

"Good luck in the finals. You're gonna need it against Ottawa."

Shane's grin widened. "Yeah. I know."

The locker room erupted when they entered. Music blasted from someone's phone. Matteo dumped a gatorade bottle over Aleksei's head. Dominic sat in his stall with his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with what might have been laughter or tears or both.

Shane peeled off his gear slowly. Chest protector first. Shoulder pads. Elbow pads. Each piece removed felt like shedding weight he'd carried for months.

His phone sat in his cubby. He grabbed it, unlocked the screen.

Shane: We won. Moving on!

Ilya: I know. I watched. That redirect was perfect. :)

Shane: Your game starts in an hour.

Ilya: Yes.

Shane: You better win.

Ilya: Planning on it.

Shane: Good. Because I want to see you in the finals.

Ilya: You'll get your wish. I promise.

Shane stared at the screen. His thumb hovered over the keyboard.

Shane: I love you.

Ilya: I love you too. Now go celebrate. You earned it.

Shane set the phone down. Dominic caught his eye from across the room, raised an imaginary glass. Shane returned the gesture.

Hayden emerged from the showers, towel around his waist. "We're hitting Saint-Laurent. You coming?"

"Yeah. Give me ten minutes."

Shane pulled on jeans, a clean shirt. His fingers fumbled with the buttons of his jacket. Adrenaline still coursed through his system, making everything feel slightly unreal.

He grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder. The locker room had mostly cleared out. Music still thumped from the speakers. Someone's stick lay abandoned on the floor, rainbow tape bright under the fluorescent lights.

Shane headed for the exit.

"Hollander."

He stopped. Turned.

A Montreal admin stood in the doorway. Mid-fifties, grey suit, exhausted eyes. Shane recognized him from contract meetings, though they'd never spoken directly.

"Yeah?"

The admin stepped inside. His gaze swept the empty locker room before settling on Shane. "Congratulations on the win."

"Thanks."

Silence stretched between them.

The admin's jaw worked like he was chewing something bitter. "I need to know how you're going to fuck us."

Shane blinked. "Excuse me?"

"When you play Ottawa." The admin's voice stayed flat, matter-of-fact. "In the finals. I need to know how you're planning to fuck us. So we can prepare. Do us that much and we'll let you out of your contract after the finals. No bullshit."

Understanding hit like cold water. Shane's grip tightened on his bag strap.

"You think I'm going to throw the game."

"You're dating their Captain. You've made it very clear you hate this organization. The optics write themselves. Rising our hopes with this gay shit and then..." The admin rubbed his face

with both hands. "So just tell me. Are you going to tank it on purpose? Make us look like fools on national television? Make another "announcement"?"

Shane stared at him.

The exhaustion in the man's eyes wasn't an act. Neither was the resignation. He genuinely expected Shane to sabotage Montreal's chances out of spite.

Maybe a month ago, Shane would have considered it.

Now though...

"Ilya would never let me live it down if I threw a game," Shane said quietly. "He'd chirp me about it for the rest of my life."

The admin's expression didn't change.

"I'm not playing for Montreal right now." Shane gestured toward the locker room, the empty stalls where the Rainbow Avengers had dressed. "I'm playing for them. For Dominic and Matteo and Aleksei and Hayden and everyone else on this team who stuck their necks out for us. I'm playing for their families, for everyone watching who needs to see that we can do this."

He stepped closer.

"...and Ilya? He's doing the exact same thing in Ottawa. Playing for his team. For his brothers. Neither of us is going to disrespect that by throwing a game. Not for anyone. Ilya would never play dirty or cheat or lie about something like that."

The admin's shoulders sagged slightly.

"So you can sit in your office and watch," Shane continued. "You can wring your hands about optics and public perception, but when we're on that ice? We're going to play the best hockey of our lives. Both of us. It's going to be a legendary game."

He moved toward the door. The admin didn't stop him.

Shane paused in the threshold, looked back.

"Don't worry. You'll get your Stanley Cup." He smiled without warmth. "...but everyone will know who really won it, won't they? Not the Voyagers. Not the admin. Us. The "gay shit" as you called it."

He walked away.

The corridor stretched ahead, fluorescent lights humming overhead. Shane's footsteps echoed against concrete. Behind him, the locker room door swung shut with a hollow thud.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Hayden: Where are you? We're waiting.

Shane: On my way.

He picked up his pace, bag bouncing against his hip. The arena exit glowed ahead, moonlight streaming through glass doors, the promise of celebration and laughter and one night of not thinking about what came next.

Tomorrow, Ottawa and Ilya would win their series. Shane knew it with absolute certainty. Had known it since the moment the schedule was released and he saw the possibility of them meeting in the finals.

Two teams. Two captains. One Stanley Cup.

The media would lose their minds. The league would scramble to control the narrative. Fans would argue about fairness and conflict of interest and whether love made either of them weaker.

Let them argue.

Shane pushed through the exit doors. Warm air hit his face. Across the street, Hayden waved from beside a black SUV, their goalie laughing at something Matteo said.

His family. His brothers.

Shane jogged toward them, grinning.

June 2012

Ilya stood at center for the opening faceoff of Game 5 against Colorado, stick in hand, breathing steady through his nose.

Across from him, Colorado's captain set up, jaw tight, eyes hard. The series had gone 3-1. One more win and Ottawa moved to the Stanley Cup finals.

The ref raised the puck. "Good luck, gentlemen."

Ilya's muscles coiled. Every nerve ending fired at once, hyper-aware, hyper-focused. He had to win this. Had to play Shane. This might be the last time he'd ever be able to play against his rival, with the knowledge and hope of Shane joining him in Ottawa after this season.

The puck dropped, and Ilya won the draw clean, sent it back to Grant on defense. From there, the play opened up ahead of him and he moved into it, reading lanes before they formed, anticipating passes three steps before they happened.

Colorado pressed hard. They knew what losing meant. Their best forward broke through the neutral zone, carried the puck deep.

Ilya backchecked, stick extended, reading the shooter's shoulders. The wrist shot came. Ilya deflected it, the puck caroming off his blade and up the boards.

Cam recovered it, sent it back to Ilya at center ice.

The game became rhythm. Shift after shift, line after line. Ilya played every other shift, Brandon managing his minutes carefully despite Ilya's protests.

"You'll burn out before the third period if I don't."

"I've done worse."

"Not on my watch."

First period ended scoreless. Both goalies standing strong, both defenses locked down tight. Colorado had won its place in this season, that much was for sure.

Second period, Ilya found the opening.

Colorado's defenseman pinched too high. Ilya intercepted the pass at the blue line, broke in alone on a breakaway.

The goalie challenged, cutting down the angle.

Ilya faked the shot, waited for the commit, then shelved it top corner.

Red light.

1-0.

The arena exploded. Ilya's teammates mobbed him, sticks clattering, gloves pounding his helmet.

"That's it! That's fucking it!"

Third period. Colorado pulled their goalie with four minutes left, desperate for the equalizer. Ottawa locked down. Blocked shots, cleared pucks, absorbed punishment.

Ilya played the final two minutes straight, legs burning, lungs screaming.

Colorado's last chance came with thirty seconds left. A scramble in front of the net, bodies crashing, puck loose. Yannick covered it. Froze it against the post.

Whistle, then the faceoff.

Ilya lined up for the draw. Colorado's center across from him looked hollow, already defeated.

The puck dropped. Ilya won it, sent it deep into Colorado's zone. From there, he had complete control. The clock wound down and the buzzer blared. Game over.

Ilya's knees buckled. He caught himself on his stick, breathing hard, vision swimming.

Arms wrapped around him. Cam. Grant. The whole team piling on, shouting, laughing, crying.

"We did it! We fucking did it!"

Ilya straightened, looked up at the scoreboard.

FINAL: Ottawa 2, Colorado 0

They were going to the Stanley Cup Finals, against Montreal, and against Shane.

The handshake line formed. Colorado's players moved through it mechanically, offering quiet congratulations that felt genuine despite the loss.

"Good luck against Montreal."

"You're gonna need it."

"Give 'em hell."

Ilya shook each hand, met each eye, said the right things.

Then he was off the ice, down the tunnel, into the locker room where the team had already started celebrating.

Someone cranked music. Champagne appeared from somewhere and Ilya was soaked in seconds. Bodies moved in controlled chaos, shouting and laughing and embracing.

"Thank God Ilya plays like he's been at this for a hundred years and knows everything!"

Ilya sat in his stall, gear still on, watching them. He chuckled. "Not a hundred years, that is ridiculous. More like..."

Then... The realization hit him hard, square in the chest, a surprise that he hadn't really thought of until just then.

Twenty-seven years.

He'd been playing hockey for thirty years now, if he counted both lifetimes. Started at five in Moscow, died at thirty, came back to eighteen for another 2 years.

27.

Twenty-seven years of ice time. Twenty-seven years of tape study. Twenty-seven years of knowing exactly how a goalie would move before he moved, how a defender would react before the puck arrived.

Ilya's hands started to shake.

He looked at them, turned them over. Young hands. Twenty-one-year-old hands, but the knowledge inside them belonged to someone twice that age.

Wait. The age.

"Fifty-one."

If he counted both lifetimes together, he was *fifty-one* years old, mentally. Though... to be fair, he'd never been allowed to actually get that old or experience that kind of life. Deep down, he still felt like a man in his early thirties. Though... Did that matter?

The room spun slightly.

All this time, he'd been using that knowledge. Every game. Every shift. Every decision informed by a future that hadn't happened yet, experiences that technically didn't exist.

Against players who didn't have that advantage.

Against *Shane*, who didn't have that advantage.

"Is any of this fair?"

The question lodged in his throat, choking him out.

He'd changed everything. Orchestrated Shane's early coming out. Built Ottawa into a contender years ahead of schedule. Manipulated draft positions. Used foreknowledge like a weapon.

A weapon, he'd even used against Shane.

"Did Shane have a choice in any of this? Or did I just... script his entire life? Did I take away things he could have done?"

His vision blurred.

"What have I done?"

"Yo, Cap!" Cam crashed into him, champagne-soaked and grinning. "We're heading to Monk's! You coming?"

Ilya blinked. Forced a smile. "Yeah. Yeah, give me a minute."

Cam clapped his shoulder and moved off, pulling Grant into a headlock.

Ilya's hands still trembled.

He'd spent two years convinced he was fixing things. Making them better. Giving Shane the happiness he deserved.

Yes, Shane was happier. There was no denying that, but only happier compared to the last lifetime. Who's to say he wouldn't have been happier... Without Ilya entirely.

Shane never chose this timeline. Never asked for Ilya to come back and rewrite history.

"Did he have any choice in this? Or did I make him..."

His phone sat in his bag. He pulled it out with shaking fingers.

He needed to tell Shane. Needed to explain. Needed to make damn sure they were on equal terms, but...

"Tell him what? That his entire relationship is built on.... ...me knowing things about him that he didn't even know about himself? That I'm from a future that no longer exists? Sure, that will all go over great!"

His thumb hovered over Shane's contact.

"Rozanov!" Brandon appeared in the doorway, whistle still around his neck.

Ilya looked up. Brandon's expression softened slightly.

"You good?"

"Yeah." The lie tasted like ash. "Just... processing."

Brandon studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Take your time. ...but not too much time. Your team's waiting."

He left.

Ilya sat in the empty locker room, music and laughter echoing from the showers, and stared at Shane's name on his phone screen.

He typed slowly, deleting twice before settling on something simple.

Ilya: We won. Moving to finals.

Shane: I know. I watched. Congratulations. Can't wait to kick your ass. ;)

Ilya's throat closed.

Ilya: Let's meet up before the game. Just the two of us. How about at your fancy new cottage? If you don't mind? Would love to have long talk with you about life.

Shane: Sounds great! I just got the place fully furnished. You'll love the bed, and the view from all the windows is amazing! I was thinking about starting to head up there after the end of every season. Make a tradition out of it, you know? Our private sanctuary, for just the two of us. :)

Ilya held back a sob.

Ilya: I love you.

Shane: I love you too.

Ilya: I have to get going. Team is celebrating.

Shane: Have fun!

Ilya set the phone down. Pressed his palms against his eyes until colors bloomed behind his lids. He'd spent two years running from his first life's mistakes. Maybe it was time to face what he'd done in this one.

Chapter 9: Past Meets Present

June 2012

Ottawa must have sensed Ilya's mood and given them the worst kind of weather to drive in. They'd started the drive to the cottage about an hour after a heavy rainstorm, which left steam from the roads and fog from the woods to pop up and around the roads. An overcast sky, grey, moody, and foreboding, that spat rain at them every so often, and made the ride that much longer with drivers all around them trying to be safe on the road.

Shane had the windows cracked two inches to get in the scent of fresh rain-cooled air in between the rain bursts, one hand loose on the wheel, radio playing low enough that it barely registered.

Ilya watched the highway blur past his window and said nothing. His stomach was in knots for days, ever since they'd planned this try. Shane, to his credit, was just as silent, exhausted in his own way after carrying the Rainbow Avengers game after game.

Eventually, flat farmland gave way to rock and pine. Road signs counted down kilometers to places neither of them had any business being, which was precisely the point. The cottage sat another forty minutes past the last town worth naming, accessible by a gravel road that Shane had apparently argued with three separate contractors about resurfacing, before finally losing that particular battle.

Ilya's knee bounced against the door panel. He knew how close they were getting and his stomach churned as he saw some of the houses on the way to the lake house, none of them even remotely the same as last time.

"You're doing the thing," Shane said.

Ilya stopped bouncing. "What thing?"

"The thing where you stare at the window and think so hard I can hear it from here." Shane glanced across. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing." Ilya turned it back toward the glass. "Nerves. The finals."

"You've been nervous for three days."

"Big series. I'm playing against second best player in league. Who would not be nervous?" Ilya attempted humor, but his voice fell flat.

A soft span of silence between them. Shane's fingers adjusted on the wheel.

"Ilya."

"Mm."

"I know what nervous-about-hockey looks like on you. That's not it. This is different nervous. This is... Scared shitless nervous. I don't think I've ever seen it on you this bad before."

Ilya said nothing. He knew his voice would betray him.

The pine trees thickened on both sides of the road, crowding the lane, branches reaching overhead until the sky narrowed to a ribbon above them. The light changed quality, going softer and mossy-colored and Ilya found himself watching the shadows between trees rather than his own reflection in the glass.

"Lot on mind these days. You know?" he said finally.

Shane let it sit for a moment. Deciding not to push yet, he turned the radio up by a bar and let the subject drop, filling the awkward quiet.

Ilya's knee started bouncing again. He caught it, pressed his palm flat against his thigh.

"Tell him. Don't you fucking dare lie to him. Not this life. Not this time."

The thought had been circling since the locker room, since the champagne and the shaking hands and the moment he'd understood, really understood, what fifty-one years of accumulated knowledge had actually done to the people around him.

"Tell him what, though. Start from the beginning? The plane? The last lifetime? The alley in Regina? Sharing that every decision I made nudged this lifetime for both of us?"

The gravel road appeared without warning and Shane turned onto it

Ilya's stomach tightened. Deep down, he hadn't wanted to come to the cottage. Not this lifetime's cottage. It wouldn't be the same. The place where they'd both bled their hearts out for each other was gone, and there was a real chance... This might be the place where their hearts might break instead.

The cottage appeared at the end of the lane through a gap in the trees. Shane slowed the car to a crawl and pulled onto the flat expanse of driveway beside it.

Ilya looked up.

The breath left his body and he almost passed out.

Glass and warm wood. Black trim. Huge window walls that caught the late afternoon sun and threw it back across the trees. Double-story height. The fire pit down near the water's edge, the private shoreline beyond it, the way the whole structure sat back from the lake just enough that the view from inside would be unobstructed for miles. The rock on the lack, where they'd swam.

He knew this place.

Every angle of it.

Every beautiful, romantic, heart-stuttering detail.

He'd spent the best day of his long, strange, painful first life here, sitting on that dock with a man who didn't know how to relax, watching him fail spectacularly at doing basic burger math, and loving him so much that Ilya shared every last gory, intimate, dark secret of his life with.

His mother, Irina. He'd told Shane about his mother here.

The wolf bird. He'd allowed himself to be openly scared here.

That day had been the wallpaper on his phone on the plane. The last thing he saw before his first life ended.

...and here it was.

The exact fucking same, in both lifetimes. Down to the last detail.

"Ilya?"

He realized he'd gone catatonic from the shock.

Door still closed. Hands flat on his thighs. Shane had gotten out and walked around to the passenger side and was standing there with his car keys in one hand and a vaguely alarmed expression, carrying Ilya's bag over his shoulder.

"You okay? You're just... sitting there."

Ilya opened the door. Climbed out. He stood on the gravel and looked at the cottage again, checking details. The exposed wood beams visible through the window glass. The stone chimney on the left side. The two chairs near the fire pit, facing the water, in the right angle.

Identical. All of it.

"Shane." His voice came out wrong, rough and compressed. "You built this yourself? You designed this?"

Shane's brow furrowed. "Well. Not literally myself. I had contractors to do the work, but yeah. I designed it all." He looked up at the facade, expression shifting into something more guarded. "Why?"

"The design. The layout. The windows. H.. How? Did you see it in a book? Did you imagine it?"

"No book had what I wanted, man." Shane rose an eyebrow, a bit concerned with Ilya's fervor. "I drew it out on graph paper about forty times until it was right. Drove the contractors crazy, they kept trying to talk me into more traditional stuff, pine siding and a smaller footprint. They kept talking about not doing as many windows, or moving the firepit, but..." Shane's mouth pulled sideways. "I told them I knew what I wanted. I was firm."

Ilya pressed the heel of his hand against his sternum.

"You told them. You built this. All of this. With your own... Mind."

"Three separate meetings. Different contractors. All of them had opinions." Shane sounded mildly indignant about it, even now. "I wanted the window wall to face the lake, not the road. Everyone thought that was backwards since the sunlight would be blinding. I was right, obviously, because the view is to die for and the automatic blinds were easy to buy if it got too bright. "

"You were right," Ilya said faintly.

"You're acting weird." Shane stepped closer. His hand found Ilya's arm, not gripping, just present. "Seriously. What is going on with you? ...and don't say the finals again, because I know that's not it."

Ilya looked at him. At Shane's face in the late afternoon light, the furrow between his brows, the careful steadiness he wore when he was worried but trying not to crowd.

He looked at the cottage. Their paradise.

Then he looked at his hands. Twenty-one years old. Fifty-one years of everything else.

Slowly, the grip on his chest loosened by one degree.

Shane had designed this place. In this life, with no template, no blueprint from some version of the future. Ilya hadn't helped with it at all, there had been so many other things that were wrong. No, Shane sat down with graph paper and argued with contractors and built the exact same place, down to the fire pit.

Because this was who Shane was. What Shane wanted. What Shane chose.

Maybe Ilya hadn't scripted that. Maybe some things were simply true regardless of which timeline they happened in. Maybe Shane was just Shane, after all.

"I just," Ilya started. Stopped. "I built everything in my head around the idea that I know what comes next. That I am the one holding the map. That without me deciding things, making choices, pushing..." He exhaled. "I worried that nothing in your life was yours."

Shane stared at him, incredulously.

"I worried I took your choices away."

The silence stretched long enough that a loon called somewhere in the pines and was answered from across the water, to neither of which Ilya flinched at this time around.

Then Shane looked at the cottage. He looked at it for a long moment. Shane's mouth stumbled to say something, over and over again. "We should go inside and you can tell me what you actually mean by all of that. Because you're on the verge of tears, and I... I'm getting a really weird sense of deja-vu and I don't know why."

Ilya took Shane's hand, letting the tears fall. "Then let me tell you a sad story of two hockey players with a heated rivalry that did not have fairy tale ending."

The fire pit was going full force, sending pale smoke up against the pine trees and the grey sky above.

Ilya had found the wood stacked under the eave on the south side of the cottage without being told where to look, and Shane had noticed that too, the same way he'd noticed Ilya's reaction to the building itself. The way Ilya had stood on the gravel, knees locked, breathing wrong, staring at something Shane had drawn on graph paper in his Montreal apartment at two in the morning a year ago.

They sat in the two chairs facing the water. Shane made tea, herbal and calming, because it gave his hands something to do.

Ilya talked and Shane listed.

He started in Regina. December 2008, which Shane knew, he'd been there, but this was a different Regina entirely.

Ilya described a version of that first night where they hadn't exchanged numbers, where they'd shaken hands and walked away from each other like strangers who stayed strangers. He described a rivalry that built across years of playoff matchups, brutal and personal, the kind that made journalists write columns and fans pick sides. He described two men who hated each other in the specific way that only people who understood each other completely could manage.

Shane held his mug in both hands and said nothing.

Ilya talked about Boston. About a version of himself who played for the Raiders for over a decade, who was never traded, who built a captaincy there and brought home Stanley Cup(s). A playboy, a pseudo-celebrity, who fucked whoever and whatever he wanted. Ilya described his father's particular brand of pressure, which Shane recognized in the shape of it even if he hadn't lived through it. He described teammates and road trips and records, a whole career's worth of hockey played in a city Shane had only ever visited.

Shane watched the lake. A strong wind blew through and pushed small waves toward the shoreline, one after another.

Ilya talked about their "meetings" that started after a photo shoot and a jerk-off session in the showers. When they'd fuck in hotel rooms, a few times out of the year when they were in the same cities. Fuck buddies. That's all they were at first. He talked about ghosting Shane for six months when things got mildly serious. He talked about a tuna melt that broke them both in half.

Then, then women. Svetlana and Rose. The broken hearts and broken minds.

Ilya shared about how they'd finally fallen into each other, reluctantly, stupidly, two men who'd spent years pretending not to circle the same drain. He described it without romanticizing it, sharing each stupid thing each of them had done in equal measure, which was how Shane knew it was real. He described their first kiss as something that happened in a corridor and left them both standing there wondering what they were supposed to do with it.

Then he talked about how Scott Hunter and Kip managed to give them both the courage to come to the cottage, be themselves, and where Shane would finally come out to his parents after his Dad spotted them, but much later than Shane could have ever expected.

Ilya talked about leaving Boston and moving to Ottawa, giving up his promising career to a team who was even worse in the first timeline than the second. All to be near Shane, which Shane's chest burst at hearing, and suddenly... Ilya's choices in this timeline's Draft made so much more sense now with context.

Then, Ilya explained the leaks. Someone catching Shane saying and doing things that could only be described as "gay", and a shipment of sex toys to his condo (for a weekend of them being together) that had been intercepted and shown by a bunch of bigots on something called TikTok, who'd wanted a big story. Shane had been forced to come out, chained and shackled into a "clean closet" by Montreal who practically owned his soul in contracts.

Ilya shared how it led to them fighting about whether or not to come out together as a couple, to let Ilya take some of the heat, and finally let them be seen with each other. He talked about all the fights that came of it. Ilya took just as much blame as that lifetime's Shane. "We didn't talk. Like we do now. We were... Both frustrated."

Then, he talked about the last night. The text argument. The things they'd said. Then he stopped talking for a moment and stared at the fire, and Shane did not push him, because there was clearly something terrible coming and he could feel its shape before Ilya reached it.

When Ilya told him about the plane, he said it simply, the way people talk about things from a thousand foot view so they don't re-live it.

Engine failure. An explosion. Rapid decompression. He described looking for his phone in the dark and the noise and the chaos, described finding it, described seeing Shane's name on the screen with an unread message attached and one last chance to send "I love you" that he didn't even know if he succeeded in or not.

"We never came out together and that broke my heart" Ilya said. He was looking at the fire, not at Shane. "You were captain. Montreal captain. You said it was too risky. You were scared and had every right to be scared. So, we were private, and it crushed my soul until I lashed out against you. Because I was scared to tell you the truth of how I felt. I chose to say terrible things because I was pissed off."

Shane didn't say anything. He noticed his hands had gone very still on the mug that had been empty for well over an hour.

The fire crackled. Somewhere on the lake, a loon called and neither of them flinched.

Shane sat with the story and let it wash over him.

Then Ilya told him of waking up in Regina again, inside his eighteen-year-old body, inside that handshake in the corridor, and this time choosing differently to be a better person and a better man.

Everything after that was the story Shane actually knew, refracted through a context he hadn't known existed. The draft. The dinner at The Lumberyard. Two years of text messages and honest, open conversation between friends instead of fuck buddies. Every choice Ilya had made that Shane had assumed was just Ilya being Ilya, now revealed as calculation, as strategy. All so they could be together, in love, and preferably out in the open and on a team that let them be free.

When Ilya finally stopped talking, the fire had burned down to deep red coals and the sky over the lake had shifted into the bruised blue of early evening, the moon sitting low in the sky.

Two hours, at minimum, of Ilya talking and Shane saying nothing. Maybe more.

The rational part of Shane's brain performed its usual audit. Outrageous claims and the evidence required for Shane to treat them as anything but creative lies. This was a lot different than trying to figure out if someone in the locker room was exaggerating over their sexual encounters.

This time, it was time travel. Previous lifetimes. A version of himself who was, by all accounts, a fucking asshole, just as much as a previous version of Ilya, was also a fucking asshole.

...but that was the thing.

Shane's life since Regina had been full of odd moments he couldn't explain.

Moments that arrived with a sense of completion rather than discovery. The way he'd felt in Regina, looking at Ilya for the first time, like picking up a book he'd put down somewhere, but knowing exactly where to look for it.

The cottage blueprints, which he'd drawn without reference, the floor plan arriving fully formed in his head at two in the morning after the lake property was finalized, like remembering a place, "his paradise" as he'd constantly called it, rather than buying one. The way drawing it made his heart flutter and each pencil stroke made a tear crawl to his eyes.

Then, there was the moments of his anger. Seeing a different version of Montreal celebrate Ilya's death, or remembering a plane crash that didn't happen, of "Lily's" messages that broke his heart and threw him into making decisions he would have otherwise been uncomfortable with before.

He'd told his therapist about this weird "deja vu". His therapist had said it was a common neurological phenomenon, or another possible "feeling" that came with where he was on the

autistic spectrum. They'd told him not to worry about it and to just "trust his feelings", which made him fire them on the spot because that wasn't fucking helpful.

With all of that information, Shane landed on one think he knew for certain.

"You're not cheating," Shane said.

Ilya turned to look at him.

"The hockey," Shane said. "You're not cheating. Think about it. There are veterans and rookies on the same ice every single night. They're compensated differently, they bring different things, and everyone accepts that. Gretzky wasn't cheating because he understood the game better than the nineteen-year-old on his line. You have experience. That's not cheating, it's just skill. You're allowed to be good at hockey, Ilya. So don't you dare feel guilty about playing in the finals, alright?"

Ilya stared at him for a long, blank moment. Then he laughed, loud and sudden, the kind of laugh that startled the surrounding trees and sent something rustling in the brush along the waterline. He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth and his shoulders shook and his eyes were wet and he laughed until it started sounding like something else entirely.

"That is first thing..." Ilya said, when he could speak again, still mid-laugh. "That is the very first thing you say to me after hearing all of that?! You bring up my hockey feelings?!"

"I wanted you confident going into the finals. Really, you shouldn't feel guilty. I mean, just look at..."

"Shane." Ilya shook his head. "I just told you I died and fell backward through time and rewrote our lives, and your first concern is my ice time?"

"Do you believe it or not? The hockey analogy. I mean, please tell me you don't think you're cheating."

"I, yes, actually, I," Ilya exhaled, something loosening in his face. "Yes. Okay. I believe it. Not cheating."

"Good." Shane looked at him steadily. "...and I believe you. About all of it."

The amusement faded from Ilya's expression, replaced by something raw

"You believe me."

"Yes."

"Just like that."

"It's not just like that," Shane said. "I've been having flashes for two years. Things I couldn't explain. Places I'd never been that felt like somewhere I'd left my keys. Conversations that felt like we'd had them before I'd finished having them. I thought I was losing my mind or constructing elaborate daydreams in my head over things happening that weren't real." He

turned the cold mug over in his hands. "I'm not the same person as that other Shane. That version of me doesn't exist anymore. I think this is like... Back to the Future or something. The future the old Shane came from doesn't exist anymore, so he and those people in the future doesn't exist anymore. ...but I think I can feel what he felt, like..." Shane searched for the comparison. "Like I'm the same house, different furniture, and the walls still know where the weight used to sit. So Back to the Future, but like with... Emotions traveling through time to where they're needed. Like a string of fate that just links us together, for all time. Maybe some things, maybe some relationships are fated to happen, and even changing the past is just... Not enough to stop it."

Ilya watched him without speaking.

"I think I know what he texted you," Shane said. "At the end. I... I've had it fuzzy in my head for a long time. Since I first starting reading Lily's texts in my memories. So... Here."

He pulled his phone from his jacket pocket. He held it for a moment, thumb resting on the screen without unlocking it, and looked out at the lake. The wind had gone still. The water was dark and flat and perfect.

He typed it out. It took a while. He crossed out a phrase, started it differently, found his way toward the thing that felt true. When it was done, he didn't read it back. He just sent it. Because he knew what he would have done in that same time.

Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Ilya looked down at it, then looked at Shane, and then opened it.

Shane watched him read it.

I'm sorry. Not for the relationship, for this. For making you feel that angry you'd say those things, and for me pushing you to that edge. I'm going to do better. I want to talk, properly, not like this, over text, where we're both angry and lashing out at each other because we're scared of losing each other. I know we both mean the world to each other. I want a second chance to do this right, but I can't do brave without you. I've never been able to do brave without you. If you'll come back to me, to Montreal, this weekend, I'll try. I promise. I'll try to have the courage to admit you're my boyfriend. I just need you to help me through it and for us to make a solid plan on how this is going to work. Maybe my mom can help?. I'm too scared to do it alone. I've always been too scared to do anything alone. I love you, Ilya. Not Lily, Ilya. I love you, Ilya Rozanov, Captain of the Ottawa Centaurs. I'm not sorry we met. I'll never be sorry we met and I refuse to accept that's how you really feel. I'm sorry we've always been dishonest with each other to the things that matter most. That's what I'll accept.

Ilya's chin dropped. His hand came up over his mouth, fingers pressed hard against it, and his breath came out in pieces, broken and uneven. His shoulders curved forward. Shane watched him read the message again, and then again after that.

Shane got up from his chair and crouched in front of Ilya's and put his arms around him. Ilya gripped the back of his jacket with both hands and pressed his face into Shane's shoulder and

let go of everything he'd been carrying. Loud, wracking sobs that called deep into the night, reverberating across the lake and into the unknown itself.

Shane held him, one hand at the back of his neck.

When Ilya's breathing had gone steady again, when he'd sat up and wiped his face with the heels of his hands and stared out at the water with the particular blankness of someone freshly emptied,.

"You... You really think that is what he said? You really think you know the old Shane?" Ilya stuttered.

Shane, with a flicker of something hot in his chest, curved a quiet smile. Ilya needed proof that these emotions passed through time? Well, then Shane would remember the moment in the last life when he knew, for certain. "These women, they are so sexy and fun, but is no matter. I cannot stop thinking about this short fucking hockey player with these stupid freckles and a weak backhand."

Ilya went completely still. Then slowly, his head turned and he chuckled. "A weak backhand?"

"Yes." Shane nodded, affirmatively. He put on his thickest Russian accent he could, nearly choking over it. "...and he is just so boring, and he drives a terrible car, and..." Shane kept his face entirely serious, "...that is my problem. All of these beautiful women and I am always wishing they were him. Is terrible problem."

Ilya's mouth opened. Closed. He was staring at Shane with an expression that was one degree away from complete collapse, and then it split into a mile wide smile.

"I love you."

"I love you."

Their arms and mouths crashed into each other. They found a new kind of passion in the cottage that night, draped in the sheets and protected by the walls of a familiar place they both knew as a second home.

Ilya woke to a bright summer dawn dancing through the cottage's wide expanse of windows. The lake beyond stretched a vibrant blue, waves slapping against the shoreline, and mist rising from its surface against the tree line.

Beside him, Shane slept on his side, one arm flung across Ilya's chest, face pressed into Ilya's side, hair sticking up at angles that would've made him self-conscious if he were awake. His breathing came slow and even, from a deep sleep that only came after a long night of exhaustion being sated.

Ilya didn't move for well over an hour after waking. He watched Shane's face in the light that slowly rose overhead, cataloguing details he'd memorized a hundred times across two

lifetimes but somehow never tired of. The freckles that darkened in summer with the light of the sun, like little constellations dotting a beautiful sky. The way his mouth went soft when he wasn't thinking too hard about anything, no tension, no performance, just Shane.

"You're my love," Ilya thought. "In both lives. In every version that matters, and even when you know how awful I was."

The guilt he'd carried for weeks had loosened its grip. Not disappeared, he doubted it would ever fully disappear, but the feeling shifted into something he could breathe around and knew, over time, would be little more than a stray worry.

Shane knew now. Knew everything. The plane, the first timeline, the choices Ilya had made to rewrite their story, and Shane had looked at him, listened to it all, and chosen to stay with him.

"You're not cheating," Shane had said about the hockey, but Ilya heard what he'd really meant underneath. *"You're not cheating at us. We're real. This is real."*

Ilya's chest thumped loudly, but in a good way this time. It wasn't from anxiety, but rather, from excitement of what the future, built on this newfound trust, would mean.

Shane shifted. His eyes opened slowly, unfocused for a moment before finding Ilya's face. A small smile pulled at his mouth.

"You're staring," Shane murmured, voice rough with sleep.

"Da."

"Creepy."

"You love it."

"I do."

Shane's smile widened. He pushed himself up on one elbow, the sheet falling to his waist. His free hand found Ilya's jaw, thumb brushing along the stubble there. "Are you okay? With all of this?"

"Should be asking you that question."

"I asked first."

Ilya caught Shane's hand, pressed a kiss to his palm. "I am okay. Better than okay. I spent two years thinking I made you into something you were not. Or something you weren't comfortable with."

"You didn't. This is who I am and who I want to be. Brave. Strong. Loved."

"I know that now." Ilya's throat worked. "...but I needed to hear you say it. Needed you to know everything so we could be..." He searched for the word. "Equal."

Shane studied him for a long moment, hazel eyes serious in the morning light. Then he leaned down and kissed him, soft and deliberate. In a way that said "*I'm here*" and "*I'm staying*" without needing words.

When Shane pulled back, his expression had shifted into something lighter. "Are you happy? In this life?"

The question landed with unexpected weight. Ilya blinked and felt a churning of his stomach.

"I mean it," Shane continued. "With me, with how everything turned out. Are you happy here? Shouldn't just be me that's happy you know."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He thought about it properly, the way Shane would've wanted him to.

About Ottawa and the Rainbow Avengers and Scott Hunter's press conference and Ryan Price sitting behind a microphone daring the league to come at him. About Troy Barrett at sixteen posting a video on YouTube, braver than he'd ever been in his twenties. About the cottage, identical in both timelines because Shane had built it from something deep inside himself that existed regardless of which life they were living.

About Shane, right here, asking the question.

"Yes," Ilya said finally. His voice came out rougher than intended. "Yes, I am happier. Because I get to be with you, out in the open. ...and you..." He cupped Shane's face with both hands. "You are happier in this lifetime. Less miserable. Less scared. That makes it worth everything."

Shane's expression softened further. "I am happier. You're right about that." He paused, thumb still tracing Ilya's jaw. "Are you okay with what you did? Changing things?"

"Most days." Ilya exhaled. "Some days I worry I fucked it all up. Made everything worse. Got people hurt who should not have been hurt."

"Like who?"

"Like you. At that gala. In that boardroom. Wearing a jersey you hated because I pushed us out of the closet before we were ready."

Shane shook his head. "You didn't push me. I pushed myself. We talked about this."

"Still..."

"Ilya." Shane's voice firmed. "Look at me."

Ilya met his eyes.

"I'm glad you told me," Shane said carefully. "About the time travel, about the other life. I'm glad we're on equal terms now, that I know what you know. It makes this..." He gestured

between them. "It makes us make sense in a way they didn't before. All the weird deja vu, all the moments I felt like I'd lived something twice."

Ilya's chest tightened again.

"...but you didn't make me do anything. Nobody can make me do anything, just ask my mother." Shane continued. "Instead, you gave me options I wouldn't have had otherwise. You built Ottawa into a place I could go when you knew how shitty Montreal would turn out. You showed me it was possible to be out and be good at hockey at the same time. You didn't script my life. You just... gave me a better map, one that was more filled in. One I could read easier."

Ilya's vision blurred. He blinked hard.

Shane's thumb brushed under his eye, catching moisture before it could fall. "We're soulmates, right? That's what this is?"

"Soulmates," Ilya repeated. The word felt foreign on his tongue, too big and too certain.

"Yeah." Shane's mouth curved. "I think we are. I think we've always been. In both your lives, we found each other. That's not manipulation. That's just... us. We're drawn together like magnets or something equally cheesy that you'd say."

Ilya laughed, the sound wet and choked. "Is very cheesy."

"Shut up, you love cheesy." Shane kissed him again, brief and firm. "We're strong enough that death can't beat us. You proved that. You died and came back and found me anyway. Made sure our love was strong enough to beat anything."

"Shane..."

"Promise me something."

Ilya waited.

Shane's expression turned serious. "You're not allowed to die again. We're not leaving this world until we're both ninety and in a nursing home and ready to go together. Deal?"

The request punched through Ilya's chest. He pulled Shane closer, wrapping both arms around him until they were pressed together from shoulder to hip. "Deal."

"Can you keep that promise?"

"If I don't, I'll fall through the past again," Ilya said against Shane's hair. "Find you when we're eighteen. Start over. Do it all again. As many times as it takes. For till 90. That much I swear."

Shane's arms tightened around him. They stayed like that for a long moment, the lake beyond the windows slowly brightening as the sun climbed higher.

Eventually Shane pulled back, just enough to see Ilya's face. His expression had shifted into something closer to mischief. "I'm glad we can be Shane and Ilya this time. Not Jane and Lily."

Ilya groaned. "God, those names. What were we thinking?"

"We were thinking we were clever."

"We were idiots."

"Yeah." Shane grinned. "We were." His smile faded slightly. "I'm going to work my ass off to make sure there are no more Janes and Lily's. Or at least, a lot less of them this time."

"What do you mean?"

Shane sat up properly, sheet pooling around his waist. "I mean I'm going to fight. For the league to change. For teams to be safe for guys like us. I'm going to make noise and push boundaries and make sure the next kid who realizes he's gay doesn't spend a decade hiding like we did in your first life. Then, from hockey, we take it to the mainstream. We fight. For a better tomorrow. One we didn't have."

Ilya's throat closed. He pushed himself up to sitting, mirroring Shane's position. "That is... very you."

"Is it?"

"Yes. You see problem, you fix it. You do not wait for someone else to fix it for you. You obsess and obsess until it is fixed and until then, you stress and grumble."

Shane ducked his head, color rising in his cheeks. "Yeah, well. Someone's got to do it."

"I'll help," Ilya said. "Whatever you need. We do it together."

"Together," Shane agreed.

They sat facing each other in the morning light, the cottage quiet around them except for the distant call of loons on the lake. Outside, the mist had mostly burned off, leaving the water clear and bright, as the sun finally broke through the previous day's overcast. A perfect day for swimming out on the lake.

Ilya reached for Shane's hand, threading their fingers together. "So. The finals."

Shane's expression shifted immediately, something competitive and sharp moving into his eyes. "Yeah. The finals."

"You and me. Montreal and Ottawa."

"Biggest series of our lives so far."

"What are we going to do?" Ilya asked.

Shane was quiet for a moment, thinking it through the way he always did, methodical and thorough. "I think we should let fate decide this one."

Ilya blinked. "Fate?"

"Yeah." Shane's grip tightened on Ilya's hand. "I'm not holding back. Neither are you. We both play our best hockey. Whoever wins, wins. No throwing games, no strategic losses, none of that bullshit."

"Montreal will hate you if I beat you."

"Montreal already hates me," Shane said flatly. "I'm playing for the Rainbow Avengers. For Dominic and Matteo and Aleksei and Hayden and everyone else who stood with me. I'm playing for every kid watching who needs to see that we can do this."

Ilya's chest swelled with something that felt dangerously close to pride.

"...and you?" Shane asked. "What about Ottawa?"

"Ottawa is special to me," Ilya said carefully. "The team I know I am going to assemble in the future. The brothers I am building this for and the ones who bleed and sweat with me now." He paused. "I am not going to let them down. Not the current team, not the team I know is coming."

Shane nodded slowly. "So we both go all-out."

"Da."

"No matter what happens."

"No matter what."

They stared at each other for a bit too long, the competitive tension crackling between them in a way that was electric.

Then Shane grinned. "You're going down, Rozanov."

Ilya grinned back. "In your dreams, Hollander."

Shane lunged. Ilya caught him, and they tumbled back into the sheets, laughing and grappling and kissing in equal measure, the morning stretching wide and golden around them.

When they finally surfaced again, two rounds later, Shane's hair was even more disheveled and Ilya's mouth hurt from smiling.

"I should probably get up," Shane said, making no move to actually do so.

"Probably."

"We've got the finals in three days."

"Yes."

"Should start preparing. Tape study. Strategy."

"Absolutely."

Neither of them moved for another three hours.

ESPN SPECIAL REPORT: STANLEY CUP FINALS TIED 3-3 IN SERIES

By Greg Holt and Diane Park | June 2012

The impossible has become inevitable after Montreal's "Rainbow Avengers" clenched a comeback win in the third

Game 7 is on, hockey fans. Montreal versus Ottawa, in Ottawa's home rink. Boyfriends Shane Hollander versus Ilya Rozanov. The Stanley Cup Finals deadlocked at three games apiece, and tomorrow night, one of them hoists the trophy while the other watches.

The series has lived up to every impossible expectation. Montreal's Rainbow Avengers, now sixteen strong after three additional players joined the movement mid-playoffs as allies to the cause, with donations to LGBT+ foundations as proof of their loyalty, have defied every projection, every doubt, every voice that said LGBT+ players couldn't compete at this level.

They've done more than compete, fans. They've dominated.

Shane Hollander leads the Avenger's playoff scorers with twenty-three goals and assists, while Dominic Vaillancourt sits second with twenty-one. Matteo Ferrara has anchored the defense with a plus-eighteen rating. The Rainbow Avengers account for every goal Montreal has scored in the playoffs, and with only six players from the original roster still refusing to use rainbow tape, the team has effectively split into two distinct units.

One plays hockey. The other watches from the press box.

"We don't recognize them as teammates anymore," Vaillancourt said after Game 6. "You're either with us or you're not. There's no middle ground. Doesn't matter if you're gay or straight to be on the ice, all that matters is what you put into the game. We should be playing together, as equals, in every way. To those that don't see us as equal? Well, I hope the Free Agency is kinder to you than it has been to us."

Montreal's coaching staff walked off after Game 3, citing "irreconcilable differences" with management. The Rainbow Avengers have been effectively self-coached since, with Hollander acting as both captain and strategist. Reporters have taken to calling him "acting captain and coach," a title he hasn't disputed.

"Someone has to make decisions since Montreal has clearly decided they're not a serious agency anymore," Hollander said when asked about the coaching vacuum. "Might as well be us."

Yet, for all of Montreal's improbable success, Ottawa has matched them stride for stride with no sign of letting down.

Ilya Rozanov has been put into the books as "a possible Gretzky" with a little more time and experience, hitting an incredible 16 goals during this series, as the leading scorer of the league, with one more game to look forward to pad that stat.

Brandon Wiebe's patient, supportive coaching has created something unprecedented in Ottawa, a team culture where seven active LGBT+ players thrive openly, supported by straight teammates who've made allyship a core identity rather than performative gesture.

"We're building something bigger than one season," Wiebe said. "Win or lose tomorrow, this matters. What we've created here matters. We'll be back in the finals for a decade or more to come, you can quote me on that."

The betting lines have moved four times in the last week. Neither team holds clear advantage. Las Vegas oddsmakers have called it a coin flip.

This story, however, is about more than just wins and losses and stats.

Ottawa now has the highest ratio of out LGBT+ players to straight players in professional sports history. Interest to join the organization have tripled. Season ticket renewals hit one hundred percent for the first time in franchise history. Sponsors are flocking, and it is rumored that stadium improvements have been put on the table for their players and staff. The Centaurs, once the league's laughingstock, have become the most sought-after destination in hockey.

"Players want to come here," team president Marion Holloway said in a rare interview. "Not just LGBT+ players. Everyone. Because we've proven you can build a winning culture on respect instead of fear. Doesn't matter who you are, so long as you've got the drive to kick ass on the ice!"

Tomorrow night, one of these teams wins the Stanley Cup.

One captain lifts the trophy.

One organization claims hockey's ultimate prize, but everyone watching knows the real story.

This isn't Montreal versus Ottawa. This isn't even Rainbow Avengers versus Centaurs.

This is Shane Hollander versus Ilya Rozanov. The two men who kissed at a charity gala and changed professional sports forever. The couple who've spent the last three months proving that love doesn't make you weaker, it makes you unstoppable.

Game 7. Tomorrow. 8 PM Eastern.

The world will be watching.

Chapter 10: Enjoying the Butterflies

July 2012 (Ottawa Arena, Game 7 of Stanley Cup Finals)

The 2012 Stanley Cup Finals would be a thing of legends that hockey fans would remember for years to come, and Shane would, likewise, remember for the rest of his life.

Ottawa came out swinging, demolishing Montreal in Games 1 and 2, on their home turf. Shane knew he and the rest of his team were fighting one of the best teams in the league and the home crowd, who came out in record number to sold-out figures, all celebrating Ottawa's first chance at a Stanley Cup in decades.

Shane knew they weren't beat. He used Games 1 and 2 to test their limits. So, by Game 3 and 4, their limited roster had a good rhythm of when to play. Which, must to Shane's chagrin, their entire first line HAD to be out when Ilya was on the ice, or there was no chance in hell of stopping him. That alongside firing on all cylinders when the lower half of the Centaur roster was out on the ice, they managed a 2-1 victory in both Games 3 and 4.

Game 5 was a bloodbath back in Ottawa. 3-0, as exhaustion had started to set in on Montreal, and their poor goalie (without a backup on their reduced roster) was playing on fumes. All of the Rainbow Avengers were reaching their limits, and Shane knew their lack of support from Montreal's full roster was starting to get to them.

Then, Game 6 back on Montreal ice, had been as close to a comeback as possible. 3-2, in overtime, in a last ditch effort that nearly had Shane and Dominic passing out on the ice to get the last goal in past Ilya.

Now... Game 7. Ottawa ice, Ottawa home crowd. He could hear the roar of the stadium from all the way in the locker room.

Shane scrolled through Twitter on his phone, needing the distraction.

@MTLHabsFan4Life: *Fire the entire home office. FIRE THEM ALL. Five core players are carrying this team on their backs, with MAYBE two and a half lines total? Management won't even give them backup, make a statement, or even bring in fucking coaches to help these guys out?! I hear the only person left on staff is the Equipment Manager! This is a disgrace to Montreal hockey. #FireMTLManagement*

@BellCentreRegular: *boycotting season tickets until ownership changes. not giving another cent to an organization that treats its players like this. I don't care if they're gay, straight, or even Boston fans. shame on you @MTLVoyageurs*

@QuebecHockeyMom: *My son asks why the Voyageurs don't help Hollander's line and why his favorite players are sitting out of the cup final. What do I tell him? That grown men would*

rather lose the Stanley cup than skate on the ice with gay players? Sickening. New owners. New management. NOW.

@JacquesPelletierMTL: *The Rainbow Avengers are down 2 games because they're EXHAUSTED. Meanwhile plenty of healthy players sit in the press box because they don't want to support their team? This isn't hockey. This is sabotage. They're trying to lose, trying to blame all this on the gay guys, it's so obvious. All those guys in the press box, and all the old coaches? Get rid of them, now!*

@PeeWeeRefDad: *It's some of the dumbest coaching and management decisions I've ever seen, and I referee peewee hockey games. Montreal admin is worse than helicopter parents trying to get their special snowflakes the most ice team, and I thought I'd never say that. #MTLManagementSucks*

@MontrealSportsDaily: *BREAKING: Protests outside Bell Centre demanding ownership change. Chants of "Sell the team" audible from blocks away. Talks from famous billionaires have started in major media, with a few already pitching offers over twitter.*

@VoyageursSupporter88: *Two and half lines, total. Against a full Ottawa roster and the next Gretzky, Ilya Rozanov... and management wonders why we're losing. Get rid of every single executive. Start over. #RainbowAvengers deserve better.*

Shane pocketed his phone.

In a move he'd never pictured in his life... The city had turned on Montreal's front office. No, worse. Hockey dads, hockey fans, from all walks of life had turned on Montreal. Shane didn't imagine all of them being allies or if many of them even cared about the lives of players, but he did imagine that the fury of losing the Stanley Cup was enough to make them at least start to fire up some brain cells.

Hayden clapped his hands together, gathering the attention of the small roster before him. His expression was grim but determined.

"Right. Listen up. I think our leader needs to give us our last speech before we head out there."

The fifteen players who'd suited up for the final gathered close. Shane pushed off the bench, stepping into the circle beside Dominic and Aleksei. Matteo leaned against the wall, sweat already beading on his forehead despite the game not starting for another twenty minutes.

Shane thought about it, deeply and chuckled. "We're probably not going to win this," Shane said, flatly.

Dominic's jaw tightened. "Fuck that, we're..."

"We're **probably** not," Shane interrupted. "We're exhausted. We're outmatched. We've got less than three lines who can barely stand after a week of the hardest hockey we've ever

played, and Ottawa's got a full roster plus the best player in the league, who people are already calling Gretzky Jr."

Shane's saw how everyone's stomach twisted. He took a deep breath. "But..." His voice hardened. "Every shift we take, every goal we score, every second we stay on our feet, that matters. Not for the Cup. For everyone watching who needs to see us fight. Because the city is on our side. Because they need to see how tough we are. That we're no different than the straight guys out there and will bleed for this cup."

Aleksei nodded slowly.

"So, we go out there," Shane continued, "...and we play the best fucking hockey of our lives. We make them earn it. We show the world what we're worth. Hell, if we fight hard enough, we might just even win this thing, but I mean... We have to pull out all the stops. We have to use our bodies to their very limit, down to the last calories we can burn. We have to fight and live with no fucking regrets. Only then... Could we maybe do it."

Shane met everyone's eyes. The team, tired but fierce.

"...and I think we've got the balls to do that. Who's with me?!"

A cheer, a roar, clacking of sticks together and arms and hugs pulling each other in for fierce waves of support.

"Rainbow Avengers on three?" Matteo offered.

They stacked hands. They cheered, they roared, and they lined up.

Shane pulled on his gloves and headed for the tunnel.

He stood at the mouth of it, helmet already on, stick in hand, rainbow tape bright even under the harsh fluorescents. Behind him, the team lined up in their blue and white, the men who'd rewritten Montreal's season through sheer stubborn refusal to back down for what was right.

Across the ice, visible through the gap in the boards, Ottawa's black and red filled their own tunnel. Ilya was be at the front. Shane knew it without looking. Captain's privilege, first man out, leading his team onto home ice for the biggest game of their lives.

Shane's chest felt tight and his body was at the point of breaking. He breathed through his nose, four counts in, four counts out.

The crowd noise built beyond the tunnel walls. A low rumble that grew teeth as more fans found their seats, as the energy in the building started to concentrate into something bigger than any of them.

Hayden's hand landed on Shane's shoulder pad. "You good?"

"Yeah."

"Bullshit."

Shane's mouth twitched. "Yeah, it's bullshit."

"Same here," Hayden said quietly. He squeezed once and stepped back.

The arena announcer's voice boomed through the speakers, introducing the starting lineups. Ottawa first, home team advantage. Shane listened to the names, catalogued them against what he knew from tape study and previous games. Grant on defense. Cam on the left wing. Yannick in net.

Then: "*...and your Captain, number eighty-one, Ilya Rozanov!*"

The building might as well have announced the presence of God himself. Sound crashed against the tunnel walls, a physical force that Shane felt in his sternum. Seventeen thousand people on their feet, screaming themselves hoarse for a team that hadn't made the playoffs over a decade before this season. On the Jumbotron, Ilya's face was wide with a smile, waving to the crowds, and even blowing a kiss in Shane's direction.

Shane closed his eyes, after catching the kiss in the air. He breathed.

The co-announcer, the former broadcaster from Montreal who'd been hired by Ottawa after his firing, moved to Montreal's lineup. He skipped announcing the coaches, the owners, and those players in the press box, out of pure solidarity with the team. Hell, he didn't even call them the Voyagers, he called out their new name, The Rainbow Avengers. In a familiar voice that made them all stand up a bit straighter, out of pure respect for what he'd sacrificed for them, they were called out. Dominic. Matteo. Aleksei. Hayden, and the other souls who'd joined them.

"...and your acting Captain and coach, number twenty-four, Shane Hollander!"

The noise shifted. The same explosion that Ilya had, and maybe even just a little bit louder. A crazy thing to hear on an away game. Shane opened his eyes watched as the spotlight hit him, cameras flickered and the audience were all up on their feet for him.

He hit the ice.

The cold struck his face first, clean and sharp. He circled toward center ice where the rest of his team was gathering.

The warm-ups blurred. Passes and shots and skating drills, muscle memory taking over while Shane's brain catalogued every detail of Ottawa's positioning, their timing, the way they moved as a unit.

Seventeen minutes later, the horn sounded. Shane's gaze drifted across the ice. Ilya stood at Ottawa's bench, helmet off, listening to Brandon Wiebe. Whatever the coach said made Ilya's expression go serious, then determined.

The teams lined up for the anthem.

Shane stood at attention, hand over his heart, but his eyes found Ilya across the line. Ilya was already looking back.

Neither of them looked away. The Jumbotron and all the sports networks caught it, and memorialized it for the rest of their careers.

The anthem ended. Players scattered back to their benches and Shane skated to center ice for the opening faceoff.

Ilya met him there.

They stood across from each other, sticks resting on the ice, waiting for the ref. The crowd noise faded to background static. All Shane could hear was his own breathing and the quiet scrape of Ilya's skate as he adjusted his stance.

The ref raised the puck. "Good luck, gentlemen."

Ilya's eyes met Shane's. Something passed between them, too fast and too private for anyone else to catch. An acknowledgment. A promise.

No regrets. We both play our best.

Shane's grip tightened on his stick. "I love you."

Ilya's mouth curved into something fierce and warm. "I love you too. Now I'm going to put everything into beating your ass, my love."

"Try me, old man.. We've got nothing to lose and everything to gain."

The puck dropped.

Period One

Shane won the draw clean, sent it back to Matteo. The game opened ahead of him and he moved into it, reading the ice like he always did.

Ottawa pressed hard. They wanted to set the tone early, wanted home ice advantage to mean something, and damn if their crowd wasn't giving it to them. Ilya carried the puck through the neutral zone, weaving between defenders like they were traffic cones.

Shane backchecked, stick extended, reading Ilya's shoulders. The shot came. Shane's blade connected, deflecting it wide.

"Nice try, babe!" Shane called, with a wink.

Ilya grinned, already circling back. "Was just warming up, princess!"

The first ten minutes played out in tight, controlled chaos. Both teams knew each other too well by this point. Every weakness identified and exploited. Each team got a little desperate to break through.

Shane set up in the offensive zone, calling for the puck. Dominic threaded a pass through traffic. Shane one-timed it, catching an opening in a split second.

Yannick's glove snapped out, catching it clean.

"Fuck," Shane muttered.

"Better luck next time, Hollander!" Yannick called out.

Montreal's line changed. Shane skated to the bench, breathing hard already. Hayden slapped his shoulder pad as they passed.

"You're getting him next shift."

"Damn right I am."

Shane watched from the bench as Ottawa controlled possession. Ilya moved with the kind of effortless ease that made defending him feel like trying to catch smoke in a bottle. His boyfriend lived this game before, Shane realized. Maybe not this exact game, but something close enough that his body remembered the patterns.

The thought of Ilya's lifetimes of experience should've been intimidating.

Instead, Shane felt his competitive edge sharpen.

"Good. Let him bring everything. So will I. I'll learn and grow from him, get better, faster than I ever did before."

Twelve minutes in, Ottawa struck first.

Ilya intercepted the puck at the blue line, fed it to Cam streaking down the wing. Cam's shot beat Montreal's goalie five-hole. The red light blazed for the score and the arena erupted.

Shane watched Ilya celebrate with his teammates, saw the pure joy on his face, and felt his chest swell despite himself.

"That's my boyfriend. That's my rival. That's the man I'm going to beat, no matter what."

Shane's heart raced, at the thought of spending the rest of his life playing with Ilya. The sheer joy of always having someone to challenge him, but also being there for him, in ways that made Shane braver and stronger.

Montreal's next shift started at center ice. Shane won the faceoff this time, sent it to Aleksei. They worked it around the boards, cycling, probing for openings.

Shane found space in the slot. Aleksei's pass arrived perfectly. Shane's shot went top shelf before Yannick could react.

Goal. The game was 1-1 and the crowd cheered, regardless of whose home team it was.

The Rainbow Avengers mobbed Shane, sticks clattering, voices shouting. Shane's grin split his face. He looked across the ice. Ilya stood at Ottawa's bench, helmet off, running his hand through his hair. He caught Shane's eye and shook his head, smiling.

Shane blew him a kiss, returning the favor from earlier.

The crowd lost their minds.

Cameras flashed. Somewhere, a broadcast team was probably losing their composure. Shane didn't care. He skated back to center ice for the faceoff, feeling lighter than he had in months.

The period wound down. Both teams traded chances, both goalies standing strong. The pace never let up, both sides knowing that one mistake could be the difference.

With two minutes left, Ilya broke through Montreal's defense on a partial breakaway. Shane chased him down, stick extended, reading the play three steps ahead.

Ilya pulled the puck. Shane's stick checked it away, sent it up the boards.

"Gotcha," Shane said as they tangled in the corner.

"This time," Ilya shot back, grinning.

They separated, both breathing hard, both smiling.

The buzzer sounded.

End of the first period: 1-1.

Period Two

Ilya waited at the bench, watching Shane circle before the second period. The man moved like water, like a speed skater despite all the bulk and pads, effortless, every stride a calculated expense of energy, like a precious resource to be managed. Even now, after two years of this timeline and a lifetime of seeing him before, watching Shane play still made Ilya's equal parts jealous, intimidated, and in love.

"Twenty-one years old and he's already the best player I've ever faced. Probably will ever face. Fuck, he's so good at this."

The ref blew the whistle. Ilya hopped the boards.

Shane met him at center ice again, that same competitive fire in his eyes that Ilya had seen across two lifetimes. The puck dropped between them.

This time, Ilya won it.

He sent it back to Grant, then drove hard toward Montreal's zone. The play developed fast, Cam carried it up the left side, drawing two defenders. Ilya cut to the slot, calling for it.

The pass arrived. Ilya shot it before the puck even hit his stick, and well before Montreal's goalie could set.

Top corner. Bar down, red light flashing for the goal.

2-1 Ottawa.

Ilya's teammates crashed into him, but his eyes found Shane immediately. Shane stood at center ice, stick across his knees, jaw tight. He was pissed. Of course he was. Ilya didn't blame him.

"Good. Stay angry. Play better. Get that fire in you. Push me back. Give me everything."

The celebration broke. Ilya skated past Shane on his way to the bench.

"You're gonna have to work harder than that," Ilya said, grinning.

Shane's eyes narrowed. "Watch me. I'll pull something out even you haven't seen before."

Montreal's next shift came out flying. Shane won the faceoff, worked the puck to Dominic along the boards. They cycled it low, patient, probing for their best chance at a score.

Then Shane, true to his word, did something Ilya had never seen before.

He faked toward the net, drew Ilya with him as if to try and set up a shot, then pivoted sharply and fed a blind backhand pass to Matteo, their weakest shooter, at the point. The pass threaded through three sets of legs and at least four sticks, arriving in a neat line.

Matteo's made one adjustment, shot with all he had in him, and beat Yannick clean, who'd completely lost track of the puck thanks to Shane's crazy pass.

2-2.

Ilya stopped mid-stride, staring.

"That pass. I've never seen Shane make that pass."

Shane skated past him during the celebration, close enough that only Ilya could hear.

"Gotta keep it interesting in the bedroom and on the rink, you know. Think you can keep that up and surprise me?"

Ilya's chest swelled with something that felt dangerously close to pride and fear mixed together.

"Hell, he might already be better now than he was back in his 30s. Maybe that's what living out and free, with no reservations, really means. Maybe he's not weighed down anymore. He can just worry about hockey now."

The game tightened after that. Both teams locked down defensively, every shift a battle, every inch of ice contested. Nobody was making any hasty shots.

Ilya caught Shane in the corner during a board battle, their shoulders colliding hard enough to rattle helmets.

The period wore on.

Ottawa controlled possession for long stretches, but Montreal's defense held firm. Shane blocked two shots in one shift, his body throwing itself in front of slap shots without hesitation.

"Crazy bastard. He's going to get himself hurt."

With five minutes left, Ilya found an opening. Grant sent a stretch pass that hit him in stride at the blue line. He broke in alone, just him and Montreal's goalie.

Shane backchecked hard, closing the gap faster than should've been possible.

Ilya faked the shot. The goalie committed.

Ilya went to shelf it...

...but Shane's stick appeared from nowhere, deflecting the puck wide.

They crashed into the end boards together, tangled and breathless.

"How the fuck did you catch me?" Ilya asked, genuinely impressed.

Shane's grin was wild. "I missed you, of course. Needed a smooch."

They pushed apart, both laughing now despite themselves.

The buzzer sounded.

End of the second period: 2-2.

Period Three

Shane's lungs screamed. Despite his cocky attitude in the second period, his legs felt like they'd been filled with lead, each stride a battle against muscles that had nothing left to give.

This was the Avenger's weakness, as they were with limited players. They could hold it together for two periods, but by the middle of the third, they were all skating like zombies. With only a few lines, they didn't have the luxury of long breaks and it was whittling them down.

Around him, the Rainbow Avengers were falling apart. Dominic nearly went down at center ice, caught himself on his stick. Matteo's skating had gone choppy, his usual fluid movement

reduced to basic forward and backward. Even Hayden, who'd played through a separated shoulder in juniors, looked ready to collapse.

Shane took a shift, lost the puck to Grant, and barely made it back to the bench before his vision tunneled, dark.

"You okay?" Dominic asked, though he looked worse.

"Fine. I can take it."

"Liar."

Shane managed a weak grin. "Yeah, maybe not, but I'll do it anyway."

Out on the ice, Ottawa controlled possession. Ilya and Ottawa's first line moved like they had reserves no one else could access, skating circles around exhausted defenders. He set up Cam for a shot that missed wide by inches.

The clock ticked down. Eight minutes left. Score still 2-2. How that was possible was beyond Shane. He was grateful for their second line putting everything into defense while the first line got some rest.

Shane watched from the bench, trying to find an answer. *Any answer.* His body had nothing left. The team had nothing left. They'd given everything across seven games and they didn't have much left to put out there.

"This is it. We're done. Ottawa's going to wear us down and score, and that'll be the end of it. We won't be able to come back if they score and then score on them to win. We have to score and then stop them. That's it. That's the only path forward."

The thought should've hurt more than it did.

Instead, Shane felt something like peace settling over him. They'd fought. God, they'd fought so hard. The Rainbow Avengers had proven everything they'd needed to prove. History, he hoped, would remember them.

Ilya nearly scored again. A breakaway that Montreal's goalie somehow stopped with his blocker, the puck deflecting high over the glass.

The crowd erupted.

Shane closed his eyes. Breathed.

"No regrets. That's what Ilya said. Live so you don't die fumbling on the ground trying to make things right."

He opened his eyes.

In a flash, there were only four minutes left. The second line was done for, they weren't going to be able to defend for much longer. Ilya was going to score on them soon, that much was

certain.

Shane stood. His legs protested by wobbling on him, nearly sending him to the ground. He ignored them.

"One more shift," he said.

Dominic looked up. "Shane..."

"One more." Shane pulled on his gloves. "Everything we've got. No holding back. No saving energy for later because there is no later. Now or never. We don't score? We're done. You with me?!"

Aleksei pushed himself upright. Then Matteo. Then Hayden.

"Fuck it," Hayden said. "Let's go."

They hopped the boards.

Shane took the ice and immediately felt the difference. His body screaming, yes, but underneath it, something else, like focus.

Ottawa won the faceoff. Ilya sent it deep into Montreal's zone.

Shane chased it down. Got there first, somehow. Sent it up the boards to Hayden.

Hayden fired it across to Dominic. Dominic passed it back to Shane at the blue line.

Shane carried it in, reading the defense. Two defenders collapsed on him. He threaded the puck through to Aleksei in the slot.

Aleksei shot. Yannick stopped it for Ottawa.

The puck bounced loose.

Matteo dove for it, poked it forward.

Shane crashed the net. Bodies everywhere, sticks tangling, chaos in the crease.

The puck crashed free to Hayden.

Hayden passed instead of shooting, finding Shane at the far post.

Time stopped as Shane caught the puck.

Shane saw everything. The angle of Yannick's body, weight shifted left. The gap between his blocker and the post, microscopic but there. Ilya diving toward him, stick extended, already reading Shane like a book and knowing where that shot was going. That microscopic opening was going to shrink.

Thankfully, Shane wasn't alone.

The Rainbow Avengers crashed into Ilya like a wave at the beach. Dominic hit him first, shoulder to chest. Then Matteo from the side, while Aleksei dove low. A desperate, three man pile that would have been excessive if it hadn't been Ilya Rozanov and hadn't been their first ditch effort. It was a miracle the ref hadn't called anything.

Ilya went down hard, tangled in a mess of bodies and equipment.

Hayden threw himself at the mess, slamming into two defenders that tried to come for Shane.

It left Shane alone.

The gap in Yannick's defense widened as the goalie tracked the chaos in front of him, so shocked to see such a desperate gambit. That was it, that opening. The only chance for victory. If he missed? That was it, they wouldn't get another chance.

Two lifetimes crashed through Shane's awareness. The first Shane's desperation and heartbreak, weighing him down for an entire lifetime. This Shane's courage and love, and how freeing it was not having a secret stabbing through his chest. Both versions converging into this single moment, this one shot. Past and present, united as one front, determined to prove themselves to Ilya Rozanov, the NHL, and hell, maybe even the world.

Shane found his focus. His stick moved on instinct, muscle memory from thousands of hours of practice. He knew that perfect angle to hit, and through the burning muscles and body that was ready to quit, he fired the shot.

The puck left his stick's blade.

Everything slowed.

Yannick lunged, catching the gap in his defense and trying to stop the puck.

Too late.

The puck sailed past his blocker, caught the inside of the post.

Dropped into the net with a sickening thud.

A red light burst out, confirming the goal.

The arena went oddly silent, and then erupted in a cacophony of noise that didn't feel human. A mixture of boos, cheers, and who knows what else, for who knows what reason.

Shane's knees buckled. He caught himself on the post, breathing so hard he thought his lungs might rupture.

Hands grabbed him. Dominic. Hayden. Aleksei. The whole line piling on, shouting, crying, holding each other up because none of them could stand alone.

3-2 Montreal.

Three minutes left.

Shane couldn't move. His body had given everything on that shift, spent the last reserves that didn't exist. He tried to skate back for the faceoff, to try and fight the last battle, and nearly went down.

Hayden caught his arm. "You done?"

"Yeah." Shane's voice came out hoarse. "I'm done."

"You gave us the lead. We'll hold it. We're a team. We'll finish this game, together."

Shane made it to the bench. Collapsed onto it. His vision swam.

Dominic took the faceoff. Lost it clean to Ilya, and it wasn't even close.

Ottawa pressed. Full offensive zone time, cycling the puck, probing for the equalizer.

The Rainbow Avengers locked down. Blocked shots, cleared pucks, absorbed punishment. The second line were literally throwing their bodies onto the puck and ice, because that's all they could do anymore, anything "tactical" went out the window.

Two minutes left.

Shane watched from the bench, unable to do anything but breathe and pray and put his faith in his brothers.

Ilya had the puck along the boards. He cut toward the net, drawing three defenders. He passed instead, finding Cam open at the point.

Cam wound up for the slapper.

Matteo dove. The puck hit him in the shoulder, a deep thud even through the pads, and deflected wide.

Ninety seconds left.

Ottawa pulled their goalie. Six attackers versus five exhausted defenders and a goalie on his last leg.

Shane gripped the bench with both hands.

The faceoff in Montreal's zone. Dominic versus Ilya.

Ilya won it, again, without contest. Sent it to Grant at the point.

Grant fired. Montreal's goalie saved it.

The rebound bounced to Cam. He shot. Matteo blocked it, tripped right after, and slammed into the boards, nearly knocking himself out.

Sixty seconds.

Aleksei intercepted a pass, tried to clear it down the ice.

The puck didn't make it out of the zone. Grant kept it in at the blue line.

Forty-five seconds.

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs. He couldn't watch, but he couldn't look away. He tried to get back on the ice and then promptly slammed onto the ground in front of the bench instead. He struggled to get back up on his feet.

Ilya had the puck again. He skated toward the net, and suddenly, Shane saw it happening before it did. The man would fake left, go right, thread the puck through Aleksei's legs to Cam in the slot. Cam would shoot blocker side.

Except the goalie saved it, on all fours afterwards as he started sobbing from the exhaustion.

Thirty seconds.

The puck bounced loose in the crease. Bodies crashed together. Sticks swinging. The play went nowhere, and Ilya was screaming at the top of his lungs for his team.

Whistle.

Faceoff.

Twenty seconds.

Dominic won this one out of pure spite, nearly breaking Ilya's stick in the process. Fired the puck down the ice with zero control and zero target.

Ottawa chased.

The clock ticked down.

Ten seconds.

Ottawa couldn't get set up. Ilya was sprinting, trying to break through this desperate defense, but found no openings. Grant fired a shot from the blue line.

Wide.

Five seconds.

The puck bounced around the boards.

Three.

Ilya found the puck. He sprinted, desperate and needy.

Two.

Ilya fired, right at the goalie, a long shot.

One.

The puck hit the tip of the goalie's skate, bounding off, missing the opening by half an inch or less.

Zero. The buzzer screeched over head.

Game over.

Shane collapsed forward, face in his hands. He screamed. A loud, painful, guttural scream he didn't know he had in him.

They'd won.

The Rainbow Avengers had won the Stanley Cup.

Around him, the team erupted. Bodies piling onto the ice, gloves and sticks flying, screaming loud enough to drown out seventeen thousand Ottawa fans sitting in stunned silence.

Shane couldn't move. Couldn't process it. His body had shut down completely, muscles refusing to respond to any command.

Hands grabbed him. Pulled him upright.

Not his teammates.

Ilya.

Ilya's arms wrapped around him, supporting his weight entirely. "Congratulations, my love. Come on. Up you go. Take your fucking victory lap, we nap later. You bastard, that last move was so perfect I'm still not believing what I saw."

Shane looked at him through blurred vision. "Ilya..."

Grant appeared on Shane's other side. Then Cam. Ottawa players surrounding him, helping him and his worn-down teammates onto the ice, to celebrate.

The crowd noise shifted. The initial shock giving way to something else. Applause.

Not just polite applause. A standing ovation.

Seventeen thousand Ottawa fans, their Cup dreams crushed, on their feet clapping for the team that had beaten them.

For the Rainbow Avengers. Who'd won through exhaustion and pushed themselves to the limit.

For Shane.

For the best damn game of hockey any of them had seen, or would see, for a good decade.

"Hell of a game," Ilya said quietly.

"You too." Shane's throat closed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't." Ilya cupped Shane's face with both hands. "Don't apologize. You played perfect. You won. You deserved to win."

"You deserved it more. Fuck, that last shot, it was half luck."

"Not luck. That is bullshit. I saw, I saw you line that fucking beauty of a shot. Honestly, if you had a fucking team, or even a third line, you might have had even better odds." Ilya pressed their sweaty foreheads together. "You can make it up to me next year. When we're together. We win together. With a team who supports us. We... We don't lose. We can't lose." A kiss.

"I'll try." A kiss back.

Ilya laughed, the sound wet. "I love you."

"I love you too."

They stayed like that for a moment, the arena thundering around them, cameras flashing, history being made.

Then Ilya pulled back. "Go celebrate. Your team's waiting."

Shane watched him skate away, back toward his own team who stood at center ice, devastated but not broken.

Dominic crashed into Shane from behind. "We did it! Holy fuck, we actually did it!"

Hayden appeared, pulling Shane into a crushing hug. "You beautiful crazy bastard!"

The team surrounded him. All of them together, rainbow tape bright under the arena lights, holding each other up because none of them could stand alone.

Everyone watched as the Montreal coaches, owners, and other players from the press box tried to make it onto the ice for the ceremony, and then smiled when Ottawa fans deliberately blocked their path and nobody from the NHL security or Ottawa security stepped in to stop it.

The NHL commissioner appeared with the Stanley Cup.

Shane stared at it. The trophy he'd dreamed about his entire life. The thing he'd thought he needed to earn the right to be himself. The thing he thought was necessary to prove his worth to his family, his friends, and his country.

Except he'd learned something different this season. He didn't need the Cup to be worthy. He was worthy already. That last game, game 7, win or lose? They all were worthy after that. Every last one of them.

The commissioner handed it to Shane first. Captain's privilege.

Shane lifted it. His arms shook with the effort, his body having nothing left, but he got it overhead.

The arena exploded. Tears rolled down Shane's eyes. He didn't care, didn't mind the cameras capturing the real him, and how he really felt. If men can be gay, then men can be allowed to cry too. Fuck toxic masculinity too while they're at it.

After taking the lap, Shane lowered the Cup, passed it to Dominic. Then to Matteo. Then to Aleksei. Then to Hayden. Each Rainbow Avenger, gay, bi, ally, anyone who'd taken up the tape and supported them, held it, their joy undeniable.

Shane's vision blurred again. He sank back onto the bench once the main event was over, unable to stand anymore.

He closed his eyes and let the noise wash over him. A new memory of victory, one sweeter than any he had ever experienced. A night he would never forget.

Deep down... He knew he'd made not just himself proud, but the old Shane proud as well.

@TSNHockey - July 2012

BREAKING: Shane Hollander immediately signs with Ottawa Centaurs after end of contract with Montreal. Sources say Ilya Rozanov took a significant pay cut to make the cap space work so both men would be paid the same. "A dream come true." Hollander reports. Hayden Pike, ally on the Rainbow Avengers, also joining Ottawa on reduced salary stating "I'm going to be a dad soon, I need to set the right example." Many others of Rainbow Avengers sign with supportive teams to the LGBT+ cause, such as Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, after amazing performance during Game 7 of Stanley Cup 2012.

ESPN SPECIAL REPORT - August 2013

Breaking: Montreal Voyageurs Sold to Tech Billionaire for Record-Low Price

The Montreal Voyageurs franchise has been sold to Canadian tech entrepreneur and billionaire Marcus Chen for an undisclosed sum, sources confirm at substantially below market value following a catastrophic 2012-13 season and record-low ticket sales. Prior

owners are said to have sold the franchise at a loss, citing "disgust" with the current atmosphere of sports.

Chen's first actions as owner include terminating the entire coaching staff, declining to renew contracts with six players who refused to support the Rainbow Avengers movement, and issuing a public apology to Shane Hollander and other members of the Rainbow Avengers or staff that were impacted by the 2012 season.

"We failed our players," Chen said at a press conference. "We failed our fans. We failed the sport. That ends now. Montreal will do better."

In a symbolic move that sent shockwaves through the league, Chen announced the team would rebrand as the **Montreal Avengers**, permanently honoring the Rainbow Avengers who carried the franchise to its first Stanley Cup in decades.

"Those men saved this organization, and nobody ever thanked them," Chen said. "The least we can do is remember what they stood for and respect it was them that brought us the Stanley Cup, and not the Voyagers."

Dominic Vaillancourt and Matteo Ferrara will remain with the newly named Avengers, with both players signing extensions to help rebuild the franchise culture.

"Someone's got to teach these new guys what it means to wear this jersey," Vaillancourt said. "Might as well be us."

The NHL Commissioner's office praised the sale as "a new chapter for a storied franchise."

@SportsCenter - June 2014

Your 2014 Stanley Cup Champions: The Ottawa Centaurs defeat Boston 4-2 in series. Captain Ilya Rozanov hoists the Cup for first time in his career, and many attribute the win to his and Shane Hollander's (boyfriend) exceptional drive in the 2014 season..

Rozanov, visibly emotional, handed the Cup directly to Shane Hollander after his lap. The two embraced at center ice before Hollander took his own victory lap.

"We did it together," Rozanov said post-game. "This belongs to both of us."

NHL OFFICIAL STATEMENT - September 2014

Following comprehensive review and consultation with players, coaches, and advocacy organizations, the National Hockey League announces the following policy changes effective immediately:

Non-Discrimination Protections: Teams may not discriminate in hiring, contracts, or ice time based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Mandatory Training: All teams must provide annual diversity and inclusion training for players, coaches, and staff.

Complaint Mechanisms: Independent third-party reporting for discrimination or harassment claims, with penalties including fines up to \$5M and loss of draft picks.

Pride Initiatives: Official NHL Pride Month recognition, with teams encouraged to participate in local LGBT+ community events.

Commissioner Croswell acknowledged the policy came "later than it should have."

"The events of 2012 showed us we had work to do," he said. "These policies ensure no player ever faces what Shane Hollander faced in Montreal, and hopefully talent will be allowed to shine, regardless of your choices of life partner."

Early reports indicate twenty-three of thirty teams already had similar policies in place, largely inspired by Ottawa's model. The remaining seven now face compliance deadlines.

@OttawaCitizen - April 2014

CONFIRMED: Each NHL team now has at least one openly LGBT+ player, per recent NHL league census. League-wide acceptance growing, though challenges remain.

Sources estimate roughly 1 in 4 teams still struggle with locker room culture and management handling of issues that arise, but progress undeniable compared to 2012.

@EliteProspects - June 2014

Ottawa Centaurs select Zane Boodram (LW) and Troy Barrett (RW) in 2014 NHL Draft.

Ilya Rozanov personally scouted both players alongside Centaur coach Wiebe, calling them "destined to be great."

Reply @JuniorHockeyWatch: Barrett came out at 16 after watching Hollander/Rozanov's Gala event in 2012. Full circle moment for young athletes everywhere.

ESPN SPECIAL REPORT - June 2015

Scott Hunter Proposes to Boyfriend After Stanley Cup Win

New York Admirals Captain Scott Hunter, who led his team to a 4-3 series victory over Ottawa, dropped to one knee at center ice and proposed to boyfriend Kip Grady in front of twenty thousand fans.

Grady, tears streaming, said yes.

"Four years ago, I watched Shane and Ilya kiss at a gala," Hunter said in the press conference. "I thought I'd never have that courage. Tonight felt like the right time to prove I was wrong."

The NHL released a statement congratulating the couple within minutes.

Hunter and Grady plan to marry in the off-season.

HOCKEY CANADA PRESS RELEASE - August 2015

Ilya Rozanov Becomes Canadian Citizen

Ottawa Centaurs Captain Ilya Rozanov officially became a Canadian citizen today at a ceremony in Ottawa, renouncing his Russian citizenship following years of estrangement from his birth family.

"Canada gave me everything Russia took away," Rozanov said. "My team. My lover..." he paused, grinning, "...well, boyfriend sorry, he hates when I call him that, but... Also, my family. My freedom."

Rozanov's father Grigori publicly disowned him in 2012 following his coming out at the now infamous Gala event. Grigori died in 2014 without reconciliation.

"I made peace with that," Rozanov said. "My real family is here. I am the fun Uncle to the little Pikes, and that is more than I could have ever dreamed for in either life."

Shane Hollander attended the ceremony alongside Rozanov's Ottawa teammates. He remarks he is also "the fun Uncle". The Pike children declined to comment.

@TSN - June 2016

STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS: Ottawa Centaurs defeat Montreal Avengers 4-3 in series in what many call "the rematch of the decade", ending in Game 7.

In post-game ceremony, Captain Ilya Rozanov removed his glove to reveal an engagement ring. Shane Hollander did the same.

"We've been engaged for three months," Hollander said, grinning. "Seemed like a good time to tell everyone."

The proposal apparently happened at "the cottage" where the couple spends their off-seasons. Rozanov proposed to Hollander, in front of friends, family, and loved ones.

"It was a once in a lifetime kind of day." Rozanov tells TSN.

@TMZ - July 2017

EXCLUSIVE: Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov married at a private ceremony at Shane Hollander's summer cottage after an impressive attempt at the Stanley Cup, falling short of Boston and their new roster led by Captain Ryan Price (also newly married, to his long term sweetheart Fabian Salah).

Photos on social media show the Hollander-Rozanov couple on lakefront at sunset, both in white shirts and barefoot for a "casual" ceremony. The two plan to travel to Japan for their honeymoon, where Hollander says he looks forward to finally exploring his cultural heritage.

Ilya took Shane's surname during the ceremony, becoming Ilya Hollander for the upcoming 2018 season, now marking the first time for a married couple to share the same last name on team jerseys in the NHL.

"My birth family disowned me," Rozanov explained in a statement. "Shane's family became mine. His name means more than the one I was born with. I hope to do my new legacy proud"

Yuna and David Hollander attended the ceremony, along with Ottawa teammates and close friends. Long time friend of both men, Hayden Pike, served as best man for both grooms, with

Jackie Pike serving as Maid of Honor, while their three daughters Ruby, Amber, and Jade, served as flower girls.

OTTAWA CENTAURS PRESS RELEASE - October 2017

Harris Drover Joins Centaurs as Social Media Manager

The Ottawa Centaurs are pleased to announce the hiring of Harris Drover as the team's new Social Media Manager.

Drover, 24, brings innovative digital strategy and a background in sports marketing. He plans to focus on emerging platforms, particularly TikTok.

"Hockey needs to meet fans where they are," Drover said. "Social media isn't just highlights anymore. It's storytelling."

Drover recently adopted a failed therapy dog named Chiron, a Labrador-mountain dog mix who has already become popular with players and featured heavily in their new marketing plans.

Captain Ilya Hollander is frequently photographed with Chiron during practice and has been stated to have stopped practices entirely for "doggy ice time".

@HockeyNightCanada - June 2018

Ottawa Centaurs draft Luca Haas (RW) and acquire goaltender Wyatt Hayes via trade from Toronto.

Haas, 18, from Switzerland called being drafted by Ottawa "a dream come true."

"I grew up watching Rozanov and Hollander, and had their posters on my wall for years!" Haas said. "Getting to play with them? I can't even describe it."

Hayes, 26, requested the trade specifically to join Ottawa.

"Best team culture in the league. My wife is ecstatic that I made it here," Hayes said. "Where else would I want to be?"

@OttawaCentaur - September 2018

[VIDEO: Chiron the dog interrupts practice by stealing a puck. Entire Ottawa roster chase him around the ice set to "Benny Hill Theme" while Captain Ilya Hollander laughs so hard he falls over. Coach Weibe shakes head. Drover narrates: "This is professional hockey, folks."]

Views: 4.2M | Likes: 890K

Reply @SportsCenter: This is the content we need.

November 2018 (Ottawa Locker Room)

Ilya pushed through the Ottawa locker room door and immediately regretted it.

Luca Haas stood on a bench, phone held high, belting out what could only generously be called singing. The eighteen-year-old Swiss kid had chosen some god-awful Eurodance track that sounded like it'd been rejected from a 2003 nightclub.

"EVERY TIME WE TOUCH, I GET THIS FEELING...."

"Please stop," Wyatt Hayes groaned from his stall, pulling his goalie pads on, while on the phone. "My wife says you sound like a drowning cat."

"Your wife loves me, she would never say that!" Luca protested, not stopping. **"AND EVERY TIME WE KISS, I SWEAR I COULD FLY...."**

Harris Drover sat cross-legged on the floor, Chiron sprawled across his lap. The dog's tail thumped lazily against the concrete. "This is **gold**. Keep going, I'm filming! The early 2000s AMV kids will eat this up!"

"Don't encourage him," Zane Boodram muttered, lacing his skates. Troy Barrett sat beside him, grinning like an idiot and very much encouraging it by clapping along.

"Too late!" Harris aimed his phone at Luca.

Cam threw a rolled-up sock at Luca's head. Missed entirely. Luca didn't even flinch, just transitioned into an interpretive dance that made Ilya question every draft decision he'd ever influenced.

"Kid's got confidence," Grant said, appearing at Ilya's shoulder. "I'll give him that."

"Kid's got no taste," Ilya countered, but he couldn't stop the smile tugging at his mouth.

This.

This was what a locker room should sound like. Laughter, stupid music, teammates who actually wanted to be around each other. No tension, no homophobia simmering under forced politeness, no coaches screaming about discipline and weakness.

Just a band of brothers being ridiculous together.

Something eased in Ilya's chest. A knot he hadn't realized he'd still been carrying, even after all this time in this second life. The ghost of his old life's cold silence, of Montreal's hostile stares, of a plane that had disintegrated mid-air.

All of it, finally, blessedly quiet, drowned out by men who couldn't carry a tune.

Shane appeared from the equipment room, tape in hand, and immediately zeroed in on Ilya. His husband crossed the space between them like he had magnets in his skates, leaned up, and pressed a kiss to Ilya's cheek.

"Hurry up and get ready," Shane said, the words warm against Ilya's skin. "We're late for practice, even allowing for the 20 minutes of goofworld Wiebe lets you guys get away with. I swear, we could use a little more discipline."

Ilya caught Shane's wrist before he could pull away. Held him there. Shane's brown eyes met his, questioning.

Around them, the locker room carried on. Luca hit a particularly ambitious high note. Chiron barked. Someone, probably Troy, started harmonizing. Harris laughed so hard he nearly dropped his phone, now focused on Troy, a little sparkle of something more in his eye.

"I'll take my time. We should all take our time," Ilya said, pulling in Shane for a big hug. His mouth curved into something soft and private.

"We should all stop and enjoy the butterflies."

Chapter 11: Another Side, Another Story

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Among the most comments I got, I got asked "what happened to original Shane?".

This extra chapter is my own little epilogue that shows what happened to the original Shane and how his "memories" crossed over into the main story. It also lets you see a few extra scenes from the story that Shane went through and wasn't in the original text, little tidbits of his life that spark queer happiness.

If you enjoyed the original story and don't want to deal with time travel shenanigans, then I understand, this piece is standalone and doesn't have to be read in order to enjoy the rest of this story!

I also want to warn you that there are some suicidal themes in the first section of this chapter (Chapter 11 Only), so if you want to skip that part, you can move down to the first solid line after the start of the text and start at (December 2008 – May 2009, Second Timeline) instead! The first section is also VERY angsty (a lot like how angsty Chapter 1 was), but I assure you, there is a happily ever after towards the end.

This ends the last of this AU, and now I can go back to working on my next story now that I feel this little tidbit is tied up.

Thank you all for reading and commenting, they have been the highlights of my day. <3

(January 2021, Montreal, Shane's Residence, Original Timeline)

Shane stood on the balcony of his home, hands gripping the railing hard enough that his knuckles burned white. The time, he knew instinctively, was just a little after midnight. Only a little time left until the worst day of his life would replay itself in his mind.

Three days.

Three days later, and 12:21 AM still managed to feel like a knife was still jutting in his heart.

The city of Montreal sprawled below him. Montreal's midnight sky was clear, stars shining, the full moon casting shadows wherever the light touched.

Ten floors down, Shane spotted the sidewalk.

He wondered, briefly, how fast and how quick a fall from that height would be. Was it far enough that he wouldn't feel anything after the initial impact? Was it gruesome enough so everyone would have to see the depths of his pain and anger? Would the message scream

loud enough to silence the monsters at bars who celebrated someone's death? Would it finally be enough to just let people love who they wanted and cut the bullshit?

He'd been googling a lot of things lately. Terminal velocity. Survival rates. Usually getting responses for a hotline number he ignored.

Those three days blurred a lot in his mind. He'd missed games, and he didn't bother telling anyone he was going to miss, because... *Fuck them*. Fuck the team, fuck anyone who celebrated Ilya's death with a cover of "ding dong the witch is dead".

"I will never play for them again," Shane thought, and promised himself he'd never wear the Montreal jersey again.

The team called, left voicemails, and sent texts. Shane deleted them all without listening.

Montreal's management came to his door and he didn't let them in. Only informed them that he wouldn't be playing. They made threats, naturally, but Shane said they were free to sue him for breach whenever they wanted.

"I don't care. Take me for all you've given me. Take your goddamn blood money. Who fucking cares anymore?" Shane had yelled to them through the shut door.

In those days, food sat untouched in the fridge. His body stopped feeling hunger two days ago, replacing it with a hollow ache that felt... Comforting. Water was about the only thing he could stomach, anyway.

Shane stared at the night sky, the full moon, and thought about *nothing*, because thinking hurt too much.

"Ilya's dead."

That's what all thoughts led to.

Flight 626. No survivors. All souls lost.

The words repeated in his mind, a mantra that had worn grooves into his consciousness.

Shane wanted to call people. The people Ilya cared about, his friends, the WAGs of the Centaurs... It was a long list of people Ilya loved, and at the very least, Shane wanted to offer condolences.

People like Harris Drover, who'd lost Troy in the crash. They were the guys Ilya talked about liking so much and really pushed for them to start dating.

Or maybe offer to pay for Luca Haas' family to fly to Canada for the memorial service being held in Ottawa. He'd seen them sobbing on the news, twice.

Shane considered calling Boodram's wife and kid. Maybe even get the kid a scholarship, set up a trust so he'd have something to remind him of his old man, or... *Something. Anything* to soften the blow.

Because he knew all of them were suffering, just the same as he was.

The thing was, and the painful thing about all of that good intention was...

Shane was just the Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs.

He didn't know any of these people, personally. To them, he was just a minor celebrity, at best, probably trying to make a grab for clout. He was someone in the NHL who probably "felt bad". They'd be appreciative, probably, but at the end of the day, they'd never understand what he was really saying.

Because *Shane wasn't Ilya Rozanov's lover or boyfriend.*

None of them knew that. *Nobody knew that. Nobody would ever know that.*

His phone sat on the kitchen floor, cracked in half after that soul-crushing realization sent it flying to the ground.

Shane thought about the texts. The fight. The terrible things they'd both said to each other.

"Maybe I'm tired of being your secret."

Shane's throat fought back a wave of bile. He pressed his forehead against the cold metal railing.

"Maybe you want us to be over with."

God, he'd been so cruel. ***So stupid.*** Pushing and pushing because he was scared, because he'd wanted Ilya to understand without having to say the words that terrified him.

"I don't want to disappoint my parents, who I'm not even sure if they love me or if they just tolerate me after lying to them for so long. I don't want to lose my career because it's the only thing about me that matters in the world. I don't want people to know I'm dating my rival, on a different team, because everyone would assume we were colluding."

Except none of that mattered, because Ilya was gone and Shane's last words to him had been bitter and cold.

"If this is too hard for you, to be with me, then just say it. Say you want us to be over. Go be with someone else. Go be out and open like you want. Nobody's stopping you."

Shane wrote those words in anger. Or maybe, because he thought Ilya truly deserved better. He deserved a better boyfriend, one who'd stand by him, who'd be with him, through the best and worst of it all.

"I wish I never met you."

Ilya had written that, in their final exchange. Shane had read it seventeen times, each time feeling the words carve deeper into his chest. He'd tried to send a message back, to clear the air, but...

From the time stamps and all the evidence he could see online, the message delivered right as the plane started to crash. There was little chance Ilya saw it before he passed on.

"He died thinking I wanted him gone. He died believing I regretted us."

Shane's hands trembled on the railing. His vision blurred. Hot tears streaked down his face.

A lot of things ran through his mind then. The things that had led to all the terrible choices in his life.

The Voyagers were awful. He knew that now in a way he hadn't let himself acknowledge before. They'd used him. Paraded him as their golden boy while treating him like a trophy to be displayed rather than a person to be supported.

*"I hope they fucking... **Lose everything.**"*

Then, his parents... God, his parents.

He'd spent years lying to them. Years pretending. Years convinced that if they knew the truth, they'd look at him differently. Love him less. Be disappointed in the son they'd sacrificed everything for.

Except he'd never given them the chance to prove him wrong.

So, by the time they knew the truth, he'd crushed his mother's heart and forced his father to see the lie firsthand, at the fucking cottage, Shane's one place of peace from the world, of all places!

*"Coward. You're such a fucking coward. **You should have told them sooner!**"*

The railing pressed against his ribs. Shane leaned forward slightly, testing how it handled his weight. The balcony edge was smooth. It took his weight like a champ, didn't budge a bit.

"Happy accidents are out."

Yet... The rails were easy to climb.

Shane thought about Scott Hunter. About Eric Bennett. About Troy Barrett. About every LGBT+ person who'd fought and bled and suffered just to exist in a world that hated them for something they couldn't control.

*"We're all so tired. We're all just so goddamn tired of fighting. Why can't people see how much it hurts?! **Why do we all stay so quiet for so long?**"*

A breeze picked up, carrying the scent of rain in the distance. Shane's hair fell flat against his forehead. He didn't brush it back.

Ten floors was a long way down.

The fall would be quick.

The pain would be brief.

Then... nothing.

Just blessed, empty nothing where this agony couldn't reach him anymore.

"I'm so tired of being....me. I don't want to be me anymore..."

"If I'm ever born again... I hope I'm someone else."

"Because being me is the worst thing you could ever be."

Just as Shane lifted a leg to the rail, a burst of wind pushed him back. Away from the railing, away from the edge.

"Ilya wouldn't want this."

The thought arrived like a shock to his system. Shane tried to push it away but it clung like a burr.

Ilya would be furious. He'd yell in that way he did when he was scared, when his accent got thicker and his words came faster. He'd grab Shane's shoulders and shake him and demand to know what the hell he was thinking.

"Do you want your mother finding you?! Like I found mine?! I would never want you to die for me! Never, Shane! NEVER."

Shane's breath caught in a choke. A sob tried to claw its way up his throat.

"Please." His voice cracked, barely a whisper against the night air. *"Please don't take him away from me."*

Shane fell to the ground. He curled up, in a fetal position, finally letting three days of grief explode.

He screamed. No one answered the scream, of course.

The city, the world, the universe, everything and everybody was just as deaf and blind to him and everyone else in the world just like him. Or, if they did hear and they did listen? *They didn't care.*

"He's all I have..." Shane's hands tightened into fists until his hands ached. "He's the only reason I get up in the morning. Without him, I'm *nothing* but hockey, and hockey without him is *nothing*. Without him, *nothing* has meaning."

The words poured out, desperate and broken.

"I didn't mean to say those things. I was angry! I was scared! I didn't mean it. *I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I didn't...*"

His voice gave out. Shane pressed his forehead harder against his knees, the pressure grounding him mildly.

"I just want another chance." The whisper barely made it past his lips. "Please. Please give me another chance. I'll do better. I'll be braver. I'll tell my parents. I'll quit Montreal. I'll do whatever it takes. I'll be whoever you need me to be, just please..."

He looked up at the moon from his pitiable display on the ground.

At the stars scattered around it.

"Please bring him back."

The night offered no response.

Shane watched the sky. Watched it like if he stared hard enough, long enough, something would change. Something would shift. Some cosmic force would take pity on him and rewrite reality.

"Like guys like us would ever get a happily ever after..." Shane spat. He slammed his eyes shut.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, he finally felt something. A tickle, right on his face.

Shane opened his eyes.

A butterfly? A butterfly had landed on his nose. A bright blue Monarch, with wings speckled with little white dots, that looked like constellations in the sky.

The butterfly's wings fluttered.

After they fluttered, and Shane's eyes adjusted, he saw a star falling from the sky, right behind the butterfly's wings.

Shane blinked, slowly uncurling from himself. He watched another streak of light trace across the darkness. The butterfly flew away, landing on Shane's shoulder, its wings now at rest.

More stars fell. One, after the other, in a dazzling display of every color of the rainbow.

"A meteor shower?" he thought, passively.

Hundreds of stars fell, thousands maybe, all falling at once in defiance of what should be possible in the world.

Shane stared. His mind, exhausted and broken, struggled to process what he was seeing. He stood up. Walked slowly to the edge of the balcony. He gripped the cold metal, noting how warm it was to touch now. The butterfly didn't move from its spot on his shoulder.

The world around him began to drain of color. The Montreal skyline bled to grey. The lights dimmed to monochrome. The moon above went pale and ghostly.

People on the streets started to vanish, as if blinking out of existence. In that same blink he saw portions of them start to return, little by little. Like an artist erasing something that seemed like a mistake, and editing them to something more pleasing to the eye.

Then came a flash of white light, so bright Shane's hands flew up to shield his eyes. It consumed everything, erasing the balcony, the city, the stars, until there was nothing but blinding emptiness.

Shane felt himself falling, but there was no ground to meet him. Just endless, weightless nothing.

This didn't feel like death, though. He was neither cold nor was he scared in this dark abyss. The opposite, actually. He was... Warm. Like he'd been tucked into bed before the start of a long winter's hibernation.

Then, from somewhere in the void.... He felt a presence.

Familiar in a way that made Shane's chest constrict.

"You're here. Shane, you're... You're here," Ilya said.

"You okay, man? You look, uh... A little choked up," Shane replied.

Ilya's voice had reached Shane's ears. Impossible, but unmistakably his.

...and had Shane also heard his own voice?

Shane tried to speak, to call out, but had no mouth, no throat, no body to produce sound.

The darkness began to lift. Slowly at first, then faster, reality reforming around him in pieces.

Shane was no longer on his balcony, and definitely not in Montreal.

Cold air and the bite of winter was felt on his flesh.

Shane's eyes opened, finally, for the first time since falling.

He stood in an alley behind an arena. Snow crunched under his feet. His breath formed clouds in the frigid air.

Regina.

Shane was in Regina.

Somehow, he just knew it.

"*Good luck Shane,*" Ilya said, catching himself. "*I mean Hollander. Good luck, Hollander.*"

"You too." Shane felt his mouth open and close, but it wasn't him speaking the words. Or at least, not the "him" that was thinking at the moment.

(December 2008 – May 2009, Second Timeline)

Shane experienced this "second" Shane's life like it was a dream. Like he was an all-seeing observer in the most vivid lucid dream of his life. He couldn't control the outcome, but he felt everything as if he did have control.

As though his mind and this second Shane's mind were the same house with the same foundation and wall structure, but they both had distinctively different tastes in furniture and styling. Everything was just different enough he could tell... *Something had changed within this second Shane.*

The second Shane moved through Regina, through the tournament, through conversations with Team Canada teammates whose faces Shane recognized. He lost the Junior World Tournament, because of course he did, to Ilya.

Speaking of Ilya... Had Ilya always been that good at hockey when they were younger? Also, *since when* had Ilya been that sweet and talkative when he was in Regina? Was Ilya always so complimenting and so sweet in the past, and Shane had merely missed it?

"You played a good game. Lot to learn. Still, brilliant head. If you had team that supported you right, you might have had chance."

That sounded more like Ilya after he'd joined the Centaurs.

"I wish we could talk more." Shane thought. Knowing how this life goes, he wouldn't talk to Ilya on a serious level for... Ages. Suddenly, he grieved for his lover all over again.

"Hey, uh... this might sound weird, but would you want to talk hockey sometime? Like, actually talk. I feel like I could learn something from watching you. You know... Talk shop?"

Shane's heart stopped.

"That definitely didn't happen before."

The text messages came next.

Shane felt himself smile, or rather *the second Shane smiled*, at playful threats typed into a phone screen.

...and the names on the text messages weren't Jane and Lily this time around.

Shane: *Saw your tape that you sent! What was that crazy stunt in the first period?*

Ilya: *Was just warming up!*

Shane: *Keep telling yourself that. I've got your number now. I'm learning how to beat you! You're handing me the tools to your own destruction.*

Ilya: *You have had my number for months. Is why we text so much. ;)*

Shane: *You know what I meant, asshole.*

Ilya: *Yes. I know. You are learning my patterns. Good. Makes games more interesting when you push back.*

The warmth in Shane's chest, *the second Shane's chest*, surprised him.

This banter felt natural. Easy. Nothing like the hostile rivalry Shane remembered from a lifetime before.

More texts followed. Months of them. Arguments about plays, debates over strategy, stupid jokes that made second Shane laugh at two in the morning when he should've been sleeping.

Shane: *Your backcheck in the third period was sloppy.*

Ilya: *Your face is sloppy.*

Shane: *That doesn't even make sense.*

Ilya: *Makes perfect sense. You have sloppy face. Very punchable.*

Shane: *I'm going to destroy you next time we play.*

Ilya: *Looking forward to it. ;)*

Shane watched these exchanges with something like jealousy in his heart. A jealousy over his second self. This kind of ease... When had anyone ever matched his intensity without making him feel like too much?

The months passed.

Training camps before the Draft. More texts.

Then, phone calls.

God... So many phone calls.

One night, in particular, right before midnight, would stay in Shane's mind forever. When their cell phone rang, he watched the second Shane grab it off the nightstand. He saw Ilya's name and answered without thinking.

"Did I wake you?" Ilya's voice came through rough, clearly exhausted.

"No. Just got out of the shower." Shane wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear as he laid out on his bed. "You?"

"Sitting in hotel room staring at wall. Exciting life of professional athlete."

Shane snorted. "Where are you?"

"Nowhere important. Hotel looks same in every city." A pause. "Training camp stuff, fitness tests. Very boring, but I'm not drafted yet, so these things I must do. Coach made us run until our right wing threw up."

"Gross."

"Was impressive actually. He made it fifteen minutes longer than last year before vomit. Very promising."

Shane was fully awake now. He leaned up on the headboard, turning the phone on speaker. "Your standards for impressive are deeply concerning."

"Says man who watches tape of own games for fun."

"That's different. That's useful."

"Is nerdy."

"It's *preparation*."

Ilya laughed, his voice warm against Shane's ears. "Yes, yes. You are very serious hockey man. I know."

Shane's mouth pulled into a grin he was glad Ilya couldn't see. "Someone has to be. You certainly aren't."

"I am extremely serious. I am Russian. We invented serious."

"You're ridiculous."

"Can be both."

Quiet settled between them. Not awkward. Just... there.

Shane listened to Ilya breathing on the other end of the line, and heard the faint sound of traffic outside Ilya's hotel.

"How's life treating you? Are you nervous about the draft?" Ilya asked.

"Life's good, and I wouldn't say I'm nervous about the draft. We're looking at condos in Boston and Montreal right now, the way things are shaking out." Shane looked around his bedroom. "Mom keeps sending me furniture catalogs and tells me to pick out what I like. Which is hard, because I don't even know where I'm living yet. The furniture I'd have in the Boston layout would be way different than the one in Montreal."

"She wants you to have nice things."

"She wants to make sure I don't sleep on an air mattress. She keeps thinking I'm going to have this sad, bachelor life with like... One TV and a mattress in an empty condo."

"She has a reasonable goal."

Shane smiled. "Yeah. Though I don't think she realizes I'm really into interior design. I watch a lot of HGTV and mock their open concept kitchens."

Shane paused, listening to how easily second Shane spoke. In his original lifetime, he'd never admitted that to anyone before. Maybe Ilya, maybe in the future, but not when he was still basically just a kid.

Interior design and HGTV was gay stuff. Stuff that got you laughed out of locker rooms.

Yet, here his second self was, opening up about a passion like it was nothing.

"I bet you will have beautiful condo. You'll invite me some time. We'll have party. Just no tuna melts. I despise tuna in every form."

"You got it, man."

Shane's eyes drifted to the ceiling.

"Shane?"

"Mhm?"

"Do you ever get tired?" Ilya's voice dropped lower. "Of the... performing. Always having to be 'on'?"

Shane's chest tightened. "Yeah. All the time."

"Me too." A rustle of fabric was heard over the phone, with Ilya shifting his position on his bed. "Sometimes I want to just... exist. Not be Ilya Rozanov, Draft Pick, or Ilya Rozanov the angry Russian. Just... person."

"I get that."

"You do?"

"Yeah." Shane turned onto his side, curling around the phone. "It's exhausting. Everyone wants something from you. Photo, autograph, quote for their article. They just expect you to be this one kind of person based on what they've heard, and... Nobody just wants to talk. Nobody wants to get the real you. They want the hockey superstar, the best prospect in years, and not... A scared 18-year-old who's ready to puke every time he sees a camera."

"Exactly." Relief flooded Ilya's tone. "Is like being museum exhibit. Look but don't touch. Don't be real."

Shane's throat went tight. "Except we're talking. Right now."

"Yes we are."

"...and neither of us are performing."

"No we're not." Ilya's voice softened. "This is just us."

The words hung there. Shane felt something shift in his chest, some door opening that he hadn't known was closed. Or, was that the second Shane? He didn't know anymore. More often than not, they just felt like one and the same these days.

"I like this," Shane said quietly. "Talking to you like this."

"Me too." Ilya yawned, long and unapologetic. "Sorry. Is late."

"You should sleep."

"Don't want to yet. Tell me something."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Something real. Not hockey."

Shane thought about it. "I hate celery."

Ilya's laugh burst through the phone. "That is what you choose? Celery?"

"You said anything!"

"Yes, but celery is so random. Why celery specifically?"

"The texture. It's awful. Like chewing wet string. Also, you complained about tuna earlier, so food was on my mind."

"Wet string." Ilya was still laughing. "This is best description I have ever heard."

Shane grinned. "Your turn. Tell me something real."

"Hmm." A long pause. "I am scared of birds. Small ones especially."

"Birds?"

"Yes. They are unpredictable. Fly in crazy patterns. Attack for no reason."

"They don't attack."

"They do! In Moscow, when I was boy, pigeon flew at my head. Entire thing was traumatic experience."

Shane bit his lip to keep from laughing. "A pigeon."

"Was very aggressive pigeon."

"I'm sure."

"You are mocking me."

"A little bit."

"Rude." But Ilya sounded amused. Another yawn. "Okay. Now I am actually tired."

"Go to sleep."

"You first."

"I called you second. You hang up first."

"No, you."

They went back and forth like idiots until they finally just agreed to stay on the line until they fell asleep together.

Shane laughed to himself as the second Shane fell asleep first and he got conked out as well. He always did. *Every single time.*

(Hollander Household, December 2009, Second Timeline)

Shane couldn't help but smile as his "Second Life" continued to unfold. Well, most of it anyway.

Sure, watching the draft unfold had been interesting, especially whatever the hell Ilya had done to piss off Boston. Yeah, seeing his rookie career again was cool, even it was still with those bastards at Montreal.

Though none of it compared to moments like at the Lumberyard Bistro or the late night texts and calls with Ilya.

There was something charming about seeing what could have been, if he'd had anyone in his corner before. Having Ilya, having a friend he could confide in, about the big things, was something he didn't know he needed so badly.

Because whatever was going on between second Shane and Ilya was a hell of a lot better than fuck buddies, healthier at least, but not quite to the level of dating. Or, "yet" he should say. Right now, it felt more like puppy love, the kind of experience neither of them had been allowed to have in their first timeline.

Second Shane hovered over the dining table of his childhood home at the tail end of December, after the start to his hockey career and while the NHL was on Christmas holiday. He was adjusting the napkins for the third time.

The napkins were folded into perfect triangles, white linen against the dark wood of the dining table, but something about the angle felt wrong. He moved one slightly to the left.

"You're being weird," his father said from the doorway.

Shane's hand froze mid-adjustment. "I'm not being weird."

"You've reorganized that table four times in the last hour." David leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed with a bemused expression. "Your mother threatened to ban you if you moved another fork."

"The forks were uneven."

"They were fine."

Shane stepped back from the table, surveying his work. Everything looked perfect. Too perfect, maybe. Like he was trying too hard.

Which he was.

Because Ilya was coming for Christmas, and this mattered in a way Shane couldn't quite articulate without sounding ridiculous.

"What's so important about this dinner?" David asked, moving into the kitchen. He opened the fridge, pulled out a beer and came back to the dining room. "It's just Ilya. He's been here before. You talk to him every day of your life."

"For a few hours, at most. Not for Christmas."

"So?"

"So, it's different." Shane turned to face his father. "He doesn't have anywhere else to go. I just..." He trailed off, unable to find the right words.

David's expression softened. "You want him to have a good Christmas."

"Yeah."

"He will. Your mother's been cooking since yesterday. The turkey alone could feed half the neighborhood." David took a sip of his beer. "You don't need to stress about this, Shane. Ilya's your friend. He'll just be happy to be here."

Shane nodded, but his hands still felt restless. He moved to the counter, started rearranging the appetizers his mother had laid out.

"Shane."

He looked up.

David studied him for a long moment, something knowing in his gaze. "You really care about him, don't you?"

Heat crept up Shane's neck. "He's my best friend. I've not had many of those, you know? I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, to be honest. My whole life has been hockey and traveling, so I don't know what it means to just, you know... Have a regular guy friend."

"Is he, though? Just a regular guy friend?" David asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

David shrugged, expression carefully neutral. "Nothing. Just that you've never fussed this much over Hayden visiting."

"That's different. Hayden has his family and..."

"...and Ilya has you."

The words landed heavier than they should've. Shane's throat felt dry all of a sudden. "Yeah. I guess he does."

David clapped him on the shoulder, leaving the dining room. "Then relax. That's all that matters."

Shane stood alone, staring at the perfectly arranged appetizers and finger foods, feeling like his father had just seen straight through him.

Because Shane didn't know if he really was "just a friend" anymore. All the late night calls, texts, and visits when they could manage it were becoming some of the most important time in Shane's life. The only thing he even remotely looked forward to anymore.

Besides, Ilya was bisexual, after all. Which meant, he liked guys.

Does that mean Ilya liked him? Was Shane attractive to guys? Did Ilya like his face and his hair? Did Ilya ever think about Shane in a "sexy" kind of way? The kind of way he imagined Ilya in?

Yuna appeared a moment later, pulling off her apron. "Is everything ready?"

"Yeah!" Shane exclaimed, cutting off his inner thoughts instantly.

"Good." She checked her watch. "He should be here any minute. Why don't you go help him with his things?"

Shane moved to the window, looking out at the driveway. Snow had started falling an hour ago, fat flakes that stuck to everything and made the neighborhood look like something from a Hallmark Christmas Card.

His mother joined him. "You're nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"You reorganized the table four times."

"Dad told you?"

"Didn't need to. I have eyes." Yuna's hand found his shoulder, and squeezed it gently. "Shane. He's going to love it. All of it. The food, the decorations, being here with us. Stop worrying."

"I'm not worried."

"Then why are your hands shaking?"

Shane looked down. They were. Just slightly, but enough that his mother noticed.

He shoved them in his pockets. "I just want everything to be perfect for him. He's had such a rough year. I mean, think about it, he got picked NINTH in the draft despite being the best player in the league, his father and brother disowned him, he's playing for the worst team in the league, and he's all alone! He deserves something good, Mom. He deserves... A lot."

Shane wondered how much of that was his own feelings, bleeding into the Second Shane. He thought about how his memories, his guilt, and his anxieties always seemed to trigger bouts of Déjà vu for the second Shane, and give him little pushes here and there.

Yuna's expression shifted into something Shane couldn't quite read. She studied his face for a long moment, then smiled. "You're a good friend, Shane. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

"I try."

"You're more than that, though."

Before Shane could ask what she meant, headlights swept across the driveway. A car pulled in, windshield wipers working overtime against the snow.

Ilya had finally made it.

Shane's pulse kicked up. He didn't move immediately, just watched as the car door opened and Ilya climbed out, bundled in a heavy coat and scarf, carrying a bag in one hand.

"Go," Yuna said, nudging him. "Let him in before he freezes."

Shane moved to the front door, pulled it open before Ilya could knock.

Ilya looked up, snow already dusting his shoulders and hair, and grinned. "Hello, Shane!"

"Hey." Shane stepped back. "Come in. You're going to turn into a popsicle out there."

Ilya stomped the snow off his boots and entered, immediately pulling off his gloves. "Is beautiful snow. Very Christmas-like. Makes me almost nostalgic for Moscow."

"Thought you hated Moscow."

"I do, but snow is good memory before everything went bad. Had good snows with my mother many times." Ilya shrugged out of his coat, revealing a dark sweater underneath that made his eyes look more amber than hazel.

David appeared from the living room, hand extended. "Ilya! Good to see you."

"Mr. Hollander." Ilya shook his hand firmly. "Thank you for having me. I brought..." He paused, went through his duffle bag, and from it, he produced a bottle of Vodka with a bright red ribbon on it. "Very good vodka. From home."

David took it, examined the label with an appreciative nod. "This'll be perfect for later. I've got a karaoke machine set up in the entertainment room we always do after Christmas dinner. Your mother loves those old Christmas songs, and I need something strong to get through Mariah Carey one more time."

Ilya laughed. "I look forward to it. Though I warn you, my singing is terrible."

"Everyone's singing is terrible! That's the point," David laughed, giving Ilya a side hug before heading off to put away the bottle.

Yuna swept in, greeting Ilya with a warm hug that seemed to catch him off guard. "We're so glad you could make it. Thank you for joining us."

"Thank you for invitation. I..." Ilya glanced at Shane, something vulnerable flickering across his expression. "I did not have plans. This means very much."

"Well, you're family now," Yuna said simply. "Come. Dinner's almost ready."

The dining room smelled of roasted duck, honey-glazed ham, and every side dish Yuna had spent two days shopping for and preparing. Shane took his seat next to Ilya, while his parents settled at either end of the table.

Ilya stared at the spread, eyes wide. "This is... very much food."

"Mom goes overboard," Shane said.

"I do not go overboard. I go exactly as far as necessary and we've **never** had leftovers!" Yuna passed the duck to Ilya. "Please, help yourself to whatever you'd like."

Ilya loaded his plate with the kind of enthusiasm Shane had only seen him apply to hockey. When he ate, he ate with gusto, stuffing his mouth like it were the most divine thing in the world. He tried a bite of the duck, and his expression melted into something close to reverence. "Mrs. Hollander. This is incredible."

"Call me Yuna."

"Yuna," Ilya corrected, grinning. "This duck is best I have ever had. Better than anything in Moscow. Better than anything ever!"

"High praise," David said, cutting into his own portion. "So, Ilya. How's Ottawa treating you?"

Ilya chewed, considering his answer while he swallowed. "Is... different. Team is not good, but I knew this coming in. Coach Wiebe is very kind man. Very patient. He does not yell or

throw things like other coaches. He asks if we are okay. If we need anything. Is strange."

"Strange good or strange bad?" David asked.

"Strange good. I like it." Ilya took another bite, chewed thoughtfully. "Team goes to each other's houses after games. Even losses. Everyone knows each other. Is like family. All we need now as hockey team is to be good at hockey. Then we are set for life!"

Shane watched him talk, noting the way Ilya's expression softened when he described his team. Despite Ottawa's record, despite the losses, Ilya seemed... content, like he really was happy there.

"That sounds wonderful," Yuna said. "Much better than some of the horror stories we hear about other teams." She glared at Shane, knowingly.

"Yes. I am lucky." Ilya glanced at Shane. "Your team is good, yes? Montreal treats you well?"

Shane's jaw tightened. "They're fine."

"Fine?" Ilya raised an eyebrow. "You are shaping up to easily be Rookie of the Year. Should be more than fine."

"They expect a lot."

"Of course they do. You are Shane Hollander." Ilya said it like it was obvious, like Shane should already know his own worth. "Best prospect Montreal has seen in years. They are lucky to have you. They should be worshiping the ground you walk on!"

Embarrassment caused Shane's face to flush. He focused on cutting his ham. "Yeah, well. Sometimes it feels like they forget I'm still learning and like to throw everything on my shoulders. I'm not even Captain, and I feel like everyone expects me to run the team."

"Then they are idiots," Ilya said simply.

David chuckled. "Can't argue with that assessment."

Yuna rolled her eyes. "Look, I've been a Voyageur fan for as long as I can remember, but I'll be honest... I've been telling Shane, he might try and start sniffing around. Loyalty is important, but it's a two-way street. I'm not seeing a lot coming from the other street if you know what I'm saying."

"Mom," Shane groaned.

"What? They're dicks!" Yuna spat, passing a bowl of potatoes and gravy over to Ilya. "...and you, pile up some more food. I know how hockey players eat, and you're being too modest!"

The conversation flowed easily after that.

Yuna asked about Ilya's apartment, whether he'd decorated for Christmas, if he was managing okay on his own. Ilya answered each question with the kind of honesty and long-winded

answers that suggested he was starved for normal conversation, for people who cared about him as a person rather than a player.

Shane barely tasted his food. He was too focused on Ilya, on the way his face lit up when he laughed at one of David's jokes, or the careful way he thanked Yuna for each dish she offered him.

Under the table, Ilya's socked foot nudged against Shane's.

Shane's breath caught. He glanced up.

Ilya met his gaze, something warm and private in his expression, and pressed his foot more firmly against Shane's shin.

Shane's wasn't uncomfortable with the touch. He pressed back against Ilya's foot with his own socked feet.

Ilya's mouth curved into a small, secret smile before he turned his attention back to David's question about Russian Christmas traditions.

Shane sat there, foot touching Ilya's under the table while his parents talked and laughed and made Ilya feel welcome, and felt something that went far beyond friendship brewing between them.

(April 2012, Montreal, Second Timeline)

Shane watched Second Shane go through so much in what felt like was such a short period of time.

After the defeat in June 2010 against New York in the Stanley Cup playoffs, he watched Ilya, Mr. Smooth Rozanov, pull out his shower technique again, and kick start their relationship years before they were ever anything together.

He witnessed Second Shane coming out, much earlier to their parents just a few days later when he was awarded Rookie of the Year in July 2010, and was met with nothing but love and respect. More than that, though, was that they supported his choice of Ilya, wholeheartedly. Because they knew him so much better than they had before.

Then... A blissful time of love and bonding and growing as people between then and February of 2012. Even when they were apart during the hockey seasons, there were calls, texts, weekend hangouts. No ghosting, no fake dating, and no tuna melts.

...but of course, things had to get complicated.

Shane felt his anger spike when he heard the Montreal GM make homophobic comments at the Gala event, remembering back to all the assholes in the bar that mocked Ilya's death in the other lifetime, and he wondered if Second Shane felt that rush as well, because... Coming out publicly to the world of hockey, in 2012 of all times, took courage and drive that Shane never thought he was capable of, in any lifetime.

Shane felt the anxiety, the fear, and the trepidation of navigating that kind of life.

Montreal, naturally, was as awful, if not more awful than they'd been in his first lifetime. The suffering that came from having to play with them was soul-crushing, but then...

Dominic Vaillancourt, Matteo Ferrara, and Aleksei Volkov all came out.

In Shane's original life, not a single one of them ever said a word, but now, he got to hear them, and in the least likely of places Shane ever imagined.

The neon sign outside Fluffernutters buzzed and flickered, casting pink and purple shadows across the sidewalk. Shane stood beneath it with Dominic, Matteo, and Aleksei, all four of them dressed in simple sweatshirts and jeans that somehow still screamed "hockey player" and "straight passing" as loud as it could.

The four of them wanted to try living a real gay experience. The kind of night out that they'd never allowed themselves to have before in public. According to the internet, and according to a reddit post Shane had made and asked, going to a queer bar and dancing was the "standard gay experience". He wasn't sure about that, but people on the internet probably knew more about being gay than he did, so who was he to argue?

"This is it?" Matteo asked, eyeing the rainbow flag hanging above the door.

"According to Yelp," Shane said, pocketing his phone.

"Yelp." Aleksei shook his head. "We are trusting internet strangers to find a LGBT bar."

"You have a better idea?" Dominic countered.

Aleksei didn't.

They pushed through the door.

The interior was a sensory overload. Lights strobed in alternating colors, pink, blue, purple, while music thumped through speakers mounted at every corner. Bodies packed the dance floor, moving with abandon, laughter rising above the bass. Rainbow flags draped from the ceiling. The bar itself glowed with LED strips that cycled through the entire spectrum of color.

"Jesus," Matteo muttered, blinking against the assault.

Shane felt a nervousness bloom from his chest. Not from discomfort, but from the strangeness of it all. He'd spent most of his adult life avoiding places like this, convinced that being gay meant living quietly, privately, in spaces that didn't advertise themselves with neon and pride flags.

Seeing it now, loud and unapologetic, felt like stepping onto another planet.

"We look like idiots," Dominic said, scanning the crowd who were in a mix of bright, colorful clothing, and some of them far more skimpy than the bar probably called for. "Everyone here is..." He gestured, wildly.

"Comfortable?" Shane offered.

"Yeah. That, let's go with that."

They found a table near the back, away from the speakers but close enough to watch the crowd. A server appeared almost immediately, a young guy with glitter on his cheekbones and a smile that suggested he knew exactly who they were.

"Rainbow Avengers, right?" He set down cocktail napkins. "You guys are legends here. What can I get you?"

Shane ordered a ginger ale. The others followed suit with various drinks with colorful names, each sounding slightly uncertain, like they'd forgotten how to order drinks in public.

The server left. The four of them sat in awkward silence. They could not have stood out more if they'd tried.

"This is weird. Not, like bad, but like... Fuck, I know my wife said to just go check it out to bond with you guys, but... I don't think this is my thing. It's too loud, and I can't hear myself think," Matteo said finally.

"I like it. Very lively. My boyfriend is going to be so excited we can go to places like this now," Aleksei said, with a wide smile on his face.

Shane watched the dance floor. Two men swayed together near the center, arms wrapped around each other, completely absorbed as they grabbed onto their most personal places. Across from them, a group of women laughed over brightly colored drinks. At the bar, someone in platform boots and a sequined jacket held court with an audience hanging on every word.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do here," Dominic admitted. "Like... what's the protocol?"

"Protocol?" Shane turned to look at him.

"Yeah. Like, do we just... exist? Dance? Talk to people? Drink? Hollander, how do we do "gay"?" Dominic ran a hand through his hair. "I don't actually know how to *be* gay in public."

Matteo nodded. "Same. I know how to be the token straight guy in my apartment with my wife, and not whatever being "bi" means. That's it."

"I know how to be gay in bedroom with boyfriend and lights turned off and curtains drawn," Aleksei said flatly. "Very limiting skill set."

Shane's mouth twitched. "So, we're all terrible at this."

"Apparently."

The drinks arrived. The server set them down with a flourish. "These are on the house, by the way."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Paid for." The server gestured toward the bar. "Group over there. Said they wanted to buy the Rainbow Avengers a round."

Shane followed the gesture.

Four men stood at the bar's far end, raising their glasses in acknowledgment. They looked nothing alike, one tall and broad, another lean and tattooed, a third in wire-rimmed glasses, the fourth barely old enough to be drinking. Different body types, different styles, but all grinning at them like they'd just won the lottery.

"Oh," Shane said.

"Huh." Dominic picked up his beer. "That's... nice?"

"Very nice," Matteo agreed, though he looked as confused as Shane felt.

The music shifted. Something upbeat and poppy, the kind of song that made people surge toward the dance floor in a wave.

One of the men from the bar approached their table. The tattooed one, Shane noted. He moved with easy confidence, stopping just close enough to be heard over the music.

"Hey. You guys want to dance?"

The question hung in the air.

Shane's first instinct was to say no. "I'm seeing someone," Shane said, the words coming out before he could stop them.

The man's grin didn't falter. "I know. Rozanov, right? Saw the kiss at the gala." He gestured toward the dance floor. "This isn't a pickup thing. Just... group fun. Celebrating being free. Let us treat you guys and welcome you to the family."

Before Shane could respond, the man pulled a rainbow boa from seemingly nowhere and draped it around Shane's neck.

"Come on. Live a little."

Dominic stood first. Then Matteo. Then Aleksei, all three of them wearing identical expressions of "why not?"

Shane looked down at the boa, ridiculous and bright against his dark shirt.

"Fuck it."

He stood.

The dance floor swallowed them.

Bodies pressed close, but not in a sexual way, more like a community, with the crowd making space while simultaneously pulling them in. The music shifted again, something with a beat that didn't require skill, just movement.

Shane moved awkwardly at first. His limbs felt disconnected, his rhythm nonexistent. Around him, Dominic bounced like a dad at a wedding. Matteo swayed with his eyes closed. Aleksei just sort of... vibrated in place.

None of it mattered.

The group from the bar joined them, not dancing *with* them so much as *near* them.

Someone grabbed Shane's hand, spun him. He laughed, surprised by the sound coming from his own throat.

Dominic got pulled into an impromptu circle, strangers cheering as he attempted something that might've been the moonwalk.

The songs blurred together. Silly, fun, ridiculous pop that nobody took seriously. Shane's boa kept slipping. He adjusted it three times before giving up and letting it hang lopsided.

At some point, Shane looked up.

Dominic had been pulled to the edge of the crowd by one of the men from the bar. They weren't quite dancing together, more like talking with bodies swaying, deep in a conversation. His expression had gone soft, open, the mask he wore on the ice completely absent.

Then the men leaned in.

Their lips met.

Dominic's hands came up, cupping the stranger's face, kissing him like he'd been waiting his whole life for permission.

Wolf whistles erupted. Matteo and Aleksei materialized beside Shane, grinning like idiots.

"Get it, Dom!" Matteo shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth.

Aleksei just laughed, shaking his head.

The song ended. Dominic broke away from his kiss, face flushed, grinning wider than Shane had ever seen him smile.

"That was..." Dominic trailed off, breathless.

"Good?" The stranger offered.

"Yeah. Really good."

"Great. Wanna see where the night takes us?"

Dominic nodded, a little kiss-drunk on his face.

They re-joined the group. The next song started, slower this time, couples pairing off across the floor.

Shane stepped back, found a clear spot near the wall. His legs burned pleasantly. Sweat stuck his shirt to his back. The boa had migrated to somewhere around his waist.

He watched Matteo laugh at something Aleksei said. Watched Dominic still holding the stranger's hand like he'd forgotten he was supposed to let go. Watched the crowd move and shift and exist without fear, without performance, just people being themselves in a space designed for exactly that.

Shane pulled out his phone.

Shane: At a queer bar with the avengers. This is exhausting and loud and not my scene at all. Props to people that do this every night

Ilya: Having fun?

Shane: Actually? Yeah. But I'd rather be home talking to you.

Ilya: Sap. Stay out. Enjoy it. You earned it.

Shane: Dom made out with someone.

Ilya: Good for him. You make out with anyone?

Shane: Just you. Always just you.

Ilya: Correct answer. ;)

Shane pocketed his phone. Matteo appeared at his elbow, a fresh drink in hand.

"You good?" Matteo asked.

"Yeah." Shane accepted the drink. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"About how being gay doesn't mean anything except... this." Shane gestured toward the dance floor, the bar, the people laughing and dancing and existing. "Finding your people. Finding your pace. Living your life however it works for you. We're not "bad" at being gay, we're bad at just living a free life and doing what we want to do."

Matteo followed his gaze. "Yeah. That sounds about right."

"I thought it would be more complicated. Like there'd be rules or expectations or..." Shane trailed off.

"A gay agenda?" Matteo grinned.

"Yeah." Shane laughed. "If there is an agenda, mine's boring as hell. I just want to play hockey, hang out with my teammates, be a normal guy, and have great sex with Ilya."

"I'll drink to that."

They stood in the corner, toasting drinks to one and other, watching Dominic get pulled back onto the dance floor by his new "friend" and both their hands "exploring" uncharted territories. Aleksei had somehow acquired his own boa and was currently being taught what looked like salsa by one of the older regulars, who wanted to help Aleksei impress his boyfriend.

The song shifted again. Something upbeat returned, pulling people back to the floor in droves.

Matteo clapped Shane's shoulder. "Come on. One more dance before we call it a night."

Shane followed him back into the chaos, boa bouncing, drink forgotten on a nearby table.

He danced like shit, laughed too loud, and didn't care who saw.

(June 2012, Shane's Summer Cottage, Second Timeline)

Shane watched Second Shane and the Rainbow Avengers pull off the biggest, most bullshit series of wins in hockey history. He felt like he was watching an Air Bud movie and was

waiting for the Third Period shocker where a golden retriever would be allowed to play on the third string for relief.

Yet... It was real, and it was happening.

A group of LGBT+ players were on their way to a Stanley Cup victory. (How or why Ottawa was playing against Montreal in the finals when they were in the same division was a mystery to Shane, but at this point, he'd just accepted that time had fractured itself and it was best to not ask questions.)

Shane watched as Second Shane and Ilya made their way to the cottage for a final weekend of relaxation before the finals began. He could sense something was wrong with Ilya. ...and he'd been right.

Over the span of a day, Shane learned the truth.

This "Ilya" wasn't just a little different.

No. This was Shane's Ilya. The one who'd "died" in the plane crash. The one who'd gone back in time, re-lived the past, and was now telling Second Shane everything that happened the first time around: all the fights, all the arguments, and he never once tried to make one side seem "right" and one side seem "wrong".

While the shock of realizing his Ilya was alive and well was enough to make Shane cry in the depths of Second Shane's mind, there was something else that made his chest hurt even more.

Ilya didn't have to do all of this.

Ilya didn't have to re-live this life again.

Ilya could have chosen any number of lives to live in this Second Chance he'd been given. The man could have made investments and gotten rich, could have found a better boyfriend who was a lot less complicated than Shane, or tried to find a life that didn't revolve around hockey.

Yet, out of all of the timelines Ilya could have made... He'd chosen this one. He'd chosen to find Shane again, chosen to try and make things better for everyone around them.

Ilya, he realized, had sacrificed himself, again, for Shane's well-being. Just like he'd done in the original timeline when he left Boston for Ottawa, but this time... He'd done so much more.

Shane felt himself drawn forward as Second Shane pulled out his phone. For that brief moment... He felt his hands working in tandem with Second Shane. Not as two separate entities, but as one, unified man, trying to reach across time and space to deliver something important to their lover.

Their thumbs, united, moved across the screen, slow and deliberate. Deleting. Retyping. Finding the words that had never been read, in a timeline that no longer existed.

“I'm sorry. Not for the relationship, for this. For making you feel that angry you'd say those things, and for me pushing you to that edge. I'm going to do better. I want to talk, properly, not like this, over text, where we're both angry and lashing out at each other because we're scared of losing each other. I know we both mean the world to each other. I want a second chance to do this right, but I can't do brave without you. I've never been able to do brave without you. If you'll come back to me, to Montreal, this weekend, I'll try. I promise. I'll try to have the courage to admit you're my boyfriend. I just need you to help me through it and for us to make a solid plan on how this is going to work. Maybe my mom can help?. I'm too scared to do it alone. I've always been too scared to do anything alone. I love you, Ilya. Not Lily, Ilya. I love you, Ilya Rozanov, Captain of the Ottawa Centaurs. I'm not sorry we met. I'll never be sorry we met and I refuse to accept that's how you really feel. I'm sorry we've always been dishonest with each other to the things that matter most. That's what I'll accept.”

Together, they hit send.

The message traveled and reached Ilya's phone in his pocket.

Ilya pulled it out and read it. His face crumpled, and his chin dropped. A hand came up over his mouth, fingers pressed hard against it, and his breath came out in pieces, broken and uneven. His shoulders curved forward. Shane watched him read the message again, and then again after that.

“I love you.” They, Shane and Second Shane, both said at the same time.

Shane felt himself moving forward, not walking but dissolving into the scene before him. He watched Ilya and Second Shane embrace by the fire pit, watched them hold each other while the sun set over the lake.

Then he felt it.

The pull.

Not away from this timeline, but *into* it.

Second Shane turned his head slightly, as if sensing something. His eyes unfocused for just a moment.

Shane felt himself step forward. Felt the distance between them collapse.

Two versions of the same person, reaching across the space that separated them.

“You gave us this”, Shane thought toward his younger self. *“You fought for it. You earned it.”*

Second Shane's mouth curved into a small, private smile, like he'd heard something on the wind.

Then Shane felt himself... Finally become one with this second Shane.

Not violently. Not painfully.

Like water from two different mountains streams meeting together in a lake. Like coming home, *at last*.

Memories flooded through him, both timelines at once. The hostility of the first life and the openness of the second. The secrets and the truth. Jane and Lily becoming Shane and Ilya. The plane crash and the butterflies. The balcony and the meteor shower.

All of it, converging.

Shane gasped. His hands, gripped Ilya tighter.

"Shane?" Ilya pulled back slightly, concern flickering across his face. "You okay?"

Shane blinked. The cottage came into sharp focus. The fire pit. The lake. Ilya's face, worried and beautiful and *here*.

"Yeah." Shane's voice came out steady. "I'm okay. Better than okay."

Because he was whole now.

Not Original Shane or Second Shane.

Just *Shane*.

All the memories, all the love, all the pain and joy compressed into this single moment, this single person, this single life.

He cupped Ilya's face with both hands. "*Thank you*."

Ilya's brow furrowed. "For what?"

"For coming back." Shane's thumb brushed across Ilya's cheekbone. "For choosing me. For giving us this."

Understanding flickered in Ilya's eyes. He leaned forward, pressed their foreheads together.

"Always," Ilya whispered. "In every lifetime. In every universe we find ourselves in... Always you. I'll always find you and I'll always love you."

Shane felt the last threads of the old timeline release their hold. The grief, the regret, the desperate prayers on that Montreal balcony, all of it dissolved into something lighter.

He'd been given a gift most people never received. A second chance. A better path. A love strong enough to survive death itself.

They pulled apart slowly. Shane felt settled in his skin in a way he never had before. Complete. *Whole*.

This was his life, his future, and his soulmate.

...and he was not going to waste this Second Chance.

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