

Built For The Ice, Not The Lights

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/79941316) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/79941316>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Autistic Shane Hollander , Autism , Sensory Overload , Autistic Meltdown , Neurodivergent Shane Hollander , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Established Relationship , Angst , Anxiety Attacks , Anxiety
Language:	English
Collections:	Anonymous
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-20 Words: 1,604 Chapters: 1/1

Built For The Ice, Not The Lights

by Anonymous

Summary

His heartbeat was too fast. His chest felt tight. The microphone foam brushed his knuckles and the texture was suddenly unbearable, coarse, wrong.

Too loud.

Too bright.

Too close.

Too much.

He needed space.

or

After an intense game and overwhelming post-game media scrum, Shane hits sensory overload and has a meltdown. Ilya finds him hiding away and stays, grounding him through it and reminding him he doesn't have to handle everything alone.

The worst part wasn't the game.

Shane could handle the game.

The game had rules. It had structure. It had the clean geometry of the rink, the crisp bite of steel on ice, the predictable rotation of shifts. Even when it was chaotic, it was a chaos he understood. Pucks moved in patterns. Bodies angled in lines. Systems nested inside systems. Shane had been mapping them in his head since he was a kid.

Media Day did not have rules.

Or rather, it had too many.

"Just be yourself," the PR woman had said with a bright smile that hurt to look at. "Relax. Smile. Keep your answers light."

Be yourself. Relax. Light.

The hallway outside the locker room was already too loud. Reporters clustered like birds, their voices overlapping in sharp bursts. The lights from the camera rigs were brighter than usual, hot and white and relentless. Someone had turned the music up in the dressing room, bass thudding through his ribs.

Shane stood at his stall, fingers curled around the edge of the wooden bench. He tried to catalog sensations the way his therapist had taught him.

Too bright. Too loud. Fabric itchy at the back of his neck. The elastic in his compression shirt digging into his ribs. Sweat cooling too fast along his spine.

He inhaled for four counts. Held for four. Exhaled for four.

"Hollander!" someone called. "You ready?"

He nodded automatically. He was always ready.

Except today his skin felt like it was two sizes too small.

The game itself was brutal. Fast, punishing, every hit to his body landing harder than it should. It was the kind of rivalry matchup that fed headlines for weeks. Shane scored once, assisted once, and blocked a shot that left a bruise blooming across his thigh. He played well. He played the way he always did, precise, relentless, methodical.

But the crowd was louder than usual, a constant wall of noise pressing against his skull. Every whistle shrieked. Every horn drilled straight through him. When he sat on the bench, the smell of sweat and rubber and ammonia stung the back of his throat.

By the third period, his thoughts had started to fragment.

Too loud.

Too bright.

Too much.

He missed a pass he would normally make without looking. His stick felt wrong in his hands, the tape uneven. His gloves were damp and suffocating. When the final buzzer sounded and the arena erupted, the sound didn't feel like celebration. It felt like an explosion.

They won.

Someone clapped him on the helmet. "Media's gonna love you tonight, Hollander." The thought made his heart sink just a little.

The hallway afterward was worse.

The lights hadn't dimmed. If anything, they were harsher. Microphones were thrust toward his face, logos flashing. Questions overlapped, voices stacking on top of each other until he couldn't separate them.

"Shane, talk about that second-period goal—"

"Was that set play something you practiced—"

"How does it feel to beat—"

"How much pressure did you feel coming into—"

Pressure.

He felt pressure everywhere. In his ears. In his teeth. Behind his eyes. He tried to answer the first question. He opened his mouth. The words did not come out in the right order.

"I—uh—the play, it was—" The lights flickered slightly as someone adjusted a camera, and the motion snagged his focus. "We practiced—no, I mean—"

Someone laughed softly, not unkindly, but it sliced through him anyway.

His heartbeat was too fast. His chest felt tight. The microphone foam brushed his knuckles and the texture was suddenly unbearable, coarse, wrong.

Too loud.

Too bright.

Too close.

Too much.

He needed space.

“Shane?” another reporter prompted.

He couldn't look at them anymore. Faces blurred into shapes. The questions kept coming, stacking, stacking, stacking. His brain tried to process each one, file it, answer it, but they overlapped like corrupted data.

“I can't,” he said, but it came out too quiet.

“Sorry?”

He stepped back. Someone stepped forward to close the gap. The room tilted.

He dropped his gaze to the floor, to the safe black rubber matting, but even that felt like too much information. The overhead lights hummed, a high-pitched electrical whine he had never noticed before and now could not unhear.

“I can't,” he said again, louder, hands slamming up over his ears because that was the only thing that made sense.

The hallway fell into confused silence.

Shane turned and walked, fled, down the corridor, past the training room, past the equipment racks, into the first empty storage space he could find. He shut the door behind him and slid down against it, pressing his back into the cool metal.

Dark. Better. Safer.

But not enough.

His breathing was ragged, too fast. His hands were shaking. Every sensation from the last two hours replayed at full volume in his head. The laughter. The lights. The whistle. The horn. The reporters' voices.

He rocked forward without thinking, hands fisted in his hair. It wasn't a choice. It was a release valve. His body trying to discharge the overload. The pressure on his skull finally matching the pressure he felt inside, giving him something to focus other than the thought of —

Too much.

Too much.

Too much.

He didn't know how long he stayed like that. Time fractured. He tried to count his breaths but lost track. He pressed his forehead to his knees. He dug his fingers into the fabric of his pants, grounding himself in the pressure.

At some point, the rocking turned into quiet sobbing. He hated that part, the loss of control, the way his body simply decided it was done.

A knock came at the door. Gentle. Two taps.

“Shane.”

The voice cut through the static. Ilya.

Shane’s chest hitched. He couldn’t answer.

The door handle rattled softly. “I am coming in, okay?”

The door opened a crack, then wider. The storage room light flicked on, but Ilya immediately winced and turned it off again.

“Too bright?” he murmured.

Shane nodded, eyes squeezed shut. Ilya stepped inside and closed the door behind him, plunging them back into near-darkness. He didn’t approach immediately. He crouched a few feet away instead, giving Shane space.

“You left them very confused,” Ilya said lightly. “Which I enjoyed. But I think maybe you did not.”

A broken sound escaped Shane’s throat. Ilya’s tone shifted instantly. Softer.

“Hey. Solnyshko. Look at me, if you can.”

It took effort, but Shane lifted his head. Ilya’s expression was stripped of its usual teasing edge. Concern, open and unguarded, filled the space between them.

“Too much?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded again. “Everything. The lights. The questions. I couldn’t—” His voice wobbled. “I couldn’t sort it.”

“That is okay.” Ilya moved a little closer. “You do not have to sort it right now.”

Shane pressed his palms against his eyes. “I messed up.”

“You did not mess up.” Ilya’s voice was firm. “You were overwhelmed. That is different.”

The word settled somewhere in Shane’s chest. Overwhelmed. Not broken. Not weak. Overwhelmed.

“Can I touch you?” Ilya asked quietly.

Consent. Always.

Shane swallowed and nodded.

Ilya shifted closer until their knees brushed. He reached out slowly, placing his hands on Shane’s shoulders, then pulling him forward into a solid, steady embrace.

It wasn't gentle. It was firm, deep pressure. Exactly what Shane needed.

He exhaled shakily and let himself fold into it, forehead pressed against Ilya's collarbone. Ilya's arms wrapped around him, strong and grounding, one hand splayed between his shoulder blades.

"Breathe with me," Ilya murmured. "In. Two. Three. Four."

Shane followed, focusing on the cadence of Ilya's voice. On the warmth. On the weight.

"Out. Two. Three. Four."

The rocking slowed. The shaking eased.

"I told them you were not feeling well," Ilya said after a while. "Which is true. Your nervous system is idiot sometimes."

A small, damp huff of laughter escaped Shane.

"I can fight entire team of men twice my size," Ilya continued, brushing his lips against Shane's hair. "But I cannot fight lighting designer. Very unfair."

Shane's grip tightened in the fabric of Ilya's shirt. "I hate that it does this to me."

Ilya leaned back just enough to look at him. "Your brain works very hard," he said simply. "It sees everything. Hears everything. That is why you are best player on ice. But it means sometimes you need quiet after."

Shane blinked. "You don't think it makes me—"

"No." Ilya cut him off. "It makes you Shane."

The certainty in his voice left no room for argument.

They stayed like that for a long time, long enough for Shane's heartbeat to settle, for the buzzing in his head to fade to something manageable. Ilya kept up the steady pressure, tracing slow circles between his shoulder blades, counting breaths when Shane's started to hitch again.

Eventually, the world shrank back to a tolerable size.

"Better?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded against his chest. "Yeah."

"Good." Ilya pressed a kiss to his temple. "Next time, we make plan. Maybe you do fewer interviews. Maybe I throw microphone in trash. We adapt."

Shane almost smiled. "You'd get fined."

"For you?" Ilya shrugged. "Worth it."

Shane pulled back enough to meet his eyes. The storage room was dim, quiet, safe. The game was over. The lights were far away.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ilya brushed his thumb along Shane’s cheek, wiping away the last trace of tears. “Always,” he replied.

And in the steady rhythm of Ilya’s breathing, in the firm, unwavering hold of his arms, Shane felt the overload recede. Not erased, not forgotten, but understood.

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