

is just ten year plan to fuck

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by [akatomlinson](#)

Summary

Shane fucking Hollander. Hockey's Golden Boy. Long-time crush of Ilya Rozanov. Long, loooooong time. A decade of being a fucking simp for this man. God, he was in trouble.

It should be pretty much illegal to go from their only contact being at face-off across the ice, to suddenly hosting Shane in his exclusive club—during a fucking event, no less. Ilya's event.

He would never admit it, but he's been stealthily trying to get Hollander to show up at his club for years now. Hell, Shane was the whole reason he invested in the club in the first place. Bought a fucking house here. Maybe that was an insane thing to do, but he didn't care. Ilya was insane. Insane for Shane.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Someone made a trailer for this fic!!!!!! Thank you SO much to @rozyhollanov on twitter, you are incredible!!!

[Watch the trailer here <3](#)

Chapter Notes

Please read the tags.

Friendly reminder that this is a work of fiction! It is not meant to inform anyone of how to participate safely in BDSM scenes/arrangements, nor is it meant to provide an accurate representation of how typical BDSM scenes/arrangements would play out. I am not an expert. This is purely for entertainment purposes. Enjoy!

Given the accusations in this fandom recently, I can't believe I have to say this, but this work is 100% written by a living, breathing human!!! I spend hours upon hours of my time writing, researching, and editing to bring this story to life, for no reason other than the fact that I love doing it. Please do not insult me by accusing my work of being AI-generated.

I am not an expert at Russian or hockey lol, feel free to correct me if I get anything wrong! First chapter is all in Shane's pov, but I have a huge chunk of chapter 2 written already and that will be in Ilya's pov (which is just so insanely fun to write and completely re-shaped what I thought this fic would be). Enjoy!!!

also my twitter is @sluthollanov if anyone wants to be moots :) will follow back if you post hudcon/hollanov

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

When Shane first arrives at *Hush*, he blinks heavily until his eyes can adjust to the dim lighting. He's been to private bars before, but nothing like this. Nothing that requires a password and a recommendation from two members to even get through the door.

It's not the type of favor he'd ask from just anyone. Luckily, he has a Rose in his life, and she happens to be highly connected. She's not a member herself, but apparently several of the cast from her upcoming movie are. Which is how the topic gets brought up in the first place.

“You’re deprived,” Rose had told him dramatically as she polished off whatever ridiculously expensive cocktail they’d come here to try.

“I’m fine,” Shane had laughed with exasperation, but Rose looked at him with that same expression she always wore—the one that told Shane he wasn’t fooling anyone, least of all her.

“Your teammates aren’t buying that, and neither am I,” she stated bluntly, shrugging her shoulders.

Shane sighed, his stomach swirling in anticipation the same way it always did when they broached this topic. It was still a very new revelation—Shane being gay. He’d had time to come to terms with it, but not a lot of time to experiment. Well, Shane supposed it had more to do with lack of freedom rather than lack of time.

“Hey,” she leaned forward, squeezing one of his wrists from where they were resting on top of the table, one loosely curled around his drink. “You don’t have to be out and proud to get laid.”

Shane breathed a laugh and rolled his eyes. “I know that,” he replied lightly, eyes dropping as he took a swig of his beer. “It’s just...more difficult, you know? I can’t exactly go out and find someone.”

“Why not?” Rose wrinkled her nose, as if it were really as easy as hitting the nearest club and inviting someone back to his place.

But he was Shane Hollander, and that meant something to this town. It meant he was a four-time Stanley Cup Champion. It meant he had to hold himself to the highest regard. And it absolutely *didn’t* leave room for a random hookup that might unintentionally get him outed.

“You know why,” Shane grumbled, but Rose wasn’t having it.

“Oh, please. You think you’re the only closeted person in the public eye? Plenty of people are,” she spoke matter-of-factly, and then, when Shane failed to react, she leaned in closer. “A couple of the girls from my movie were talking about a club they just discovered.”

Shane buried his face in his hands. “You know I’m not into clubbing.”

“Would you relax? It’s not a dance club. It’s a private club,” she told him in a hushed tone.

“A private club for what?” Shane dropped his hands to the table.

“For sex,” she nodded at him pointedly. “It’s for, like, rich people or...people who don’t want their business spreading around like wildfire. They have confidentiality contracts that protect the members. I’m pretty sure you can’t even get in without a background check.”

“Okay, I am not going to a *sex club*,” Shane hissed at the mere suggestion, eyes darting around the room to make sure no one was listening in on their conversation.

“Oh my god, I was kidding. It’s not a sex club,” Rose waved off as she reached for her drink again. “Just think of it as an exclusive club, yeah? You’re not the only one with a secret, Shane. Lots of other people want to let their freak fly without reading about it in the press the next day.”

Shane ducked his head, both hands cupping the back of his neck as he tried to ignore what she was saying to him. Rose typically had a lot of crazy ideas, but the more she talked, the more he had to admit it wasn’t the *worst*. Theoretically, there was no harm in at least checking the place out.

That’s how he finds himself here: in a dimly lit club that feels almost more like a cave with the way each entryway curves around him. There’s a heavy crowd of people when he first steps inside, but looking past the cluttered bar, he can see many other areas that are less inhabited.

To his right, there’s a dancefloor with a DJ playing something that makes Shane’s heart hammer a little louder in his chest. On the other side, there are tables, private booths with seat backs that extend all the way to the massive ceiling, creating a greater sense of privacy. There are a few doors at the back that seemingly lead elsewhere, but without his glasses, he can’t quite make out the lit-up lettering above each.

Either way, he’s glad he decided to come alone. It’s a lot to take in, and as much as he loves hanging out with Rose, she tends to attract a lot of attention, and he’d really rather lay low tonight. In fact, he’s only here so he can say he gave it a shot, that he made a valiant effort in attempting to act on his newfound gayness. As Rose had so kindly put it, he owed it to himself. Just because he was in the closet didn’t mean he couldn’t let a little light in.

Plus, he only had two more weeks of press here before he could officially head off to his cottage for the summer and disappear in classic Shane Hollander fashion. This year had taken a toll on him. Between winning his fourth cup and trying to navigate his sexuality in the process, Shane was exhausted. While Rose seemed excited for him to go out and sow his wild oats, all Shane wanted to do was retreat to his fortress and wallow in self-pity. Surely, there would be time for wild oat sowing later.

But, he’s here nonetheless. Giving it his best shot. And the massive contract he’d signed a week prior was honestly doing little to quell his nerves. He felt too big for his skin, like he was wearing a giant sign on his forehead that said, *I’m Shane Hollander and I’m gay!*

It wasn’t even a gay club, but Shane couldn’t fathom why someone would come here if they weren’t holding onto a massive secret. Normal people could express themselves freely in public, no matter how rich they were. He supposed some of them just preferred the privacy.

Shane sighs and starts pushing his way through the crowd in search of a path to the bar. He’ll stay for one drink, he decides. That would give him enough time to really scope out the place, confirm once and for all that it just wasn’t his thing. Clubs in general had never been his thing.

“Hiya, love,” a stunning girl greets him from behind the bar. “What can I get for you?”

“Um,” Shane pauses, squinting at the menu in front of him. The drinks all seem to have special names, none of them actually giving any indication as to what might be inside of them.

“You must be new here,” she smiles at him, and Shane only flushes a little at the accusation.

“What makes you think that?” He clears his throat, squaring his shoulders a little from where they’re tucked under his leather jacket (an item Rose *insisted* on buying him for his big debut into the *exclusive* scene, whatever that meant).

“You seem confused by the menu,” she points out with mild amusement. “We’ve got regular drinks. Whatever you want. But *that* menu is for anything else you’d like to experience during your time here at *Hush*.”

Shane frowns and slowly shakes his head. “I- I don’t follow.”

“Discretion. It’s our policy, remember?” She points to a quote painted across the wall above her that reads *Discretion is the highest form of respect* in large, swooping letters. “We have code words for access to certain rooms. The specials change depending on what’s available that night. Some rooms are invite-only, others are available upon request. It just depends on what you’re here for.”

“Oh,” Shane nods dumbly, though he’s not really sure what she could be talking about. Special rooms for what?

The girl watches him for a minute and then reaches for a bottle of liquor, measuring it out as she mixes up a drink. “So,” she says conversationally.

From here, the music is distant enough that he doesn’t have to strain to hear her, which is nice. The place is pretty massive now that he’s had more time to exist inside of it. The way the ceilings curve almost makes each area feel like it exists within its own bubble.

“What *are* you here for?” Her voice brings him back to the conversation.

“I—” Shane stutters, mouth dropping in surprise. “Aren’t you not supposed to ask me that?”

She shrugs, pouring the freshly made cocktail into a frosted glass that must have come from a dry ice freezer the way it’s smoking. “I can ask you whatever I want. It’s entirely up to you whether you want to answer, but it’s not like I’m going to tell anyone,” her lips quirk in amusement. She tops the dark liquor drink with a crystallized orange slice and then slides it across the bar. “Here. Try that.”

“What is it?” Shane asks, but he reaches for it anyway. He tries not to think about the calories.

“Something to calm your nerves.”

Shane takes a hesitant sip, closing his eyes when the warm liquid travels down his throat despite the icy glass. It’s strong, he notes right away. A little smoky around the edges, but sweet enough to have him going back in for another taste.

“I’m Angel, by the way,” she introduces herself with a smile, turning to work on another drink.

“Angel?” Shane laughs. “Wow. Is that your real name?”

She looks over her shoulder at him, something twinkling in her eye. “Discretion, remember? It’s nice to meet you. Shane,” she adds softly, low enough that no one’s probably heard, but it still lights a spark of fear through Shane’s spine.

It’s confirmation that he’s been recognized, likely *will* be recognized by many others if these first five minutes are anything to go off of. The thought alone nearly has him bolting to the exit.

“Don’t worry,” she says after a beat, clearly having picked up on his panicked expression. He’s not exactly got a great poker face. “Nobody here cares about you. They’re much more interested in themselves tonight. As they should be,” she shrugs, serving another drink to someone who must be a regular. “This is a place where people get to indulge in their wildest fantasies.” She pauses to look at him seriously again, her lips curling slightly at the edges. “I really hope you find what you’re looking for.”

And before Shane can ask her what she means, she’s halfway across the other side of the bar serving a group of people who’ve just come in hanging all over each other. Shane sighs and takes another sip of his drink, wincing as it burns when he swallows.

He turns his back to the bar to survey the massive room in front of him once more. And, well, considering he can’t see the signs directing towards the rooms in the back, it appears he only has two options: dancefloor or the tables.

The tables seem like an obvious choice. He’s never really been one for dancing, especially not the kind of dancing this crowd of people seems to be into. A few pairs are being quite tame, but for the most part, everyone’s grinding on someone.

There are lots of gay people here, he realizes, probably a beat too late. Women intertwined in lip-locks, men groping each other, even groups of people passing each other around like they’re at the world’s greatest buffet.

Shane takes another sip of his drink and turns to head over to the tables, but before he can, a familiar glint catches his eye. He may not have his glasses, but he’d know the glare from that necklace anywhere, having stared at it enough times when leaning over the puck for face-off. Ilya Rozanov is in the building, and he’s sandwiched between a man and a woman.

For a second, all the air leaves Shane’s body. It’s not exactly insane that Ilya might end up at a place like this. He’s notoriously public about his sex life, often seen leaving nightclubs with one—or sometimes even two—women on his arm. Still, Shane would have never expected to find him like this, a man sucking on his neck as Ilya does the same to a girl in front of him.

He shouldn’t be seeing this. He shouldn’t even be here. Getting recognized was one thing, but having *Rozanov* know he was here? Absolutely not. This whole night was a huge mistake.

He's one minute away from dropping a 20 for Angel at the bar and disappearing, never to be seen again, when Ilya's blue eyes lock on him. Shane jumps slightly in surprise, staring back in dread as realization dawns on Ilya's face.

He's smirking, Shane notes with horror, but he doesn't have to dwell on that for too long because Ilya's mouth quickly drops open in a gasp at whatever the guy behind him is doing to his neck. Ilya's eyes are half-lidded now, half-lidded but still zeroed in on Shane. And Shane...Shane can't look away.

He can't drag his eyes away from Ilya's biceps bulging deliciously in his tight-black shirt, moles littering his arms all the way down to where his hands are gripping the girl's hips, pulling her flush against him. He's sweating, like he's been here for hours and maybe the crowd and the dancing and whatever else he's gotten up to tonight have finally caught up to him. He reaches up to pull the guy closer, wrapping a possessive hand around the back of his neck that winds the trio even tighter together, until Shane can barely tell where one of them ends and the other begins. A sweaty blur.

Shane turns sharply back to the bar, cheeks flushed as he tries to blink the image out of his mind. If there's one thing he already gets enough of in this life, it's Rozanov. It's a face that sometimes plagues his nightmares, Roz stealing the puck at the last second and, with it, Shane's chance at Stanley Cup victory. When he was younger, maybe Roz had made a few other appearances in his dreams—ones that he'd never admit out loud—, but that was history now. Ten years of rivalry built up between anything that might have once existed between them.

He sighs down at his drink in frustration, wondering if he can truly have anything in this world that won't be tarnished by Roz, wonders if they're destined to do this dance forever, Shane's own personal demon from hell sent here to make sure nothing ever comes easy.

It's not that he really thought this club would be a solution to his...problem. But, maybe a small, tiny part of him had hoped— no. Nothing. It didn't matter. Shane Hollander was not meant to exist in places like this.

He swirls the remainder of his mostly full drink and glances around the bar for Angel, but she's nowhere to be found. Maybe she's on break. She hadn't exactly asked him to pay for the drink, hadn't requested to open a tab for him, but Shane would never feel comfortable leaving without paying, and all the other bartenders seem preoccupied.

Just as he's about to shove a couple of bills behind the bar to cut and run, the heat of a presence comes up beside him. Shane swallows. He can smell him before he sees him.

It's unmistakably Roz, sharp cologne cutting through the smell of sweat and other people. It's nauseating almost as much as it is intoxicating. He shifts uncomfortably and finally lets his eyes dart over.

Roz's curls are damp but contained, like he'd started the night with them gelled back, but they inevitably fell loose with all the activity. Shane tries not to think about that night in the gym nearly ten years ago, how Roz's sweaty arms had plagued his dreams for possibly a year,

maybe more, before the image had started to fade from Shane's mind. Now, he finds himself stumbling back, all of those memories flashing in front of his eyes.

"I have not seen you here before," Roz opens with, eyes squinted slightly as if he's trying to figure Shane out.

"I was just leaving," Shane replies tightly, his posture wound in knots as he hunches over the bar, tries to make himself as small as possible to avoid being recognized by anyone else. Especially with Roz hanging over his shoulder.

"Leaving," Roz puffs a laugh at this. "You insult me, Hollander. Is my presence that unbearable?"

Yes, Shane has half a mind to fire back, but even he knows it wouldn't come out entirely truthful.

"Ah," Roz nods, eyes landing on Shane's drink. "Angel gave you welcome drink, yes? You are very nervous."

Shane's eyes dart to him again with a ferocity. "I'm not nervous," he replies defensively. "I just..." he trails, pausing to find the words. "Nothing. I shouldn't have come here. This was a mistake."

Roz is quiet beside him for a moment, seemingly contemplating his next words as he surveys the man in front of him. "You are tense, yes? Is this why you come? Hockey becoming too stressful for you. You need to dabble in...other activities?"

Shane scoffs and turns to face him fully this time. "I don't think taking home a fourth Stanley Cup qualifies as *too stressful*," he shoots back. Roz is watching him with something like amusement. "Two more than you have, isn't it?"

"Hm," Roz looks him over pointedly, noting his tense shoulders. "Yes, is true. But, more cups must equal more stress, no? The Golden Boy does not look so golden in this light."

Shane feels his face start to get hot with irritation. He's two seconds away from telling Rozanov off, from using a few choice words that he would rarely say to anyone on *or off* the ice when—

"Angel," Roz calls over Shane's shoulder. "You did not tell me we have Montreal royalty Shane Hollander in the house. I would have arranged for welcome committee."

Shane turns just in time to see Angel roll her eyes. "Leave him alone, Rozy. Can't you see he's nervous? It's his first time."

"No shit," Roz mutters around a laugh, and Shane doesn't have time to chime in before a hand slides across the leather of his jacket, settling low on his back. "We will need the shots that are on fire."

Angel laughs as she swipes a few empty glasses left on the bar, neatly tucking them away. "Fire shots, Rozy, really? You're going to scare him off."

Roz rolls his eyes and lets his hand drift up to Shane's shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze as he jostles him a bit. "Look at him. He is already scared. He needs premium liquor, the good stuff. Only the finest money can buy for Shane Hollander."

Shane is pretty sure Roz is making fun of him like he usually does, but he can't help the way his cheeks flush even further. He feels so ridiculously out of place, even more so with the knowledge that Roz is very clearly a regular here if his camaraderie with the bar staff is anything to go by.

Angel just smiles and shakes her head, giving a little salute. "Aye, aye, captain," she acknowledges, reaching for a small slotted shot tray that she lines with six tall shot glasses.

Shane is frozen in place as Angel makes quick work of pouring the shots, Rozanov's hand too heavy on his shoulder, almost like he's anchoring him in place. He's embarrassed by how much it works to keep him from bolting.

Just as he's building up the courage to use his voice and say *thank you, but no thank you*, Angel produces a blowtorch and quite literally sets the shots on fire. Roz laughs as Shane jumps, rubbing his thumb over his shoulder. "Relax, Hollander," his accent curls around the words, his breath heady and suddenly very close against Shane's ear.

"I really should get going..." Shane trails awkwardly, trying to sink out from under Rozanov's touch, but the other just moves his hand to the back of Shane's neck and squeezes intentionally.

"Wow, you are really scared of fire," he teases, words playful and light like he's at risk of scaring him off. "You come here to let loose, no? This is not loose, Hollander," Roz puts both hands on him now, squeezing his shoulders. "You are professional hockey player. You have heard of massage, yes? I figure four-time Stanley Cup winner can probably afford this. Or does budget just go to fancy rabbit food and leather jackets?"

Shane finally gains the courage to shove Rozanov off of him, turning around with a fire in his eyes.

"Alright, break it up, boys," Angel cuts in, sliding their flaming shots across the bar top. "Season's over, remember? Cheers," she holds up one of the flaming shots for herself.

Rozanov places a hand on Shane's shoulder once again, almost like he can't help himself. Shane reckons maybe he's just so drunk that it doesn't register. He grabs one shot for himself and then forces the other into Shane's hand. "Come on, Hollander. You are the best, yes? Surely you can handle a little fire."

Shane glares daggers at him, heat building in his chest as Rozanov's eyes sparkle down at him. As much as they are arch rivals, ten years of playing against each other has clearly come with some knowledge. Rozanov seems to know exactly which buttons to push to get Shane to cave.

Reluctantly, he lifts the shot and warily looks between the other two as the actual *flame* registers to him for the first time. Angel and Rozanov clink against his glass in a cheers and

down it like it's nothing, the fire disappearing as fast as it had lit. Shane watches to make sure it's safe before downing the shot himself, wincing as it rocks through his nervous system like an atom bomb.

"Another," Rozanov encourages, and guides Shane to a second shot before he can even process what's happening. The second shot goes down a little smoother, a little buzzier, and Shane can physically feel the knots in his skin start to loosen and detangle themselves. "One more," Rozanov hums, and his words are so soft, so soothing that Shane really has no choice but to comply.

By the time the third shot hits him, his eyes feel a little glassy, his feet a little lighter on the floor. It's almost enough to make him forget why taking shots with Rozanov should be a very bad idea.

"Good," Rozanov praises, and the word nestles itself into Shane's head, stoking the warm feeling in his belly from the fire shots. Roz takes the last shot like it's nothing, licking his lips as he holds Shane's gaze, his hand still firm on Shane's shoulder. "You will come with me, yes?" Roz says to him, voice silky amongst the otherwise pulsing room around them.

Shane is starting to wonder if fire shots are code for something because all-of-a-sudden he feels drugged, like he'd agree to anything Rozanov says. Angel is no longer at their side, somewhere off helping other customers, and Shane doesn't have anything or anyone else to anchor his focus to, so he just nods numbly.

Rozanov's smile is answer enough, and Shane's world spins as Rozanov starts maneuvering him through the club, hands on the back of either of Shane's shoulders. Shane lets himself be led, mind apparently only in half-working condition if his complacency is anything to go off of. Roz doesn't seem to mind, very content to do all the thinking as he stalks through the cave like he owns the place.

When Shane finally feels himself come to a standstill, he blinks the haze from his eyes and looks around. He's sat in one of the tall booths, Rozanov sitting across from him, watching him intently. They each have a full drink in front of them, and Shane wonders when they had time to order that; Roz certainly wasn't carrying drinks when he was busy guiding Shane.

"So," Roz tips his head, eyes cataloging Shane's face with a hint of curiosity as he twirls a jalapeño pepper around his drink by the stem. The rim of his cup is red and looks spicy. Shane wonders if the fire theme is intentional, if it's a specialty of the club, or perhaps just Roz's own preference. "What brings you here? Really."

Shane just blinks at him. Are they really doing this? Sipping cocktails? Chatting like two teammates who've stumbled into each other on a night out? The real reason why Shane ended up here tonight sits heavy on his chest, a secret that's been locked away for so long, he doesn't even know how to find the key. Shane averts his eyes and wraps a big hand around his drink, peering into it.

Roz seems content to watch him, waiting patiently for an answer, like he knows how much the shots must be affecting him. Maybe that was the goal. To get Shane to let his guard down.

Shane's stomach twists at that knowledge, that Rozanov knows him well enough to know he doesn't open up without some encouragement. Shane's not sure how well his plan is working.

Rozanov hums after some time. "You are very quiet tonight. Is nice. Sweet," he comments, and that's enough to pull *something* from Shane.

"Shut up," Shane speaks up, scoffing, and Rozanov smirks as if to say *gotcha*. "I'm just...I needed a night out. Is that so crazy?"

"Mm," Rozanov nods like he's taking in the information as he gulps down half his drink in one go. "A night out," he says plainly, his expression emotionless and masterful. "So, you show up alone at secret club. Makes a lot of sense."

Shane glares at him again. "And why are you here? What's your secret?"

Roz shrugs and rests his forearm on the table, glass still dangling loosely from his hand. "There is no secret. I come here to fuck. Let loose. Is good place for people who like sex." He pauses intentionally before saying his next line. "That is why I am confused to see you here."

Shane bristles before he can help himself, shoulders rising to his neck. "What's that supposed to mean? You think I don't like sex?"

Roz smiles evenly, nonchalance dripping off of him like it's the most normal conversation in the world. "I never hear about you with girls. Long hockey career, yes? Lots of mentions of Shane Hollander in the press, but never with girls."

"It's private," Shane grits out. "Not all of us feel the need to parade around our personal lives."

"Ah, you parade around with Rose Landry, no?" Roz points out with a raise of his glass as he takes another sip, licking the red spice off his cupid's bow. Shane tracks the movement. Rozanov winks effortlessly in awareness. "Big movie star. You do not seem to care about privacy there."

"That's different," Shane huffs, taking a sip of his drink for the first time. It's vodka this time, clean and sharp like the blue eyes trained to him. "Rose is a friend."

"Rose was not always a friend," Rozanov notes, referring to Shane's very brief stint where the two of them dated. "Something happen? Big hockey star Shane Hollander cannot keep his girlfriend satisfied?"

"Would you *shut up*?" Shane slams his drink down a little too hard, liquid splashing over the sides and onto the table.

Rozanov purses his lips, almost like this isn't the reaction he was going for. Shane supposes they're in uncharted territory. This is the first real conversation they've had in almost ten years. Their first conversation maybe *ever* that isn't about hockey.

Shane sighs and ducks forward, running his fingers through the hair at the back of his neck—a nervous habit. Rozanov notices.

“Rose is just...just a friend. We’re better as friends,” he says with finality, glancing up at the other to see his reaction.

Rozanov’s expression settles into something like understanding, a silent answer that Shane hasn’t given to a question Rozanov never asked.

“Is okay, you know?” Rozanov offers lightly. “I am not mean hockey enemy. Tonight, I am here for fun, same as you.” He seems to survey him for a second. “You do know what fun is, don’t you, Hollander?”

Shane puffs an exasperated laugh, hand falling to his cup again. His fingers dance against the glass to give him something to focus on. “Something tells me you and I have very different definitions of fun.”

Roz’s lips curve slightly at the corners, shoulders lifting in a shrug. Something dawns on Shane.

“What are you doing here, anyway? In Montreal,” his brow furrows. “Shouldn’t you be in Boston? Or...I don’t know. Russia?”

It’s Roz’s turn to tense this time, and he pulls his drink a little closer to himself, wielding it like a shield of armor. “I have business here,” he says stiffly, and Shane can tell he doesn’t want to go into detail. “I have a permanent residence nearby.”

“You do?” Shane’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “Since when?”

“Long time now,” Roz squares his shoulders, swirling the jalapeno around his drink once more. “A close friend of mine from Russia lives here. Is nice to be close to her. Especially in off season.”

Shane sits with the information that Roz has apparently been living in Montreal, at least part-time, for...what? A year now? More? Shane wasn’t sure what constituted as *a long time*, but it’s hard to imagine he and Rozanov have been silently flying under each other’s radars this whole time. Sure, Shane spent most of his time off at the cottage, but Montreal would always be home, too. All his friends were here. His teammates. He supposed they just often found themselves in very different environments.

“What?” Roz prompts at Shane’s prolonged silence. “Is city of Montreal not big enough for two hockey stars? You are annoyed you have to share?”

“What? No,” Shane replies quickly, shaking his head. “I’m just...surprised. That’s all,” he offers quietly, still thinking.

“Yes, well,” Rozanov swirls his drink. “I am full of surprises, Hollander.” He downs the rest of his drink and then gives Shane a pointed once-over. “As are you. I’m sure. With all your —” he gestures to him vaguely. “Privacy.”

That pushes a laugh out of Shane, and he mimics Roz by taking another sip of his own drink. “I’m not that exciting.”

“This I know,” Roz is quick to reply. “You are very boring. Classic Canadian.”

“Hey,” Shane protests. “Canada is not boring.”

Roz smiles like he’s proud to have gotten another rise out of him. Like he’s made himself a game out of doing so. “Is better now that I’m here. More fun, probably. You will learn this soon.”

Shane smiles despite himself, surprised to learn that Rozanov is maybe not so bad off the ice. Maybe.

Rozanov is still smiling too, something akin to fondness in his eyes. “You will come back here, yes? Is nice place. Not very eventful tonight, but,” he tips his head, looking around.

Shane doesn’t know what he means by that. It seems pretty eventful, if the near orgies on the dancefloor are anything to go off of. “I dunno,” he admits, not sure that there’s anything for him here.

“So, that’s it?” Roz questions. “You sign big contract. You get recommendations from friends and go through lengthy background check, for what? A few fire shots and no fuck?”

Shane blinks at him, hands still curled uselessly around his drink. “A friend recommended I try it out,” he replies lightly. “I just don’t think it’s for me.”

“Yes, well, you come on boring night. Is your specialty, so I cannot say I am surprised.”

“Boring night?” Shane questions, chewing at the inside of his cheek. “Does...does something else normally happen?”

Rozanov’s lips curl into a big smirk now, like Shane hasn’t even begun to understand the inner-workings of the club they’re in. “Is fancy private club for rich and famous, Hollander. There is a lot that happens.”

Shane flushes under his gaze, taking another gulp of his drink, unsure of what to say.

“Your friend recommended this place for a reason, yes?” Roz chimes in again, comfortably filling Shane’s frequent bouts of silence. “You go through many hoops to get approved. May as well see what all the fuss is about.”

“I have some press to finish up, but then I leave for my cottage in two weeks. I’m not really looking for anything crazy. It’s probably not for me.”

“I can see tension from here, Hollander,” Rozanov gives him another once-over, a look in his eyes like Shane’s physical state is causing him actual pain to witness. “If anyone needs this place, it is you. Trust me.”

“Trust you,” Shane lets out a weak laugh, shaking his head. “Yeah. Right.”

Rozanov swallows and masks his expression into something guarded again, his eyes quickly shifting to the stone material of the table.

Shane wonders if he's thinking about the summer before rookie season. That night when Rozanov had made fun of him in the showers, or later when he teased Shane about coming to his hotel room after an entire day of calling him pretty.

"I should go," Shane says, the air suddenly feeling very stuffy around him.

Roz's eyes dart to him urgently, like he can feel his control over the situation slipping through his—usually—very capable fingers. His face quickly turns to one of acceptance, however, as if he recognizes the night has come to a natural end. At least for Shane.

"I will have front-staff call you a car," he says to Shane. He must see the disagreement on Shane's face, however, because he quickly adds, "Is standard club procedure. Discretion, yes?"

Shane closes his mouth as the words die on his tongue. "Let me at least pay for the drinks."

"Not necessary. They are already on my tab," Roz waves off. "Besides, is my idea anyway. I know alcohol does not fit into fancy Hollander diet. Bank will probably cancel credit card if they see bar tab on statement."

Shane lets out a surprised laugh at that, his eyes warm as he shakes his head. "Fuck off."

"Mm," Rozanov hums happily at him, his blue eyes twinkling yet again. He reaches for one of the waitstaff as they pass by, murmuring something to them in Russian, and the person nods before they rush off.

Shane just watches in curiosity, wondering just how often Roz must visit that the staff can understand requests from him in Russian. Did they all know Russian? Or maybe just a few of them. Maybe simple phrases learned specifically for Rozanov. The thought sends a small shiver down Shane's spine.

"Your car will be here any minute. Let me walk you out."

Rozanov stands from the booth, stretching his arms over his head as he does so, revealing a small sliver of skin between the edge of his shirt and his pants.

Shane swallows and only stares a little bit. He feels compelled to down the rest of his drink, seeing as Roz paid for it and all, and he only winces a little as the rest of it goes down his throat. When he looks up, Roz is watching him intently.

"Is good vodka, yes? Russian. Only the best stuff here."

He sounds almost prideful, like the club having good vodka is a direct reflection of him and his effect on Montreal's bar scene.

"Yeah," Shane nods, his throat feeling dry from all the alcohol and no water. He doesn't really know much about vodka, but he does know he feels properly buzzed. Probably fully drunk, if he had to guess. He was definitely going to struggle through his workout tomorrow. It was maybe worth it though. To get to see Roz like this, hair still damp and curling at the

sides, his happy trail loosely exposed from where his shirt was still rucked up. Fuck. Shane did not need this image in his head right now.

“Come on,” Rozanov urges, nodding in a direction that Shane does not remember coming in from. “We will use back entrance. Is more private this way. Lots of people coming in and out right now. Too much...uh...foot traffic.”

Shane breathes a laugh at that and slips out of the booth, hitching a breath when Rozanov’s hand comes to rest at the small of his back again. He’s too drunk to protest, however, so he just lets Roz lead him towards a door off the side of the bar. There’s a hallway with several other doors that mostly just look like closets, maybe offices of the owners or something. And before Shane knows it, they’re outside in the cool Montreal air.

Rozanov claps him on the shoulder, giving him another squeeze. “Is good to see friendly face here. Montreal hockey royalty.”

And Shane rolls his eyes, sure that Roz is teasing him now. “You’re such an asshole.”

“I’m serious,” Roz cuts in, and when Shane looks up at him, his expression is flat. The intensity makes Shane avert his gaze, kicking loosely at the gravel beneath his feet. “There is an event here on Thursday. Invite-only.”

Shane meets his eyeline this time. “Okay?” He says slowly, like he isn’t sure what to take from it.

Rozanov rolls his eyes. “I am inviting you, idiot. If boring press schedule will allow.”

Shane bites his lower lip and looks over his shoulder as a car pulls up to them. The windows are tinted, and the headlights dim to almost nothing as it rolls to a stop.

“Come,” Rozanov encourages again, like he can sense Shane’s hesitance. “I think it could be good for you.”

Shane doesn’t know what that means, but he’s so drunk that he just nods in response. It seems to satisfy Rozanov enough.

“I will tell owner to text you the details. There is a strict dress code. And rules to follow. But this will be easy for you. You are very good at following rules, yes?”

Shane’s sure it’s another dig at his expense, but when he looks up, Rozanov’s face is still serious. Like he truly means what he says.

“Alright?” Rozanov asks, surprising Shane by lifting his gaze with a gentle nudge to his chin.

Shane meets his eyeline and swallows, nodding jerkily. “Alright,” he says, because his brain is otherwise short-circuiting right now. Between the heavy alcohol and Rozanov’s intense stare.

“Good,” Rozanov says softly, voice thick like syrup. “Go home now. Drink some water, yes? Maybe carbs in morning to soak up alcohol. One piece of bread will not kill you, you know?”

Shane rolls his eyes, but lets Rozanov open the car door for him, ducking in first to greet the driver before he ushers Shane inside. “Goodnight, Hollander,” he says lightly, hovering a beat too long.

Shane blinks up at him as he fastens his seatbelt. “Goodnight,” he replies, careful not to slur his words too much, those last few swigs of vodka really starting to hit him now.

Rozanov still looks a little concerned as he mutters something in Russian to the driver, “Убедитесь, что он благополучно доберется домой.” The driver voices his agreement, Roz shutting the car door resolutely. Shane watches through the back windshield as Roz crosses his arms over his chest and doesn’t step back inside until they’re halfway down the block.

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Shane wakes the next morning to a terrible headache. Despite Rozanov’s advice, he failed to drink any water before falling asleep last night, much to present-Shane’s demise. The words ‘*one piece of bread will not kill you, you know?*’ echo around his brain a bit, and Shane considers them for a second before remembering that there’s a *reason* he holds four Stanley Cup titles to Roz’s two. Discipline. He promptly throws up in the toilet.

Despite the extremely rough morning, he’s only about thirty minutes behind schedule, arriving at the gym with a quickly thrown together protein shake that goes down a little more painfully than he’s used to. At the cottage, he has his own private gym and sauna—a practice hockey rink too—but he likes the expansive luxury of the gym he goes to in Montreal.

There’s a massive Olympic-sized pool that Shane typically walks right past, but today, he can’t resist taking a dip. Luckily, his gym sells swim trunks for this exact reason. He shells out a hundred bucks for a pair, unfazed by things like cost anymore, and quickly changes.

The pool water feels good on his aching joints. It’s mostly empty too, which means Shane has nearly the entire pool to himself. He alternates between laps of freestyle, backstroke, and breaststroke. He’s never been great at butterfly.

Once he feels sufficiently refreshed, he dries off and goes through his usual routine. Short bursts of cardio in between rounds of weight lifting, just like his trainer taught him. Everything has a proper order. Shane takes pride in executing that order to perfection, his reps timed down to the second. He has to work a little harder today to get through the poison sludge still pulsing through his veins, but it’s a welcome challenge. His body thanks him for the consistency.

He grabs a quick shower on his way out, glad he remembered his scentless body wash and shampoo this time. He doesn’t always shower at the gym, likes the comfort of his own house, but today he has brunch plans with Rose, and he’s already running behind. He makes it with two minutes to spare.

“You’re late,” she blinks her big eyelashes at him, eyes way more alert than they have any right to be when Shane still feels mildly like crap.

He checks his Rolex with wrinkled eyebrows. “It’s 10:58. We said 11:00.”

Rose smiles at him knowingly. “And since when is Shane Hollander anything other than fifteen minutes early?”

Shane rolls his eyes at her and shrugs off his jacket, placing it on the back of his chair as he collapses into it. “Give me a break.”

“Sounds like you got one,” she hums in interest. “How was *Hush*?” She says it in a whisper, as if forbidden to even speak the name.

Admittedly, Shane’s grateful for the attention to detail. Several of their private conversations have accidentally ended up in the press before, and they’ve been lucky that none of those contained incriminating details about Shane’s love life. Or lack thereof.

Shane’s mouth twists at the question, which only seems to spur Rose’s excitement.

“Oh my god,” she exclaims, grabbing his hand. “You *didn’t*.”

Shane puffs a breath. “Well. No. I didn’t.”

He tries not to feel offended at the way her excitement quickly drops off her face. “Shane,” she says scoldingly.

Shane just opens the menu and tries to ignore her. “Whatever, okay. That place is weird. I don’t know what I expected.”

“Well, spill,” she urges, gesturing for him to go into detail. “Was it like some creepy sex dungeon?”

Shane laughs and shakes his head. “Jeez, no. It was just...I dunno. A normal club. Not that exciting.”

He’s being purposely vague, and when he looks up, he finds Rose staring at him with that same expression. The one that says, *what aren’t you telling me?*

Shane sighs and puts the menu down for a minute. “Look, I had some drinks. There were... flaming shots and lots of people dancing to loud music. I don’t know. It’s definitely not my scene.”

“Wait a second,” she stops him, hands in the air animatedly. “You, Shane Hollander, had flaming shots? Oh, *come on*. There’s no way that was your idea. You’re definitely leaving something out.”

Shane knows he’s done the second he feels a flush spread across his cheeks, coating his freckles.

“Shane,” Rose demands again, shoving at his arm.

“Okay, okay,” he gently pushes her off of him. “And,” he pauses, holding his menu up again as the next words leave his lips. “*And Ilya Rozanov might have been there,*” he says all at once, so quick that he isn’t even sure she’s heard him at first.

He's hiding behind his menu still, but at the prolonged silence coming from the other side of the table, he carefully peeks over the top of it.

"I'm sorry," Rose says slowly. "Russian *Love Machine*, Ilya Rozanov?"

"Oh my god," Shane firmly stands the menu back up again. A hand comes up to tug it down.

"Number one hockey rival, Ilya Rozanov? Fetus Shane *Gay Awakening*, Ilya Rozanov?"

"Would you shut up?" He hisses, leaning in as he quickly surveys the tables around them. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with their food, but considering they haven't ordered yet, a waiter could walk up at any moment.

"Wow," Rose says, stunned. It's the first time he's ever seen her even remotely close to speechless.

"It's not a big deal," Shane mutters, using his menu as a forcefield.

"Why was he in Montreal anyway?" Rose muses, knowing enough about hockey to understand why it's a little odd.

"Um. I guess he sort of...has a house here," Shane admits lightly, giving her a warning look when her eyes go wide again. "He said he 'has business here', whatever that means," he waves off. "And a close friend. A childhood friend from Russia."

"Wait," Rose breaks into a slow smile. "This is a lot of information to find out in one sitting." She pauses, eyes sparkling before striking with her accusation. "*You talked to him*," she says knowingly.

Shane swallows as his cheeks heat up a little more. Obviously, he talked to him—that much was clear—but now he recognizes just how much ammo he's given her. They didn't just bump into each other and exchange niceties. He and Rozanov had a full-blown conversation, one that spanned at least an hour, maybe more. And Rose wasn't going to just let that go.

"*And?*" She asks, as if waiting for the big reveal. "What did he say? Did he say why he was there?"

"No, god. He's there because he gets around," Shane rushes to reply, not wanting her to make a bigger deal out of this than it is.

"Oh my god," she says suddenly. "Do you think he likes guys? Is that why he's there?"

Shane thinks back to when he first spotted Rozanov, a man glued to his back, lips pressed to Roz's neck. He ducks his head and tries to wipe the image from his mind. If Rozanov does like men, that means he really was fucking with Shane all those years ago. Playing with him for his own entertainment.

"*And if I come to room 1410 at, let's say, 9 o'clock?*"

"I might open," Shane had replied, trying not to let his voice shake even with fear lining every fiber of his being.

"I might knock."

Shane remembers waiting in his hotel room all night, twitching at any slight sound, as if Rozanov's knock would somehow be light enough to escape into the evening air if Shane didn't listen closely enough. He waited like that until almost 1am. Until sleep tugged on his eyelids almost as heavily as the disappointment did. The knock never came.

"What can I get for you this morning?"

Shane takes the waitress's question as a welcome distraction, ordering his usual before he glances over at Rose. She's watching him with a sort of sympathy, almost like she can feel the pain from his memory across the table, permeating the air.

His first gay rejection. Well, his only rejection, really. Shane Hollander didn't really get rejected much these days. He mostly did the rejecting. He frowns and tries not to think too hard about what that might mean.

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Shane gets a text two days later from an unknown number.

Hush would like to formally invite you to a very special evening.

Event Details: *Thursday evening. Please arrive at 7pm sharp. Do not be late. No exceptions.*

Dress Code: *Strict all-black attire. Level of dress is up to hosting partner. Club rules apply.*

Dinner and alcohol will be provided. As always, it is up to the discretion of the bar whether couples may participate in special menu items. Anyone may be asked to leave at any moment for any reason.

Discretion is advised. Please do not share the details of this event.

We look forward to hosting you.

Shane squints down at the text in confusion, reaching onto his nightstand for his glasses to ensure he's reading it correctly. Why was the club texting him? How did they even have his number?

Shane worries his lip between his teeth for a moment before pushing out of bed. Thursday. That was tonight. And Shane had a full day of press ahead of him. He wasn't even sure he'd be done by seven.

Not that he was planning on going. Obviously. The invitation was confusing and gave no indication as to what the event entailed. But, even more so, Shane had no good reason to go back to that club.

Rozanov, his mind supplies unhelpfully, and he quickly swats that thought away like a mental gnat. He'd looked good that night, though, Shane lets himself admit. He rarely got to see Rozanov like that up close, without his gear, without his armor. All muscle and alcohol and sweat.

"God," Shane groans, pressing his face into his hands. This was the last thing he needed. A fucking Rozanov relapse nearly ten years into his sobriety. He'd been good for so long, and now, his mind felt like it was spiraling.

He drowns it out with a nice cold shower to simulate a cold plunge. Fuck, he missed his cottage. *Two weeks*, he reminds himself. But the thoughts don't stop. Rozanov's in his head now, has infected his weak little brain once more, like he never left.

Shane slaps his hands over both cheeks a few times and then leans his forearms against the wall of his shower whilst ducking his head. He lets the water wash over him with a fury, tries to visualize the tsunami of bad thoughts going down the drain instead of hanging over him like a dark cloud. He's been so much better at ignoring it lately. That yearning. That desire for someone. Anyone. To touch. To feel something. A distraction from the paralyzing thoughts that tend to plague him at all times. No matter how perfect he is or how many Stanley Cups he wins.

He's being dramatic. He's okay. Really. He is. He has to be.

He arrives to his interview five minutes late. The rest of the guys are already there, some rolling their eyes due to Shane's unfortunate text a few days ago, urging everyone to be on time. *Early is on time*, he had practically scolded them. Hayden and JJ don't seem to mind too much though, instead ribbing him as hair and makeup rush to get him ready.

"And when has our Capitaine ever been late?" JJ laughs loudly. "You were fucked good last night. I can see it in your face."

Shane hopes that's not true. He hopes his brief run-in with Rozanov a few days ago isn't somehow showing on his face. How fucking pathetic is that, if true.

"Yeah, I've only ever seen you look that way when Boston Lily is around," Hayden chimes in unhelpfully.

Shane's grip tightens on the arms of the makeup chair, his eyes closed as the artist works on him, just a bit of powder to reduce shine.

There is no Boston Lily. It's a code name his team had come up with for the imaginary girl he was seeing in Boston. Shane wasn't actually seeing anyone there, but something *was* different about Boston. Something that always made him buzz a little harder with adrenaline, made him play a little better, made the crowds cheer a little louder.

Maybe it was knowing that the rivalry between Boston and Montreal ran deep. Shane liked to believe that. But, deep down, he knew there was another reason. A truer reason. And that likely had more to do with Boston's star center than anything else.

"Oo," JJ voices, clearly encouraged by that thought. "Boston Lily. Long time no see. Are we finally going to get to meet *the* Boston Lily?"

"Wait," Hayden pauses. "I thought that was done. Is Boston Lily actually back, Hollzy?"

"Can we just focus on getting through this shoot?" Shane sighs, crossing his arms over his chest.

JJ and Hayden share a look with one another before slowly retreating, seemingly able to recognize his tardiness for what it actually is rather than what they'd made it out to be.

Shane thinks that's it, that they'll drop it, but over his shoulder, he hears JJ mutter to Hayden.

"Damn. Boston Lily has him on a tight leash."

Shane forces a smile once the stylist finishes on his hair and then stands to join the rest of his team. They've still got a long day ahead of them.

After being shuttled around to different interviews for the majority of the day, Shane is exhausted. Being around the guys for that long—for anything other than hockey—was always a little overstimulating, but interviews were kind of the worst. As a group, they had too much energy to sit still, and that resulted in a lot of rowdiness. Rowdiness that usually ended up being Shane's responsibility, as Captain, to deal with. To top it all off, they'd had limited time and options for lunch, which meant Shane wound up eating a half-wilted salad from a nearby grocery store instead of his usual macrobiotic meals.

He lets out a breath when he finally gets back to his car. His stomach is desperate for protein, and his head is aching in a million different places. He reaches for his phone and sees three missed messages. One is from his publicist, the other from his mom, asking how the interviews went. A third one is from Hush.

Reminder: Event starts in 1 hour.

Shane looks down at his watch and chews at his lower lip. Thirty minutes. It would be close, but he could probably make it if he left now.

He shuts his eyes tightly, feels the tension through his skin like a live wire. How long can he keep living like this? It wasn't healthy, he knew that. In fact, he can't even remember the last time he had sex.

That's a *lie*. Technically, it had been with Rose. Jesus Christ, he was fucking pathetic.

Shane slams his hands down on the top of the steering wheel once, twice, three times. Until his palms are burning with the indent of the stitching. He turns them over to stare at the redness for a second. He takes a deep breath. He puts the car in drive and starts towards the club.

7:05

He's late for the second time that day. He tries not to let the thought fester and eat him alive like he knows it could. It's only five minutes. Most people usually arrived late to parties anyway, right? Shane was almost always the first to show up places. At some point, Jackie had to tell him they didn't actually expect him to come at the exact time. The other players tended to trickle in thirty minutes to an hour after he did. Maybe things were the same here.

Shane looks down at himself before he gets out of the car. He looks nice, he thinks. His navy blue blazer isn't as neat as he'd ironed it this morning, after the day's activity, but he still feels presentable. Underneath, he's got on a white casual button-up and tan jeans. It's an outfit his stylist picked out for him a few weeks ago, one that he felt confident in. He still had a bit of makeup on from the shoot, but his hair looked good at least. The front pieces were falling into his face a bit.

7:08

Fuck. He checks himself in the mirror one more time before quickly exiting his car and heading towards the entrance.

There's a security guard standing outside the door.

"Hi, I'm here for the event tonight," Shane says with as much confidence as he can muster.

The guard doesn't even blink. "Doors close at 7pm."

Shane swallows. "Oh, um. I got caught in traffic."

"Invite says doors close at 7pm. No exceptions."

"I didn't realize," Shane stutters to explain. "It's my first invite. The instructions were kind of vague."

"Your first invite?" The guy lifts his sunglasses to look Shane over. "Who invited you?"

Shane scrunches up his eyebrows in confusion. "Um...I got a text."

The guard rolls his eyes, growing frustrated. "Your partner. Who is hosting you?"

"Hosting me," Shane repeats, as if the words are foreign to him. "Partner?"

"черт возьми," the man mutters to himself, spitting onto the ground before saying something unintelligible into his ear piece.

This time, the words are actually foreign to him. Russian, if he's not mistaken. Shane pushes his hands into his pockets and gnaws on his lip some more.

The security guard looks him over as he listens to someone in his earpiece, something dawning on him suddenly. "Why didn't you just say you are with Rozy?" He says gruffly, and Shane stiffens at the tone. Scolded like a child.

“Rozy,” Shane repeats slowly, phrasing it more like a question.

“Да, хорошо, хорошо, я буду к нему добра,” the guard says, giving Shane one final once-over before sighing heavily. “I will lead you to back entrance,” he tells Shane, gesturing for him to follow.

Shane blinks a few times, but ultimately walks after him. He adjusts the loose pieces at the front of his hair with his fingers and gives his jacket another smooth-over on the walk over. His hands are shaking. It could be from anxiety or adrenaline or exhaustion. It could be from any number of things, and Shane might just be feeling all of them. He places a hand over his heart to try and slow its beating, heat rising up to his ears.

Fear. He doesn't know what he's so scared of. Being recognized, maybe. Being caught, outed. Career over. Everything he's worked so hard for, all down the drain because of one night. One event at some club that he can definitely live without.

But he's been doing that for so long now. *Living without*. It doesn't feel good enough anymore. It doesn't feel sustainable. He doesn't like to admit it to himself very often, but he feels it now. There are days when he's sure his brain could explode, could obliterate into fifty million pieces and, somehow, those fifty million pieces would still continue to worry themselves into another fifty million pieces. And the cycle would continue on like that until the world was simply filled with billions of tiny, little anxious pieces of Shane Hollander. The biggest player in the NHL was nothing but a closeted, nervous wreck.

They're standing in front of the back entrance before he knows it. He realizes he still has his hand over his heart, so he quickly drops it to his side as the guard waves a card to open the door. “Go on,” he urges, pulling the door wider for him.

Shane takes another deep breath and walks right through. The first sight he's met with is Rozanov's face and, boy, does he look irritated. His jaw is tense, and his eyes are slits of blue that feel like they could pierce right through him.

“You are late, Hollander. Are you telling me you cannot read? Invitation says 7pm. No exceptions.”

Shane freezes up. “I— sorry. I was in shoots all day. Interviews. I came straight when it ended.”

“And what is this?” Rozanov pulls at the fabric of Shane's jacket. “Dress code is black. Black only. This will not be allowed.” He curses something in Russian and adjusts his necklace over his chest. “You are making me look bad.”

“What?” Shane frowns, looking him over fully this time. Roz is in a black tank top that fits tight against his skin, his pecks on show under the fabric. A black backwards cap sits over his curls, loose black jeans sitting low on his hips. He has a cigarette tucked behind his ear, like the urge to smoke could strike at any moment, and he wanted to be prepared. Maybe it was because he knew how hot it made him look.

“Come with me. Quickly, please. We must get you change of clothes,” Roz strides over to one of the doors down the hallway, ushering Shane in with a wave of his hand. “You have already made me late, Hollander. Do not waste my time.”

Shane swallows at that and rushes into the room, not sure why Rozanov is being more of an asshole than usual today. He looks around the room as he steps inside. It’s a nice, spacious office, black interior with brown, wooden accents, and Roz moves around the space with ease. He steps over to a set of drawers and opens one, rummaging around until he finds what he must be looking for.

He tosses an article of clothing to Shane. It’s a black t-shirt. Close to his size, maybe even a little bigger. Next comes a pair of pants. They’re a little more flashy than the t-shirt, with large patches of textured leather filling gaps of otherwise silky track pants. The pockets are embellished with gold zippers, and Shane immediately recognizes it as something Rozanov might wear. He blinks up at him.

“Sometime today, Hollander. Fuck,” Rozanov curses and pulls the cigarette from his ear, placing it between his lips.

Shane scrambles to get out of his blazer, folding it just once before tackling his shirt. He’s in the process of folding that too when he risks a glance at Rozanov, who just stares back at him.

“What?” Shane asks a little breathlessly.

“You are wearing makeup,” Roz tilts his head, eyes doing that thing where they flit quickly over Shane’s face, cataloguing him.

“It’s from the shoot,” he replies, pulling the black shirt over his head. It fits nicely, loose enough that Shane doesn’t feel self-conscious about it pressing against his skin. It smells good, too. Familiar. Warm.

When he looks up again, Roz is still watching him, unlit cigarette still poised between his lips, held in place by his teeth. He lifts it up and down with his tongue.

Shane strips out of his jeans next, reaching for the pants. He winces slightly at the feel of the leather on his fingers, but the silk track material feels better. Luckily, as he puts them on, he realizes that’s the fabric that mostly touches his skin. The pants are a little big on him too, a little long, but they’re really comfortable. He winces again when his fingers snag on one of the gold zippers over the pockets.

He glances over and holds his arms out for Rozanov’s approval, since the stupid dress code seemed so important to him. Roz is watching him with even more intensity now, eyes tracking every reaction, every micro expression on Shane’s face.

“Um, is this alright? I’ve never actually heard of a strict all-black dress code. Only places where you have to look nice. Is this nice enough?”

“This is very nice,” Roz comments softly, his eyes going a little easy around the edges.

Shane flushes under the attention. “Sorry. The invitation was weird. I didn’t know it was so serious.”

Rozanov seems to stiffen at that, standing a little taller from where he had been leaning against the edge of the office desk. “Is very serious,” he says. “Club has rules. Rules must be followed. Does not matter whether you think rule is important or not. Rules are there for a reason.”

“I wasn’t sure I was even going to come,” he blurts, worrying his lower lip between his teeth for the umpteenth time. He could already tell it would be sore in the morning.

“Why not? You were invited, yes? Why not come?” Rozanov presses, something indecipherable in his eyes.

Shane puts his hands on his hips, blinking up at the ceiling before he lets out a sigh. “This place just isn’t for me. I shouldn’t be here.”

Rozanov watches him, eyes tracking again. Taking in information. Trying to figure something out. It makes Shane feel like he’s see-through.

“Why?” Rozanov finally says. “Because Shane Hollander should be locked away in big, scary tower like prisoner? Does Shane Hollander not deserve to have some fun?” Roz steps closer to him. “A little *release*.”

“It’s dangerous—“

“You are safe here, Hollander,” Roz tells him firmly. “Haven’t you heard? Russian mob runs this place. Nothing leaves these walls.”

Shane cracks a small smile. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious.”

Rozanov huffs a laugh. “I am joking about mob, yes. But, not about you being safe. I promise, when you are here, you do not have to worry.”

Shane wants to believe him, but he knows he has a lot more to lose than some of these people. Hockey was a pretty unforgiving sport, but especially in the sense that the league wasn’t ready for another gay hockey player. Scott Hunter had caused enough problems when he’d kissed his boyfriend on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup. Some people were supportive, sure. But, mostly, it proved that the league wasn’t ready for players who were a little bit...different. Shane was already an anomaly, being one of the only Asian guys.

His mind flashes to Rozanov just a few nights earlier, the guy pressed against him, Roz pulling him in hungrily. Shane blinks to push the image from his mind. Even if Roz did like guys though, he would always have girls. He’s not even sure people would believe Roz was into men. Maybe they’d be more inclined to think he mostly just fucks anything that moves. Shane reckons that narrative would still go over better than him trying to put a rainbow flag in his Instagram bio.

“Okay, as much fun as this is, we are very late. Club cannot show you special treatment just because you are Golden Boy Shane Hollander, yes? Go find Angel at the bar. She will give you what you need.”

Shane nods before he’s even had time to process what Rozanov is saying to him, now hyper aware of himself and his tardiness. *Go to the bar.* He goes to the bar.

The club is decorated decadently this time. Long, swooping ribbons of lush black fabric have been hung elegantly over the cave-like walls. A sea of people dressed in black occupy the usual spaces. No one’s on the dancefloor, however, mostly crowded around the open area in between the dancefloor and the booths. It’s not nearly as crowded as it was the night he came, and yet, with everyone congregated together, it looks even more so.

When he finds Angel at the bar, she waves him over excitedly, smiling like she hadn’t expected him to come back so soon. “You’re here! I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Hi,” Shane laughs, scratching the back of his neck nervously. “Sorry, I...I was a little late. I hope it’s not an issue.”

She waves him off. “Look, just don’t make a habit of it. Rozy won’t tolerate tardiness.”

“Rozy,” Shane repeats, testing the name on his tongue. “Is that what people call him here?”

Angel looks at Shane like he’s funny and then gets to work behind the bar. When she’s finished, she slides over two glasses, a drink and a shot. “Drink up,” she offers cheerfully.

“Oh, no, thank you. I didn’t eat much today. I probably shouldn’t drink,” Shane politely declines.

Her expression falters. “Uh,” she stalls, eyes dropping to the prepared drinks before looking to Shane again. “You’re free to take that up with Rozy if you want to.”

Shane tips his head. “What do you mean by that?”

Before she can respond, there’s shushing sounds coming from the main area, a hush falling over the crowd as someone steps up to the front of the room.

It’s unmistakably Rozanov—*Rozy*—and Shane watches as he holds up a glass half-full of clear liquid. “Thank you all for coming,” his Russian accent echoes in the otherwise silent room. “We are honored to have you again for our annual *In The Dark* event. It should be a very fun night. However,” he pauses, smile dropping from his face. “Hosts, we urge you to please be extra cautious of your surroundings, as your partner cannot. We have a zero-tolerance policy. If you are acting irresponsible, you will be asked to leave. No exceptions.”

A murmur of agreement sounds out from the crowd.

“All club rules apply. Special menu items are available at the discretion of the bar. No arguments,” Roz says firmly. “Their decision is *law*. If you do not like this, you will be asked to leave. Safety is a top priority tonight, same as every night. You are all here for a reason. The night is what you make of it.”

He pauses at that and claps his hands together. “Staff will be coming around with blindfold for hosting partners, and food will be served shortly. Enjoy.”

“Uh,” Shane turns to Angel with a confused expression. “What does he mean by blindfold?”

Angel blinks at him like she doesn’t know how to answer that question. “Didn’t he invite you?”

“I mean, I got an invite from the club,” Shane replies slowly. “It didn’t have a lot of details.”

“But, Rozy is your hosting partner,” Angel says carefully. “Right?”

Shane just stares at her for a second, his mouth hanging open a bit as he tries to put his thoughts into words. Rozanov beats him to it.

“Of course, I am hosting partner. Do not be ridiculous,” Roz sidles up next to him, leaning his side against the bar in order to face Shane. “You have not had your drinks.”

“Yeah,” Shane furrows his eyebrows. “Well, I didn’t have much to eat for lunch. I probably shouldn’t drink yet.”

Rozanov assesses him. “Why did you not eat lunch?”

“I had interviews all day,” Shane explains for the second time. “We only had thirty minutes to grab lunch. It was either fast food or a salad from the grocery store.”

“Salad is rabbit food, Hollander. You are big, strong hockey player. You need fuel. Carbs, ебать,” Rozanov curses in Russian. “I will get you food soon, okay? Take the shot for now. Drink is just for sipping. Is good to have later.”

“I said *I’m good*,” Shane replies a little more sternly.

Rozanov braces his hands against the bar and mutters a string of Russian to himself. When he pushes off, he brings one hand up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. “It is clear you do not understand. Maybe I should have taken more time to explain.”

Shane looks him over. “Explain what?”

“I am hosting you tonight. You are...with me,” Roz tells him slowly, like he’s struggling to form his thoughts in English right now. “This means that I will look out for you. All night. Anyone who is being *hosted* tonight will wear blindfold. That is you.”

“Excuse me?” Shane laughs in disbelief. “What? No. I’m not going to wear a blindfold.”

Roz watches him with an unimpressed look. “Why? You are scared of dark or something?”

“No,” Shane protests, scoffing. “But, I’m certainly not going to wear a blindfold. Why would I do that?”

“Because you came here for a reason, Hollander!” Rozanov snaps suddenly. “Few nights ago, and now again, today. You tell me you do not want to come back, but still, here you are. You are hoping to find something here, Hollander. I am giving you chance to participate. But, you will not find it by sitting on sidelines being scared of own shadow. Fuck.”

Shane swallows, averting his gaze to the floor as Roz’s words melt into him like bullets. He was right about one thing. Shane *did* feel a lot safer from the sidelines. Most of the time. Hockey was the only exception. But, in life, he generally didn’t take a lot of risks. He didn’t really try that hard to put himself out there, probably because hockey and his physical health were always a top priority. And, maybe in that time, he’d somehow come to neglect the other parts of himself. The parts that craved something *more*.

Roz sighs when Shane stays silent. “Sorry,” he mutters, apologizing for his outburst. “Is trust exercise,” he adds softly. “Can be very relaxing for some to just...let go. Not have to think for a while. I thought this might be a good thing for you. You are always thinking so loudly.”

Shane frowns at the notion that Rozanov might be more perceptive than he’s given him credit for. Still, he can’t help but feel this is all part of some elaborate prank to make him look stupid, a joke at his expense. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“You,” Shane says carefully. “You’re in charge of this event?” He squints back over at the crowd, who are eagerly accepting their blindfolds.

“Yes,” Rozanov agrees, his gaze following Shane’s. “I am...how you say,” he falters for a moment, trying to find the words. “*Silent partner*.”

“Of the club?” Shane’s head snaps back around. He hadn’t realized Rozanov was an investor.

“Is Russian-owned club. You did not notice?” He raises his eyebrows. “My good friend is owner. She is very busy running several businesses. It is a nice club, good place, so,” he takes another sip from his glass. “Whatever. Point is, this is my event, and you are making me look bad.”

Shane huffs, not liking the feeling that twists in his gut at Rozanov’s words.

“First, you show up late. Not in proper dress code. You are refusing drinks I pick out for you and, now, blindfold,” Rozanov sighs heavily. “Maybe this is my fault for thinking Shane Hollander could let loose for one night.” He watches him, still contemplating for a second before cursing again. “This is clearly mistake. You should not be here.”

Maybe it’s the part of him that always strives for perfection. Maybe it’s the hint of disappointment hidden in Roz’s voice, like more than anything, he’d actually *wanted* Shane here. Maybe it’s the way Angel is watching him sadly, like he’s the villain in his own story, a victim of his own vices.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and Shane quickly fishes it out to check the notification.

A text from Rose.

Daily reminder to be bold! I'm at Senta with Miles. We miss you! xxxx

"You must leave," Rozanov says urgently. "There are no phones allowed out here." He quickly glances over to the crowd, who seem more than occupied with getting their blindfolds situated. For now. "Hollander," he says again when Shane fails to move a muscle. "You do not have to participate if you do not want, but you cannot stay here."

Shane makes the split decision to turn his phone off and silently offer it up to Rozanov.

Rozanov just stares back at him.

"Take it," Shane tells him, still holding the phone. "I—I'll wear the blindfold. I'll stay."

Rozanov is looking at him like he doesn't trust the words leaving Shane's mouth.

Shane huffs and rolls his eyes. He reaches for the shot still sitting on the bar and downs it in one go, wincing slightly as the liquor burns down his throat.

"Blindfold," Angel smiles and produces a black silk scarf. She glances at Roz next, something in her eyes almost like encouragement.

Roz is still surveying him carefully. "You are sure about this?" He asks. "I will not force you to do something you don't want to do."

Shane takes a deep breath, nodding steadily. "I want to. I want to...let go. Like you said. Stop thinking. I *need* to," he adds. Maybe it's himself he's trying to convince. Or maybe a small part of him just wants to keep being near Rozanov. Wearing what may very possibly be his clothes, from his office.

He hadn't just extended an invite to Shane tonight. He'd invited him *personally*. As his guest. As his partner. The thought sends a little shiver down his spine.

Rozanov takes his phone, fingers brushing Shane's as he does, and Shane flushes a little at the point of contact. Under Roz's heavy gaze.

"You understand what is happening, yes? You are giving up control. You are allowing me to lead you."

Shane actually shivers at that, a full-body shiver. He tells himself it's just cold in here, that he isn't actually having a physical reaction to the idea of Rozanov taking control. "I understand," he nods jerkily.

Maybe he doesn't. Not fully. But he knows the implications of wearing a blindfold. Of Roz being his partner for the evening. At least, he thinks he does.

Roz gives him one final look-over and then glances to Angel. "I will take this," he reaches over the bar to take the scarf from her, trading for Shane's phone. "This goes in my office. In locked drawer. No one touches this."

Shane is a little thrilled at the idea of Roz having an office. Of him having authority here. This was Roz's event, and Shane was the one he'd chosen to invite.

Angel takes the phone and then darts in the direction of the back hallway, leaving the two of them alone.

Roz is still watching him cautiously, like any second Shane may change his mind and take off running in the other direction. Shane steels his face a little more. Roz seems to notice and puffs a laugh.

"You are funny, Hollander. One minute you look like scared bunny rabbit, the next you try to be big, tough guy. Hm," he tips his head, something fond in his eyes. He looks down at the blindfold in his hands. "I will put this on you now, yes?" He checks one more time.

Shane nods jerkily and lets Rozanov approach him.

"There are some other rules that I forgot to mention," he murmurs lowly once he's in Hollander's space.

Rules were good. Shane liked rules.

"When blindfold is on, you are mine for the evening. You are not to address anyone without my permission. No one is allowed to address you. I will be with you the whole time, so this should not be difficult," he hums, placing a gentle hand on Shane's chin to tip it up. "I am not Rozanov to you tonight."

"Rozy," Shane mutters lightly, brown eyes searching Roz's blue.

Amusement dances in the other's eyes. "You are learning," he notes happily. "But, to you, no. I am not Rozy either. Tonight, I only want to hear one thing. Yes sir. Or no sir."

Shane shudders a bit, eyebrows pressing together until a little line forms on his forehead. Rozanov reaches up and gently smooths it away with his thumb.

"You do not need to worry. You do not need to think. I will do this for you. Do you understand?"

Shane's throat feels dry. "Yes," he says raspily.

"Yes, what?" Roz prompts, holding his chin a bit more firmly until Shane meets his eyeline again.

Shane huffs and then adds, "Yes...*sir*."

Rozanov's eyes darken, and he gives Shane a gentle slap on the cheek. "Good boy," he praises, and Shane flushes all the way up to his ears. "Blindfold now," he informs him, placing a gentle hand on Shane's neck as he slowly turns him around. Shane's skin burns on contact.

Roz is careful with him, but his hands are experienced in the way he fastens the blindfold. He makes sure Shane's eyes are completely covered, tying it off in a way that's secure, but not tight. And then...darkness.

A touch slips down Shane's spine, settling neatly in the crevice of his lower back. "How is it?" Roz asks, his breath so close to Shane's ear.

Shane gasps softly. "It's good," he chokes out, a thrill running through him.

"Good," Roz purrs, his hand wrapping around Shane's hip this time and giving it a small squeeze.

Shane's breath hitches.

"I am going to put your drink in your hand now, yes? You will carry it and try not to spill."

It's almost like being on a phone call. He can't see Roz's face, can't read his expression, can't tell if he's smiling or frustrated or annoyed. Shane struggles with phone calls sometimes, has a hard time picking up on those little cues. "Okay," he voices unsurely.

He jumps when the touch on his back shifts to his arm, maneuvering his right hand until his fingers are open and waiting. Shane's shoulders tense when a cool glass is pressed into his palm, the iciness startling each nerve ending. He's almost certain he's dropped the glass when he hesitates to take the drink, but no; Roz must be holding it until Shane has a good grip.

"Relax," a thick accent says close to his ear. "Breathe. I've got you."

Shane swallows and lets his fingers close around the glass, holding it securely.

"Good," comes the praise again, and Shane's heart flutters. "I am going to lead you to a table now. We will wait for food. I know you must be very hungry."

As if on cue, and much to his embarrassment, Shane's stomach chooses that moment to let out a loud gurgle. It pulls a laugh from Rozanov.

"Don't worry. Food should be ready soon. I will not let you starve, Hollander," Roz assures him, and his voice is warm. Shane lets himself sink into it a little further. The only other sensation grounding him to the moment is the cool press of the glass in his hand.

Rozanov places a steady hand on the small of his back again, another hand wrapping securely around Shane's bicep to lead him forward. "We are walking now," he informs, and Shane forces himself to take a tentative step forward.

It's difficult, giving up control like this. Letting someone take over one of his most basic senses. Trusting them to lead him blindly into the chaos that Shane knows exists past the threshold of the bar. A sea of strangers, half of them blindfolded just as he is.

"It's okay," Roz murmurs his encouragement. "One foot in front of the other. I will not let you fall."

“I wasn’t going to fall,” Shane bites back, unable to help himself as he fights off a wave of frustration. Or maybe fear.

Roz doesn’t say anything to that, and Shane tries not to wonder what expression he’s wearing on his face. If he thinks Shane is already failing at this.

Shane huffs and takes another blind step forward. And another. And another. Once he has a bit more confidence that he’s not going to run into anyone else, he relaxes a bit. Lets his legs carry out the motions at a normal pace. Trusting Rozanov to guide him.

And Rozanov does. He keeps a firm grip on Shane’s back, even pulls him to a halt by the fabric of his shirt as a voice rings out close to them.

“Hi Rozy,” a girl drawls at him, dragging the y. If Rozanov acknowledges her, he doesn’t do it verbally, instead keeping his focus on Shane as they continue to propel forward.

The noise grows louder as they make their way further into the room. There’s lots of chatter, niceties exchanged, some laughter ringing out. Shane turns his head this way and that, like he’ll suddenly be able to see if he looks hard enough.

“Focus on me,” comes a grounding voice in his ear. Before he knows it, Rozanov is stopping him with a firm hand on his shoulder. “Sit down,” he commands, pressing down until Shane reluctantly follows.

He takes his time, feeling around for the confirmation that there is actually a seat to fall into before he fully lowers himself.

“There is a table in front of you,” Rozanov informs him, taking Shane’s free hand to place it on said table. “You can put your drink down. I am sliding in next to you.”

Shane places his drink down once prompted and sits helplessly. He squeaks a bit in surprise when he feels the weight of Rozanov’s thick thigh pressing against his, pushing him a bit further into the booth. The cool of the polished wood bleeds into the backs of his legs through his pants.

“Rozyyyy!” Comes another voice that suddenly feels much too close. “There you are!”

It’s a woman. By her accent, Shane assumes she must be Russian too.

“Hi, Sveta,” Rozanov greets. He sounds audibly fond.

“I’ve been looking for you for the past thirty minutes. Of course, when you finally appear to give your big speech is when I go to fix my makeup.”

“Mm,” Roz hums. “There is no need to fix makeup when you are this beautiful.”

The woman laughs. “You lie to me, but I don’t care.”

Shane shifts uncomfortably as the darkness rolls on.

“Where is Milo tonight?” Rozanov asks, drumming his fingers casually on top of the sleek stone table.

“Ah,” the woman, Sveta, makes a sound. “Too much attitude. I’ve put him in timeout for now. We will see if he’s good enough to come out later.”

Roz puffs a laugh at this. “You keep him on a tight leash.”

“Mm, someone has to,” she replies in what sounds like delight. “And who is this with you tonight? I don’t think I’ve seen him before...”

Shane opens his mouth to respond, sure that she must be talking to him, but he receives a sharp squeeze on the back of his neck before any words can come out.

“He is my boy for the evening. That’s all you need to know,” Roz says curtly, and Shane breathes an exhale. The hand on the back of his neck slips up into his hair all of a sudden, scratching lightly where it meets the nape of his neck. Shane tries not to melt.

“Possessive,” the woman comments in amusement. “Well, he is very well-behaved.” Shane flushes at that. “This is his first event, no? I did not see him last time.”

“Yes, he came in for first time earlier this week. I figured this would be a good event for him. Test the waters, you know? A bit more tame than others that we host.”

Shane’s curiosity piques a little bit. A blindfold event was considered tame?

“He is wearing your clothes,” the woman notes lightly. And then...a bout of silence. Other than the ongoing chatter around them. Like Roz and Sveta were having a private conversation with their eyes now. Something that was just for them, something that Shane wasn’t intended to hear.

Roz’s hand slips down his back again, and Shane stiffens at the sudden movement. “Take a sip of your drink, котенок,” comes a voice in his ear.

Sveta lets out a laugh. “Ah, so he is your котенок now?”

“What does that mean?” Shane can’t help but ask.

Another hush falls over the two Russians as Shane’s voice permeates the air.

“Ilyusha,” Sveta says quietly, like something has dawned on her for the first time.

“Нет,” Rozanov replies, his voice firm. “Больше ничего не говорите.”

Shane sighs in annoyance. What was the fucking point of him being here if everyone was just going to speak in Russian and ignore that he existed?

“Relax,” Roz squeezes his hip this time. “It is just pet name. Ah,” he pauses, and Shane can hear commotion throughout the room. “Food is arriving. Svetlana, you may want to bring some for Milo.”

“I think I am capable of deciding whether to bring him food,” she replies, and Shane can feel the tension in the air. “Будьте очень осторожны с тем, что вы будете делать дальше. Мы еще не закончили обсуждать это.”

Rozanov lets out a grumble beside him that Shane tries to pick up with highly trained ears, but his thoughts are pulled from the moment at the sound of plates being set in front of them.

“What is it?” Shane asks curiously, sitting up a little straighter. A wave of panic starts to creep in as he thinks about his diet. He has no idea what type of food they’d be serving at an event like this.

“Is good, don’t worry,” Roz assures him, and Shane can feel him shift next to him.

“How am I supposed to eat with this blindfold on?” Shane can practically hear Rozanov’s eye roll in response.

“I am going to help you. That is the whole point, yes? Is okay to accept help sometimes, Hollander. I know this is foreign concept to you.”

Shane huffs, feeling frustrated.

“You act like blindfold is supposed to make things harder for you, but you are not being asked to do anything,” Rozanov reminds him. “I am taking on these things so you don’t have to. Is supposed to help you relax, but you have to *trust me*. I assure you, I am very capable of feeding you delicious food.”

Shane doesn’t respond to that, instead sniffing the air to try to get a sense of what’s for dinner.

“Here,” Roz murmurs softly. His hand departs from Shane’s hip, leaving a coldness in its wake as he moves beside him.

Shane can smell his cologne as he leans over him, can hear the scrape of a knife like Rozanov is cutting into something on his plate. His fingers twitch, itching to touch, to rip the blindfold off. He’s starting to see shapes in the darkness, and it’s giving him a headache.

“Open,” Rozanov requests, something hovering near his mouth, and Shane hesitates. “Fuck, Hollander. It is fucking food. Take a bite.”

Shane lets out a sound of annoyance, but opens his mouth reluctantly. Something is placed gently on his tongue, and Shane carefully closes his lips around it. He’s expecting to feel the metal prongs of a fork, but instead, he feels his tongue come in contact with Roz’s fingers. Shane hums in surprise and sucks the piece of meat fully into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully once the fingers disappear.

It’s undeniably steak. Filet mignon, if Shane had to guess. Juicy and rich. It’s not exactly the leanest meat on the market, but it is fucking delicious and practically melts in his mouth.

“Good?” Roz asks him softly.

Shane jumps slightly when a finger comes up to swipe at the corner of his lips. Shane wipes the back of his hand across his mouth on instinct.

He hears a small sigh.

“Sorry,” he replies quietly, suddenly hyper aware of the fact that Roz *wants* to dote on him. The whole point is for Shane to need him. To need guidance on where his cup is, where his food is. Rozanov wants to clean his face and feed him by fucking hand. Shane feels a little dizzy at the thought. “It’s really yummy.”

“Yeah?” That same voice double-checks. It’s gone a little soft around the edges, less bite to his accent than Shane is used to hearing.

“That woman,” Shane broaches carefully.

“She is friend from Russia, like I told you.”

“You used to date her,” Shane mutters. “Svetlana, right?”

“No, never date. We have fucked sometimes, but not for a long time now. We are friends. Good friends.”

Shane offers a hum in response.

He can hear amusement in Roz’s voice when he replies. “Jealousy looks very pretty on you, Hollander.”

“Shut up,” Shane bites back immediately. “I’m not jealous.” He doesn’t even want to think about the implications of what that might mean.

“Well, good. You have no reason to be. You are mine for the evening. My attention is solely on you,” Rozanov vows, picking up another piece of steak. “Open. Few more pieces and then you can sip at your drink. Is good vodka. You liked it last time, yes?”

“I—yes,” Shane nods jerkily, cutting off the rest of his sentence.

“But?” Roz prompts, sensing something more.

Shane pauses, eyebrows furrowing slightly. “It’s not good for my diet. Too much alcohol.”

Rozanov seems to pause in contemplation. “It is off-season now. Your diet can be...a bit looser, no?” He sounds genuinely curious rather than judgmental.

“Maybe for a two-time Stanley Cup winner,” Shane can’t help taunting back playfully.

“Hey, hey,” Roz scolds, leaning down to graze his teeth over Shane’s shoulder in a mock-bite.

Shane yelps and jolts backward at the sensation.

“Be nice, yes?” Roz purrs, pressing a kiss to his shoulder this time, and Shane holds his breath. “Alcohol is just to help you calm down. Look at you. You are nothing but tension.” A hand comes down on the space where his shoulder meets his neck and squeezes. “A little will not mess up your diet, I promise.”

Shane can’t help the way he melts into the touch. “I—what are you drinking?”

“Mm, tonight? Nothing,” Roz surprises him by saying.

“Really?” Shane asks in surprise. “*You?*”

“Yes, me. I am capable of having fun without alcohol, you know? Plus, I do not drink when participating in scenes like this.”

Shane turns the words over in his head. “Scenes like this…” he trails. Maybe something is getting lost in translation.

Before Roz can explain further, a group of voices approach the table.

“There you are, Rozy!”

“Yes, yes, here I am. Everyone is looking for me, apparently,” Roz sounds like he’s rolling his eyes.

Shane feels everything around him shift, the voices coming from all sides now, like a large group has joined their table.

“We didn’t see you come in. Everyone was wondering who you were bringing tonight. Is this the lucky lady?” A voice teases.

Roz runs a hand over Shane’s back, probably feeling the way he tenses up beside him.

“Wow, Zeba. I would almost think you are the one with blindfold on. Seeing as I am very clearly with a man this evening.”

“Oh, relax,” she replies. “Darling, your cup. You’re going to knock it over,” she addresses someone else this time, seemingly her partner. “I am just surprised, is all. I haven’t seen you bring a man in ages.”

“Yes, well,” Roz says slowly. “Ones like this are hard to find.”

Shane’s stomach flutters at the soft praise.

“Here, open. You must keep eating. And, then a sip of your drink, please.”

Shane recognizes the command is for him now and dutifully opens his mouth, accepting the piece of steak gratefully this time. He wants to prove that Rozanov is correct, that he made the right choice by inviting him tonight. He indulges himself by sucking on Roz’s fingers a little as they slide past his lips, and he doesn’t miss the pleased sound he gets from Roz in return.

“Good boy.”

Shane’s breath hitches slightly as he chews his food. He wonders if anyone can recognize him behind the blindfold. If anyone here is even into hockey. They must know who Rozanov is, right? They address him as Rozy, but it wouldn’t take much to put two and two together. Ilya Rozanov had quite a memorable face, after all. Surely, everyone in Montreal knew who he was, whether they were at a secret club or not.

It dawns on Shane that Roz might be trying to protect his identity by not having people address him directly. That, or maybe it’s a control thing. He isn’t sure.

He feels the edge of a glass pressed to his lips next, carefully tipping until sharp liquid filters into his mouth. Shane only wants a small sip, and is surprised when Roz seems to take notice of this, the glass retreating just as quickly as it had arrived. Shane swallows thickly around the crisp alcohol.

“Good?” Rozanov double-checks.

Shane can’t help the smile that drifts across his lips as he nods. It’s kind of nice, being doted on. He lets himself relax a little bit. He thinks Roz can feel it too, the way he gives his lower back a small rub in encouragement.

“You are being so good for me, котенок,” Roz tells him lowly, privately, so the rest of the table cannot hear. “Just keep staying relaxed. Is very, very good.”

Shane shivers and nods in quick succession. Relax. He can do that. He lets the darkness take him a little further, zones out until the rest of the chatter just fades to background noise.

“He is very delicious,” a deep voice comments. “What do you call him?”

“For you, he is just my boy. Do not address him,” Roz’s voice brings Shane back to the present moment. He’s vaguely aware that they’re talking about him, but another piece of steak pressed against his lips drags his focus away. This time, Shane refuses to let go of Rozanov’s fingers until they are pulled from his mouth with a pop. “Do not be greedy,” Roz mutters, wiping the corner of his mouth again.

Shane feels drunk already from just the shot and the few sips of vodka. Or maybe it had more to do with the way Roz was talking to him, he wasn’t sure. His head was scrambled, blurry from the long day, eyes aching from looking at nothing but the dark. He lets out a small yawn.

A hand around his waist pulls him closer.

“Alright, Rozy. Well, how did you and *your boy* meet?” A female voice asks.

“Same way all of you fuckers have met. He stumbled into this club looking for something and realized only Ilya Rozanov can provide.”

A flurry of laughter. So, they did know who he was.

“Lucky him. You are very picky about who you invite. It is a one-time thing or...?”

Shane holds his breath at that.

“We will see,” Rozanov says curtly, fingers dancing at Shane’s hip. “Right now, is more for him than me. He is...” he pauses like he wants to choose his words carefully. “He is needing something. For now, I am showing him what my world has to offer. It is up to him if he decides to stay.”

Something warm floods into Shane’s body, seeping into his bones, lighting up his nerve endings.

“Well, he is in good hands,” the deep male voice replies.

Shane reaches out for something to ground him, aiming for the edge of the booth, but instead he catches on Roz’s thigh. His fingers twitch against the fabric of his soft pants, and he goes to remove his hand, but Roz catches him first, keeping Shane’s hand there under his own. He gives his fingers a little squeeze and then retracts, but Shane understands. He feels like he’s finally started to speak the language. So, he confidently lets his fingers relax onto Roz’s thigh, stroking across the warm denim of his jeans, taking comfort in the way his nails catch on a small rip. He can’t see anything, but right now it’s almost like he can *feel* it all.

The night continues on like that. Voices come and go, but Shane is eased by the fact that he doesn’t have to keep up conversation with any of them. Roz takes that on himself, and Shane revels in the fluctuations of his voice. How he can go from quick and irate—a grumble radiating from deep within his chest—to suddenly playful, soft and fond. When Rozanov is eager for a conversation to end, he wraps his fingers impatiently against the table, and Shane finds he can have an impact by sliding his hand further up Roz’s thigh. It relaxes him almost instantly, like remembering Shane is there is a comfort in itself.

Rozanov doesn’t stop touching him. Doesn’t stop praising him. And everything is so foreign to Shane—he’s so tired—that for a while he’s pretty certain he’s dreaming. It’s the only explanation for the half-lucid state he’s entered. He can hear everything around him, but it’s all distant. The one thing keeping him grounded is Roz’s voice, the skin-on-skin contact.

Roz prompts him to open his mouth for more food every once in a while, the occasional sip of a drink, but other than that, Shane sits quiet and fuzzy at his side. Content to just exist with no strings attached. For once, his brain isn’t deafeningly loud.

He isn’t sure how much time passes before Roz leans in close to his ear. “Night is coming to an end.”

Shane hums in loose awareness, fingers digging into the fabric of Roz’s jeans. He doesn’t know what that means, isn’t sure he wants to step back into his body to find out. He likes not having to think. Likes how Rozanov is handling everything for him the way his mom used to when Shane first started playing hockey.

His mom would pack his bag for him, ensure he had all his equipment. She’d pack him a snack and a water bottle. She’d clean up Shane’s knee anytime it got a little scuffed from his

padding. She'd even tell off the coach if a player slammed into Shane just a bit too hard, enough to leave bruises, or sometimes even blood.

Shane lets his head dip down until it's resting on what he's sure is Roz's warm, beefy shoulder, so tired from holding himself upright. He's been up since nearly seven in the morning. Roz's fingers sink through his hair, giving him a rewarding scratch at the nape of his neck. Shane's pretty sure he audibly purrs.

Roz's resounding laughter confirms this. "You are very sleepy, котенок. It has been a long day for you."

Shane doesn't respond. He's lost in the darkness at this point, entirely unaware of his surroundings to the point where he feels completely reliant on Rozanov.

"Come now. I will bring you to my office and remove your blindfold."

Shane lets out something akin to a whine when Roz shifts out from under him to stand up, taking all of his warmth with him.

"I know, I know. You are very pliant like this. Take my hand."

Shane grabs onto the hand that is presented to him and allows the other to pull him to his feet. Shane sways unsteadily, but Rozanov steadies him with an arm around his waist. Shane momentarily falls forward into his big, broad chest. He would give about anything right now to just curl up and stay there. He was so incredibly tired.

"There you are. Come, it is not far. You can do it. One foot in front of the other. There you go."

At some point, Rozanov must decide it's easier to guide Shane from behind, two firm hands on his waist that steer him easily as they walk. Shane barely registers that the ground is moving beneath him.

All of a sudden, he's sitting again, the surface dipping beneath his weight. He feels hands on his knees, someone kneeling in front of him, and then working at the knot in his blindfold.

"Close your eyes," Roz whispers, and Shane does, something bright threatening him. Rozanov seems to notice and reaches for something that makes the light a little dimmer. Shane feels the soft pads of two fingers tracing over his eyelids. "Careful, now. Can you open for me?"

Shane doesn't really want to open. He wants to stay buried in the murkiness of the shapes dancing over his vision, but his curiosity gets the best of him. He winces as the light pours in and makes a sound of disapproval.

"You're alright. Slowly. Your eyes will need to adjust," Roz tells him gently, giving Shane's knee another comforting squeeze.

Shane blinks a few times, but the haze still blocks him from seeing anything. The change in intensity is painful, and Shane places his hands on either side of him to steady himself.

“Easy,” Roz’s soft voice chimes in. “Take your time. It will come back to you.”

Slowly and surely, it does. The first thing Shane sees is Ilya crouched in front of him, and for a second, he feels just like he did ten years ago. The blue in Ilya’s eyes are sparkling at him the same way they did when Shane had approached him that first day.

“There you are,” Rozanov smiles fondly, running his thumb over Shane’s chin. “You’re okay. It is okay to feel a little distant right now. Is kind of the point.”

Shane swallows, watching him intensely as he breathes in and out. After a minute or two like that, he risks a glance around the room. They’re not in the office from earlier. Instead, they’re in a bigger room. He’s sitting on a nice leather couch. There’s an armchair across from them, and oddly enough, a bed pressed against the opposite wall.

“Feeling good? Relaxed?” Roz double-checks, and Shane musters a small nod. Words don’t find him right now, so he doesn’t say anything in return. Roz doesn’t seem to mind. “One second, I will get you a water bottle.”

Shane frowns when the weight of Rozanov’s hand leaves his knee, watching as he stands and walks over to a nearby mini fridge, uncapping a water bottle before kicking the fridge door shut. He returns just as quickly as he’d left, hand returning to Shane’s knee and sliding up his thigh. “Drink this,” he requests, pressing the open bottle into Shane’s hand. He’s crouched in front of him again, watching Shane with trained eyes.

Shane lifts the bottle to his lips on autopilot, taking a tentative sip.

“More,” Ilya had urged that night in the gym.

Shane just stared back at him and complied with ease.

“More,” Rozanov nods, and Shane shivers, but listens anyway. His throat bobs as he swallows. “Good boy.”

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Chapter End Notes

Please let me know your thoughts!! and buckle up for Ilya's pov lol. Poor Shane you have no earthly idea, do you?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Don't expect an update every day on this lol, this was mostly all written already and I was dying to give you Ilya's pov so you have a bit more context into both of their perspectives. I'm not exactly sure how I'll do their poves going forward, if it will be chapter to chapter still or perhaps a chapter that is half Ilya's half Shane's, but wanted to give them both a proper intro!

I have a reaaaaally fun idea for the next chapter and have written a little bit, very excited for this next one I think you will really like it.

Anyway, I give you Ilya Rozanov Certified Lover Boy

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

Ilya wakes the next morning to a cold and empty bed. It's his least favorite way to wake up, but it isn't long before memories of the night before start flooding in, causing a smile to paint his face.

Shane fucking Hollander. Hockey's Golden Boy. Long-time crush of Ilya Rozanov. *Long*, long time. A decade of being a fucking simp for this man. God, he was in trouble.

It should be pretty much illegal to go from their only contact being at face-off across the ice, to suddenly hosting Shane in his exclusive club—during a fucking *event*, no less. Ilya's event.

He would never admit it, but he's been stealthily trying to get Hollander to show up at his club for years now. Hell, Shane was the whole reason he invested in the club in the first place. Bought a fucking house here. Maybe that was an insane thing to do, but he didn't care. Ilya was insane. Insane for Shane.

He was rhyming now. Cool. This is all very normal, and Ilya will act as such.

His phone buzzes to life on the nightstand next to his bed, and he practically dives to retrieve it.

Shane: 👍

A single thumbs up. Ilya grins at his phone like a fucking idiot.

Shane was okay. He was probably into his third workout and second panic attack of the afternoon, but he was okay, and he had done what Ilya asked. Ilya secretly, selfishly hoped his brain was still mushy, that the effects of last night have bled into his morning. Made

waking up a little easier. A little lighter. Shane deserved to feel light. Ilya could help him with that.

There was also the likely chance, however, that Shane was freaking out. His Shane was an overthinker. Ilya knew this for a fact. The way he worried his lower lip between his teeth when his team was falling behind or not working in tandem like they should. The way he scratched the back of his neck when he was nervous. The way he sometimes froze up entirely in social situations, even though—to this town and, honestly, probably most of the world—he was a fucking king.

Ilya has known him long enough to experience all of this first-hand, but not so close up. At least, not in a very long time. He doesn't like the thought of Shane worrying himself into a nervous wreck, but he also knows he has to tread carefully. His Shane is very easily spooked. Coming on too strong has never been an option. Admittedly, his five-year plan turning into a ten-year plan wasn't ideal either. But Ilya was playing the long game. The very long game.

Still, it's 11am, and Ilya feels looser than he has in a while. His muscles are relaxed, his brain is full of optimism. He decides to reward his happiness with a nice jog to get his body moving.

The air feels good on his skin. The birds are singing more cheerfully than they have in a while. Not just that, but colors are brighter too. He feels like his mom is watching over him as the sun pours life into his cheeks. He wonders if she is rooting for him and Shane too.

I deserve this, mama, he thinks to himself. The leaves rustle in agreement.

He is blessed with a lot of great things in his life. His successful hockey career. His stunningly gorgeous sports car collection. Svetlana, his best friend and number one supporter. He has other things too. Like the club. His properties. The wonderful people he has met in the BDSM community. Those who would take his secrets to their grave, while most others would spill them willingly to any reporter who offered enough dollar signs.

But for each good thing he has earned, he has suffered through something twice as bad. Finding his mother lifeless and overdosed on the kitchen floor when he was just twelve years old. The loss of his father, and more recently, his brother. His entire family ripped out from under him. His sister-in-law and niece, both killed in an accident due to his brother's stupid mistakes. Ilya still drowns with the guilt that his money likely paid for the substance that caused the crash.

He has mourned enough for one lifetime. Has had to let go of Russia, his home, because the memories were simply too painful to bear.

He still has struggles now, of course, but they are all background noise to a much brighter reality. Montreal was good for him. He liked being close to Svetlana in the off-season. So much so that he was already in talks to sign with Ottawa next season. It didn't hurt that another Canadian hockey star would be very close-by all year long. The thought made his heart soar with emotion.

He was getting ahead of himself. Maybe. But ten years was much too long to spend pining after someone. Especially when he had girls and boys falling at his feet. Still, Shane Hollander was not like any other boy or girl. No, he was special. The *most* special. And that's why Ilya had to handle him with so, so much care.

He breathes into his burning lungs as he finally slows to a stop in front of McDonald's. Perfect way to end a good jog. A McGriddle with a nice, icy cup of Coke was calling his name. He would sit in the grass of the park while he ate, and think of the perfect reply to Hollander's 👍.

He couldn't be too eager. Shane would smell it from a mile away and probably have another panic attack. Ilya didn't want to cause panic attacks. He wanted to overwhelm Hollander in other ways, sure, but not panic. Never panic.

After nearly thirty minutes of trying to come up with a reply, his phone buzzes to life. He lets himself hope for half a second, but sighs when Svetlana's name pops up on his screen.

"Ебать," he curses, but hits answer anyway. "What is it now?"

"Ah," she gasps in outrage. "Is that any way to talk to your beautiful best friend?"

Ilya rolls his eyes. "I am in the middle of something, you know?"

He can hear her eye roll through the phone as well. God, he loved her.

"Yes, intensely pining after Shane Hollander, what else is new?"

Christ, was he that predictable? *Yes*, his mind supplies.

"Speaking of Shane Hollander," her voice takes on an edge now. "When were you planning on telling me he was coming?"

Ilya sighs dramatically. "Well, darling Sveta, *I* didn't even know he was coming."

"So, Shane Hollander just showed up randomly at my club for *In The Dark*. Is that what you would like me to believe?"

"No," Ilya grumbles, pulling at a piece of grass.

"Then, how, Ilyusha?"

"He was there Monday night. I approved his papers last weekend," Ilya says casually.

"And since when do you approve new membership without telling me? Especially when it involves Shane Hollander."

"You were busy!" Ilya protests. "What was I supposed to do? Delay membership for Golden Boy, Shane fucking Hollander? I did not want him having second thoughts."

“You could have *told* me about it. Seeing as you’ve only been pining for a decade now,” she matches his tone. “I think it is worth mentioning to your gorgeous best friend of many years, yes?”

Ilya takes a deep breath before speaking again. “I wanted to...make an impression. He came in on Monday. I showed him a nice time, invited him to event. I wasn’t even sure he would come, okay?”

“But he did come.”

“Yes, well,” Ilya pulls at the grass some more, hesitant to say this next part. “I may have...left out some details.”

“*Ilya*,” her voice is scolding this time. “You cannot trick Shane Hollander into coming to club events.”

Actually, Ilya could. And did. Quite successfully.

“Hollander is like scared baby animal. He must be lured in, or he will have panic attack. Trust me, it is the best way.”

“If it was the best way, it wouldn’t have taken ten years,” she mutters, as if he won’t be able to hear her.

“Why are you trying to ruin this for me? Ten-year plan is finally working. I am so close now, Sveta. What do they like to say? Slow and steady wins the race, yes?”

That finally pulls a laugh out of her, and Ilya breaks into a smile.

“You are ridiculous,” Svetlana tells him. As if he doesn’t already know. “I can’t believe you actually got him to participate.”

Ilya couldn’t really believe it either. He was fairly positive Shane was gay at this point. Or at least, definitely interested in men. It was something Ilya always questioned, leaning towards yes, but Shane’s brief stint with Rose Landry gave him the confirmation he needed. Straight men did not fumble A-List movie star celebrities that hard and then stay close friends with them. Even more than that, Ilya knew that pretty much all of Rose’s guy friends were gay as fucking penguins. Because Ilya had found out recently that, apparently, penguins can be gay. Which he thought was really cute. He wondered if dogs could be gay too.

“Ten-year plan,” he reminds her, sounding like a broken record, as if it will speak to his expertise on the matter. As if it didn’t originally start out as a five-year plan. Whatever. He was only a little behind schedule. “But, yes. Of course, he will participate. He is my fucking soulmate.” Ilya knew this for a fact.

“Вам нужно расслабиться,” she tells him with a sigh.

But, no. Ilya could not relax. He was so fucking close. Now was *not* the time to relax.

“Have you heard from him yet?” Sveta asks when he doesn’t reply.

Ilya grunts. “Thumbs up. He texted me this morning.”

“Wow,” she draws out the word slowly. “You are so fucked.”

Yes. That, he already knew.

“So, you have spent the entire day figuring out what to say back, then.”

His resounding groan is as much of an answer as anything.

“Well, I would offer my services, but apparently you are the expert on all things Shane Hollander, so,” she says non-comitally. “I’m sure you will figure it out.”

He’s sure he will. He just hasn’t figured it out quite yet.

And by 9pm, he still hasn’t figured it out. He’s typed, deleted, and re-typed a million different drafts of virtually the same text.

How are you?

How are you doing?

Was that okay?

Are you alright?

Feeling good?

That was fun, right?

See how good we are together.

Ilya throws his phone across the room in frustration. It should not be this difficult to talk to someone he has known for ten fucking years. But it was *Shane*. Shane, who couldn’t admit to himself for nearly ten years that he liked men, even though he had watched Ilya jack off in the shower with stars in his eyes and pure *desire* when they were only nineteen.

Ilya had arranged an entire photoshoot on Shane’s behalf. Had called him pretty to watch the way his constellation freckles glimmered especially bright over the flush of his cheeks. Had made his attraction towards Shane *glaringly obvious*, despite how much he was risking. He had even waited outside room 1310 for four fucking hours, knocking every thirty minutes just in case Shane had somehow forgotten and fallen asleep. He paced the hallway, wondering whether it was possible that Shane had stepped out for a minute, possibly gone to visit his parents’ room, or maybe even stopped at a vending machine.

In the end, Ilya came to terms with the fact that he had been rejected. Maybe Shane just wasn’t ready to explore that side of himself yet. Maybe he needed time to come to terms with some things of his own.

Ilya just hadn't really expected it to take ten years. Ten years of flirty chirping, of kicking each other under the table during press interviews, of Ilya calling Shane pretty every chance he got. This year's most recent All-Star game was supposed to be his in. After so long of being positioned as rivals, he and Shane were *finally* going to be on the same team now. They'd have an excuse to talk, hang out in a low-pressure environment, and maybe even take things to the next level, if Ilya had his way. The one thing he hadn't accounted for, of course, was Rose fucking Landry. Shane's first-ever serious girlfriend.

Ilya had spent the entire weekend sick with jealousy as Rose charmed the pants off of practically everyone she met. Not only that, but she and Shane were in coordinated outfits all weekend. It still didn't stop Ilya from pressing a big fat kiss to Shane's helmet after a particularly impressive goal. Lucky for him, neither Rose nor Shane actually seemed to mind. If only past-Ilya could see how far future-Ilya has come in just a matter of months.

Ilya sighs and walks across the room to retrieve his phone from where it bounced off the couch and onto the floor. If he waits for Shane to make a move, he fears he will be waiting another ten years, so he swallows his pride and sends the text.

Ilya: *How are you feeling?*

There. That was boring enough. Low pressure for Shane and his beautifully anxious mind. Not too many things to get stuck on or stress over. Just four simple words.

Ilya isn't expecting a reply so soon.

Shane: *Tired. But like, good tired*

Shane was feeling *relaxed*. Satisfied, maybe even for the first time in his life. Ilya had made him feel that way. *Ilya was good for him.*

He tries to contain his smile as he writes back.

Ilya: *Good tired is good. Less tension for you, hm? It is not healthy to carry so much stress.*

Ilya holds his breath when he sees the typing bubble. Appear and disappear. And reappear and disappear. And reappear and disappear.

Jesus. Shane was going to send him to an early grave at this rate. His stress was so large and palpable that it was even causing *Ilya* stress through a fucking *phone*.

A reply finally comes fifteen minutes later.

Shane: *I guess so. It's just this press schedule. I'll be fine once I get back to the cottage.*

Suddenly, Ilya feels his heart in his ears. *No*. Shane was only in town to finish up press for the Voyageurs and their recent Stanley Cup win. In a week or so, he'd be going back to his cottage for the entire summer. Far, far away from Ilya and his club. Far, far away from making any additional progress towards the ten-year plan.

Ilya: *Well, I am happy to help out with stress during press schedule. Golden Boy needs to look as perfect for camera as possible.*

His reply comes quicker this time.

Shane: *Ha, ha. Very funny.*

Ilya: *I am being serious. Last night was very good for me too.*

He doesn't wait for Shane to overthink that one before sending another text. And another.

Ilya: *My friend from Russia, the owner of the club. She would like to meet you. She is a very big Shane Hollander fan. She knows everything about hockey.*

Ilya: *Technically, you have already met her last night. But, not officially.*

And another.

Ilya: *Trust me, she has no interest in sharing your boring secrets, Hollander. You are probably least interesting person to ever come to the club.*

That one gets a reply.

Shane: *Hey. Rude.*

Ilya grins and goes for the kill.

Ilya: *Tomorrow night. 8pm.*

Ilya patiently waits the whole forty-five minutes of panic attack it takes for Shane Hollander to reply with one simple emoji.

Shane: 👍

Ilya whoops loudly and runs around his entire house, screaming happily at the top of his lungs. Because he is a very normal person reacting to very normal news.

Whatever. He had another date with Shane fucking Hollander.

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There isn't a lot that Ilya has to commit to in his off-season. He works out, of course. He may not have special fancy trainers like Shane Hollander, but he certainly knows how to keep himself in shape. He gets on the ice occasionally, sometimes sees a hot physical therapist for a very...*special* massage. Mostly, though, Ilya spends his free time at the club.

The club was his second family. His only family, actually. The one thing Ilya loved most about it was that they needed him there. And Ilya liked to be needed.

Svetlana was busy these days. She was an entrepreneur, a *businesswoman*, and Ilya loved her dearly for her work ethic. But, as much as she loved the club, she didn't *need* it like Ilya did. He took pride in creating a safe space for a very select group of Montreal's finest, in curating one-of-a-kind experiences that allowed people to explore themselves more deeply, in a place they felt safe. Of course, he was still always holding out hope for Montreal's *actual* finest, and now it seemed like that goal was finally in reach.

Shane Hollander was on the guest list tonight. He was coming at Ilya's request. No tricks.

As much as Ilya liked to hope his *In the Dark* event had broken the ice (ha, get it? ice), he unfortunately knew Shane Hollander a bit too well. Shane had agreed to come, yes, but he would likely arrive with an apology on his lips. A plan to talk about how this was all a really bad idea, how it was more trouble than it was worth. Ilya was sick of talking. He wanted to get to the kissing.

Ten fucking years without a kiss from Shane Hollander. He couldn't believe it. They were going to hang his hockey jersey in a fucking museum for all the wrong reasons. *Death by Pining. World's Greatest Golden Boy Fumble*. Ilya had fucking game, for crying out loud. He'd slept with Swedish princesses. And yet, somehow, Darling of Montreal Shane Hollander made him too weak in the knees. Too stupid in the head.

But, no more. Ilya was going to get that kiss tonight. No more tricks. Shane Hollander was hot for him. He knew this for a fact. Knew it in the way Shane went pliant under his touch and practically purred when Ilya pet his hair just right. Ilya could do *everything* just right for him if Shane would just let him. Ilya *wanted* to take all the worries from his pretty, overworked brain. He wanted to turn Shane into a pile of mush, to shut his mind *off*. Shane deserved that. Shane deserved everything. And Ilya would find a way to give it to him.

Ilya arrives at the club around 5pm. It's a Saturday night, which usually meant the perfect backdrop to some of their biggest and most exclusive events. Any other week, they'd likely have the entire club rented for something private, something invite-only. But, Ilya's *In The Dark* event had taken precedent this week, which meant the only special events going on tonight would occur behind the heavy discretion of their private rooms.

Ilya looks over the special menu items at the bar, vaguely aware of some of the staff moseying around as they get ready to open for the evening.

Blush and Hush

That one was for a bachelorette party. The club had arranged for strippers and provocative toys that would surely lead to a fun time.

Smoke and Scripture

A little odd, but very fitting for the religious-themed orgy planned in the Velvet Room.

Opal Dagger

A knife-play demonstration. Ilya wouldn't mind attending that one, his curiosity getting the better of him, but no. He was spoken for this evening. The last thing he wanted to do was scare Shane off by revealing anything too soon.

He reaches for a marker and adds one in his own scrawling handwriting.

The Long Game

That one was for him and Shane, and it was mostly symbolic. A manifestation of sorts.

Along with an office at Hush, Ilya also had his own personal playroom—for lack of a better word. But, he owned a sex club, for crying out loud. It was necessary.

He didn't bring all of his partners into the comfort of his personal room. In fact, it was rare enough that the room didn't usually get much use at all. Most of Ilya's scene partners up until this point had been casual. He teased them. He fucked them. He messed with their heads, and then he gave really good aftercare. His relationship with them did not go beyond that, so it was easier to use one of the club rooms. Less personal that way. And less chance of attachment.

There was only one risk of attachment for Ilya. And that risk would be here in a few short hours.

Ilya checks his outfit. A dark gray distressed tank top with little grommets along the edge of the straps, since Shane seemed to take *really well* to his bare arms the other night. Another pair of black jeans, but the fabric was a mix between a soft denim and a corduroy this time. Because Shane liked things that were soft.

He had gone home in Ilya's clothes.

Ilya didn't want to get ahead of himself, especially since he wasn't expecting anything extravagant to happen tonight, but he secretly hoped he could somehow get Shane in his clothes again. Maybe he could pretend he'd forgotten to tell him about the dress code for this evening. Make something up even though it would be glaringly obvious that others in the club were dressed differently. God, he needed to show Shane a good time.

Once he's in his private office, he pushes a bit of product into his hair, gelling the sides just enough that his curls stay in place. He still has a few hours until Shane arrives, and he wants to look good. He needs to look *earth-shattering* so his Shane sees him as more than just some sexy rival.

He's in the middle of applying some very fancy face cream when someone comes rudely barging in.

"Wow. You look so handsome, Ilyusha," Svetlana grins brightly as she walks up to him. She looks pretty devastating herself with black boots accentuating her long legs, a tight black dress hugging her incredible body. "You are here early."

“*You* are here early,” Ilya grumbles back. “I am here at regular time. Someone has to run this place.”

Svetlana rolls her eyes. “Is there a reason you are giving me attitude right now? Or are you just being asshole today like usual?”

He doesn’t answer her, instead focused on himself in the mirror as he pushes each singular hair into place.

“Ah,” Svetlana nods in understanding. “Shane Hollander must be coming in tonight. Are you going to have him sit in on the knife-play demonstration?” She wiggles her eyebrows playfully.

“Absolutely not. Do you want Golden Boy to have heart attack? Do not play about things like this,” Ilya shakes his head seriously.

“*He* is not the one who will be having a heart attack, by the looks of it. Боже мой, you need to calm yourself,” she sighs.

“I cannot be calm!” Ilya bites back. “I am so close. Do you understand? If anything goes wrong, he will slip right from my fingertips.”

Svetlana gives him a disbelieving look. “I do not think there is risk of that, Ilyusha. He was purring in your lap just a few nights ago. I think it is safe to say he is yours.”

Ilya scoffs, shaking his head again. “There is no such thing as safe. He will change his mind in a split second. He is very easily spooked. Everything must be perfect, or I risk losing everything.”

As much as Ilya liked to believe Shane wouldn’t go running scared back into the closet, a part of him knew that was always, *always* a possibility. He had to handle this with the utmost amount of care. The one thing that Shane cared most about in this entire world was hockey. If anything threatened to jeopardize that, Shane would cut and run faster than Ilya could say LGBTQ. And, although Ilya hated this about his sport, the NHL was very openly averse to gayness.

Scott Hunter had been a fluke. A glitch. The NHL tolerated it, sure. What else could they do? The long-time Captain of the New York Admirals and two-time Stanley Cup winner was virtually untouchable at this point. Hockey could handle having one gay player.

What they likely couldn’t handle was three gay players. Three gay Captains of teams who regularly made it into the playoffs. Especially if two of those Captains were some of the highest performing players in the League’s history *and* known arch rivals for the past ten years.

Yeah. That wasn’t going to go over well. Which meant that, unfortunately, Shane’s fears were very valid. Which meant that Ilya was going to have to play his cards exactly right if he wanted this to work.

It didn't matter how beautifully Shane had gone down for him the other night. It wouldn't even matter if he walked right in, shoved Ilya against the wall, and professed his undying love for him.

Well. Okay. That would matter *a lot* to Ilya, actually. But, still, it wouldn't make Shane any more of a sure thing. Not until Ilya had a ring around his finger.

God. He was going full-on Lover Boy tonight.

"Ilya," Svetlana's voice brings him back to the present. She's speaking gently to him. Like *he's* the one at risk of being spooked off. "He will see that you are good for him," she assures, giving his hand a quick squeeze. "He will have to."

Ilya's chest throbs painfully as he looks to her. He has never wanted anything so badly in his life, and yet, he has lost so much. *Shane would make it all worth it though*, he thinks. Shane would make up for every ounce of sadness he has had to experience. And, more so, Ilya thinks that he could have an equally good impact on Shane's life.

"I told him you want to meet him. Is excuse I gave so he will come tonight," Ilya lets slip. "I said you are big Shane Hollander fan and you are not interested in sharing his boring secrets."

"And he accepted?" Svetlana laughs and rolls her eyes. "Вы оба идиоты."

Ilya shoots her an unimpressed look.

"He is obviously coming here to see you, not me. But whatever you say. I am happy to play hot, sexy club owner tonight if it will help you land your soulmate."

Ilya's lips twitch, his eyes softening a bit at the acknowledgement that, *yes, Shane was likely his soulmate*.

"Wow, that is all it takes for you, huh? If only our patrons knew you were such a pushover for hockey's Golden Boy. Your scene partners would never take you seriously."

"Whatever," Ilya scoffs. "If things go as planned, there will be no more scene partners. Just Shane."

Svetlana offers him a genuine smile. "Что ж, тогда я с удовольствием внесу свой вклад."

Ilya's heart swells. The ten-year plan was coming to a close very soon. He could feel it.

By the time 7:30pm rolled around, Ilya was checking the clock compulsively. It was still early. Still thirty minutes until 8. Many of their guests would likely not arrive until at least 9 or 10. But Shane was usually very on-time. Which meant that, realistically, he could walk in at any moment now.

8pm arrived, and still, Shane had not shown. Ilya was growing impatient.

He downs a fire shot just to feel the burn in his lungs. He downs another at 8:15. And then another at 8:30. As the clock ticks closer and closer to 9pm, Ilya is nearly ready to throw in the towel and call it a night. Either that, or show up on Shane's doorstep and downright demand to know what the deal was.

Did Shane enjoy messing with Ilya's fragile little heart? Did he take pride in the way he'd stolen it all those years ago, leaving Ilya to deal with the mess, to track down all the bitter and broken pieces?

He was this close to being done with Shane Hollander forever. Ten years was too long to let someone play with his emotions like this. Ilya was a catch, damn it. And fuck Shane if he couldn't see that.

"Rozy," Angel calls from the other end of the bar.

"What?" Ilya snaps. He's in the middle of drowning his sorrows with massive amounts of liquor as he looks over to see what could possibly require his attention at this moment.

Angel smiles at him and nods in the direction of the front entrance. "Looks like your boy is here."

Ilya turns so fast he's pretty sure his head might spin off. But, sure enough, it's Shane Hollander stepping through the doors.

And, *fuck*, does he look *good*.

The day Shane Hollander got a stylist is the day Ilya Rozanov was sure the universe wanted him dead. There was no other explanation for the amount of torment this man caused him.

Shane's in a custom-fit black button-up shirt that's been left half-open at the chest. The sleeves are rolled up to his forearms, revealing miles of delicious tan skin that Ilya wants to *bite*. He's wearing black pants with thin white pinstripes that are tight at the top and loosely flaring at the bottom. His hair is styled with product, all pushed back and sexy, but yet somehow still in his face and...and—

And Rose Landry is wrapped around his arm like a fucking octopus.

No. Absolutely *not*. This cannot be happening.

"Sveta," Ilya hisses, latching onto her as she sidles up to the bar. "Since when is Rose Landry a member here?"

Svetlana just blinks at him, feigning annoyance as she delicately removes his hands from her. "Uh, since the entire cast of new *X-Squad* movie has been coming in for months," she rolls her eyes. "I have business, you know? I cannot reject people just because you think they are a threat to your stupid ten-year plan."

Not just *a* threat. *The* threat. The reason Ilya never got to make his move at the All-Star Game. The epitome of what all straight men aspired to. Especially straight men who were so *far* in the closet that they didn't even realize there was a whole world *outside* of it.

“Would you relax? *He’s here. He came,*” she hisses, seemingly able to pick up on his rapidly escalating mental breakdown. “You reek of alcohol, my god. Angel, do we have any cologne back there? It is an emergency.”

Svetlana didn’t get it. Rose was his ammo. His buffer. Someone he could stay glued to all night so that if Ilya ever tried to steal him away, he could say *no thank you*, and have a damn good reason for it. Even more so, there was no way he was going to let his guard down while surrounded by the entire cast of *X-Squad*.

Ilya wrinkles his nose as Svetlana sprays him to death with something expensive, her long nails trying to push his hair back into place from where he’d nearly torn it out of his head from worry.

“You need to get it together. If he wanted to be with Rose, he would be. They are just friends, Ilyusha. Like you and I.”

Suddenly, Ilya finds Shane looking right at him, and he immediately straightens up. Shane’s eyes dart quickly to Svetlana, whose hands are still all over him, and then he’s instantly distracted by something Rose says.

There’s a whole group of them. A few girls Ilya recognizes as newer regulars. Probably the cast members Sveta was talking about. There’s another guy with him too who looks pretty visibly gay, especially with the way he can’t take his eyes off Shane.

Great. Ilya was going to have to go to war for his boy in his own fucking club. Game fucking on.

Something takes him over, all of a sudden. A newfound fire in his belly. An urgency to claim his man once and for all.

Ilya stands up and smooths out his top. “Angel,” he says seriously, turning to her. “I need a round of fire shots for this group. Keep them coming. I don’t want to see a single hand without a drink in it all night, yes? Put it on my tab if you must.”

Angel smiles and nods her understanding, getting to work on a big tray.

Ilya takes a deep breath, adjusting his necklace to sit comfortably between his pectoral muscles. He could do this. He had trained his whole life for this moment. The game was tied and in overtime, two minutes left on the clock. This was his chance to leave it all on the ice or risk going home with nothing.

Shane is caught in the middle of a conversation when Ilya finally approaches their table, a massive tray of fire shots in hand.

“Oh my god,” Rose claps delightedly. “Shane, you weren’t kidding about the fire shots.”

So, Shane had mentioned the fire shots. He wonders what else Shane has mentioned.

“Mm, Russian specialty,” Ilya jokes, a little too loose from the alcohol he’s already consumed. He didn’t even know if fire shots *were* Russian.

“Ilya Rozanov, right?” Rose asks, her eyes sparkling with something that Ilya can’t quite place. “I think we met briefly at the...”

“At the All-Star Game, yes,” Ilya says quickly, wanting to cut off that thread of topic as soon as humanly possible.

“You guys played great that game,” she smiles as the rest of the cast marvels over the fire shots. “It was really fun to watch.”

“Yes, well,” Ilya’s eyes dart to Shane, finding him already staring back at him. “Is very fun to play when you have Golden Boy as Captain. Makes for an easy win.”

Shane flushes and ducks his head, but Rose’s smile only widens.

“He’s amazing, isn’t he?” She gloats, wrapping an arm around Shane like he’s nothing but her token hockey player. Like she needed to surround herself with hordes of hot, talented, successful people at all times or she’d simply die. *Greedy*, Ilya thinks.

“Yeah, yeah,” Shane waves her off, the compliment rolling off his back like he’s immune to understanding just how incredible he is. “A Captain is only as good as the rest of the team. You know that,” he says to Ilya this time.

“That is true,” Ilya nods in agreement. “Unless that team contains Shane Hollander.”

He doesn’t miss the way Shane’s eyes glow at the praise. Ilya was going to die.

The group of them start throwing back shots, Angel already on her way over with more, and Ilya hates that Shane has somehow secured a spot sandwiched between two people who may very well be in love with him.

Well, technically, maybe that was kind of a given, considering Ilya was half-convinced that *everyone* was in love with Shane Hollander. But, still. No one was in love with Shane Hollander like he was. And it was his club. He deserved Shane Hollander sitting privileges. He deserved to be able to touch Shane Hollander at all times, especially with how much Shane Hollander seemed to like being touched.

He tries not to let his pout show on his face, tries not to stare too hard at Shane’s freckles as the group continues to chatter about stupid, movie-related things. Rose must notice, however, because a minute later she is standing up out of her seat with claims of needing to use the restroom.

“Ilya, would you mind pointing us in the direction of the ladies’ room? Me and the girls could use a touch-up.”

Ilya has never been so glad for girls and their constant need to flock together.

“Yes!” He says, trying not to let his excitement show on his face. “It is right through there. The door is marked clearly. You will not miss it.”

“Thanks. Shane, we’ll be right back,” she tells him and then gives Ilya a pointed look.

Ilya just stands there, stunned. Wow. Okay. So, maybe Rose Landry is not enemy number 1 after all.

In fact, new enemy number 1 seems to be the only guy of the group. The one who is still sitting much too close to Ilya's Shane. Which...made sense, actually. Considering Ilya was almost 100% sure Shane was gay.

The other side of the booth has completely opened up now. Ilya could easily slide right in and sit across from them, but he doesn't want to risk losing his spot next to Shane for when the girls come back. So, instead of going for casual, he does the dumb thing and piles into the same side as them, with Shane sitting comfortably in the middle. If anyone asks, he will just blame it on the alcohol for being unable to think clearly.

Shane seems amused, at least. "Hi," he greets, looking at him with what Ilya hopes is fondness.

"Hi," Ilya says back, and tries to keep himself from buzzing out of his skin. "You brought your friends with you."

"Yeah," Shane nods, because right. That was obvious. "The girls come here all the time, and Rose and Miles had never been, so."

"Hey. I'm Miles," the guy feels the need to introduce himself, getting all up in Shane's space with the notion of reaching to shake Ilya's hand.

"Ilya," he says in return, giving him one of the quickest handshakes in all of human history.

"Oh, I know," Miles' lips curl at him. And Ilya can feel the way Shane stiffens at his side.

If they were a bit further into the night, a few drinks deeper, Ilya could maybe put a hand on Shane's thigh, give him a reassuring squeeze. But, they weren't there yet. Not tonight, at least.

"Shane was telling us all about the event the other night," Miles says, his voice slow and almost seductive with the way he holds himself.

"Did he now?" Ilya raises his eyebrows, reveling in the way it makes Shane flush deliciously.

"Sorry, um. Was I not supposed to? They were asking questions," Shane replies nervously, like he actually thinks Ilya would chew him out for anything, let alone talking about an event that was maybe the single greatest night of Ilya's life so far.

"No, no, it's fine," Ilya laughs, slyly pressing his thigh a little closer to Shane's under the pretense of getting more comfortable. "I am just surprised. I did not realize your friend group was so...adventurous," he teases, watching the way Shane's freckles dance on his cheeks.

Miles leans closer again, and Ilya is ready to throw hands soon if this guy doesn't back the hell off his cookie.

“Oh, we’re very adventurous. We were all wondering what it takes to get an invite,” he bats his eyes slowly. “Maybe next time, Shane could bring me as his plus one.”

“No,” Ilya blurts out before he can stop himself, and then tries to backtrack into something a bit more normal. “I mean— uh, Hollander is new here, so. Events like that are usually more for...experienced club goers. And selection process is very tricky, you know? We try to keep it, um, *exclusive*.”

“Hm,” Miles seems to take this into consideration. “Maybe you could bring me then. As *your* plus one.”

And...what? *Oh*. Ilya has maybe read this all wrong. Miles wasn’t interested in Shane. Miles was interested in *him*.

“Ah,” Ilya lets out a soft chuckle, resting his elbows on top of the table. “I am spoken for, actually.”

He risks another glance at Shane, but his expression falls slightly when he sees the way Shane is looking at him, some of the light gone from his eyes.

Svetlana, bless her, chooses that exact moment to approach their table.

“What is this?” She laughs at their funny seating arrangement. “Boys on one side, girls on the other? You are all squished together.”

“Sveta!” Ilya greets her with maybe a little too much anxious excitement. “There you are! Look, I wanted you to meet Golden Boy Shane Hollander, remember? Best player in all of the League.”

Shane looks a little shy under all the attention, but Ilya will never in a million years not take the chance to gloat about his many talents.

“Hollander, this is Svetlana. Friend from Russia, like I told you.”

“Right,” Shane nods, looking only a little uncomfortable. He offers her a small smile, nonetheless. “It’s nice to meet you. Rozanov mentioned you own the place?”

“Yes, when I am able to manage it,” she smiles, looking around the room fondly. “I have many other businesses. But, luckily, Ilyusha has taken on a lot while I am gone. He is the main reason this place is what it is today.”

“Sveta, dear, you flatter me,” Ilya grins, even though he knows she is laying on the charm thick for his benefit. “Mostly, though, I am just here to have fun. Is not much more to it than that.”

“You’re being modest,” she insists, squeezing his arm.

Shane tracks the movement.

“Yes, modest. I am very known for this,” Ilya jokes, pulling a laugh out of Miles and hardly a smile out of his frowny boy.

Dear Lord. He was going to have to change tactics *fast*.

Before he can think of another plan, however, Rose and the girls return from the bathroom.

“Oh my god, I *love* your dress,” Rose tells Svetlana.

“You are Rose Landry,” Sveta laughs delightedly while Ilya gives her an unimpressed look. “I am so excited to see your new movie!”

No loyalty whatsoever. Absolutely none.

Ilya takes the distraction as his opportunity to turn to Shane.

“You are not drinking anything,” he notes, seeing that Shane has not touched a single fire shot. “Let me fix this.”

“Oh,” Shane blinks at him. “No, I mean. That’s okay. I’m probably not going to drink tonight.”

Bad. This would be very bad if that were the case.

“Shane’s like...the only guy I’ve met who’s so committed to his body. I think it’s really admirable,” Miles smiles at him and puts an intentional hand on Shane’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” Shane lets out a nervous laugh.

Oh, *hell no*. Someone was going to have to hold Ilya’s earring.

“Of course. But Hollander is the best player in the league. One drink could never change this,” Ilya cuts in, because who the fuck does this guy think he is? Ilya was two seconds away from shoving Shane into his pocket and running away with him forever.

Shane rolls his eyes like he thinks Ilya is just fucking with him. Like it isn’t a known fact that he’s the best. “I already drank twice this week.”

“Barely anything on Thursday, though. I made sure of this,” Ilya tells him matter-of-factly. Because Shane needs to understand how serious Ilya takes his needs.

That earns him a small smile from Shane, at least. “I think your Russian vodka is pretty strong. I was *definitely* drunk that night.”

Ilya doesn’t know whether to frown or preen. Frown at the fact that Shane thought the alcohol did that to him when really, *Ilya* had done that to him. Ilya had made him feel that way. Preen maybe at the fact that Ilya had treated him so nicely that Shane felt literally *drunk* off of it. Either way, the last thing he wants is Shane attributing what happened that night to any effects from any alcohol. Ilya had been very intentional about how much he served him.

“You had small shot and a few sips of a mixed drink over nearly five hours. Even Russian vodka is not this strong,” Ilya replies plainly.

Shane’s expression twitches. “Wait. *Five* hours? I—it didn’t feel that long.”

Ilya can’t help the way his lips lift slightly in a smirk. Yes, he and Shane were very good for each other indeed.

“Must have been a really fun event,” Miles purrs, his hand still on Shane’s shoulder. “You’ll have to tell us more about it. We barely got *any* details.”

“What happens at event stays at event,” Ilya cuts in sharply. “Discretion. Is big policy here.”

He doesn’t miss the way Shane relaxes a little at the out.

“Pity,” Miles shrugs, still smiling, but his hand finally falls back to his side.

Suddenly, Ilya has an idea.

“There are some private events happening here tonight, actually,” Ilya sits up a little, hoping to pique Miles’s interest.

“Really?” Miles raises his eyebrows.

“Yes. There is a private demonstration. Is invite-only, but you know. If you are interested, Svetlana could probably make an exception.”

“A demonstration?” Shane’s eyebrows press together. “A demonstration of what?”

Ilya freezes for a second and then lets out a jerky laugh.

“Wow, Hollander, so greedy. You already got invited to an event this week. Besides, it is not something I recommend seeing without any alcohol in your system.”

Shane raises his eyebrows as if Ilya’s just given him a challenge. “Well. If it’s that serious, I suppose I could have maybe *one* drink.”

Ilya starts to panic. Shane *cannot*, under any circumstances, view the knife-play demonstration. Ilya can see all of his progress start to go down the drain. Hollander would be scared shitless, scarred for life. He would think this club is something that it is not. He would think that that was the kind of stuff Ilya was into, and he would *never, ever* come back. Ten years out the fucking window.

“Um, Shane,” Ilya says, and that must grab his attention because Ilya has been very careful to not *ever* cross that line. An invisible boundary between them. They were on a *strict* last-name basis, on account of the whole...arch rivals thing. “Actually, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” he continues, thinking on his feet, because Shane was apparently known for surprises. “In private,” he adds, eyes flickering to the dead weight sitting next to them.

“Oh,” Shane frowns, suddenly looking very concerned. “Um, sure. Yeah. We can do that.”

“Let’s grab something from the bar,” Ilya offers, wanting to take advantage of his moment before it passes. “Sveta,” he calls loudly, pulling her attention away from Rose and all of her super stylish, famous friends. “Miles, uh. Miles wants to see the demonstration,” Ilya says, giving her a pointed look that he hopes conveys, *please get this unforgiving leech away from me so I can speak to my Shane in peace.*

She glares at him for a fraction of a second before breaking into an easy smile. “Of course. I think we can arrange for that. Does anyone else want to come see the demonstration? It’s a juicy one.”

Ilya breathes a small sigh of relief. Crisis averted. Sort of.

“You’re in good hands,” he tells Miles with a quick nod before finally, *finally* directing all of his attention to Shane. “Shall we go to the bar?”

“Sure,” Shane shrugs, and Ilya jumps up like a spring that’s been coiled for much too damn long.

The walk to the bar is short. So short that Ilya has to wrack every inch of his brain to come up with something he could have possibly needed to pull Shane away privately for.

“So...drink?” Ilya offers when they finally get to the bar.

Angel greets them with a smile.

“I guess, um. The Russian vodka was pretty good?” He says with a soft laugh.

“Mm, he wants my special drink,” Ilya nods knowingly to Angel, giving her a quick wink.

She giggles in return and goes about making it before sliding two glasses across the bar.

Shane reaches for his wallet to pay.

“Ah,” Ilya stops him before he can even get it out of his pocket.

“You know, I can’t imagine this place is profitable with how many drinks you give away,” Shane huffs in amusement, but he takes the glass anyway.

“Only to Canadian hockey royalty. And Canadian hockey royalty’s friends. You know this by now.”

Shane’s eyes glimmer up at him. “So,” he says, once Angel has given them some distance. “What did you want to talk about? Sounded serious.”

He has that concerned expression on his face again, and *right*. Ilya still had no idea what he was planning to say.

“Oh. Yes. Is very serious,” he nods, taking a sip of his drink to buy him just a little more time. “Is about...hockey, actually.”

“Oh,” Shane straightens up slightly.

Right. Hockey. That always put Shane in a good mood.

“Okay...” Shane voices, when Ilya has failed to say anything else for a few seconds. “What about hockey?”

“Um,” Ilya rubs the back of his neck. Come on. Think. *Think*. “Well, you know. I am free agent now. Contract with Boston is finished.”

Shane raises his eyebrows. “Oh yeah?”

“And I was thinking,” Ilya starts. Shane is watching him like he has no idea where he’s going with this. “I am maybe going to sign with Ottawa.”

Shane doesn’t even try to hide the surprise on his face. “Oh, wow. I mean...really? Why?”

Ilya smiles lightly and shrugs, taking another sip of his drink. “I think I would like to become Canadian citizen. There is nothing for me in Russia. And Montreal has been very good to me. I have my club. I have Sveta.” *I have you*, he doesn’t add.

Shane clears his throat and nods. “Yeah, no. Of course. It makes sense. That you’d want to, um, be close to her.”

Ilya’s eyebrows press together instantly. “Is not about her, really,” he’s quick to correct, not wanting Shane to get the wrong idea. “We are just friends. Nothing more. She is away on business half the time anyway,” Ilya waves off.

“Oh. Right,” Shane accepts, taking in the new information. “So. Why are you telling me then?”

“Um,” Ilya sighs, because he hadn’t really thought that far ahead. “Well, Ottawa is hometown for you, yes? And is close-by. Close-by to cottage. Close-by to Montreal. I figured, you know. It would be nice to get your opinion. See if Ottawa might be a good fit for me.”

“Yeah,” Shane smiles, and Ilya thinks he’s actually maybe finally put him at ease. “Yeah, I mean. Wait—” he pauses. “How do you know it’s close-by my cottage?”

Ilya blinks, wondering if he’s fully given himself away this time. “I uh— saw the house tour you did. On Nature Channel or something? I was researching properties. In case of Ottawa.”

He internally curses himself. None of those words made any sense together.

“You did?” Shane laughs, seemingly delighted by the thought of Ilya watching his boring documentary. “Wow. I didn’t realize you kept up with stuff like that.”

Ilya’s lips pull into a smirk as he spots his in. “What? I can’t keep tabs on arch rival? What is it they say? Keep friends close, but enemies closer?” He slides a little closer and gives Shane a playful shove, letting his fingers trail down the other’s chest.

Shane grins, those few sips of vodka apparently giving him permission to relax enough to allow physical touch.

Hook. Line. Sink. Ilya had him.

“So, you’re keeping tabs on me?” Hollander tips his head, eyes filled with amusement.

“Yes, yes. I make it my personal business to keep tabs on all the best and hottest hockey players, you know? Just the ones who can give me a run for my money,” he teases back, pretending to inspect the fabric of Shane’s shirt just so he can have an excuse to keep touching him.

“Best and hottest, huh?” Shane watches him playfully, his pretty pink lips so inviting that it takes everything in Ilya not to claim him right then and there.

“Well,” Ilya rolls his eyes. “According to Cosmopolitan, anyway. But, you know. They seem to know their stuff,” he offers Shane a soft smile, pretending to adjust his collar this time.

“It’s funny. They had you at what? Number five? I don’t agree with that.”

“Yes, yes. I’m sure you thought it was too generous, hm? Come on, Hollander. I know I cannot compete with you or Scott Hunter, but I am hotter than JJ, at least. You must give me that.”

“No, actually,” Shane leans against the bar, which brings him just a tiny bit closer. “I thought you should have been higher.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows at that. “Really?” He can’t help but ask. “How high were you thinking?”

“Definitely above Hunter. I mean, he’s good-looking, but he’s like, what? Forty-five years old? I don’t know what they were thinking putting him as number two.”

Ilya has never wanted to kiss Shane so badly in his life.

“Oh my god,” he cackles loudly. “You are funny, Hollander. But I agree. Scott Hunter is a dinosaur. I am much hotter than him,” he smiles proudly and dares to be a little bolder, letting his fingers dip across where Shane’s shirt is splayed open over his skin.

He doesn’t miss the way Shane shivers.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to make it tonight,” Ilya admits, his voice a little quieter. Now that he’s got a little taste, he can’t stop from wanting to touch Shane all over. He lets his hand slide casually to Shane’s neck, fingers pressing into the back of it just slightly.

“I—um,” Shane stutters, like his brain is short-circuiting from just the feeling of Ilya’s hands on him. “Yeah. Sorry. I wanted to come earlier, but Rose thought we should wait until the place filled up a bit. She usually knows more about these types of things than I do, so.”

“Well, I am glad you came. Even if you did bring annoying friends with you,” Ilya smiles to let Shane know he’s teasing. “Is much harder to get you alone this way.”

“Oh,” Shane says carefully. “You, um...you wanted to get me alone?”

Ilya gives him an unimpressed look before rolling his eyes. “Yes, Hollander. And it is impossible with how many suitors you have vying for your attention. First, I have to get through Rose Landry. Now, I must worry about this *Miles* guy. I am fighting for my life out here, and you don’t even notice.”

“*Miles*? What? No,” Shane shakes his head quickly. “He’s not. I mean, he *isn’t* into me. Um, and neither is Rose, for the record. I mean, she was. When we were dating. But, not...not anymore.”

Ilya laughs and gives the back of Shane’s neck a friendly squeeze, still testing the waters. He could tell Shane he liked him seven different ways to Sunday and, somehow, it would *still* go straight over Shane’s head.

“Miles is *definitely* into you. Anyone with eyes is into you, actually,” Ilya takes another shot.

“Really?” Shane looks like a lost puppy, like the fact that he’s the hottest man alive has somehow never occurred to him. Like he’s never once seen himself in the mirror and thought, *Damn, I’m the finest specimen on this Earth*. “Is that—” he pauses, and Ilya can see the cogs turning in his brain.

Yes. Come on. He was almost there.

“Does that um...does that include you, then?”

Yes, Ilya wants to shout from the rooftops. Anyone with eyes includes me, seeing as I have two fucking heart eyes pointed at you at all times.

Ilya gives the hair at the back of his neck a rewarding scratch because Shane Hollander is very nervous all of a sudden. Very tense.

“Yes, котенок,” Ilya replies patiently. “This includes me, of course. I have eyes, no?”

“I...I dunno,” Shane laughs awkwardly. “I guess so.”

“Mm, you guess correct. You are right, though. Russian vodka must be very strong if you are questioning this.” Ilya watches him with a soft expression as his eyes catalogue Shane’s face.

“Oh,” Shane says quietly, like he’s unsure how to respond to Ilya casually laying all his cards on the table after nearly *ten years* of carefully dropped hints.

“You had fun on Thursday, yes? With me?” He double-checks, cause he has to be sure he isn’t reading this wrong.

“Yeah,” Shane rasps, his eyes a little foggy.

“Yeah?” Ilya questions as he cups Shane’s neck a little more firmly, gently tracing his thumb across the light stubble painting Shane’s jawline.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, swallowing thickly.

“What did you like about it?” Ilya presses, wondering how much he can get out of him.

Shane’s eyes dart down to his drink momentarily, likely to avoid the heat of Ilya’s gaze, but Ilya carefully redirects his attention with a gentle nudge to his chin until brown meets blue. “I...I liked not having to think.”

“Yeah?” Ilya rewards him with another scratch, a thrill running through him as Shane practically melts like putty in his hands. “What else?”

Shane takes a deep breath, like voicing the things he wants is so painfully foreign to him that he doesn’t even know where to begin. “I liked, um. Not having to talk.”

“Mm. That can be very nice, yes,” Ilya agrees, tipping his head. “What else?”

“I liked,” Shane shuts his eyes tightly for a moment, almost shamefully. “I liked when you —” he cuts himself off with a deprecating laugh.

“Tell me,” Ilya urges. Needs him to say it.

“I liked when you were feeding me,” he whispers quietly, and his eyes are darting all over the place as he tries to look anywhere but at Ilya.

“Feeding you with my fingers,” Ilya adds, saying the part that he knows they are both thinking. “I liked this very much too.”

And then, because Shane has done so, *so* well for him, Ilya keeps going.

“I like having you sit next to me all quiet. Speaking for you. *Thinking* for you, so you do not have to. Giving your mind permission to go blank. You are so beautiful when you are quiet,” he admits openly, like he’s not afraid. “I like touching you all over. Hearing the way you react. God, Shane, you have no idea.”

Shane shudders at that, eyes darting to Ilya’s lips all of a sudden. Like he needs to kiss him almost as much as he needs air to breathe. Ilya can relate.

It takes everything in him not to claim Shane’s lips right there, but unfortunately, he knows his boy too well. And kissing Shane for the first time in the middle of this crowded club with a giant group of his friends lurking somewhere nearby was, admittedly, a *very* bad idea.

Ilya traces his thumb over the freckles dotting Shane’s cheeks this time, leans in a little closer until he’s sure Shane can smell his cologne.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes, his voice shaky, like maybe he’s affected by this just as much as Ilya is.

“Not here,” Ilya says quietly, to avoid spooking his very scared counterpart.

He feels his chest start to unclench when Shane nods jerkily in agreement. Good. They were on the same page then.

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Chapter End Notes

Let me know your thoughts, I'm dying to hear! I will keep you updated on my progress with the next chapter as any comments come in, but right now, I am only a little ways in. All I know is you will absolutely loooooove it :)

Feel free to share this fic!! The reactions so far have definitely motivated me to keep writing!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Enjoy!!!!

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

The more Ilya thinks about it, the more he realizes the *In The Dark* event was perfect for Shane for many reasons. Number one, Shane was practically unrecognizable while wearing a blindfold; that made hiding him in plain sight a lot easier. Ilya could still parade him around, still stake his claim, but Shane didn't have to worry about anyone finding out something he didn't want them to know. Whether that had more to do with Shane's sexuality or being spotted in a compromising position with his arch hockey rival, Ilya wasn't sure. Possibly both. Either way, Shane needed to feel comfortable in order to go down.

Number two, taking away one of Shane's senses had also taken away the fear factor. Sure, Shane had been terrified at first, mostly of falling, but being in the dark had its perks. He couldn't read too much into things, couldn't anticipate Ilya's moves, and overthink them to death. He had to rely only on feeling alone, and Ilya *always* made Shane feel good. Always.

Number three, it had forced him to give up control, whether he was actively aware of it or not. This made Ilya's life a whole lot easier. The trust came more freely. Shane was reliant on him because he had to be, and that was what had made him drop into something fuzzy. Something so nice, Ilya was sure that Shane didn't even have a name for it.

The problem was that Ilya couldn't exactly just recreate the *In The Dark* event every time he wanted things to progress with Shane. No. He had to come up with new ways of activating those same triggers, ways that would allow Shane to exist in his world without fear of judgment or exposure. And that...that would be tricky. However, as always when it came to Shane Hollander, Ilya was very much up to the challenge.

"Are you kidding me?" Svetlana's voice rattles through the phone. "We cannot host a special event every time you fumble Shane Hollander. These things cost money, you know?"

"I will cover the cost, obviously," Ilya tells her. "I will do all the planning, the guest list, the decorations, the food. I will make sure everything is perfect, Sveta. You know that I will."

"Ilyusha," she says, her voice very serious. "This is out of control. I do not understand. What happened to last night? I thought—"

"I was not expecting Hollander to bring all of his stupid friends!" Ilya shouts into the phone because clearly, there were things that even he could not plan for.

“Which is why you had me bring them into *Sasha’s private event*, remember? Do you really think that is what he wanted? Entire cast of X-Squad watching him slash up Ivan?”

Well, knowing Sasha, that was probably exactly what he wanted, actually.

“He was already on edge,” Ilya groans, running a hand through his hair. “You cannot honestly expect me to kiss Shane Hollander for the first time while he is looking over his shoulder every five seconds. I need time with him.”

Svetlana sighs in frustration. “I do not understand why you are making this so difficult for yourself. You have so many opportunities and, yet, you do not take any of them.”

“Opportunities, yes. Like, what?” Ilya laughs incredulously. “Please explain.”

“Like the *In the Dark* event that we already *had*. You could have taken him to your private room at any moment—”

“He was already *down*, Sveta,” Ilya replies coldly. “I did not want to take advantage by giving him something he does not fully understand yet. I do not want him to kiss me because he is feeling loose and fuzzy. I want him to do it because he wants to.”

“How is hosting another event going to help with that?” She asks plainly.

“*Because*,” Ilya sighs. “He almost kissed me, himself, last night.”

“Ты такой тупой, клянусь,” she lets out a heavy sigh.

“You don’t have to understand,” he shakes his head, because clearly, she wasn’t ever going to. The inner-workings of Shane Hollander were very difficult to explain, but Ilya has spent the better part of a decade learning to master them.

“Ilya,” Svetlana says sternly. “Just have him come to the club on a regular night. Tell him to please not bring his friends this time. I am sure he is capable of listening. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

“A regular night is not going to *work* for this. He is a closeted star hockey player. *The* star hockey player. He is not going to kiss his arch rival in the middle of busy club, and I don’t want to assume things by bringing him to my private room because Shane Hollander is easily spooked and—”

“Then, *how* is an event going to help?” She demands.

“Because it will conceal his identity,” Ilya replies patiently, in the hopes of getting her on board. “He felt comfortable at the last event because he was hidden behind blindfold, yes? So, I have come up with a *new* event that will make him feel comfortable. I will get him loose and fuzzy, and I will kiss him senseless this time. I will make sure I have consent. He did not know what he was getting into last time, and that is my fault, but I could not tell him, okay? He is—” Ilya pauses and sighs.

Shane was so delicate, and sometimes Ilya thought his mind was too terrible for his own good. Shane's head was a *weapon* against himself, so Ilya had to hide things. He had to act secretly to prevent Hollander's brain from putting up defense mechanisms against things that might actually be good for him.

"I'm sorry," Ilya says instead. "I know I am acting insane. I just—" he swallows and grips onto his necklace for courage. "I do not feel things like this. Something about him...I..." Ilya pauses, trying to find the words. "I know he is right for me. Ever since I first saw him, I have known. I wish things did not have to be so complicated, but I know that if I scare him off again, then that will be it. He has been fighting this for ten years, Sveta. I know him. He will keep fighting unless I can convince him to let his guard down."

It wasn't just him that Shane was fighting. Shane was also fighting himself. And his Shane was relentless. Ilya couldn't even imagine how painful it probably was to deny yourself of something for so long. He wasn't sure whether Shane had come to terms with his sexuality fully yet, but he *hoped* he had. He hoped Shane had had the opportunity to experiment, to see what was out there. Hoped he hadn't actually spent the last ten years hiding himself away, trying on girls that were never going to fit right.

His Shane needed to be held, to be cared for. His Shane was physically strong, the biggest hockey star on the planet, but he could also be so small, so fragile. Ilya understood him in ways most people never would, which also meant he was uniquely qualified to offer the care Shane so desperately needed, even if Shane, himself, didn't realize it yet.

"I am so close," he says, after Svetlana has been quiet for some time. "This time, I really am. But, he is leaving in less than a week. I need to make sure he feels something for me before that happens. God, Sveta, everything I do, everything I've done, it has all been for him. I am trading teams, *moving countries* for him. And if it still doesn't work, then I will buy a cottage, I will open new club in fucking lame cottage town if I have to. I will never stop trying, but I am so tired. I am so tired of watching us both suffer when I know there is something so good here. Please...try to understand."

"You deserve to be happy, Ilyusha," Svetlana nearly whispers into the phone. "I just worry what will happen if this does not go the way you plan."

Ilya shuts his eyes tightly.

She was right. Of course, she was right. He has never been this close to crossing a line with Shane, an actual line, one that isn't rooted in quick glances and brushes of skin. If Shane were to reject him, if this really was all just leading up to nothing, Ilya wasn't sure how he would cope. But he had to try. He had to give it one final shot. And if everything went to shit, at least he could say he gave it his all. A stark contradiction to his father's title for him: *Lazy*. Ilya was a lot of things to a lot of people, but with Shane at least, he had never been lazy. Not once.

"I know," he breathes carefully. "I know."

He waits through another bout of silence, checks his phone twice to see if the line has somehow disconnected, but then finally—

“Okay.”

Ilya pauses. “Okay?” He asks lightly.

“We will have your event. This week. Before Shane Hollander leaves for his fancy cottage.”

Ilya exhales a breath he didn’t realize he was holding in.

“But, this is the last time, okay? I mean what I said. I am worried about you.”

“Last time,” Ilya agrees easily. “I promise you, this will work. I have thought through everything so carefully.”

She sighs. “What’s the event?”

The event takes place on a Thursday, exactly one week after their *In The Dark* event, which means Ilya really has his work cut out for him. Normally, events could take months to plan, but Ilya only had a matter of days. He was up to his eyeballs in logistics. Not only did he have to make sure the event went off without a hitch, but he also had to make sure things with Shane went the way he wanted them to.

First things first.

Ilya: *Are you free on Thursday?*

Shane: *Maybe. Why?*

Playing hard to get as always, but at least he wasn’t taking an hour to reply like he often tended to.

Ilya: *I am hosting another event.*

He’s conveniently leaving out the part where he’s throwing the event *specifically* for Shane. But, oh well. Some things were better left unsaid.

Shane: *Oh?*

Ilya rolls his eyes. His Shane was going to make him work for this. Ilya flexes his fingers in preparation and then starts typing.

Ilya: *Similar to last week. I would like to invite you, if you are free.*

Shane: *Is it like a partner event again?*

Ilya smiles. Shane was learning to speak his language, and he was enjoying it very much. He couldn’t wait to teach Shane some other choice words, but that would come with time.

Ilya: *Yes, we do many partnered events. It is more fun this way. More intimate.*

He doesn’t get an immediate reply this time.

Hm, Ilya places his necklace between his lips in contemplation. Maybe intimate was not the right word to use.

Ilya: *It will be the same as last time. No one will know who you are except that you are mine for the evening. I will handle everything. You will relax and enjoy. You liked this last time, yes?*

Yes. Shane had told him he liked it, at least. Ilya really hoped a few sips of vodka weren't enough to turn Shane into a compulsive liar.

His ears are still ringing with how close he had been to kissing Shane, how Shane had looked at his lips, had seemed for the first time like he *really* wanted it. Not just because he was drunk, not just because Ilya had sent him to the good place, but because he had *actually* wanted to. Denying him was not Ilya's strong suit. Still, he knew it would only backfire if he went about this in a way that was...unplanned. Shane needed structure down to the millisecond, so Ilya would have to deliver.

Other than the rocky intro, Ilya had actually had a pretty good time with Shane's friends. He liked Rose a lot more than he ever expected himself to, especially now that he knew she wasn't even remotely interested in his man. If anything, Rose was becoming a very good ally to him. She'd given him several nudges throughout the night, creating space next to Shane when there wasn't any, throwing Ilya subtle looks when opportunities to get closer opened up. He had a feeling that the two of them were in this together, that she wanted this for Shane as much as Ilya did.

Ilya wondered if there was a reason for that, if Shane had said anything specific to her that might indicate he was interested, or if she was just extremely perceptive about picking up on chemistry. Ilya, personally, thought that he and Shane had great chemistry. It just didn't seem to be as obvious to *Shane*.

Shane: *Will I be blindfolded again?*

Finally.

Ilya: *Not exactly, but you will like it, I promise. You have to trust me.*

Ilya knew it could be hours before Shane let himself agree, so he got to work on all the intricate details of the event in the meantime. They often used the same caterer, so luckily, he was able to get them on short notice—with a heavy tip, of course.

The guest list would be a bit more complicated. Ilya did not want anyone there who could possibly make Shane feel uncomfortable. Big-name celebrities were automatically out, as well as anyone who might run in the same circles as him and his friends. Shane would be hidden this time, but not exactly blindfolded. Other guests would not be able to see him, but there was a slight possibility of Shane seeing *them*, so Ilya wanted to avoid anyone who might provoke any additional nerves. He also wanted to steer clear of partners who were a little more hardcore. This was a BDSM event, obviously. Ilya owned a BDSM club. But certain events were tamer than others, and he didn't want anyone who was going to cross any serious boundaries in public—at least not in the main area.

Shane: *What time?*

Ilya: *Do you have press schedule that day?*

Shane: *Just the morning and afternoon.*

Perfect.

Ilya: *Come to me at 7pm. Dmitriy will bring you around back entrance again. He is the security guard, just tell him you are with Rozy.*

Ilya: *This is a bit before the event, since I know you have a problem with tardiness.*

Shane: *I don't have a problem with tardiness!*

Ilya smirks. God, he was delicious.

Ilya: *Mm, maybe if you are extra good for me and do everything I say, I will give you a special treat at the end of the night.*

What the fuck. That was definitely way too much. Ilya quickly deletes it and retypes.

Ilya: *Good. Then, I will see you at 7.*

He waits patiently for Shane's confirmation and five minutes later...

Shane: 👍

"Fuck yes," Ilya breathes, squeezing his necklace once more. He was in.

Invites went out officially the next day, since he had to start getting the word out if he expected anyone to actually show up. Almost everyone would receive the same text, but Ilya had edited Shane's to look a little different.

-

Shane sucks in a breath when his phone buzzes the next morning. An official invitation for Rozanov's event. He stares at the name outlined in bold.

Hush proudly invites you to join us for our first ever masquerade.

*Please see details below specific to your hosting partner: **Ilya Rozanov***

Event Details: Thursday evening. 7pm.

Dress Code: To be provided.

Dinner and alcohol will be served.

As always, it is up to the discretion of the bar whether couples may participate in special menu items. Anyone may be asked to leave at any moment for any reason.

Discretion is advised. Please do not share the details of this event.

We look forward to hosting you.

A masquerade. He had no idea what that meant. Perhaps a costume party? Shane wasn't sure how he felt about that, but at least his identity wouldn't be at risk? Still, he supposed that meant Rozanov was picking out his costume. Fuck, he hoped it wasn't something embarrassing. If it was, Shane could always say no, right? He could tell Roz to fuck off, tell him once and for all that none of this was funny anymore. It hadn't been for a while.

It was the only way to rationalize all of this in his head because there was simply no way he was perceiving things correctly. His number one arch rival, the same guy who had been fucking with him for nearly a decade now, who had probably known Shane was gay before he even realized it himself. *That guy*, the one who fucked everything that moved and probably just wanted to see how far he could push Shane until he cracked.

All that talk about Ottawa, the compliments, the fucking *touches*. Maybe Ilya Rozanov was just a genius with some elaborate plan to take the Stanley Cup from him next year. The thought made bile rise in Shane's throat. Would he really do that? Make a complete fool out of Shane just to gain the upper hand on the ice? Shane liked to believe he wouldn't, but a small part of him still wondered.

Another part of him, however, felt almost entirely opposite. Excited. Scared. Nervous, even, but in a good way. Like how he felt the morning after *In The Dark*. Like maybe this was something that the universe was actually going to let him have. Not for long, of course. Shane would be heading to his cottage in less than a week and, at that point, he could forget all about Ilya Rozanov and whatever kinky life he was leading here in Montreal.

By the time next season started, Shane would be back in Montreal, and Ilya would be somewhere in Ottawa. Probably losing too. Which also made no sense, but Shane wasn't going to sit around trying to talk Roz out of making bad decisions. Especially ones that involved hockey.

Shane sighs and looks down at his phone when another text comes in.

Rose: *Emergency. Come with me to get mani/pedis?*

Shane frowns and immediately types back.

Shane: *Is everything okay??*

Rose: *Meet me in 30?*

Rose: *6214 Rue St-Hubert*

By the time Shane arrives at the nail salon, he's pretty convinced that Rose is not really having an emergency at all. In fact, when he walks in, he finds her sitting on a hot pink couch, slurping noisily on a lavender latte like she doesn't have a care in the world.

"Shane," she greets him with enthusiasm when the bell rings to signify someone has walked in. "How's my favorite hockey player?"

"What's the emergency?" Shane asks warily, wondering how she's managed to find the pinkest nail salon in all of Montreal. Not that he's been to a lot of nail salons, but. He was pretty sure all of them weren't this pink.

"Are you going to get something? My treat," Rose offers, standing so they can be led to their chairs. "Everyone appreciates nice fingers and toes," she smiles at him.

Shane just fish-mouths for a second and then nods.

"Wow, you're very agreeable today. And kind of quiet," she looks him over, placing her purse on a table next to her as she sits down in the pedicure chair.

"You said you had an emergency," he mutters, shrugging while he toes his shoes off.

"Yeah," she looks at him intentionally. "*A Shane emergency*. I wanted to spend time with you," she laughs. "I feel much better already."

"Oh my god," Shane huffs a laugh of his own, shaking his head when he looks over to her. "Well, I'm glad it's nothing serious, at least."

"Yeah, well. There *is* something I wanted to talk to you about," Rose leans in while the pedicurist fills their baths.

"Okay," Shane presses his eyebrows together. "What is it?"

"I was just wondering if you noticed. You know. At the club," she says casually.

"What?" Shane's eyes go a little more alert. "What do you mean? Noticed what?"

"*Shane*," she emphasizes. "Ilya Rozanov was like...*all* over you," she looks him up and down. "You had to have noticed."

Shane ducks his head and coughs. "Um. Yeah. No. I mean, I don't know," he stammers. When he looks up again, she's got an expectant look on her face. "*What?*"

"Is there something you're not telling me?" She squints at him, smiling when the woman comes over to show her the color options. "Oh, this one is perfect," she points to one. "And he'll just do clear," she points to Shane, but then pauses to look at him for a second.

"Actually..." Rose trails, contemplating. "He'll do this one. The pink jelly one."

"Rose," Shane says sternly, sitting up a little.

“Relax,” Rose assures him. “It’s what they do for the guys on set. It just brightens a little. Practically unnoticeable. Now,” she turns to him seriously. “What happened with Ilya Rozanov? I can tell you’re keeping something from me.”

God, was he that obvious?

Shane sighs and leans his head back against the head cushion, letting his eyes close.

“Shane,” Rose says again, only softer this time.

“I’m just—” he huffs, hunching his shoulders in irritation as he sits back up. “I’ve got a lot going on right now, okay? This press schedule has been a lot and...and I really need to just, like. Get through this week and spend some time at home.”

He means his cottage, which was starting to feel like home more and more lately.

“Yeah, where you’re going to be all alone,” Rose reminds him, letting the manicurist take her hand. “I don’t think it’s healthy for you.”

“I *like* to be alone,” Shane reminds her. “I like that the cottage is private. It’s peaceful.”

“I’m sure that it is,” she nods, rubbing her lips together in thought. “It’s a big place, yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean. Pretty big,” he agrees, not getting where she’s going with this.

“Don’t you ever think about having someone there with you?”

Shane crinkles his eyebrows in careful confusion. “Rose, I already told you. You’re welcome to come any time you want.”

“Wow, thank you, *I know*,” she laughs, reaching over to push at his arm. “I meant like someone to share it with,” she raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *have you thought about that?*

Shane scoffs lightly. “Is this another lecture about not putting myself out there enough?”

“Shane, no. I think you’re actually putting yourself out there *plenty* right now,” she tells him seriously. “Like, really. You’re doing a great job.”

“Then, what?” Shane asks, looking over at her. He shifts a little uncomfortably when the woman starts touching his feet, but tries to keep still.

“I just think you should shoot your shot, that’s all,” Rose says matter-of-factly, before turning to slurp down the rest of her latte.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Shane mutters.

“Why are you lying to me?” Rose shakes her head as she turns to face him again, setting the empty drink down next to her. “He was *touching* you, Shane. You were letting him.”

“So, I let him touch me!” Shane says in exasperation. “It’s Rozanov! He’s a fucking asshole. He’s probably just fucking with me like usual.”

“No,” Rose voices her disagreement. “You’re wrong. I don’t know what happened all those years ago, but this is different. The way he was looking at you...” she trails off. “There’s something there, I’m telling you.”

Shane swallows and lets her words eat up all the air around him. “He invited me to another event,” he admits finally.

Rose’s eyes go wide. “Really? When?”

“Thursday.”

“You’re going, right?” She double-checks.

Shane chews at his lower lip for a moment.

“Shane, you’ve liked him for ages,” she practically whispers.

“I don’t want to talk about this here,” he says, as if suddenly noticing their surroundings for the first time. “I just...I know, okay? It’s complicated. It’s way too fucking complicated.”

Rose lets out an exhale and unlocks her phone with her free hand. She scrolls through her messages from the last few days and stops when she gets to one in particular.

Svetlana ♡

Later that night, when Shane is getting out of the shower, he looks down at his freshly manicured nails. The color Rose had picked out did look nice. It was only slightly pink, practically the same color as his natural nails, but a little prettier. A little shinier. He had it on his toes, too.

Ilya would like it, his mind supplies.

Holy shit. He needed to cut it out. This was very, very bad.

“Get it together,” he runs both of his hands through his damp hair and stares at himself in the mirror. God, this was so stupid. Who did he think he was? He needed to end this thing once and for all. He needed to text Ilya and cancel. *Rozanov*. Fuck.

Shane makes a split-second decision and reaches for his phone, typing before he can change his mind.

Shane: *Can’t come to the club on Thursday. I forgot the team is going out to celebrate the end of our press shoots. Sorry.*

Yeah, that was good. Believable. And Rozanov probably wouldn’t even question it. He’d find another partner to bring before the day was up.

Shane's phone buzzes to life in his hand. Fuck. Rozanov was calling him.

Shane watches the phone continue to vibrate, completely frozen in place as he debates whether he should answer or not. Maybe...yes. He could put an end to this once and for all. Plus, for all Rozanov knew, he really did have a good excuse.

Shane presses answer and brings the phone up to his ear.

"Hello?" He says, hearing silence on the other end.

Until, finally, "Hollander."

Shane swallows at the tone of voice. "Uh, what's up?"

"Why are you making up fake plans?"

Shane freezes. "They're not fake," he replies quickly.

"You want me to believe *you* forgot team plans. Right..." Rozanov drags the word in disbelief.

"Yeah, um. Well, we talked about it last week. I guess it just sort of slipped my mind. Lots going on, you know?"

"Wow," Roz laughs. "You are a *really* bad liar."

"I'm not lying," Shane scoffs.

"Okay, what time are your plans till? I will change when the event starts," Roz offers.

"No, you don't need to do that. We'll probably be out late, so." Shane bites his lip.

"How late? Club stays open pretty late. My guests will not mind a late event."

Shane huffs in exasperation this time. "Rozanov," he says a little more seriously. "I can't make it, alright?"

"Why? Because you are scared of how I make you feel?" Roz challenges. "You are embarrassed? What is it?"

"What? No," he shakes his head, even though he knows Roz can't see him. "It's just...not a good idea."

Roz doesn't respond for a beat or two. And then—"I do not understand what you are so afraid of."

Fuck. Shane wanted to tell him he could take his pick. Shane was scared of being outed, of someone seeing him with Rozanov and leaking it to the press. His entire hockey career would be over. He'd be the laughing stock of the NHL. The thing is that wasn't even his worst fear.

No, his worst fear was that this was all just a game to Roz. That he was using Shane for his own enjoyment. That seemed to be his specialty.

“Shane,” he says softly, and Shane just grips onto his bathroom counter with his free hand. “The event is sort of...well—” he pauses, as if contemplating how much he should say. “I am sort of throwing it because of you.”

Shane blinks a few times and then slowly asks, “What do you mean?”

“I had a lot of fun at *In The Dark*. You were so perfect for me, and I was hoping to do it again.”

“To do *what* again?” Shane asks.

“О Боже. Мама, дай мне сил,” Rozanov mutters to himself. “To take care of you. To help you shut off your very loud and anxious brain.”

“I don’t need you to—”

“It’s because *I want to!*” He raises his voice. “You can pretend you do not want it or need it, but *I* want it. *I* need it.”

Shane just stands there for a minute, trying to make sense of the words. “I don’t understand,” he puffs out a breath.

“Да, я это вижу,” Roz says in Russian before exhaling. “You told me you liked it. You told me you liked not having to think. And...I did not get to kiss you the other night,” he adds quietly, almost carefully.

Shane’s heart beats faster in his chest. “You wanted to?” He asks before he can stop himself.

“Hollander. Fuck,” Roz lets out an easy laugh. “Yes, I have never wanted anything so bad in my life. I am throwing an entire event just to have a reason to do so.”

Shane feels his cheeks burn at the thought of Rozanov orchestrating an entire event for him. But, still, it didn’t make sense. Not after... “I don’t understand,” he says again.

“You don’t understand that I am into you? I’m not sure how much clearer I can make it,” he admits easily.

“I don’t understand why you—” Shane chokes off before he can finish the end of his sentence. God, he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t bring up the plans to meet in his hotel room all those years ago. Roz probably didn’t even remember, it was so meaningless to him. Maybe Shane was only one of many options that night, and another one had simply won out.

“Котенок,” Rozanov says softly. “Why I what?”

“Why you stood me up?” Shane exhales finally, feeling like all the air has gone from the room. It feels like that for Rozanov, too, who has suddenly gone silent on the other end.

“Stood you up when?” He voices rockily.

“At the *hotel*. All those years ago,” his voice cracks. “You asked for my room number and then—”

Rozanov lets out a laugh in disbelief. “Are you serious? I stood outside your room for *hours* knocking. Don’t tell me you didn’t hear.”

Shane presses his eyebrows together until they form a line, still leaning all his weight on the bathroom counter like he might topple over if he lets go. “*What?* No, I would’ve heard you. I stayed up all night waiting.”

Rozanov seems at a loss for words, like the things Shane is saying to him aren’t making sense. “I was there. Room 1310. If anyone stood anyone up, it was you,” he murmurs, and he sounds defeated.

Shane feels his heart in his ears. “Room *1410*,” he corrects.

More silence.

“No,” Roz finally says. “It was Room 1310. Trust me, I remember.”

“It was the 14th floor,” Shane insists. “I remember because I was originally supposed to be on the same floor as my parents, and their anniversary is on the 14th, but then they got moved to the 5th floor.”

More silence. And then, suddenly—

“Fuck. Oh my god,” Roz curses. “Are you serious? This whole time you thought I stood you up?”

Shane is still trying to wrap his head around what’s going on.

“Shane,” Rozanov lets out a heavy sigh. “I didn’t stand you up. Or— I didn’t mean to, at least. Fuck, I can’t believe this. I am such an idiot. How could I get the number wrong?”

Shane swallows. His entire body feels like it’s on fire. “I don’t...I don’t understand.”

“I went to Room *1310*,” Rozanov reiterates. “I was there. At 9pm. I waited for hours. I thought you might have fallen asleep or stepped out for a minute. Eventually, I just thought you changed your mind. That you didn’t want to meet anymore.”

“*What*,” Shane breathes, feeling panic rise in his chest. “No,” he disputes quickly. “No. I thought...” He pauses, trying to make sense of this new reality, a reality where Roz *had* tried to come to his room all those years ago.

“Fuck, Shane. I am so sorry,” Roz says regretfully. “I am so sorry for screwing things up. No wonder you think I am such an asshole. Fuck.”

Shane suddenly feels like his entire world has shifted. “You mean...you wanted to?”

“Fuck,” Roz says again, a self-deprecating laugh this time. “Yes, I wanted to. I wanted to more than anything. I have spent the last ten years trying to get your attention. That is how badly I wanted to.”

The air feels thick, wrong, hard to breathe. He tries to process the new information, tries to rethink every interaction between now and then. All the chirps, the comments, the times when Shane thought Roz had been trying to get under his skin. And now? Now, he wasn't so sure.

“I can't believe this whole time,” Roz breathes out. “I thought you were too scared. I thought you rejected me.”

“I wasn't. I—I didn't,” Shane gets out quickly.

“No, it is my fault,” Roz sighs. “I am *very*, very stupid. I should have tried more hotel rooms. I should have knocked on every one until I found you.”

Shane lets out a surprised laugh. “I wouldn't expect you to do that. Maybe...maybe, it's my fault. Maybe I said the wrong room number. I was really nervous, so. It's possible.”

Roz hums at that. “I do not think so. This is my mistake. And, it is a horrible one if it has let you think that for all these years. I am...very upset with myself right now.”

Shane frowns. “Hey, no. It's okay. It was a misunderstanding. Besides, it was almost ten years ago. It doesn't matter anymore.”

“It matters to me,” Roz says seriously. “If I had gotten the number right, if I did not screw this up, maybe things would be different now. Maybe—” he cuts himself off with a huff.

“Maybe...maybe, what?” Shane finds himself asking.

“Please come on Thursday,” Roz begs suddenly. “*Please*. I need to make things right. I don't know if you are serious about boring team dinner or whatever—”

“No,” Shane surprises himself by saying. “I mean, I—I'll come.”

He hears a big sigh of relief from the other end of the line. “I swear to you, Shane, I will never make a mistake like this again. I will make it up to you. You do not deserve to be stood up, even though you were not, you don't deserve to feel like you were. I am so sorry for making you feel that way.”

Shane feels warmth from within his chest, a fluttering feeling in his tummy. “Ilya,” he says softly. “It's alright, yeah? It was a misunderstanding.”

“This misunderstanding...has cost me everything,” Roz says quietly, almost to himself.

Shane presses his eyebrows together as he tries to make sense of it.

“I am so sorry, Shane. Please don't hold this against me—”

“I don’t,” Shane intercepts him. “Hey, I don’t. I swear, okay? We’re good here. You and I... we’re good.”

He hears what sounds like acceptance through the other end of the phone, and the corners of Shane’s lips turn up slightly.

“I’ll see you Thursday, alright? I’ll be on time,” Shane vows, and he can hear a wet laugh from the other end.

“Please,” Ilya requests. “I promise you, Котенок. I will not hurt you like this again.”

Shane just smiles fully to himself and shakes his head. “I know.”

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Ilya couldn’t believe it. All these years of thinking Shane rejected him, all these years of pining, of trying to get his attention, and for what? Shane thought he had *stood him up*. Ilya was sick to his stomach. Ilya wanted to curl up and die. Ten fucking years. Ten years of trying to convince the love of his life that he wasn’t just some asshole rival. Ten years of effort with his hands unknowingly tied behind his back. God, no wonder he was so far off his game.

“Ilyusha, this place looks stunning,” Sveta tells him, looking around the decadent room.

The theme for the décor is black and gold this time. Ilya had repurposed some of the black ribbons from their *In The Dark* event to save a bit of cost. Other than that, he’s spared no expense. Along with the black ribbons spanning the cave-like ceiling and looping all the way down to the floor, they’ve added black lace to all the walls, with golden trim and accents scattered throughout.

The flowers adorning the added black marble high-top tables were gold. There were also a few long tables off to the side that would soon be filled with snacks and other treats. He isn’t ashamed to say he’s really outdone himself with this one. Even more so, the guests that did receive an exclusive invite were positively delighted with the theme. **Unleashed: A Primal Masquerade.**

Yeah, so maybe Ilya was lying to Shane a bit again. Not lying, just...omitting the truth. The last thing Ilya wanted to do was scare him off over something he was *sure* Shane would like. And Shane would like this so much. He knew it for a fact. Actually, he *owed* it to him after everything that has transpired.

“Why do you look so tortured?” Svetlana sighs, stepping over to him with a shake of her curls. “I swear, you will never let yourself be happy.”

“He thinks I stood him up,” Ilya reminds her lowly.

“Yes, I know. It’s unfortunate, but what’s done is done. He will get over it, моя любовь. I can promise you this,” she runs her hand over his back just the way his Mama used to.

“You don’t know that,” Ilya swallows, looking around the room once more. Everything did look perfect. For only a few days of planning, he’d pulled off a near-miracle.

“He is coming, like you said, yes? You have been texting him.”

Ilya licks over his lips and nods. He had been texting Shane. Only because he couldn’t help himself. He didn’t want their conversation about the hotel to be the last one they had before they saw each other. So, Ilya had gone out of his way to try to send things that would make Shane smile.

A pretty flower he found on his run. A picture of two gay penguins holding hands. Two cups he found for sale at the local coffee shop: one said team Voyageurs, the other, team Centaurs. He secretly thinks Shane had liked that one the best.

“Then, he will be here,” Svetlana smiles. “And you will make it up to him. Maybe it is a good thing.”

Ilya’s eyes dart to her, glaring slightly.

“What? I’m serious,” she blinks at him. “This whole time you weren’t sure why your ten-year plan wasn’t working. Now, you know.”

Well, yes, that was true. He didn’t think it was necessarily *a good thing*, but he’s glad Shane made the choice to bring it up. If not, maybe they would have gone *another* ten years running in circles around each other. Ilya doesn’t want to think about that.

“I think he will love this,” she tells him sincerely, quieter this time. “You have put a lot of thought into his needs. I am sure he will recognize this and fall madly in love with you, just as he was always meant to.”

Ilya’s heart pulses at the thought. He hoped so. He really hoped so.

As the clock ticks closer and closer to 7pm, he darts into his office to look himself over one more time. He doesn’t usually tend to dress up too much for these events, likes to be comfortable during a scene, but for today, he’s added a little flair. A black blazer vest with the sleeves cut off, the V of the neckline putting his chest on show, with two French buttons done up on his left side. He’s bare-chested underneath and will probably unbutton the vest as time goes on, but for now, he’s comfortable. He’s got on a silky pair of black satin suit pants as well, ones that are tailored to perfection. He’s hyper-aware of the fact that Shane will probably be very touchy tonight, and he wants to be mindful of his preferences towards certain fabrics.

He’s got an outfit for Shane as well, one that he can’t *wait* to get him in. His Shane was going to look stunning, more stunning than anyone else. Ilya would make sure of that. Not that it was hard.

His hair is styled like usual, a bit of product to keep his curls out of his face, with the knowledge that they will likely fall later. Ilya wanted Shane to have full-reign of his curls for

hair-touching purposes, just in case he finally did get that kiss tonight. Well, not just in case. He *had* to. He *needed* to.

At 6:57pm, Dmitriy buzzes his office. “Твой мальчик здесь,” he says through the intercom, and Ilya beams. Shane was on time, even a few minutes early.

“Приведите его ко мне,” Ilya buzzes back, his heart beating wildly in his chest.

This would be his first-time seeing Shane since the revelation about the hotel room, and, admittedly, his nerves were on fire. Would Shane look at him differently now that he knew? Would Shane give up the closeted tough-guy act and immediately fall into his arms? God, Ilya hoped so.

He pokes his head into the hallway when he hears the backdoor beep open. And his Shane... his Shane looked...flustered. Intense. Anxious, *always* anxious, but this time, even more than usual.

“Are you okay?” Ilya’s eyebrows press together, and Shane just sighs heavily. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Shane replies, but his mouth is in a firm line.

“Doesn’t look like nothing to me,” Ilya says in return. “Looks like a very definite something.”

Shane blinks at him in what looks like mild frustration.

Ilya frowns. “Come here. Tell me what happened.”

Shane stands still in the hallway for a second, looking *defeated*, before he finally, finally makes his way over to Ilya’s office.

Ilya ushers him in with a hand in between his shoulder blades, eager to touch, *always* eager to touch.

“Боже мой, you are nothing but tension,” Ilya notes with a shake of his head. The amount of stress Shane carried within himself on a day-to-day basis could not be healthy.

“It’s nothing. Just glad the stupid press schedule is over,” Shane mutters.

Ilya’s eyebrows crease together. “Press schedule where you get to talk about hockey? About Captaining your team to winning the Stanley Cup? Why is this so stressful for you, котенок?”

Shane exhales heavily, like he’s holding the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I don’t know. The guys have been giving me so much shit lately.”

“Who is giving you shit about what?” Ilya straightens to his full height.

“Nothing. It’s so stupid,” he shakes his head.

“Sit down,” Ilya urges, pressing him into the thick leather couch. “It is not stupid if it is making you feel this way. You are radiating loud thoughts.”

Shane looks at him in what he thinks is disbelief before letting his shoulders drop a little. “It’s really nothing. They’re just teasing me about...this...girl.”

Ilya feels every muscle in his body go stiff. “What girl?” He forces the words to leave his mouth.

Shane’s eyes dart to him momentarily before drifting back to the ground. He holds onto his silence a little longer, seemingly steeling himself for what’s to come. “No one. There is no girl. That’s the problem.”

Ilya blinks once, twice, three times. “I am not following.”

Shane groans and presses his face into his hands. “It’s some stupid thing they made up. Some girl they think I’ve been seeing in Boston for years now. They call her Boston Lily. Apparently...apparently I start acting different when I’m texting her or like...whenever we’re in town to play Boston.”

Okay. Ilya is really confused now. “So...Boston girl is...is not real?” He double-checks. “Then, why do they think this?”

Shane’s eyes dart to him once more. Nervous. Jerky.

Ilya waits patiently for a response.

“I guess,” Shane says slowly, too slowly for Ilya’s liking. “I guess it’s sort of...you?”

Ilya’s eyes go comically wide. “Me?” He asks incredulously. “*I* am your Boston Lily?”

“Forget it,” Shane sighs, dropping his elbows to his knees.

“No, absolutely not. What do they think you start acting like? Why is this upsetting you?”

“I don’t know,” Shane admits with hunched shoulders. “I guess they think I’m like whipped or whatever. But the thing is, there *is* no Boston Lily. They’re always ribbing me about her, asking when I’m going to introduce her to the team, but she isn’t real.”

Ilya can’t help the way his lips turn up into an insane grin.

When Shane turns to look at him, he blinks in confusion. “What?”

“She is real,” Ilya says matter-of-factly. “She is me. *I* am the one they want to meet.”

Shane scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Not ridiculous. Is what you just said, no? I am Boston Lily. The one you are...‘whipped’ for.”

Shane's eyes narrow slightly. "Don't be a fucking asshole."

Ilya can't help the laugh that escapes him; he's so happy. "I can't believe they have thought this for years when, the whole time, Boston Lily has been thinking you hate her."

"Yeah, well. I also thought *Boston Lily* stood me up in a hotel room the summer before rookie season," Shane fires back.

"Mm," Ilya hums happily. "And yet, they still thought you were...what was it again? Whipped?"

"Shut up," Shane grumbles in irritation at him. "You are such an asshole, I swear to god."

Ilya smiles and sits next to him on the couch, bumping his knee against Shane's. "Is okay. Boston Lily is *whipped* for you, too," he tells him, watching the way Shane's eyes slowly meet his. "Your teammates sound like the real assholes."

Shane's eyebrows pinch, and he immediately shakes his head like it's a reflex. "No. They're good guys, really. They're just, I don't know," he sighs.

Ilya nods in understanding. They don't have to talk about this right now. In fact, there are about a million other things he'd rather discuss instead. But, still. Small talk is important before a scene like the one they're about to do. Ilya wants to make sure everything is all out in the open.

"So, the press stuff went well, other than your teammates? You are finally done?"

"Yeah," Shane exhales another sigh. "I'm glad it's over. It can be overwhelming to be with the team for that long when we're not on the ice. Too much testosterone in one place."

Ilya hums in agreement. He did not love being around his team for too much either. That's why he was so comfortable with the idea of not re-signing.

"What about you?" Shane tips his head.

Ilya just blinks. "What about me? I do not have any press for big Stanley Cup win."

Shane lets out a soft laugh. "No, I just meant, how was your day? How have you been?"

Ilya blinks again. He doesn't think they've ever just, talked, like this. "I am okay. I've been working a lot to get the event set up, but it's a labor of love. Everything has turned out really nicely. I'm excited for you to see."

Shane gives him a smile. His first real, genuine one of the day. Ilya sees stars.

"Me too. I've never been to a masquerade before," Shane says shyly, but Ilya can sense the hint of excitement in his voice. "Is this your costume?" He asks all-of-a-sudden, looking Ilya up and down with interest.

Ilya glances at what he's wearing. "Mm, it is not exactly a costume party. There are elements of that, but you will see. I think you will like what I have planned for you."

Shane licks over his lips and looks around the room. "Do you have what I'll be wearing? Can I see it?" He asks eagerly.

"Well," Ilya's lips pull up. "Maybe if you ask nicely."

He doesn't miss the way Shane's cheeks color at the edges, his throat bobbing as he swallows.

"Please, can I see what I'll be wearing? Please," he tries again, and god. Ilya thought he was just perfect.

Ilya gives Shane's knee a little squeeze in approval and then pushes himself off the couch to retrieve the outfit. He feels like he has electricity running through his spine as he walks back over. Shane is sitting on the edge of the couch in interest, eyes trained to the pile in Ilya's hands.

"Start taking your clothes off. Shirt first," Ilya commands softly, warming them both up to what's coming. This time with Shane right now was essential. He didn't want a repeat of last time. He wanted Shane to understand what this evening would be.

Shane hesitates for a second, and Ilya realizes this is the first time they've been around each other like this without any liquid courage. Still, Shane is moving before he can finish that thought, slowly pulling his shirt over his head.

Ilya watches with intensity in his eyes, drinking in each inch of new skin that's presented to him. He watches as Shane folds his shirt before placing it down next to him, nervousness in his eyes as they dart around, sometimes landing on Ilya, other times the wall.

"Your pants next," Ilya says casually, eyes flicking down to Shane's legs. "Stand up for me."

Shane follows instruction beautifully, moving at a careful pace to complete the task that Ilya has given him. He stands and unbuttons his jeans, tantalizingly pushing them down his thighs before he folds those too and places them on top of the shirt.

Ilya keeps his expression neutral, but he looks him over in approval. He places the pile of clothes he's been holding on top of his desk and then reaches for the pants first. The pants are black, silky, and satin, similar to the ones Ilya currently has on, only less fitted and more loose. They're Ilya's own, too, which means they'll be slightly too big on Shane, and the thought makes his mouth water. He hands them over and watches as Shane puts them on. When he's done, Ilya steps over with the hoodie to help Shane into it.

"No shirt," Ilya answers the question in Shane's eyes, holding the fabric while Shane navigates to slip each arm inside.

The fabric is dark gray-washed, cozy on the inside, but a little edgy and more stylish on the outside. It's also one of Ilya's that he swiped from home. Once Shane is properly situated, he

zips the hoodie up halfway, leaving some of Shane's bare chest exposed.

What he brings out next has been custom-made for Shane.

"What is that?" Shane asks, his voice a little raspy.

"This," Ilya holds it up. "Is your masquerade."

It's essentially a mask, only the front is made up of an extremely thin layer of wire mesh that's been fitted to perfection with a gorgeous layer of black lace. On top, consists of a small black pair of cat ears that will sit beautifully in Shane's hair, the mask intended to be secured around the back of his head with black ribbons.

Shane sucks in a sharp gasp.

"I had it made specially for you. It should fit very nicely," Ilya explains. "Would you like to try it on?"

Shane nods so quickly that Ilya is sure his head might spin off, and he smirks as he steps up to him.

"The front is made of a flexible material. You should be able to see through it just enough, but the lace will hide you from anyone looking in. If I wish to feed you, or maybe just want to see your pretty mouth," Ilya teases, running his thumb over Shane's lower lip. "I will be able to fold this in any way I want to expose you more," he demonstrates, scrunching up the fabric to show him how it works.

Ilya carefully fits the mask over Shane's face, leaving the thin fabric pressed up so his boy can get used to it. Shane is very, very quiet. So quiet that, for a moment, Ilya starts to question whether he's still breathing. As Ilya fastens the mask, carefully tying the small ribbons around the back of his head, Shane reaches up to touch one of the cat ears.

"Котенок," he says in explanation. And then, Ilya sinks his fingers through the top of Shane's hair, giving one of his kitten ears an intentional, delicate, little scratch.

"You—" Shane stutters, and Ilya can see his eyes squeeze shut from behind the mask in thought before popping back open. "You called me that before."

"Yes. It means kitten," he hums, scratching through Shane's real hair this time. "Tonight, you are my little kitten."

"Oh," Shane breathes, and up close like this, Ilya can see his eyes have gone glassy around the edges.

Ilya lets go of Shane's hair and, instead, pushes the mesh wiring of the mask a little higher until he can see his entire face this time, wanting to get a sense of his reaction. He then reaches for one of his arms. At the end of each sleeve, there are thumb holes that he carefully helps Shane's fingers into. "And these, these are going to be your paws," he tells him, and watches in thinly-veiled adoration as Shane scrunches his fingers up, almost like he's trying to test his new paws. "How are you feeling? Would you like to be my kitten for the evening?"

Maybe you will make some other friends, hm? Other kittens and pups attending just like you.”

“Ilya,” Shane hiccups a gasp, his pupils swallowing up all the brown in his eyes until only black remains. And then, “Am I...am I going to have a collar?”

Ilya’s pulse throbs. Shane Hollander was going to fucking kill him. He hadn’t really had the forethought to get a collar in the chaos of everything, but whatever Shane asks, he shall receive. He wracks his brain for anything he can use as a substitute. The idea hits him like a dagger.

No, he thinks to himself. Him and his impulsive need to please Shane no matter what could be blinding sometimes, even deadly; but this...this was just too much. He couldn’t. Shouldn’t. He curses himself for how much he still wants to.

“You’ll have a collar,” Ilya assures him, his voice a little shakier than he’d like it to be. He traces over Shane’s neck with his fingers, letting his palm press fully against where his chest meets his collarbones, feeling his heartbeat ricochet loudly against his fingertips.

Then, he lets go of Shane and brings his hands to the back of his own neck as he reaches to unclasp his necklace. The one thing he had left of his mother, the one thing still tying him to her. By wearing it, it felt like he was still hers, like he would always be safe and protected with her watching over him. He wanted Shane to feel like that too; he wanted to *be that for him*.

He watches Shane’s big brown eyes blink up at him as Ilya moves closer, until he and Shane are practically nose to nose. Shane’s cheeks are pinkening deliciously, and Ilya wants to pepper them with kisses. Instead, he leans in and hooks his chin around Shane’s shoulder in order to fasten his mother’s gold cross around the Golden Boy’s precious neck. Once the necklace has been secured, Ilya pulls back a bit, letting his eyes wash over Shane. *His* Shane.

His Shane is trembling, just a little bit, and watching him in mild confusion.

Ilya smiles at him and ducks down to kiss the necklace from where it now sits against Shane’s bare chest. “Now, everyone will know you are mine.” He carefully hooks his front two fingers in the chain and gives it a delicate tug.

Shane lets out a breath as he’s pulled forward, his eyes blown out, while Ilya does what he pleases. Like Shane is his precious little doll.

And before Ilya can even really process what’s happening, Shane is closing the last few inches between them and kissing him, the sleeves of his hoodie half resting on Ilya’s jaw and half wrapped around his neck. Ilya just sighs, *finally*, and sinks into it, pulling Shane in by his hips as soon as he remembers to breathe. He deepens the kiss between them, practically inhaling him as he tips his head slightly to adjust the angle. He lets his hand slip underneath Shane’s hoodie and up his bare back, gripping onto the skin with his fingernails as he presses his tongue deep into Shane’s mouth. And Shane *moans*. Like audibly *moans* into his mouth, and Ilya feels his knees start to go weak in response.

Shane pulls back momentarily to catch his breath, but Ilya doesn't let him get far, gripping Shane by his chin this time as he slots their lips together once again. He wants *more*. He sucks on Shane's tongue deliberately, until Shane's knees actually *do* go weak and he stumbles into Ilya's chest. Ilya catches him around the waist, letting his hand slip down to cup Shane's ass, delighted when the feel of the fabric reminds him that Shane is wearing *his* clothes. Shane practically whimpers into his mouth, and Ilya just swallows it like he wants to eat him alive.

Eventually, Ilya pulls back just enough to look at Shane properly, both of them still breathing heavily into each other's mouths. He slips his fingers up Shane's chest and gives the necklace another little tug, sending out a silent *thank you* to his Mama, who he's sure has somehow ignited the final spark they needed in order for him and Shane to come together.

"You are delicious," Ilya says into his lips, nudging their noses together.

Shane is just watching him with rapt eyes, almost as if he's just now noticing something for the first time.

"It is almost 7:30," Ilya tells him, rubbing along the edge of Shane's jaw with his thumb. "How are you feeling?"

Shane licks his lips and presses forward for another kiss, which Ilya easily grants him. "I'm feeling...good," he nods, shutting his eyes as their foreheads press together.

Shane's voice is syrupy slow, and Ilya can see that the little warm-up he planned has worked really well to get him in the proper mindset.

"It will be like last time. You remember?" He prompts, feeling Shane nod against his forehead. "I am going to have your mask down so people cannot see you. I will do the talking. But there are some differences. Because you are my kitten." Ilya is the one to give him a kiss this time, before pulling back to cup his chin, ensuring he has all of Shane's focus. "When we are at a table, you will kneel by my side. I have arranged for nice kneeling pillows so you do not hurt your knees," Ilya tells him.

Shane lets out a soft, indecipherable sound.

"I will be keeping a close eye on you, but if you need a break, you will get my attention, yes? If you are feeling pain or discomfort. I need to know these things so I can make sure you're okay," Ilya hums, holding onto the pendant of his mom's necklace and giving it a little tug until he gets Shane's nod in confirmation. "I will be feeding you. Petting you. Making you feel lots of good things."

He watches Shane for a second, watches the fuzziness in his eyes, how he seems like he could go down at any moment now.

"I think it is time for us to decide on a safeword," he tells Shane, still holding him by his mom's necklace. "It is a word used in the middle of a scene—"

“What’s a scene?” Shane interrupts him to ask, and then winces, like he isn’t sure if he was supposed to.

Ilya just smiles at him, glad that Shane is asking the right questions. That he is interested to know more about Ilya’s world.

“A scene. Some people call it session or play, but it is basically a pre-determined time when we will engage in this sort of...activity. In which I will be taking control, and you will be giving up control. And to make sure everything is safe and consensual, we will come up with a word we can use if things start to get too intense.”

“Too intense?” Shane’s eyebrows press together.

“Remember last time when you were all fuzzy?” Ilya prompts, stroking Shane’s cheek with the back of his knuckles.

Shane nods his agreement.

“Well, sometimes, words are difficult. A lot of people use the stoplight system. So, I can check in with you. Ask you if you are green, which means good and to keep going,” he links his fingers with Shane’s and brings them to his lips. “Yellow means slow down or wait a second.” He leans forward to kiss Shane’s nose this time. “And red means to stop completely. Something is not right.” He checks to make sure Shane is understanding and smiles when he gets another nod in return. “Sometimes, though, it is nice to just have one safeword. Saying this means we pause and check in with each other. Make sure everything is okay before we keep going. It is usually a word that does not come up in regular conversation, one that we would not accidentally say.”

Shane wrinkles his nose a little bit. “Why can’t the safeword just be safeword?”

Ilya blinks at him and then breaks into laughter. “You are funny, Hollander. Would you like our safeword to be safeword? I have never, ever heard of anyone doing this.”

Shane has the nerve to flush, his freckles coming to life on his pink, pink cheeks. “It just seems easy to remember, that’s all,” he says quietly, shrugging.

“Mm,” Ilya takes him by the chin again, cupping his jaw fondly. “Everything about you drives me wild. You do not even know how devastating you are.”

“Devastating,” Shane repeats with a huff.

“Yes, devastating,” Ilya replies with a frown. “What? Is translation wrong?”

“Devastating is usually a bad thing,” Shane mutters, fiddling with one of the buttons on Ilya’s low-cut blazer.

“Ah, but I meant it as a good thing, Котенок. I meant that you are so striking and wonderful that I must fear for my life because I think you quite literally *destroy* me,” Ilya murmurs practically into his lips.

Shane responds by practically swallowing him with a kiss.

Ilya pulls off of him with a smacking sound and squeezes the back of his neck. “Okay. It is time.”

He carefully fixes Shane’s face-covering, pulling the mesh down fully until his boy is properly hidden behind the delicate lace. Then, they make their way out to the main room, Ilya leading Shane by the hand with loosely linked fingers.

As hot as it would be, he doesn’t want his boy crawling tonight, hyper-aware of Shane’s need to keep his body in peak condition, even during the off-season. There was no need to have him with sore knees for the next few days, especially not without reason. No, kneeling would be plenty for tonight.

The place is filled up quite nicely, partners scattered in various states of undress and positions. Some pets were already on the floor, while others were allowed to stand as their masters doted on them. Some pets were nearly bare, save for their unique face coverings and skimpy undergarments.

Ilya watched proudly as the catering staff began to set up food off to the side. His event was very beautiful, indeed. His event partner, even more so.

“Would you like to drink tonight?” Ilya asks Shane, since they haven’t had much time to discuss their preferences for the scene in-depth.

Shane, to his part, is already a little out of it from their warm-up. Still, he’s responsive as ever, giving Ilya’s fingers a small squeeze as he sways closer into his space. “Want you to decide,” he says softly, and Ilya smiles at the extreme display of trust.

He knew Shane prioritized his physical health over everything, so to have Shane hand over this decision to him— well, Ilya did not take that lightly.

“Mm, we will do same as last time then. A shot to start and then a drink for sipping,” he tells Shane of his plans before leading him over to the bar.

Angel is working, like usual, and she greets them both with a large smile. “Rozy! The event is gorgeous. I can’t believe you pulled this off in only a few days.”

Ilya lets himself preen at the compliment. “Thank you. It is shaping up to be very nice,” he nods in agreement, wrapping a possessive arm around Shane’s waist as he cranes his neck to look at him through the mask. It was different, knowing Shane could see him this time, even though his vision was still limited due to the mesh and lace. “My котенок is being very sweet today. He was giving me nice, little kitten lick kisses earlier,” Ilya recalls, running a knuckle over the soft lace of Shane’s face covering. “I would like a milk and honey shot for him. And then a full glass of my special drink.”

“Coming right up,” Angel agrees cheerfully and then turns to reach for the correct glassware.

Ilya takes that moment to gently lift Shane's face covering enough to expose his mouth, and then a little more just to see his pretty nose. "Can I have another kiss, котенок? So everyone can see how good you're being for me?"

Shane sucks in a little air and then presses forward, lips pursed and ready for a kiss, but Ilya stops him with a sharp pull on the back of his hoodie.

"Uh, uh," Ilya chides lightly, grabbing his chin. "This is *not* how kittens kiss, котенок. You know better than this, hm? How does a kitten kiss? With their scratchy little tongue, yes? Why don't you show me?" He requests, turning his face to offer Shane his cheek.

Shane lets out something akin to a huff and then leans forward again, this time slowly swiping his tongue across Ilya's cheek.

Ilya hums hungrily and then turns to suck Shane's tongue into his mouth, giving him a proper kiss this time. "Good boy," he praises, running the pad of his thumb over Shane's bottom lip. He reaches for the shot when Angel hands it to him and then holds it up to Shane's wet lips, watching as Shane leans forward to try and take the shot, but Ilya just tugs the back of his hoodie in reprimand again. "No, котенок. Like a *kitten*, remember?"

Ilya watches as Shane's cheeks flush brightly against his tan skin before he tries once more, this time dipping his little tongue into the shot glass so he can lap at it. The milky color of the shot makes him look like he's actually drinking from a bowl of milk, and Ilya's mind goes to dark, hot places.

"That's my good boy. Angel, I think we will need a bigger drink like this, actually. My котенок likes his milk," Ilya says, keeping his eyes trained on the boy in front of him until the entire shot is almost gone. Once Shane has trouble reaching the rest of the liquid, Ilya carefully tilts the remainder into his open, waiting mouth and then claims his lips with one more kiss.

He has another brutal idea, one that's sure to end in his own destruction, but luckily, Svetlana steps up to the bar before he can talk himself out of it. "Sveta," Ilya acknowledges her as she walks up. "Do you have eyeliner in your bag? It is an emergency."

She looks between him and Shane for a moment before blindly reaching into her bag to produce a stick of eyeliner. "What are you going to do with it?" She asks, as Ilya swipes it from her.

He wastes no time in uncapping the pencil, pulling Shane to him by the chin as he quickly draws on six little cat whiskers, three on either side of his perfect nose. He hesitates for a second and then, at the last moment, colors a heart onto the tip of his nose before pulling back to assess his handiwork.

Svetlana, nosy as she is, cranes her neck to look at what he's done. "Oh, Ilyusha," she says in what sounds like delight. "He's just precious. And this mask...so stunning," she nods her approval, but not before stealing the eyeliner back from him before he can come up with anymore ideas. "It's good to see you, Shane," she greets knowingly.

Ilya practically growls and pulls Shane closer to his side, feeling the other tense in his hands. “Sveta,” he hisses, eyes darting around to make sure no one has heard her.

“Yellow,” Shane whispers against his neck, and Ilya just about loses it.

“Jesus fucking Christ. Get the hell out of my face *right* now,” Ilya demands, his blood boiling beneath his skin. “Тебе повезет, если я вообще заговорю с тобой до конца ночи.”

She at least has the nerve to look apologetic, a *sorry* on her lips that Ilya has no interest in hearing.

Ilya turns to face Shane fully this time, towering over him, hiding him from view of the rest of the room as he strokes his cheek. “Are you alright?” He checks, combing his hands all over him, wherever he can reach.

Shane just swallows and nods jerkily, but he looks like he’s on the verge of tears if his quivering lips are anything to go off of.

“I promise you, котенок, no one can see you through this. Svetlana knows she is not supposed to acknowledge you like that, especially not during a scene,” Ilya tells him seriously. He needs Shane to understand he has thought through every detail with a painstaking attention to his comfort level. “Is that why you colored? You are worried someone will see you like this?” The *with me*, goes unsaid.

Another jerky nod.

“Моя любовь,” Ilya pulls him close against his chest. “You are safe here, I swear it. I would never bring you to something like this if I thought you would be uncomfortable. Sveta knows not to tell anyone about you being here. She was not thinking, and I will make sure she does not approach us for the rest of the evening. I’m so sorry I broke your trust.”

Shane grips him tightly, rubbing his nose along the underside of Ilya’s jaw, probably smearing his freshly applied heart nose, but Ilya doesn’t care.

“If you do not wish to continue, we will not. We can go back to my room and just sit, hang out, maybe kiss some more,” Ilya offers, pulling back slightly to watch Shane’s reaction. “Tell me you are red and I will take you away right now.”

Shane sucks his lower lip in between his teeth thoughtfully, as if contemplating his options. “I’m green,” he says, after a moment of deliberation.

“You are sure?” Ilya double-checks, waiting for the emphatic nod he gets in return. “Good boy. My sweet котенок,” he peppers his face with kisses. “You will never be in trouble if you need to color out or use your safe word, okay? I will never be upset. I am so proud you told me you were yellow. That was very, very good,” Ilya speaks to him soothingly, and it seems to have the desired effect, with Shane already going lax in his arms again.

“Thank you,” Shane says softly, barely a whisper, but Ilya hears it.

“You’re very welcome. My gorgeous boy,” he replies, scratching through the hair at the base of Shane’s neck until he’s practically vibrating against Ilya’s skin. “Are you hungry? I think it’s time we get you something to eat.”

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Shane is beyond embarrassed by the fact that he’s colored out so soon. Ilya probably thought he was pathetic. If he thinks that, however, he certainly isn’t letting it show. He’s still telling Shane the nicest things, still touching him and doting on him like he’s something important. Like he’s worth more than just how many goals he can score in a season or how many Stanley Cups he’s won.

Shane *likes* him. He hates how much he does. Ilya is just *so* nice when he’s like this. Shane blinks up at him, wondering if he’s been asked a question. Ilya is looking at him expectantly, but if a question was asked, Shane certainly doesn’t remember it. He feels good. He feels really good.

Ilya laughs and says something else in Russian. Shane smiles. His eyelids feel heavy.

“You’re so cute with your ears, котенок,” Ilya says next, and reaches to pet at one of Shane’s little ears. Shane understands him this time and leans into the touch. He likes that nickname. He likes when Ilya speaks Russian in general. He likes how naturally it rolls off his tongue, how his lips form around the words, how Shane doesn’t have to think about what he’s saying, aware of the fact that it isn’t for him to know.

Shane reaches for one of the buttons on Ilya’s sleeveless blazer, fiddling with it slightly to give his hands something to do, to have an excuse to touch him.

“Ah, you want me to unbutton this?” Ilya asks in understanding and easily undoes the two buttons, opening up the blazer to reveal his bare, defined chest.

Shane’s eyes go wide behind the face covering. He hadn’t been asking for that at all, but he’s so glad Ilya has the best ideas. Shane immediately reaches to touch his hard abdomen, sucking in a breath of air as his fingers glide over the well-earned muscle.

“You like that, do you?” Ilya smiles at him in amusement, and Shane nods. He really, really does like it. “Come on, don’t be greedy. Let’s go get some food. I’ll take your drink for you.”

Shane watches from behind the face covering as Ilya grabs his drink from the bar and then hooks two fingers into Shane’s belt loop, tugging him forward. Shane gasps and stumbles into his back before straightening up again. Technically, he can see through the mask, but it’s a little fuzzy around the edges, a little difficult to make out the full picture. He still has to rely on Ilya’s guidance as he walks after him.

It’s different from last time, though, when Shane couldn’t see at all. This time, he sees the other couples. He’s surprised to find some of the “pets” wearing full head covers in the shape of a cat or dog. Some are almost completely naked except for a few strips of clothing. Some are on leashes, crawling around on the floor, while others stand politely next to their “owners”.

Shane is glad Ilya isn't making him crawl. He wrinkles his nose thinking about how dirty the floors must be. He did say something about kneeling, though. Shane is reminded of this when he glances up to see Ilya has brought them to a booth. There are already a few people sitting at the table; some have their partner sitting next to them, while others appear not to. Shane tips his head as he contemplates why that might be, but before he can come up with anything, his attention is pulled by a square pillow dropping to the ground in front of him. He looks up to find Ilya pointing at it.

"Be good, котенок. You're going to kneel for me now, okay?" Ilya gives the necklace around Shane's neck a little tug. "I'm going to be right here the whole time. If you need anything at all, you get my attention. I'm going to be keeping an eye on you. Servers are coming around with food soon."

Shane swallows unsurely, but nods as Ilya places a firm hand on his shoulder, putting some pressure until Shane finally starts to lower to his knees on top of the pillow.

"What color are you?" Ilya asks, giving the back of his neck a quick squeeze.

"Green," Shane says, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Good. You can sit however feels comfortable, hm?" Ilya tells him, dropping himself down into the open spot at the edge of the booth.

Shane is surprised when he looks up to find two other pets under the table. One is a bunny, their head half in their owner's lap as the owner stroked one of her white ears. Another is a puppy who has its face buried in their owner's crotch.

Shane shifts a little uncomfortably at the idea of company, but luckily, neither of the other pets pay him any attention, seemingly off in their own world. He jumps when something is set down in front of him. It's a bowl, and Shane looks up to find Ilya pouring his drink from the bar into it, some of the milky liquid splashing messily over the sides.

He's a little freaked out, he realizes all of a sudden. This is a *lot*. This is...too much. Too much all at once. He frantically reaches up to grab Ilya's leg as he sucks in a panicked breath.

"Relax," Ilya leans down to him, brushing some of his hair out of the way so he has more room to see out of the mask. "You're okay. I'm right here. Just focus on me. Don't focus on anything else."

"Ilya," Shane says softly, digging his fingers into the other's thigh.

"I'm here," Ilya says again. He seems to contemplate something, eyes cataloging Shane's face. "Would you like to sit with me instead? In my lap? I think that would be better," he tips his head, running a hand through Shane's hair.

Yes, Shane thinks so too. He thinks he would like that a lot better. "Please," he remembers his voice, scraping his fingernails over Ilya's knee.

“Alright, up you go, c’mon. And then, no more speaking unless it is to color or use your safeword. Kittens do not talk,” Ilya chides lightly, but helps to steady Shane as he quickly rises to his feet. “Grab your bowl, котенок. Put it on the table for me.”

Shane huffs and reaches for the stupid bowl, but carefully places it on the table as asked. Mostly, he just wants to sit in Ilya’s lap now. He’s unprepared, however, for all the eyes that are suddenly staring at him when he does. For a second, he’s terrified they can see him, that everyone in this room has now witnessed *the* Shane Hollander on his knees dressed like a cat. But if anyone recognizes him, they don’t show it on their faces.

Another thing Shane is hyper-aware of right now is his size. He’s big in a muscular way, athletic, but where Shane is nervous Ilya won’t be able to hold him, Ilya just squeezes his hip and shifts until they find a good position, like Shane actually weighs nothing in his lap.

“There you go. Better?” He checks, and Shane nods, though his heart is still hammering at all the eyes on them.

“Rozy, you have to tell us where you found him. Gossip is spreading all over,” a blonde woman leans forward, putting her chin in her hand. She’s got a leash looped around her wrist, and when Shane looks to her left, he spots a pet with a muzzle over their mouth.

Roz scoffs, letting his fingers slide under Shane’s hoodie and over his bare hip. “What is this gossip you speak of? What the hell are you even talking about, Zeba? Always causing drama where there is none.”

“Gossip or no gossip, I can see it with my own two eyes,” a man chimes in. “Since when are you locked down, Rozy? Is this why you stopped playing with me?”

Shane turns sharply at that, eyes locking on the guy’s brown hair. Tan skin. Brown eyes. He’s pouting like Shane has taken something from him.

Suddenly, Ilya wraps an arm fully around his waist and pulls him closer, placing a possessive hand on the inside of Shane’s thigh, and Shane hiccups a surprised breath. “You are being very rude, Sasha. Perhaps that’s why I want nothing to do with you. That, and the fact that you don’t respect rules. You are always pushing for more, always testing me. I do not mind if you want to be versatile, but when you are with *me*, I expect you to be *submissive*.”

“Ouch,” Sasha places a hand over his heart like he’s been wounded, but he’s wearing a smile as he says it. “I can be submissive. Maybe the great *Rozanov* just can’t handle brats. Good boys are so much easier, aren’t they? Especially for a lazy Dom like you.”

The table is deafeningly quiet, and Shane can feel Ilya go stiff with tension underneath him, his skin buzzing in anticipation. “You think you are a good Dom?” He voices lowly, his words like ice. “The only reason you are here tonight is because you are one wrong move away from being banned forever. In all my years, I have never seen such negligence. You are talented with a blade, yes, but to leave Ivan so soon and with such poor aftercare the other evening...” Ilya grits his teeth, setting his jaw.

Shane nervously presses a little closer and winds a sweater paw around Ilya's neck, not liking how on edge his partner has become. He presses the tip of his cold nose to the skin on Ilya's neck, as if craving comfort, then watches in satisfaction as Ilya practically absorbs the physical touch, shutting his eyes momentarily while the action appears to breathe warmth back into him. When Ilya opens his eyes again, he smiles minutely down at Shane and fondly loops his fingers through his mother's necklace, giving it a soft tug.

Sasha scoffs from across the booth, crossing his arms over his chest, and to Shane's dismay, Ilya's attention is torn from him once more, blue eyes narrowing over the table.

"And, where is Ivan tonight? As I recall, the invite was addressed to you *both*. More to him, if I am honest."

Sasha just shrugs, tipping his drink into his mouth. "He is tired. So, I am here alone."

"На мероприятии партнера. По какой причине?" Ilya leans closer to the table. "If you are here to spread more of your filth, feel free to leave. You are setting a bad example for everyone here."

"Oh, please, Ilya. You are just worried of what your new boy might think of you, meanwhile, he's scared to death with all the shouting you're doing. He's practically trembling in your arms," Sasha gestures to them.

Shane is, he realizes belatedly. Not because of the shouting, necessarily, but because of how much attention it's drawing. Shane can see people starting to peer over from other tables, all of them curious to see what the commotion was about. He shrinks a little, feeling too big for his own skin.

Luckily, a distraction comes in the form of food as servers start bringing large platters around to them. Ilya catches his attention by giving the cross around Shane's neck another tug. "Baby. Are you alright?" His eyebrows are creased together in concern. "You are. You're shaking," he mutters almost to himself, and readjusts them so Shane is sitting up a bit more. He takes Shane's right hand and loops it fully around his own neck, linking their fingers together before pressing a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "Mm, what is this?" Ilya hums, leaning in a little to inspect his fingers.

Shane blinks and leans forward to try and see what he could be looking at.

"Pink and shiny." Ilya tilts Shane's hand in the light. "I like your claws, kitty. This is very, very cute."

Shane's cheeks feel warm.

He doesn't get a chance to react before trays are being placed in front of them, each containing different variations of the same-sized, tiny cubes. Before he can come up with a guess for what they might be, Ilya picks up a pinkish-looking cube and hovers it in front of Shane's lips. "Тreat, котенок?"

Shane eyes the 'treat' warily, leaning forward to sniff it before carefully accepting the ahi tuna cube from Ilya's waiting fingers.

"Good?" Ilya double-checks, and at Shane's nod, he reaches for another one.

Shane feels himself start to calm down with everyone absorbed in the new activity, the attention safely off him at least for a moment. He leans forward to wrap both arms fully around Ilya's neck now, pressing a kiss underneath his jaw just to see what he tastes like there.

He can feel the way Ilya smiles against him. "Remember, kitten. That is not how cats kiss. Be good," he strokes a hand down Shane's back.

Though he doesn't fully understand it still, Shane desperately wants to be good, so he leans in with a newfound determination and experimentally flattens his tongue against Ilya's neck, lapping at the skin there until he feels Ilya start to harden against him.

Shane flushes and jumps slightly in surprise once his brain catches up with what's happening. He rubs his wet lips together and then lets out a soft moan when Ilya surges forward to kiss him properly this time, all-tongue, until saliva has started to coat Shane's chin. He whines when he feels Ilya's hand start to creep up his thigh, and for a second, he's deaf to all of the noise around them.

He only notices they have an audience when they finally pull away, and he sees Ilya's smug face, almost like he's proud to be the one who's able to reduce Shane to this, like he was flaunting it in front of everyone. Like Shane was just a toy to be shown off, a pet to be controlled. Heat rushes through his belly at the thought. He can feel his chest turning red, maybe half with embarrassment, but half with want too.

"Face the table, котенок," Ilya turns him by the hips. And once he's facing straight, Ilya hooks his ankles with Shane's, positioning Shane's legs over his own as he spreads them wide. Shane squirms at the new position, but Ilya just holds him in place with a possessive hand over Shane's bare chest, fingers stroking at the gold cross against his skin.

"Rozy. He is wearing your mother's necklace?" A brunette woman asks, causing Shane's eyebrows to scrunch up a little in confusion.

"Mm," Ilya hums, twisting the necklace in his hand just to feel the way Shane gasps when it tugs against his throat. "My котенок needed a collar."

"But, it is your mother's cross," she continues. "I have never seen you without it on."

Ilya just shrugs and busies himself with running a hand over Shane's chest, pausing to tweak at one of his nipples. Shane mewls, turning to try and hide his face even more than it already is, but Ilya just keeps him there.

"You would really disrespect your mother's memory this way?" Sasha tuts at him. "Using her necklace as a sex collar for your whore?"

Shane's stomach tangles into a knot as Ilya's hands freeze on him. He did not like this Sasha guy. He didn't like how Sasha talked to Ilya, how they apparently had a history together.

Shane tries to push the mental image from his mind, tries not to think about how many other people in here Ilya has been with. Which one of them would he be inviting to events after this was all over? After Shane went off to his cottage and life went back to normal?

He doesn't realize how heavily he's breathing until Ilya is pressing kisses to the back of his neck, bringing him back to the present moment and out of the darkness of his head.

"I've got you, ангел. Just focus on me," Ilya says lowly, petting over Shane's stomach. It's soothing enough that Shane shuts his eyes, trying to follow the instruction.

"Wow, Sasha," Svetlana appears suddenly, with Milo on a leash at her feet. "Jealousy is such an ugly look on you. I think even you know Rozy would not allow *just anyone* to bear his mother's necklace."

Ilya is still whispering sweet nothings into his skin, distracting him with soft grazes that allow Shane to search for that fuzzy place, to risk diving a little deeper. He flushes with the thought that Roz is still hard against him, and squirms slightly in his hold, a thrill running through him when Roz just presses him firmly in place.

"Obviously, his котенок is very important to him. He did not put this event together in a matter of days just for you to come in and ruin it with your obnoxiousness," Svetlana clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Anyway, this is a partner event, and seeing as you are not with a partner, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Ilya raises a challenging eyebrow at Sasha across the table, daring him to argue, but Sasha just smirks and holds his hands up in defense.

"Oh, Rozy. Always needing Svetlana to fight your battles, even when we were young," Sasha shakes his head. "You think you are top dog around here, but really, you are just pathetic."

"That is enough, Sasha," Ilya addresses him calmly, and Shane focuses on the cadence of his voice as his hair falls into his eyes and shields the view from his mask even further.

"And, as for your котенок," Sasha sneers mockingly. "He is the same as any one of your discarded toys. You will grow bored of him, like you do with everyone, and he will be scarred from the memory of you. The same as your father, your brother, and every other member of your family who lie in their graves."

Ilya sits up sharply, Shane's breath hitching with the movement as he's jostled forward, but Svetlana cuts in loudly before anything else can be said.

"Ты мерзкое и презренное существо!" She raises her voice. "Убирайся отсюда, пока я тебя силой не вытащил."

"That is enough," Ilya says roughly. "You may speak ill of me, of my family, but do *not* speak about my partner this way. Or anyone else in this room, for that matter. Sveta and I

pour our souls into this club to create a safe space for those who cannot exist, as they are, outside of it. You are making a mockery of that, and, mostly, you are making a mockery of yourself. You are a weak man, Sasha. And, yes, maybe you are right in that I have failed my family, but what I will not do is sit by and watch you try to take apart the family I have created for myself *here*.”

“Leave, Sasha. Now,” Svetlana says seriously as two of the club security guards approach the table. “If you do not go willingly, I will get the police involved. Do not think I won’t.”

Sasha looks between Ilya and Svetlana, then over to the guards, as if contemplating his next move. “Fine,” he decides, buttoning his suit jacket as he stands from the booth. “Just know this,” he places both hands on the table, leaning into Ilya’s space.

Shane feels Ilya’s hands tighten around him once more, making himself bigger as Sasha comes closer. Shane just holds his breath and watches with wide eyes, his heart hammering from where Ilya’s hand is splayed over his chest.

“Your mother would be ashamed of the man you are today. And don’t think for one second she would approve of this...lifestyle,” he scoffs, and then spits onto the ground. “She would be rolling in her grave to know her necklace rests on the neck of this disgusting whore.”

In one quick move, Ilya is sliding out from under Shane and lunging after Sasha, his fist colliding harshly with the other’s jaw. Shane startles backward from his new spot in the booth, the sound of Ilya’s punch echoing loudly against the curved ceilings of the club. Everyone else has gone silent around them.

“Ты не будешь так с ним разговаривать, отвратительный кусок мусора,” Ilya says through gritted teeth, holding a bloody Sasha up by the collar of his shirt. “Ты жалкое подобие мужчины. Убирайся с глаз долой, пока я не совершила чего-нибудь, о чём потом пожалею.”

All at once, Ilya lets go of him, and Sasha drops to the ground with a harsh thud, the security guards hauling him back to his feet to drag him out.

Ilya shakes his hand out and then slowly turns to face the rest of the club, straightening out his sleeveless blazer as he clears his throat to address the room at large.

“I apologize for the foul behavior displayed here tonight. This is not up to the standards of Hush, and we will be taking precautions to ensure nothing like this ever happens again. That being said, I will never tolerate disrespect. Not towards my partner, and not towards anyone in here. I hope you can forgive me for the outburst, and I hope we are all able to enjoy the rest of the night.” Ilya gestures to the bar. “Please feel free to see the bar if you or your partner would benefit from a private room to re-center. Once again, I’m very sorry for the disturbance.”

Then, Ilya turns directly to Shane, his heart still beating wildly in his chest, but at the same time...he’s hard as a rock. Fuck. He shouldn’t be so turned on by the thought of Ilya punching someone, practically in Shane’s honor. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Shane shuts his eyes tightly and tries to will his erection to go down. He was hard before, sure, having someone touch him so openly and without shame. After *years* of fighting his desires, he couldn't exactly blame himself for wanting it. No one has ever touched him like that. Not in his nearly thirty years on this Earth. But, Ilya....Ilya looked like he was ready to go to war for Shane, and that...did something to him. Shane swallows, eyes drawn to the vein still throbbing in Ilya's neck, the way his knuckles are red and already bruising over. Shane wants to suck those fingers into his mouth, the ones that just knocked into hard flesh and bone because someone called Shane a whore. Fuck it, Shane felt like a whore right now.

"I'm so sorry, котенок," Ilya sighs, kneeling in front of him. He takes one of Shane's hands between both of his own and presses a series of kisses to his flushed skin. "You should never be spoken to like that. Especially not here. Are you alright?"

Shane hesitates to answer, blinking slow as he takes in the sweat beading across Ilya's forehead, the way his fingers are rough against Shane's own.

"If you need to use your safeword, then please. I will not be upset with you. This night is not what I intended it to be," Ilya sighs, mistaking his silence for something that it, decidedly, is not.

Shane's throat feels dry as he pulls Ilya's hands closer to him at a painstakingly slow pace, ignoring the confused glance he receives in favor of sucking two of Ilya's quickly bruising fingers between his lips, mouth hollowing around them.

Ilya takes him in with a fresh sense of awareness, eyes cataloguing Shane's puffy lips all the way down to where he's rock hard in Ilya's pants. And then, he smirks. "Oh, I see," he licks over his own lips in interest. "Does that turn you on, драгоценный?"

Shane moans lowly and nods around Ilya's fingers, eyes blown wide from behind the mask as he twirls his tongue. God, he was so fucking turned on. More turned on than he's ever been in his life, probably. He feels blood rushing all through his body, but especially south. And for once, he isn't embarrassed to be attracted to this. Someone sticking up for him in front of an entire room of people. Ilya wasn't afraid to make his desires known, and that turned Shane on beyond belief.

He's dressed like a fucking cat in a room full of strangers who wear their sexual desires for one another boldly across their chest. He's never felt more raw than he does in this moment, more animal. He feels fucking feral, like he has to fight the urge to climb Ilya like a pole and hump his leg until he gets off in his fucking pants.

Ilya just hums happily, surging forward to claim his lips in a biting kiss. And when he pulls away, Shane practically loses his balance trying to chase after it.

"Will you kneel for me down here, котенок? I think it will be good for you to sit still for a minute. That was very intense for both of us. I want to pet you while you drink some water for me."

Shane is pretty sure Ilya could ask him to jump off a roof right now and he'd agree. His mind feels like sticky honey, his eyes hazy as he drinks the other in.

“Color, baby?” Ilya asks, gently tipping Shane’s chin up until he can just barely see Shane’s starry eyes through the mask.

Shane releases Ilya’s fingers from his mouth with a satisfying pop, smacking his lips together loudly. “Green,” he rasps, and Ilya smiles, his thumb stroking over Shane’s cheek.

“Good boy. Switch places with me, please,” he requests, and helps Shane carefully stand from the booth with two steady hands around his waist.

When Shane is properly situated on his knees again, Ilya slides back into the booth and reaches for a glass of water. Shane doesn’t hesitate to press his cheek against Ilya’s knee, rubbing the skin of his face against the soft fabric of Ilya’s pants as he wraps both arms around the other’s calf.

“There’s my sweet boy. Who knew that is what it would take to get you down tonight?” He smiles at him fondly, placing a straw in the glass before offering it to Shane.

Shane watches him with dark eyes and licks straight from the cup, avoiding the straw altogether as he recalls Ilya’s words from earlier, *like a kitten, remember?*

“Господи, помоги мне,” Ilya mutters, slipping his fingers through Shane’s hair to give one of his ears a little scratch. “You are so perfect for me.” And Shane just nuzzles further into his hand.

The rest of the night goes by without a hitch. Shane starts to feel really fuzzy once he gets into the headspace of being a kitten kneeling at Ilya’s side. It’s surprisingly fun, actually, to let his brain go quiet like this.

He watches some of the other pets under the table in interest, no longer freaked out by their presence. In fact, he’s curious. Curious like a cat. He watches the puppy, who is still mouthing at their owner’s crotch, sniffing intensely as if he were really a dog. Another pup nearby has his tongue lolling out of his mouth, drool dripping from his chin, and collecting on the floor beneath him.

Want twists in Shane’s belly as he rubs his cheek against Ilya’s leg again, receiving an enthusiastic pet in return. Shane tries sticking his tongue out for a second to see if he might like that too, and it feels *good*. He hadn’t even known he’d be *into* something like this, but here he was, panting with his tongue out and feeling so, so loose. So syrupy and hazy.

He whines just to make himself known, and his cock throbs when Ilya just shushes him from above. *The owners are talking*, he thinks to himself, and recognizes it’s not for him to understand. *Know your place*.

Fuck. The thought of Ilya owning him, of *belonging* to him. Shane lifts one paw to scoop up the chain around his neck, bending to inspect it a little further. It’s a necklace he’s stared at a thousand times over face-off, but he hadn’t known it belonged to Ilya’s mother. He didn’t even know Ilya’s parents were dead, let alone his whole family, and the thought makes Shane sad. He presses a wet kiss to the necklace before thinking about it, and when he risks a glance towards Ilya, he finds the other staring back at him, something meaningful in his eyes.

Shane straightens a little once he realizes Ilya's attention is on him. He lets his tongue loll out of his mouth, showing off.

It pulls a laugh from Ilya, who shakes his head fondly. "This is for puppies, котенок. You are a kitten, remember? What do kittens do?" He prompts, nudging his fingers under Shane's chin.

Shane responds by pressing his open mouth to Ilya's clothed thigh, letting the fabric grow wet under his hot tongue as he sucks, his teeth pressing in just slightly.

Ilya smirks and gives him another pet, scratching his nails soothingly against Shane's scalp until Shane is practically purring, nuzzling his further into the other's thighs as he wraps his arms around Ilya's waist.

"Mm, you are hoping for a different kind of treat, yes?" Ilya raises an eyebrow, spreading his legs a little wider and watching in fascination as Shane immediately takes advantage of the new space. Ilya stops him with a firm tug on his hair and a ruffle of his ears. "Later, hm? If you are good. Then, we will see."

Shane lets out a playful growl and lets his hands slip under the fabric of Ilya's vest, wanting to cloud each one of his senses, but Ilya centers him again with another pull of his hair, and Shane *whines* pathetically.

"Fuck," Ilya sucks in a gasp, watching Shane desperately palm at him with laser-focused eyes. "Keep this up, котенок, and I may have to adopt you for good," he tells him with lust in his voice.

Shane wants that *badly*, and yet, the words escape him. So, he does the only thing he can think of and *meows*, watching as Ilya's eyes shift from blue to black all at once. Ilya turns to say something quickly to the other owners at the table, and then, before Shane can make sense of what's happening, he's being hauled to his feet and dragged by his collar in the direction of the back hallway.

When the door of the hallway shuts behind them, Ilya presses him harshly against the wall and claims his lips in a bruising kiss. "Color," he mutters desperately into Shane's mouth, still walking them in the direction of his private room as Shane struggles to keep up. "What's your color, baby?"

Shane is having a difficult time, his brain sucking in any thought he has like quicksand. All he's aware of are Ilya's hands all over him, making him feel things he never even thought were possible.

Shane still hasn't answered by the time Ilya maneuvers him into another room. *The one with the bed*, his brain yells at him from some faraway place. This room is a lot quieter than the last, but it doesn't make Shane's head any clearer, doesn't allow him to voice his thoughts any easier.

Ilya collapses onto the leather couch and pulls Shane on top of him to sit in his lap, big hands cupping his face now. "Can I take this off of you, драгоценный?" Ilya traces his fingers over

the lace of Shane's mask, and Shane nods. He wants to see Ilya fully without filter, wants to see the heat in his eyes, the glint of his too-white teeth. "No one will disturb us in here, you are safe," Ilya vows, carefully reaching to undo the ribbons tied in bows around his head.

Shane blinks heavily at the adjustment to the light, trying to re-focus his eyes as he hears Ilya let out a groan.

"Oh, baby. You are so messy," Ilya rubs at where he drew on the eyeliner whiskers just a few hours ago, the makeup smudged cutely across Shane's pink cheeks. "You are the cutest thing I have ever seen. The prettiest kitty in all the land, котенок."

Shane just preens under the affection, rubbing at one of his hazy eyes with the sleeve of Ilya's hoodie.

"I need you to tell me your color, sweetheart," Ilya voices again, brushing some stray pieces of hair out of Shane's eyes. "I can't keep going until I have your color."

Shane huffs and falls forward into Ilya's chest, sighing happily when strong arms wrap around him to bring him closer. He doesn't want to say his color. He wants to stay in kitten-land a little longer, wants to exist in a world where words don't exist, at least not for him. Shane was sick of talking, of everyone looking to him for the answers. He didn't want to be a Captain. He didn't even want to be Shane Hollander. All he wanted to do was sit in Ilya's lap and communicate through purrs and kitten licks.

Ilya pulls back a little to grip his chin firmly. "Shane," he says, and that wakes him up a little. He doesn't feel like Shane right now. In fact, he's surprised to find that he *is* actually Shane still, given how outside of himself he feels. "If you don't give me your color, we have to stop. You are really far down right now, baby. And, that's okay. You can stay down. I just need to make sure you're safe."

Shane frowns and reaches to pull at his collar, Ilya's eyes dragging down to the golden cross as he does so.

"Mm, you like that, yes? You like being mine," Ilya seems to understand, rubbing a hand over Shane's side.

Yeah, Shane pants. He really liked being Ilya's. At least right now, while his brain couldn't understand why it was so wrong.

"You are very hard still," Ilya hums, but he doesn't seem like he's in any rush, just watching Shane in interest. "Would you like some help with that?"

Oh, Shane lets the words filter into his muddled head. He would like that very much. He forces his head to lift up and down despite how heavy it feels.

"Tell me your color, precious," Ilya's voice is soft against Shane's ear.

Shane huffs and bites into Ilya's shoulder.

"Hey, *no*," Ilya scolds, but he sounds amused. "Bad kitty."

Which makes Shane giggle against his neck, and when he pulls back to look at Ilya, he finds that the other is grinning back at him.

“Green,” Shane uses up every ounce of mental energy to get the word out, his stomach fluttering at the way Ilya’s eyes go soft.

“Good,” he says, his words so, so gentle. Shane feels like he’s on a cloud. “Good boy. You’re doing so good for me. Is it okay if I touch you now?”

Shane frowns in confusion. Ilya is touching him. He’s touching him all over.

Ilya just laughs at his expression. “No, like this,” he explains, pressing his hand to Shane’s erection.

And, *oh fuck*. Shane’s mouth drops open in a soft moan. He’s never been touched there before. Not fully. Not by another man.

There had been one time he tried to meet up with someone from Grindr. It was a businessman, someone who seemed like they had a secret to keep just as much as he did, but after a messy makeout and some on-the-bed grinding, Shane had ultimately chickened out. He’d been drunk and way too nervous of getting outed, so when the guy went to the bathroom, Shane took his chance and fled from his hotel room. Since then, nothing.

Still though, as much as Shane really wanted Ilya to touch him, there was something else he was craving *so* much more. He’s clumsy as he scrambles off Ilya’s lap, ignoring the confusion and worry in the other’s eyes in favor of falling to his knees. He’s been thinking about it for the better part of an hour, maybe. Time was a foreign concept right now.

Ilya’s blue eyes go wide in understanding, and he leans forward to brush his fingers over Shane’s cheek. “You wanna suck me, baby?”

Shane nods jerkily. He wants to. He wants to so badly.

“Fuck,” Ilya mutters, licking his lips as he takes in the sight in front of him. “Yeah? Alright, go ahead. Tell me if it’s too much, okay? Shane.”

And Shane nods again to show he understands, struggling to pull at Ilya’s silky suit pants with the paws of his hoodie.

“Alright, hold on, hold on. Let me help you,” Ilya assures him, leaning forward to help remove Shane’s hands from the thumbholes. “This will be easier, yes?”

Shane lets Ilya take control of the paw situation, flexing his fingers once they’re finally free. He then watches with glassy eyes as Ilya unbuttons his pants and carefully works them down his legs. Shane doesn’t even wait for him to get them off fully before he dives forward, burying his face in the fabric of Ilya’s boxers, similarly to how he had watched the pup do it all night.

“Oh fuck,” he hears Ilya sigh, and when Shane glances up, his eyes are practically searing into him. “Я умер и попал в рай,” Ilya shakes his head. “Я не могу поверить, что это

правда.”

Shane doesn't know what he's saying, but he sounds so fucking hot, and it makes his brain fall further into that gooey state. He lets his tongue loll out again. Maybe next time he can try being a puppy.

Ilya presses his thumb into Shane's waiting mouth, and Shane happily hollows his cheeks around it, letting his eyes slip shut as he focuses on just feeling. He was feeling so, so good. *So good.* His hands are heavy from where they rest on the couch, positioned on either side of Ilya's knees. When he remembers them, he slips them onto Ilya's thighs, tugging clumsily at his boxer briefs.

Ilya seems to understand and reluctantly pulls his thumb from Shane's mouth in order to push his boxers down with the rest of his pants. And then, Shane is all over him. He's tongue-first licking at Ilya's cock, nuzzling against his inner thighs, trying to memorize his scent.

“Jesus fucking christ,” Ilya groans, pulling Shane off of him with a hand in his hair. “Fuck,” he curses, and Shane whines. “Hold on, I've got you.” He holds his cock at the base and then neatly presents it to Shane's waiting mouth, running the tip over Shane's lips slowly as he looks on, mesmerized.

Ilya is *big*, Shane realizes. Like...big big. And for a second, he actually fears for his life.

“Have you done this before?” Ilya breathes heavily, like he's having a difficult time existing right now, the same way Shane is.

Shane swallows and shakes his head.

“Fuck,” Ilya bites his lower lip, taking in the sight in front of him with calculated eyes. “Fuck, okay. And you're sure you want to?” He double-checks.

Shane answers by trying to press forward, but Ilya just holds him firmly.

“Just...go slow, yeah? There's no rush. Nice and easy.”

Shane blinks at the instruction and keeps his eyes on Ilya, tongue darting out gently this time to kitten lick over the head.

Ilya shuts his eyes tightly, but forces them back open like he wants to watch.

Good. Shane wants to watch him too. He opens his mouth a little wider and sucks deliberately at the head this time, feeling a little thrill run through him under the heat of Ilya's gaze.

“More,” Ilya encourages, guiding his length a little further into Shane's waiting mouth, and Shane eagerly accepts, letting him set the pace. “Good boy. That's it. Bob your head.”

Shane follows the command and hollows his cheeks as he sinks a little further down before pulling back up.

“Oh yeah,” Ilya shudders, his fingers still tangled in Shane’s hair. “Just like that. Use your tongue too.”

Shane hums and wiggles his tongue a little against the underside of Ilya’s cock, delighted when it draws another rough moan from his Russian counterpart. They work themselves into a nice rhythm, Shane bobbing up and down while trying things experimentally with his tongue, Ilya keeping control of the pace with a hand on the back of Shane’s head.

For a while, the only sounds filling the room are Ilya’s moans, Shane’s audible hums against his cock. In a way, it’s almost like hockey. Well, no. No, it’s not really. But Shane shivers at the thought of Ilya fucking him against the ice. *Fuck*.

He could feel his mind going to places it had never been before. Ilya made him want to give it all up, to sit at his feet all day waiting to be fed. Whether it was food or cock he wanted, Shane wasn’t sure. He was starting to have a strong preference for one over the other.

“Fuck, come up here,” Ilya says all of a sudden, pulling Shane off with a sharp tug of his hair.

Shane whines defeatedly. He was *not* done enjoying his treat.

“Wanna touch you. Can you take your pants off for me, sweetheart?” He asks, pulling Shane closer by his hips to start stripping him out of his clothes. “God, you are so, so pretty,” Ilya mutters under his breath, almost like he’s talking to himself more than Shane. “Color, baby?”

“Green,” Shane whispers easily this time, like it’s second nature. He doesn’t need all the words in the English language, but Ilya had made it clear he needed at least a few if he wanted to continue. And Shane really did.

Ilya lets out a string of curses when Shane’s boxers fall to the floor. “C’mere. Come sit on my lap,” he encourages, unzipping Shane’s hoodie fully to have more skin to explore.

Shane gasps when Ilya’s thumb grazes his nipple, stumbling forward until his bare ass is settled against Ilya’s thighs, their cocks bumping together. “Please, please, please,” he begs deliriously, and Ilya just shushes him knowingly before presenting his hand.

“Can I have some kitten kisses right here, baby?” Ilya requests, holding his palm up to Shane’s lips.

Shane eagerly presses his wet tongue to Ilya’s palm, laving over the skin repeatedly. He’s just about to go in for a claiming bite when the hand disappears and suddenly wraps around both of their cocks.

“Ah,” Shane gasps loudly, letting his forehead drop onto Ilya’s chest as his hips stutter forward. The press of their dicks together is fucking godly, and Shane is pretty sure he sees stars, losing control of his motor functions as he writhes in Ilya’s lap.

Ilya wraps his other hand around Shane’s neck to pull him in for a searing kiss, which is mostly all tongue, with the way Shane can’t get his brain to tell his mouth what to do. All he can do is burn to death under the searing pressure of *want* that builds deeper and deeper in the

heat of his belly. He's being loud, can feel random sounds spilling from his lips, but he can't hear them behind all the fireworks of his orgasm as he shoots off wildly into Ilya's hand.

He's crying, maybe, or hyperventilating, or his brain has decided to go back to its regularly scheduled non-stop vortex of panic, but either way, he sees white, Ilya tensing up beneath him in what Shane can only assume is his own orgasm.

Shane tries to suck in air. His throat feels like it's closing up. The air of the room is hot and sticky around him. He's pretty sure he might pass out.

"Fuck, baby, you're so fucking good. You did so well for me," comes Ilya's voice tethering him back to Earth, and suddenly, he can breathe again. His vision is still murky, his body feels like he just ran eleven marathons, but there's a heartbeat under his hand, the steady thrum of it guiding his breathwork until he no longer feels like he's drowning under water. "You're alright, I'm here. Everything's gonna be okay."

Shane chokes out a gasp that might be a sob and wraps himself tightly around the warm body underneath him. He's never felt this close to someone in his life.

Ilya rubs his back soothingly, pressing little kisses behind Shane's ear. He's murmuring something to him, too. Maybe it's Russian, or maybe Shane's brain no longer understands English anymore. That would make sense considering he feels like a puddle. He could float away at any moment, probably, but Ilya holds onto him like an anchor. Weighing him down, keeping him steady.

This is real, Shane realizes distantly, in a place he can't fully make sense of yet. He's not dreaming. He's not outside of his body. He's here, in Ilya's lap, having his first gay experience at nearly twenty-seven years old.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay I need detailed thoughts and opinions because I felt insane writing this, but whatever. Kitten Shane for the win. Plus, knowing your thoughts will greatly help me as I write the next chapter :) Thanks for reading!!

note: After receiving a few comments about it, I have removed some tags that I no longer feel properly represent this fic. Please note, it is never my intention to be misleading about the content of this story! Open to suggestions regarding any tags or warnings that you feel could be included for better safety and awareness. Learning and growing with you all on this, I appreciate the feedback and will try to be more diligent.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

When Shane wakes the next morning, his brain is pleasantly calm. He feels warm all over, like the bed is radiating heat, wrapping all around him like a cocoon. It's the most peaceful rest he's had in a while, both his body and mind so oddly satisfied that, for a second, he thinks he's at his cottage.

Only he doesn't hear the birds chirping, or the rustling of the trees against the window. All he hears is a soft noise behind him as strong arms pull him closer into a broad chest.

Wow. It felt really nice to be held.

"Good morning," comes a deep Russian accent, and Shane blinks to try and comprehend the reality he's in. "Did you sleep alright?"

"Mm," Shane murmurs his approval. "S'warm."

"Yes, you would not stop shivering last night. I had to turn up the heat twice," Roz tuts, but he sounds fond, pressing the words into Shane's skin. "Good thing you are very cute."

Shane swallows, pushing out of the other's arms slightly as he moves to sit up. He avoids Roz's inquisitive gaze by rubbing his eyes and then takes a careful look around. They're in Roz's private playroom. Still at the club, then.

The memories come flooding back to him in bursts, and shame washes over him like a dark cloud. A knife twists at the pit in his stomach, the never-ending black hole that tells him he's not good enough, that he has to try harder, that he has to suffer *more*.

Shane jumps when he feels Rozanov's calloused hand on his back, and Roz has the decency to hesitantly remove it.

"Shane," he says softly, almost nervous, like Shane could collapse, could disintegrate at any moment and slip through the cracks of the walls.

Shane feels that way, though; he feels like he could disappear. In fact, he wants to.

"Sorry, I um—" Shane shakes his head all of a sudden, quickly rising to his feet. "I can't..." he pauses, but the words don't find him.

Can't what? Can't deal with this right now? Can't handle the shame of who he is? Of what he wants? Of *who* he wants it from?

"I can't do this," he says finally, for lack of a better explanation.

“Hollander,” Roz tries, but Shane has already decided he needs to get as far away from this club as he possibly can.

“I’m sorry,” Shane shakes his head, reaching for the closest articles of clothing he can find. He needed to get out of there right now. Before Rozanov could say or do anything to try to change his mind. God, Shane was under his fucking spell.

Maybe everyone was just under Rozanov’s spell. Maybe that was the reason he had so many suitors, so many people willing and wanting to sleep with him.

“Hollander,” he hears Roz call again, but he’s halfway out the door, still scrambling to get his shirt on.

It’s not like they went all the way, but Shane can’t help but feel like another notch on his belt. A rare box that Rozy’s just checked.

And Shane had been delirious with it. Had practically begged to suck Roz off. Had sat on his knees at Roz’s feet with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, waiting for a treat. And, even worse, he’d gotten off on it.

He realizes then that he doesn’t even have shoes with him, but it’s too late. He can’t go back. He can’t face Roz, or even himself, right now. He may not be able to face him ever again.

Shane nearly throws up twice in the Uber. He actually does throw up when he finally gets back to his house, but it still doesn’t feel like enough. He wants to shove his fingers down his throat, wants to turn himself inside out and erase any remnants of the night before. Maybe if he got rid of all the evidence, he could pretend it never happened, pretend he never wanted it. He looks down and notices he’s wearing Roz’s shirt. Shane wants to scream.

Instead, he punishes himself with a scathing shower. Except every time he closes his eyes, he remembers the heat of Roz’s gaze looking down at him as Shane knelt by his feet. He remembers the weight of the kitten ears in his hair, how *good* it had felt to let his mind go completely blank, to give up control, to trust that Roz would take care of him.

And Roz had. Roz had taken such good care of him. Despite Shane coloring out, despite him knowing next to nothing about this type of stuff, or even sex in general, Roz had been nothing but patient with him. He never made Shane feel uncomfortable, never made Shane feel less than for his lack of experience. No, the only thing Roz made him feel was *good*. And, really, maybe, that was what scared him the most.

When he steps out of the shower, he towels off his hair and then stares himself down in the mirror. He doesn’t look any different. Doesn’t look any...gayer. Doesn’t even particularly look like someone who had Roz’s cock in their mouth not even twelve hours ago.

Still, Shane finds himself feeling vengeful at the person who stares back at him. He had the perfect life, the perfect hockey career. He hated himself for risking it, for tempting fate. All it would take was one wrong move to send his perfectly balanced life toppling to the ground in sure-fire destruction.

His phone vibrates against the bathroom counter, his mother's face flashing over the screen, and for a second, he's terrified. Terrified that his entire evening has somehow leaked all over the internet; that his mom was calling, not only to do some serious damage control, but also to ask him what the hell was wrong with him. God, he wouldn't be able to look her in the eye ever again. He wouldn't be able to look his teammates in the eyes ever again. Probably wouldn't be able to show his face in Montreal, possibly all of Canada, for the rest of forever.

Still, he would have to accept his fate sometime or another, so Shane holds his breath and answers the phone, trying to be brave as he steels himself for the absolute worst.

"Shane!" His mom greets him cheerfully.

And...she sounds awfully excited for someone who's possibly just found out that her son is secretly a cat. A cat for *Rozanov*, specifically.

"Hi Mom," Shane says carefully, like she'll somehow be able to figure it out from the cadence of his voice.

"I saw some of the footage from the press shoots. You look so handsome! That stylist of yours really outdid himself."

Shane swallows and shuts his eyes. "Thanks, Mom."

"Your father and I are so excited to see you in a few days. You're still coming to the cottage soon, right? I'm sure no one would blame you if you wanted to stay in town and celebrate with the team a little more. You boys have certainly earned it."

The cottage, right. Shane suddenly feels a lot more at ease. He could escape to the cottage, give himself some distance from Roz, and Montreal, and pretend none of it ever happened. He could pretend he never found out about the hotel room, that Roz really *had* stood him up all those years ago. It was, admittedly, much easier to stomach than his current reality.

"Yeah," he breathes. "I'm still coming. Actually," he pauses, the idea hitting him like a thunderbolt. "I might even come up a few days early."

"Really?" His mom questions through the phone, but she sounds delighted. "We would love that, honey! We can't wait to see you. But don't rush back on our account, okay? Make sure you get enough time with Hayden and the rest of the guys before next season. Oh, how is Rose, by the way?"

Rose, who Shane's parents still secretly hoped he was dating. God. If he was going to leave early, he at least had to see her one more time before heading out. The problem was, he knew it would only take one look at him for her to realize that something was really wrong. And, knowing Rose, she would be able to get it out of him almost immediately. He was powerless against her almost superhuman-like ability to pry.

"Rose is...good, yeah," Shane mutters distractedly as he tries to fight his way through the millions of thoughts ricocheting around his brain. All the scenarios of how exactly his life would fall apart over the next few days, weeks, months; following each thread to the very

end, before taking a sharp turn to explore whatever the next twisted road towards his ultimate demise had to offer. It felt like life, as he knew it, was over. Shane was probably being dramatic, again. But that's how it felt.

"Is she still planning on coming up for a visit? We'd love to have her over for dinner. Or we could always come to yours."

Shane can't handle the conversation anymore, his mom's cheery voice making plans for the future as if there even was one. As if the world wasn't a short way away from swallowing him whole and spitting out all the fucked up pieces.

"Yeah, I think so. It depends on her shooting schedule, but hey, I really have to get going, Mom," he interjects, before he can get roped any further into the conversation.

"Alright, sweetie," she says easily. "Text me when you're on your way to the cottage and once you arrive. We're so, so proud of you, Shane."

Shane wonders if she would still be talking to him like this if she knew where he'd been last night, what he'd done. He swallows that thought like the bile he swallowed earlier.

"Thanks, Mom. I will."

"Love you," she says.

"Love you," he replies.

When the line finally cuts dead, he kneels over the toilet to throw up again, but just winds up choking on nothing, coughing and heaving into the empty bowl. He thinks it might be a metaphor for his life.

After another shower and a chalky, loaded protein shake that he forces himself to drink, he finally gets up the courage to text Rose. They meet at a new café bistro, because Rose is a social butterfly and always has a list of restaurants a mile long that she wants to try out.

He's not in the mood to be a real person today, though. He'd thrown on the first set of clothes he could find, his head running a thousand miles a minute while he forced himself to complete the simple, and yet, much too difficult task of getting himself out the door. And it isn't until he's sat across from her, a bland plate of eggs and sliced avocado in front of him, that he realizes he's wearing Ilya's hoodie from last night too. Another bullet to the chest. He wants to stab himself right then and there.

"Okay, you've got to tell me what's going on." Rose puts her fork down suddenly. She's been watching him with knowing, worried eyes the entire ten minutes they've been sitting at the restaurant.

Shane barely even flinches at her inquisition. He feels like an open wound, like there's no point in even deflecting anymore because one small gust of wind could knock him off his feet and send him into oblivion.

“I think I’m going to the cottage early. I just wanted to say goodbye.” He says it like he’s going off to war, like this is their final moment together before he knowingly and willingly surrenders himself to the open fire.

Rose just blinks at him, wearing her concern openly on her face. “Okay…” she trails carefully. “What changed? I thought you weren’t going for a few more days still.”

Shane can’t even look at her. He pushes his eggs around on his plate and accepts that the world, as he knows it, is coming to a definite end.

“Shane,” she says again, apprehensively. “You’re really starting to freak me out.”

Shane can’t help the way his face crumples, his lower lip shaking as his eyes fill with unshed tears that he knows he won’t let fall. He presses his face into his hands, anyway.

“Oh my god,” Rose murmurs, and Shane hears the scrape of her chair as she moves closer to sit next to him, one of her soft hands coming to rub circles on his back.

God, why couldn’t it be this easy? Why couldn’t he just like Rose the way everyone wanted him to? Rose was good for him. Rose represented the man he was *meant* to be. The star athlete with the hot movie star girlfriend. The *straight* guy. One who was into normal sex and didn’t get off on the idea of being *owned*. The thought makes him shake a little more.

“Shane,” Rose says desperately, wrapping her arms around him this time as Shane falls apart on the restaurant table. He doesn’t answer her, and she doesn’t ask for more, instead just holding him while he shakes.

Once he’s finally able to collect himself, they eat the rest of their meal in silence. The waiter comes with their check, and Rose slides her card over as Shane sits numbly in his chair. His eyes are still bloodshot, half-rimmed, and bleary from wanting to cry but refusing to let himself. He knows he looks a mess, but luckily, Rose takes care of everything. She puts a hand on his back when it’s time to leave and leads him all the way to her car.

Shane hadn’t driven, unable to trust his muddled mind behind a wheel right now. She opens the passenger door and ushers him in, shutting it resolutely behind him before slipping into the driver’s seat.

“Babe, you can talk to me, you know? About anything,” she reminds him.

Shane knows that. He wants to talk to her, he realizes, but he isn’t even sure what to say.

She pauses and then winces, choosing her next words carefully, as if aware of the level of reaction that may follow. “Does this have to do with Ilya Rozanov?”

And Shane just…snaps. He breaks down. He loses it. He’s crying in a way he hasn’t since he was a kid, which unfortunately just reminds him of the way he’d cried in Rozanov’s lap after coming all over his chest last night, and *that* only makes him cry even *harder*. He’s not okay, he realizes. He’s not even remotely fucking okay, and with the way his pain is oozing out of

him relentlessly, showing no signs of stopping any time soon, he has to recognize that he likely hasn't been for a while now.

Stanley Cups were not like Band-Aids, he realized. Or maybe they were. Maybe they were exactly like Band-Aids, in that they hid the wound from plain sight while bacteria continued to secretly fester underneath. Until the wound wasn't just a wound anymore; it was an infection. An infection that had, unbeknownst to Shane, spread throughout his entire body. And now, now he was incurable. A walking disease. Something that needed to be *put down*.

He hates himself, a part of his mind flutters in distant awareness. And, fuck. What a revelation to discover this far into his seemingly picture-perfect life. All this time thinking he had everything together, everything he could have ever dreamed of, that little Shane would be *proud* of the man he's become, the life he's created for himself. He imagines meeting face-to-face with that Shane now, the shame that he would wear in his eyes at having to admit it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Not even close.

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Ilya wishes the ground would swallow him whole. It would be a lot less painful, he thinks, than watching Hollander walk out the door with fear and *regret* in his eyes. Like last night was a horrible mistake, an error to be corrected.

Maybe he needed more aftercare, Ilya's mind assaults him. Maybe Ilya hadn't communicated things clearly enough. Maybe he had let him go down *too far*. Maybe he should have stopped things before they got physical. Maybe Shane wasn't ready to cross that line yet. Maybe it had just been too much *all at once*. Either way, Ilya should have known better, should have stopped things before they got *this* out of control.

Dom drop, the words flicker warningly inside his brain, but it feels like a selfish thought. During all his years in the scene, Ilya had never once experienced Dom drop. Admittedly, he hadn't even really believed in it before now. To him, it was a myth. Yes, Doms needed aftercare, but not like subs did. He, as a Dom, had never felt vulnerable enough in a scene to experience that kind of shame...that kind of rejection that often came with the nature of submitting.

Now, though, he feels it like a white-hot blade in his sternum. He'd put himself out there for Shane, laid himself bare, both metaphorically and literally. And Shane...Shane had spit it back in his face.

Not intentionally, of course. Ilya knew that. His Shane was probably scared to death. Another wave of guilt washes over him at the knowledge that *he's* to blame here. Maybe Shane really was better off without him.

He runs into Svetlana as he's on his way out, a pile of Shane's clothes in hand that he fully intends to wash and return. If Shane didn't want to see him, then that was fine. Ilya would come to terms with it. Maybe he could orchestrate a way to get them to Rose, and she could initiate the trade.

“Ilya!” Svetlana greets him happily. She’s wearing a big smile on her face, as if the world isn’t coming to a final and definite end around them. “I see you stayed over in your private room.” She wiggles her eyebrows knowingly. “So...how was it? Did you finally make your move?”

Ilya feels sick to his stomach.

“Ilyusha,” she says quietly, her face shifting to one of concern. “You look green. Did something happen?”

Ilya, to his part, just lets out a weak laugh, like his body can’t make sense of the colossal loss that hasn’t even fully settled into his bones yet.

Svetlana is watching him worriedly, her fingers twitching at her side like she isn’t sure whether to reach out and comfort him or not. Like he’s a ticking time bomb that could go off at any minute.

Ilya lets Shane’s clothes drop to the floor as everything hits him all at once, his face and body crumpling until he collapses on the ground right with them. He feels Svetlana holding him as he sobs, shaking in her arms as the reality of the situation starts to catch up with him.

“I fucked up, Sveta. I fucked up so bad,” he cries into her chest, wishing more than ever that his Mama was here. She’d know just what to say; she’d know just how to fix it.

Svetlana just shushes him and holds him through it, rocking him gently in her arms. “I’ve got you. It’s all going to be okay,” she whispers against his hair, brushing his curls back with her fingers.

No, he thinks sharply. It wasn’t going to be okay. Nothing was ever going to be okay again, in fact. It wasn’t just that he’d struck out with Shane; Ilya didn’t care about that, no. Ilya cared about the fact that he’d broken Shane’s trust *again*. That he’d dropped the ball *again*. He’d promised Shane he wouldn’t hurt him, and yet, here he was, brutally living with the consequences while Shane was likely suffering so much worse.

Svetlana’s phone goes off in her hand, and Ilya ignores it as she quickly moves to turn it off. She must see something, however, because she freezes up underneath him.

Ilya snuffles and pokes his head up, face already red and puffy from crying. “What is it?” He asks, noting the way her expression has taken on an odd undertone.

She shakes her head stiffly, but it only causes Ilya to sit up further in concern.

“Sveta. Tell me,” he urges, needs to know what other horrors await him on this terribly horrid day.

“Maybe it’s best if—”

He makes the decision to grab the phone from her hand before she can finish that thought, ignoring her protests as he opens the notification. It’s a news alert from a gossip magazine,

and there, on the front page, is Shane Hollander sobbing against Rose Landry through the window of a car.

To his horror, he discovers there are more pictures further down. Shane openly having what looks like a panic attack in the middle of a restaurant as Rose comforts him, much like Svetlana was doing now.

He feels all the air leave his body instantly. His blood feels like cyanide in his veins.

“Ilya,” he distantly hears. “Ilya, breathe.”

He can’t breathe. He doesn’t deserve to. He’s a weapon of mass destruction. He’s worse than a nuclear bomb because, at least then, he was chaos and suffering to any and all. No playing favorites. But, no. This was just Shane who he had destroyed. His Shane. *Not his Shane*, his mind lays the perfect kill shot. Cause of death? Take your pick. Ilya didn’t want to live on this Earth anymore. Not if his only contribution was inflicting enough pain to send the love of his life spiraling out of orbit.

“Ilya, you have got to calm down.”

“How can you say that to me?” He yells at her. “I cannot calm down. Look at how hurt he is! *I* did that to him, Sveta. I do not deserve to live with myself.”

“Hey,” she looks at him furiously. “Do not speak this way, Ilyusha. Whatever you have done, it is not worth killing yourself over. I can assure you that. Maybe it is not what it looks like. Maybe this goes deeper than whatever happened between you last night. Do not jump to conclusions.”

Ilya just shakes his head, sobbing openly into his hands as his body trembles with regret. “If it is even partially to do with me, then I deserve whatever comes next. It is his first time with a man, and I have— I have ruined that for him. I will never be able to take this back.”

Svetlana just wraps him in her arms again. She was unsure of how to fix things, unsure if they were even fixable, but she knew there was someone, at least, who might be able to help.

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“Here you go,” Rose says softly, placing a warm cup of tea on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” Shane mutters in loose awareness.

She hasn’t asked him about it yet. His very public mental breakdown that has apparently already made it to every major news outlet in the city, maybe the world. He wonders if Roz has seen the pictures, if he thought Shane was as weak and pathetic as he felt.

He’s already received several texts from his teammates asking if he and Rose are back together. Not if he’s okay, just if they’re back together. He tries not to think about the implications of what that means.

He sighs heavily, picking the tea up to take a tentative sip. His tongue burns on contact. His lips tingle in remembrance of how it had felt to kiss Roz for the first time. Years of wanting him only to run scared at the first spark of something more. Shane was a prisoner to his own fear.

“Have you ever...” Shane starts, aware that he at least owes her some sort of explanation for falling apart in her lap. “Wanted something. That was maybe a bit...weird?” A terrible way to start a conversation, really, but words were hard for him right now.

He wasn't sure he trusted his brain anymore, his mind screaming at him *stop, do not proceed*, but he had to tell someone, or it was going to eat him alive, take over every part of him until there was nothing left but a shell. A machine disguised as a human man.

“Um,” Rose seems to take his words into serious consideration, probably very aware of how fragile the situation is by now. “If you're talking about having a crush on your arch rival, I really don't think that qualifies as weird,” she says gently, like one wrong move might send him spiraling off the deep end again. “Is this...is this because he's a man?” She asks carefully, voice feather-light.

Shane puffs a self-deprecating laugh because, sure, there were layers to his insanity. Still, though, she wasn't completely off base.

“God. There's just...so much. I don't even know where to begin,” he pinches his lower lip between his fingers.

And then he tells her everything. He tells her about seeing Roz that first night in the club with a man, about Roz inviting him back for *In the Dark*. He tells her about the blindfold, about how fuzzy and peaceful Roz had made him feel, about how he'd felt nothing but shame in the days following, but mostly because he'd thought it meant nothing to Roz. Mostly because he thought Roz had been trying to humiliate him, to somehow gain the upper hand in their ridiculously stilted dynamic.

He tells her about the hotel room, how Roz hadn't actually meant to stand him up all those years ago, how he'd apparently thought *he'd* been rejected, just like Shane had. He tells her about the apologies, about the event he'd planned specifically for Shane, about how terribly he'd seemed to want to make it up to him.

And then he tells her about the kiss, about being Roz's kitten for the evening. He tells her about Roz punching Sasha at the club, about how hot it had made him feel. He tells her about the kneeling, about the licking, about the traffic light color system. He tells her about the fear of being found out, the shame of liking it so much, how those factors had almost even *added* to the experience.

He even tells her about the blowjob, about Roz getting them both off between him while Shane sat on his lap, about how he'd cried after because the orgasm was so intense. He tells her about staying over in Roz's private room, about waking up warm and happy for a split second, before his mind caught up with him and yanked it all away.

He tells her about Boston Lily, about how his thoughts were starting to become paralyzing. He tells her how the fear has started to control him, has started to bleed into every little aspect of his life, starting with hockey and his diet, and now, even his personal relationships.

He tells her how scared he is of getting outed, of his sex life being put on blast for all to see, especially if Roz was involved. He would lose hockey, everything he's worked towards, and was that really worth the risk? Could he even exist without it?

When he finally looks up, he's troubled to see that there are tears in Rose's eyes. He hadn't intended to upset her, but he supposes it's better than the alternative. The one where she can only look at him in disgust.

"I'm sorry," she sniffles, dabbing carefully at her eyes to avoid ruining her mascara. "I just..." she pauses, shaking her head as if trying to collect her thoughts. "I hate that you've been going through all of this on your own. I wish you would have talked to me."

Shane swallows down the lump of guilt sitting in his throat. "I'm sorry," he replies softly.

"No, *no*," she reaches for his arm and squeezes it tightly. "You have nothing to be sorry for. *I'm* sorry if I ever made you feel like you couldn't come to me. I should have...noticed something was off sooner."

Shane's eyebrows crease together. *But I've worked so hard to keep it hidden*, he wants to say. *How could you have noticed?*

Rose sighs and glances up to the ceiling, fanning her eyes like she's trying to get control of her tears, before she looks at him fully. "Listen to me," she says seriously, blue eyes wide. "You are completely valid. Everything you're afraid of, everything you're feeling, that's all rooted in something *real*. You're not weak for being scared. You're not abnormal for wanting more."

Shane's face twitches as he takes in her words.

"As much as I know that hockey is the most important thing to you, I also think that it fucking sucks," she laughs wetly. "It sucks that, because the league has outdated views on this type of thing, *you* have to feel uncomfortable in your own skin. It sucks that you don't feel safe in your own locker room, around your own teammates. It sucks that everyone else's opinions on your sexuality feel more important than your own because they could *quite literally* have an impact on everything you've worked so hard for."

Shane closes his eyes tightly and nods. He meets her gaze when she squeezes his arm again.

"One thing I do know is that there's absolutely *nothing wrong* with the things you're into," she tells him earnestly. "Whether that's liking men, or liking Rozanov, or liking being fucking...electrocuted while suspended 50 feet in the air, I don't know." Her lips pull up into a small smile, and Shane chokes out a surprised laugh. "People are into a lot of weird shit! Who am I to judge? Who are any of us to judge, really?"

Shane wipes at one of his teary eyes.

“My point is,” she says around a full smile this time. “Whatever you get up to in your private time is your business, not anyone else’s. And you don’t deserve to feel shame over something that makes you feel good, especially considering *a lot* of other people are probably into it as well.”

Shane thinks of Roz’s community at the club, how he had basically called them his chosen family, how he had yelled at Sasha for daring to make anyone feel like they weren’t deserving of that. Of feeling safe in their own skin, especially when the world outside could be so cruel.

“I’m not saying it’s easy,” she adds as an afterthought. “It sounds like you have a lot of work to do when it comes to accepting yourself, maybe even discovering what you’re into. And you might have a harder time coming to terms with that than most people. This world is, admittedly, not stacked in your favor,” she tells him sadly. “Life is fucking brutal and unfair,” she scoffs in disgust. “But, the good thing is, you’ve got a lot of people who really *do* want what’s best for you,” she adds as a consolation. “You’ve got me, for one. And, while I wouldn’t exactly go tell your parents everything you’ve just told me...” she trails, raising her eyebrows as if to say, *awkward*.

Shane’s mouth drops open, half in a gasp, half laughing.

“What I do know is they’d support you no matter what,” Rose smiles confidently. “Your parents are awesome, Shane. From what you’ve told me, at least. And I’m very positive they wouldn’t love you any less for being gay, into Rozanov, or even wanting to be a cat.”

God, Shane loved her.

“I also think,” she starts slowly. “There’s someone in a very similar position to you, someone who probably can relate directly to what you’re going through,” she says pointedly.

Shane licks his lips, catching the lower one between his teeth.

“In fact,” she pauses, looking Shane over carefully. “I’m almost entirely certain that you’re wearing all of his clothes right now, including what seems to be his *very* noticeably recognizable signature cross necklace.”

Shane looks down quickly at his neck. Fuck. He hadn’t even noticed he’d left with Roz’s chain. Ilya was probably freaking out trying to find it.

“You two obviously have like...a lot to talk about,” Rose acknowledges. “Like, as cool as it is that you’re gay, two men, together, is like a *recipe* for disaster when it comes to communication.”

Shane huffs in amusement around a smile.

Suddenly, Rose’s phone buzzes to life next to her, a flurry of about a dozen messages coming in all at once.

“Uh oh,” Rose sighs to herself as she reaches to retrieve it. “Hopefully, they’re not extending this movie *again*.” But when she looks at her phone, she’s surprised to find that all the texts are from Svetlana. She wrinkles her eyebrows and squints to read them as they come in.

“Everything okay?” Shane frowns, not liking the expression on her face.

“Um,” Rose drags the word. “I think...I think you *really* need to talk to Ilya.”

“What?” Shane feels panic rise in his chest. “What is it? What happened? Is it about the necklace? Is he mad I have it?”

“No. Nothing like that, it’s just,” she winces. “It’s Svetlana. Apparently, Ilya saw the pics of you crying, and he’s like...*freaking* out. He thinks it’s because of him.”

“What?” Shane’s eyes go wide. “No, I mean—” he flounders. “I’m the one who ran away and got scared. I’m the one who freaked out. He—he didn’t do anything wrong.”

Rose’s eyes flicker over the screen as her phone continuously vibrates in her hand. “Yeah, well. I think you should make that clear, because apparently, he’s being really hard on himself about it. Svetlana’s *really* worried about him. Like...like I think you need to call him right now.”

Shane blinks a few times. “Fuck. Fuck,” he shakes himself out of his stupor. “Yeah. Yeah, I—I’ll call him.”

“I’ll give you some privacy,” Rose offers, but Shane is already out of his seat, phone in hand.

“No, it’s fine, I’ll take it on the patio. I could use some fresh air anyway,” he replies, mentally trying to steel himself for what’s to come.

“Okay,” she relents, giving him a once-over. “I’ll be here if you need anything. You...you’re okay, right? Like,” she winces, tipping her head. “Sorry, *you’re not*, obviously. But, like—”

“Yes,” Shane cuts her off with a smile, his fingers twitching with the need to call Ilya. “Yeah. I feel a lot better, thank you,” he offers her a meaningful look. “Thanks for being so cool about all this. I’m sorry for like...breaking down on you earlier.”

Rose just shrugs, her lips curling at the corners. “What are friends for if you can’t have a little mental breakdown on them every once in a while? I’m happy you came to me, seriously. Plus, I honestly think the cat stuff is like...kinda hot,” she offers, twirling a piece of hair around her finger.

Shane just laughs wetly, rubbing at the edges of his eyes before taking a grounding deep breath. “Okay,” he says, and then steps outside, embracing the biting wind on his cheeks. He pulls Ilya’s hoodie a little more tightly around himself.

And then, for the first time in weeks, he does something without hesitation, pressing his finger on the call button next to Rozanov’s name before his brain can talk him out of it. His heart hammers loudly as it rings. Once, twice, four times, six. He sighs when he gets Roz’s

voicemail, and momentarily debates leaving a message, but before he can do so, the phone is vibrating urgently in his hand.

“Hello?” Shane says, pressing the phone to his ear.

“Shane,” comes Ilya’s reply, and Shane can immediately tell he’s been crying, his voice rough with emotion. “I—I’m *so*, so sorry. I do not deserve your forgiveness, and I won’t ask for it. I’ve been so stupid. Careless. Reckless. Selfish beyond belief. I should have never had you come here. I will never forgive myself for breaking your trust and—”

Shane’s eyes are wide as Ilya’s words fly through the receiver, his accent so thick with passion and tears that Shane can barely understand him.

“Ilya, wait,” Shane tries to cut him off with a frown.

“If Rose wants to come break my legs, I give her permission. I do not deserve to walk this Earth after hurting you, after I *promised you* I would not. I am a terrible person and an even more terrible Dom—”

“Ilya,” Shane says sharply, and it seems to actually pull his attention this time. “Just...just slow down, okay? I’m not mad at you.”

Ilya snuffles loudly, and Shane can hear how much of a mess he is, how much of an effort he must be putting into trying to keep himself together.

“I have your mother’s necklace,” he says calmly and waits, hearing silence on the other end.

“Oh,” Ilya says finally, like he hadn’t even realized it was gone. “You can keep it. Or throw it away, even,” he scoffs in defeat. “My Mama would be ashamed of the man I have become. Ashamed of the way I have treated you.”

“Ilya,” Shane huffs, shaking his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who freaked out, okay? I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

“Shane, it is clear you’re trying to let me down easy, to be nice and respectful like a good Golden Boy should, and maybe you do not fully understand, but you are *wrong*. I have taken risks with your safety out of my own selfishness and, for that, I am more sorry than you will ever know. I should not even be allowed to participate in events, let alone own a club that *hosts* them—”

“Ilya,” Shane laughs, running his shaking fingers through his hair. “I *need* you to listen to me, okay?”

Another snuffle, but otherwise, silence. Almost as if he were telling Shane to go ahead, twist the knife. Fire the last bullet and put him out of his misery.

Shane sighs and tries to get his thoughts together. “I’m...having a really hard time with all of this. And, it’s not,” he huffs, deliberating over which words to use. “I don’t know. I’m having a really hard time, in general, I think. I...” he pauses, clutching the railing of the deck for courage as he says this next part. “I’m really fucking attracted to you. Like, god, you have no

idea. And last night..." he trails again. "I guess I just wasn't expecting to be so into it. I never thought I would like stuff like that. It *scared* me, how much I liked it. I was embarrassed, more than anything. Ashamed."

"Yes, Shane," Ilya says through gritted teeth. "And I am trying to explain to you that it is *my fault*. These things are supposed to be discussed ahead of time, but I got greedy. Negligent. I pushed you to do something you were not ready for, and I did this for my own selfish gain because I have wanted you so badly for so long."

"It's not just this," Shane sighs, shaking his head, ignoring his sentiments. "It's not even really about you *or* the event. It's just—" he huffs a sigh, before forcing himself to say the next part. "I think...I think I'm gay."

More silence, and then, a surprised laugh, still wet with emotion. "Wow, Hollander. What... uh, what makes you think that?"

"Shut up," Shane scoffs, but he's smiling. "*You're not gay.*"

"Mm, no. Not completely—"

"Well, I think I am. Completely," he presses forward. "And I think I've kind of been... punishing myself for it, I guess? I don't know. I just...hockey is everything to me."

"I know," Ilya acknowledges softly.

"I guess I was just so scared that someone was going to find out. I've been like *terrified*. Not even just at the club, but always. 24/7. For years and years now," he admits, chewing on his lower lip. "I tried so hard, you know? To like girls. It would just be so much easier. And every time I've tried to put myself out there, to take a chance with a guy, I end up sabotaging it before anything even happens because I'm so fucking scared of being outed."

Ilya hums, urging him to continue.

"And I think like...if I *did* get outed, especially if I was seen with someone like *you*," Shane sucks in a breath. "My entire career would be over. I'd be laughed out of the NHL. A punchline. My entire legacy erased over something as stupid as...I don't know. Wanting to be your...котенок," he tries, his mouth forming awkwardly around the Russian word.

Ilya breathes a laugh through the phone. "Котенок," he corrects softly.

"Котенок," Shane repeats, but it still comes out wrong.

"Mm," Ilya makes a sound through the phone. "I wish I had done this very differently. Starting with getting the room number correct all those years ago."

Shane huffs. "Yeah. Me too."

"I hear what you are saying, Shane. I do," Ilya sighs. "But, I need you to understand that, if I had done my job correctly, you would not have been so scared this morning. That is...not a

reaction one should have after a scene, at least if it is done safely and properly. You are not at fault for reacting that way, regardless of whatever else is going through your loud brain.”

Shane swallows, but listens closely.

“It is very dangerous what we were doing. I have made it much more so by not talking through things with you ahead of time,” Ilya voices. “For this, I am more sorry than you will ever know. Something terrible could have happened. Something terrible *did* happen, but it could have gone *much worse*. And I need you to know this. So that, in case you want to try anything like this again, you can find a Dom who will treat you right.”

Wait, what? Shane shakes his head in disagreement. “What? Ilya, I don’t want to find another —”

“I am not good for you, Shane,” Ilya cuts him off. “I am careless. I am blinded by my feelings for you. And I have already screwed up too many times. I will not put you at risk anymore.”

“But, I’m fine now,” Shane says into the phone, an edge to his voice. “I freaked out because I was scared of the consequences. Of what it would say about me. If it somehow got out that Shane Hollander likes to dress up like a fucking cat for Ilya Rozanov.”

“That is why you discuss scenes ahead of time. Not shove cat ears at someone randomly and expect them to have normal reaction.”

“You and I both know I wouldn’t have done it,” Shane admits quietly. “If we talked about it ahead of time.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “Which is why we should not have done it.”

Shane scoffs. “So, what? That’s it, then? You bring me into your fucking ‘world’, and when one thing goes wrong, you kick me out of it? Is this some fucking game to you? A new notch on Rozy’s never-ending hitlist. Right? The one that got away all those years ago. Now that you finally *bagged the Golden Boy*, you can check it off? Move on to the next one. Am I right?”

“Shane—”

“God, you are such a fucking asshole. You know, of everything I was scared of, this is the thing I feared the *most*. That you were just fucking with me. Pretending to like me to get me to submit. To humiliate me. What’s next? Is there a secret camera? Are you going to leak the footage so everyone can see what a whiny bitch I am for you, too?”

“I would *never* violate you like this,” Ilya hisses into the phone. “You may come check for yourself. No footage of you like this exists, Hollander. That I swear to you.”

“Your words don’t mean shit to me, Roz,” Shane shouts into the phone this time. “I may not understand much about what you do, but just know something,” he pauses. “If there is a point

at which you fucked up, it's *this*. *Right now*. Not whatever stupid conversation you think we should have had."

"Don't do this, Hollander," Ilya swallows. "Don't make this out to be something that it is not."

"You're making up excuses," Shane gets out angrily. "If you don't want to see me again, then just fucking say that."

"I do not want to see you *get hurt* again," he corrects.

"You know I can't have this with anyone else," Shane practically whispers into the phone, shutting his eyes. "How could I *ever* trust someone again? I let you see me in a way I've never been around anyone. I'm telling you things I've barely even admitted to myself. And you're rejecting me."

"Shane," Ilya croaks.

"Well, if you wanted to ruin me for anyone else, congrats, Roz. You got your wish," Shane laughs bitterly, but he sounds defeated even to his own ears.

"This is not my wish!" Roz snaps. "I have wanted you for years."

"Then, fucking *have me*," Shane demands. "*I want you too*. Don't you get that? I'm scared out of my fucking head. But, under all the fear and...and shame...and self-hatred," his voice shakes. "All I can think about is how badly I want you. *This*. All of it. You can't give me things I never even knew I needed and then rip it all away. I— please," he begs. "You can't." And then... "I can't *suffer* like this anymore, Ilya. I'm *so fucking lonely*." His lower lip wobbles as tears threaten to spill.

"God," Ilya's voice cracks, and there's a muffled sound, like he's turned away from the phone to avoid audibly crying into it. "If I had one wish, I would do everything over. All the way back to summer before rookie season."

"I wouldn't," Shane surprises himself by saying. "I want you. Now. Despite everything. I...I deserve...to have this."

Ilya goes quiet again, save for the occasional snuffle on the other end of the line that tells Shane he's still there, still processing.

"You said you didn't give me a proper choice before," Shane reminds him.

Ilya makes a sound of agreement.

"Don't take it from me this time," he pleads softly.

More silence. It feels like it goes on forever.

And then, "Okay."

“Okay?” Shane double-checks, a little breathlessly.

“Okay,” Ilya agrees.

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Ilya is nervous when Shane asks to meet him the next evening at the club. Truthfully, he had never felt less sure of himself as a Dom than he did right now. Shane made him careless. Desperate.

Of course, his instincts had been correct. Shane seemed very into the things Ilya had painstakingly planned for him, but he hadn't done his due diligence by talking the scene through with him first. And that was a mistake that Ilya would not make again.

“Hi, моя любовь,” Ilya greets with tired eyes as Shane steps into the building through the back entrance. He had cried a lot these past two days. He hoped it wasn't too obvious.

“Are you okay?” Shane asks, tipping his head.

“I am very upset with myself,” he admits quietly. “It is my biggest fear that I will hurt you. Fail you. I have failed so many people in my life.”

“Hey,” Shane frowns, surprising him by stepping forward to wrap his arms around Ilya's shoulders.

Ilya, to his part, just freezes for a moment, but then slowly sinks into it, cautiously accepting the embrace.

“Look, maybe I don't understand everything,” Shane sighs, pulling back to look at him properly. “But, I did some research, and I know you weren't *trying* to hurt me. Okay? You never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do.”

“No,” Ilya agrees easily, because that much was true. “But I should have talked through the scene with you. You go down very easily, Shane. It's not fair to have you decide if you are okay with something in the moment.”

“You told me I was going to be kneeling before the scene started.” Shane sinks his fingers into the curls at the nape of Ilya's neck.

“I *told* you you would be kneeling,” Ilya emphasizes. “I did not ask for your thoughts. That is not a proper discussion.”

“And when I was uncomfortable, in the moment, you noticed. You pulled me into your lap.”

Ilya sighs heavily.

“I'm just saying,” Shane rolls his eyes. “You aren't careless. I never felt unsafe or pressured to do something.”

Ilya watches him carefully, eyes dropping to his mother's cross, which still hangs on Shane Hollander's perfect neck. "Well, I am glad you did not. But there are certain things that should be discussed. And, going forward, we will not participate in a scene without them."

Ilya is surprised when Shane kisses him on the chin, just off the corner of his lips.

"Sorry," Shane says, flushing. "Do we have to discuss kisses or..."

Ilya replies by kissing his nose. "Yes, Hollander. We are going to discuss everything. Would you like to come to my playroom now?"

"Is that what it's called?" Shane asks, wrinkling the precious nose that Ilya has just kissed.

"My private room. But sometimes playroom. Depending on what mood I'm in."

"Are we going to play tonight?" Shane questions, hopefully.

Ilya regards him carefully, brushing the front pieces of his hair out of his eyes. "We will see."

If they did get to anything tonight, Ilya knew it would be something simple. Much less than the elaborate scenes he had planned for Shane before. They wouldn't have to start over completely, but Ilya did feel the need to revisit the basics before progressing any further with Shane.

"Let's sit on the couch," Ilya suggests, once they're safely tucked away in his playroom. He inhales, then exhales.

Shane is watching him curiously.

"I want to make sure we're on the same page. This means talking about things like limits, the things that we like, safety," he explains, smiling when he notices Shane's outfit. "I can see one of the things we both like, already," he teases. "You are wearing my clothes."

"I washed them," Shane feels the need to say.

Ilya puffs a laugh. As if he would ever assume *Shane Hollander* to be unclean.

"We did not get to discuss how you felt about the event," Ilya steers the conversation back. "I want to know which parts you liked about it, and if there is anything you didn't."

Shane swallows, shifting a bit on the couch. "Um." He seemed to be at a loss for words, the man that Ilya knew to have a thousand thoughts running through his head at all times. "I liked...the ears."

"Just the ears?" Ilya prompts.

"No, I mean. All of it. Kind of. I don't know," Shane replies, and Ilya can tell he's struggling with having to voice it out loud. Almost like verbalizing it will somehow make it more real.

“How did you feel? Being my kitten. What was nice about it?” Ilya tries again, spreading his legs a little wider, until his thigh brushes against Shane’s.

“I liked...not having to talk,” he says, and Ilya can tell they’re getting somewhere now.

“You said that about the *In the Dark* event, too,” Ilya reminds him. “Why is it nice when you don’t have to talk?”

“Um. Cause I don’t have to think?”

“Like, what?” Ilya leans in, laying an arm over the back of the couch just for an excuse to be close to him. “What are you normally thinking about when you’re talking?”

“I don’t know,” Shane sighs in frustration.

“What are you thinking about right now? You are frustrated, yes? While trying to talk. What is frustrating about it?”

“Cause I don’t know if I’m saying the right thing,” he huffs.

“Ah,” Ilya smiles. *Ding, ding, ding*. “This is why you like not having to talk. Because there is no risk of getting it wrong. This makes a lot of sense for the Golden Boy.”

“Stop calling me that,” Shane crosses his arms.

“Not if you are going to look so cute every time I do,” Ilya laughs. “And you are doing perfect, by the way. You are saying the exact right thing, Hollander.”

Shane tries to hide it, but Ilya can see how affected he is by the praise.

“Is there anything else you liked about being my good kitten? I know you like when I feed you with my fingers. You already told me this.”

Shane nods quickly. “I liked that. I like when you do things for me. When you decide things, so I don’t have to.”

“Give me an example,” Ilya requests.

Shane bites his lower lip in contemplation. “The drinks at the bar. I like not having to pick.”

“Why do you like it?” Roz tips his head.

“I don’t know. I guess, I don’t have to worry as much.”

“Worry about alcohol?”

“Calories,” Shane whispers, so softly that Ilya almost misses it.

Ilya sits up a little. “Hollander. You are a star hockey player with big, strong muscles. What is the worry with calories?”

“Empty calories,” Shane huffs. “Slows me down in the gym. Messes with my schedule. Ages me, probably. Which means less time playing hockey.”

“You like it when I force your loud brain to relax,” Ilya deduces, though this is something he already knew.

Shane lets out a soft sigh. Maybe in relief. “Yes.”

“Do you remember when I asked you to kneel? Just now, you said you had been uncomfortable. Do you remember why?”

“I—you were ignoring me,” Shane stutters.

“I did not. You were barely there a full minute,” Ilya corrects. “But, you liked it better the second time, hm? Why was it better, *котенок*?”

“Cause you were touching me,” he says easily, like he’s letting his mind take him back to that feeling. “I think...I already felt a little good, too. So, it was easier.”

“You were down,” Ilya tells him the proper verbiage. “It is subspace. Not always, but you go down very easily. Which means I have to be very careful with you.”

“Subspace,” Shane tests the word on his tongue. “How do I know if I’m in it?”

“Remember the other night, at the end of the night? When I brought you back to my playroom? Words were really hard for you, then, yes? Subspace can make your head very foggy. It’s hard to think clearly. That’s why it’s important to talk through *all* our plans for the evening first. Yes?” He double-checks that Shane is listening.

“Yes,” Shane’s lips quirk slightly.

“We should not have done anything sexual that evening without discussing it,” he admits through a lump in his chest.

Shane’s eyes are very alert. “Okay,” he nods, before adding, “but I really liked that part too.”

Ilya’s mouth twitches at the corners.

“Okay, I think we should discuss some hard limits. You may not know all of them right now, and that is okay. But, I think one of your hard limits that we’ve talked about already is: nothing in public unless your identity is concealed. Do you agree with that?”

“Yes,” Shane says firmly.

“Good. My hard limits are that I will never cause you extreme pain. I am okay with some things, but I do not do torture. Ever,” Ilya says seriously, watching as Shane’s throat bobs. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yes,” the reply is immediate.

“Aftercare is also very important to me. It is important for both of us, actually. This gives us time to come back into ourselves, wind down after a scene. This means water, usually cuddling. This is a time where I get to tell you very nice things while you are loose and fuzzy in my arms. Is sometimes the best part. For me, at least.”

Shane visibly reacts to his description, and Ilya just smirks.

“Everyone needs a different level of aftercare. Some people are all good to go in just twenty or thirty minutes. For others, it can take hours to return properly to themselves. There is even something called subdrop, which can happen in the days after.”

“What, like randomly?” Shane asks, suddenly looking worried. Like he was somehow going to drop in the middle of a hockey game or something, even though they were currently in the off-season.

“It is not exactly the same as regular subspace, but it can make people very tired or sad. Feelings of shame.” Ilya swallows, tilting his head at the realization. “Maybe this is a little bit what you were feeling yesterday, hm? Do you see what I mean? Subdrop is very dangerous, Shane.”

Shane just blinks at him, taking the information in while his brain makes, what is likely to be, a million mental footnotes. “You were crying a lot yesterday, too,” he points out, watching Ilya carefully. “Does it happen to Doms also?”

“Supposedly, yes,” Ilya nods slowly. “I did not believe in it, at first. But, after yesterday, I think it is probably true. We both suffered because of my mistake. Dropping is more common when you feel very connected to someone. I have not experienced this with other partners, personally. Probably because they were one-off scenes.”

“Ilya,” Shane says seriously. “Isn’t there something we can do? To make it better? Or does it just go away on its own?”

“Yes, there are simple things that can help, like resting a little extra, drinking lots of water. Warm shower. Protein. *Carbs*,” he nudges Hollander knowingly. “Helping the body to get back to normal. But, mostly, it’s best to check in with each other. Talk, like we did on the phone yesterday. Reassure each other that we are okay, that the scene went well for both of us. A cuddle doesn’t hurt either.”

“Can I?” Shane asks, looking over his open body language.

“Can you what?” Ilya’s eyebrows flick up.

“Can I cuddle with you?” He clarifies, then adds as an afterthought, “Please.”

Ilya hums his approval and stretches his arms wide for Shane to fall into his chest. “Mm, you have such good ideas, Hollander. But, we are not finished with this conversation.”

“I know,” Shane murmurs, pressing forward to sink into Ilya’s arms.

Ilya takes advantage of the new position to run his fingers through Shane's silky black hair. "Are there any other hard limits you can think of off the top of your head? These are things we will absolutely not do under any circumstance."

Shane is quiet for a minute, thoughtful. Ilya appreciated how seriously he was taking this. "I guess mostly just...not having people know. Obviously, I know that Svetlana knows."

"She should never have addressed you by name during the event. That was very wrong, and she knows not to do it again," he tells him seriously, but can't help smiling fondly when Shane looks up from his spot against Ilya's chest. He has waited ages to be able to do this, to be able to hold Shane properly.

Shane nods carefully. "I also...told Rose."

"Mm," Ilya agrees, his heart panging. "I figured this. The pictures of you crying."

Shane shifts closer, wrapping his arms more securely around Ilya's waist. "I'm okay, really. I just...it was really overwhelming. Realizing how much I liked it. It feels...wrong, I dunno. Not normal," he admits quietly. "Like I'm weird for being into it."

"Well, if you are weird, then there are a lot of other weirdos out there just like you. I am definitely one of them," Ilya fiddles with the chain around Shane's neck. "But, if it makes you feel this bad that you are having public panic attacks on Rose Landry, we will not do it again."

Shane sits up, turning sharply to him, his eyebrows furrowed. "I *want* to do it again. I really, really liked it."

"It was too much too soon," Ilya says guiltily. "We should have eased into more serious scenes like that. I was too eager to show you things I thought you would enjoy."

"Well, I did enjoy it. A lot. I *really* want to do it again."

Ilya smiles lightly, eyes cataloguing Shane's face. "Slow and steady. There are many, many things I want to do to you, котенок."

"Like what?" Shane's throat bobs deliciously as he swallows.

"We will need to have a more in-depth discussion. I will send you home with some homework, and you will come back to me telling me what things you're interested in trying. We will see where we feel similarly," Ilya tells him.

"Can't you tell me what you're interested in, though?" Shane hums, twisting a little on his stomach, until their faces are closer together.

"No," Ilya nudges his fingers under Shane's chin. "I want to make sure you're being honest with me. I do not want your preferences to be affected by something you think I want from you." He pauses, noticing something in the other's eyes that he isn't voicing out loud. "What is it?"

“I like when you take control. I like when you decide things for me, or ask them, in the moment. It...it keeps me on my toes. The surprise of it,” Shane admits shyly. “I like not knowing.”

“Mm,” Ilya nods, taking that into consideration. “This is good to know. And maybe we can figure out how to continue to do this safely. As we get more comfortable knowing each other’s limits.”

“I just...” Shane pauses, avoiding his eyes. “I think it’s easier to ask for what I want when I’m a little...”

“Down,” Ilya fills in softly.

“I feel...so weird. I should *not* want you to treat me like a cat,” he says shamefully.

And Ilya hates that this is clearly a much deeper issue for him. Maybe it stemmed from hockey, maybe it stemmed from Shane’s own anxious head, but either way, he could tell it would be hard for both of them to start breaking down those walls.

“It’s called petplay,” Ilya looks him over in contemplation. “It is a very common kink in the BDSM community. There is no need to be ashamed of something you like if it makes you feel good and if it is done safely. And it especially makes sense for you with the things you told me you like. There is lots of praise and lots of touching. You do not have to think or speak because it is your owner’s job to do it for you. It can be very freeing to let go like this.”

Ilya can’t help tugging Shane a little closer by his ‘collar’.

“Do you like being ‘owned’ by me?” He asks, and he can feel the shiver that runs through Shane as he nods. “Tell me.”

Shane shuts his eyes tightly, as if bracing for impact, and when he opens them again, Ilya meets his gaze head-on. “I like being owned by you,” he agrees, but Ilya can practically see the guilt trickling into his belly with the admission. Like every potential good thing in Shane’s life cannot possibly exist without a cost.

“Again,” he requests.

Shane steels his expression a little bit and clears his throat. “I like being owned by you,” he says, with a bit more confidence this time.

“Good, котенок. I can tell you responded really well to it. You were being very sweet towards the end of the night. Very...silly,” he recalls with a small smile.

“Was not,” Shane flushes, trying to bury his face, but Ilya doesn’t let him.

“You were. It was *very hot*, believe me. I am already thinking of new things we can try, if you are comfortable.”

Shane’s eyes spark in interest. “Really? Like...like what?”

Ilya hesitates for a moment, doesn't want to influence Shane's interests one way or another, but this...this he knew they were both interested in. So, he decides it's probably okay to offer at least one suggestion, to give Shane some ideas to think about as he does his research later. "Well, a lot of pets like to have tails, too."

"A tail?" Shane's eyebrows crease cutely.

"Yes. Have you heard of a plug? It goes in your—"

"Yes," Shane cuts him off, flushing deliciously. "I've...I've heard of that." But his reaction has Ilya raising his eyebrows in interest.

"Oh, you have? Who told you about this?"

Shane just rolls his eyes. "Jesus. No one. I'm not actually entirely clueless, you know?" Debatable. But, he's deliberately avoiding Ilya's question. Ilya raises an eyebrow at him. "I... may have one. Just, like. For myself, you know. I haven't..." he trails.

Oh, yes. Ilya was delighted with every new piece of information that Shane casually let slip. The thought of Shane, alone in his room, working himself over with a plug, was enough to get Ilya's cock twitching in his pants. "Well, some plugs have very pretty tails at the end of them. Tails that swish when you walk...or crawl. Usually very soft. You like soft things, yes?"

Shane nodded, and the flush from his cheeks has spread to his neck as well.

"Would you want to try something like that? A plug with a tail? It is just a suggestion," he reminds him, wanting to eliminate any pressure.

But Shane's jerky nod is answer enough.

"Okay. Maybe for next scene, then. I will get you some things, and we can look at them. See how you feel. Does that sound good?"

Shane leans forward and presses a quick kiss to his chest in response, his eyes affirmative. "Mm. Can we...can we do something right now?"

"What would you like to do right now?" Ilya asks, stroking his hair once more.

"I don't know," Shane admits, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. "I want...like before."

"When is 'before'? Before, like in the hallway today? Before like crying against Rose Landry?"

Shane huffs and shoves at his chest, but he doesn't go far. "You know what I mean."

"Mm, I do not. You will need to be more specific."

“I want to be...your котенок,” Shane tries the Russian word again, and Ilya’s heart swells. “I want you to tell me what to do. So, I don’t have to think. I want you to...talk to me like you did.”

Ilya smiles and rewards him with a little scratch at the nape of his neck. “We can do this. But, only a little bit. I do not want you going fully down today. You are still recovering from your drop. As am I.”

Shane pushes his lips out in a little pout.

“What’s your safeword?” Ilya prompts, and Shane licks his lips.

“Safeword.”

“Good boy,” Ilya praises. “And your color?”

“Green,” Shane tells him, suddenly eager, like he wasn’t expecting Ilya to actually agree to it.

Ilya could see how their dynamic was going to be tricky for him. He had a hard time denying Shane anything. It was so far from his experience with previous partners he’d worked with. “I am just going to talk to you a bit, okay? Pet you. Tell you nice things. Are you okay with me kissing you while you are like this? Touching you a bit?”

“Yes,” Shane replies immediately. “Please kiss me. And...you can touch me, too. Wherever,” he adds, and Ilya notes the little flicker of arousal in his eyes.

“Mm, good boy,” he says again. “You may talk if you wish, but it is okay if you do not want to. I’ll take care of you, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane responds, and Ilya can see a little thrill run up his spine. “Can I have a kiss now?”

And, how could Ilya say no? He nods and presses forward, taking Shane’s chin in his hand to guide them into a chaste kiss. Their first real one this evening.

“Would you like to sit in my lap, котенок?” Ilya asks, feeling himself slip into his own headspace. A space where he felt a little more in control, his voice soft, but level, commanding.

Shane nods emphatically, and Ilya helps maneuver him with a gentle hand on his hips until Shane is straddling him, knees resting on the couch on either side of his thighs.

“That’s very good,” Ilya coos, running his fingers over the smattering of freckles dotted along Shane’s cheeks. “You are even wearing the perfect hoodie for kitten paws. Did you do this intentionally, котенок?” He hums knowingly, reaching to help Shane’s fingers into each of the thumbholes.

“Yes,” Shane admits, his cheeks pinkening deliciously as he lets Ilya fuss over him.

Ilya smiles, pressing a kiss to each of his paws. He holds Shane's fingers up for a second, admiring the nail polish he'd noticed from the event the other evening. "You are so good at grooming yourself, mm? I have never seen such nice, little kitty claws." His voice is slow, and he can see the effect it has on Shane already.

Shane has that little deer-in-headlights look. That look he gets when he wants something, but isn't sure he's allowed to have it. Ilya desperately wants him to have it, though. Would do anything to be the one to give it to him.

"Already nice and quiet for me. My kitty is so well-behaved." Ilya lets his fingers easily slide across Shane's lower back, slipping under the fabric of his hoodie until they're skin-to-skin.

He can see Shane starting to relax, which is so, so nice. *God, he's the perfect sub*, Ilya thinks to himself, glad to be able to admire him close up when he's like this. Any time spent with Shane felt like a privilege. He never thought he would get to have something like this. His eyes are drawn once again to his mother's necklace, glinting brightly on the Golden Boy's neck.

"Do you like this collar, baby? I can try to find you a better one. More for a kitten, if you want?"

Shane's eyes go wide, and he quickly shakes his head, wrapping a protective sweater paw around the chain, as if it were somehow Ilya's intention to take it away from him.

"No?" Ilya double-checks. "You can keep wearing it, if you want. Even when we are not playing. It looks very nice around your neck," he tells him, reaching up to pet at Shane's chest. "I just don't want someone to accidentally notice and wonder..."

But Shane's cheeks are bright red. Almost like...

"Ah, I see," Ilya smirks knowingly. "Maybe you are secretly hoping someone will notice. Discover you are my sweet kitten. Is that it?"

Shane ducks his head, probably in embarrassment, but Ilya catches the little nod.

Shane liked the fantasy of someone finding out. He didn't *actually* want anyone to know, but at the same time, it was clear he got off on the *idea* of people knowing. It made a lot of sense considering how easily Shane had gone down during the events. He liked the shame, got off on it, at least a little bit. As long as it wasn't real. As long as it didn't come with any actual consequences. Ilya could definitely work with that.

"Mm, what would people think? If they saw you wearing my collar. Most people probably wouldn't know," he reasons, tipping his head in consideration. "But, maybe one or two people...they would see this on your neck and wonder. Wonder why you are wearing something of Ilya Rozanov's."

He can feel the way Shane's pulse has quickened, his heartbeat thudding loudly under Ilya's palm on his chest.

“Little do they know, you are wearing my clothes, as well. I think maybe you secretly want them all to know I own you. Don’t you, baby?”

Shane whimpers, and Ilya can’t resist pressing forward to steal the sound from his lips, kissing him fiercely. He deepens the kiss when he feels Shane’s hands on his chest, slipping up to wrap around his neck, and he responds by pulling Shane flush against his hips.

And, *oh*. Shane was already half-hard in his lap. Interesting.

Shane is pawing at his chest as Ilya attempts to kiss each one of the freckles that dot his beautifully flushed cheeks. Like he will die if he leaves a single one untouched. Unloved.

“You are allowed to want this,” Ilya reminds him, cause he thinks Shane really needs to hear it. Needs permission to let himself *want* things. Ilya does not like the thought of Shane going so long without this. Without someone to kiss him and tell him he’s beautiful. Without someone to remind him that, no matter what, he would be safe and cared for. If Shane lost hockey tomorrow, Ilya would still want him, want this. He hopes Shane would feel the same.

Shane hiccups a gasp, blinking heavily like he’s on the verge of tears as he ruts his hips forward a bit.

“Mm, a nice warm cat to writhe in my lap. How did I get so lucky?” Ilya murmurs, pressing their noses together. “Can I have a kitten lick, драгоценный? You are so sweet for me when you are like this.”

Shane responds with a tiny lick across Ilya’s lips that makes his heart flutter wildly in his chest.

“Good boy.”

And Shane desperately grinds down against him this time.

“Are you wanting to get off, baby? We did not discuss this,” Ilya tells him softly, tracing his fingers down Shane’s neck. But Shane had mentioned it was easier to ask for things once his guard was down a bit, and he’d expressed that Ilya could touch him wherever he wanted. Still, he wanted to be mindful of boundaries, especially after what happened last time.

“Please,” Shane begs deliriously. “Want it so bad.”

At least he wasn’t down fully, perfectly capable of using his voice this evening.

“I am not sure if I should give this to you,” he muses, squeezing Shane’s hips between his fingers.

“Ilya,” Shane whines, panting a little bit now.

“Hm,” he hums in consideration. “Maybe you should have to work for it. Do you think you are capable of doing this? Yes or no, kitty cat?” he asks again, swiping his thumb across Shane’s lower lip.

“Yes,” Shane whispers.

“Color, baby,” Ilya requests.

“Green,” Shane supplies easily.

“Then, get yourself off,” Ilya decides, removing his hands to place them behind his head as he looks at Shane expectantly.

Shane, to his part, just blinks up at him. Almost as if waiting for further instruction.

“Just like before. Grind against me. You want to be an animal, hm? Perfect kitten for me? Animals do not have opposable thumbs,” Ilya informs, raising a hand to wiggle his thumb at Shane. “They must hump if they want to get off.”

Shane makes the cutest little frustrated frowny face that Ilya wants to bite off him, but instead, he keeps his expression neutral. He waits patiently as Shane gives an experimental wiggle of his hips, but it’s instantly clear to Ilya that his jeans are not giving the kitten much to work with.

“Here, try like this,” he leans forward to adjust them, shifting Shane so he is straddling against just one of Ilya’s thighs now, instead of both. “Mm, that’s better, yes?”

He can tell immediately by the way Shane’s eyebrows press together as he moans, hips bucking against Ilya’s thick thigh. The kitten shifts, wrapping his arms tight around Ilya’s neck as he practically collapses face-first into his chest, dragging his clothed cock against the fabric of Ilya’s jeans.

“That’s my boy. Very, very good,” he praises, his voice low and intentional.

“Ah,” Shane’s mouth drops open in a gasp, and then starts mouthing helplessly at Ilya’s shirt.

“Mm, good fucking boy,” he encourages, slipping a hand through Shane’s hair this time. It has the desired effect, with Shane instantly nuzzling into his hand. He turns to nose at the newly presented skin and then swipes his tongue flat across Ilya’s palm. “Fuck.”

Shane is desperate, grinding his hips wildly against Ilya’s leg now, like he’s being timed and graded on his performance. Ilya bets he would like that, actually. Especially because Ilya would never give him anything other than an A+.

Hm...that could be hot to roleplay, he thinks. Him as the strict professor and Shane as the very shy student, eager to make up a poor test grade. His eyes darken as he watches the sinful thing in his lap continue to work himself over.

He’s letting out soft little grunts now. Little *uh, uh, uhs* that are going straight to Ilya’s cock. Ilya wonders if he can actually come like this, really wants to see him try.

“My kitten. You’re making such a mess of your owner, aren’t you? Claiming me with your scent. So, everyone will know I am yours?” His fingers catch on his mama’s cross around Shane’s neck.

Shane nods frantically, and Ilya can see in his face how much it's affecting him, the combination of his words and the heat of Ilya's thigh pressing deliciously where Shane needs him most. He's rutting his hips faster now, using Ilya like a fucking *sex toy* to get himself off, and Ilya's pretty sure it's the hottest thing he's ever seen.

"Mark your territory, baby. Show everyone I am all yours," Ilya goads him on, because he'd proudly wear Shane's cum like a badge of honor for all the world to see. For Ilya, personally, he would give up hockey in a millisecond if it meant getting to have this for the rest of his life. No question. It would be the easiest decision in the world.

Shane whines high in his throat, practically face-first in Ilya's torso now as he ruts against the edge of his knee. He's got the angle down to a science, and Ilya can tell he's close, if the noises and lack of motor control are anything to go by. He's only seen him orgasm once, but Ilya was a quick study. Especially when it came to Shane.

"My feral kitten. So desperate and small, humping my leg," he murmurs lowly. "You are the hottest thing I have ever seen. I should keep you in a cage by my desk, so I can look at you and pet you whenever I want. And then, when I am exhausted after a long day, maybe I will let you rub your leaking cock all over my leg to get off. Is that what you want, sweet boy? To sit quiet on the floor while your owner works very hard to keep the lights on for you? To pay the bills so you can just be a kitten all the time and not have to think about anything?"

Ilya feels it when Shane finally comes with a full-body shudder against his knee. Ilya just holds him through it, telling him soft praises while Shane mewls and mouths at the fabric of his shirt like he doesn't know what to do with himself.

"So fucking good for me. That was so perfect," he leans down to press a kiss to Shane's hair, lightly scraping his nails up his back. "My perfect baby котенок. I have never seen a kitten as well-behaved as this one. I think I made the right choice by adopting you. Yes, I did."

Shane is a bit of a teary finisher, Ilya realizes, as he's blessed to witness it for a second time. When Shane sits up a little, he's breathless and red in the face. And he's not crying, but his eyes are filled to the brim with unshed tears.

Ilya pulls him fully to his chest, pressing an array of kisses down the side of his neck. "You are mine, yes? I am never letting you go now that I know how perfect you are. I have never met a kitten this flawless in my life. Perfect little freckles. Little spots on my kitten. What type of kitten are you anyway?" He talks just to keep Shane with him, present in the moment. "Are you a black and white kitten? These types of kittens are very mischievous, yes? This could be you. You're very playful. Very cuddly, котенок, aren't you?"

Shane just snuffles and buries his face in Ilya's neck, going completely lax in the other's grip.

"I am so lucky to have a kitten that is so precious. The best fur," he continues, coaxing another soft moan out of Shane when he pets his fingers through his hair. "You will have to teach me how you get your fur this nice. Maybe you will show me how you clean yourself with your little scratchy kitten tongue."

His Shane is spent and boneless in his arms, so Ilya hooks a hand under Shane's knee to pull him back on his lap fully.

"Maybe when my kitten goes into heat, I will fuck him. You are probably desperate for it, aren't you, baby?"

Shane lets out a soft whine.

"Mm, don't be embarrassed," Ilya tuts. "I like that you need me so much. I need you, too, котенок. It is okay if you are down, my little angel. I will keep you safe," he vows. "You can stay down if you wish. Just keep listening to my voice, okay? In a few minutes, I will get you some water, and then we can cuddle a bit, yes? But, for now, you are perfect just like this. Just as you are," Ilya soothes, offering reassurances.

Shane's eyes are closed, but if the little smile on his face is anything to go off of, Ilya is sure he's listening.

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Chapter End Notes

I have a looooooot of ideas about things these two will get into together buuuuuut, just out of curiosity, what other kinks would you like to see explored here? No promises, I'm going to let these characters and their dynamic play out as they're meant to! But would love to hear your thoughts as things progress between them. As promised, there is much more to cum ;)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

As much as Shane wants to, he knows he can't avoid Hayden anymore. He's been quiet in the team chats lately. Distant from the team. When he was a rookie, those guys had felt like family, but lately, Shane wondered if they really had his best interests at heart. Hockey was everything to him, but maybe it wouldn't always be, and that was a reality he was going to have a hard time accepting. Still, though, recently, Shane couldn't imagine a world in which he wanted to see any of his teammates outside of the rink. He was even a little bit dreading the start of next season, which was something he had not ever experienced in his life thus far.

The one person he knew he could count on, however, was Hayden. Shane had grown increasingly close to Hayden and his wife, Jackie, over the years, so much so that their kids even called him Uncle Shane. Hayden didn't know him like Rose did, though. And, the more Shane discovered about himself, the more he wondered if Hayden would accept him for who he was when the time came. He'd like to think so, but when nasty comments flew around team spaces, Hayden didn't flinch. Didn't roll his eyes or show that it bothered him in any way. It was just locker room talk, but to Shane, it was starting to become debilitating. A constant reminder of how trapped he was, how there wasn't any escape at all, let alone an easy one.

"Dude, where the fuck have you been?" Hayden shoves at his shoulder as he slips into one of the high-top chairs across from Shane. "You haven't replied in the group chat in days. All the guys think you're *drowning* in Boston Lily."

Shane just puffs a fake laugh and nods. "Just been busy, that's all."

"And then, we saw you crying all over Rose Landry! You've gotta fill me in, bro. I'm your best friend. Don't I at least get to know the gossip?" He wiggles his eyebrows.

Shane watches him for a second, almost like he's waiting for the punchline, but it pretty quickly becomes clear that one isn't coming. "Yeah. I'm not dating Rose, so," he mutters, busying himself with pulling the wrapper off his straw.

"So, you *are* back with Boston Lily? I knew it. So, what? Is she like...staying with you during the off-season?" Hayden questions while looking over his menu.

"Um," Shane stutters, but he isn't sure how to have this conversation without lying about *something*, so he decides to just go along with it, figuring it's currently the least destructive path. "Yeah. Or, she's not staying with me. But. She's in town, yeah."

"Wow," Hayden whistles, giving him a slow clap. "Shane Hollander is finally going steady. I never thought I'd see the day."

“Yeah, whatever. It’s not like that,” Shane smiles lightly, shaking his head while he glances down at his own menu. He already knows what he’s going to order, though. He checked the menu before they arrived. Salmon and broccoli. A salad on the side if they can’t take the seasoning, oil, and butter off the couscous. Easy. Safe.

“You’ve got to let us meet her at some point, man. Jackie is gonna go crazy if we don’t get a night out soon. We could do a double date! She’s in town, like you said?”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Shane quickly diverts. “Plus, I’m leaving for my cottage in like...a day. It’s not a good time.”

“Wait. So, is she going with you to your cottage?” Hayden asks, raising his eyebrows. “Oh my god. This is actually getting serious, isn’t it? Good for you, man,” he grins in approval, before his eyes drag to the menu again.

“What?” Shane presses his eyebrows together because underneath it all, they’re both technically talking about Ilya. Hayden didn’t know that, of course, but there was no Boston Lily. Whatever they thought they saw in him, Ilya had caused that. Ilya had made him act that way. Even still, they could spot it in him. The same reactions he’d had when visiting Boston for the last ten years. Only now, even more so.

“What’s the deal with you being so secretive? Is she, like... not cool with your job or something? Kinda hard to keep your relationship private forever, Shane. Jackie and I tried that for like two seconds, but it was hell.”

And well, he actually had a point there. It was misdirected and far more complicated than that, but it still had Shane thinking. He wouldn’t be able to keep this up forever. Not with a sorta kinda mildly homophobic team. Not when he wasn’t even fully sure he could trust his closest guy friend with his secret. Not the kinky stuff, obviously, but coming out as gay probably wouldn’t go over much better if Shane were being honest with himself. Much worse if they knew he was messing around with Rozanov.

That’s all it was right now—messing around. It wasn’t like they were a couple. No. It was purely sex.

He’s lying to himself, he knows. It wasn’t just sex for Ilya, at least. Shane didn’t think so. Not the way he looked at him, the way he treated him. That was different, right? He knew not all sex was like that. Then again, he’d only had sex with girls so far. And maybe Domming was different.

Holy shit. He realizes all at once that he’s probably going to lose his gay virginity to Ilya fucking Rozanov. The kink list Ilya had texted him is still burning a hole through his pocket.

“Hello, Earth to Shane. Oh my god,” Hayden laughs and shakes his head. “You’re wearing the face *right now*. You can’t stop thinking about her for even one second? You’re so obviously gone for her, bro. I’m telling the team that’s where you’ve been so they can stop asking already.” He’s laughing still, typing something into his phone already, but Shane just couldn’t do this anymore.

“Listen, Hayden. I think I need some space from the team for a bit,” he sighs, shutting his menu resolutely to look at him head-on. “At least over summer until practice starts back up again.”

“What are you talking about, man?” He’s still typing on his phone, still grinning like this is all one big joke. Shane was sick of feeling like he was the butt of it.

“The guys on the team are assholes,” Shane grits out a little more intentionally this time, and that seems to get Hayden’s attention.

“What?” His expression falls, his fingers faltering a bit. “What do you mean? Those are our boys.”

“Well, they haven’t really felt like my boys recently,” he scoffs, recalling the nasty looks from when he was late to the press shoot.

Hayden rolls his eyes. “You’re not seriously mad about Boston Lily, are you? Jeez, Shane, we’re just joking around. Captain of the team, and yet, I hardly ever see you dating anyone. The guys just want you to be happy.”

“Do they?” Shane challenges, his tone hardening, as everything he’s been thinking for months is finally starting to bubble to the surface.

Hayden’s mouth drops open for a half second before he closes it. “Where is this coming from? Did someone say something?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the guys come off super homophobic. The locker room talk is out of control, and it’s not just in the locker room. It’s in the group chats, it’s at team outings, it’s all the time.”

Hayden puffs a small laugh, looking at him in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? Since when are you such a big ally to gay people?”

Shane just glares at him, willing Hayden to put the pieces together, to prove that he was different than the other guys.

“Shane? Wait...did someone complain?” Hayden’s eyes go wide all of a sudden. “Someone on the team? Who is it?”

Shane scoffs. “Me. I’m the one complaining. They say some real vile shit, and honestly, I’m sick and tired of being Captain of a team that I can’t feel proud of on *and* off the ice.”

“Are you serious?” Hayden checks again, and he looks around like someone’s going to pop out and tell him he’s being punked. “Shane...” he trails, looking at him apprehensively. “What are you saying, dude?”

“Take a guess, Hayds,” Shane challenges, and he watches as the realization slowly settles over his face.

“I...you’re— are you—?”

“Yeah,” Shane says stiffly, because he doesn’t really want to hear him say it, scared of how the word might come out. “And it’s really uncomfortable to be around a bunch of guys who constantly say offensive shit. Not even mildly offensive, actually. Like *super* offensive and just wrong. So, yeah. I need some fucking space right now. I’ve got enough shit to worry about without having to wonder whether my own team would accept me or not. Lately, I’m leaning towards not.”

“Shane, look, I had no idea—”

“Of course, you didn’t. Why would I tell you?”

Hayden has the nerve to look hurt by that. “Jeez, dude. I thought I was your best friend.”

Shane sighs, leaning his forearms against the edge of the table as tension bleeds up his spine. “I know. And you are. I’ve just had a lot of shit to...figure out. I’m still fucking figuring it out, Jesus. But, honestly, I didn’t really know how you would take it. Sure, maybe you don’t laugh at the jokes, but you don’t exactly tell them to knock it off either.”

“I— I guess I didn’t realize how offensive it was. I didn’t know there was anyone around to be offended.” Hayden presses his eyebrows together, his lips still slightly drooping at the sides. “Shit. I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell me. Jackie’s gonna be pissed at me. Especially since I kept trying to set you up with all her friends. Wait—I can tell Jackie, can’t I?”

Shane smiles lightly and nods. “Yeah, you can tell Jackie. But no one else, okay? That includes the kids.”

“So, uh...what are you going to do about the guys?” Hayden dares to ask, wincing slightly, as if he knew there wasn’t really a good answer to that question.

Your contract is up, a little voice reminds him. Technically, he was a free agent now. He’d fully intended to re-sign with the Montreal Voyageurs, but as time went on, he was running out of reasons as to why he should. They were a great team on the ice, a winning team, a Dynasty—one that Shane had put the past ten years of his life into. That used to be the most important thing to him, and maybe one day it would be again, but more than anything, Shane was getting really sick of the way his brain talked to him. And something told him that being around a bunch of homophobic assholes wasn’t exactly helping.

“Wait, Shane,” Hayden cuts into his thought bubble. “If you’re, you know,” he pauses to look around the room, making sure no one’s listening before whispering, “gay.” He clears his throat, leaning in. “Does that mean there’s a Boston...Billy?” He tries, looking a bit apologetic at the short-term name replacement.

Shane huffs a laugh, letting his head drop slightly as he looks down at his hands, face contemplative.

“Woah. There is, isn’t there? You’re wearing it again. That’s definitely your Boston Lily face — er, Billy? Sorry. We’ll work on it. But you’re seeing someone.” Hayden looks him over, still trying to worm the answer out of him. He was nothing if not relentless.

He sighs, running his hands over his face momentarily. "It's complicated."

"Ah, so you're *fucking* someone," Hayden grins, wiggling his eyebrows. "Or..." he backtracks, scrunching his eyebrows up like he's about to voice something he shouldn't. "Someone's fu—"

Shane doesn't let him finish that sentence. "Don't," he begs, because technically, no one had fucked anyone yet.

"You know, you could still invite them for dinner. I'm sure Jackie wouldn't mind. Actually, I know she wouldn't. She loves gay guys. I think a few even go to her Mommy and Me classes."

"Hayds, I love you, but I'm still trying to figure all of this out," he tries to let him down gently. Shane knew there was simply no way they'd still be having this conversation if Hayden knew who Boston Billy *actually* was.

"Alright, sorry, sorry," he holds his hands up in defense. "Just trying to be supportive. And hey, if you want me to start speaking up to the guys when they say stupid shit, I will," he offers, which Shane actually really appreciates. "I've got your back, man."

"No, I'd rather not stir the pot. I just need some time away from everything," Shane smiles lightly, though he was glad he decided to open up to Hayden. It was his first real time coming out to someone, and it had gone, surprisingly, pretty well. Shane feels a little lighter because of it.

Before they leave, Hayden gives him a big fat hug and tells him that he and his mystery man have an open invitation to his and Jackie's any time. Shane just thanks him and promises to call soon. Truthfully, he's been a little bit distracted all day because he knows he has plans with Ilya later. *Gay plans*, he reminds himself, because he's still trying to get used to that part.

He's got his list, just like Ilya asked, but the task had proven to be a bit more challenging than he was expecting. He'd had to google a lot of it, went down about a million internet rabbit holes as he debated which ones appealed to him versus which ones probably didn't.

But the whole time, he'd found himself wondering what Ilya had put for his answers. If there was something Ilya was *really* into, then Shane would probably be willing to try it. He didn't want to write anything off completely, just in case. So, for a lot of them, he just put maybe.

They're meeting at the club for the second night in a row, and Shane tries not to let that thought nestle into his brain too deeply. Ilya was just really good at sex, and he needed to be with someone he could trust. He'd really lucked out with him, Shane realizes. There weren't a lot of people with whom he had a history dating back ten years, before both of them had even officially debuted in the NHL. Considering everything, it was pretty crazy to think about.

Ilya has Shane meet him in the regular club area today, which Shane had been a bit nervous for, but Ilya assured him they wouldn't be open yet. It was still the afternoon, so not even the

bar staff would be in to set up until a bit later.

Dmitriy lets him in, and Shane smiles and thanks him, like usual. There's no one around when he steps inside, except for just one person, who Shane immediately identifies as Svetlana.

"Oops, sorry. I am not supposed to be out here when you arrive," Svetlana sighs as she spots him, pushing her curls out of her face. "I am trying to make the special menu items look good, but I do not have the penmanship for it. Ебать," she curses, shaking her head.

"It's okay," Shane assures her with a curl of his lips. He didn't mind the fact that Svetlana knew, actually. From what he knew, she was practically the closest thing Ilya had to family, and she had only ever been kind to him, as far as Shane was concerned. "The special menu items are..." he trails, trying to remember what Angel had said about them.

"Sometimes they are for private parties. Other times, the club offers special showings or displays. These are not always for every club member, so we try to keep it discreet."

"What's a special showing?" Shane asks curiously, eyes flicking towards the hallway door that leads to Ilya's office. Technically, he was still a few minutes early.

Svetlana grins brightly at him. "I'm sure you will see at some point. How are things going with your arrangement?" She puts her pen down, instead leaning over the bar to offer her full attention.

"Arrangement?" Shane furrows his eyebrows. "Um, what do you mean?"

"Your arrangement with Ilya," she says plainly, gesturing between Shane and the hallway door.

Shane is still lost on what, specifically, she means by that, and it must show on his face, because she almost immediately starts to retreat.

"Never mind. You know, it is none of my business," she smiles, looking up just as Ilya happens to walk up to the bar.

"What is none of your business? Are you harassing him again?" Ilya crosses his arms over his chest, a warning in his eyes that's directed at Svetlana.

Shane swallows, looking between them as tension bleeds through the air. Svetlana's eyes have hidden meaning in them, too, he notices, a silent conversation between two people who have clearly known each other long enough to communicate effectively in little to no words at all. It was like Ilya and Svetlana spoke a language that Shane couldn't even understand, and more than one, actually—at least not yet.

"I am not known to *harass*," she shoots back, eyes flickering with something else now. Something dangerous. Shane is pretty sure it's something to do with him; he doesn't understand why they won't just speak out loud if it's not, but again...they spoke different languages.

Russian, yes, but also sex. *The scene.* Shane feels like a visitor looking in. Someone they've decided to temporarily try on, testing to see if he was a good fit. There's a verdict, one way or another; he can tell by the way they hold themselves. Still, a disagreement on how to move forward hovers in the air.

"Sorry, Shane. Svetlana is supposed to be away on break right now." Ilya turns to him stiffly, and then back to Svetlana.

"Ah, I was just leaving." She raises her hands in defense, an exasperated look in her eyes. "It is not my fault your котенок is early."

"Sorry," Shane chimes in lightly, which inadvertently clears some of the tension from the room as both parties turn to him.

"You are great when you are early. Do not listen to her," Ilya assures, shooting another dagger-y glare in Svetlana's direction. "Why don't we go sit down while Svetlana figures out how to find the exit?"

Ilya's not touching him, Shane realizes. Maybe, intentionally. Maybe because he doesn't think Shane wants him to in front of other people. Which, right. He didn't. That was one of his hard limits. And Ilya *had* told him the place would be empty.

Still, Shane doesn't mind being around Svetlana. Doesn't mind her seeing him here like this. He might not even mind Roz touching him around her, claiming him a bit. It would certainly be better than whatever this is. This distance between them, especially with Roz doing it calculatedly. Shane hated that feeling. He swallows thickly.

"Why are we doing this out here when we can just go in your private room?" Shane crosses his arms over his chest, feeling an uncomfortable vibe settle into his skin.

"We are going to do this in an area that is more neutral. I am in control when we are in my playroom."

Playroom. Last time he called it that, the 'playroom' had been open for business. He wonders if the same could be on the table for tonight. What he has to do to earn it.

Shane had his preferences printed out and, as requested, checked neatly to the best of his abilities; so, he hoped Ilya would be pleased enough to let them scene. Shane *needed* it after coming out to Hayden so suddenly. He hadn't planned on doing that. Definitely not today, maybe ever. And, although he was glad he did, it had taken a lot out of him. Especially when Ilya was so far away when Shane needed him *close*.

Ilya leads them to one of the club booths and slips into the far side, craning his neck to keep a watchful eye on Svetlana at the bar as Shane settles in across from him. "Did you do your homework?" He asks plainly, business as usual.

Shane wants to say *no*, just to get a rise out of him. Just to get Ilya to grab him, maybe throw him around, pay attention to him in some way that isn't cold and distant like he's doing right now.

“Yes,” Shane clears his throat, pulling out a folder with his printed kink sheets.

It was just a starting off point. Ilya mentioned that there were lots of other niche kinks to explore, but he thought it would be best to start with the basics. *Basics*, right. The list still took up three whole pages.

“Okay,” Ilya looks over his shoulder again. “She is gone now. Can I see them?”

She’s gone, and Ilya still hasn’t touched him, still hasn’t smiled at him, has hardly even looked at him except to demand stupid fucking papers. Shane scoffs.

Ilya arches an eyebrow at him. “What is it?”

And, did he really have to spell it out for him? Shane wants to yell. He wants to kick and scream. Wants Ilya to hold him down and force it out of him until he’s crying. Until Shane tells him all about his stupid, homophobic team, who used to mean everything to him, but were slowly and surely starting to make him dread the one thing he cared about in this world. About coming out to Hayden without meaning to because he was just *that* sick of hiding from everyone around him, including his own fucking self. Shane was tired. He was so fucking tired, and Ilya was treating him like a box to be checked. A sub to be Dommed.

“Shane,” Ilya frowns, like he’s caught on to the fact that this is something deeper than just Shane being in a bad mood.

“Are you even going to fucking touch me? Or are you going to keep acting like this is a business contract?” He can’t help but spit, and he hates the way he sounds to his own ears.

Ilya looks a little stunned, but his eyes are grazing, calculating, like they do when he’s trying to get to the root of something. Like he knows there’s more than what Shane is showing him on the surface. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah, something fucking happened. I’m right fucking there waiting for you. You didn’t even fucking acknowledge me—”

“Yes, because Sveta. She was not supposed to be there. We talked about—”

“Svetlana obviously knows what’s going on between us. You two were very clearly having a private conversation about it *right* in front of me!” Shane says in frustration, and Ilya’s eyes soften.

Shane watches as Ilya carefully slips out of one side of the booth before sliding around to join Shane on his side. Once they’re face-to-face, Ilya slips a firm hand across his thigh, squeezing intentionally until he and Shane are blinking at each other in awareness. “I’m sorry I did not greet you properly,” he apologizes, and he sounds like he actually means it, his expression sincere as he watches Shane’s reaction.

Shane swallows and averts his eyes, instead looking across the other side of the room.

“There is something else you’re not telling me, yes?” Ilya guesses, running his hand up Shane’s thigh and back down to his knee while continuing to search for the real reason of this

seemingly sudden outburst.

Shane can feel tears welling up in his eyes already, but he blinks rapidly to keep them from spilling down his cheeks.

“Oh, baby,” Ilya frowns and leans forward to collect Shane into his waiting and open arms.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Shane mutters petulantly as he buries his face in Ilya’s shoulder. In reality, he did want to talk about everything eventually, but mostly, he just wanted to get to the warm and fuzzy part so he could disappear for a bit. Ilya was so, so good at making him disappear. “Can we scene? Please, can we scene,” he begs without shame. Tonight, he needs it more than he ever has before.

Ilya just rubs his back soothingly, pressing a soft kiss behind Shane’s right ear. “Can I see your list, angel?” He hums because that part was still important. To Shane, as well, even though he was sick of talking already. Sick of the exhausting levels of communication. The whole point was that he wanted to turn his brain *off*, not make it think even more.

Shane reluctantly pulls out of the hug and wordlessly slides the folder further into Ilya’s space. Ilya is still watching him with that careful expression, like Shane could run for the hills at any moment. It feels like they both hold their breath when he finally takes a cautionary glance inside, blue eyes raking over the new information that Shane had painstakingly filled out. And then, those eyes dart sharply to him once more.

“This is all maybe. You put maybe next to everything,” Ilya states matter-of-factly.

Shane frowns, hunching his shoulders a little. “Not everything,” he argues. There were some obvious nos. Ones that involved extreme levels of torture, which Ilya had already mentioned was a hard limit for him. There were some that Shane couldn’t even imagine someone being into, some that he’d marked as *no* from the very first description on google. For everything else, though, Shane wasn’t sure. It felt preemptive to say no to something that he didn’t fully understand yet, especially if there was a chance Ilya might be into it. He didn’t want to write anything off too soon without giving it a proper exploration. Or, at the very least, hearing Ilya’s thoughts.

“Shane,” Ilya sighs, and he sounds frustrated. “I asked you to answer these honestly. What is this?”

Shane’s eyebrows furrow. “I *did* answer them honestly.”

“Did you even look up what half of these mean? Because, if you are doing this for my benefit, you have completely missed the point of this exercise.”

“I looked them up,” Shane argues back, irritated by the accusation.

Ilya raises an unimpressed eyebrow and then looks down at the list again. “Human ash tray,” he calls out one at random before his eyes land on Shane again.

Shane shifts uncomfortably. “I dunno. You smoke...” he trails, as if that would explain it.

“Do you want me putting cigarettes out on you, yes or no? Is that something you’re going to get off on in a scene?”

“Maybe,” Shane’s voice goes high as he shrugs his shoulders wildly.

“Boot worship,” he reads another. “You want to crawl on the ground and lick my shoes? Is that it?”

“I...I don’t know. That’s why I put maybe,” he replies, shifting uneasily.

He didn’t like Ilya’s tone of voice or the way he was looking at him, like he had somehow done this task wrong instead of thoughtfully and melodically.

“Shane,” Ilya states, and he sounds disappointed.

Shane sinks slightly under his gaze, a terrible feeling of rejection working through his chest.

“You are supposed to fill out what you are actually interested in trying. Not just what you think I am interested in wanting you to try.”

“I *did* fill out what I would be interested in trying,” Shane fires back, and his voice is shaking now. “I don’t know for a fact, which is why I put *maybe*,” he frowns, eyes darting away with hurt lingering in his gaze. “Jesus. I didn’t think I would be into pet play either, but it was really fucking hot. So,” he finishes lamely.

Ilya is just blinking at him, Shane’s papers still in hand. And then, “You wanna sit all tied up and pretty like a little rope bunny for me?”

Shane shudders. “Maybe,” he admits. Not being able to move, not being able to think. Fuck. He liked the sound of that.

“Mm. You want to be furniture for me? Hold my drink on the perfect arch of your back while I do something better with my time. You like being useful, don’t you? Especially to me.”

Shane didn’t care. He was turned on by all of it. He was turned on by Ilya.

Ilya licks his lips.

“Do I get to know your list now?” Shane asks, trying to hide the eagerness in his voice, but he feels like he’s about to buzz out of his skin.

Ilya raises an eyebrow at him. “After you gave me all maybes? Not a chance. You will have to earn my list, the same way it seems you are going to make me earn yours.”

Shane shivers. He liked the sound of that. Liked the sound of having to *earn* anything from Ilya.

Ilya tips his head in what looks like contemplation. “I planned something for us today.”

Shane straightens immediately, looking around like the scene will suddenly become obvious to him. Like there are props hidden in plain sight. “You did?” He says when Ilya fails to say more.

One nod in confirmation. And then, hesitation. “I think you will really like it. If you can get in the right headspace. And if your loud brain will let you.”

Shane’s stomach swirls nervously, like he knows whatever Ilya’s about to ask for is going to touch on a nerve point.

“I wanted to run it by you, though. Since you’re still learning what your hard limits are,” Ilya leans forward a bit, his face in the palm of his hand as he rests his elbow on the table.

“Okay,” Shane nods, clearing his throat, waiting for impact.

“I want to feed you,” Ilya starts with what he knows Shane is already comfortable with.

“Okay...” Shane replies inquisitively, waiting for the punchline—the catch.

“Sweet stuff,” Ilya says gently, almost like he’s timing his pauses, trying to make it seem like he isn’t delivering scary news. And maybe he isn’t, but to Shane’s head, there often wasn’t much of a difference. “I want to be sweet with you. I want to get you all messy and clean you up. I want to feed you sugar from my tongue and press it into your skin.”

A ripple runs through Shane, a hot flare burning within him. Heat travels through his veins, want lining his core. “Why?” His voice cracks slightly, but he doesn’t flinch. He wants to know what Ilya sees when he looks at him. Wants to know what triggers have led him to this idea for their scene tonight.

“You said it is nice to not have to worry about calories,” Ilya muses gently. “It had me wondering. When the last time you had sugar was. Who was with you? Did anyone ever tell you that you are very sweet as well? Has anyone ever pressed it into your skin until you remembered?”

No, Shane thinks heavily. He wasn’t meant to have that properly. He couldn’t be the Golden Boy and get the happily ever after. Things didn’t work like that. Either way, Shane hated knowing what Ilya had in store for him. It was like planting a seed, one that started to grow roots and trickle across different waves in his brain, until it was all he could think of, all he could see.

“I see,” Ilya comments, watching Shane’s thoughts flit across his face. “Is this a hard limit for you?”

“I don’t know,” Shane admits with a sigh. His diet was important, but he *could* break it, of course. If that’s what Ilya thought was best. Shane just really wished he hadn’t told him about it because now the worries were flooding in, filling every part of him until he felt like he was drowning in his own skin.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Ilya requests, and Shane looks at him, still miles away. Not touching, not forcing. He was trying to be mindful of Shane’s boundaries, but Shane didn’t want him to be. Shane wanted Ilya to push his boundaries, maybe even without permission.

“I don’t like knowing what you’re gonna do,” he admits, almost shamefully. Like Ilya is going to tell him off for wanting to do things unsafely. Did that make him destructive? Maybe.

“What do you mean by this?” Ilya’s eyebrows press together intently, like he’s determined to get to the core of what Shane is actually trying to say.

“I’d rather...I’d rather you just do it. Without telling me. I like not knowing,” he adds shyly, tentatively, like he isn’t sure he’s allowed. “When you tell me, I start to think about it too much and—“

“It makes your brain louder,” Ilya realizes in understanding. “This is the opposite of what we want to do.” He links his fingers together, his facial expression pulled thoughtfully as he tries to come up with a solution. “You are very different to other subs I’ve had. Very...complex.”

“Complex?” Shane repeats, unsure if it’s supposed to be a good or a bad thing.

“Yes. You are challenging me as a Dom,” Ilya explains, his lips curling slightly at the sides. “Just as you do in hockey. I think that we are very well-matched.”

“Really?” Shane asks, sitting up only a little eagerly at the compliment.

A nod, but then, a pause. Ilya clears his throat before speaking again. “I noticed you put a *maybe* next to *Domming*.”

“Oh,” Shane replies dumbly. “I mean, yeah,” he frowns, not understanding the question.

“You would like to Dom me?” Ilya double-checks.

“Well...yeah. I mean, *maybe*,” Shane voices carefully.

“Why?” Ilya watches him with inquisitive eyes. Not judgmental, just...curious. Like he’s trying to figure him out.

“I don’t know,” Shane flushes under the scrutiny. “Just to see what it’s like.”

Ilya presses his lips together in consideration, his eyes flicking over the pages of *maybes* once again. “Okay. Would you like to come into my playroom now?”

Shane nods, despite knowing what’s coming.

He’d learned by now that Ilya was thorough when it came to scenes. For what they’d done so far, at least, everything had been thought out to extreme levels of detail. Shane being a cat wasn’t just Shane being a cat. It was also sweater paws, and kitten ears, and licking milk from a shot glass. Ilya liked to keep him on his toes, which usually meant not giving away every single detail of the scene, and Shane was really growing to like that part the most.

Ilya shuts Shane's folder and quickly tucks it up under his arm before reaching for Shane's hand. Shane gratefully accepts it and follows after him. The air feels like it changes once they reach the hallway, and Shane holds his breath until the playroom door shuts resolutely behind them.

There are candles, Shane realizes. Fake ones, maybe, but they're everywhere. On the shelves lining the walls of the room, nestled in the crevice between the edge of the couch, scattered across the floor around a big open space in the middle. The floor is covered in some sort of tarp, but at closer glance, Shane notices there are pillows laid underneath.

"You okay, baby?" Ilya asks him, crowding into his space fully for the first time that evening. "I know you said you don't want to talk about whatever happened today. We do not have to if you don't want to. But, at least, assure me it was nothing serious."

Ilya's hands are on his hips now, and Shane feels himself sink gratefully into the touch. He lets his own arms slip around Roz's neck, pulling him close until their foreheads are pressed together, his eyes cast down. "I came out to someone," Shane whispers, nearly against Ilya's mouth. He can practically feel the sharp intake of breath, almost like Roz has stolen it directly from his own lips.

"You did?" Ilya breathes, just as quietly, like something as silent as a single breath of air could somehow disturb the moment between them.

"Mm," Shane nods, and the motion causes their noses to bump together.

"Who?" Ilya dares to ask, his fingers pressing a little deeper into Shane's hips, and Shane smiles warmly.

"Hayden," he fills in softly, his eyes still downcast as their eyelashes brush against each other's.

"How did it go?" Ilya presses, nudging their noses together once more, until their lips are so, so close to touching.

Shane hiccups a small gasp. "It was...good. Really good," he finds himself smiling, and when he finally looks up, Ilya's eyes are a mere millimeter away from his, watching him with so, so much pride.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya grips his chin to pull him into a searing kiss. "I'm so fucking proud of you. That's...*amazing*. You're amazing."

"Thanks," Shane whispers, his lips red from where Ilya has just kissed him.

"I didn't know you were planning on coming out to Hayden," Ilya hums in awe, brushing his knuckles against Shane's cheek as his eyes flit over his face.

"I—I wasn't," he stutters softly. "It just sort of came out. I guess...I guess I was just tired of carrying the secret for so long. I feel like I shouldn't have to hide from my closest friends."

“You shouldn’t,” Ilya tells him fiercely. “Not if you are ready to tell them, and not if they are your real friends.” He pauses and looks him over carefully, something warm lighting his expression as he presses another gentle kiss to Shane’s pouty lips. “You are so incredible, you know that?” He’s searching his eyes like he wants to ensure that Shane *does*, indeed, know it for a fact.

Shane just flushes and stares back. He already feels a little hazy from the way Ilya is looking at him, the quiet way Ilya is talking to him. Praising him. With Ilya, things almost always felt too easy, like Shane could slip under without a second thought, and that...was scary. Knowing the type of power Ilya had over him. Knowing that Ilya could ask Shane for practically anything he wanted, and most likely, Shane would say yes. No questions asked.

“You with me, baby?” Ilya checks, smiling when he gets a nod in return. “What’s your color, sweetheart?” He asks, like he’s aware that Shane has already started the descent down.

Green, green, green, his mind yells. Only, maybe it’s not actually coming out of his lips, because Ilya pulls back to assess him.

“Green,” Shane tries again, and *bingo*; that seems to have the desired effect, with Ilya springing back into action.

“My best boy,” he coos, petting at the back of Shane’s hair, and Shane just feels light as a feather, vaguely aware of Ilya taking his hand and pulling him further into the space. “Can you come take your clothes off for me, pretty? Or, do you need me to help you?”

I always want you to help me, Shane thinks. Anything to keep Ilya’s hands on him, to keep his attention.

“Are you gonna be alright if I touch you tonight, princess?” He questions softly, and a thrill runs up Shane’s spine at all the new pet names he’s unlocking with this session.

“Please,” his lips barely form the words, but Ilya understands him regardless, ducking to press a kiss to his tummy once Shane’s shirt comes off.

“Of course, baby. Anything you want. I’m gonna take such good care of you,” he vows, and Shane wants to curl up in his voice and sleep forever. He doesn’t understand how it’s possible for someone’s presence to be so comforting, so soothing, that pieces of his brain can suddenly cease to exist. That thoughts can suddenly detach from his mind, even as his body is glaringly present.

Ilya kneels down on the ground to help him out of his pants and boxers next, and Shane shivers at the way the cold air attacks his skin. Ilya notices and runs two warm hands over his hips, leaning in to press a kiss to each sharp hipbone. Shane makes a soft noise in appreciation.

“You have no idea, Shane,” Ilya says softly, almost to himself, as he seems to take in the sight in front of him. With Ilya on his knees and all the candles surrounding them, Shane felt like he was having a religious experience. Like Ilya was praying to him in his own house of worship.

“Come down here with me, драгоценный,” he prompts, but he must not be expecting Shane to do any of the work, because he easily guides him down to the tarp before stripping out of his own shirt.

Shane watches in awe at the sight, eyes raking over Ilya’s freshly exposed arms and chest.

“Lay back for me, hm?”

And Shane listens without thought, trusting him blindly even though he has no idea what’s coming. *Something sweet*, his brain reminds him from somewhere far away, but even those words hardly make sense to him right now.

“Close your eyes. There you go,” Ilya’s slow voice lulls him, and for a second, Shane is sure that this is his task. To get naked, lie down, and fall asleep. It makes sense in his sub-muddled brain, given that’s exactly what’s happening. But just as he’s on the edge of fully drifting, he feels something wet coat his abdomen.

He’s buzzed, despite not having any alcohol. He’s high off of coming out, off of going through a massive list of kinks and imagining Ilya putting him through all of them. Checking off every one until the entire list is complete, only before moving on to the next, more complex kink list that Shane knew awaited them. It was almost like a challenge, and Shane wanted to win.

“Hm,” Shane lifts his head slightly in dazed confusion, and when he finally convinces his eyes to stay focused, he spots the sticky, shiny honey clinging to the crevices of his abdomen. Ilya is close by, spreading it over him with what looks to be a baking spatula. Shane’s chest roars with want.

“That feel nice, kitten?” Ilya hums knowingly and diverts by spreading some across Shane’s nipple with his fingers this time.

Shane moans at the contact, turning his head to try and escape from the odd sensation of it. Of Ilya rubbing sticky honey into his nipple. He doesn’t get far, however, before Ilya is sucking that honey-coated nipple into his mouth, tongue swirling as if trying to capture every bit of sweetness from Shane’s skin. “Ah,” he gets out pitifully.

Ilya drags his fingers through the honey on Shane’s abs, holding Shane’s heated gaze before licking broadly over them with his tongue. Shane’s eyes go a little blurry around the edges. It must be why he doesn’t notice Ilya pressing those same fingers into his mouth next, and Shane moans in surprise, sucking messily at them.

“Good boy,” Ilya reminds him, dragging his fingers out of Shane’s mouth and down his chin until there’s sticky spit-slick honey all over his face.

Shane just watches him like a man possessed, mouth half open in a pant as he tries to process the different textures, the different sensations.

“My pretty baby. You’re so delicious. I wish you understood,” Ilya sighs, squeezing some more honey onto his chest. “Sweetest thing in the world. I think I’ll have to keep reminding

you,” he hums, kissing into a particularly drenched spot of honey before suctioning his lips to Shane’s neck, making a sticky line of kisses all the way down his collarbone and across his shoulder.

“Ilya—” Shane gasps, clutching onto his shoulders and back like he might fly away if Shane doesn’t keep him here.

“I love when you moan my name. When you show me how desperate you are for me. You are, aren’t you?” He double-checks, letting his wet fingers caress each inch of Shane’s hard body. “Desperate for me. You like this so much. Falling apart under my touch, knowing I’m the only one who can give you what you need.”

Ilya starts kissing lower, and Shane squirms excitedly when he gets closer to where Shane wants him. Ilya, however, breezes right past his cock, instead scraping his stubble across Shane’s inner thighs until he keels high in his throat.

“Please,” Shane begs, thrashing a bit as Ilya holds him down. “I need—”

“What?” Ilya looks up at him from between his thighs, golden curls framing his face like an angel descended from heaven. Shane thought he was so fucking pretty as well.

He shakes his head, not wanting to say the words out loud.

“Tell me,” Ilya presses, letting the pad of his finger trail across Shane’s perineum until Shane is shaking with it.

“I need you,” he whines, fighting against Ilya’s strong grip on his thighs. “Please, please, please.”

“My baby begs so beautifully,” Ilya smiles, grazing his teeth over Shane’s inner thigh before something wet trickles over his hole.

“Ah,” Shane gasps, as Ilya pushes his legs up until he’s nearly folded in half. *Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.* Every last brain cell leaves his body when he feels Ilya’s tongue swipe across the sticky honey coating his rim. He’s fucking ascending.

“Mm,” Ilya hums. “So sweet,” he murmurs, before going in for another taste, and Shane sees white.

He’s licking him slow, like Shane is an ice cream cone, a treat to be enjoyed or devoured. And Shane... Shane is twisting and turning in his grasp, fighting against the hands holding him down as he tries to simultaneously escape and bring himself closer to the sensation.

Ilya’s eating him out. Ilya fucking Rozanov is eating honey out of his ass while calling him a good boy.

Shane feels like he’s on the verge of tears. He yelps when Ilya presses another kiss to his rim and then carefully presses the tip of his tongue forward, flicking upward when it catches on the edge of his hole before swirling and repeating. Like he wants to push the honey deep inside of him. Like he wants remnants of this night to exist within Shane for weeks to come.

“Ilya,” Shane sobs, and Ilya just shushes him, reaching for one of Shane’s flailing hands. Shane grips him tightly, thankful to have something to hold onto, to ground him to reality as he soars higher and higher.

The honey starts to trickle down his ass as Ilya continues to lick him through it, and Shane’s mind can’t help but drift to dirty, dangerous places, like the sensation of come dripping out of his spent hole after Ilya’s fucked him for the first time. The first drop of honey onto the tarp below them is deafening.

“You taste so good, мой маленький ангел. It’s alright. Let daddy take care of his little angel.”

Shane is crying now, overwhelmed, his entire body shaking as he grinds down on Ilya’s tongue, frantically chasing his orgasm. It only takes one more viscous lick, Ilya’s nose nudging against his scrotum as he fastens his lips around Shane’s rim and *sucks*, until Shane is coming untouched all over his tummy.

Ilya licks him through it, until Shane is whimpering and whining from overstimulation, Ilya enjoying his treat as he laps up the mixture of cum, honey, and sweat that has started to gather in the crevices of Shane’s v-lines.

“Daddy’s boy is very messy today, mm. You did so good for me, babydoll,” Ilya praises, rubbing his hand through the mess on Shane’s abdomen. He moves up Shane’s body to press kisses to his teary cheeks, finishing with a wet kiss on his lips, and Shane flushes all the way down to his chest when he remembers all the places those lips have been this evening.

“Please,” Shane whines, and he doesn’t even know what he’s asking for anymore. He just needs more, needs Ilya to consume him until he’s nothing but a puddle on the floor.

Ilya smooths Shane’s sweaty hair out of his face with his clean hand and presses a sure kiss to his forehead. “Don’t worry. I’m not done with you, princess. Give me one second.”

He’s vaguely aware of Ilya moving around him, but his brain can’t make sense of things like spatial awareness right now, so he just makes grabby hands with the trust that Ilya will come back to him.

When he does return, he carefully slips onto the floor behind Shane, his back against the couch behind them as he positions Shane between his legs, encouraging Shane to lie on his chest.

“Open, моя любовь,” Ilya requests, and Shane doesn’t even have to open his eyes, following the command without question as his lips part. “Very good,” Ilya praises, then presses something against his mouth. “Bite down for me.”

Shane does and is surprised when the sweet taste of a chocolate-covered strawberry coats his taste buds, the juice running down his chin. He wiggles restlessly against Ilya, craving the feeling of their skin rubbing together as pleasantries fill his senses.

“You are so, so sweet like this, my little котенок,” he whispers, leaning down to press a warm kiss to Shane’s cheek. “Я не вижу причин, почему мы не должны этого сделать навсегда.”

Shane is so soothed by his accent, by the way the Russian words mean absolutely nothing to him. *It’s not for me to know*, his mind tells him thrillingly. He doesn’t have to do anything, doesn’t have to understand. Ilya is taking that on for him. Ilya is handling everything.

Shane hums delightedly when Ilya’s lips meet his, yelping slightly in astonishment when Ilya passes him another piece of the strawberry with his tongue, licking the fruit into his mouth. *Ilya has the best ideas*, Shane thinks to himself, and dutifully swallows the strawberry.

He’s soft and languid from his orgasm, content to lie on Ilya’s chest for the rest of forever and be fed strawberries like some twisted cat king. Did cats even eat strawberries? Shane didn’t care. He was living proof.

He whines when Ilya pulls away, eyes still closed because it’s more fun that way, not knowing what he’s going to do next. His mind drifts in the blackness, thoughts of hockey leaving his brain and, instead, centering on the way the honey is drying on his chest.

Ilya isn’t moving, isn’t doing anything, to Shane’s knowledge. Just breathing, Shane rising and falling with the heavy flow of his chest. After a few moments, he cracks one eye open out of curiosity and is surprised to find Ilya staring back at him. He’s got a soft smile on his face, his eyes warm as he watches Shane, holds him. Shane’s heart gives a nervous little flutter.

“Hi, baby,” he greets, his hands coming to life now that Shane has caught him staring. He runs his heavy palms over both of Shane’s shoulders, inadvertently pressing the substance into his skin as he gives him a massage.

Shane arches into the touch and lets out something akin to a moan. He can’t remember the last time someone touched him like this. Maybe his sports therapist, but that didn’t count. Maybe his mom when he was little, but he was her son. What was he to Ilya? What had Shane done to deserve such wonderful treatment? Did Ilya treat all his subs like this?

Almost like Ilya can tell he’s going back to that horrible, rotting place of thought, he leans down to Spider-Man kiss him, their lips slotting together upside-down, imperfectly. Shane feels like he’s buzzing out of his skin.

“You’re okay,” Ilya reminds him. And how does he know that Shane needs to hear it? Is he that see-through? Is he wearing his thoughts that loudly across his face? “I can hear you thinking, sweetheart. Come back to me now.”

Shane swallows and turns to press his face into Ilya’s thigh. He hasn’t taken his jeans off, and Shane watches in fascination as the fabric glints with leftover spit and honey. Which...right. He’s still covered in the stickiness. A spark of heat lights up his belly.

“My messy boy. You’re so beautiful when you let me play with you. You’re beautiful all the time, but I think even more for me, yes?” Ilya coos, pressing his tacky fingers to the edge of

Shane's jaw before lifting them so Shane can feel the restraint, the way they fight to stick and stay glued to Shane's face forever. He wouldn't mind that.

Shane presses his tongue to the wet fabric of Ilya's jeans, licking there just to see how it feels. The texture of raw denim mixed with the mess they've made. There's come drying on his abdomen, tear stains smeared across the corners of his eyes. There are traces of Ilya everywhere, branding his skin in ways that won't last until tomorrow, even though Shane desperately wishes they would. Wishes he could wear them proudly for all the world to see.

Ilya's fingers catch on the necklace still on Shane's neck. "Were you wearing your collar when you went to see Hayden today?" He questions, scraping his nails through the hair at the nape of Shane's neck. "Did you tell him that you are not really into men, but mostly, just *Property of Ilya Rozanov*?"

Shane gasps and jumps when he feels Ilya flick at one of his nipples. He's everywhere all at once, but he's also right. Shane had been wearing the necklace; it was tucked neatly into his shirt. Still, the thrill that Hayden *could* have seen it is enough to have Shane squirming again. Plus, he really liked the idea of being Ilya's property.

"I don't even know if you're gay. I think you are more Ilya-sexual, yes?" He hums knowingly. "You are a slut for me and me only."

"Yes," Shane rasps his agreement, because he has to let Ilya know that he knows. He's a *slut*. And he wants fucking everything. As much as Ilya is willing to give him.

"Good boy. I will not tolerate my pet going around giving kitten licks to others," Ilya says possessively, wrapping his big, bulky arms around him until Shane is nothing but a floating head in his grasp.

Ilya is palming at his chest, claiming every single inch of open skin while pressing kisses across his face until Shane feels like he's going to hyper-ventilate. He's breathing fast, his heart pumping wildly in his chest like he's going to run out of blood. He's half hard again.

"You love this, don't you?" Ilya breathes into his ear before licking over it, into it. "Letting me love on you. Letting me take you apart with my tongue and touch you all over with my fingers. Your body is perfect. *You* are perfect."

Shane can barely move with the way Ilya's holding him, but if he could, he'd be thrashing uncontrollably. *His voice*, god his voice. It was deeper when they were like this. Slower. Shane couldn't tell if that was Ilya's doing or if his own head was having trouble processing the sound, distorting it into something more sultry, more lethal. He's never felt attraction like this in his life. Years of wondering if there was something wrong with him because he didn't crave girls like his teammates did. He didn't even really crave guys, now that he thought about it. Not like this. *Never* like this.

He's overwhelmed. He can feel tears in his eyes again, even though he's not sad. There's a lot inside of him that's gone...untouched, he thinks, undiscovered. For maybe his whole life. Feelings he's never encountered, or maybe never let himself have. Desires that now feel like they're bursting with the need to escape after so long of being ignored, being buried away. He

feels the cage inside of him creak a little, threatening to break at the hinges, but it keeps its hold. He's relied on that cage for a very long time, to keep him disciplined, meticulous, controlled.

Restrained.

He's spinning out of control now, a bit. In Ilya's grasp. And still, Ilya is holding him through it. Giving him permission to let go, vowing to keep everything in order, while Shane just *relinquishes*. Feels freely for the first time. The cage will beat him back into submission tomorrow, likely with much less gentle hands than the ones holding him right now, but Shane was used to operating within very strict margins. It was safer that way. Or so he told himself.

It's as if Ilya is able to read his mind.

"I'm never letting you go back to that place," Ilya tells him seriously, and Shane hums when another chocolate strawberry passes through his lips. It tastes *so* good. He can't remember the last time he had chocolate. The last time it felt this freeing to indulge. "That place where you think you have to do everything by yourself. That you are in this life alone. I am right here. I am willing and able to take some of your stress. You just have to let me, and I will spend forever doing so."

Shane focuses on the task of chewing the strawberry. And his eyes are closed again because he likes the way Ilya's words play out in colors behind his eyelids. Purple hearts, yellow swirls. Ocean blue eyes that Shane wants to drown in.

"I have seen you be so relaxed in my arms. It is the easiest thing in the world to get you there. I don't even have to try."

Another strawberry. Shane's tummy swoons in appreciation.

"There is no reason to deny yourself this. To deny *us* this. We are so good for each other. This feeling in my chest for the last ten years cannot be for nothing. I want to spend every day fighting off the demons in your head, quieting the thoughts that threaten to overtake you. I believe it is my job to do so. The reason I was put on this Earth."

Another strawberry.

Time passes on like that. In a blur of reassurances that hold deeper meaning than Shane can make sense of in his current mental state. Chocolate strawberries and honeycomb kisses, and Ilya's never-ending string of consciousness. Shane wishes he could have his voice running through his mind at all hours of the day, instead of the sinister hiss in his brain reminding him constantly that he will never be enough. Not for himself, and not for anyone.

There's chocolate truffles at some point. Rich and decadent. Whipped cream that dots his nose, and he giggles as Ilya slurps it off before crawling over him and licking sugar into his mouth. They're both fully naked and so wrapped up in each other that Shane isn't sure where one of them ends and the other begins.

He's fuzzy in a way that's different than when he feels like a cat. In a way, he's more present. Less *down*, as Ilya would put it. It's clear he has more brain function as a human. Mostly, though, he's more in his head than he is in the room, Ilya leading him through different scenarios like he's trying to deprogram a bomb that has somehow nestled its way in Shane's mind.

It's mentally exhausting, and that makes him feel far away. Zoned out. Sharply aware, but in some vague, remote way. He could speak if he wanted to. Words would find him—unlike when he was a cat, being *silly*, as Ilya had told him—but the desire still isn't there. For now, there is more power in listening.

At some point, Ilya's words turn to white noise as his brain finally settles for the evening. Cloudy. Distant. Peaceful.

He hardly registers it when Ilya slips out from under him, his world spinning slightly as the other scoops him up like he weighs nothing. Shane's body buzzes in warmth, and he just holds on tightly, pressing his thoughtless head to Ilya's firm chest.

He's placed on a fluffy rug, the sound of running water jarring him into awareness, but he shuts his eyes again when nothing happens after that. Fingers in his hair. Kisses that breathe life back into him. A heaven on Earth that Shane didn't think existed. Hockey could be so cold.

He's in the air again, in Ilya's arms, and then he's suddenly submerged in a cocoon of heat. He's against Ilya's chest, the other's strong thighs bracketing him in as a fluffy loofah glides over his body.

Shane feels like purring, like being a kitten again, so he turns slightly to lick at one of Ilya's pecks in appreciation.

"Mm, yes, it is bath time, kitty. Very good. Thank you for cleaning me," Ilya's voice rumbles, and Shane presses his ear closer to listen, to feel the vibrations against his cheek.

Ilya takes his time, lifting each of Shane's long limbs to thoroughly clean off all the sickly-sweet remnants of their evening together. He's kissing him just as often, pressing praises into the freshly washed skin like he's trying to sear the words into the very fiber of Shane's being. The bomb could not be disarmed, but maybe it could be rewired. Maybe when it finally exploded, Ilya would be there with a plan to pick up the pieces.

Ilya washes his hair next, and normally, Shane would wrinkle his nose at the scent, but right now, it smells like his owner. Calming. Like Ilya is claiming him in yet another way that Shane can wear on his skin without people knowing.

Shane moans lowly when Ilya massages the shampoo into his scalp, scratching his fingers in a way that shouldn't feel so good. He doesn't know what he's done to deserve this.

"Feel nice, baby?" Ilya's voice reverberates against his skull.

“Yes, daddy,” Shane answers mindlessly, lost in that place where he’s running on autopilot, drunk on his desires. But Ilya had wanted to be daddy today, and Shane, as usual, always, always wanted to be good for him.

“Good boy,” Ilya rewards into his wet hair, kissing him once, twice. He lets his hands glide down to Shane’s shoulder and neck, thumbs digging into skin where tension always seems to simmer under the surface.

Shane melts into his touch, feeling again like he wants to cry. It’s too much. Too good. He *doesn’t* deserve this, a voice reminds him. He hasn’t done enough. Hasn’t earned it. Hasn’t even gotten Ilya off tonight.

“Hey, you’re okay,” Ilya reminds him softly. “You’re doing so well. Did everything I asked you to. Took everything I gave you.”

Shane still sobs into his neck, and Ilya hugs him so tightly, like he’s terrified Shane will go running again. His legs twitch with the urge. He shouldn’t want this. Shouldn’t need it. But he feels like he does in order to survive. He was getting too comfortable having good things. It was only a matter of time before hockey started up again, and all of this would come to a natural end.

Shane had his cottage. His parents. The Dynasty that he had built and carried on his back for nearly ten years, sacrificing everything short of his sanity in order to be able to do so. They were the reigning Champs, and would be again if Shane had his way. And as much as he wanted to stay here in this cozy bubble forever, he knew that being Ilya’s best good boy and being Shane Hollander, Captain of a four-time Stanley Cup-winning team, did not go hand in hand. In fact, they never would.

He cries a little harder.

By the time Ilya is done cleaning them both, Shane is mostly cried out, sniffing every once in a while as his eyelashes continue to bat away big puppy dog tears. His fingers are pruned, and he feels warmth leave his body as the bath water drains below. Their time was coming to an end, and so was his freedom.

“Я так сильно тебя люблю,” Ilya whispers against his temple, and it feels important, so Shane tries desperately to hold onto the words, but they evaporate into the air before he can commit them to memory.

Ilya is lifting him again, carrying him like he weighs nothing, before placing him on the bathroom counter and wrapping him in a warm, fluffy towel. Shane barely registers it when Ilya pulls a hood over his head and slips his hands into warm pockets, before picking him up again, koala-style, hands under his thighs as Shane wraps his legs around him. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, however, and spots the kitten ears on the hood of the towel. One black ear, one white. His heart throbs in his chest, and he wraps his arms around Ilya a little tighter. Covering his hands are tiny kitten paws.

When they get to the bed, Ilya kneels down in front of him to help towel him off. He ruffles Shane’s hair against the hood, running his hands over the rest of him until the last drops of

water cling to the absorbent fabric. Shane just watches him, blinking slow, and startles slightly when Ilya meets his eye.

He smiles fondly, reaching up to poke at one of Shane's cat ears. "You are such a cute котенок. Thank you for being so good for me. There is nothing that makes me happier than taking care of you."

Ilya helps him out of the towel next and into a navy long-sleeve shirt that Shane doesn't recognize. It smells like Ilya's cologne, though, and he turns to press his nose into it, greedily inhaling the scent. He's vaguely aware of being maneuvered into a pair of loose boxers, but the sleepiness is starting to creep up on him, starting to make it hard to be aware of his surroundings.

Ilya is moving around him, folding the tarp and cleaning up what's left of the mess they made. He reappears in front of Shane with a bottle of water and gently coaxes him into drinking at least half, a reassuring hand on his knee and encouragements on his lips. "My best boy," he coos, and Shane yawns.

The lights go off at some point, and the heat cranks up. Ilya is still mostly naked, but Shane doesn't have the energy to ogle him like usual, just lets himself distantly appreciate the fact that this angel sent from heaven has decided to look after him for the evening. Tries to ignore the pang that reminds him their time is fleeting. It's something to tackle tomorrow.

Rozy slips into bed behind him and wraps around him until they're touching from their toes all the way up to the tops of their heads. A strong arm around his middle that positions a claiming hand flat across his abdomen. A nose pressed against the back of his neck, inhaling his scent. Warm feet that bleed into his cold ones.

"You are the best thing in my life," Ilya tells him unguardedly, whispering it into his hair. "If there is anything you need from me, anything you want, I will do whatever I can to make sure it is yours. You deserve everything, Shane. Everything."

Shane feels a sharp twist in his gut, a knot that tightens the reins, tells him he needs to kick himself back into gear. His time in Montreal was over. Tomorrow, he was supposed to head back to his cottage, something he looked forward to every year. His oasis. His home away from home. *His safe place.*

He doesn't recall ever feeling this safe, though. Not at his cottage, not at his parents' house, and not anywhere really. At least, not in a very long time.

Before hockey, probably, which he'd started at the mere age of three years old; the thoughts had plagued him even then. Possibly his first real core memory was that he needed to do better on the ice, needed to be faster than the kid next to him, needed to train harder so he could progress faster. If he wanted to be in the NHL, to win Stanley Cups like the hockey stars he idolized that came before him, he had to stay focused. He just hadn't realized until now how monocular that focus had been, how paralyzingly all-consuming, leaving room for only discipline and not much else.

Ilya kisses him where his hair meets the nape of his neck. Once, twice, three times, four. Until Shane's heavy eyes are slipping shut, his fingers linking tightly with the ones around his middle.

When he wakes in the morning, his head is clear. He knows where he is, and the weight of Ilya around him is a warm comfort. For a moment, everything is still. His thoughts don't plague him like rolling thunder before a storm. Tension doesn't line his body like a rubber band ready to snap. He's present, and he's okay, and he feels good. Ilya makes him feel good.

"Mm," Ilya lets out a pleased noise as he wakes to Shane in his arms.

Shane smiles and sinks a little closer, wiggling slightly at the way Ilya's curls tickle the back of his neck.

Ilya playfully growls and holds him more tightly in place, pulling a soft laugh from Shane. He feels Ilya's hands slip under the fabric of his shirt, heating the cool surface of his skin. He presses his feet to Roz's in hopes of stealing more of his warmth. His Russian counterpart was like a furnace to the ice that ran through Shane's veins.

"You are freezing, котенок," Ilya murmurs into his skin. "I have turned the heat up so much, it's like a sauna in here. How can we get some meat on these bones?" He runs his hands soothingly over Shane's sides.

It's enough to trigger the memories from last night, and Shane's stomach churns at the thought of how much sugar he consumed. He can't remember all of it in clear detail, how much he ate exactly, but he does remember the truffles, the chocolate strawberries. The honey and the cream. He remembers Roz feeding him aimlessly, and he feels a little violated by his own lack of awareness during that time. The defenses had come down, but now, with renewed clarity, Shane remembers they were put up for a reason.

He takes a cursory glance around the room, spotting all the candles from last night that have since faded to a dull dim, like they were running out of energy. It feels like a metaphor.

Time's up.

"Are you hungry, baby?" Ilya doesn't seem to notice the war that's started back up in Shane's head. "I can run out and grab us some food. Could feed you. Let you be quiet a little bit if you wish," he adds gently.

He's talking slow, like he doesn't want to come off too eager, doesn't want to give away how badly he wants it. Like it's just a suggestion, and Shane can take it or leave it, 'cause it really doesn't matter to him one way or the other. But, Shane can hear it in his voice, can feel the pull of desire in his own skin just like Roz's—magnets to each other's wants.

He lets himself shut his eyes and picture it; he could admit how nice it sounded.

But no. Shane was spoken for today. Shane had strict plans for the rest of the summer. His cottage. Spending time with his parents. Dodging questions from his teammates about Rose. *Training, training, training.* He was only getting older, and he couldn't afford to take a break.

Maybe he could explore his sexual interests further down the line, but hockey wasn't going to wait for him while he figured it out. His time in the NHL was limited.

That's all this was. A short summer fling. An exploration of his sexuality. A confirmation that he liked men...that he liked men a lot, actually, and maybe he probably always has. This was a release. It should make things easier, going forward, not harder. But, either way, it was time to let go.

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"I'm uh...I'm heading back to my cottage today," Shane voices awkwardly, and Ilya's blood runs cold, his hands freezing on the Golden Boy's skin.

"Oh," he says, and hopes it doesn't sound like a wounded battle cry, an unintentional admission of defeat.

"I was always supposed to leave today," Shane adds quickly, as if that will make the blow any less significant, any less detrimental.

"Yeah," Ilya rasps, clearing his throat as he carefully untangles himself from Shane's pliant body. He doesn't have the fight in him today. Not when he'd been so sure that last night would solidify something between them. Make it so that Shane couldn't just argue this away when his head came knocking, demanding answers, fighting for control.

Ilya was at war with a parasite, something that had Shane on lock from the inside out, something that had likely been growing and *taking* from him for years and years now, possibly since birth.

And for a split second, Ilya is angry. Did Shane's parents not know? Had they somehow failed to realize there was something living inside of their son, controlling his thoughts and making decisions for him like some sort of evil dictator? What about his teammates? Surely, they had caught onto the fact that their Captain was *not alright*. Not by any human sense, at least.

Or what about Hayden? His supposed best friend of nearly ten years now, someone Shane shared countless hotel rooms with on the road, whose kids called him Uncle Shane like he was part of the fucking family. Had no one caught on to the fact that Shane was a living zombie? Prisoner to the tight grip of whatever anxious leech lived within him.

Ilya was seeing red. All this progress, and for what? Shane would go back to his cottage and revert to his old, nasty habits, slowly driving himself insane with the relentless chase of his journey to perfection. He would push his body to its limits, starve himself until his bones started to deteriorate, until the person inside of him began to whittle away into nothing, just a walking corpse marching closer and closer into oblivion. He felt like he was going to be sick.

Shane is shifting on the bed next to him as Ilya stares at the wall. He's uncomfortable with the silence, if his fidgeting is anything to go off of, but Ilya doesn't have the energy to shield the waves that are projecting off of him right now. He's tired. He's so tired of chasing someone who runs at a million miles an hour, who never takes a day off, even just to breathe.

He feels numb, unsure of what else he can do at this point to change Shane's mind, especially considering Shane wasn't even the one in control of it. He was fighting an invisible opponent, a vaporous gas that had already poisoned all the air around them. Ilya could feel himself starting to choke on it.

"I guess, um," he sighs, feeling heavier with every moment that passes. "I guess you'd better get going then," he forces the words out of him like sludge, turning over his shoulder to offer a sad smile that he hopes comes off as more accepting than he actually means it.

He didn't want to add to any of Shane's guilt. It wouldn't make a difference either way. Shane wasn't at fault here. He couldn't help that he was genetically wired for self-destruction. But he also didn't seem any closer to escaping said ruin. Ilya had thought they'd made progress; now, he couldn't be sure.

"Yeah," Shane whispers, and for a brief second, Ilya thinks he sees a spark of fight left in his eyes. Like he might stand up, put his foot down, and stick up for himself for once. Listen to his desires and chase them full-stop.

It disappears almost as quickly as it arrived.

If they were a more normal pair with more regulated emotions, there might be parting words. A final, definite end to whatever the hell has gone on between them this past week. Instead, there's only silence. A mutual understanding, an unspoken agreement that words won't help—won't change anything and won't make things better.

So, Ilya watches as Shane collects his clothes once again, more slowly than he did last time, like he's trying to savor as much as he can before saying goodbye, possibly forever. In Ilya's morbid brain, it feels like a funeral. Something that he will have to grieve painfully after the sudden and short-lived rush of thinking that things were actually going to work out this time.

He had given everything, and it still wasn't enough. The thought sticks with him long after Shane has left, the bed cold and empty beside him.

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Chapter End Notes

We're going to the cottage!!!

Friendly reminder that Ilya and Shane are still experimenting with what works for them. They're going to test a lot of kinks, not all of them will "stick", but kitten Shane is definitely here to stay. Also, please trust that whenever I leave you with angst, a resolution will shortly follow lol. Like Ilya, I'm not a masochist.

Curious to hear thoughts, questions, predictions! And, as always, would love to hear how you feel about the kinks they've explored so far/what you'd like to see explored in

the future (no promises).

I mentioned this in the comments, but would like to give you a small spoiler that Ilya loves orgasm denial (it's kind of his specialty as a Dom), so that is a definite. This fic is going to continue to be slow-burn as they take their time working through their issues and figuring out their dynamic, but considering how much more I want to cover, I think it's safe to say this fic will be pretty long. I appreciate anyone who has decided to join me for the ride.

Thanks for the support! Your kudos, comments, and shares have been extremely motivating to my writing process. Also, I did cave and make a twitter so please find me @sluthollanov if you wanna be moots and take a deeper dive into my insanity :)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

When Shane gets to his cottage, the door shuts loudly behind him. It feels bigger than he remembers—more empty. It doesn't bring the immediate peace he was hoping for.

He brings his bag into his room and turns on the lights, eyes falling to the familiar king-sized bed. He's tired. He should want to fall right into it, but he doesn't. Instead, he unzips his suitcase and puts on his gym clothes. Then, he works out for two grueling hours, until the music on his current playlist has started to loop.

After his cooldown, he heads to the sauna for ten minutes to help relax his muscles. Next, a cold plunge for three minutes to help with any inflammation and to reset his nervous system. He rests for two minutes and then does it all over again. Sauna. Cold Plunge. Rest. Sauna. Cold Plunge. Rest.

Like clockwork, he heads to the shower thirty minutes later. He's settling back into his routine—his routine that keeps him happy, healthy, and motivated. He's perfected his life here at the cottage, and that's what made it so relaxing. That's what Shane enjoyed the most about it.

Once he feels bone-dead exhausted, he collapses into bed and lets sleep find him easily. He was back to normal. Back to the place where everything in his life seemed pretty damn good, mostly because he didn't have to acknowledge the things that weren't. Those things ceased to exist at the cottage, and for that, Shane was grateful.

He wakes the next morning feeling a little jittery, his heart thumping irregularly in his chest as something odd scatters through his bones. An unsettledness.

He washes it away with a brush of his teeth and a swish of his mouthwash before heading down to the kitchen. He's already dressed for his run, eager to get through breakfast and get going, so he settles for something quick: a banana, a small bowl of oats, and his favorite protein shake.

He's putting away the protein powder when he spots something out of the corner of his eye. He stares at the bottle, something in him beckoning him forward before he can even register what he's doing. And, at the last second, he makes the quick decision to drizzle a little bit of honey onto his oats before shoving the bottle to the back of the cabinet. He pushes surfacing thoughts away, burying them deep in his mind.

Shane eats his breakfast as quickly as he can without messing up his digestive timing, and then heads out the door.

It's a little brisk this morning, perfect running weather, so Shane takes advantage of the trails. He runs until his lungs burn, until his feet start to feel uncomfortable in his shoes, until his

headphones no longer feel relaxing in his ears. Then, he turns around and runs the same trail home. By the time he steps through the front door, he feels near the point of collapse.

He takes his shoes off and practically pours himself into one of the kitchen barstools, leaning down to check his distance.

17.36km / 10.79 miles glares back at him.

Jesus, that was a lot. He usually ran somewhere around the **6.44km / 4 mile** range. But it made sense. He had missed running on the long nature trails near his cottage, and clearly, he had a lot on his mind.

He wasn't thinking about Ilya, though. No. Shane was thinking about hockey. He was thinking about strategies for his team. Coming up with plans for how they were going to win their fifth cup. He'd be halfway to his goal of ten if they succeeded, and the thought makes him smile. It's everything he's ever dreamed of, and he was *so* close. Just a little further.

He takes a second to stretch and then heads for a cold plunge, a shower following that. He eats his prepackaged lunch, custom-crafted by a special chef who works with his trainer to nail down his dietary needs. He watches old hockey tapes. He follows the same protocol for dinner. He hops in the sauna and then goes for another shower. Until his body is spent. Until his mind has no space to roam. He sticks to the routine. He keeps himself in check. He feels fucking good. Normal again. Like the machine is back in working order after an intense reset.

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Ilya is trying his best. He really is. He's not crying every second of the day like he could be. He's not moping—well, maybe a little—but for the most part, he tries to resume normal life. He goes to the club. He drinks a bit more than he probably should. He lets Svetlana watch him with the saddest pity eyes ever until he can't take it anymore and has to force himself to go home.

At home, he drinks a little bit more. He looks at properties in Ottawa and wonders if there's even a point. If he's doing anything for the right reasons anymore. If he ever was.

It's pretty pathetic, he thinks to himself, that he's built his entire life around the hope that he and Shane might cross paths. Only, now, they've done much more than just cross paths; they've crashed and burned against each other, flown too close to the sun.

He hopes Shane is okay, more than anything. He just wishes he could check on him, see how he's doing. He tells himself it's not for selfish reasons, but everything he's done has been selfish. He is his father's child through and through.

Shane still has his mother's necklace, and Ilya has a fleeting thought that he hopes she likes it at the cottage. If he can't see it for himself, he's glad she gets to. He hopes she will watch over Shane, much like he hopes Shane will take good care of her. In a way, it's kind of poetic—his two favorite people in the world deserved to be near each other.

The next morning, he forces himself out of bed at a reasonable time and takes himself to breakfast. He's partially hungover, so of course, he looks like shit when he accidentally bumps into Rose Landry.

"Sorry," he apologizes immediately, steadying her with a gentle hand on her forearm.

"Ilya," Rose greets in surprise, once she realizes who he is. "It's so good to see you. How have you been?"

Ilya's mouth twists uncomfortably, but he manages a nod. "I am okay. I have been better," he admits openly, because he has no reason to lie to her. In some ways, maybe he just wants an excuse to talk about it with someone—a third party who may have some additional context into the inner workings of Shane Hollander.

The curl of her lips is sympathetic as she surveys him. "You do sort of look like crap today," she notes softly, but not unkindly, as she tips her head in consideration. "Do you want to get a table together? I was just on a mission to try a new coffee flavor today, but I could use some company if you're free." The *you clearly could as well* goes unspoken, but Rose arches a knowing eyebrow.

Ilya would never pass up the opportunity to get more intel, though, so he nods jerkily and follows her to a table.

They order drinks with the waitress when she comes over and then face each other once more, Rose looking him over as if he might suddenly crumple into a pile of dust on the ground and float away with the wind.

"How are you doing?" She asks again, and Ilya opens his mouth to give the same answer, but she puts a hand up to stop him. "How are you *really* doing?"

Ilya feels the familiar weight on his chest, the same one he gets every time he thinks about his Mama for too long, the one he gets when he's doing everything he can not to lose it and start crying.

His expression wobbles slightly, but he keeps it steady, pulls it back. "Not good. Probably bad," he says shortly, trying to keep his voice at an even level.

"It sucks not having him here," Rose laughs, but it comes out sad, like maybe she gets where he's coming from, even though Ilya hadn't mentioned Shane. Maybe it's just that obvious.

"Yeah," he agrees simply, because there's not much else to say—at least, not in a public restaurant.

His mind drifts back to the pictures of Shane crying in Rose's arms over a table. Shane clearly felt comfortable enough to let her in, and he'd called Ilya later that day, almost like Rose had talked him off a ledge. He wonders if she can help with this now.

"Has he said anything?" Ilya lets himself ask with a sigh. "Is he okay? I haven't heard from him in a week."

Rose smiles when the waitress comes back with their drinks, and the two quickly put in the rest of their food orders before she turns to him again, twirling her straw around her coffee.

“He hasn’t said much since he’s been there,” she admits softly, lips twisted in contemplation. “I am worried about him. I think he’s really struggling with all of this.”

“With me,” Ilya attempts to clarify, but it comes out more confident, like he’s sure he’s the root of the problem.

“I don’t think so,” Rose shakes her head. “I mean, maybe, a bit. But, no. I think more with himself,” she muses, taking a sip of her coffee. She pauses, and then her lips pull into a big smile. “Wow, that’s amazing. You have to try some.”

Ilya just blinks when she passes the coffee over to him and takes a hesitant sip from her straw. “Mm,” he swallows, thoughts pulled to a week ago when he had Shane laid out beneath him. “Tastes like honey,” he comments softly.

Rose’s smile widens as she leans forward to take another sip. “I’ve been looking for the best coffee in Montreal. It’s my mission while I’m here. Shane used to be my breakfast buddy. Well,” she laughs. “He’s honestly, like, my *only* friend here other than the rest of the cast. And we see each other constantly at work, so. Now, I guess I’m on my own for breakfast.”

“I like breakfast,” Ilya finds himself offering, and his lips twitch at the way her eyes light up. Ilya could also use some company, and it was nice to be around someone other than Sveta who knew about Shane. He could admit he needed someone to talk to.

“Be careful what you’re offering,” she laughs, reaching across the table to squeeze his arm. “I will seriously call you up all the time.”

“I don’t mind,” Ilya shrugs, finding that he quite enjoys being around Rose. He’s glad that Shane has her in his life, that he has someone he obviously feels comfortable opening up to. From what Ilya could tell, he definitely needed that. “Did he tell you about...how he...” Ilya trails, not wanting to share something with her that Shane hasn’t shared himself.

Rose crinkles her eyebrows for a moment before the realization must dawn on her. “Oh! About Hayden? Yeah, he told me,” she nods, smiling once again. “I’m really proud of him for that.”

“Me too,” Ilya says quietly, distracting himself by taking a sip of his water.

“I think he’s been struggling with his team,” she reveals, placing her napkin in her lap. “It’s nice that he has Hayden on his side. I hope it’ll make a difference in how he feels about going into next season.”

Ilya frowns slightly at that. “His team? Why? What is wrong with his team?”

“Just...locker room talk,” she rolls her eyes. “They sound like a bunch of assholes, if you ask me, but you know how he is. He’s given everything to those guys. I doubt he’s going to give up on them anytime soon.”

“What kind of locker room talk?” Ilya’s eyebrows pinch together. “They are saying things? About him?”

“No, I think it’s more in general. They make little comments. You know how guys are,” she offers sympathetically. “I think it’s just really starting to get to him. That’s why it’s so good that he told Hayden. He needs someone who’s going to have his back out there.”

Ilya did not like the thought of Shane’s team contributing to whatever the hell was going on with him right now. Hockey was everything to Shane, and if he didn’t feel safe around his teammates, then his support system would be basically non-existent when the season started up again.

“I am thinking of going to Ottawa,” Ilya divulges, figuring it’s probably somewhat relevant to the conversation.

Rose raises her eyebrows in surprise. “Really? Wow, why Ottawa?” She asks, looking genuinely shocked.

Ilya puffs a soft laugh with the recognition that she obviously knows something about hockey if her reaction is anything to go off of.

“Sorry, I mean,” she laughs as well. “It’s just, you know. Ottawa.”

“Yeah,” he breathes, shaking his head. He smiles at the waitress when she comes by with their food and picks up his fork to start eating. It’s his first real meal in days. “I enjoy my life here in Montreal. There is nothing for me in Russia anymore, so I think I would like to become Canadian citizen.”

Rose nods in interest, taking a bite of her own food. She chews thoughtfully for a moment, then swallows before addressing him. “Does this have anything to do with Shane?”

Ilya hesitates, wincing slightly.

“Sorry, it’s none of my business—”

“No, no. It’s alright,” he waves her off. “It is definitely partially to do with him, yes. Maybe part of me is hoping there’s something for us down the line. Maybe that is stupid...selfish, I don’t know,” he sighs.

“I don’t think it’s stupid or selfish,” she reassures him. “I think it’s really nice, actually. That he has someone who obviously cares a lot for him.”

Ilya puffs a self-deprecating laugh. “Mm,” he hums. “All I seem to do is mess things up for him. I am not sure he wants anything to do with me.”

“Oh, Ilya, I promise you that’s not true,” Rose tells him seriously. “I think Shane cares about you *a lot*. I’m sure it’s scaring the hell out of him. In fact, I know it is.”

Ilya regards her carefully, as if trying to determine whether she’s exaggerating to make him feel better. “He has said this to you?”

Rose just laughs. “Ilya, I’m pretty sure you were like...his gay awakening. He’s *totally* into you, trust me,” she adds, but then looks contemplative. “I think right now it’s more coming to terms with himself, that’s the problem. I think he’s struggling with where his sexuality fits into all of this. Hockey is *everything* to him.”

Ilya swallows. He respects Shane’s dedication to hockey, but sometimes, he wished hockey didn’t *have* to be everything for him. There were lots of other things in this world, and Ilya feared that, by putting all his hopes into one basket, Shane was setting himself up for failure. He needed fallbacks, other things that made him happy in case hockey ever stopped being a safe space. It sounded like it already wasn’t.

“I do not know what to do,” Ilya admits, sounding defeated. “Every time I think we are in a good place, he slips away from me. I don’t want to force him to be with me if that’s not what he wants, but he is sending lots of mixed signals. I thought I knew how to read him, but now, I am not so sure.”

Rose reaches for his hand this time, and Ilya smiles faintly, accepting the gesture.

“From what he’s said, I think he’s really...scared of his feelings for you. I think he knows he isn’t going to be able to hide from them forever, and he can’t really picture a life for himself right now that doesn’t involve hiding. He’s been doing it for *so* long. I mean,” she sighs, squeezing Ilya’s hand tightly. “I don’t think he’d ever told anyone he was gay before me. He didn’t even really tell me, I just sort of guessed,” she smiles sadly. “It breaks my heart knowing how long he’s been feeling like this without having anyone to talk to. It’s a big adjustment, you know? *Ten years* of keeping something like that to yourself. Of not telling a soul. I can’t even imagine how much he must have been suffering on his own.”

Ilya’s heart breaks for him a little more each day. He’s had his own share of sufferings, sure, but he’s always had Svetlana. She’s been his rock ever since they were little; meanwhile, Shane has been carrying this burden on his own for so long.

“Fuck,” Ilya shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “If only I didn’t screw up all those years ago. He did not have to suffer alone. Even if he does not want to be more, I am here for him. He can trust me with this.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Rose pulls his attention back to her. “Everything happens for a reason, right? Maybe the universe has other plans for you guys. Either way, I have a sure feeling that there’s something very real here. I think both of you feel how strong it is.”

Ilya takes a deep breath and nods. She was right. Ilya also liked to think it wasn’t all for nothing. There must be a reason he’s felt so drawn to Shane all these years, even with minimal interaction between them. He reaches for his necklace, his heart panging when he remembers where it lives now.

“Look, I’m actually headed to the cottage soon. Few days, maybe a week, depending on how filming goes,” Rose informs, giving his hand a final squeeze before reaching for her coffee. “I’m happy to look into it. Maybe I can give you a better idea of where he’s at right now. I think he always does a little better when he has someone to bounce ideas off of. Sometimes, he just needs a little push,” she offers him a hopeful smile.

“Really?” Ilya’s eyes dart to hers, a flicker of optimism causing him to straighten up in his chair. “Please,” he nods emphatically. “Or...don’t make it seem like I was asking. I do not want him to feel pressure coming from me. It’s the last thing I want.”

“I don’t think he feels pressured,” she laughs happily. “From what he told me last time...” she trails, her eyebrows flicking up suggestively. “I think he’s super into it.”

Ilya watches her in amazement. “He...he told you?” He asks in disbelief. His Shane seemed like the type to take their scenes to the grave. “About...”

“You know,” she gestures vaguely with her hand. “The stuff at the club. Being your,” she pauses, as if looking for the right word.

“Котёнок?” Ilya guesses lowly.

“Yes!” She snaps her fingers excitedly, but her face falls a moment later. “Sorry. Was he not supposed to? I know the events are, like, top secret or whatever.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Ilya assures her. “You are a member, anyway. I am just surprised he told you.”

“Yeah,” Rose agrees. “He was pretty upset at first, but I told him it’s totally normal. Actually, I think it’s *really hot*,” she giggles into her hand, which pulls a smile from Ilya.

He was really starting to like her, especially considering how open she seemed towards everything. He could see how important it was for Shane to have a Rose in his life.

“He’ll come around to it. Once he gets over the initial shock, I think,” she nods like she’s sure of it. “He’s got a lot on his plate right now, but like, he’s made some big steps lately. Telling Hayden, that was *huge* for him. I don’t think he ever intended to come out, like *at all*, so. The fact that he did is a really, really good sign. I think he’s starting to realize how good things can be for him, you know. If he’s willing to step out of his comfort zone a bit and go after the things he wants.”

Ilya breathes a small sigh of relief. He feels better after hearing Rose’s thoughts. Like maybe there’s hope for him and Shane, after all.

Once they’ve finished with breakfast, Rose walks him out and pulls him into a big hug.

“You’re not alone in this either, you know?” She tells him warmly. “I know you have Svetlana, but you’ve got me too, yeah? Plus, I’ll never complain about having someone else on Team Shane. I think he needs all the support he can get right now, hm?”

Ilya nods and tries not to get teary, tries to hold himself together a little longer, but he can’t help the way he clutches her back tightly. “Thank you. For being so good to him,” he professes genuinely. “I am very glad he has someone like you in his life.”

“Well, ditto,” Rose grins, pulling back to cup Ilya’s cheek. “Don’t beat yourself up about this, okay? He’ll come around, I promise.”

Ilya laughs wetly in agreement.

They trade phone numbers and then hug goodbye once more, with Rose promising to send updates about the cottage as she finds out more. Ilya leaves breakfast feeling a whole lot lighter.

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Shane has spent a whole week at the cottage avoiding his parents. He doesn't have a real reason, not a good one, anyway. But some part of him knows it's because he hates lying to them. He's been doing it for a while, he supposes. He's been having gay thoughts for ten plus years now. It hasn't been like this before, though.

Now, he has a Rose in his life who his parents are constantly asking him about. A Rose who is coming to visit any day now, as soon as she can get away from her endless filming schedule, and he knows his parents will want to meet her. He knows they're going to have a lot of questions for him, and lately, he isn't sure he'll be able to answer them with a straight face.

After telling Hayden, Shane felt like his secret was about a moment's notice away from spilling out of him. He hadn't even planned to come out to Hayden, but now that he had, it felt inevitable that he would have to tell his parents soon. They deserved to know. Well, at the very least, they didn't deserve to be lied to anymore. And Shane deserved to feel comfortable in his own skin around his loved ones.

It's not like he thought they would take it poorly. No, he was sure they would accept him. It was more the questions that he knew would follow. Once they found out there was no girl, no Rose, they would start prying into other things. Were there any guys in his life? Shane wasn't sure he could lie to them about that either. Everything was becoming more and more difficult to keep inside.

His routine isn't fueling him like it did the first few days. The cottage feels quiet, lonely. He's reminded of how deafening the isolation can be without anyone around him to tell him that he's valid, that he's okay the way he is. It's his first summer away at the cottage since meeting Rose, his first summer since really putting himself out there with a guy. With *Ilya*. He misses having a quiet mind, but more than anything, he misses Ilya's touch. His confident hands. His reassuring words. *It's more than just sex*, Shane lets himself admit. Ilya was becoming a comfort to him—no, a *lifeline*.

He didn't realize how freeing it was to have someone who understood every aspect of his situation. Someone he could be completely honest and transparent with. Who could relate to the pressures of hockey. Who knew firsthand about the shame of what he was into. Ilya even seemed to understand the way Shane's mind worked, and he wasn't scared of it. In fact, it only seemed to motivate him *more*, made him want to try harder.

Shane thinks about the list of maybes still sitting in his bag somewhere. He traces his lips and recalls the ghost of Ilya's touch still calling out to him, ringing loudly in the back of his mind. He thinks back to Ilya's sad smile when Shane had said he was leaving, the painful silence that followed as he collected his things.

He's still got the cross around his neck, and maybe a part of him is trying to convince himself that it's not really over, that he can still be Ilya's. He wants that desperately. He just doesn't know what it means yet. He needs more time to think. To plan. To dissect a million little different threads of possibility.

He knows he can't avoid his parents any longer, though, so he agrees to dinner at their place that evening, and steels himself for whatever awaits him on the other side. He's not planning on coming out, but if he does, then maybe that would be okay. Maybe it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to have more people he could count on.

"Shane, honey, there you are," his mom greets him the moment he walks through the door.

"Hi, Mom," he laughs, wrapping her in a big hug. God, he missed them. It's been a brutal few weeks of press and self-discovery. He doesn't think he's ever been so mentally exhausted in his life.

"We were starting to think you were going to cancel on us again," she scolds him, handing off some silverware so he can start setting the table.

"Sorry," he winces slightly. "I've just been trying to settle in. Get back on the ice a bit. Take advantage of the nature."

"Oh, honey, you know we're not mad. You've had a busy couple of weeks," she smiles, waving him off. "My four-time Stanley Cup Champion."

"Mom," Shane huffs a laugh, but he can feel the way color paints his cheeks. Once he's set out all the silverware, he sits in his usual seat, voicing his thanks when his dad delivers a cup of water. "Hey, Dad."

"Good to see you, Shane," David smiles warmly at him, clapping him on the shoulder in greeting before heading back outside to finish up on the grill.

"We're just proud of you," Yuna reminds him.

"I know, I know. I appreciate it," Shane replies honestly, taking a sip of his water.

Once David finishes up on the grill, he returns with a piping plate of grilled chicken and roasted veggies, which he sets on a big platter in the middle of the table. They usually eat family style, so Shane waits until his dad has sat down before he starts to help himself to a plate.

"So, what else is new?" His mom asks conversationally. She's being a little too nonchalant, like there's something she wants to ask, but isn't sure if she should bring up. Almost like she's hoping Shane will bring it up himself.

"Not much," Shane shrugs. He doesn't know what she's getting at, anyway. Figures she'll bring it up on her own time if it's really important. "Been getting some good gym time in. Going over tapes from this season. The usual." He starts cutting into his chicken and takes a small bite.

“That’s nice,” she smiles politely at him, but Shane can see the way her eyes keep darting to his dad.

“What?” He asks, frowning a bit when the silence stretches on.

“Nothing, honey,” she shakes her head, but Shane can tell they’re not going to let this go.

“What is it?” He says again, resting his hands on the table as he pauses cutting up his chicken.

His mom glances at his dad once more, who only seems to shrug in reply, before she lets out a small sigh. “We’re just worried about you, Shane. We saw the pictures with Rose.”

Shane’s heart hammers in his chest. “Oh,” he gets out smartly, eyes drifting back to his full plate of food. “Yeah. I mean. I’m alright—”

“I mean, the nerve of that girl,” Yuna scoffs, causing Shane’s eyebrows to press together in confusion.

“Wait, what?” He asks, looking between both of his parents this time.

“Well, first she breaks your heart, and then she’s seen on a date with your biggest rival? It’s a little immature if you ask me,” Yuna waves her fork around as she talks.

Shane’s eyebrows raise high on his head. “Huh?” Now he was extremely confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, baby,” Yuna’s expression falls slightly. She looks concerned. “Have you…not seen the photos?”

“What photos?” He sits up a little in his chair. He assumed they were talking about the pictures of him crying, but now, he’s curious to know what the hell else they’ve seen.

His mom shoots his father another look.

“Mom,” Shane gets out dryly.

“Are you sure you want to see—”

“Yes, I’m fucking sure,” he can’t help the edge to his voice as he demands to know more.

“Alright, alright,” she raises her hands in defense before pulling out her cell phone.

He waits as she pulls up whatever gossip site scooped the pictures, and quickly takes the phone when it’s handed to him.

It’s a flurry of pictures of Rose and Ilya at breakfast together. Rose is holding onto his hand, and Ilya is smiling at her in that warm way he does with only the people he really cares about. Shane hates that he knows that smile so well.

There are more pictures as he scrolls down. Pictures of them hugging outside the restaurant. Passing phones back and forth like they're exchanging numbers.

He feels nervous, his hands shaking slightly, but it's not for whatever reason his parents are thinking.

"It's...it's nothing," he tells them, still looking at the pictures, trying to determine what exactly is happening within them. "Rose is *not* dating Rozanov."

A small hesitation from his parents' side of the table. And then, "There's more."

What more could there possibly be, Shane thinks to himself. Rose and Ilya *obviously* weren't together.

He passes the phone back to his mother and lets her pull up a new gossip site. And this one... this one is all about Ilya's missing cross necklace. Not only that, but also...the gold chain resting around Rose's neck, the pendant conveniently hidden under her jacket.

Shane's blood runs cold when he sees his name.

Hockey star Ilya Rozanov's signature golden cross has been found missing in action. Fans noticed the cross has not made its usual appearances in Rozanov's frequent social media story posts, but it wasn't until Rozanov was spotted with Rose Landry that murmurs of the missing cross necklace began trending on Twitter.

Rumors about where the cross could have gone started up just two weeks ago when Rozanov was first spotted without it. Fans of the Boston Bears center speculated on whether Rozanov had taken the necklace in for a repair, or possibly misplaced it on a wild night out. The newest theory, however, comes in the form of X-Squad actress Rose Landry, who was famously linked with another hockey superstar, Shane Hollander, not too long ago.

Rozanov and Hollander have a known rivalry dating back to their rookie season, where the two athletes were picked first and second, respectively, in the draft. Since then, the rivalry has spanned nearly a decade of intense face-offs and heated press runs. Rozanov, known for his Playboy reputation, is often seen with many women, but this is the first time he's publicly gone after one of Hollander's old flames.

As new pictures dropped of Rozanov and Landry holding hands and sharing an intimate embrace, fans were quick to notice an unidentifiable gold chain around Rose's neck. Could she be the mystery inheritor of the missing Rozanov cross? And is this a direct dig at Hollander, who was spotted at breakfast with Landry in an emotional display not too long ago? Is Rozanov finally looking to settle down by offering Landry a token of his love in the form of his signature necklace? Only time will tell.

Stay tuned for updates as we continue to report on this budding romance!

Fuck. Fuck, this was not good. This was not good at all.

"Shane," his dad says cautiously. "Are you alright?"

“What?” He looks back up at them, his eyes wide with panic, and with the way they’re watching him like he’s an animal they’re at risk of spooking off, he must look insane. “No. I mean, I’m fine,” he shakes his head, quickly passing the phone back to them.

“Shane,” his mom says softly, and he hates the tone of voice she’s using. “You can talk to us. I know you and Rose had something really special.”

“Mom,” Shane puffs a frustrated laugh. “Rose and I aren’t together, okay? We’re just friends.”

She has this look on her face like she doesn’t believe him, and Shane can’t help the way he rolls his eyes.

“Seriously. She’s still coming to the cottage. She still wants to meet you guys. Everything is fine, okay?”

They’re the ones who look confused now, though, still passing cursory glances between each other. Shane hates how guarded everyone has become around him.

“It’s just...the pictures of you crying...”

“That—” Shane runs a hand through his hair in exasperation. “It’s not what it looks like, okay? Seriously. Rose and I are just friends.”

“But, Shane,” his mom huffs. “I mean, seeing *Rozanov*—”

“She isn’t seeing him, okay?” He tells them loudly, but they’re watching him like he’s in denial. Like he’s losing his mind. “Can you just trust me on this? It’s not what it looks like. Rose is good friends with Svetlana, who is Ilya’s childhood friend, okay? They know each other. They run in the same circles.”

They’re blinking at him like he’s just grown a second head, and Shane realizes a beat too late that he’s just called him Ilya. He groans slightly to himself at the poor judgment call, but steels himself on the fact that it *is* his name. Was it really so crazy for Shane to refer to him that way?

“He...he lives in Montreal. During the off-season. He has a business there,” he explains slowly, but each new piece of information only seems to alarm them more. Like he’s weird for knowing all of this. “I ran into him recently. It’s not a big deal. I hung out at his club with the rest of the X-Squad cast.”

He’s word-vomiting, and it’s backfiring, if the wide eyes are anything to go off of. The half-open mouths, like Shane has just admitted to murder, instead of casually running into his arch rival on a night out, in the city they both live in.

“But, sweetie, she’s clearly—”

“She doesn’t have his necklace, Mom,” Shane laughs. “Jesus. It’s just some stupid gossip site. They don’t know what they’re talking about. Trust me, Rose is *not* dating Rozanov. She wouldn’t do that. She knows he’s off limits.”

He's sure they'll take that as a real answer this time, sure that they'll let it go. He's addressed every part of this weird, fabricated story; he's accounted for every detail. He can relax now. Rose was in the clear, and so was he.

And then, suddenly, Shane watches in slow motion as his mom's eyes drop just a fraction. To the space between his collarbones and his chest. To the unfortunate revelation of skin where Ilya's signature golden cross has unknowingly escaped from the confines of his button-up shirt and is now glinting proudly against his neck under the harsh light of the kitchen table.

Maybe they wouldn't have recognized it, had it not been for the article. Maybe he could have explained it away, if he hadn't just gone on a long-winded tangent about why Rose and Ilya know each other, and how Shane knew for a fact they were most definitely *not dating*.

But he has just done all those things, and he can see the way realization spreads across his mom's face, that she's starting to do the detective work to put it all together. And Shane... Shane just bolts from the table.

He can hear someone calling his name, but he doesn't respond, instead beelining for his car in the driveway. He can't handle this right now. Can't answer the questions he knows they'll ask. He hasn't even figured things out for himself, yet. How the hell was he possibly going to explain it to them?

His head is thundering venomously at him, lighting fires that spread through every cell in his body until he's vibrating with it. What a stupid fucking recipe for disaster, wearing Rozanov's necklace around town for all the world to see. To his fucking parents' house just because he couldn't bear the thought of taking it off for one single evening, for one single *second*.

His stomach is flipping back and forth as he speeds home, the thumb of his nail in his mouth as he chews all the surrounding skin off. He had prepared for the fact that he might possibly come out to them, but *not* this. Not them finding out he was so...friendly with Rozanov. Especially not the fact that he was wearing Roz's necklace.

He's going to be sick. He turns the final corner to his cottage, prepared to run inside and drown his sorrows in whatever bullshit piece of his routine he can stomach tonight, but before he does, he spots a familiar car in his driveway.

It's Rose's rental.

Shane furrows his eyebrows in confusion. She's not supposed to come up for a few days, but it's unmistakably her, her profile visible in the driver's seat. And, as he pulls in next to her, he comes face to face with none other than Ilya Rozanov on the passenger side.

Shane's hands freeze on the wheel, his face like a deer in headlights. Roz is staring back at him, something indecipherable in his Slavic gaze. But he's here...at Shane's cottage...in the middle of the night. Shane carefully shuts his car off. He's too in shock to even brace himself for what's coming as he steps out of the vehicle.

Rose cuts the lights while she and Ilya do the same, and as Shane gets a better look at them, they both look incredibly guilty.

“What’s going on?” Shane asks, immediately fearing for the worst. He’s wound so tight he thinks he might explode if he receives any more bad news.

“Hey,” Rose offers with a light smile, her keys clutched in her hand. “Sorry to show up without calling first. I just...thought you might want to hear it from me.”

“Hear what? What the fuck is going on?” Shane demands, and he’s reacting to more than one thing at once. His parents. Her showing up on his doorstep unannounced. The fact that Ilya is here with her.

Rose winces and steps closer, glancing once at Ilya before facing Shane again. “I wasn’t sure if you saw the article.”

Of course. The stupid fucking article that had somehow inadvertently alerted his parents to the fact that he was Ilya Rozanov’s fucking property. Not in so much detail, but still. Wearing his signature necklace was telling enough.

“Ilya was freaking out. He didn’t want you to think it was true. I mean, *obviously*, it’s not,” she lets out a tentative laugh, but it falls short at whatever insane expression Shane must be wearing on his face right now. “Anyway. I figured it would be easier to drive up and talk. Plus, they’re doing some reshoots over the next few days with Miles, so. I was free...”

Ilya is still standing silently next to her, his eyes cataloguing Shane like he knows something serious is brewing inside of him. Like he wants to reach out and touch, but he isn’t sure whether he’s allowed.

Shane can feel as it all starts to boil over.

“Fuck,” he clutches his head tightly, tugging at his hair. “Fuck, I can’t believe this is happening.”

He’s having a panic attack. He can feel it in the way breathing has suddenly become an impossible task, and he bends over to try and get himself together, to try and catch his breath enough to stand there and have this conversation with them like a normal human being. But he can’t. His vision has gone black. He can no longer feel his feet on the ground. His ears are buzzing so loud, he isn’t even sure where he is anymore.

Someone is talking to him. He can hear it vaguely, lost in the fuzz of the noise of his head. There are hands on him. Touching him. Maneuvering him. He can feel a steady heartbeat under his hand. It feels like Roz’s.

“Breathe with me, Shane,” a voice comes into earshot. “In...and out. Come on. In...and out. That’s it.”

He tries to follow along, sucking in shuddered breaths that take up all of his energy, all of his focus.

“There you are. You’re okay. Just keep breathing. In...and out.”

He's following the other person's inhales and exhales, guided in time by the hand he has on their chest. It's Ilya. It has to be.

Shane keeps breathing.

"You're alright. You're okay. I've got you."

Shane is crying and collapsing into his chest before he gets his vision back, strong arms wrapping around him, and it's then that he realizes they're on the ground. There's gravelly pebble digging into his butt, Roz hovering above him, holding him close.

He shudders out another sob and buries his leaking face into Roz's neck, grateful for the familiar scent of cologne. He inhales again, and exhales.

Time passes by unbeknownst to him. They could be there for minutes, hours, days; he wouldn't know the difference. But Roz is still wrapped around him, rubbing his back and whispering Russian into his ear like he knows it's easier for Shane to stomach right now. Maybe it was more for his benefit than Shane's.

Eventually, he's calm enough to open his eyes. His vision is blurred with tears, but he sees the exhaust of Rose's car in the air around them, the lights on suggesting she'd stepped away at some point to give them some privacy.

Like Rozanov has a sixth sense for all things Shane Hollander, he pulls back slightly to check on him, and through his tears, Shane sees a sea of worries in his eyes. An avalanche of questions, or maybe reassurances, that he holds tightly behind clamped lips.

Shane snuffles and removes an arm from around Roz's neck to wipe at his puffy eyes.

Ilya is squatting over him in what looks to be the most uncomfortable position, but he also looks like there's nowhere he'd rather be, like you couldn't drag him from the asphalt of Shane's cottage driveway with the force of a thousand SWAT teams. He carefully lowers himself down to the ground next to him as Shane tries to reorient to the world around him.

He swallows thickly, and his throat feels sore. His eyes feel swollen. His nose is drippy and red, and he's so mentally spent.

"This is not about the pictures of me and Rose," Ilya says decidedly, and Shane can't help the wet laugh that pours out of him. God, he was losing his fucking mind.

"Not exactly," he rasps, trying to clear some of the roughness out of his throat. Ilya is rubbing his back, still looking like he's fighting the urge to physically wrap Shane up and keep him safe in his pocket forever. But instead, he waits patiently for an explanation.

Shane lets out a big sigh.

"Do you want to go inside?" Ilya asks, ducking closer to him to try and get a read on his face.

Shane considers the question for a moment before nodding.

“Okay,” Ilya agrees, and then lets go of Shane to push himself to a standing position.

Shane watches as he motions something to Rose before ducking back down to help him to his feet. “C’mon. Here we go,” he says softly, using his big, strong muscles to hoist Shane up. Shane falls into his arms without thinking, letting Rozanov take half of his weight, and Ilya does so without protest.

“Hey there, big guy,” Rose smiles at him from inside the car. She’s got the windows rolled down now. “I’m going to head over to a hotel for the night. Maybe I can come back tomorrow once you’re feeling a little better?”

Shane frowns, ready to object, but Ilya just squeezes him once around the waist, and Shane practically melts into his side. “I—” he stutters, but he doesn’t have the energy right now. Doesn’t have any fight left in him to argue. “Yeah. Yeah, alright,” he says thickly, nodding. “Um. Sorry about—”

“Don’t even worry about it, babe. You’re completely fine,” Rose assures him, speaking to him in that slow voice so he knows she’s serious. “Ilya’s going to take good care of you, okay?” She smiles, her eyes drifting to him momentarily, something like a *thank you* hidden in her gaze.

“Thanks for driving me,” Ilya says back to her. “We’re alright.”

Shane shivers at the sure way he says it, like he knows for a fact that this is just a blip, that everything really will be fine. He hates how reassuring it is.

“I’ll see you guys soon. Call me if you need anything,” Rose says her final goodbyes, before pulling out of the driveway and heading off into the night.

Ilya turns to him, then, blue eyes logging each emotion on his face. “Ready?” He asks softly, running his fingers gently over Shane’s side, and Shane nods jerkily. “Keys,” Ilya requests.

Shane moves to get them out of his pocket, but Ilya notices first and retrieves them himself before pulling Shane a little more securely against his side. Shane watches him as he leads them to the front entrance, slots the correct key into the door on the first try, and then enters his space.

It’s pretty surreal, having Ilya here. It feels like something out of another reality, and he can’t believe this has all happened in only a matter of weeks. Rozanov wasn’t just Rozanov anymore. He was becoming a permanent fixture in Shane’s life.

Ilya steadies him with one hand as he ducks to help Shane out of his shoes, pausing for a minute to toe off his own. Then, he starts leading Shane up the stairs. “Where’s your bedroom?” He asks, noticing three different doors.

“Far right,” Shane whispers, still hanging off of him as Ilya continues towards his room.

Shane doesn’t even have it in him to think about his outside clothes touching the bed when Ilya lowers him into a sitting position.

“Okay?” He checks carefully, sitting down next to him to look him over.

Shane knows what he’s asking. He’s obviously not okay, not really. But physically, he’s fine. He’s not a threat to himself. He’s not at risk.

“Yeah,” he sighs, feeling embarrassed and a little bit of whiplash from everything that’s happened over the past few hours.

Ilya places his palms down flat on the bed behind him, almost like he isn’t sure where they stand, isn’t sure whether Shane wants to be touched. He turns his chin slightly towards him. “Do you want to talk about it?” Ilya asks.

He’s not forcing him, he’s not demanding to know. He’s just asking if Shane *wants* to talk about it. And Shane does, so he nods jerkily.

“Um,” he starts, voice unsteady as he tries to get his bearings again. “Fuck.” Everything starts coming back to him in pieces.

“It’s okay,” Ilya whispers, and then carefully reaches out for Shane’s hand. Shane just smiles sadly and accepts the gesture, fingers gripping his thankfully.

“Well,” he exhales heavily, dropping his gaze to the floor. “I was at dinner with my parents.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything, but Shane can tell he’s listening intently, can tell he’s preparing himself for whatever it is, ready to spring into action to be whatever Shane needs.

“Um, I guess they’ve been wondering about me and Rose. Since we hang out so much, you know. They were sort of under the impression that maybe we’re still dating? Or something?” Shane furrows his eyebrows. He wasn’t even really sure, himself. Hadn’t gotten a chance to ask too many questions. “Anyway,” he starts again, chewing at his lower lip. “They saw the pictures of you guys at breakfast.”

He feels Ilya’s hand tense slightly in his, but Shane powers through.

“And um,” he sighs. “I guess they thought you two might be seeing each other now. Which, like, *not* a good look on Rose’s part. Us being arch rivals and all,” he gestures between them. “So, I was trying to explain that...you know...it wasn’t true,” Shane struggles to recollect exactly how it had gone down. “Cause Rose was still planning on coming to the cottage, and I still wanted to introduce them. I didn’t want them to have a reason not to like her, especially one that isn’t even true.” He shakes his head.

Ilya squeezes his palm in encouragement, signaling for him to keep going.

“So, I told them about Svetlana. About how she’s your childhood friend, and how Rose and her are friends, so that’s why she knows you, through her. But, they still weren’t convinced. They thought I was just delusional or something. Like I didn’t want to believe it,” Shane scoffs half-heartedly. “So, I started telling them about your club—I mean, not literally *about* your club—but just that I’d gone with Rose, and the X-Squad cast, and that you have a house

in Montreal, and *that's* how I knew you guys ran in the same circles, that you were just friends, and Rose definitely *wasn't* seeing you."

He risks a glance at Ilya to find him watching with his eyebrows drawn together. Like he wasn't really sure where Shane was going with this.

"But, um," Shane rubs his hand over the back of his neck. "But my mom showed me this one article, and it was..." he pauses, feeling his stomach start to churn again. "It was all about your necklace."

He watches Ilya come to the same realization that his mom had, his eyes carefully falling to the gold chain that still rests on Shane's neck.

"And um," Shane laughs weakly. "Yeah. I didn't stick around for that conversation. I just bolted. I didn't know what to do. Didn't even know what I would say if they asked."

Ilya is rubbing his thumb over Shane's hand now, and Shane smiles lightly at the gesture.

"Then, I found you guys here. And it was just a lot. You know?" He swallows, turning to meet his eyes fully this time, finding something indecipherable in them.

Ilya just stares at him for a minute, processing, but then, all at once, he curses and tugs him forward into a hug. "Fuck, Shane. I'm so sorry."

"S'not your fault," Shane promises, falling into his chest easily. "I shouldn't have been wearing it," he admits to himself.

"Well, I am glad you are," Ilya says openly, squeezing him a little bit tighter. "Even though I wish this never happened. I am sorry my pictures with Rose outed you to your parents."

"Hey, no, they didn't," Shane vows, rubbing his nose against Ilya's neck. "It's my fault. Really. I should have been more careful. I just...I didn't think they'd even notice. I didn't know your fans had like...realized it was gone."

He feels Ilya smirk lightly against his forehead, and Shane pulls back to shove at his chest.

"Don't," he tells him, before Ilya can say anything smart.

"Mm, the Rozanavis are very perceptive."

Shane actually does pull back fully this time to regard him with an unimpressed look. "Please tell me you didn't actually name your fans after the blue Avatar people."

"Ah, no. That's the best part. They named themselves," he replies with a toothy grin, and Shane can't help but laugh.

"God, you are such an asshole."

"Mm, I think you like it," Ilya replies fondly, resting his chin on top of Shane's head as he pulls him into his side once more.

Shane hums and wraps his arms around Ilya's waist. He's quiet for a moment, and then, "Thanks for calming me down back there. I feel bad that Rose had to leave. She could have stayed in one of the guest rooms."

"She is a good friend," Ilya says softly, running his hand over Shane's side. "I am glad you have her."

"Yeah," Shane agrees easily. "She's the best." He pauses. "So, um. Why *were* you guys at breakfast together?"

Ilya puffs a sigh and pulls back a little, creating some space between them. "Uh, we ran into each other. Just randomly, at the restaurant. She asked if I wanted to sit with her, so I said yes," he shrugs lightly. "I guess I was hoping she could tell me how you were doing," Ilya admits quietly, risking a glance at him. "I'm sorry if that was...out of line."

Shane furrows his eyebrows. "No, of course not. I um," he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I shouldn't have left like that. I'm really sorry for leaving that way."

Ilya shakes his head, forehead creasing. "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm the one who was asking for too much. I shouldn't have put so much pressure on you. I've gone about this completely the wrong way."

Shane chews on his lower lip thoughtfully. "I guess I just thought..." he starts. "I thought that I could come back here and everything would go back to normal. That it would be just like last summer. Before anyone knew I was gay. Before I had to worry about people finding out or...or figuring out how to live with it."

"Shane," Ilya says warningly.

"No, that's not what I mean," he rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying, like. Whatever I've been doing, it's not *working* anymore. I can't keep shutting myself off to people, pretending this massive thing that's a part of me just...doesn't exist. Because it does."

Ilya licks over his lips attentively.

"So, I need to figure out how to start living with it. Like, recognizing this is who I am. Ignoring it isn't going to make it go away, and it's not going to make me feel any better. It *isn't* making me feel any better," he emphasizes. He pauses to take a deep breath and then continues. "What *is* making me feel better...is you," he admits softly, risking a glance at him.

He finds Ilya already staring back at him, something akin to confusion in his blue eyes.

It forces a little smile out of Shane.

"I do not feel like I am making you better," Roz admits, letting his gaze fall to the bed. "I feel like I am constantly missing the mark. Scaring you off. Maybe even traumatizing you."

Shane laughs in surprise. "Ilya," he shakes his head, but his lips drop to a frown once he realizes he's being serious. "Hey, what? Absolutely not," Shane dismisses, sliding closer to the other to squeeze his hand tightly. "Jesus. Is that really what you think?"

Ilya just shrugs miserably, and Shane watches on helplessly as his lower lip begins to wobble. All of a sudden, his face pinches up, and he turns his head in the other direction, a stray tear rolling down his cheek. "Sorry," Ilya sucks in a breath.

"Hey," Shane grimaces, turning to take Ilya's face in his hands, before making the executive decision to swing one leg over him and settle in his lap.

Ilya's face crumples as he gives himself permission to let go and fall forward into Shane's chest, wrapping two arms tightly around his back.

Shane just shushes him and holds him as he cries, letting Ilya rock him slightly until the sobs start to slow, until his breathing starts to even out again.

"I'm sorry I've been so back and forth," Shane says regretfully, pulling back to cup Ilya's cheeks and look at him head-on. His teary blue eyes are so beautiful. So heartbreaking, but so, *so* beautiful. "But I don't think I can keep lying to myself anymore. Pretending I don't like you. Cause I really do. I think I like you a little too much."

Ilya just swallows and presses their foreheads together. "I have been causing you so much pain. Even today, with your parents, it is my fault."

Shane smiles lightly, wiping at Ilya's tears with the pads of his thumbs. "You and Rose drove all the way here to apologize for being spotted at breakfast together because you thought the pictures might upset me."

Ilya snuffles and nods slightly.

"You are so fucking thoughtful, Ilya. So fucking intentional with our time together. You're the only thing that's been keeping me sane through all of this. And, yeah, maybe I was totally freaking out," Shane relents, because that much was true. "But it's only because I was so fucking scared of how you make me feel. Of how *good* I feel when I'm around you," he vows, letting his eyes graze over Ilya's features. "I've never felt like this around anyone. I didn't know it was possible. This whole time I thought I was...broken, I dunno."

Ilya swallows and shakes his head in Shane's grasp, giving his hips an intentional squeeze. "You're not broken. You are just very complicated. And that's okay. You do not need to be perfect for me to think that you are."

Shane's cheeks brighten minutely, and he ducks to press their noses together. "See what I mean? You're *so* good to me, even when I haven't done anything to deserve it."

"You deserve good things, Shane," Ilya pulls him closer, breathing in his scent. "You deserve everything. I wish your anxious brain would not try so hard to convince you otherwise."

Shane nods carefully, tangling his fingers in Ilya's curls. "I'm working on it. I've got a lot of stuff to figure out still, but I'm working on it."

"You don't have to do it on your own, you know? I'm right here. If you need someone, even just a friend, I want to be the one you come to when things are falling apart," Ilya whispers

against his lips.

“Only as a friend?” Shane double-checks, and he can feel the way Ilya’s breath stutters beneath him.

“Whatever you want. I’ll be anything you want,” Ilya nods against his forehead, still speaking in hushed tones. “Just don’t push me away again. Please.”

Shane doesn’t hesitate before pulling him into a warm kiss, sighing when he feels Ilya surge up into it, his hands moving across Shane’s back, commanding him closer. Shane hums contentedly and happily accepts the tongue that presses between his lips, tipping his head slightly to adjust the angle.

Ilya’s such a good kisser that it makes him feel weak in the knees, and he can’t help melting like putty in his grip. He moans softly as Ilya pulls back with a gasp, gripping him under the thighs before lifting him and turning to press Shane back against the bed. It’s the first time they’ve been physical outside of the club, outside of Ilya’s playroom, and a little shiver runs up Shane’s spine at the thought.

Ilya looks him over, brushing his fingers through Shane’s hair to pull it back from his eyes. “You are so beautiful,” he tells him seriously, peering down at him with an open expression.

Shane’s lips curl at the edges, and he reaches to pull Ilya into another gentle kiss. “You’re the best thing in my life right now,” he admits honestly, brown eyes blinking dazedly up at brilliant blue.

Ilya smiles and shakes his head, pressing a kiss to his nose, then his cheek, his jaw, until he’s attacking him with kisses, Shane giggling wildly as he tries to shove him off, but Ilya is relentless.

And Shane is ticklish beyond belief, which Ilya realizes in about two seconds flat and immediately weaponizes against him, until Shane is laughing so hard he can’t breathe and they’re nothing but a pile of limbs on the bed. It finally comes to a halt with Ilya pinning his wrists against the mattress, straddling on top of him. Shane attempts to free himself, but a thrill runs through him when he realizes he can’t, that Ilya has him locked securely in place.

“Is this any way to treat your host?” Shane teases, testing Ilya’s grip once more, but it’s rock solid.

“Mm, I think I know by now how the host likes to be treated,” Ilya smirks down at him, giving Shane’s wrists a quick squeeze.

Shane just grins and sinks into the next kiss. And the next one. And the next one. And the kisses keep coming until his eyelids grow heavy, until his limbs go languid, until his mind goes blank.

They fall asleep like that, clothes still on, Ilya half on top of him like a weighted blanket, and Shane’s fingers curled loosely in his hair. He sleeps better than he has in months.

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Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the lack of smut, but I had to split the chapter in half because it was getting ridiculously long! Pt 2 of this chapter will be up very soon, I promise. Thanks for your patience, and as always, can't wait to hear your thoughts :)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder that this is a work of fiction! It is not meant to inform anyone of how to participate safely in BDSM scenes/arrangements, nor is it meant to provide an accurate representation of how typical BDSM scenes/arrangements would play out. I am not an expert. This is purely for entertainment purposes. Enjoy!

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

When Shane wakes the next morning, he has ten missed calls on his phone.

6 from his mom, 3 from his dad, and 1 from Rose.

Ilya is snoring softly into his shoulder, and Shane smiles, taking in the sight for a moment, before he lets the events of last night flood his mind. He cards his fingers through Ilya's golden halo, scratching lightly at his scalp until the other starts to shift in awareness.

Ilya cutely scrunches his face up at the light streaming in through the window, stretching his long arms out and nearly knocking Shane in the face as he wakes.

"Hey," he laughs, ducking to avoid the line of fire. "Watch it, big guy."

Ilya opens one blue eye as he seems to take in his surroundings for the first time, pushing up onto his elbows before blinking into focus. "We are in your cottage," he states, as if suddenly aware of the fact.

"We are," Shane agrees, glancing around the bedroom, trying to picture what it must look like through Ilya's eyes. "Do you like it?"

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Ilya isn't sure how to tell Shane he's spent the last several years trying to picture what his room might look like. Shane's room is big, open windows, lots of natural light. His bedding is blue, which Ilya can see clearly now that the sun's out and he doesn't have a giant lap full of panic attack.

His furniture is minimal, but nice. He has a few pictures scattered around the room, but mostly just of himself with his family. All in all, it's very boring. Very Shane. Ilya's body thrums with excitement.

He was in Shane's *oasis*, his favorite place in the world, and he had let Ilya stay over, sleep in his bed, take up space here.

He realizes after a beat that he's been quiet for too long, that Shane's expression has fallen slightly, like Ilya would ever say anything other than, "I love it." He leans over to press a kiss to Shane's clothed abdomen. "It's *very* boring. This is how I know it's perfect for you."

"You're such an asshole," Shane shakes his head, but he's grinning, and it comes easily. Like, for right now, at least, his mind is quiet.

Ilya just purses his lips, silently begging for a kiss until Shane obliges and leans down to give him one. "Good morning," Ilya greets breathlessly, drinking in the sight of a sleepy Shane Hollander in what he considered to be the most peaceful place on Earth.

"Morning," Shane repeats, looking at him with a newfound determination in his eyes.

Ilya's heart speeds against his chest.

"Do you want breakfast?"

He's scared to ask what breakfast looks like in the Hollander household, but he is hungry, so he nods in agreement. He's pleased and a little surprised when Shane takes his hand to lead him to the bathroom. He rummages around in one of his cabinets and then hands Ilya a brand-new toothbrush. They brush their teeth together, Shane bumping against his hip in greeting, so Ilya pushes him against the shower and kisses him until they're both breathless and minty.

He's so much more open in the cottage, and Ilya can tell he feels free here. Unobserved, maybe. Shane liked when things were quiet. He liked being cut off from the outside world. And Ilya liked seeing him in his element.

He watches in fascination as Shane Hollander moves shirtless around his kitchen, mixing up a protein shake and pulling ingredients out of the fridge. He feels like a fan getting an inside scoop on their favorite celebrity's private life, like he's a fly looking in on the one thing he's *always* wanted to witness: Shane Hollander just...being.

He pulls out two pans and starts on an egg white omelet in one, frying them greasy in the other. There's fruit being cut and bowls being arranged, and Ilya just tries to take in every detail. This was *The Machine*, the same person who Ilya had lost to many times out on the ice. Shane could be absolutely lethal when he locked in, when he put all of that anxious focus into executing a task, especially one that he had practiced a thousand times. Repetition. Execution. Perfection.

In ten minutes, Ilya has a full plate of food in front of him that's filled with breakfast items he actually has an interest in eating. Very much unlike Shane's plate of bird food. He's gone to the trouble to adapt to Ilya's preferences. Ilya isn't sure why he's so surprised. Under it all, Shane aimed to please. It's why he was so incessant in his mission to do everything flawlessly.

"This looks great, baby," Ilya says low in his chest, and he's captivated by the way Shane suddenly looks flustered all at once. He clears his throat and offers Shane an innocent smile. He hadn't meant to slip into his Dom voice, but seeing Shane like this, watching him be a

good little housewife. It was doing things to him. It was making him want to do things to Shane.

“Fuck, um,” Shane’s face drops abruptly, and for a second, Ilya’s blood runs cold. “I should probably call my parents.”

Jesus Christ. Shane was going to give him a heart attack. Ilya feels his shoulders start to relax, his breathing start to resume.

“Fuck. I have no idea what I’m going to say,” Shane groans, leaning forward to bury his face in his arms against the counter, and Ilya immediately springs into action.

“Just tell them the necklace is a coincidence.” He reaches out to rub Shane’s back soothingly. He smiles at the short chuckle he gets from Shane. Probably an eye roll, too, but humor always was the best medicine. “Tell them you stole it as part of Stanley Cup-winning prank.”

“Right, cause that’s believable. Me...a necklace thief,” Shane deadpans.

“You are a thief, alright,” Ilya wraps his arms around him. “You have stolen my heart.”

“Ilya.” Shane shoves at him, and Ilya actually does see him roll his eyes this time.

“Fine, fine,” he holds his hands up in defense. “I suppose you could just tell them that you are my little котенок and I am your owner and that is the reason why you wear my collar on your neck.” Ilya shrugs. Easy.

He’s expecting another eye roll out of Shane, maybe a laugh, but what he isn’t expecting is for Shane to look so...*affected*. His lips pull up into a smirk.

“Shut up,” Shane mutters, but his cheeks are so pink that Ilya can’t resist poking one before he actually gets serious.

“How about you just start with telling them you are gay, yes?” Ilya offers, letting his hand glide over one of Shane’s shoulders with the intent of transferring some courage into his skin. “Maybe you could take the necklace off so it doesn’t steal the focus—”

“What?” Shane’s hand flies to protect the chain around his neck. “No. They’ve already seen it, anyway. Taking it off isn’t going to change a thing.”

Ilya is *so*, so fond of him. He’s bubbling over with it, so much so that he wants to lean in and take a bite out of Shane’s perfectly freckled face.

“Christ. I probably have to go there in person. I completely ran out on them last night,” Shane curses, dropping his face to his fists this time.

Ilya feels for him, but he has no idea how to help. “I could...I could come with you. If you want?” He isn’t really sure that it’s a good idea or that Shane will want to take him up on it, but in a way, he helped make this mess. The least he could do was offer to help clean it up.

Shane looks up at him seriously this time. “Would you?” He asks, and Ilya nods without question.

“Of course.” He had gone from spending the night in Shane’s cottage to meeting the parents all in one day. Fuck. That was a lot of pressure. Ilya didn’t know much about Shane’s parents, but he did know that he was close with his family. Which was very much unlike Ilya’s experience. He had not been around any family in a long time, at least not outside of his chosen family. His club.

He hoped he would not disappoint the Hollanders. If this really was going to happen, Ilya couldn’t screw up the first meeting with his future in-laws.

“Okay,” Shane nods after a moment. “Yeah, um. I guess...I guess let’s get dressed and head over.”

“Right now?” Ilya raises his eyebrows.

Apparently, yes, right now, because they are dressed and in the car in ten minutes. Ilya is kind of freaking out in the passenger seat, but he stays calm on the surface for Shane’s benefit. He holds his hand on the gear shift and presses warm kisses down his arm, pleased when it triggers a small smile out of the other.

The drive is much too short, however, and Ilya’s heart feels like it’s going to beat out of his chest as he and Shane step up to the door. Shane is shaking a little bit, so Ilya just bites down his own nerves and squeezes his hand tightly, pulling Shane’s knuckles to his lips before ultimately letting them drop.

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Shane had called ahead of time, so his parents at least knew their son was coming, but he made the executive choice not to mention *that Ilya* would be joining them. He figured they would find that out soon enough, didn’t want to leave them with too much to overthink before the two of them even arrived.

Even though he’s not sure how they’re going to take it, he’s glad Ilya is with him. He’s comforted by his presence, by the way Ilya seems to be able to read him like his favorite book, knowing when to jump in to keep Shane grounded. He makes Shane feel looked after, cared for, *reassured*.

Shane takes a deep breath and opens the door, calling out to his parents as he does so.

“Mom? Dad? It’s me. Shane,” he says in greeting, and he can hear commotion in the kitchen. He turns to look at Ilya once before leading him further into the house. “Um. Mom?”

“In here, sweetie,” his mom’s voice rings out, and Shane steels himself for what’s coming. The big reveal of inviting Hockey Enemy Number 1, Russian Love Machine, *Ilya Rozanov*, into their home.

Shane steps into the kitchen first, and he's met with a too-bright smile. She's nervous, a little unsure of herself, if the jerky movements are anything to go off of.

"Hi, darling. Do you want some tea? Your father's making some in the kitchen."

"Yeah, um. That would be great. And, if he could make one extra cup, actually. I brought someone with me..." He trails off, but he doesn't have to say more because his mother's eyes have already caught onto Rozanov hovering like a scolded schoolboy behind him.

Her eyes are wide, mouth open like she can't believe what she's seeing. Like maybe Shane wearing Roz's necklace had all just been one big fever dream. Like she thought they were all going to do the mature thing and pretend it never happened, pretend it didn't exist.

It exists, though. It's still around Shane's neck, and he hasn't tried to hide it today, leaving the chain freely exposed over his shirt. Her eyes find it once more, like she can't help it, like maybe she had planned on avoiding eye contact, but with Rozanov in the mix, in her living room, she has no choice but to prove to herself that she hasn't hallucinated it.

His dad steps into the room then, two mugs in hand, and his expression goes blank in surprise at the sight of his son standing next to his biggest hockey rival.

"Hi," Ilya says in greeting. Short and sweet. His accent sounds thick in the otherwise quiet air.

His parents are still frozen in place.

"Uh. Sorry to spring this on you. Could we all just...sit down?" Shane suggests, wincing slightly at how it comes out.

He turns to touch Ilya's arm, gesturing for him to take a seat at the kitchen table, and Shane does the same by grabbing the chair next to him.

By the time they're sitting down, his parents haven't moved at all, but then, his mom clears her throat, and the two of them startle out of their stupor, claiming the two seats across from them on the other side of the table.

Then, the four of them sit there in silence, and Shane realizes he should probably be the one to speak. He's the one who called them all here, who got them into this mess in the first place. He feels Ilya squeeze his knee in support under the table, and it gives him the strength he needs to start talking.

"I'm sorry for running off last night. That was...yeah," he shakes his head. Not his proudest moment. "You shouldn't have found out that way."

"Found out what, exactly?" His mom interrupts, and her eyes are darting wildly between Shane and Roz, like she has no idea what to make of this. Like her son wearing Ilya Rozanov's signature cross necklace is something she could never have accounted for.

"Um. That I'm gay," Shane starts, because, as per Ilya's suggestion, it seemed like the easiest part to address. "Which I was going to tell you soon. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, it's

just. It's been a lot for me," he admits, and Ilya's hand is a comfortable, grounding weight on his skin.

Their eyes are wide when he looks back at them, so he presses onward, wanting to rip the band-aid off all at once.

"And, yeah. This is Ilya," he nods to the man next to him. "Rozanov. But, you already know that."

His mom's eyes drop to the necklace once more, then back at Rozanov's empty neck.

"He's visiting. And we're um..." Shane cuts himself off, unsure of how to continue. He risks a glance at Ilya and finds the other's blue eyes sparkling back at him. "We're sort of...seeing each other? I guess." Well, for lack of a better word, at least.

Ilya's lips twitch into a smile, and he nods just slightly. Like he agrees with Shane's statement, even if they haven't really defined what they are. Well. They had, actually, but Shane really didn't want to go into detail about how Ilya had adopted him as a little black and white kitten to run around his exclusive sex club. Some things were just better left unsaid.

His parents still haven't said anything, still looking shell-shocked in the seats across from them.

Shane is going to freak out if they don't say something soon, a nervous energy coming to life inside of him as the bomb resets, re-engages, prepares to explode.

Before that can happen, however, Ilya is reaching for one of the untouched mugs of tea and pressing it into Shane's open palm, Ilya's hand sliding across his lower back lightly in encouragement.

"Here, котенок. Drink," he says softly, and Shane feels heat rise all the way to the tops of his ears. *Ilya had called him kitten in front of his parents.* Sure, they probably didn't know what it meant, didn't speak Russian as far as Shane was aware, but it still makes him feel warm all over. Like he's laying himself bare, being his true self in front of them for possibly the first time in his life.

Shane dutifully follows the instruction and takes a small sip, glancing over at Ilya thankfully, and he relaxes even more when Ilya gives him another little rub in approval. "Good," Ilya comments softly. "You're okay."

When Shane looks back up, his mom's eyes have softened a bit, even though she still doesn't seem to know what she's looking at.

Luckily, his dad takes one for the team and speaks up. "Um, so. When did this...happen?"

Shane looks at Ilya again for courage before answering. "A few weeks ago. Uh, right around the time I started all the press shoots."

They look surprised by that answer, and Shane realizes all of a sudden that this is quite a lot. Coming out to them for the first time, introducing them to someone he isn't even in a real

relationship with, wearing Ilya's signature necklace around his throat like a branding for all the world to see.

"It's really new," he feels the need to add. "But, uh. He's been really good to me. He's...he's important," Shane says seriously, and he can feel the way Ilya's fingers curl into his skin, lighting a fire in his veins. "Mom?" Shane prompts, desperate for her to say something, to react in some way other than anger or disgust.

"Sorry, it's just," his mom shakes her head, eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "You hate him."

Shane swallows and shakes his head. "No. I mean...I get that," he validates, nodding a little bit. "But um, no. It's just...a misunderstanding. I don't actually hate him."

"I made a terrible mistake the summer before our rookie season," Ilya speaks up, then, drawing the attention of the table. "One that I regret more than you will ever know," he directs to Shane this time, but Shane just smiles and shakes his head, squeezing Ilya's hand in reparation. "But we have talked about it, we have made amends, and I have never harbored any hatred towards your son. In fact, it is quite the opposite." Ilya watches him intentionally, bringing their linked fingers up to his mouth to press a kiss to Shane's knuckles.

Shane can't help the way his lips curl, his heart fluttering against his chest. "It was a misunderstanding," he reminds Ilya softly.

His attention is pulled by the scrape of a mug as his mom takes a healthy couple of sips of her tea before standing from the table suddenly. "Well, I could use a drink," she says by way of excusing herself, before re-entering with a big bottle of vodka and a couple extra glasses.

She starts passing them around and pours herself a vigorous dose, placing the bottle in the middle of the table for anyone else who wants to help themselves.

Shane's eyes dart to Ilya's intentionally, a question there, and Ilya gives him an imperceptible nod. So, Shane watches as he reaches for two of the empty glasses and pours them each a proper serving, much like the one he'd receive if he were attending an event at Hush. If Ilya were hosting him for the evening. Shane holds his gaze as he takes a small sip, and Ilya squeezes his knee as if to say *good boy*.

His parents are still watching them, tracking their moments, seeing how they react to each other. His dad looks pensive, thoughtful. His mom still looks like she's recovering from shock.

"Ilya, I have to say I'm a little surprised. You have a reputation for being such a ladies' man," David chimes in, reaching to pour himself his own glass of vodka once everyone at the table has helped themselves.

"Mm," Ilya hums, straightening up a little in his seat, though he doesn't remove his hand from Shane's thigh. "It's not untrue," he addresses plainly, but Shane doesn't miss the way his parents freeze.

“Uh. Ilya likes both,” Shane clarifies. It doesn’t exactly have the desired effect he was hoping for.

Ilya swallows another swig of vodka and nods. “It’s true, I’ve been with many women. But there is nothing compared to what I feel for your son. It has only been a few weeks and, already, I cannot picture my life without him. I have been searching for this feeling for what seems like a very long time now.”

Shane swallows at the raw declaration. He’s heard Roz say a lot of things to him in the privacy of his personal playroom, but never out in the open like this, never with such an important audience present. He recognizes that this meeting is incredibly important for them, and it appears that Roz does too.

“I...uh, me too,” Shane feels the need to add, clearing his throat. “I’ve never felt like this before. About anyone.”

He feels sparks under his skin when their eyes meet, fireworks going off in rounds in his stomach. He doesn’t know how he went so long without this, now that he’s had it, now that he knows what it’s like to want something this much.

“Does your team know?” His mom speaks up to ask.

“No,” Shane shakes his head quickly. “No one knows. Well, except Rose,” he adds, addressing the leftover elephant in the room. “She’s actually staying at a hotel nearby. She and Ilya drove in last night. It’s a...long story, but um,” Shane winces. “I’d really like for you to meet her. She’s kind of been, you know, my rock. Through all of this.” He glances at Ilya to find him smiling encouragingly back at him.

There’s a lull in conversation, an emptiness in the air that Shane isn’t sure how to fill, isn’t sure what questions have gone unanswered. Before anything else can happen, however, his mom snuffles and rises to her feet, rushing out of the kitchen in a hurry. Shane hears the side door close resolutely behind her.

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Ilya is sitting across from David Hollander, the man staring him down.

Shane has just gone out after his mother. They needed to talk, that much was obvious, but in their wake is a huge, awkward gap that Ilya supposes he is expected to fill.

“Is good vodka,” he says the first thing that comes to mind. And it is. It goes down clean and smooth, the same way his vodka does at the club.

“Thanks. I uh, try to buy the Russian stuff,” Shane’s dad nods, and he seems alright. Much better than Ilya’s dad would have been if he were still alive to have this conversation. “So, um. A couple of weeks, huh?”

Ilya swallows another sip of vodka and nods cautiously. He knows how it sounds. A couple of weeks did not seem very significant, very permanent, but Ilya did not want them to get the

wrong idea.

“I care very much for your son,” Ilya says quietly, like he isn’t sure how David will react.

“You’ll have to forgive me for saying so,” David leans forward with a sigh. “But, a couple of weeks is not a very long time. I mean, you barely know each other.”

Ilya nods again, thinking through his next words before choosing them carefully. “There has been something between Shane and me for nearly ten years now. Maybe just a feeling, a crush, yes,” he explains. “But it is there. It has been there, maybe since we first met. When we were just seventeen. And it is still there now, only much stronger, and much more real.”

David is just watching him, listening.

“I cannot speak for Shane, but I have wanted this for as long as I have known him. I tried to make my feelings clear many years ago, and I thought I had, but a misunderstanding between us cost me that chance,” he says regretfully. “It has been a lot for Shane to...accept this part of himself. The part of him that...likes men. I think it is something he’s still working at. Still struggling with.”

David’s face takes the hit, just slightly, like Ilya has inadvertently taken a stab at his parenting skills, which was really not his intention.

“I think he is coming to terms with it now. Realizing it does not have to mean the end of the world. The end of his career.” Ilya frowns, holding the glass of vodka more securely to his chest. “But he is very, very scared. He is very, very hard on himself. And I cannot watch him suffer through it alone anymore. Whether I am just a friend to him, or something more, I care too much to let this destroy him like I know it could.”

He watches David’s throat bob as he swallows.

“I know this must be very strange for you and your wife, and I am not asking for you to like me,” he smiles sadly, though, in an ideal world, that would hopefully be the case. “I am just asking you to understand that I want what’s best for him. I am asking you to allow me to be in your son’s life for right now. To help him in any way I can until he orders me away. Until he decides I am no longer good for him, until someone better comes along.”

It pains him to say, but he’s speaking the truth. As much as Ilya would like to believe it, he knows this isn’t a fairytale. He knows he and Shane are not likely to run off into the sunset together. Shane still had a lot to explore with his sexuality, and Ilya would never be the one to stand in his way. But for the time being, whatever they were right now, Ilya was going to take care of Shane to the best of his ability. He was determined to leave him in better working condition than he found him. And if he succeeded, maybe Shane would flourish into the adorable gay kitten he was always meant to be, even if that meant Ilya had to set him free.

Shane and his mom come back in before David can say anything else, and Ilya is happy to see that they are in good spirits. They’re both a little teary-eyed, but they’re hanging off of each other in a way that suggests they’ve just had a wonderful heart-to-heart. Yuna is smiling

with something that looks like pride and acceptance, and David instantly brightens with the good energy. Ilya doesn't miss the way he offers him a small smile in return.

"Okay, okay. Enough with the sad stuff," she declares, clapping her hands together, and Shane glides a hand over Ilya's shoulder as he sits back down next to him. Things are okay, with the Hollanders at least. Ilya has no doubt that there is much more strife to come, but for right now, they're in a good place. Shane is very lucky to have such a great support system, and Ilya's heart soars at the notion that, no matter what, he would be in good hands.

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They're all a little exhausted from the conversation, so Shane comes up with the brilliant idea to cut things short and reconvene later at the cottage for an early dinner. He still wants to host Rose this evening, feeling bad about sending her off to a hotel when she was originally supposed to stay with him. She had offered, of course, and Shane had been grateful for the privacy, but more than anything, he wanted his parents to meet her. He wanted her to see how good he and Ilya were together.

They drive by a quick little market, and Shane runs in really quick to get the ingredients for pasta. It wasn't his first choice for dinner, but he didn't have the mental energy to put together anything complicated. Especially not for five people—well, six, if you counted the fact that Ilya was like a human garbage disposal.

They're speeding through a lot of milestones for two people who haven't even officially fucked yet, but Shane doesn't care. He knows how he feels about Ilya. He knows that this is something serious. So, instead of running away from it, he recalibrates and speeds straight ahead. Ilya's confidence in them certainly doesn't hurt.

He pulls him into a salacious kiss the second they pull back into his driveway, fueled by the way Ilya arches up into it like a man possessed. A man starved for anything and everything that Shane is willing and able to provide. And that makes him feel powerful. Confident. Secure in his own skin. It's a feeling he hasn't felt in a while, maybe ever. At least, not when it came to his sexuality.

"Thank you," Shane pulls back to tell him, their noses and foreheads still pressed together.

"What are you thanking me for, котенок?" Ilya cups his jaw, but he's smiling. "I have not done anything."

Shane puffs a wet laugh, emotions still loose from his big cry with his mom earlier. "It was something to me," he clarifies, gripping the back of his neck to keep him close. "I know that was asking a lot from you. To meet my parents. To help me come out to them."

"Mm, but you did not ask, I offered," Ilya smiles, leaning back slightly to nudge Shane's chin up, brown eyes meeting blue. "And I am happy to do it. I am lucky you feel comfortable enough to bring me around the most important people in your life. It is an honor and a privilege, and I do not take this lightly."

Shane can't help grinning. He feels unstoppable, on top of the world, like he could take on anything and come out the winner.

"It went well, yes?" Ilya double-checks, like he wants to make sure Shane felt the same. "Your mom is okay?"

Shane nods emphatically, claiming Ilya's lips in another gentle kiss. "I think, you know, obviously they're a bit confused. But, mostly they just want me to be happy."

"And you are happy when you are with me?" Ilya questions gently.

Shane huffs and practically pulls Ilya over the console to kiss him until their lips start to bruise. Until the car horn starts to go off because Ilya is half in his lap, holding himself up in a way that makes his arm muscles flex deliciously. Shane feels starved after going a week without him, but for the first time in a while, the noise in his head has cleared. He's not overwhelmed. In fact, he's invigorated. Excited. And there's a question at the edge of his lips. One he's been thinking about for the past few hours.

"I um...I want to ask you something," Shane musters up the confidence to say, once they've finally made it inside and put away all the groceries.

"Anything," Ilya tells him, pressing Shane against the kitchen counter, his hands bracketing him in on either side.

"It's something I want to try. For our next scene. If you'd be comfortable," he gets out a little nervously, biting at his lower lip as he watches Ilya's reaction drift across his face.

He looks intrigued, at the very least, and Shane realizes then that he hasn't outright asked for anything before. Not implicitly. He supposes it's a testament to how he's feeling after the events of this morning.

"It's just. You never gave me your list, so..." Shane trails, because the last thing he wants to do is suggest something that Ilya considers a hard no.

Ilya just runs a reassuring hand over his hip. "Mm, I have told you my hard limits, but I am open to most things as long as they are done safely. I will need to prepare an updated list for you at some point. It's been a while since I have had a steady arrangement."

"Svetlana said that word to me," Shane notes, resting his hands on Ilya's shoulders. "She asked how our arrangement is going."

"Yes, we have not discussed this in-depth yet. So far, it has mostly been scene-to-scene. But, I think we are at the point in which we should talk further," Ilya agrees, pressing a kiss to Shane's cheek. "The arrangement refers to the nature of our relationship. Our dynamic. Our boundaries with each other. Any rules that stretch further than just when we are in a scene."

Shane listens intently, his brows furrowed in thought as he takes in the information.

"Sometimes this is outlined in a contract. To make the agreement more formal. Make sure we are 100% on the same page. This can be important for more serious arrangements. Which...I

would like to be,” he adds, watching Shane’s reaction.

“What does it mean? To be in a more serious arrangement,” Shane questions, letting his fingers slip through the soft curls at the nape of Ilya’s neck.

“Mm, well, for starters, we would need to talk about exclusivity. If this is a closed arrangement, then you are not to see other Doms, and I am not to see other subs.”

Shane freezes in Ilya’s grasp, his eyes going wide for a fraction of a second, but Ilya just smiles and rubs his hip.

“Relax,” he soothes. “I have not seen anyone since I have been seeing you. I promise you, КОТЕНОК.”

And Shane instantly caves, letting out a soft breath. “Okay. Good,” he nods, feeling comforted by that fact. “I haven’t either,” he adds, just in case Ilya was worried, but Ilya only laughs.

“Yes, I figured this. Since sometimes you can be scared of own shadow.”

Shane shoves him playfully. “Fuck you.” But Ilya’s smile never falters. “What about, um, seeing other people though?” Shane feels the need to ask. “Like. Dating. Or whatever.”

Ilya’s smile drops into a straight line, his eyes dipping somewhere out of Shane’s view. “That is something we can discuss as well. If you would like to see other people, then of course, you are free to do so.”

Shane swallows and tips Ilya’s head up a bit, redirecting his gaze until their eyes meet. “Hey. That’s not what I want. I only want to see you.” He watches in satisfaction as Ilya’s eyes become warm again, humming happily when the other presses forward to kiss him.

“I want the same,” Ilya confirms, bumping their foreheads together, and Shane feels giddy with the confirmation. “There is more than just that to discuss. We will need to have a much longer conversation about dynamics. Things like what I am in control of and when. Sometimes Doms are only in control during agreed-upon scenes, sometimes that control extends outside of scenes as well. It just depends on how we define our roles and limits.”

Shane nods lightly, trying to take in the new horde of information. BDSM relationships were complicated, much more than he realized. He used to think it was just about being rough, being kinky, but as he learned more, he came to understand it was much more about control. And control could come in many different forms.

“So…” Shane redirects, bringing the topic back around to his initial inquiry. “What if I was wanting to, like,” he pauses, a little nervous to bring it up. “Dom you,” he gets out. “Temporarily. I mean. Just for one scene. Just to see how I like it.”

Ilya blinks at him for a moment and then sucks in a deep breath. “You were serious about that,” he states, and Shane nods, even though it isn’t a question. Ilya pulls back for a minute,

his eyes cataloguing Shane's face as if looking for an answer to something he's trying to figure out. He must not find it, however, because a beat later he says, "May I ask why?"

Shane licks his lips, letting his hands fall to Ilya's forearms, feeling the hard muscle threatening to burst through his t-shirt. "I dunno. I guess, um. I want to see what you get out of it, kind of? I want to feel powerful. Like I'm in control of something. I just...today felt really good, you know? Like I was reclaiming something. Like I don't have to be so afraid of things if I just meet them head-on."

Ilya is listening closely to him.

"I'm sick of feeling so helpless all the time, like I don't have control over my life. And, I guess, I just want to give myself a chance to explore how it feels. To deliberately take control in a place where I feel safe. With someone that I trust. When I know there's not going to be any bad consequences." He searches Ilya's eyes for a moment, hoping to see a reaction one way or another, but he comes up blank. "Is that...is that a hard limit for you?"

Ilya presses his lips together thoughtfully, like he's taking everything Shane has said into careful consideration. "I am not opposed to this," he breaks finally, and Shane realizes he's been holding his breath. "I am a little concerned. About how you will react to switching roles. But..." he trails. "I will not deny you of it if it's something you want to explore. I need you to know that I have not subbed for anyone, and it is not my intention to be anyone's sub."

Shane's face falls slightly. "We don't ha—"

"I am willing to do this with you," Ilya cuts him off, giving his hips another squeeze. "Because I like the idea of you exploring this newfound confidence. But we will need to talk through the scene in depth, and there will be lots of safety precautions put in place. No surprises, okay? I know you mentioned you like to be surprised in scenes, but that will not be the case here. We will plan something that lasts for a short, pre-determined amount of time, and we will talk through every single thing you wish to explore. We will check in *very* often with each other."

Shane nods jerkily, flexing his fingers excitedly on Ilya's neck. "Is it...Do you not trust me to take control? Does it make you nervous? The thought of giving it up?"

Ilya watches him carefully, a slight hesitation in his voice. "Honestly, Shane, it is not me that I am worried about. I trust you to take good care of me, to check in with me, yes? I do not feel like I am at risk of going far down, if at all. But there is a reason we are each inclined towards different ends of this dynamic, hm? You are looking to quiet anxious thoughts, not take on more decisions, whereas I benefit from feeling needed, from channeling my focus into caring for someone else."

Shane watches him, listening attentively.

"I do not think it is a bad thing that you want to explore this. And that is why I am open to it," he adds, looking him over. "I understand where you are coming from, and I think it makes sense given all the changes happening in your life right now. I just need you to

understand how careful and intentional we need to be. And I also want to make sure you are seeing this as a one-time thing.”

Shane sucks his lower lip between his teeth. “I guess so, yeah. I mean, I don’t want to completely switch forever. But, I also don’t know if I will like it or not...”

“We can certainly cross that bridge when we get there. But I am not looking to be a sub in this dynamic,” Ilya clarifies seriously. “I will agree to it for one scene, to let you explore this side of yourself with someone you trust and feel safe around, but if you wish to explore more, you will need to find someone else. That is a strong boundary for me. Are we clear on that?”

Shane swallows thickly and nods. “I—yeah. Just the one time,” he agrees. “Just to see what it’s like. It’s just...curious.”

“Okay,” Ilya offers a small smile, gently tickling his fingers into Shane’s side to pull a laugh from him. “There’s my smiley boy. Now, why don’t you tell me what you had in mind for the scene?”

“Um. Well, I wasn’t sure you would say yes,” Shane admits, running his hands over Ilya’s abdomen just to feel the allure of well-defined muscle.

“Mm, try me,” Ilya encourages, bracketing him in against the counter for the chance to tower over him.

Shane tips his head as if to say *is that a challenge?* “I wanted to restrain you. Tie your hands to the bed,” he relays slowly, moving his hands to wrap around Ilya’s wrists on either side of the counter. “And then I wanted to kiss you a bit,” he leans closer, until their eyes are inches from each other’s. “And maybe suck your dick.” His cheeks are flushing despite himself, but Ilya still seems affected, his pupils blown wide.

“Do you have other fantasies, or do you only get ones that involve Domming me?” Ilya wonders aloud. “Because you have never come to me with anything like this before.”

“I told you,” Shane bats his eyes at him. “Today made me realize I want to be more in control of my life. Cause it feels good. I only thought of this on the car ride back.”

Ilya’s lips pull into a smirk. “Fuck, Hollander. You are kind of hot when you take control. Maybe I will enjoy this more than I thought.” He leans over him a little more.

Shane laughs and gives Ilya’s wrists another squeeze. “Does that mean you want to? Do the scene?” He double-checks, tipping his head in question.

Ilya hums and watches him for a second, but his eyes look warm, his smile’s still there. “Yes, I think I would like to do the scene. Mostly, because I think it will be cute to try and watch you Dom.”

“Hey,” Shane shoves at him, his mouth dropping open in an affronted gasp. “Watch the way you talk to your Dom. I might have to gag you next.”

Ilya can't take how fucking cute he is, so he shuts him up by lifting him up on the counter and pulling him into a silencing kiss, glad when it has the desired effect.

Shane wanting to Dom was troublesome, to say the least, but his reasoning behind it felt like a good thing. A step in the right direction. The fact that he felt confident enough to approach Ilya with an idea for a scene was *so* good. Ilya was proud of him, and it finally felt like they were making real progress. He liked a confident Shane. A Shane that seemed comfortable in his own skin, comfortable enough to ask for what he wanted. Ilya thought it was fucking sexy.

The scene sounded hot, too, if he was honest. Ilya hadn't ever had the desire to sub for anyone, but Shane made him want to do ungodly things. He'd run to the ends of the Earth, bathe in fire if he had to—anything to make Shane happy.

Still, Ilya had concerns. Lots of concerns. The first being that Shane was generally very anxious. Ilya wasn't sure he would do well with the pressure of being in control, the responsibility of having to make decisions, and knowing what to do next.

He also knew that Shane typically felt guilty after a scene. Shameful, sometimes. That was going to hit him a whole lot harder with the gravity of being in charge of another person as well. Double the guilt. Ilya knew it well.

They would have to be very careful, but Ilya was prepared to do it as safely as possible. They could check it off the list, so Shane could feel like he'd tried it, and then they would never do it again.

"C'mon," Ilya tells him once he's successfully kissed Shane breathless. "We should get started on dinner before Rose gets here. I'm sure she will want to get caught up on everything she missed."

Shane hums in agreement, looking a little dazed from the kiss, so Ilya just smirks and kisses him on the nose before helping him off the counter and nudging him towards the stove. His housewife fantasy haunts him as Shane puts on a sexy blue apron. So much so that Ilya barely even minds when Shane forces him into one as well.

They cook just like that, moving seamlessly around each other. Shane chops herbs and vegetables while Ilya starts on the meat sauce. When the pasta is done, Ilya starts plating up main dishes while Shane mixes the salad. Once the food is tucked safely into the fridge, Shane sets the table, and Ilya fills water glasses. They're perfectly in sync, like they've spent the last ten years skating around each other. Ilya supposes they have.

They head upstairs to change into something a little nicer than t-shirts. Shane dresses in a button-up shirt and then finds one for Ilya since Ilya hadn't really had the forethought to bring clothes. He hadn't even really expected Shane to want him to stay. Mostly, he just wanted to see him, to make sure he was okay. He missed him. Even being around him the past day or so, he still missed him. Ilya probably wouldn't be satisfied until Shane could physically live inside his chest. Ilya would keep him safe from everything.

“This is tight on you,” Shane comments, tugging at the fabric around Ilya’s biceps, but his freckles are pink.

“Mm, because I am so big and strong,” Ilya agrees, flexing when Shane’s fingers graze over his skin.

“You forgot annoying—”

Ilya cuts him off with a kiss. “You are so delicious, we could have had you for dinner. But I am not known for my ability to share.”

“Really?” Shane smiles hazily, raising his eyebrows. “You wouldn’t share me?” He tips his head.

Ilya’s own eyebrows raise high on his head. “Share you?” He asks, wondering if Shane is asking what he thinks he’s asking.

Before he can get an answer, however, the doorbell rings. And Shane...Shane fucking winks before heading off to answer it.

So, great. Now, Ilya’s hard in his jeans.

When he finally catches up to Shane downstairs, Rose is already in the kitchen, admiring how beautiful the cottage is. The cottage *is* beautiful, but it’s nothing compared to his Shane. The evening sun is hitting him through the windows, casting shadows across his constellation freckles. He’s smiling while talking to Rose, looks completely at ease, completely in control here. Maybe there really was something to the cottage. Something that made Shane feel more comfortable, being in the place he considered his true home.

“He can’t even hear me. Hello? Earth to Ilya.”

Ilya shakes out of his stupor to find Rose looking at him expectantly, her blue eyes wide, lips pulled into an open-mouthed smile.

“Oh, there you are. Glad I could finally get your attention,” she laughs, and Ilya just shrugs, stepping further into the kitchen. “I was asking how your first night at the cottage was, but judging by how you can’t even look me in the eye, I think I already know the answer.”

Ilya pulls his gaze away from Shane to smile at her. “Hi, Rose,” he greets pointedly, before redirecting his attention to Shane once more.

“Hopeless,” Rose shakes her head, but Shane is laughing and looking at him like he invented sunshine, so.

“How was your night, Rose? Was the hotel okay?” Shane tips his head in question.

Ilya wants to bite him to steal his attention back. As much as he wanted to see Rose and make a better impression with Shane’s parents, he also couldn’t wait until all of them left, until Shane was his for the rest of the night.

He turns to find Rose watching him knowingly. “It was good. Something tells me I’m going to be there a few more nights.”

“Rose, you’re more than welcome to stay in one of the guest rooms,” Shane offers, furrowing his eyebrows.

“Shane, I think Ilya might start pissing in a circle around you to mark his territory if I come anywhere near this house tonight,” Rose laughs.

Ilya ducks his head, cause he hadn’t actually thought he was being that intense. “Sorry,” he mutters, his lips curling slightly. “You really are okay to stay here if you want. I am the one intruding, anyway.”

“No one is intruding on anything,” Shane assures them both. “Everyone is welcome to stay.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m fine at the hotel,” Rose promises, reaching out to touch Shane’s arm. “You guys deserve some alone time. Now, is anyone going to tell me what I’m walking into tonight?”

Shane huffs a laugh and leans against the countertop. “I told them I’m gay and introduced them to Ilya.”

“Okay, wow,” Rose glances between them. “Introduced them to Ilya as what?”

“Um. Well, I just said we’re seeing each other,” Shane replies a little tentatively.

“Are you guys? Seeing each other?” Rose challenges, and Ilya shoots her a glare.

“I mean. Obviously, we are,” Shane frowns, his eyebrows furrowing. “We’re...seeing each other. I mean, we’re seeing each other right now.”

“We are involved,” Ilya chimes in, maybe a little unhelpfully.

“All I’m saying is you guys might want to figure out what your story is before someone else notices that necklace,” Rose tells them, giving Shane’s neck a meaningful look.

Ilya watches the bob of Shane’s throat as he swallows, but truthfully, he’s been thinking the same thing. As much as he loved Shane wearing his collar, he, too, wondered how long it would be before someone else figured it out. Especially considering Rose was photographed nearly everywhere she went, and she went places with Shane quite often. There would already be more eyes on her because of their pictures from breakfast.

It isn’t long before Shane’s parents show up, and they seem to be in pretty decent spirits considering the fact that they just found out their son is doing gay stuff with Ilya Rozanov.

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“Mom, Dad, this is Rose,” Shane introduces them and watches in fascination as Rose immediately charms them. He briefly wonders if this is a terrible idea, having Rose and Ilya

here for his parents to dissect side by side. Either way, it was too late to turn back now. His mom was already asking Rose who was handling her brand deals.

He's so caught up in their conversation that he hardly notices Ilya is off somewhere talking to his dad. Shane raises his eyebrows, intrigued, and joins them in the kitchen.

"Ah, yes. This is the good stuff. Much smoother than American vodka. You did good with this one," Ilya is smiling, and Shane's surprised to see his Dad looks pleased.

"Once I started buying it, I couldn't go back. It's so much smoother."

"Mm, is higher grade spirit. Makes it smoother. I will carry nothing less than the best in my club. We get shipments directly from Russia."

Shane steps in before they can get into any further discussion about the club. "I didn't realize you were such a vodka extraordinaire, Dad."

David just shrugs. "They were doing a feature about it in The New Yorker."

Shane doesn't miss the playful look Ilya shoots him as he goes to retrieve some glasses from the cabinet. "You're annoying," Shane whispers to him when his dad heads back to join his mom at the table.

"You love it," Ilya shoots back, poking his hip.

"You're a few glasses short," Shane notes in amusement.

"You and I will not be drinking tonight," Ilya informs him, causing Shane to tip his head in confusion. "We have a scene later, yes? We will stick to water."

"I—tonight?" Shane double-checks. He hadn't been sure if that was officially happening yet. At least not so soon.

"This is what you wanted," Ilya reminds him, frowning slightly.

"No, no. I do," Shane nods in assurance, stepping further into his space. "I really want to. Tonight is good."

"Okay then," Ilya smiles and leans in to peck him on the cheek before bringing the vodka and the glasses over to the table.

Dinner goes much better than earlier. Rose does a great job at charming his parents, and she even goes out of her way to include Ilya in the conversation, singing his praises whenever she can. Shane wants to kiss her.

"Seriously. Ilya owns the coolest club. It's practically the hottest spot in Montreal right now. My cast mates go there almost every night," Rose brags.

"So, Ilya, how did you get into owning a club?" His dad asks. "And in Montreal, of all places."

Ilya swallows around a mouthful of pasta before answering. “My good friend Svetlana is original owner. At some point, I was spending so much time in Montreal that I decided to invest. It has been a fun side project for me in the off-season.”

“Why were you spending so much time in Montreal?” His mom questions next. “I assumed you would spend your summers back in Russia with your family.”

“Mom,” Shane says softly, shaking his head, but Ilya answers anyway.

“My family are all dead. Sveta is the closest thing to family for me, and she is in Montreal. I think I will try to get my Canadian citizenship soon,” Ilya offers, smiling when Shane reaches for his hand.

“Oh, wow, I’m sorry to hear that,” Yuna frowns, sharing a look with her husband. “Well, I’m glad to hear you have a support system in Montreal. Though, wouldn’t it make more sense to try for your American citizenship since you’re in Boston for most of the year?”

“My contract with Boston is up, so I am a free agent now,” Ilya explains, swirling another forkful of spaghetti. “I am thinking of signing with Ottawa.”

“Ottawa?” His mom’s eyes go wide, and Shane huffs.

“Mom, seriously?”

“What? I’m sorry, but leaving Boston? They drafted him,” his mom explains passionately, and when Shane looks over, Ilya looks more than entertained.

“It will be nice to be closer to Montreal,” Ilya responds. “Plus, then Shane and I will be only two hours apart all year-round.”

Shane freezes slightly at the mention of his name, turning to catch Ilya’s eyes. Was he actually a factor in Ilya’s decision to play for Ottawa? No, that couldn’t be. Ilya was talking about Ottawa way before they’d gotten involved. Surely, that was just an added bonus now. But Shane hadn’t even thought about what next season might bring for him. Not in terms of Ilya, at least.

“You would leave Boston for Shane?” His mom asks with thinly veiled disbelief.

Ilya blinks, like he’s just been asked an odd question. “Well, and the club and Svetlana, of course. But, yes,” he nods seriously, and Shane’s heart hammers against his chest when blue eyes meet his, the intensity of Ilya’s gaze taking him by surprise.

Later, after everyone has left and they’ve put all the dishes away, Shane corners Ilya against the sink.

“Well, hello there,” Ilya grins like he’s glad that Shane has decided to invade his space.

“Did you mean what you said about Ottawa?”

“What? About playing for them? I have told you this already.” Ilya is looking at him oddly, like Shane’s having a repeat of his old head injury.

“No, um,” Shane pauses. “Like about me. Being two hours away.”

Ilya raises an eyebrow. “Can you not do math, Hollander? Yes, Montreal and Ottawa are two hours away.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane shakes his head. “*No*. I meant, is that part of the reason you’re considering it?”

“Shane,” Ilya rolls his eyes. “You live in Montreal. Of course, I have considered that.”

“But this is a big decision. I don’t think you should be basing it on me,” Shane presses, but he hates the way Ilya’s expression drops.

“It is not all about you, Hollander. I have a life in Montreal, too—”

“No, I know,” Shane sighs. He isn’t even sure what point he’s trying to make anymore.

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Ilya knows what he’s saying. Shane wasn’t ready to commit to anything right now. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He seemed pretty ready to commit to a Dom/sub agreement with Ilya, at least the last time he checked. Maybe he was hinging a lot on that little detail, or maybe he was just hopeful, but something told him he and Shane were in this for the long run. The move to Ottawa was very important, and while Ilya hadn’t told Shane officially yet, he was already in talks to look over contracts.

“Shane,” Ilya says, while stepping over to him. “I am not looking to sign with Ottawa because of you. If that’s what you are worried about. Regardless of whatever this is, I want to be closer to Montreal, and I want to be a Canadian citizen. Ottawa lets me do this, yes? If I get to play with a curious kitten every once in a while, even better,” he shrugs.

That, luckily, pulls a laugh from his very anxious counterpart.

“Now, are you ready to go upstairs to play pretend Dom?”

“Hey,” Shane shoves at his chest, that spark resurfacing to his eyes this time, which sends a thrill through Ilya’s veins.

He was a little bit looking forward to it, trying to watch Shane take control. Ilya was going to get a lot of his frustrated kitten face tonight; he could already feel it. But first, some level setting. A lot of level setting, actually.

They’re all over each other before they even get to the stairs, kissing so hard they nearly trip up them, refusing to separate. It’s then that Ilya remembers they haven’t seen each other in over a week, which maybe wasn’t that long, but Ilya was *always* foaming at the mouth for Shane. Any second that wasn’t spent doing something to make him feel good was a second wasted. Which meant that Ilya had to make up for a *lot* of wasted time.

“Ah, not yet,” Ilya stops him when Shane starts reaching for his clothes. He gets an adorable pout in return. “We still need to discuss a lot of things.”

Shane’s face straightens a bit, and he nods, like he’s ready to be serious.

Ilya’s lips quirk. Could this be Shane Hollander trying to enter into his Dom mode? Was it even possible? As far as Ilya was concerned, Shane was a textbook submissive. He loved rules and being told what to do. He enjoyed having people decide things for him, enjoyed not having to think or even speak. It was pretty much the opposite of what being a Dom was.

So, as Ilya saw it, he would be backseat Domming tonight. He wasn’t very confident in his own ability to relinquish control to Shane, but he could certainly pretend while staying hyper-alert as Shane lived out this fantasy. Ilya trusted him, he really did, but he didn’t have a lot of faith that this would go smoothly. So, they needed to be prepared in case it didn’t.

“Okay, you said you wanted to tie my wrists,” Ilya reminds him. They’re sitting on the bed now, separated by a few inches.

“Yes,” Shane agrees, and his eyes are dark.

“We will use something easy. A single access point. Normally, I would suggest Velcro cuffs, anything that can be opened in one motion, but since I am sure you do not have those, we will use a necktie,” Ilya informs, watching Shane seriously. “We will need scissors by the bed. In case you are feeling unsure, you can cut me loose, yes? Do you have these things?”

Shane nods quickly and springs from the bed to start hunting down the requested items. Even now, he’s eager to follow directions. Ilya wondered what the plan was to get them both into the right headspace. If Shane really just wanted to *think* he was in control, rather than actually be in control.

He returns a few moments later, a silky tie in hand and a pair of kitchen scissors.

“Good,” Ilya says softly, taking both from him to inspect the items. The tie was good; it would work in a pinch. As long as Shane remembered the scissors, they would be fine. He could cut him out quickly if needed. “We are going to set a time limit for this scene, okay? How do you feel about twenty minutes?”

Shane swallows and nods, eyes caught on the necktie in Ilya’s hands like he’s starting to picture the scene. That was good, too.

“We will check in with each other the whole time. Use our colors. We will use our safeword if necessary. *Either* of us,” he clarifies, so Shane is aware that he can color out of this, too. “Safewords are for both parties, okay? If yellow, we will pause immediately and discuss. If red, you will untie my wrists or cut me out. The same thing for using the safeword. The scissors will be right here on your nightstand,” Ilya reminds him, placing the scissors next to the bed. “Repeat what I just said.”

“If yellow, we will pause immediately and discuss. If red, I’ll untie you or cut you out. Same for using the safeword,” Shane nods attentively. “The scissors will be on the nightstand.”

“Good boy,” Ilya lets slip out. “We will set a timer for twenty minutes and another for ten minutes. After ten minutes, we will pause and check in. Just because this is your first time Domming and my first time subbing, we want to be extra cautious. If we are both feeling good and safe after ten minutes, we will continue for the next ten minutes until the scene is over. Does this make sense?”

“Yes,” Shane says firmly, and he looks like he’s trying to psyche himself up for it.

Ilya’s eyes flicker down to his collar, and Shane tracks the movement, a question in his eyes. “Maybe...maybe it would be best to remove the collar. Just so there is no confusion of power dynamics.” He doesn’t miss the way Shane frowns, but before he can protest, he’s nodding in agreement and reaching to unclasp the necklace. Ilya watches as he places it on the nightstand next to the scissors.

“Okay. Tell me again what you had in mind for the scene. Walk me through every detail, okay? As your sub, I want to know everything you’re going to do so I can feel comfortable and safe.”

“Okay, um,” Shane nods, running his fingers through his hair. “I want to tie your wrists to the bed.”

“And we are going to make sure it’s not too tight, yes? A loose knot. It is more important that we are able to get out easily than it is to make sure I am properly restrained, do you understand?”

“Yes,” Shane agrees, sliding a hand over Ilya’s knee.

Ilya isn’t sure if he’s trying to warm up or if he’s looking for comfort right now, so he just places a hand on top of Shane’s and squeezes. The other looks appreciative, like Ilya has offered him a reassurance. “Okay, keep going. What else is going to happen?”

“I will...take your clothes off. And kiss you.”

“Kiss me where?” Ilya prompts.

“Your lips,” Shane fills in shyly. “And...and your body.”

“Where on my body?”

“Your neck, and your chest, um. Your abs and your hips. And then I want to maybe...rub my face in your boxers and get you hard. I want to take my time.”

“Good,” Ilya nods in appreciation. “Keep going. What else?”

“Then, I want to get you out of your boxers. Kiss your thighs and...and suck your dick.”

Ilya feels a little flicker of arousal at the admission. “Yes. You would like that, wouldn’t you, котенок?”

Shane flushes and nods his response. "I want to suck you off until you come all over my face."

"Mm, I would like that very much as well," Ilya reveals to him, and Shane's hand moves further up his thigh. "I want you to take control tonight. To take care of me," he tells him intentionally, watching as Shane's mouth goes dry. "Do you have any rules you would like me to follow? Any way I can be a good sub for you?"

"Um," Shane hesitates, a little wrinkle forming between his brows like he isn't sure what a good rule would be.

"It's okay if you do not. This scene is pretty straightforward," Ilya soothes, cupping his cheek. "I want to give this to you, okay? I trust you, and I feel safe with you. We both know what is going to happen. We both feel good about the plan, yes? Remind me once more what you are going to do if either of us need to use our colors."

Shane holds his gaze. "Yes. If yellow, we are going to pause and discuss it. If red, I'm going to untie you immediately."

"Or use the scissors. Yes? Remind me where the scissors will be."

"On the bedside table," Shane tells him dutifully.

"And the two alarms?"

"One at ten minutes, we pause and check in. The other at twenty minutes when the scene will end. If we are not feeling good at ten minutes, we stop."

"Good," Ilya nods, running his thumb over Shane's chin. "We will do aftercare once we are done. We will cuddle, maybe get a little snack from the kitchen. We will have a calm conversation about how we both are feeling. Aftercare is for both of us, okay?"

"Yes," Shane offers him a little smile. He seemed good. Confident. At ease. Ilya was feeling a lot better than he did ten minutes ago.

"We can stop at any time. If you are ever feeling unsure, use your color, okay? I am still right here with you. We are still in this together. You do not have to worry," Ilya reassures him. "Let's just take it slow and check in throughout. I'm going to follow your lead, okay? I'm letting you take control."

Shane nods and presses forward to kiss him, which Ilya happily accepts. He's making an active effort to take control already, pressing Ilya back against the bed. *Shane's bed*, he reminds himself. At the cottage. The cottage that Ilya had already seen from the documentary, but it hadn't featured Shane's bedroom. Ilya had lain awake at night trying to picture it, wondering what the Golden Boy of hockey kept in his personal bedroom at his private oasis. Apparently, neck ties that he was going to use to restrain Ilya tonight. There was a first time for everything.

Ilya swallows and tries to push his own nerves aside. He did trust Shane, and more than anything, he trusted that Shane knew how to follow rules. How to stick to a plan. They confirmed three times over what would happen if either of them started to feel overwhelmed. Ilya was already starting to feel a little overwhelmed, but he wanted to give this a real shot. Maybe he mostly wanted Shane to realize that there was a reason their dynamic worked the way it did.

He tries to let his mind go a little quiet. Less attentive, to allow Shane to take control. It would be interesting to experience things from the sub's perspective. Maybe, in some ways, it would even make him a better Dom.

Shane starts to strip him out of his shirt, and Ilya obliges, smiling when Shane looks him over carefully and asks, "Is this okay?"

His heart warms a little. "Yes, thank you," he murmurs, and accepts the next kiss Shane gives him. Once again, he can't believe he gets to have this. After so many years of wanting it, Shane is kissing him, touching him all over, convincing him to *sub* for crying out loud. All things Ilya never imagined would happen. Not in his wildest dreams.

He lets Shane kiss him a little more, sucking his tongue into his mouth with a soft moan. Ilya sinks his fingers into Shane's hair and pulls him closer, gasping when Shane starts kissing down his neck, sucking at the sensitive skin there.

"Does that feel good?" Shane checks, and Ilya nods, clutching onto him a little more tightly.

"Yeah," he rasps. "Feels really good, baby. You're doing so well." He clamps his mouth shut around the praise and tries to remember his role here. Shane is in control right now.

Shane just smiles and gives him another smacking kiss. "I'm going to start tying you up now, is that okay?"

Ilya licks his lips nervously and nods, running his hands over Shane's shoulders from where the other is hovering over him.

"Good boy," Shane says to him, and Ilya's stomach twists oddly at the praise. He's mimicking him, he realizes. Trying to copy what Ilya would say to him to help reassure him in a scene. Which was...good. That was good. He was doing all the right things right now.

Ilya's nerves buzz through his veins as he watches Shane lean over to set up two timers on his phone. The timers, right. Also, good. And a signal that the scene was officially starting. Just twenty minutes. Ilya could give up control for twenty minutes.

"Timers are on," Shane tells him softly, and he's combing his fingers through Ilya's hair. Petting him. God. Ilya loved him so much, but he did not want to be a cat tonight, and most of Shane's experience was from the perspective of one.

"I trust you," he says again, not sure if it's for Shane's benefit or his own, but it makes Shane smile. He looks at ease, and that, in turn, makes Ilya feel a little at ease.

“I’m going to take care of you,” Shane tells him seriously, and Ilya nods jerkily in acceptance. “I’m going to tie your wrists now. Can you give me your color?”

“Green,” Ilya says, without giving it much thought. *Yellow* flashes in his mind, but he pushes it aside. He was okay. Shane was doing everything right. If things took a turn, they could stop whenever they wanted.

“Good,” Shane replies, giving him another grounding kiss. “I’m not going to tie it too tightly. Can you lift your arms for me? I’m going to loop the tie through the bed and tie your wrists together.”

Ilya takes a deep breath and nods. Shane was doing a great job at talking him through this. So much so that Ilya wondered if he had done any research prior. He follows the instruction and lifts his arms, letting go of a little tension when Shane rises and starts kissing his wrists. He shows Ilya the soft necktie, and Ilya offers him a nervous smile, giving him another nod.

Shane is very thorough about how he adjusts the tie. He only ties one knot, leaving Ilya a good amount of room to move his wrists. He probably wouldn’t be able to get out without being untied or Shane using the scissors, but that was okay. They had a good plan in place.

“Does that feel alright?” Shane asks, letting Ilya twist his wrists a little to test the feel.

“Yes,” Ilya whispers, nodding. He’s fully restrained now. Can’t touch Shane. Can’t reach for Shane if things go wrong. He has to trust that Shane is okay, that Shane will follow the plan.

Shane presses a kiss to his cheek. “You’re doing well,” Shane vows, and Ilya soaks it up, tries to believe it. He doesn’t feel like he’s doing well. He feels like he’s waiting for disaster to strike. But *Shane* is doing well. He fights the urge to tell him so.

Shane starts pressing kisses down his neck and chest, just like they discussed. Ilya closes his eyes and focuses on his touch. Shane sucks on his nipple, and Ilya gasps, pulling at his restraints to try and touch him, but he can’t. All he can do is squirm helplessly as Shane’s lips travel down his body. Kisses down his abdomen. A little kitten lick across his belly button. Ilya can feel himself getting hard in his pants. Shane slides his hand over Ilya’s erection, and he moans.

“Is that okay?” Shane asks, and Ilya nods.

That was okay. That was more than okay.

“Are you green?” Shane double-checks, and Ilya nods once again.

“I’m green,” he breathes out.

“Are you sure?”

Ilya’s eyes pop open. Because all of a sudden, Shane is looking very hesitant. Very worried. It’s then that Ilya realizes his own breathing has gone a little heavy, a little ragged.

Shane's hands are frozen on him, and Ilya can see doubt start to creep in. His eyes are wide, like he's suddenly realized he's responsible for whatever happens next.

"Hey, I'm okay," Ilya promises, trying to slow his own breathing. "You're doing everything just as we planned it."

"You'd tell me if you weren't okay, right?" There's something like doubt in his eyes. Fear. Like he doesn't trust Ilya to tell him if things are taking a turn.

Yellow flashes through Ilya's mind again. Lack of trust was not a good indicator, but it feels like he's trying to look for a way out. An excuse to call the whole thing off out of his own fear of submitting. He at least wanted to make it to the ten-minute point.

"Ilya," Shane says again.

"I'm *okay*," he promises. "I'm good. I trust you."

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But he's not answering the question, Shane's mind whispers to him. Would Ilya tell him if he wasn't okay? Shane wanted to trust him, but Ilya looked...scared. It was scaring Shane.

"We can stop if you want," he offers.

"Shane, I'm okay. You're doing a great job."

Shane feels panic rise in his chest. He doesn't know whether he's overthinking this, but Ilya was responsible. He would use the colors if he needed to, their safeword if he needed to. So, Shane swallows and keeps going.

He starts working Ilya out of his jeans, peppering his v-line with kisses, his thighs, and he works him out of the denim. Ilya is hard, at least, very clearly turned on if the massive nine-inch dick in front of him is anything to go off of.

Shane's eyes go dark as he leans in to inhale him there. His fucking scent, god. Shane moans softly and presses his face to the fabric of Ilya's boxers, rubbing his nose along his clothed length.

Right now, Ilya should be telling him *good boy*, should be petting his hair, and praising him for being the best kitten in the world. Shane *wanted* to be the best kitten in the world for his owner. He glances up, unsurely, looking for guidance, but Ilya looks out of control. Expectant. Like he's waiting to see what Shane will do next.

Shane feels like he has an elephant sitting on his throat. He glances to the side of the bed where the timer is still ticking away and spots his collar discarded on the nightstand. Something ugly works its way through his tummy. He's not Ilya's right now. In this room, in this scene, Shane is not a kitten soaking up his owner's scent. He's responsible for Ilya. *He's* in charge.

Shane hiccups a swift breath and feels Ilya tense beneath him. Ilya's eyes are alert. He doesn't look relaxed at all, not with the way he's holding himself, like he's ready to spring into action at any moment. *This dynamic is scary*, Shane realizes.

"Yellow," Shane says, feeling the air of the room go cold around him. "Fuck. Yellow," he says again, and Ilya's speaking to him, but the words are decidedly not calming. Ilya sounds scared. He's trying to speak steadily, but Shane can hear the nervousness in his voice. Can tell that he's failing at this.

He keeps his eyes trained to the collar. Ilya had asked him to take it off. It's the first time he hasn't worn it since Ilya gave it to him at the club for the *Unleashed* event. His neck feels bare. Cold and empty.

"Shane, talk to me. We can stop at any time, okay? I'm not upset with you. You're doing a great job, but if you want to stop, that's okay, too."

"Fuck," Shane says again, pressing his face into his hands. Ilya is still talking, but it doesn't matter. He's in control here. He's the one who needs to decide what to do. How to proceed.

The first alarm sounds out loudly in the room, startling Shane, taking him by surprise. He can't think over the blaring sound, can't hear over his own heartbeat loud in his ears.

"Red," he surprises himself by saying, and he waits. Waits for Ilya to collect him in his arms, to tell him everything's going to be okay, that he really has done a good job. He waits, and waits, but it doesn't come. His panic is a roaring sea inside of him, and he's up to his eyeballs with it. He can't access his airways.

"Shane, the scissors. Shane. Baby. I need you to cut me out. Shane."

He's so fucking overwhelmed. The alarm is still going off, and he wishes it would stop so he can catch his breath. He wishes Ilya would just turn it off already, but when he risks a glance at him, Ilya is just thrashing around, struggling to get out of his restraints.

Oh yeah. Shane had tied him up. Guilt washes over him at the fact that this had been his idea. That he's the one who ruined their evening tonight.

"Baby. Please. Listen to the sound of my voice. I need you to listen to me," Ilya is fighting to get his attention. "Котёнок," he says sharply, and Shane's eyes go wide. "Listen very carefully to me. Everything is okay. You are safe. But I need you to get the scissors from the nightstand and cut me out of this so I can take care of you. Okay?"

Shane sucks in a ragged breath and nods, his face crumpling. He's so upset with himself. He presses his face into his hands and tries to get a grip.

"Fuck," he hears Ilya curse, and the sound of him pulling roughly at where his hands are tied together. "Fuck. Shane, please. Please get the scissors and cut me out. Please. *Shane.*"

Shane lets out a panicked sob as he quickly springs into action to retrieve the scissors from his bedside table. His hands are shaking while he tries to position his fingers properly,

stumbling towards Ilya to reach for where the necktie circles his wrists.

“Good boy. You’re doing so good for me, baby. Just cut me out, and everything’s going to be okay. You’re completely okay. You’re doing so, so well.”

Shane just cries as he tries to cut through the fabric, but the necktie is thick and unforgiving. He’s sawing at the fabric, but his hands are shaking so much, he’s nervous he’s going to cut Ilya’s skin. “Fuck, Ilya, I can’t,” he shudders, collapsing back onto his knees with a snuffle. He uses his free hand to rub at his eyes.

“Shane, listen to me. You *can*,” Ilya tells him seriously. His eyes are wide, his pupils blown. He looks like he’s about to jump out of his skin.

“There’s... I can get other scissors. There’s better ones in the kitchen,” Shane hiccups again, big eyes darting in that direction.

“*Shane*,” Ilya says sharply. “Focus. Use the scissors in your hand. You’re almost there. Everything’s *okay*.”

Shane glances down unsurely at the scissors he’s holding and then makes the executive decision to run for the others. He would be able to get Ilya out a lot faster and with much less risk of hurting him. “I’ll be right back,” he promises, ignoring Ilya’s shouts of protest.

“Shane! Shane, do not fucking leave me in here,” Ilya is screaming, and the words feel like bullets on his skin.

Shane is crying still, but he’s trying to keep himself together, trying to complete the task of getting Ilya free and safe as soon as possible. The alarm is still going off loudly in the other room, but it drowns out the sound of Ilya’s yelling enough to give Shane the focus he needs in order to grab the kitchen scissors.

He breathes a sigh of relief when he spots them and grabs them before quickly darting back to the bedroom.

Ilya’s wrists are red from tugging at the restraint, and Shane feels sick to his stomach as he rushes over and snips the neck tie in one clean cut. Relief pours over him almost instantly, but Ilya is around him in a millisecond, holding him with trembling hands.

“Don’t you ever fucking do that to me again. Jesus fucking Christ. Never again, Shane, do you hear me?” He’s raising his voice, but he mostly just sounds scared, so Shane nods and sobs into his chest.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t ever scare me like that again. Fuck. I was so worried. Fuck,” Ilya curses repeatedly, and he’s rocking Shane heavily in his arms. “Never again. We are never doing anything like that ever *ever* again. Do you hear me?”

Shane feels white-hot guilt burning through his core, his body shaking like he’s just been shot with a stun gun. Ilya’s hands are a welcome presence, however, combing over each of

Shane's limbs like he's trying to assure himself that Shane is still in one piece.

"Fuck. Fuck. Are you okay, baby? I'm sorry for shouting. I'm not angry with you. I was just so, so scared," Ilya tells him, and Shane can hear his heart pounding against his chest. "Can you let me know that you're okay? Are you hurt at all?"

Shane wants to laugh. Was *he* hurt? Ilya was the one whose wrists were practically raw from the way he'd tugged on the neck tie while trying to escape.

"I did...such a bad job. I didn't take care of you," Shane weeps heavily, climbing into Ilya's lap when prompted.

"Oh, baby. You're okay. I'm okay, yes?"

Shane hardly notices Ilya shifting them closer to the nightstand until the room goes silent around them, the alarm finally turning off.

"Your wrists," Shane's lower lip trembles as Ilya holds him close.

"My wrists are just fine, angel. I promise you. I was more worried about you. About making sure you were okay. You didn't hurt me at all, Shane, I promise," Ilya speaks lowly to him.

Shane takes comfort in the way his voice vibrates from deep within his chest.

"Shane, you're *okay*. We made a plan, and we stuck with it. We used our colors. We had safety measures in place, and they worked. That is what scenes are all about. Look at me," he pulls back to cup Shane's jaw until their eyes meet. "Life is not perfect. People are not perfect. Things do not always go exactly as we expect them to. Which is why we plan for things to go wrong. We take precautions, just in case they do."

Shane just snuffles and shakes his head.

"Hey, listen to me. Listen to me," he waits until he has Shane's attention once more. "You realized you were uncomfortable. You used your color. We had a tiny mishap with the scissors, but you reacted quickly, and you cut me free. This is *not* a failure. I am not hurt in any way. See?"

Ilya pulls one of his wrists into view, and Shane swallows, reaching to trace his fingers over it. His skin is still a little red, a little irritated, but there was no real damage. It didn't look like the restraints would leave any bruises, and there certainly wasn't any broken skin.

"You wanted to try Domming, and we tried it. Okay? You really were doing a great job before," Ilya assures him softly. "You checked in on me. Asked me my color. Stuck to the plan. I am not interested in having a Dom, but if I were on the market for one, I would still pick you," he offers Shane a small smile, and Shane can't help but look at him with a roll of his eyes.

It lasts for all of one second before Ilya is tickling him, causing Shane to break into a fit of laughter. "Stop, stop," Shane begs, and Ilya does, pressing a line of kisses across his face,

starting with one cheek and ending at the other. “I—you were nervous. I could tell,” Shane admits lightly. “You should have used your color.”

Ilya swallows and waits for a second before nodding. “You’re right, I should have. I suppose I am not the best sub either. I just...I did not want to cut the scene short out of fear. I thought I could push through, at least until the first timer, but I should have colored sooner. And, for that, I am sorry. I really wanted to let you have this experience. I wanted to be good for you as well.”

“You are good,” Shane says softly, cupping Ilya’s cheek this time. “I shouldn’t have pressured you into doing something you didn’t want to do.”

Ilya sniffs and shakes his head. “I think it is...important to step out of your comfort zone sometimes. I *wanted* to do this with you. Maybe part of me was hoping it could make me a better Dom, help me see where I have been falling short lately by putting myself in your shoes.”

“Hey,” Shane frowns, pressing their foreheads together. “You’re a *great* Dom.”

Ilya just scoffs, ducking his gaze, but Shane redirects him, confusion in his eyes.

“I do not feel like a great Dom lately. I feel like every scene you are left with some kind of subdrop. Sometimes, I do not even realize before you are running off, and by then, it is too late.”

Shane swallows thickly.

“I have never been in a dynamic with someone who I’ve had such strong feelings for. I thought this would make things easier, but it has turned out to be much more complicated.” Ilya reaches up to drag a hand over his tired face. “I feel like I am one wrong move away from hurting you in a way that I can’t take back. I feel careless and selfish and...evil.”

“I don’t feel that way,” Shane tells him firmly. “People are not perfect, like you said. It’s your job to take care of me, but I am a fully consenting adult in this. I am placing control in your hands, and I am agreeing to the possibility of consequences. I am actively asking to participate. This doesn’t all fall to you, Ilya.”

“It is my responsibility to make sure you are safe,” Ilya grits out.

“I came out to my parents today,” Shane reminds him. “I did that because you made me feel safe to do so. Secure enough in my own skin.”

“You got outted because of my collar,” Ilya adds quietly.

“I fucking love wearing your collar, and I’m not going to stop,” Shane replies fiercely. “That’s what triggered me in this scene,” he admits. “I saw your collar sitting on the table, and all I could think about was how it should be on my neck, and I should be at your feet and you should be calling me kitten while petting my hair and scratching my ears, okay? I fucking love being your *котенок*.”

Ilya swallows thickly. “I want that, too. Of course, I want that, too.”

“Then, we will *figure it out*. We will figure out how to conduct scenes safely. We will figure out an aftercare routine that makes us both feel good. We will figure out a good balance between talking through scenes and letting you surprise me, and we will do it in a way that works for *us*. Because, frankly, I don’t give a fuck how you’ve conducted scenes with other subs in the past. This is about what *I* want and what *you* want, and it is nobody else’s business, really.”

Ilya’s light eyes flicker over his face, something appreciative in them, like Shane has inadvertently talked him off a ledge. “You are very wise now that you’ve Dommed, hm?”

Shane just laughs and claims his lips in a grounding kiss. “The one thing I definitely learned is that I never, ever want to do that again.”

Ilya breathes a heavy sigh of relief and pulls him closer. “Thank fucking god. That was the scariest moment of my life. You are talented at many things, Shane, but I am not so sure Domming is one of them.”

Shane’s mouth drops open. “You said I did a good job.”

“Mm, yes. Good job for tiny kitten who is scared of own shadow,” Ilya agrees, his face buried in Shane’s chest.

Shane brushes his fingers through Ilya’s curls and presses a kiss to the top of his head. “You *do* take good care of me, you know? All I could think about this past week is how much I missed falling asleep in your arms.”

“I missed you very much, too,” Ilya agrees. “I am still very worried about doing this right, though. I need you to understand it is my biggest fear that I will hurt you. I have let down so many people, Shane.”

“You keep saying that,” Shane frowns, his heart hammering against his chest. “Who have you let down?” He brushes Ilya’s hair out of his eyes as he looks up at him, blue swimming in wetness.

“My mother,” he whispers, and Shane sinks a little further into his lap until they’re face to face.

“What happened to her?”

“She died. When I was very young,” Ilya ducks his gaze, sniffing when Shane links their fingers together. “It was an accident. She...swallowed a whole bottle of pills. I found her.”

Shane’s breath stutters. “I—how old were you?”

Ilya steels himself before answering. “Twelve.”

Fuck. Shane wanted him to wrap him up in his arms and keep him safe from the rest of the world forever.

“She was so sad. And my dad was so hard on her. I should have...told someone. Helped in some way. I don’t know.”

“Ilya,” Shane breathes, and he pulls him close, one large hand rubbing over the other’s back. “That’s not your fault, baby. That could never be your fault.”

“It’s my fault my brother is dead. My sister-in-law. My niece,” Ilya sobs into his chest, and Shane just holds him tightly. “I knew he was using the money for drugs, but I just kept sending it. I—I did not think he would be stupid enough to get behind the wheel.”

“Holy fuck,” Shane mutters, and he feels his own eyes leaking. “You’re okay. I’ve got you,” he presses into Ilya’s skin. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“And my father,” he hiccups a loud sob. “I wasn’t there for him when he passed. I wasn’t there for any of them. I am a terrible son. A terrible brother. And this is why I cannot be trusted to keep you safe, Shane. I would not be able to live with myself if anything happened.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” Shane tells him firmly, squeezing him so tight that he’s sure Ilya may have bruises tomorrow. “I’m with you. I’m not going anywhere. I’m okay.”

“You—” Ilya gasps. “You need to leave me before I can hurt you. Like I hurt everyone I love.”

Shane shudders at the raw emotion in his voice, but doesn’t say anything. He just wraps him up close to his chest, soothing him with soft words as a million thoughts run through his head.

Shane had thought he was going through a lot right now, but Ilya was going through a lot, too. Maybe that made their dynamic a little more unsafe, he wasn’t sure. He also saw a lot of opportunity for healing, though. He couldn’t speak for Ilya, but Shane’s confidence in himself had soared. At least when it came to his sexuality. When it came to asking for things, letting himself acknowledge that he had certain desires he wanted to explore.

His mind is spinning with ways he can try to help Ilya, too, going forward. But the fact that Ilya was opening up like this to him, the fact that he felt safe enough to, felt like a really promising start.

After Ilya and Shane have finished crying themselves dry, they head down to the kitchen and snack on some watermelon from the fridge. They sit on the barstools at the kitchen counter, kicking their legs and letting their feet tangle together every so often.

Shane smiles when Ilya offers to feed him a piece, and he leans in to accept it happily. Ilya still looks a little raw, a little exhausted, but he also looks lighter, like he’s let go of something heavy he’d been holding on to. Shane kisses him and hums at the way their lips slide together, the juice from the watermelon adding a bit of sweetness.

It’s nice to feel this lucid after a scene, to be able to see the aftermath play out. Usually, Shane was in La La Loopy Land when Ilya was done with him. Which...yeah, he couldn’t

wait for that next time. But, for right now, he was happy to be present. To be fully here with him.

After they wash up from their snack, they head back upstairs and brush their teeth before settling into bed for a cuddle. Shane opens his arms up to allow Ilya to lie on his chest. He was a little fragile after submitting tonight. Shane could tell the mental switch had taken a toll on him, especially after he had to jump in and take control towards the end.

Still, Shane was grateful that Ilya had trusted him to do it in the first place. It spoke volumes to him. But, seeing how much Ilya had been struggling with his role as a Dom, Shane was determined to be as good as possible going forward. He didn't want to be a reason for Ilya to have to question himself. Especially because, as far as Shane was concerned, things between them couldn't be better. Each mistake only brought them closer, made their communication stronger. They were learning, together, what they liked and didn't like, and Shane was starting to feel a lot more confident in his own desires because of it.

When Ilya's breathing starts to even out, signaling he's asleep, Shane carefully shifts to reach for his collar on the nightstand. He maneuvers himself so as not to wake his sleeping counterpart, and then re-clasps the collar around his neck, smiling when the gold pendant shines against the soft moonlight streaming in through the window.

He touches the cross gently and closes his eyes, trying to imagine what Ilya's mom might have looked like. Did she have gorgeous blonde hair like her son? Did her eyes sparkle with the weight of a thousand suns? *Probably*, Shane thinks to himself. If Ilya was anything to go off of, Shane knew she must have been positively wonderful. Beautiful. Perfect. He makes a mental note to ask Ilya to show him a picture at some point, but for now, he drops a kiss to Ilya's forehead and pulls him close, sending a silent *thank you* to the universe for gifting him a real-life Earth angel.

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Chapter End Notes

Hello all, I just wanted to give you another friendly reminder that this is a work of fiction. My characters are flawed. They are not perfect. There will be angst, and miscommunication, and mishandling of things. I recognize they have had a lot of issues come up with their scenes, and that has been mostly intentional for the purpose of this story. Everything that has played out has played out that way for a reason, due to the nature of these characters, how they handle emotion, and how I believe they would react to things.

I do want to assure you that the tone of scenes will not be as angsty going forward! I needed to get some things out of the way for their character development, as they are still learning to navigate their dynamic.

That being said, this is still fiction :) If you are uncomfortable with their dynamic, I encourage you to make the choice for yourself whether you would like to keep reading or not.

Again, super open to hearing thoughts, suggestions, ways to make this fic better. I have been learning a lot about scene dynamics and I do appreciate anyone who has offered ideas or recommendations. Thanks to anyone who continues to join me on this journey!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

[@rozyhollanov](#) made a trailer for this fic!!! it is so so perfect and fits this book SO well. i'm honored and woweddddd thank you thank you thank you. [you can check it out here if you want](#), and please show them some love <3

Chapter Notes

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

Shane is torn from sleep the next morning by the shrill ring of his cell phone.

Ilya is still a warm, snuggly weight at his side, and he grumbles at the interruption of his slumber, burrowing a little further into Shane's chest. His hand settles automatically over Shane's neck, fingers catching on his mother's necklace like it's second nature, like her presence is a comfort in itself.

Shane rubs at his eyes with his fist and strains to grab his phone, answering it with a husky, "Hello?"

"Dude, did you see the fucking pictures?"

Shane is so sick of people greeting him like this. He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose in an attempt to keep from having an aneurysm first thing in the morning. "What pictures, Hayds?"

"Rozanov and Rose Landry are fucking! That asshole gave her his fucking necklace."

And, great. If Hayden knew about it, that meant news was circling fast. It was one thing for his mom to keep up with gossip sites, but Hayden had about a million kids. Shane wasn't active on social media by any means, but he was pretty certain that meant the gossip had started spreading to NHL-specific accounts. Which meant, if it had gotten to Hayden, the rest of his team had probably seen it as well.

"Hayden—"

"No, like, since when is Rozanov in Montreal, anyway? It's like he fucking hunted her down. He's trying to get a rise out of you because he knows we're a shoo-in for the Cup next year. Three in a row. Can you imagine what that would do to his ego? As if Boston ever had a chance."

"He won't be with Boston, anyway," Shane says without thinking.

A pause. “What do you mean?”

Shane silently curses himself and his slow, sleep-muddled brain. “Nothing, I mean. His contract is up, isn’t it?”

Another pause. “Okay...why the fuck wouldn’t he sign with Boston again?” Hayden laughs, like Shane is being weird.

And, yeah. Shane feels pretty fucking weird. Talking about *Rozanov* when Ilya is snoozing away on his chest, murmuring Russian in his sleep.

“Wait a second,” Hayden says slowly, and Shane really hopes he hasn’t caught him on the one day when Hayden can somehow form a coherent thought. “Did Rose say something to you? Did you know about this?”

“What?” Shane stutters, because it feels like all the blocks are about to start tumbling down around him.

“Did you know Rose is seeing him?”

Shane is silent, feels like he can’t get his mouth to form words. Anything he says will be a lie, and he doesn’t feel like he’s telling them believably anymore. Maybe it would be best for people to believe Rose was seeing Rozanov. Maybe that would inadvertently take some of the attention off them. Distract people just enough until Shane could figure out what to do next.

“Котёнок,” Ilya says into his skin and Shane quickly shushes him. “Ммм... ты пытаешься заставить меня замолчать так рано утром? И это при том, что я веду себя исключительно мило?”

“Shane...” Hayden replies. “Holy shit. Are you like...with someone right now? Oh my god. Is it Boston Billy?”

Shane tips the phone away from his mouth to huff a heavy sigh before speaking again. “I’m at my cottage right now, Hayds. Is this something we can talk about later?”

“Shane, Rose is *sleeping* with the enemy. Why do you not sound the least bit put off by this?”

Probably because Shane was *quite literally* sleeping with said enemy. In fact, the enemy was a warm pile of sleepy Russian allure in his arms. Shane scratches his fingers through Ilya’s curls as the other looks up at him in alertness.

“Rose can sleep with whoever she wants. It’s not really my business,” Shane tells him plainly.

Hayden makes an affronted sound. “No, she fucking can’t. Not when it’s Rozanov. Not if she expects to continue being an honorary Voyageur. This is *not* going to fly with the team, dude.”

“Honestly, I don’t give a fuck what’s going to fly with the team. The team can suck my dick for all I care.”

Ilya is looking at him with a hunger, like a thrill has run up his spine at the way Shane is talking to Hayden about his team.

“Listen, man. I get that you have a lot going on right now, but you’re still our Captain. You’re still held to a certain standard. And you being all cutesy friendly with Rozanov’s *rumored girlfriend* definitely isn’t going to help whatever issues you’re having with the guys right now. Stick to one struggle at a time, ja feel?”

“Since when is my personal life any of your or the team’s fucking business? All that matters is what happens on the ice. It shouldn’t make a difference who my friends are sleeping with or who I’m sleeping with, for that matter,” Shane bites back, and he doesn’t miss the way Ilya rumbles in approval.

“Ты такая горячая, когда так дерзишь, котёнок,” Ilya practically reverberates into his skin.

Shane hears a stilted silence on the other end of the line.

“Shane,” Hayden says eerily. “What was that?”

Shane pulls his eyes away from Ilya to redirect his attention to the phone call. “What was what?”

“I—you...” Hayden pauses. “It sounded like Rozanov. Oh my god. Are they there with you right now? Shane, what the fuck? You’re hosting them at your fucking cottage?”

“What the hell are you even talking about?” Shane fires back, content to play dumb for a little while longer.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Maybe the pictures that leaked of them on their road trip? Getting gas off the highway that I’m pretty sure leads to your cottage. Your little movie star ex-lover is sleeping with the enemy, and you didn’t even think to tell any of us? Not even your best friend? Jesus. What else are you fucking hiding?”

More pictures of Ilya and Rose, then. Great. The paparazzi must have been hounding them at this point. Shane was sure his own connection to Rose wasn’t exactly helping.

Ilya, who is vaguely listening in, rolls his eyes and mimes cocking and shooting a gun at Shane’s phone. Shane shakes his head. It’s really not the time.

“Listen, dude, I’ve gotta go. We can talk about this later, alright? Tell Jackie and the kids I said hello.”

Hayden opens his mouth to say something else, but Shane is hanging up before he gets the chance.

“Wow, your team is really something, huh?” Ilya nods. “Four Stanley Cups and only three working brain cells between them.”

“Shut up,” Shane rolls his eyes, letting out a soft huff. The team was becoming a problem, he could admit that, but he didn’t have the energy to deal with it right now. Not when the press

was apparently following Rose and Ilya around on a wild goose hunt, trying to get pictures of the two of them. How long would it be before their trail led straight to Shane's cottage? How long would it be before they revisited the pictures of Shane and Rose at breakfast and found Ilya's chain around his neck?

"Hollander, do not have panic attack on me right now," Ilya sighs. "I cannot handle it after the events of last night."

Shane's eyes go soft as he looks down at him, pushing his fingers through Ilya's hair once more in an attempt to comfort him. "Sorry," he says regretfully, still feeling guilty over how everything went down.

"Is okay," Ilya promises, rolling onto his stomach to press a kiss to Shane's abdomen. "But I cannot deal with Montreal's 15th best player criticizing my relationship this early in the morning. Especially when it is upsetting my perfect kitten."

Shane smiles lightly and reaches to tangle their fingers together. "15th best player?"

Ilya just blinks at him plainly. "Yes. Did I stutter?"

"Hayden's a good friend."

"Mm, such a good friend that he is more concerned with who Rose Landry is sleeping with than the fact that his team does not respect their Captain. Especially considering that team would be nothing without you."

"Come on," Shane scoffs a laugh. "It takes a lot of people to win the Cup. It's certainly not just me."

Ilya gives him a deadpan look with half-lidded eyes. "Shane, you could go to any team in the entire League and still walk away with the Cup. I have no doubt about this."

Shane squeezes his fingers meaningfully, eyes grazing Ilya's expression. He's speaking so honestly, like he believes every word, and Ilya's confidence in him makes Shane's stomach flutter. It makes him feel like he really is capable of achieving anything. Like he's more than just the Captain of the Voyageurs. More than just the ten years he's put into this team.

"I could use a shower," Shane comments lightly, and he doesn't miss the way Ilya's eyebrows twitch upwards in interest.

"Showers can be very big and lonely. Maybe I should come with you...just in case any scary half-wit Voyageurs are lurking nearby ready to pounce," Ilya muses thoughtfully.

"Hey, I thought pouncing was my job," Shane frowns, and a thrill runs through him at the way Ilya smirks.

"I see you are wearing your collar again, котенок," Ilya mentions, running his fingers over the cross pendant.

“Yes,” Shane replies softly, sinking into the touch. Ilya licks over his lips in contemplation, and Shane’s expression falters slightly at the hesitance. “What is it?”

“No, nothing,” Ilya shakes his head, ducking to press a kiss to the golden cross. “I am just worried with how the press has been lately. I do not want you to accidentally get outed because of me.”

Shane chews at his lower lip, his heart pounding in his chest. “Do you...you think I shouldn’t wear it?”

“I will never protest to you wearing something that belongs to me, perfect angel. I am just not sure how safe it is right now,” he admits forlornly.

Shane’s heart sinks to his stomach. Mostly because he knows Ilya is correct.

“Maybe we can get you something else in the meantime, hm? Something that you can wear in public so you still feel like mine? Something that does not necessarily link you to me.”

“Then, what’s the point?” Shane frowns. He liked the fact that his collar linked him to Ilya, that it was a clear marker that Shane was *his*. Not only that, but he liked the fact that it had belonged to Ilya’s mother. That Ilya trusted him with it despite how much it meant to him.

Ilya just smiles lightly and leans up to kiss his lips. “You are so precious. Did you know that?”

“Yes,” Shane says around a quiet smile. Because he is a very good kitten, indeed.

“Oh, good then. As long as you know. I do not have to tell you this.”

“Ilya,” Shane whines, reaching for him as Ilya turns to move away.

“Mm, yes, did you need something from me?” Ilya pauses, looking back at him.

Shane just watches him with yearning eyes until Ilya finally caves with a smirk.

“Ah, okay. But only because you are cute,” he hums, returning to pet his hand through Shane’s hair intentionally. “You are the very best kitten in all the land, and, of course, I wish to tell everyone this. Starting with that fucker, Hayden Pike.”

Shane lets out a surprised laugh, nuzzling his head further into Ilya’s touch.

“Don’t pretend you don’t want him to know, too.” Ilya looks at him expressively. “Or would you rather he think it is Rose Landry who has my collar around her neck?”

Shane can’t help the little growl that tumbles from his lips, his jealousy oozing out of him. He was most definitely *not* okay with the fact that people were connecting Ilya to Rose. Not one bit.

Ilya breaks into a fit of laughter at that and tackles Shane to the bed with a flurry of biting kisses. Until Shane is giggling and pushing at his chest and practically vibrating with purrs in

Ilya's arms. Eventually, Ilya scoops him into his grasp like he weighs nothing at all and koala carries him to the shower.

They take their time undressing, mapping their hands across each other's skin, pressing kisses anywhere the sun will allow. Shane turns on the water, checking the temperature, and yelps when Ilya grips him by the hips to push him under the warm spray. They make out lazily against the shower wall, Ilya sucking at his neck like a vampire until Shane throws his head back in a moan. It's languid, and soft, and very different from the other experiences they've had being physical with one another. Not better, not worse. Just different.

It isn't long before Ilya drops to his knees to give Shane his first gay blowjob of all time, and if Shane was unsure about his feelings before, he's pretty sure he'd be willing to sign away his rights in a blood oath by the time Ilya's done with him. His knees are trembling thirty seconds in, his grip on Ilya's hair is so tight he's sure it's going to leave a bruise. Ilya doesn't seem to mind, though, as he sinks down deep like he wants to fucking swallow him whole; there's a split second where Shane thinks he just might.

He's a professional athlete, but he can't catch a fucking breath to save his life, moaning loudly into the murky, steam-filled abyss of the shower. He's yelping Ilya's name like he wants someone to hear him, like he wants someone to take notice of the fact that this man is fucking him. Draw the contract, sound the alarms; Shane wants it written in the stars at this point. He wants to contact each and every magazine, personally, and let them know that Russian Love Machine, Ilya Rozanov, is a very taken man. And not by Rose Landry either. Not by any of the many women he's been linked to over the years. He's Shane's, and based on what Ilya has said to him over the past few weeks, he's been Shane's for a very long time.

Shane wants to contact all of his previous partners. Wants Ilya's father, brother, and mother to all rise from their graves so he can alert them of the news. He wants it branded across his chest for all the world to see, tattooed into his skin until it's so glaringly obvious that even aliens on Mars can see it from space.

When Shane finally comes with a shout, Ilya swallows hotly around him, suctioning his lips until Shane is whining from overstimulation. After that, Ilya stands and pushes Shane to his knees, jerking himself off quickly before coming all over his face. A little ode to their scene last night that went unfinished. Shane is so turned on that he almost comes again, blinking dazedly up at his more dominant counterpart.

"There you go, baby. My kitten needed his Alpha's milk, yes?" Ilya hums down at him, smearing his thumb across Shane's lips to press some of the release into his mouth.

Shane blinks up at him like he's seeing God, sucking at the digit like it's all he was born to do. In this moment, he's pretty sure it is.

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Gone was Shane Hollander, Golden Boy. No. This was Shane Hollander, Kitten Extraordinaire. Ilya wanted to crown him with a little set of golden ears, even though he knew Shane to be more of a black and white kitten. He deserved the best, and Ilya was

already brainstorming new ways to make his ownership known for when they inevitably had to transition back to the real world.

And what a fucking bummer that would be. If Ilya had his way, they would both resign from hockey right now and take up residence in Montreal full-time. Ilya would run his club, and Shane would be the reigning Cat King, making his rounds, getting appreciative pets from everyone. Ilya would like the opportunity to show off his very good boy. He was a proud owner, after all. A proud owner of a prize-winning kitty. Not many kittens could say they had won four Stanley Cups, now could they?

Shane is flushed and perfect, his eyes closed as he licks up every trace of Ilya's come, and Ilya just keeps feeding him because he's positively mesmerized. Once Shane has been thoroughly ruined, Ilya sits down on the shower floor and pulls Shane between his straddled legs. He takes his time cleaning him, soaping up his strong, defined muscles while Shane just purrs against his chest.

Shane yelps when Ilya gives his cock a little squeeze, a little friendly hello as he washes lower, fingers grazing over his hole like a promise. There was a lot they still hadn't covered sex-wise, but Ilya was in no rush. He liked taking his time with Shane, found that half the pleasure was often in the journey, rather than the destination. His previous arrangements had been very to-the-point, almost like checking a box, but Ilya wanted more with Shane. He wanted something long-lasting, and that required foundation-building. One day, he and Shane would look out at the empire they had built together and remember every single brick they had laid in order to get there. Whether that legacy surrounded hockey or maybe just a giant, beautiful family, Ilya wasn't sure, but he was excited to see what the future would hold.

Shane is still a little dazed by the time Ilya is done with him. A little slow-moving, a little lethargic. Almost like a perfect, relaxed kitten should be. He's not in subspace by any means, though, likely more cock-drunk than anything, so after they finish with their shower, Ilya leaves him with a quick kiss on the mouth and heads downstairs to get started on breakfast. Shane still has a twenty-step skincare routine to get through, after all, and who was Ilya to stand in the way of his kitten's meticulous grooming routine? He was endlessly enamored by him.

He nicks a pair of Shane's sweatpants—that he's 100% certain actually belong to him—and then beelines for the kitchen with his chest bare and his hair damp. He mimics the motions of Shane's breakfast routine from the day before, reaching for foods that he knows to be safe for his kitten's strict performance diet. An egg white omelet with spinach, some mixed fruit, because Ilya would quite like to reward him with something sweet for being such a perfect angel, and of course, his ridiculously low-calorie, high-protein shake that looks like green sludge and is so thick that Ilya can barely get it in a glass. He makes himself a slightly different version of the same meal, piling on the fried eggs since it seems to be the only form of breakfast "meat" Hollander keeps in the house. He's in the process of plating both when there's a sharp round of knocks on the door, pulling his focus from the task.

It's probably Amazon, or Rose, so Ilya doesn't think twice before heading over to open it. What he's not expecting, however, is a very stunned and angry-looking Hayden Pike.

Ilya's eyebrows press together in thinly concealed annoyance. "Sorry. I do not recall ordering Montreal's 15th Best Player. I think you have the wrong address."

"I knew it. I knew you were fucking here," Hayden points a sharp finger at him.

"Wow. Nothing gets past you, Pike," Ilya rolls his eyes.

"Is there where you and Rose have been hiding out? I can't believe you guys are taking advantage of him like this. Obviously, he's too nice to say no, but I've come to talk some sense into him."

Ilya's lips pull to one side in amusement. "Ah, yes. This I would like to see," he nods, opening the door a little wider to let Hayden in.

Hayden is grumbling to himself like an angry lawn gnome as he steps inside, eyes darting all around the room in search of something incriminating. What he's hoping to find exactly, Ilya isn't quite sure, but it's hilarious, nonetheless.

While Hayden busies himself with looking for evidence, Ilya heads back to the kitchen to finish plating his and Shane's food. He's moving around the space with the confidence of someone who's been here many times before, despite only existing in Shane's cottage for two short days now, but Ilya was a quick study when it came to his Shane.

Eventually, Hayden must get bored of whatever weird investigation he's conducting, because a few minutes later, he meanders into the kitchen with an inquisitive scowl. "What are you even doing, anyway?"

Ilya raises an unimpressed eyebrow in his direction, like Pike is the dumbest person alive. "I'm making breakfast."

"Only two plates," Hayden notes with a snort. "Nice. Can't even feed your host? How fucking selfish are you, dude?"

"Mm, I'll have you know that most of my partners consider me to be *very* generous," Ilya tells him seductively, taking great pleasure in the way Hayden's face twists into a grimace.

"Gross. You are so fucking vile. I don't know what a girl like Rose sees in you," he shakes his head, not doing anything to hide his disgust. "Where is she, anyway?"

"My little sex kitten is finishing up in the shower."

"Oh my god," Hayden winces, making a gagging sound. "TMI, dude. What the fuck. I can't believe Shane is really letting you guys stay here. Would you tell him to get down here already so I don't have to keep talking to you?"

Ilya just blinks at him and wonders if he's really this fucking stupid. "I will not interrupt Hollander's very meticulous routine. Golden Boy is tending to important business right now."

Hayden just looks at him, unimpressed. "Cut the crap, Rozanov. I know he's here. I heard you in the background of the call earlier."

“Did you?” Ilya raises his eyebrows in interest. “Тогда ты, должно быть, слышал, как я хвалил его за то, что он тебе дерзил — совсем как хороший мальчик.”

Hayden narrows his eyes and opens his mouth like he’s about to speak, but before he can, Shane appears at the top of the stairs looking very, very concerned. He’s shirtless still, and his skin is positively glowing from whatever ridiculous routine he’s just done that’s taken him an entire twenty minutes to achieve. Not that Ilya is complaining. He licks his lips at the sight.

“Shane, what the fuck, man?”

“Hayden?” Shane’s eyes are wide. “What...what are you doing here?”

“We’re right down the road at Jackie’s parents’ house. I came here as a favor to the guys to figure out what the fuck is going on with you. Have you completely lost your mind, hosting Rozanov at your cottage?”

Shane’s mouth drops open a little in shock. “Um. What did he...what did he tell you?”

“Oh, nothing,” Hayden keeps his expression unbothered. “Just spewing a ton of filth about his *sex kitten* who is apparently still in the shower?”

Shane flushes all the way up to his ears as Hayden’s eyes take in his damp appearance.

“Um...are you guys having a water shortage or something? Is there a reason you look like *you’re* just getting out of the shower as well?”

Shane’s eyes dart to Ilya, who is sitting at one of the barstools, eating his plate of eggs with a sharp glint of delight in his eyes. He shoots Shane a look as if to say, *he’s your genius friend*.

Hayden lets his gaze glide over to the other plate of food still waiting at the seat next to Rozanov’s, a collection of bird food items that anyone who’s spent significant time around Shane should know very well at this point. At least, if they are operating under more than one working brain cell, which Ilya could not confidently say about the man in front of them.

There’s something like recognition there, though, a spark that suggests there may be something churning behind those oblivious eyes, after all. Ilya waits patiently for him to clue the fuck in.

One more glance at Shane, and Hayden’s eyes finally seem to catch on Roz’s gold necklace, which is dangling delicately between Shane’s deliciously ripped pectoral muscles. The face he makes once it clicks at long last is absolutely priceless.

“Shane...” Hayden says hesitantly. “Where—where’s Rose?”

Shane just crosses his arms over his chest and sighs.

Hayden’s stare becomes pleading, then. “She’s here, isn’t she? Please tell me she’s here.”

Shane ducks his head momentarily, before meeting Hayden head-on with an exasperated look. “She’s at a hotel a few miles away.”

Ilya watches in satisfaction as Hayden's face positively crumples.

"Shane, *no*. What did he do to you? Are you in trouble? Do you need help? Talk to me," Hayden pleads, like Shane has up and lost his mind.

Ilya can't help the way his laughter comes tumbling out of him until his eyes are teary.

Hayden and Shane both glare over at him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. This is just priceless. Wow. Who knew Ilya Rozanov had the power to make even *Hayden Pike* start begging?"

Hayden's eyes lock on Shane once more. "Tell me this is a fucking joke. Seriously, Shane, I'm not in the mood. I've been defending you to the guys for the past twelve hours."

"Wow, Shane. Do you think he deserves Best Friend of the Year award? He has probably never won anything like this. They do not give many awards for being the 15th Best Player of a team, do they?" Ilya clucks his tongue sympathetically.

Hayden makes a move like he's going to punch him in the face, but Shane steps forward before he can do so. "Okay, enough already," Shane puts his hands up between both of them. "Hayden, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I *told* you. I came to investigate what the fuck is going on with your best gal pal and your *arch rival*, who last I checked, we fucking *hate*."

"Hey, now, this is very mean," Roz mock pouts. "I have not done anything to deserve such treatment."

"You're a fucking asshole!" Hayden shouts at him, and Ilya mimes shedding a tear.

"Jesus Christ, would you chill the fuck out? Ilya hasn't done anything wrong," Shane huffs, and the two of them watch as Hayden's jaw drops.

"Are you fucking kidding me? *Hasn't done anything wrong*? Are we talking about the same guy here? The one who's been fucking with you since rookie season."

"Technically, summer before," Ilya chimes in helpfully. "*Trying* to fuck with you, more like. Trying to fuck you, actually."

"Oh my god," Hayden groans, burying his face in his hands. "Shane, please tell me this isn't fucking happening right now. Please tell me I'm hallucinating. I can handle you being gay, but this is just too much."

"Hollander. Did you hear that? Hayden thinks this is too much. Should we alert the media? Should we call in the troops?"

"Ilya, please," Shane sighs.

“Stop calling him that! He’s Rozanov. You call him Rozanov, and you hate him!” Hayden insists, and he sounds like he’s trying to convince himself at this point. Like he’s sure he must have stepped into some sort of alternate reality.

“Shane, if you could ignore this idiot for one second, your breakfast is getting cold.”

“Stop that,” Hayden turns to Rozanov this time.

“Stop what?” Ilya looks at him expectantly.

“Stop acting like you’re all...domesticated! This is fucking crazy. Shane, dude, wake the fuck up. Do you not see how insane this is? You’re wearing his fucking necklace!”

“Technically, is collar,” Ilya adds, and Shane actually smacks him in the back of the head.

“Ilya!”

“Ow,” Ilya pouts, but a part of him likes this feisty side of Shane.

“Oh my god. Oh my fucking god,” Hayden is shaking his head. “I thought you were seeing someone already! What happened to Boston Billy?”

Shane goes quiet at that, and Ilya just arches a pointed eyebrow at Hayden, both of them waiting for the realization to hit him.

Hayden’s face goes white all of a sudden, like he’s seen a ghost. “No. *No*. Please, no. Please tell me you haven’t been seeing him for the past *several years*. Please, Shane. I feel like I’m going to pass out right now.”

“Okay, you seriously need to calm down,” Shane says decisively. “I haven’t been seeing him for years.”

“But Boston Billy...”

“Oh, yes, I am Boston Billy, alright. I thought it was Boston Lily?” Ilya muses, before shaking that thought away. “Whatever. The point is that I am Boston Billy. Shane has been thirsting after me for years.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say *that*,” Shane chimes in, scratching the back of his neck.

“Fine. *I* have been thirsting after Shane for the past ten years,” Ilya settles on a statement that is, decidedly, more true.

“That’s only because I didn’t know you messed up the hotel room. I thought you stood me up,” Shane reminds him.

“Well, you should have known better. Because no one in all of history would *ever*, ever stand up Golden Boy Shane Hollander. That mistake cost me ten fucking years.”

“What the *fuck* are you guys talking about?” Hayden demands to know, and Ilya is delighted to find his eyes are bulging out of his head. “*Ten* years?”

“Is big misunderstanding, really,” Ilya explains with a wave of his hand. “Hollander was so nervous, he gave me wrong number for hotel room summer before rookie season.”

“Okay, you said *you* were the one who got it wrong. How is this my fault now?” Shane demands to know.

“Mm, because I think you are hot when you get all angry kitten,” Ilya purrs, making grabby hands for him, and maybe he’s laying it on a little thick, but sue him. Ilya has been dreaming of being able to show off his Shane for years. He’s not going to pass up the opportunity now, especially if it means he gets to piss Hayden off in the process.

Shane, to Ilya’s great pleasure, blushes adorably, but he doesn’t even get all angry kitten. Damn. Ilya wanted to see that. Luckily for him, he *does* get to see it piss off Pike.

“How the fuck am I supposed to act about this, Shane? Like, what the hell, dude? I feel like I barely even know you.” Hayden is standing there in complete shock, like he never in a million years could have expected this from his best friend.

Shane’s nostrils flare as he takes a step forward. “Honestly, Hayden, I don’t really care how you act about it. I told you, I’m fucking gay. And I haven’t been seeing Ilya for *years*, it’s been three fucking weeks. I can count on one hand how many people know about it. Not to mention the fact that I didn’t *choose* to tell you about it for this exact reason. You barged in here on your own. I mean, seriously, what were you expecting to find?”

“I don’t know!” Hayden shouts back. “Rose Landry and Rozanov hiding out at your fucking cottage! I definitely wasn’t expecting to find Rozanov half-naked in your kitchen after you guys obviously fucked in the shower!”

“It was technically just a blowjob,” Ilya feels the need to add, and Shane glares daggers at him.

“Do you see what I mean?” Hayden gestures wildly to Roz. “He’s the worst! Seriously, Shane, I don’t care that you’re gay or whatever, but...*Rozanov*?” He winces. “You can do *so* much fucking better than him. I’ll take you out to a club, myself, and we can find someone.”

“Mm, actually, Shane prefers to hang out in *my* club,” Roz butts in harshly. “And you are being very fucking rude to your friend here. He is sharing something scary with you, and you are making fun of him.”

Hayden’s mouth gapes. “I *am not* making fun of him! I just said I don’t care that he’s gay.”

“Yes, and yet, every time you say it, you flinch like it is fucking disease you’re scared of catching.” Ilya narrows his eyes. “My relationship with Shane is not up for discussion by you. You might have an opinion, but understand who you are hurting when you share it, because it is certainly not me. I could not care less what Montreal’s 15th Best Player thinks of me. You should be very careful with the next words that leave your mouth.”

Hayden crosses his arms over his chest.

“He’s right, Hayds. My relationship is really kinda none of your business,” Shane agrees. “And if you’re gonna keep judging me in my own home, then I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

Ilya raises an eyebrow as if to say, *check mate*.

And then Shane...Shane actually kicks him out. Ilya doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

He asks if Shane wants to talk about it, and Shane doesn’t, so they don’t.

Instead, they play video games and wrestle each other into the couch. For lunch, Shane makes Ilya try one of his weird prepackaged custom health meals, and Ilya is only half pretending when he mimes gagging at the first bite. Afterwards, they go outside to kick a ball around for a bit, and then they lie in the grass and actually, honest-to-god look for shapes in the clouds. It feels like a fucking fever dream.

When the sun looks like it’s going to start going down soon, they head inside and change out of their grass-covered clothes. They take turns in the shower, Ilya first because he’s quicker, and he wants to find something they can order to avoid having to eat one of Shane’s nightmare health meals again. Plus, he’s also pretty certain Shane’s going to take ages with his skincare routine once more, which Ilya certainly wasn’t complaining about. His skin looked fucking amazing.

Ilya changes into some clean clothes, helping himself to Shane’s wardrobe, since Shane had told him he could. Then, he beelines for the kitchen and starts looking for restaurants on his phone. There’s a knock at the door before he finds anything significant, and Ilya sighs. Maybe Shane had invited Rose without telling him. It made sense. She was in town to see him, after all. He still wasn’t thrilled at the idea of having to share his company.

What he’s not expecting is to come face to face with none other than Hayden Pike for an incredibly unfortunate second time in one day. Ilya gives him a look that is so deeply unimpressed.

Hayden just rolls his eyes and steps to the side to reveal a whole horde of Pikes standing behind him. Ilya’s eyebrows raise high on his head.

“Ah. Hello, Pikes,” he says in realization, spotting a bunch of little mini Pikes and a woman who is honestly much too good-looking to risk being seen with someone so average, let alone having kids with him.

“Hi, Ilya,” a woman who can only be Hayden’s wife, greets him. “We hope it’s alright to show up unannounced.”

“You Pikes seem to have a habit of it.”

“I cooked a nice homemade meal and figured we could have dinner. The kids miss their Uncle Shane, and Hayden wanted to apologize for his behavior earlier,” Jackie expresses,

offering Ilya a heartfelt smile.

“Did he now?” Ilya asks in interest. “Well, then. Do come in,” he agrees, opening the door wider to usher the group forward. The little Pikes practically rush in and then immediately turn to him to start asking him questions.

“Where’s Uncle Shane?” One of two identical-looking girls asks.

“Uncle Shane is getting ready for dinner. He will be down soon,” Ilya ducks a little to address her. She’s so cute that Ilya can’t actually believe Hayden played a hand in making her.

“You have an accent,” the other girl says, and Ilya smiles.

“It is Russian. Thank you for noticing.”

There’s a little boy who is shyly hovering next to his dad, and the youngest, a girl, who Jackie is holding in her arms. Ilya looks down to see a few bags in their hands.

“Let me take those for you,” he offers, and Jackie happily hands them off. Ilya looks inside to find lots of packaged containers full of different types of food. He takes them out and starts putting them into the fridge, just in case anything has gone warm on the car ride over.

“Ilya?” Shane’s voice calls from upstairs, and Ilya can hear him as he gets closer. “Oh, um. Jackie?” Shane says in confusion once he steps into view.

“Hi, Shane,” Hayden’s wife greets him and pulls him into a hug. “Nice hickey.”

“What?” Shane replies, blinking in confusion as his cheeks flush a bit. “Uh, what are you guys doing here?”

Hayden sighs. “I told Jackie about this morning, and she said I was a huge asshole to you.”

“Swear jar,” Shane and Jackie say at once.

“I figured Hayden owes you an apology. Both of you,” she addresses Ilya this time. Ilya can’t help the way he smiles in surprise. “Plus, I had way too many groceries, so I decided to make a big dinner. Don’t worry, Shane, there’s something for you, too. I even made that carrot dip you like.”

“Uncle Shane!” The twins cheer loudly and run in from somewhere across the room. They collapse into Shane’s legs, and he quickly ducks down to hug them.

“Hey guys,” Shane laughs, and Ilya just blinks in amazement.

He watches as the little boy shyly approaches Shane for a hug as well, and Shane gives a little fist bump to the toddler in Jackie’s arms before Jackie carefully puts her on the ground.

“I’m Jackie, by the way,” Hayden’s wife approaches him and goes for a hug. Ilya isn’t expecting it, but he hugs her back, somewhat shocked by the warmth radiating off of this family. He would have never expected the Pikes to feel so welcoming towards him.

“Ilya. Nice to meet you,” he offers her a small smile, eyes darting to Hayden briefly before they refocus on her.

“I hope you don’t mind that I know about you and Shane.”

Quite the opposite, actually. Ilya wanted everyone to know about him and Shane. “Of course not. It is clear you guys are family,” he acknowledges, and Shane seemed to have a lot of that. It was nice, coming from someone who didn’t have much of it these days. He couldn’t remember the last time he was at a group gathering like this, other than dinner the night before with Rose and Shane’s parents.

“And you are, too, as long as you’re with Shane,” Jackie tells him kindly, and Hayden makes an affronted noise behind her.

“Well, then, you better get used to me,” he winks, grinning when she laughs in response. He really liked this Jackie. He still wasn’t sure what she saw in Hayden, though. “So, Hayden, what is this I was hearing about an apology?”

Shane steps up beside him and crosses his arms over his chest expectantly.

Hayden sighs and scratches the back of his head. “Look, I’m sorry, man. I overreacted. You know I don’t actually care who you date, right? I just want you to be happy.” He pauses before adding. “I just...are you *sure* it has to be Rozanov?”

Shane shares an unimpressed look with Jackie, and Ilya is delighted when she elbows her husband hard in the side. This Jackie lady was running a tight ship.

“Fuck. Sorry. Swear jar, I know,” he waves off before anyone can call him on it. “What I’m trying to say is I support you, Shane. And I love you no matter what.”

“You *love* him?” Ilya raises a sharp eyebrow. Because that sure as shit wasn’t going to fly with him.

“Okay,” Shane places a hand on Ilya’s shoulder to get him to back down. Ilya only untenses by a tiny fraction. “Thanks, Hayds. I really appreciate that. And I’m sorry you had to find out this way, with all the Rose stuff. I know this is probably weird for you.”

Ilya fights the urge to boldly roll his eyes, instead choosing to stare down Hayden intensely. Hayden stares back at him for only like half a second before his eyes quickly flicker away. Out of fear, Ilya is sure.

“Sorry, man. It’s really weird for me, but like...do you,” Hayden offers him a hesitant smile, and Ilya can tell he’s really trying. He turns to Ilya next, however, and says, “But, I swear to god, if you do anything to hurt him, I’m gonna cut off your fucking balls, Rozanov. You won’t even *live* to fuck again.”

Jackie throws her hands up in exasperation. “Why do we even have a swear jar?”

Ilya just bursts into laughter. The Pikes were actually pretty funny. He sort of liked them.

“You are not so bad, Hayden Pike,” Ilya tells him with a smile. “I think you and I are gonna

be great friends. Who knows? Maybe one day your kids will even be calling me Uncle Ilya.”

“Uncle Ilya,” the twins bellow out from across the room.

Ilya watches as Hayden’s eyes narrow in the slits. “Fuck you, Rozanov. My kids aren’t calling you shit.”

“Uncle Ilya,” the little boy, Arthur, says shyly.

“Thank you for your support, little Pikes,” Ilya replies proudly. He was raising them up so well already.

He looks over to find Shane just watching him fondly, so Ilya reaches his fingers out and wiggles them until Shane grabs his hand.

Jackie follows the motion and gives them both a mega-watt smile.

“Why don’t you guys make yourselves at home, and I will get us some drinks?” Ilya offers, much to Jackie and the kids’ delight. “What do the kids like?” And the group of little Pikes rushes over to him to start putting in their drink orders, with Ilya dutifully acknowledging each request like he’s a serious waiter at a restaurant who has just agreed to serve some very important customers.

Eventually, they sit down for dinner, with the kids on one far end of the table and the adults on the other. Shane and Hayden are sitting across from each other, while Ilya and Jackie settle in respectively on either side of them.

“Have some more, котенок,” Ilya passes Shane some more of his specially-prepared rabbit food, a madness that even Jackie was in on, apparently. “I can’t believe you eat like this every day. You may as well be eating actual kibble for a kitten.”

Hayden coughs loudly, and everyone looks over to him in surprise, finding his face has gone incredibly red.

“What?” Ilya raises his eyebrows.

“It’s just...no one needs to hear about your sex life at the dinner table,” Hayden hisses at him.

Ilya just lets out a laugh. “I am making fun of Hollander’s eating habits. What could that possibly have to do with our sex life?”

“Yeah, don’t be gross, Hayden,” Jackie agrees, giving him an annoyed look.

“Yeah, Hayden. Just because we are two men, that automatically means we are having wild, kinky sex? Bit homophobic of you,” Ilya tuts, shaking his head.

“Ilya,” Shane warns.

“What?” Hayden protests, looking between Jackie and Ilya. “No, it’s true. I mean, look at Shane’s neck. He’s even wearing a collar! Rozanov said so, himself.”

Jackie blinks at him like she wants to kill him, but she turns to look at Shane's neck anyway.

Ilya leans forward a bit, pulling his best tragic Slavic look, complete with convincingly glistening blue eyes. "Actually, it's a cross pendant necklace that once belonged to my late mother. She died when I was very young, and it is one of the few memories I have left of her," he tells him seriously. "It is very, *very* special to me."

Jackie kicks Hayden hard under the table. "Stop being such a dick to them," Jackie scolds in a hushed tone.

Ilya winks quickly at Hayden whose mouth drops open as he looks over to Jackie, but by then, she's already distracted and yelling at one of their kids.

When he risks a glance at Shane, Shane is just watching him in amusement, shaking his head imperceptibly.

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Shane can't believe he's sitting here with Ilya and the entire Pike family right now. It was pretty surreal how easily Ilya seemed to fit into his life. He was more charming than Shane would have given him credit for, and he wasn't shy about showing his affections towards him. Shane liked that, that he wasn't embarrassed. Shane wasn't embarrassed of him either. Not around his family and friends.

The rest of the world. Well, that was a different story, but luckily, they had the rest of the summer to figure it out.

The remainder of dinner goes by about as well as can be expected. Ilya and Jackie seem to be really hitting it off, surprisingly. Hayden keeps shooting Shane worried glances like he wants him to do something about it, like Shane ought to intervene to keep them from becoming besties. Shane just smiles and shrugs, pretty enamored by it all.

When it's time to leave, Ilya insists he's going to get the kids gifts for the next time he sees them, which starts an impromptu cheering of, "Uncle Ilya, Uncle Ilya."

Hayden looks like he's actually going to pass out, so he steps forward to start rounding up the kids as Ilya packs up the rest of the leftovers for them. In all the chaos, Jackie approaches Shane with a smile. "He seems really great, Shane."

Shane just ducks his head a little and smiles. "Thanks, yeah. He is."

She surveys him for a minute, eyes drifting to where Shane has started to watch Ilya wrap up the food with a painstaking attention to detail, his tongue between his teeth in focused thought.

"You're pretty serious about him, aren't you?" Jackie asks knowingly.

Shane just lets his eyes go soft, that warm feeling gliding through him again, slow and easy, like honey. "Yeah," his voice replies on autopilot, like he doesn't even need to think about it. He doesn't. He's very serious about Ilya.

As they're saying their final goodbyes and walking the family out the door, Shane doesn't miss the way Jackie pulls Ilya into a big hug before getting his phone number. It makes his heart pick up a little in his chest.

By the time they get upstairs, Shane is more than satisfied with the day. It was nice to see the Pike family, to catch up with Jackie and the kids. And it didn't hurt to know that he and Hayden were still on good terms. Despite Hayden and Ilya's differences, tonight proved that they could make this work. Ilya could fit into Shane's life so easily. It was starting to become a never-ending thought.

"Okay?" Ilya asks him as they're getting into bed, probably because Shane has been mostly silent for the past thirty minutes. Contemplative.

Shane looks over at him and smiles affectionately. He carefully crawls his way into Ilya's lap, smoothing his hands over his chest to give him a warm kiss.

"Well, hello there," Ilya hums in appreciation. "What did I do to deserve this?"

Shane falls forward to wrap his arms around Ilya's neck, lying flat on top of him to nuzzle into his bare skin. "Just be all around lovely." He leans into the touch when Ilya glides a hand over his back.

"I think you are confused, котенок. You are the lovely one between us."

Shane lifts his head to address him once more. "I like seeing you with my family. With my friends. Getting along with everyone."

Ilya's lips curl slightly. "Did you think I wouldn't get along with them?"

"No, no," Shane shakes his head, eyebrows pressing together. "It's just—" he pauses. "I guess I wasn't expecting it to feel so easy. Coming out to them. Having them know about me. About us."

"You have some very good people in your life," Ilya tells him, readjusting some of Shane's fringe with his fingers, brushing the stray pieces out of his eyes. "I am very honored that you are willing to bring me around your loved ones."

"Of course," Shane replies quietly. "I know it's weird. How new this is, or whatever. But I think we have something really good, yeah?"

Ilya lets out a little laugh. "It is not new for me, Hollander. I have been wanting this for a very long time. I was only waiting for your anxious brain to catch up."

Shane just rolls his eyes and pinches Ilya's cheek in reprimand. "Don't be mean to me."

"Mm, I think you might like it if I was a little bit mean sometimes," Ilya says, his voice taking on a dark undertone.

Something flutters through Shane's spine. "I don't want you to be mean to me," he says lowly.

“Really? You don’t want me to punish you for being a bad kitty?” Ilya smirks, and Shane flushes. “Your very pink cheeks tell me otherwise, котенок.”

“I’m never bad,” Shane mumbles poutily, wrapping his arms resolutely around Ilya’s neck. “You’re the one who kept trying to flash our sex life in front of the Pikes.”

“Oh, that. Yes. I was just trying to appeal to your very obvious exhibitionist kink,” Ilya says matter-of-factly.

“Hey,” Shane protests, sitting up a little with his hands flat against the other’s chest. “I do not have an exhibitionist kink. We’re trying to *keep* people from finding out, remember?”

“Yes, well, that is easier said than done when you insist on wearing my collar out in public,” Ilya tips his head in consideration, reaching out to touch the gold pendant. “It is only a matter of time before you get caught with this, драгоценный. I am very worried.”

Shane’s eyebrows pinch together. “Really? Why are you worried?”

Ilya lets out a soft sigh. “Rose told me you are having some trouble with your team. That they are...being rude in the locker rooms.”

Shane sucks his lower lip between his teeth. “Not to me,” he clarifies, because Ilya looks way too concerned. “Just, like, in general. You know how guys are,” he waves off.

Ilya is just watching him with that careful thoughtfulness, studying him, trying to get an answer to a question he hasn’t asked. “Your contract is up, isn’t it?”

Shane hates how he flinches. “I mean, yeah. Technically,” he shrugs, because it doesn’t really matter, does it? He’s not going to leave a four-time Stanley Cup winning team. Ilya must sense that from his expression because he just hums and glides his hands over Shane’s thighs.

“I am going to officially sign with Ottawa,” Ilya tells him lightly, like it’s not a monumental revelation. Sure, he had been mentioning it for a while, but a part of Shane always wondered if he was serious. If he would really give up everything he’s worked towards with Boston.

“Aren’t you going to miss your teammates?” Shane frowns. “Like...I dunno. Marleau?”

Ilya just smiles lightly. “Marleau is a good friend to me. We will always be brothers, but I think it’s time for me to move on.”

“Ilya,” Shane says carefully. “Are you sure you’re willing to give up playing for a winning team? I mean, I know you’ve thought really hard about this, but...Ottawa is terrible.”

Ilya purses his lips slightly. “I love hockey, but it is not everything to me. There are much more important things than winning. I think Ottawa will be good for me.”

Shane just blinks. Were there more important things than winning? He didn’t really see the point in joining a team that wasn’t expected to win. And Ilya was a great hockey player; he’d surely whip Ottawa into shape, but still. They didn’t have the strength to win Cups, not with their current roster. Shane wasn’t even sure they could guarantee a spot in the playoffs.

“I thought you would be happier,” Ilya admits quietly.

“Hey,” Shane frowns, leaning in closer. “I *am* happy. If you’re happy, I’m happy. You’ve clearly been thinking about this for a while, and I know you want to get your Canadian citizenship, so. It makes sense.”

“Does it make sense, Shane?” Ilya asks, and his eyes have gone a little intense.

“Yes?” Shane replies in mild confusion. “You want to be closer to the club. To Svetlana.”

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To you, Ilya thinks, because Shane still isn’t getting it. Ilya could spell it out for him in a hundred million different ways, and Shane’s scared brain would still find a way to misunderstand. To explain it away. He wasn’t ready to hear Ilya’s true feelings for him. That Ilya didn’t see this as just some fun sexual exploration. He saw Shane as his partner for life.

Ilya doesn’t respond to that. Instead, he takes another cursory glance at Shane’s collar. “We are going to have to figure something out for this. Your team is not going to take too kindly to seeing my chain around your neck. There is too much media coverage already.”

He watches as Shane swallows and wonders if it’s really just sexual exploration he’s after, or if there’s anything more serious to Shane wanting to wear his collar out in public for all the world to see. Being owned by someone could be exciting. It could be a huge turn-on. Ilya understood that. But it was also one of the more intimate BDSM dynamics. And Shane seemed to want it for more than just the occasional scene. He was starting to want it all the time.

“I sort of...had an idea about that,” Shane divulges, and Ilya raises his eyebrows in surprise. “I was thinking, um. About all the stuff with Rose, and how you guys have obviously been spotted together. Plus, people know me and Rose are friends, and even if you two *were* dating, that would still look odd, I think. For us to run in the same circles.”

Ilya has no idea where he’s going with this. And for a second, he’s almost sure that Shane is about to ask him to enter into a fake relationship with Rose Landry. Ilya would do it if Shane asked him to. If that’s what it took.

Shane looks pensive for a second, his eyebrows furrowed together in a way that makes Ilya want to smooth them over with his fingertips. “What was your mom’s name?”

Ilya’s heart beats wildly in his chest. He watches him for a minute, wondering what the hell his mother has to do with Rose Landry and him being spotted together. “Irina,” he fills in softly.

“Irina,” Shane repeats, and it sounds heavenly coming from his lips. “Well, I was thinking, like. What if we started a charity? In honor of your mom, I mean.”

It feels like time starts moving in slow motion. Ilya forces himself to keep listening to the words falling from Shane’s lips as he desperately tries to understand.

“We could, um. Raise money. For mental health organizations. Like suicide prevention and stuff. And, um. The necklace...it could be, like, our symbol. For the charity.”

And, *oh*. That was not casual. That was not casual at all. Shane was thinking very, very serious thoughts.

“It would make sense, I think. For you and Rose to be friends. Especially if you and I were working together on a cause we both love.”

A cause we both love. Ilya’s heart is going to explode.

“I think having her name attached to it would help a lot, too. And then, it wouldn’t be so weird if I was wearing your necklace. Because then, it’s just like...the symbol of the charity. People wouldn’t have to know it’s yours. Necessarily.”

Ilya is frozen in place. Shane Hollander, Hockey’s Golden Boy, was prepared to start an entire charity in honor of Ilya’s dead mother just so he could have an excuse to keep wearing Ilya’s necklace. Ilya’s *collar*.

Ilya blinks a few times, looking down to try and stop the onset of tears threatening to spill from his eyelids.

“It’s just an idea,” Shane says, then, shyly. Like he isn’t sure what to make of Ilya’s reaction, or lack thereof.

Ilya sits up all of a sudden to pull Shane into a searing kiss, one that he wants to bruise into Shane’s skin so deeply that he remembers it for years to come. He can feel as Shane relaxes into the kiss, like he was nervous about bringing this up, and *god*, Ilya loves him so deeply. He would marry him tomorrow if he thought Shane was ready to hear it. To have it.

His Shane was so fucking sweet. So fucking thoughtful. Ilya couldn’t believe he got to have him.

He pulls away with tears in his eyes, and they’re openly flowing down his cheeks at this point, Shane scooping them up with his thumbs to try and wipe them away. “I think that’s a beautiful idea,” Ilya tells him raggedly, and he’s thankful for the way Shane is touching him all over, petting his hair, smoothing his hands over his shoulders. He needs that touch to feel grounded, to remind himself this is all real, that it’s not some cruel dream he’s going to wake up from.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Shane laughs lightly, like Ilya is being silly for feeling so moved by this. Like it was the most normal thing in the world for him to have spent time thinking about this, allocating brain power towards every detail in order to make wearing Ilya’s necklace work.

“I just,” Ilya snuffles, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. “I can’t believe how wonderful you are sometimes. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this.”

Shane watches him with a sad smile and leans in to press a kiss underneath each of his teary eyes. “You deserve good things, Ilya. Besides, it was mostly for selfish reasons, anyway.

Since I really like being your котенок and wearing your collar.”

He’s playing it off as less than it actually is. Like Ilya won’t see right through him. “What is it about wearing it in public? It is a turn on for you?” Ilya questions, because he really wants to know.

“I dunno,” Shane shrugs from where he’s still perched in Ilya’s lap. “It feels nice, I guess. To be claimed. To know someone cares about me. I think...especially with what you said about your mom, I know the necklace means a lot to you, and I think it’s really special that you wanted me to have it. To wear it. I like feeling like yours.”

“You *are* mine,” Ilya tells him seriously. “Whether people know that or not.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s why I like it so much. Since we can’t tell people. I can still show off in a way, you know? They might not understand, but it’s my way of getting to tell the world that I’m taken. That I have someone who loves me. Or, I mean, not—” Shane falters, but Ilya just surges forward to kiss him, wanting to suck the words from his mouth.

Fuck. Shane *knew*. Shane knew, and he wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t running scared. He was welcoming Ilya with open arms, introducing him to his family, making space for him in his life.

Ilya doesn’t say it yet. He’s still not sure if Shane is ready to hear it point-blank, but at least he knew. Deep down, Shane knew, and that’s what mattered most. He lets the kiss be confirmation enough, and when he pulls back to find Shane smiling wetly at him, he’s sure he’s gotten the message across.

Ilya Rozanov was in love with Shane Hollander, and Shane Hollander liked him so much that he wanted the entire world to know. Even if they couldn’t tell anyone just yet.

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The next day, Shane and Ilya go over to the Hollander’s cottage for dinner. Ilya was beginning to realize just how important family was to him, and it made his heart swell at the thought that this one was already starting to feel like his own.

Shane’s mom hugs him hello when they arrive, and David Hollander gives him a handshake and a clap on the back. They’re far more accepting than any family Ilya has ever known, having seemingly taken Shane’s newfound sexuality in stride.

They sit down at the table to eat, Yuna making her rounds with cups of tea and a can of ginger ale for Shane. He’s having trouble opening it, and at first, Ilya doesn’t understand why, until he remembers Shane’s perfectly polished pink kitten nails. “Here, babe,” Ilya leans over and pops it for him.

“Thanks,” Shane offers him a dreamy smile, and Ilya can’t resist fondly grazing his knuckles over Shane’s freckled cheek.

“So, Ilya,” Yuna says to him. She seems a little lighter today, like she was starting to grow accustomed to the idea of her son dating his biggest hockey rival. “How are you liking the cottage so far?”

“Oh, the cottage is excellent. I can see why Shane loves it so much. Very peaceful. He keeps trying to get me on the practice rink, but I told him we are in off-season right now. I think he is just trying to size up my skills before he has to play against my new team,” Ilya teases, smirking at the way it causes Shane to roll his eyes.

“New team?” Yuna raises her eyebrows. “Is it official, then? You’re going to Ottawa?”

“I am in the process of looking at contracts right now,” Ilya affirms with a big grin. “Pretty soon I will be an official Ottawan.”

“Congratulations,” Yuna offers him a smile, with David calling his approval from the kitchen. “You’ll have to let us know where you end up. We live in Ottawa most of the year.”

“Really?” Ilya raises his eyebrows and glances at Shane. “I did not know this. I knew Ottawa was Shane’s hometown, but—”

“Yup,” Yuna agrees. “Shane grew up there, and it’s still home for the time being. Other than summers at the cottage, of course. We’ll have to have you over for dinner once you settle in.”

“I would like that very much,” Ilya laughs warmly. “You will be the only people I know aside from the team.”

“Well, you’re welcome any time.” Ilya can’t help the way his cheeks flush a little, excited by the prospect of getting to spend more time with Shane’s family. They were so, so different than his own. Warm where his father had been cold, accepting where his brother had been vindictive and cruel.

Shane smiles and clears his throat. “So, um, Mom. We actually wanted to run something by you. It’s an idea Ilya and I had for a charity.”

“A charity?” His mom repeats in surprise. “Okay, what kind of charity?”

“Well,” Shane takes a sip of his ginger ale, glancing over to find Ilya already watching him. “We really wanted to do something to honor Ilya’s mom. She, um, she passed away when he was really young.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Yuna frowns at Ilya. “May I ask how she died?” Her eyes catalogue Shane immediately reaching for his hand, but Ilya is more than grateful for the physical comfort. He’d never stop touching Shane if he could.

“She swallowed a bottle of pills,” Ilya repeats what he had told Shane just two nights prior. “I was only twelve when I found her in the bathroom. It was...very traumatic for me.” He looks over to find raw pain in his boy’s eyes, and Ilya just smiles and gives his hand a little squeeze. He did not need Shane to be sad for him. Especially when Ilya was the happiest he’d

ever been. “She was very sad, but she was wonderful. I think...I think she would have loved to meet Shane.”

“Oh, wow,” Yuna seems to be taking in the words, and Ilya finds a very similar look in Shane’s mother’s eyes. In this instant, they were the spitting image of one another. “You poor thing. I can’t even imagine going through something like that so young.”

“It is okay. It was a long time ago,” Ilya shakes his head, because the point of all this was not to be upset. This was supposed to be a joyous thing they were doing.

“Anyway, the charity would be named after her. Irina,” Shane says meaningfully. “And we would raise money for mental health organizations. Like suicide prevention.”

Yuna just blinks, looking between the two of them. “Wow. That’s very...I think that’s wonderful, boys. And this is, um,” she pauses, almost like she isn’t sure how to phrase her next thought. “This is to help you come out?”

“No, no,” Shane is quick to reject. “Well,” he frowns, choosing his words carefully. “Maybe. Eventually.”

And Ilya raises his eyebrows. Shane’s eyes dart to him, and for a second, he looks worried. Like he’s said something he shouldn’t have. Like he’s decided something without discussing it with him first.

“Yes,” Ilya agrees before he can get the wrong idea, and Shane relaxes.

“We just thought, you know. With Rose and Ilya being spotted together, it’s only a matter of time before people realize we’re, um, friendly,” he says, for lack of a better word. Ilya wanted to laugh. Friendly. That was one way of putting it. “So, we thought the charity would be a good way to get ahead of it. Plus, Rose already agreed to put her name behind it as well. That way, if anyone sees me and Ilya together, it wouldn’t be so crazy. I mean, we’re not rookies anymore. I don’t see why we have to be arch rivals forever, right?”

Ilya shrugs. “We were never really arch rivals. Is just stupid thing pushed on us by the media. Hard to be arch rivals when all I could think about was kissing you.”

Shane kicks him hard under the table, panicked eyes shooting to his mom, but when Ilya risks a glance over at her, Yuna is watching them with an emotion that can only be described as fond.

“And with Ilya playing for Ottawa,” Shane continues. “Lots of guys have friends on other teams. Boston and Montreal, that’s intense. But Montreal and Ottawa, like. It wouldn’t be as crazy.”

Ilya thought it was pretty funny how Shane failed to mention that the main reason he had come up with this charity idea in the first place was so that he could continue to parade around wearing Ilya’s collar. But he supposed that wasn’t exactly an appropriate topic to discuss over dinner.

His mom is nodding in consideration, probably doing the mental math on how all of this would fit into Shane's brand. From what Ilya had seen, he knew her to be quite the Momager.

"We were thinking a hockey school for kids over the summer," Ilya adds. "We will enlist other players to help coach. Looks good for the NHL, and it will give me an excuse to teach the future generation of players how to be as incredible as Ilya Rozanov on the ice."

Shane rolls his eyes and kicks him under the table again.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ilya corrects himself. "I am, of course, forgetting about Shane Hollander, who is the reigning Golden Boy of hockey. Not to mention, the hottest player in the League according to Cosmopolitan."

He's delighted to find Yuna still watching them in amusement, like maybe she, too, was starting to understand how great they could be together.

"That article was rigged," Shane shakes his head.

"Ah, no. The article was mostly accurate except for dinosaur Scott Hunter."

"He would be a good person to talk to," David chimes in as he enters the dining area with a plate full of overflowing gourmet-looking sandwiches. "After coming out the year the Admirals won the Cup, he could probably offer you boys some advice about navigating it."

"We're not—" Shane sighs. "We're not looking to, like, come out or anything. We just want...a future. I don't know."

A future. Ilya wasn't even sure if Shane realized the implications of what he was saying. If anything, Shane's parents seemed more clued in to the seriousness of their relationship than their own son did.

David and Yuna trade a look as Shane starts biting into one of the sandwiches. Ilya takes that look to mean *Shane is in this for the long haul*. He's very, very comforted by this fact as he digs into his own sandwich, feeling extremely grateful for his new family.

They chit-chat a little longer about hockey and the specifics of the charity. At some point, Shane lets slip that he's wearing Ilya's mom's necklace, and that it will be the symbol for the charity. If his parents recognize how down bad Ilya must be in order to give Shane his most prized memory of his mother, they certainly don't let it show on their faces. He thinks it pretty much goes without saying, though, that he is utterly and completely gone for their son. He hopes they have at least started to grasp that. To some extent, he thinks that they have.

"Oh, Shane," Yuna says excitedly as their meal is winding down. "We forgot to tell you, but..." She looks over at David, who is smiling. "We're going to have a new member of the family soon."

Ilya glances over at Shane, his Shane, who has gone very still all of a sudden.

"Um...what?" He asks, looking his mom up and down.

Ilya, admittedly, is also a little confused.

“Now, don’t be ridiculous,” she rolls her eyes at their matching expressions. “I’m talking about a cat! The Sullivans’ cat just had a litter, and they have all these adorable little kittens they need to get rid of, so I said your father and I would take one. We’re going to pick it up as soon as we get back to Ottawa.”

“A cat! Did you hear that, Shane?” Ilya nudges him in excitement. “Shane *loves* cats.”

“Really?” Yuna raises her eyebrows. “I didn’t know that. Since when?”

“Since always. I mean, he practically *is* a cat,” Ilya grins, leaning over to ruffle Shane’s hair, and Shane just shoves at him grumpily. “What color is the kitten going to be?”

“Oh, I think they have some of those tuxedo cats. Right, David? Do you remember?” She turns to her husband. David shrugs in response.

“A black and white kitten! Oh my god. *Shane*,” Ilya turns to shake him by the shoulders with both hands. “There’s going to be another little kitten running around. I can’t wait to meet it!”

“Another?” David asks, looking interested. “Do you have a cat as well, Ilya?”

“Oh, yes,” Ilya nods, dropping his hand to Shane’s thigh under the table. “I have the best, most well-behaved kitten.”

“Aw,” Yuna smiles and leans in a little. “What’s its name?”

“Jane,” Ilya replies without thought, giving Shane’s leg a pointed squeeze.

Shane is silent next to him, but Ilya can see out the corner of his eye that his cheeks are blushing a vibrant red.

“My Jane is the most perfect kitty. I *also* have a black and white cat,” he smirks, especially when Shane tries to shove his arm off, but Ilya just keeps a tight grip on his knee.

“You’ll have to bring her over sometime, once you get to Ottawa. We can have a kitten play date,” Yuna expresses vibrantly.

“Yes, I think my Jane would absolutely love that,” Ilya affirms.

Shane is still silent next to him, but Ilya doesn’t think anything of it. In fact, he doesn’t think anything of it until Shane still hasn’t said anything the whole drive home. His Shane liked to be quiet, Ilya knew that for a fact, but this was different. This was not a calm type of silence like the kind he had grown accustomed to; this was an anxious one.

“Hey,” he says once they’ve brushed their teeth, and Shane still hasn’t uttered a word. He glides a hand over Shane’s hip, ducking to try and catch Shane’s eyes, but he won’t meet his gaze. “Is everything alright? Are you upset with me?”

Shane still won't look at him, won't sink into his touch, won't even give him a flicker of a smile.

Ilya swallows, suddenly feeling very guilty. "Is it cause I said that stuff in front of your parents? Because I was just teasing. I do not think they *actually* think you're a cat."

"Well, I am one," Shane says sharply, suddenly turning to face him.

Ilya's eyebrows draw together in confusion. "I do not understand."

And, Shane just crosses his arms over his chest, drops his eyes to the floor again, and huffs almost imperceptibly.

Something suddenly dawns on Ilya, and he can't help the way his face practically lights up in amusement at the realization. "Oh my god," he states, eyes cataloguing Shane from his expression down to his feisty little attitude. "You're jealous."

Shane scoffs, but his reaction only confirms Ilya's suspicions.

"You're jealous of the kitty cat," Ilya coos, pulling him into a big hug that Shane tries to escape from.

"I am *not*," Shane snaps, but he looks so angry. Like Ilya's just touched on a nerve.

Ilya frowns and carefully links their fingers together. "Shane," he says softly.

"Just stop, okay? It's stupid," Shane sighs, shaking him off once again. Ilya isn't having it, though.

"No, it's not stupid," Ilya disagrees, tugging Shane into his chest and holding him there tightly this time. He doesn't say anything else until he feels Shane start to relax against him, the tension slowly leaving his body as he melts into Ilya's grasp.

"You were so excited," Shane muffles into his chest, and Ilya has to pull back a little to be sure he's heard him right.

"I was what?"

Shane just glowers at him half-heartedly and rolls his eyes. "You were so *excited*."

Ilya tips his head in confusion, searching Shane's expression for something that might clue him into what the hell was actually going on here. "That's what you were jealous of? The fact that I was excited about another kitty cat? Oh, *Shane*," Ilya sighs, and pulls him back into his chest once more.

"I told you it was fucking stupid," Shane mutters.

"It's not stupid," Ilya assures him, shaking his head. "Not at all." He leans back slightly to catch Shane's angry little sad kitten eyes, nudging the other's chin up with his fingers. "What is stupid is that you think there's any cat in the world that could compare to you."

Shane swallows and tries to duck his head again, but Ilya keeps him in place.

“What is stupid is that you think you have anything other than my *entire* heart and devotion. It is stupid to question it, but if you need to hear it, I will tell you over and over again until it is so embedded in your beautiful kitten mind that you can never forget.” Ilya strokes his hair and pulls him close to kiss his forehead. “There is nothing I want more in this world than you. And certainly not some kitten who has never even won a *single* Stanley Cup, let alone *four*.”

Shane laughs genuinely at that, and Ilya relaxes at the sound.

“You’re a prize-winning cat. I do not think I could ever care about some regular ole kitty cat when I have the best one in the world. If anything, I was just excited that you were going to have someone to play with,” he hums. And he’s joking, kind of. But Shane has that look in his eye that he gets sometimes when Ilya’s said something he likes. Something he might actually be into. Ilya’s body thrums with the revelation. “Would you like that? Getting to have a little kitten play-date?” Ilya scratches through the hair at the nape of his neck intentionally.

“No,” Shane says softly, but Ilya can see right through him. He can read Shane like the back of his hand, at this point.

“No? Kittens do this, you know? They are very playful together. Maybe I could even get you some catnip. Some toys. You could share them with your new kitty friend.”

Shane’s cheeks are flushing like they always do when he’s very obviously interested in something. When Ilya has read him and guessed his desires correctly once again.

“Mm, you are missing the club, aren’t you, sweet boy? Missing getting to run around with all your little pet friends while the owners handle the boring grown-up stuff, hm? And all you are expected to do is be your cute, silly kitten self. It has been a stressful few weeks for you, hasn’t it, котенок?”

Shane just nods heavily, like he really is a tangled-up yarn ball of stress that his kitten self would quite like to unspool. He collapses forcefully into Ilya’s arms once again and hugs him tightly around the waist, until Ilya has no choice but to positively squeeze him to death.

“My poor baby. I wish I could take it all away. I wish I could take care of everything for you forever, so you do not have to,” Ilya tells him seriously, because Shane really did have the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Sure, Ilya had hockey too, but he didn’t carry the expectations of others the way Shane did. Shane had his parents, first off, who were *counting* on him to be *The* Golden Boy. He had his band of asshole teammates, the entire city of Montreal to answer to, and more than that, Shane had the entire world watching him. Ilya was great at what he did, but Shane had sponsorships, billboards of his face put up by companies that expected him to *sell*. It was a lot of pressure, Ilya imagined, being at the top of a very tall and wobbly tower.

The higher Shane built himself up, the more Cups he won, the more brand deals he signed on to...the less and less stable that tower became. And Ilya could see that the foundation was crumbling around him. Ilya could tell that Shane, at his core, could no longer handle the weight of the empire he had built. It was too much. Too many eyes. Too many people vying for a piece of him, hoping to get even just a taste of the Golden Boy's magic.

Ilya was throwing himself at the bottom, trying to pick up all the loose pieces, trying to stabilize the base before anyone could notice that the tower was leaning. But Shane's team was moving in on him fast, the press, his fears catching up to him, threatening to tip it all over—everything he's worked for. Ilya could see his life flashing before his eyes, and somewhere in the middle of all that, Shane was just a tiny scared kitten who just wanted to be seen. Accepted. Loved.

Ilya brightens, suddenly, when he remembers the Amazon package he had ordered upon arriving to the cottage. It had to be here by now. His instincts had told him it would come in handy, especially after helping Shane through his First Official Panic Attack™, which was not to be confused with his other *unofficial* panic attacks.

“Stay right here for a minute, baby. I'm going to go get us some water,” Ilya pulls back to tell him, cupping Shane's pretty, freckled cheeks in his palms. Shane just nods miserably, like the last thing he wants is to be left alone right now, but Ilya has just the thing to make him better. He kisses his tiny, baby kitten nose and then darts downstairs, running barefoot outside to get to the mailbox. And, sure enough, he finds one Amazon package addressed to one pouty, grumpy kitten.

He quickly cuts into the packaging with the kitchen scissors, trying not to get flashbacks from two nights before, and then heads upstairs in hopes of delighting Shane with his new purchase.

Shane is still there, leaning his weight against the bathroom sink, and looking so, so small for a professional athlete with four Stanley Cups to his name. Ilya slinks up to him with his hands behind his back, waiting to catch Shane's eye before he offers him a winning smile.

Shane just looks at him in defeated confusion, like he's taken on the world today and, for once in his life, hadn't come out on top. Ilya had just the thing to lift his spirits.

“I got something for you,” he leads in, pulling his hands in front of him to reveal two kitten ear clips: one black, one white. They're each dotted with little spots of the opposing color, which Ilya thought was quite cute since Shane was very obviously a freckled cat. There were kitten paw gloves that hadn't arrived yet, and a very beautiful custom tail that was still waiting for Shane back at the club, but this would be enough for now. This *had* to be enough for now.

Shane has gone eerily silent, eerily stoic in a way where Ilya can't make heads or tails of what he must be thinking. What he must be feeling.

But then, Shane's face is crumpling with the weight of a thousand suns, and he reaches out with shaking fingers to touch one of the ears in Ilya's hand.

They're soft, Ilya had read the reviews to make sure, and they're small enough that they should stay in place on his head without causing too much discomfort. His Shane was only a baby kitten just coming into himself, after all. The last thing Ilya wanted was to weigh him down.

"Do you like them?" He asks softly, almost hesitantly, like he's scared he somehow got it wrong.

But Shane's fervent nod and wobbling lower lip are answer enough. His eyes are teary like they always get when he's overwhelmed, and Ilya wants to protect him with all the fury of a rumbling, roaring storm. Wants to scare off anything or anyone that could even come close to upsetting his precious Shane's fragile, too-good-for-this-world heart.

"Do you want me to help you put them on?" Ilya questions this time.

Another jerky nod.

So, Ilya steps closer to Shane, grateful for the few inches he has on him to be able to position the ears in his hair properly. He places them with a painstaking awareness, trying to get them as symmetrical and secure as possible, so that when he steps back, and Shane tilts his head in quiet curiosity, Ilya's heart fucking swells at how adorably perfect he is.

"Oh, baby," Ilya says softly, turning Shane by the shoulders towards the bathroom mirror so he can see for himself.

And Shane...Shane is in awe. Like he's seeing himself for the first time. Like he's been searching for an identity for so long, and he's finally found it. And somehow, in all the chaos of this twisted and messed-up world, Shane wasn't a human boy anymore; no, Shane was a kitten, through and through. Ilya could see it in the way he scrunched his nose, in the way he slow blinked at himself in the mirror, sizing himself up with an inquisitiveness that could only be mustered by that of a true cat.

Shane's silence is different now. It's not stilted, or stuffy with the air of an unreleased tension. It's the silence of one who is very rapidly and intensely entering kitten space.

Shane must be incredibly stressed, if this is all it takes to start sending him down. Ilya wonders how long he's been hiding it, if he's even noticed it the last few days, or if it's just something that creeps up on him, sometimes. Takes him by storm. Had Shane felt it with the Pikes last night at dinner? How about the night before with his parents and Rose? Dinner today. Was that the trigger? Was it brought on by just one thing or the culmination of many others?

Ilya isn't sure. It's not the time to figure it out, though, because Shane is unexpectedly looking to him for guidance. Ilya hadn't intended to scene tonight. They didn't discuss it, didn't make a plan as Ilya would have liked to, especially considering how horribly their past few scenes have gone. Well...not horribly. That felt like an icky word to use, because truthfully, all of his experiences with Shane had been beautiful. Other-worldly. But, still. He wasn't looking to make any more mistakes.

Shane is watching him, though, with half-lidded eyes that suggest he might be a little down already. Like just the weight of the ears on his head was enough to get him there. So, Ilya immediately transitions himself into a more dominant mindset, shifts the gears in his head to account for the swift change in plans. Shane needed something tonight, needed *him*, and Ilya would sooner die than not deliver.

“You are so gorgeous, котенок,” Ilya tells him softly, slow and intentional. Shane’s eyes are tracking his every movement, cataloguing each micro-expression that crosses his face, and Ilya makes a strong effort to school his features so as not to let any lingering worries show. Being on edge was a sure-fire way to send Shane spiraling out of control, and he wouldn’t do that again. He couldn’t. “I think we should go curl up on the bed, hm? Let me pet you a bit. It’s been a long day.”

It hadn’t been that long of a day, really, but maybe for Shane, it had. Ilya still hadn’t figured out which part of his life was secretly working in the background to drain all his energy. Maybe introducing Ilya to his parents and the Pikes had played a role in it this time, but this was clearly something Shane had been struggling with for a while. Long before Ilya had made any serious appearances in his life.

Shane nuzzles into his hand when prompted, like he’d give anything to not have to think right now, and Ilya desperately wants to give him that. So, he squeezes the back of his kitten’s neck just once and then guides him back to the bedroom, Shane obediently following like Ilya’s got him by an invisible leash.

“That’s it, baby. You’re being so good for me,” Ilya coaches him through it as they climb under the covers, Shane curling up in exhaustion next to him until his fluffy black hair is played all over Ilya’s lap.

Shane blinks up at him with loosely aware, big, brown, doe eyes, and Ilya just scratches intentionally behind one of his ears and into his scalp. He watches as it has the desired effect, Shane’s lashes fluttering closed over his pretty, freckled cheeks, the kitten ears blending into his hair so seamlessly that Ilya could half-convince himself they grew that way overnight.

Ilya smiles softly at him, exhaustion washing over his own features as the events of the last few days catch up to him. It had been a lot, even he could admit that. Shane was navigating many different reactions from many different people. Some good, like his family seemed to have taken it. Others bad, in the form of his incessantly annoying team mates and the maybe not-so-terrible Hayden Pike.

The scenes were maybe a band-aid to a much bigger problem, one that Ilya hasn’t identified the root of just yet. But Shane was clearly putting in a lot of mental effort behind the scenes if he had come up with an entire charity in the span of a singular day. A complicated and detailed plan that would allow him to continue wearing Ilya’s collar in public. It was *that* important to him.

Ilya chews on his lower lip in contemplation. They were making good progress, that he knew for sure. Shane had seemed so open and happy at the cottage the past few days, light and airy around his family and friends, even as he exposed a vulnerability to them for maybe the first time in his entire life. But a part of Ilya, a twisted and ugly part that was rearing its viscous

head inside of him, still wondered if, for every knot they untangled, they were only creating a newer, tighter one to be discovered down the line.

It's a thought he can't shake for the rest of the evening, and even when Shane is seemingly peaceful and rested, fully asleep in his lap, Ilya can't escape the nagging, sinking feeling that there's still a war raging on inside of him, one that hasn't even begun to start slipping through the cracks.

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Chapter End Notes

Sneak peek of what is still to come:

- absolutely more of Ilya's club (the heart of this fic). we will be heading back to montreal very soon!
- ottawa!!!! Ilya is officially signing with ottawa and will be moving there at the end of the summer. do we think Shane is in it for the long haul with his montreal voyageurs?
- the centaurs!!!! i'm probably most excited for this part since the centaurs are some of my favorite characters from the book series
- and of course...more drama, more angst, more smut, more kinks to be explored

Your comments, reactions, theories have been amazing to read, so please keep them coming :)

ALSO!!!! @rozyhollanov made a trailer for this fic!!! it is so so perfect and fits this book SO well. i'm honored and woweddddd thank you thank you thank you. [you can check it out here if you want](#), and please show them some love <3

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

Shane is starting to get antsy being at the cottage, Ilya can tell. Where it might have relaxed him the first week or two, he can see tension starting to build once more. Shane needed release, needed a way to get out the anxious energy that was living and festering inside of him. He was getting strict with his diet again, wasn't indulging in the occasional drink anymore, instead sticking to his beloved ginger ale. Every time Ilya left the room, he would come back to find Shane watching hockey videos with his thumb between his teeth, his eyebrows furrowed, and his shoulders hunched.

Maybe he was starting to feel the pressure of going for the team's fifth Cup, especially being the reigning champs two years in a row. Ilya remembered the devastation on his face when the Voyageurs had just barely lost to the Admirals in game 7 of the playoffs, right when Shane had been expecting to take his team to a three-year Stanley Cup reign. They had recovered, of course, in the years following. Even went on to win two in a row, once again, but Ilya knew Shane was gunning for that third succession. He knew he felt he had something to prove, that Shane was desperate for his team to rank the best in the League, and for some reason, he had decided winning three consecutive Cups was the way to do that.

Ilya wouldn't pretend to know how Shane's mind worked. He wasn't sure why certain foods were considered safe to Shane while others weren't, wasn't sure why sometimes his brain and body decided it was time to kick it into high gear. That he suddenly wasn't doing enough. That his internal clock was ticking too fast, and he wasn't meeting it with enough intensity.

All Ilya knew was that Shane could coil in like a wind-up doll. That one second, he was totally fine, laughing and free of stress on the couch. And then, slowly, over the course of a week or two, he would reset, his limbs growing stiff, his walls rising up. His Shane was complicated, but Ilya was nothing if not up for the challenge.

So, while Shane busies himself with obsessing over old hockey videos, Ilya gets to work researching. He's man enough to admit that there are things he doesn't know. And the longer he interacts with Shane, the more he realizes there are significant gaps in his knowledge.

It was clear Shane wanted to be a cat. That much was obvious. And Ilya could give him that, no problem. As far as he was concerned, anyway, Shane *was* a cat. But Shane wanting to wear the collar all the time was tricky. Ilya wasn't sure what it meant for him, if it was Shane's way of saying he wanted to be a cat outside of their regular scenes, or if it was just something he liked. A little reminder of who he belonged to when he couldn't explicitly say it out loud.

But Ilya knew Shane could start slipping easily. Shane was extremely comforted by his voice, by his touch, and that maybe wasn't even that much of a problem, because mostly, Ilya and Shane spent their time together alone. Only now Shane's parents were fair game, and apparently, so were the Pikes. Which meant they needed to set some clear boundaries on

when Shane was allowed to slip into that cat space, versus when Ilya needed to pull him back. He still hadn't entirely figured out how to do that yet.

He googles for an hour or two, until his eyes start to blur from the screen. Words like *Lifestyle D/s*, *Romantic D/s*, *Pet Play regulation*, are all spinning through his head. It's a lot of pressure. He hasn't been tasked with anything of this nature before, and this was *Shane*. The light of his fucking life. He needed to do this perfectly.

"Hey," Shane says as he enters the room, and Ilya turns over his shoulder to find Shane's eyebrows pressed together. Like Ilya has personally offended him by not being at least two feet away from him at all times. "Where'd you go?"

Ilya smiles at the needy little kitten. He was so fucking cute. "I didn't want to interrupt you and your super important official hockey business."

"Yeah, well. Captain's duties. Guess you don't have to worry about that this year," Shane hums, and he must mean it to be teasing. Playful. He's also sorely mistaken.

Ilya just raises his eyebrows. "And what makes you think I'm not going to be Captain?"

Shane's expression falls to one of confusion. "What do you mean? It's not like they'd make you Captain your first year. They have some vets on the roster."

Ilya shakes his head imperceptibly. "You think I am going to Ottawa to mess around with a stale team that can't win? Clearly, they are in need of some new leadership."

"You're going to be Captain?" Shane clarifies.

Ilya smirks and crosses his arms over his chest. "Ah, I see. You thought you were going to have it easy playing against Ottawa this year. Think again, Hollander. No team plays better than when they are under the leadership of Ilya Rozanov." He can see a little flicker of desire run through Shane, and Ilya laughs knowingly. "Does it turn you on to know I am Captain?"

Shane huffs and shakes his head.

"I am very good with holding authority. You should know this by now," Ilya tells him with a click of his tongue.

"No, it's just. I've never heard of someone coming in as Captain their first year."

"Yes, well, I am very convincing. I will also be cleaning up the roster. It's time to bring in some fresh talent. I do not need these tired, boring Canadians with no light left in them. I need new blood, boys who are eager to win," Ilya explains, because clearly Shane has underestimated the amount of thought he's put into this. "If you are lucky, maybe we will convince your boring coach to trade you to the hottest new team in the NHL."

Shane looks genuinely fearful at that, and Ilya laughs, reaching for his wrists to tug him closer between his legs.

“Relax, котенок. I am not actually planning on poaching you from your asshole team,” Ilya soothes, giving Shane’s hands a little squeeze. “At least, not until you beg me to whisk you away.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Yeah, right. Fat chance of that happening.”

“Mm, you have no faith in me,” Ilya hums.

“That’s not true at all. I just know it takes years to build up a good team. I’ve seen it happen,” Shane shrugs.

“All it really takes is good leadership and the charm of Russian Hockey Extraordinaire Ilya Rozanov. You see how fast I have whipped you into shape, hm? And now you are my very good boy for me,” Ilya tips his head, watching as Shane’s eyes get a little soft. A little gooey.

God, Ilya was enamored with how easily he could start to sink, but he was also aware that they needed to set boundaries fast.

“I think we need to talk,” Ilya tells Shane gently, and he doesn’t miss the way Shane’s eyes immediately zero in on him, like he has ice-ladled anxiety running through his veins. “Relax, baby. I meant about our arrangement.”

Shane relaxes a fraction, but Ilya can still feel him tense in his arms. He’s nervous. For what, Ilya isn’t sure, but it makes him a little nervous as well. He wants to make sure they’re on the same page, wants to make sure Shane gets what he needs out of this, but selfishly, Ilya is hoping he can also get what *he* needs out of it. He’s in love with a fucking cat.

“I know you like being my котенок, yes?” That much was obvious.

He’s unsurprised when Shane gives him an enthusiastic nod in return.

“Okay. That’s good. I do not wish to change this. But we do need to set some boundaries about when you are my котенок versus when you are Shane Hollander Golden Boy.”

Shane’s lips drop into a pout just slightly. “I thought I’m always your котенок,” he says softly, and Ilya’s heart swells.

“You *are* always my котенок. Always, always,” Ilya promises, pressing a smacking kiss to each of Shane’s hands. “But there are some times when it does not make as much sense for you to be my котенок. Like when we are around family, yes? Or my good friend Hayden Pike.”

Shane swallows and nods a little, like he isn’t pleased with the idea of having to be Shane Hollander, but he must at least recognize why it’s necessary.

“I do not think it has to be all or nothing,” Ilya tells him, with hopes of brightening his spirits a bit. “I think there are levels to it. Sometimes, you are a level 1 kitty cat. And maybe this does not have to be anything crazy. It just means you are relaxed, not *down* necessarily, but a little loose. Looking to me for guidance. I noticed this when you first introduced me to your parents, hm? Sinking into my touch, asking for permission to drink delicious Russian vodka.

This is good, yes? I think this is perfectly *okay* around others, but what do you think? How did you feel?"

"I...yeah," Shane replies, and Ilya can tell his throat has gone a little dry, his heart a little fast. "I think it's okay. It wasn't...like...noticeable, was it?" He double-checks, and Ilya wants him closer, so he pulls him between his open legs by the hips.

"I do not think so. Maybe a little, but is nothing out of the ordinary. You were still able to find your words, yes? You did not feel too out of it?"

Shane shakes his head.

"Good," Ilya says soothingly, petting his hand over Shane's side. "I think level 1 is okay whenever you want to slip into it. As long as I know where you are headed, so I can keep an eye on you and make sure you're not slipping further."

Shane presses his lips together thoughtfully. "Slipping further," he repeats. "Does that mean...er, what's level 2?"

Ilya smiles. "Level 2 is when you are a bit down. You get a little more quiet. Words are possible, but maybe a little bit harder. You don't want to think as much. You are relying on me more to guide you. You are more responsive to my voice and my touch. I think it is sometimes very easy for you to get here from level 1 without even noticing. We do not want this to happen necessarily around others. Maybe only if it is a safe space. I am not sure your thoughts, but I could see you getting this way around people you trust very deeply. Maybe Rose, or even Svetlana, since you mentioned you do not care that she knows, hm?"

Shane nods jerkily. "I—yes. Maybe around them. If I want it, I—sorry, I mean, if we both want it," he corrects, and Ilya wants to kiss him.

"Mm, and how are we going to communicate to each other that we want it? Are you aware when you start to slip, baby? Sometimes, I think you do it without noticing."

Shane swallows again, dropping his gaze to the floor. "Maybe. I guess I don't always notice it, no. It can just happen sometimes. If I...um, if I'm feeling really safe around you. If your words are making me feel really good, or when you touch me a certain way. I can sort of get lost in it."

"Touch you or talk to you how?" Ilya double-checks, because Shane's triggers were important to pinpoint so they could continue to do this safely. The last thing he wanted was Shane dropping unexpectedly when they were in the middle of dinner with his family. Something told Ilya that would be difficult to explain to the Hollanders, especially if Shane drifted into an intense level 3 headspace.

"I dunno, um. Like controlling, I guess. Giving me those, like... low commands. Sometimes your voice gets all slow and deep, and it's, fuck," he closes his eyes tightly for a minute. "It's intoxicating. It makes me feel like I'm drunk. And sometimes you touch me like I'm *yours* in front of everyone. That makes me feel really, really good. Really, *really* good."

Ilya leans back in the office chair he's sitting in and carefully pulls Shane forward until the other is forced to straddle his lap. He reaches up to brush some of Shane's hair out of his eyes, smiling when his kitten leans into the touch. "I am glad I can make you feel this way, baby. Can you tell me what kind of touches get you there? An example, maybe."

"Like, um," Shane stutters, and he looks like he's having trouble getting his thoughts together. Like Ilya was having an effect on him even now. "When you squeeze my leg all possessively. Or touch my lower back...or my shoulder. The back of my neck." He shudders fully at that one. "My hair, oh god. Any time you pet my hair or scratch my head, I just..."

Ilya watches in delight as his eyes nearly roll back into his head, but Shane seemed like he was going down just by talking about it. "Stay with me, baby," Ilya reminds him, putting a little intention behind his voice, and it has the desired effect, with Shane's eyes brightening slightly, going a bit more alert. "Good. I think I am learning triggers for how to keep you present. To keep you from going too far down when you do not want to. Did that help you to refocus just now?"

Shane nods, but he's distracted, running his hands over the smooth skin of Ilya's neck, mapping the space across his collarbones.

"*Shane*," Ilya says again, and he watches it happen this time, watches Shane re-center, bring himself back. "Are you with me right now?"

"Yes," Shane says, and his eyes are clear.

"Good, baby," Ilya soothes, testing it the other way around this time. He needed to be able to bring Shane back, but he also needed to know how to push Shane further, depending on what the other was needing from him. As long as Ilya could master those verbal and physical cues, he figured they would be alright. Shane is already going back down again. "Now, focus, please. I want to talk about level 3. Level 3 is when it is the most intense for you, yes? This is when you feel like being very quiet, like words are hard, and maybe your brain is foggy. You are expecting me to be fully responsible for you when you are like this."

Shane gets this dazed look in his eyes, almost like he knows that space well. Which wasn't surprising. Level 3 was likely when Shane felt the most at peace, the most fuzzy and calm. Ilya *loved* getting him there, but there was a time and place for it.

"We will have to figure out when you want this, as I do not think it's healthy to be there all the time, but for the most part, when you are with me, you are safe to go there. Level 3 is just for when we are in private, or maybe for certain times we are at the club, if it is a controlled environment like *In the Dark* or *Unleashed*. Do you agree?" He gives Shane's hip a firm squeeze to direct his attention once more. Shane's explanation was very helpful, and already, Ilya was learning to tell the difference between touches that brought him deeper, versus touches that could bring his attention back to the surface.

"Yes," Shane gasps a little, and it was clear Level 3 was the part he was most excited about. The part he and Ilya had explored the most in detail. Level 1 and 2 were a little blurrier as, so far, they hadn't had to navigate as many spaces that weren't just shared between them two.

Still, though, there were dangers to be aware of. “I saw you start to slip into this very easily last night. Do you remember? After I put your cat ears on, it is like you immediately entered into your fuzzy kitten mode. I think this is mostly because you saw yourself as a cat, but also, you were very stressed, hm? I think this played a part. Do you think it is easier to slip when you are stressed?”

He watches as Shane seems to think it over in contemplation, before dropping his head and nodding resolutely. “I think...I think sometimes I just wanna shut my head off. It can be *so* much sometimes. I like not having to think, especially when you are so good at doing it for me.”

Ilya’s expression softens just slightly. “Hey, this is not a bad thing. It’s very, very good that I can make you feel this way,” he reassures him with a light petting. “We just need to make sure we are able to recognize when this is happening, so that we can adjust accordingly, okay?” He waits for a nod before continuing. “Now, based on what we talked about, do you think you are able to tell which level you’re in when you’re in it? If I asked you what level you are now, what would you tell me?” Ilya prompts.

Shane licks over his lips thoughtfully and then says, “Level 1.”

“Good boy,” Ilya’s lips curl in approval. “I think that is correct. You are talking to me, you seem to be thinking clearly. You are maybe a little relaxed because you are in my lap and I’m touching you very nicely, but this is okay. This is appropriate for when we are around others. If you wish to go into level 1, you are safe to do so. Does that sound like a boundary you are okay with?”

He can’t hide his grin when he gets a soft smile out of Shane. Good, they were on the same page, then.

“Now, sometimes we will need to check in. Just to make sure you are staying where you want to be. If I ask you what level you are, do you think you would be able to hold up a number? Even if you are feeling like not talking?” Ilya demonstrates by holding up one finger, watching as Shane mimics the motion. “Good. If I ask you your level, you will hold up a number depending on how you are feeling. If you are feeling between levels, you can show me both like this.” Ilya holds up one finger, and then another.

Shane copies him, holding up a 1 and then a 2. “What if I want to go deeper, though?”

Ilya tips his head in contemplation. “It will depend on the situation we are in. Some of this we may have to figure out as we go along.”

“I could um...touch my collar,” Shane suggests. “Like hook my fingers through the chain with the level I want to go to. And um...then, you could decide if it’s a good idea or not.”

“You are okay with me deciding this?” Ilya questions, because that was drifting much more into the Lifestyle category of D/s.

Shane just shrugs and wraps his arms around Ilya’s neck. “I trust you. Plus, I think it’s hard for me to know sometimes. You’re the one who can tell if I’m going too deep.”

Ilya feels his entire insides warm. “Mm, I am okay with this.” He already watched Shane like a hawk, anyway. It wouldn’t exactly be a hardship to monitor his levels, make sure he was in the proper amount of kitten space at all times. “But, this is not every second of the day, alright? It is okay for you to be in level 1, but we also need clear boundaries for when you are fully cognizant. I do not want this messing with your brain. You can be a kitten, but you are still Shane Hollander, yes? And I happen to like him very much as well.”

Shane hums and leans a little closer. “I think I feel pretty close to myself when I’m at a level one. Just a little more relaxed. I think it’s mostly your presence that does that to me, though. If anything, it feels like a good thing. You’re like my own personal stress ball of yarn.”

Ilya is suddenly overloaded with cuteness aggression for this tiny kitty. He can’t resist squeezing him and giving him a heavy shake. “God, you are so fucking cute,” Ilya whines, ducking his head forward to collapse against Shane’s chest.

Shane just laughs and picks his face back up to press a kiss to his nose, but he doesn’t say anything as they gaze at one another.

Ilya rests his hands at Shane’s hips once again. “I know we have talked about this a bit already, but I need to be sure we are on the same page,” Ilya says seriously, because this part was important.

He waits for Shane’s eyes to zero in on him a little bit.

Ilya swallows, his eyes drifting downward as he rubs soothingly at Shane’s hips. The last thing he wants to do is spook him. “This...is not casual for me. I know, for some arrangements, there is no emotional attachment, but that is not the case here. I feel very deeply for you. It is more than just sex, more than just being your Dom.” He looks up to find Shane still watching him. “We do not need to define it right now; there is no pressure coming from me, but I need you to know where I’m at. And I need to know that you, at least a little bit, feel the same.”

There. He’s said his piece. Now, he waits with bated breath for Shane’s reaction.

Shane looks a little shy, a little nervous as he busies himself playing with the curls at the nape of Ilya’s neck. Ilya already feels like he’s made this too serious, so he digs his fingers into Shane’s sides a bit to earn a laugh out of him.

“Stop it, stop it,” Shane scrunches his nose up adorably as he squeezes Ilya’s hands to keep them in place. “Yeah, it’s, um...we’re seeing each other, right?” He double-checks, and if it were up to Ilya, they’d already be boyfriends. Fiancés, even. But Shane wasn’t ready to hear that, so Ilya just nods.

“We are seeing each other. As more than friends, yes? More than just me being your Dominant, and you my submissive. Do you agree?”

Shane chews at the inside of his cheek, eyes unfocused as he loses himself in thought. “What does that mean?”

It means, if Ilya were allowed, he'd be taking Shane out to all the nicest restaurants in the city. Showing him off. Posting him on Instagram for all the world to see. But Ilya isn't allowed to do that. For right now, he's only allowed to have Shane in private settings like these, and for the time being, that had to be enough.

"It means we are not seeing other people. Not having sex with other people. Not kissing other people. Not *flirting* with other people."

Shane's eyebrows crease. "When was I flirting?"

Ilya huffs and shakes his head. "You are stunningly gorgeous, Hollander. Everything you do is flirting."

Shane's mouth drops open in surprise. "It is not!"

"See," Ilya points at him. "You are so seductive, even now. I will not tolerate this around other people. Especially not Hayden Pike."

"Hayden is married!"

"And, yet, if he had the chance, I guarantee he would go for it," Ilya says seriously. He was pretty sure everyone in the entire league wanted to take a crack at Shane, whether they were gay or not. "You are not to offer this hole up to anyone but me. Understand?" He gives Shane a little smack on the ass.

Shane's cheeks just flush like he's about to say something he considers to be a bit dirty. Ilya leans in with interest. "My hole has *been* yours. I just keep waiting for you to take it."

Ilya raises his eyebrows high on his head. "Oh, I have not been satisfying you and your slutty hole, is that it?"

"Oh my god, stop," Shane ducks his head, embarrassed. "I'm just saying. You could have fucked me by now."

"Hollander," Ilya says seriously. "I am working you up to this. You cannot go from sucking your first dick to all of a sudden taking nine inches in your unstretched hole."

"Fuck," Shane curses, hiding his face deliberately in Ilya's neck this time. And then quietly, "Who said it's unstretched?"

Ohhhh, shit. Ilya was going to come in his pants. "Excuse me?" He asks because he doesn't think he can get his brain to come up with any other appropriate words right now.

Shane just huffs and stays hidden, as if that will somehow make the question disappear from Ilya's extremely one-track mind.

"Who the fuck has been stretching it?" He demands to know, once he forces himself to come up with a clear thought.

Shane pulls back and looks at him like he's stupid, his expression deadpan. But Ilya actually has no earthly idea what he's talking about. "I have a...thing."

"A thing," he repeats, his eyes squinted as he tries to figure out what the fuck his boy is talking about.

"A dildo," Shane mutters with a roll of his eyes, and Ilya's expression darkens considerably.

"What...color?" He asks, genuinely curious, but Shane just shoves at his shoulder. "How big is it?"

"Big enough," Shane tells him.

Ilya raises an unimpressed eyebrow. "Unless it is nine inches, it is not big enough, and you are not ready. Maybe if you are a good kitten and train nice and well for me, then I will eat you out and finger you for an hour, and then, after you have been waiting *all* night, then I will fuck you."

Shane is watching him with that dazed, slipping expression again. But Ilya still needs clarity on one thing.

"So, you agree we are exclusive? And that we are...we are more than just an arrangement?" He's trying to be nonchalant about this, trying not to scare Shane by using words like 'romantically involved' or 'in a committed relationship', because he knew how Shane's head worked by now.

Shane's lips curl slightly, and he leans in for a quick kiss. "You're so cute when you're nervous."

And...*what*?

"Nervous?" Ilya pulls back incredulously. "I am not nervous, Hollander. You are the one who is scared, little bunny, while I am big, strong Dominant who will pin you to the floor in one second. I am not *nervous*. You do not scare me."

Shane just hums in amusement, his eyes warm and stuck on Ilya's lips. "Then, why can't you just say what you really want to ask me?"

Okay. Well, maybe now Ilya was nervous. With Shane looking at him expectantly. He isn't even entirely sure what Shane is seeing, whatever must be showing on his face that Shane is hoping Ilya will ask.

"You're blushing," Shane pokes his cheek before Ilya can say anything.

"No," he shakes his head fervently. "Never in my life have I blushed. Russians do not do this."

Shane just giggles softly, like Ilya is the silliest thing in the world to him, until Ilya is forced to huff and sit up a little, pulling Shane closer by his hips. It makes Shane lean in a little more, his hands cupped around Ilya's face, and Ilya closes the distance until their foreheads

are pressed together, their noses inches apart. “I suppose if it were up to me...” he sucks in a breath, hoping he’s not making a mistake. “You would be my boyfriend.”

“Your boyfriend?” Shane pulls back a significant amount, and Ilya’s heart drops to his stomach.

Fuck. He should not have fallen for this fucking trap. Shane was a god damned menace, but a scaredy cat through and through.

“I mean,” he swallows, wondering if there’s a way to somehow backtrack, play it off as a joke. As something less serious.

“I’m not going to agree to be anyone’s boyfriend if they haven’t even fucked me yet. How do I know that the sex is good?”

And, wow. Shane wanted to be a fucking brat today, then. Okay. Ilya could work with that.

“Oh, you think you have leverage here,” Ilya recognizes what game he’s playing. “You want to play hard to get? How many suitors do you have? How many people am I up against?”

“I’m not playing hard to get,” Shane lets out a laugh. “I’m telling you I want you to fuck me. Like *right* now.”

“Mm,” Ilya hums, because the idea was pretty delicious. But not here. Not like this. “I do not want to fuck you the night before I leave. You will be sore the next day, and I want to spend all day taking care of you.”

“Leave?” Shane frowns, and he pulls back suddenly like he’s been burned.

“Hey,” Ilya matches his expression, immediately trying to get him closer, but Shane firmly holds himself at a distance. “Baby, stop that. Come here.”

Shane just scoffs and starts climbing out of his lap.

“*Shane*,” Ilya says again, pleading with him.

“No, it’s cool. If you want to leave, then just leave. Leave tonight for all I care.”

Ilya’s heart cracks a little. “Baby, please listen to me before acting this way.”

“Ilya, it’s fine, really,” Shane huffs, but he won’t even look at him.

“Hey,” Ilya says more sharply this time, and with a hint of his Dom voice. It seems to have the desired effect, with Shane’s eyes darting to him. Ilya can see the hurt hidden behind the anger. “You do not turn away from me like that. I have done nothing wrong. Of course, I would love to stay here with you for the rest of the summer, but I have business to attend to. The club will not run itself.”

“Svetlana can run the club,” Shane bites back venomously, like it’s Ilya’s intention to forget about him and leave him behind.

“Her father is sick, and she needs to visit him,” Ilya replies calmly, and he watches as Shane’s expression softens just slightly.

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Do not be so quick to react when you do not have all the details. Do *not* push me away for no reason. Especially when I have been nothing but sweet to you,” Ilya tells him firmly, until he can see guilt dripping into Shane’s expression. “Now, if you would let me finish, then you would know I want nothing more than for you to come back to Montreal with me.” He sees the little flicker of annoyance flare up in Shane once again.

“I can’t go back to Montreal,” he says with that same level of attitude from before.

“And, why is that?” Ilya looks at him, unimpressed.

“Because. My Montreal apartment is being renovated for the rest of the summer. I bought the one next door. I’m having them combined into one.”

Ilya can’t help the way his lips pull into a smirk. “Ah. Mr. Real Estate. Big moves.”

“Shut up,” Shane rolls his eyes, and his arms are crossed over his chest. “So, anyway. I can’t come. I have no place to go.”

It is Ilya’s turn to roll his eyes this time. “It is a good thing I have a perfectly good house with plenty of room for a tiny baby kitten.”

That causes Shane’s expression to falter, his resolve to crack just a little. “What? I can’t...I can’t stay at your house.”

Ilya just looks at him like he’s the most boring person in the world. “Why not? I am staying at your house right now, and I didn’t even bring one item of clothing. Luckily, you have stolen half of my wardrobe by now, which, by the way, you can do a lot more easily if you are staying at my house.” He watches as Shane’s face pinches up, like his brain is assaulting him with a million different thought bubbles.

“But, what about the cottage?”

Ilya groans, burying his face in his hands. “Hollander, you are having panic attack. What *about* the cottage? It will still be here when you get back, no? Is it not much better to come stay at your boyfriend’s house and get fucked and play kitten some more at your hot boyfriend’s private BDSM club with all the other puppies and bunnies? I mean, really. This does not sound like a tough decision.”

Shane just chews on his lower lip, so much so that Ilya is sure it must be bleeding by now.

He sighs and pushes out of the office chair to approach Shane with a slowness that rivals even Hayden Pike. “Shane,” he says softly, doing his best to use as soothing a voice as he can muster. “There is nowhere I would rather be than with you at your cottage right now. For the rest of forever, if you would have me.”

He doesn't miss the way Shane's cheeks flush in response, and he can't help reaching to run his knuckles over his kitten's beautiful freckle spots.

"I am so grateful that you have opened up your home to me. Brought me around your friends and family. It means more than you will ever know. But I have obligations in Montreal, yes? My own family I need to be there for." He is, of course, referring to Svetlana. Well...and the lovely patrons of his beautiful club. "I understand if you want to stay here and continue to enjoy your summer. I know this place is very special and comforting to you. But please understand that it is not my wish to leave you. If I had my choice, I would keep you locked away inside my chest and bring you with me everywhere, hm?" He cups his cheek this time. "Please. I would love for you to come with me back to Montreal. I do not want to lose momentum with what we have here. I believe it is a feeling you find only once in a lifetime. I will do anything to continue earning your heart."

He gets a tiny smile in return, and it's a good sign, one that sparks a tiny blossom of hope inside of Ilya's fluttering tummy. After a good thirty more seconds of silence, Shane finally tells him what he wants to hear.

"Fine," Shane breathes out. "I'll go." And Ilya is about to start jumping for joy. "But," Shane tells him seriously. "I'm *not* your boyfriend." Ilya frowns, trying not to let the devastation show on his face. "Not until you fuck me, anyway. I have to make sure it's good."

Ilya lets his jaw drop, an affronted look taking over his Slavic features. "You think I am Dominant sex god with nice BDSM club who does not know how to fuck?" He practically yells. "You think I cannot fuck you nice and good the way you want? Whisper things in your ear that will drive you wild? Call you котенок until you are so deep in kitten space that you cannot remember your own name?"

Shane is laughing despite himself, so Ilya makes the executive decision to duck down and throw Shane over his shoulder—all 200 pounds of him. Ilya was really going to need to get a little stricter with his gym routine if he wanted to keep impressing Shane by manhandling him like this, but he can tell it has the desired effect when Shane practically squeals in his arms.

So, yeah. His Shane was turning into a greedy, little brat of a kitten. Which meant Ilya was really going to have to do something about his behavior.

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Rose is a great friend, Shane thinks to himself as he watches Ilya talk her ear off from the passenger seat. She doesn't look too annoyed for someone who is being forced to listen to a dissertation about how Russians are naturally better at sex for a variety of reasons, those of which Ilya has decided to list and explain to her in great detail. Shane is 100% sure it's for his benefit.

"Cold climate! Builds endurance. If you can survive a Russian winter, you can survive anything. It makes us more patient, but also more resilient," Ilya is explaining passionately, while Rose just politely nods along.

“Also, it is very intense in Russia. Shane can attest to this when he went for the Olympics. We are intense and dramatic, but this translates into passion in the bedroom. Russians do not do anything halfway. We are also better with control, see, because Russians can be very stoic. This means better restraint and awareness. Makes for a very safe and protected sexual experience.”

“I see,” Rose offers him a slight curl of her lips.

“They teach strong discipline in Russia, too. Which means better precision and physical skill. And blunt! We are very blunt, which means better communication. There are no guessing games. See, a Russian lover is basically a perfect storm. That is someone you want to lock down immediately.”

Shane is pretty sure he hasn't taken a single breath since they've been in the car. He's watching him in nothing but admiration from the backseat.

“Wow, that's really good to know, Ilya. I guess I should probably find myself a Russian lover, then,” Rose laughs, trading an amused look with Shane in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, everyone should. They are very hard to come by. I mean, *I* am available, of course. Since no one has decided to lock me down yet. Is a shame, really,” he sighs, purposely avoiding Shane's gaze.

“Someone should snatch you up. You're a total catch!”

And it's Shane's turn to roll his eyes this time, but they're clearly trying to ragebait him, and it's not working. Shane was firm on his rule, anyway. He didn't want to make anything official until they'd had sex. It was a rule for more reasons than one, but mostly, he needed more time to come to terms with it.

He'd wanted Ilya to ask him. Wanted to know for certain that that was what Ilya was gunning for. Because a lot of non-committal words and hopping around the topic had left him feeling a little antsy. Like maybe he was reading this all wrong. Like maybe Ilya was scared of getting in too deep, especially when they were still going to be hundreds of miles away from each other for most of the year once hockey season started back up again.

And could Shane really go into his potential fifth year of winning the Stanley Cup with a *boyfriend*? A boyfriend who was Ilya Rozanov? Hayden had taken it badly enough and that was Shane's *best friend*. It hadn't been something he could keep from telling his parents, and they weren't even really together yet. How hard would it be for Shane to keep his mouth shut if they were official fucking boyfriends?

How long would it be before his team found out and— well. That was the thing. Shane had no idea how his team would react. Not well, obviously, but *how*? Would they kick the shit out of him? Would they accuse him of staring at them in the showers? Of watching them while they were getting changed? Or, would they kick him out of the locker room altogether? Kick him off the team, even.

Fuck.

Shane takes a deep breath and leans his head against the car window, shutting his eyes. He stays like that for a minute or two, until he can feel the weight of someone's gaze on him. He lets his eyes blink open and is met with the sight of Ilya watching him intently, blue eyes grazing over him in what looks to be careful consideration.

Ilya just blinks in awareness at the fact that Shane has caught him staring. Like he doesn't really care if Shane knows or not, because really, he just wants to know that Shane is okay.

Shane forces the ends of his lips to turn up, but it must not be very believable, because Ilya turns fully in his seat and leans across the car to place a questioning hand on Shane's knee. He gives his leg a little squeeze, eyes cataloguing each inch of Shane's face. "Всё в порядке, котёнок?"

Shane doesn't really know what it means, other than котёнок, of course, but he takes it to be Ilya asking if he's okay. He is, so he nods.

"Уровень?" Ilya asks, looking concerned. "This means 'level' in Russian," he adds quietly.

And, right. That would be useful. Ilya was asking him his level in Russian.

Shane doesn't know what level he is. He's tired, maybe a little stressed. He shrugs, but he doesn't feel like talking. Was that kitten space? He wasn't even sure anymore. Sometimes, it felt like his brain simply needed to shut down, and lately, Ilya had been giving him permission to do that. Not talking. That, at least, had to be level 2. Level 1 meant words were supposed to be easier. Level 3 was full-on kitten. Shane didn't feel like that. Words weren't hard right now; he just didn't care for them. He holds up two fingers.

Ilya nods, his eyes sharpening a little, like he was visibly setting himself up to take control. He gives Shane a thumbs up, but Shane can see the question in his eyes. *Are you good to stay there?*

Shane would like to go deeper, if he were honest, but level 3 wasn't meant for places like this. Plus, Shane felt like he was seconds from falling asleep anyway, so he just nods. He was good where he was, and Ilya was aware of his mental state, and that meant he could let go, so he does. He shuts his eyes and falls right to sleep, comforted by the hand that continues to weigh on his knee. He instinctively feels himself slide a little closer to feel more of his touch.

The last thing he hears before he passes out is, "Такой хороший котёнок."

When he wakes up a few hours later, it's to the sound of soft voices.

"Maybe I am being too intense, I don't know," Ilya exhales, and when Shane opens his eyes, he spots him gazing out the window stoically.

"Your feelings are intense," Rose reasons. "I don't think that's a bad thing."

"I am going to scare him off, I feel it. Any day now, I am going to say the wrong thing and ___"

“Ilya,” Rose cuts him off, while reaching over with one hand to squeeze his arm. “You need to relax. Shane *likes* you. He introduced you to his family. He had you over at his cottage.”

“I showed up at his cottage unannounced. And the only reason I met his family is because they accidentally found out. Same with Hayden the other morning. These things have happened, yes, but it was not his *choice*,” Ilya stresses, and Shane swallows at how tense he sounds. “He did not choose to introduce me to anyone. To have me over anywhere. If anything, I am the one who pushed for it. I’m the one who offered to go with him to his parents. I’m the one who opened the door for Hayden.”

Rose is quiet, and Shane has this terrible sinking sense that she agrees with Ilya. That she also thinks Shane is a coward who’s too scared of his own feelings. That Ilya is wasting his time. She doesn’t say any of it out loud, but her silence is answer enough.

He shuts his eyes again and tries to keep the white, hot knot in his stomach contained. It wouldn’t get any smaller, but he could try to keep it from growing any bigger.

The next time he opens his eyes, it’s dark out, and he’s alone in the car. Shane squints and looks around, spotting Ilya through one of the car windows. He’s chit-chatting with Rose, and luckily, he seems to be in much better spirits than before. Shane relaxes a bit when he sees Ilya laugh, his stomach doing a little swoopy thing, but not before Ilya catches his gaze through the glass of the window.

His smile is blinding, and Shane watches as he leans over to say something to Rose before pulling her into a tight hug. Rose is smiling, too, and saying something to Ilya while patting his back. Shane is just glad his two favorite people are getting along.

He’s still a little foggy from his nap when Ilya opens the car door, ducking down a little to greet him properly.

“Morning, sleepy head. We are here.”

Shane yawns and scrunches his nose up, rubbing at his eyes. “Where?”

“Montreal. At my house. Is very late, and I need to get something in your stomach since you slept through dinner. Do you need me to carry you from the car?” He asks, tipping his head in amusement.

Shane glowers at him for a second before straightening up, raising his arms above his head to stretch out after hours spent in the same uncomfortable position.

“Big stretch, kitty. There you go.”

“Shut up,” Shane grumbles, getting out of the car with unsteady legs. He nearly stumbles, but Ilya catches him around the waist before he does.

“Easy, baby. That was a long cat nap, hm?”

“Would you cut it out?” Shane sighs.

He could only imagine what Rose thought of him after what he'd overheard of her and Ilya's conversation, and that was just a few minutes out of a nearly 7-hour-long car ride.

"Shane," Ilya frowns, and Shane can tell that he's hurting him, that maybe he's been hurting him this entire time.

"I'm sorry," Shane swallows, and after a moment of thought, he carefully untangles himself from Ilya's grip to sit back down in the car. "Maybe...maybe I should just stay with Rose."

"*Shane*," Ilya says again, but this time he sounds sort of frenzied. Terrified. "What is going on right now? You are staying with me. I thought you wanted to stay with me."

Shane tips his head back for a moment, trying to keep the tears that are gathering in his eyes from falling down his cheeks.

"Shane," and now it's soft, pleading. "Please, talk to me. Do not push me away again. Not after everything we talked about."

Shane is aware of the fact that Rose is hovering somewhere nearby. Admittedly, he doesn't really want to drag her into this, and he probably shouldn't invite himself to stay with her without asking first. Especially when it's late, and she had driven them the entire way back with no complaints.

"Can you just...come inside, please?" Ilya is squatting in front of him now, his face raw and open, and so, so desperate. "Let's just talk and get some rest. It's been a long day. You can sleep in one of the guest rooms if you want, and—" he sighs, ducking his head momentarily. "If you still feel like this tomorrow, I can take you to Rose's. Okay?" He asks, and Shane's heart hurts with how badly he wants to sleep in Ilya's bed. At least for tonight. He could be selfish tonight.

"Okay," Shane heaves a breath in agreement. He doesn't get a chance to say anything else before Ilya is surging forward to pull him into a hug, and Shane is so bone-tired, he has no choice but to sink heavily against him.

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Once Ilya finally gets Shane inside, he locks the door resolutely behind him. Shane was not going anywhere; not tonight, not tomorrow. Ilya was going to make sure of that. He wasn't sure what evil powers had suddenly possessed Shane during his very long catnap, but they were certainly not welcome in his home. He would light a candle if he had to, sage each room, line the entire house with magical pixie dust if that's what it took—anything to keep Shane from pulling away.

It seemed like every time they took a small step forward, Shane wanted to bolt twenty steps back. Ilya wondered how long it would take for things to feel safe for him, until he could trust that Shane wouldn't go running off again.

Ilya places Shane's bag in the living room for now, trying to buy himself some time so he can hopefully talk Shane into sleeping in *his* bed for tonight. Ilya wouldn't be able to sleep

knowing Shane was anxious as hell in some other room of his house, intentionally avoiding him out of what Ilya was sure was fear.

He's on thin ice again. He doesn't know if he's allowed to touch Shane, what he's allowed to say to him. He's not allowed to ask point-blank either, because that would absolutely scare off his very anxious counterpart. All he can really do is tread carefully, test the waters, try and get to the root of the problem faster than Shane can deteriorate.

"You like tuna melt?" Ilya sighs, leaning against the kitchen counter as he looks inside the fridge. There wasn't much of anything, but he did have canned tuna and some bread stored in the freezer. Ilya had no doubt he could make a delicious meal out of very little; the problem was that Shane had proven to be a very picky eater.

He must be tired. Defeated. Because when Ilya turns over his shoulder, Shane just nods slightly. Like he doesn't have it in him to argue. Or maybe he really did just understand that Ilya was out of food. A tuna melt was the only option.

He makes quick work of preparing it and pops it into his panini maker once he's finished. When he turns back around, he finds Shane, unmoved, staring at the same spot on the countertop.

"Can you talk to me, please?" Ilya asks quietly, and he hates the way Shane flinches. "What changed on the car ride over?"

"I heard you," Shane snaps all of a sudden, like he can't hold it in anymore. Like his anxieties are so vast, they're spilling out of him to make room for new ones. "In the car."

Ilya stiffens. "Heard what?"

"How you think I'm just fucking with your head. How I don't know what I want and you're just waiting for me to go running scared."

Ilya frowns. He had said a lot of things to Rose on the car ride over, but nothing like what Shane was accusing him of. "I never said this. I do not think you are fucking with my head. The opposite, in fact. I think your own head is fucking with you."

Shane scoffs. "I don't even know what that means."

"It means I am fucking obsessed with you, Shane," Ilya tells him clearly, because toeing around it didn't seem to be working anymore. "And I think that you really like me, too. Or you *want* to, at least, but for some reason, your anxious brain keeps trying to convince you that you can't have this. Or that you *shouldn't*."

"Of course, I fucking like you," Shane yells, and it looks like it takes everything within him to do so. "I already told you I did."

"Then, why do you keep running? If you like me and I like you, what is there to be afraid of?" Ilya asks, keeping his voice as calm as he possibly can.

Shane's face crumples, and Ilya is at his side in a millisecond, holding him like he's trying to put all of the falling pieces back together. "It's not the feelings I'm afraid of," he admits, Ilya rocking him back and forth as he cries. "It's the consequences."

The consequences. Like having a crush on Ilya could ruin his life. It hits him like a dagger through the spine.

"We don't have to tell anyone," Ilya reminds him, but it comes out as a whisper.

Shane just shuts his eyes tightly, the unshed tears from earlier spilling silently down his cheeks.

Ilya wished he could fix him, that what he had to offer could be enough, but he was doubting that more and more these days. Shane... Shane maybe needed help. This wasn't just something that could be fixed with kitten headspace or all the love that Ilya knew he could provide. This was almost... maybe a deep self-hatred of some kind. Shane's brain was punishing him for things he couldn't control. Things like liking boys. Wanting to be a cat. Having feelings for his arch rival.

The consequences he spoke of were real, though; Ilya knew that. Shane had a valid reason to be scared of losing hockey, of being ostracized from his team, of becoming the laughingstock of the NHL. The pressure was there, but the coping mechanisms were failing him. He could do better. *Ilya* could help him do better.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Shane gasps a sob, pressing his wet face fully into Ilya's chest this time. "I'm sorry for freaking out. I'm okay, really."

He wasn't, but that was also okay. They were going to figure this out together. Ilya didn't have a doubt.

"You're alright, baby," Ilya tells him softly, rubbing over his back with a steady hand. "Just breathe. I've got you. I'm not going anywhere." And he means that. Shane wasn't going to scare him off anytime soon.

"I wanna sleep in your bed," Shane gets out desperately, and Ilya just hugs him tightly in response.

"Fuck, of course, you can, angel. Was never going to let you sleep anywhere else. I'm not gonna let you run from me. You can be scared. You can cry and scream and call me every horrible name in the book if you want, but you're not going anywhere. You're mine now, okay?" He presses into his hair, kissing the top of Shane's head.

The panini maker goes off with a shout, startling them both out of their embrace, but it pulls a jolted laugh out of Shane, so Ilya can't help but smile. He pulls away to cup Shane's cheeks, searching his eyes for confirmation that he's okay. At least for now, he seemed to be.

"Gimme kiss," Ilya requests, because that certainly would be the deciding factor, and he's delighted when Shane plants one on him without giving it much thought. "Mm, so sweet to me, baby. Thank you." He ruffles his hair a little before heading over to retrieve the tuna melt.

“I...um,” Shane clears his throat, speaking up while Ilya plates his sandwich. “I’m level 1 right now.”

Ilya turns over his shoulder and quirks an eyebrow. They were still doing that, then, despite Shane getting upset over his teasing just twenty minutes prior. “Did I...did I do something wrong by making cat jokes around Rose? It’s just, you know. I thought she knew already, but —” Ilya lets out a heavy breath. “I realized I did that around the Pikes, too. And your parents. It has been making you uncomfortable, and yet, I am still doing it.”

“Hey, no,” Shane furrows his eyebrows, shaking his head. “God, it wasn’t making me uncomfortable. I think I liked it too much, actually,” he frowns. “If anything, I think I wish people could know more.”

“Know more?” Ilya repeats in surprise. “What do you mean? Like...like know that you are a cat?”

“I don’t know.” His cheeks are flushed. “Kind of. Maybe not the sex part, but um. I like when you call me котёнок. I guess because they don’t really know what it means, but *I* do. I liked the stuff you said around Rose, too. I just...I was already a little—” he waves his hand, like he doesn’t know how to put a name to his emotions. “From the car ride.”

“Okay,” Ilya replies carefully, because his Shane was truly a never-ending puzzle. “And what about your parents’ house?”

Shane sucks his lower lip between his teeth. “I guess I was kinda jealous. I don’t know. I mean, it sounds so fucking stupid,” he huffs a self-deprecating laugh. “But maybe I’m jealous that the cat gets to walk around with its ears and its cute little tail. The cat gets to be pet, and gets to purr, and show off, and be lazy. And the cat can give attitude, or lick, or bite, and no one bats an eye because...those are all normal things for a cat to do.”

Ilya’s heart picks up a little in his chest.

“Sometimes, I just wish it could be a normal Shane thing to do. Maybe I want to just bite you in the middle of dinner and not have anyone look at me weirdly,” he admits shyly, twisting his fingers together from where they’re resting on the kitchen counter top.

Ilya sucks in a deep breath and just laughs before presenting his arm to Shane from across the counter.

Shane blinks slowly at him, eyes darting down to his arm before back up again.

“Go ahead. Bite me,” Ilya prompts, and then he watches in fascination as Shane presses his little teeth into the skin of Ilya’s wrist. It’s barely a nip, no real force behind it, but it still leaves a tiny imprint of canines into his skin.

Shane looks positively pleased with his work, and maybe even a little bit dazed.

“Shane, I know I keep saying this, but you can have whatever you want. I honestly do not think anyone would care if you wanted to act like a cat sometimes,” Ilya tells him genuinely.

“We can talk about ways to make this work if that’s what you need. I just need you to tell me what’s going on with you. I can’t fix it if you don’t say something is wrong.”

Shane nods, but Ilya can see his level 1 is slipping a little closer to a level 2. He doesn’t want to speak anymore, and Ilya doesn’t want to make him. Not after the day they’ve had. Shane was mentally exhausted from all the acrobatics his thoughts were doing inside his very busy brain. One minute, he was giving Ilya the silent treatment or snapping at him, the next, he was expressing some pretty serious feelings and slipping right into kitten space. He’d slept for nearly the entire 7-hour car ride, and yet, he still looked like he could go for another twelve.

“Shane,” Ilya sharpens his voice slightly, until Shane’s eyes zero in. “You are slipping a bit, baby. Are you meaning to go to level 2 right now?”

Shane blinks a few times, blinks slowly. So slowly that Ilya is sure he might even be close to a level 3.

“Baby, you can go to level 2, but I do not want you at level 3 right now, okay?” Ilya squeezes his hand firmly. “Stay with me for a bit. Don’t go too far. I need you to eat your sandwich, and then we can go to bed. Can you let me know you’re with me? Are you good at level 2?”

Shane smiles and taps two fingers against where Ilya is holding his hand.

He’s here. He’s down and wants to stop thinking, but he’s okay.

Ilya lets go of Shane to grab the freshly plated tuna melt, and then walks around the side of the counter to sit next to him at one of the barstools. Shane is watching him raptly, which was good.

Ilya blows on the sandwich to make sure it’s not too hot before pulling it apart and selecting a small piece to put in Shane’s mouth. “Here, baby,” he prompts, presenting the food until Shane leans forward to lick it up. “Good,” Ilya hums, running his other hand over Shane’s thigh as he chews. His honey-warm brown eyes are twinkling a little bit. Ilya leans forward to steal a kiss.

He lets Shane suck on his fingers, claiming his lips in between tiny bites of tuna melt, until Shane is flat out licking him with his whole tongue. Ilya scrunches his nose up and tries not to tackle him because he’s *sooo* fucking cute. He’s never thought about owning a cat before, but he also was not aware the universe made cats in the form of Golden Boy Shane Hollander.

“That’s a very good boy. You’re doing so well eating your sandwich for me. Stay with me, yes?” He continues to anchor Shane to the moment to keep him from drifting any closer to level 3.

Shane looks so relaxed, so happy as he chews on his bites of tuna, his eyes filled with nothing but adoration, and Ilya is so glad he’s able to give him this. So glad he can bring peace to his terrorist of a brain for even a single second. Shane deserved that and so much more.

Once he's polished off the entire sandwich—save for the crusts, which Shane didn't seem to like very much—Ilya gives his hair a ruffle and then moves to put the discarded plate in the sink.

“Ready to see your room, baby?” Ilya asks, reaching for his hand, and he's delighted when Shane nods and moves to follow him. He's stable right now. Present. So, Ilya grabs his bag from the kitchen floor and starts tugging Shane in the direction of the master.

His house is nice, not that the cottage wasn't, but it's more modern. A little less peaceful, maybe, but for what it lacked in scenic nature, it made up for in amenities. A nice fire by his bed that Ilya could picture Shane curling up in front of, on top of the fluffy rug. He has the ability to heat the floors, too, in every room of the house, including the bathrooms. Just in case Shane starts to get cold feet.

Shane doesn't really seem to be taking much of it in right now, too distracted by whatever good fuzzy feeling must be warming his brain, but Ilya is sure his real estate fetish will take notice tomorrow. He couldn't wait to hear Shane's thoughts, seeing as this was basically his house too now. At least, in Ilya's mind, it was.

He places Shane's suitcase on the couch in his room and carefully unzips it, pulling a few necessities out for Shane, like his toiletry bag that contained his many, many skincare products. Shane probably wasn't in the right mind to go through his complicated routine right now, but Ilya knew he would be stressed the next morning if he didn't at least get something on his kitten's precious skin.

He grabs the toiletry bag and pulls Shane towards the master bathroom, before scooping him up by the hips to place him on the counter. Shane is watching him with a funny look in his eyes as Ilya wets a washcloth and then carefully glides it over Shane's face. He doesn't look like he's in the mood to understand what's going on, so Ilya doesn't explain it to him, instead reaching for what looks to be a cleanser.

He soaps his hands up and then gently rubs circles into Shane's cheeks, lightly using his fingers in those hard-to-reach places before grabbing the washcloth once again to clean him off. He repeats the process with Shane's toner and then a serum or two, finishing up with face cream and eye cream. He's certain he hasn't gotten it perfectly correct, but Shane is looking at him with big, big heart eyes, so Ilya reckons it's good enough. When he's finally done, he presses a kiss to Shane's button nose and then loads his toothbrush up with toothpaste.

Shane is laughing as Ilya tries to help him brush his teeth, eventually taking over by wrapping one large kitten paw around the toothbrush. He's not doing a great job of it, instead just moving the brush from one side of his mouth to the other, but Ilya is hopelessly endeared regardless. Ilya brushes Shane's hair out of his eyes as he leans over the sink to spit, and then presses a kiss to his minty mouth.

“How you feeling, princess? Alright?” Ilya asks, and Shane closes his eyes, giving a tired nod. He's exhausted, but Ilya doesn't blame him.

He helps him off the counter with firm hands around Shane's waist, and then nudges him in the direction of the bed. Once there, Ilya strips Shane out of his shirt and his road trip

sweatpants, leaving him in just a pair of boxers. Shane usually ran a little cold while he slept, but Ilya was determined to warm him up, so he doesn't reach for anything else to cover him.

Once Shane is all wrapped up like a sleepy bug in his bed, Ilya ruffles his hair and then leaves momentarily to complete his own nighttime routine. By the time he returns, Shane has his eyes shut, and he looks mostly asleep, but Ilya can't resist spritzing the pillow with a bit of his cologne, and that causes Shane's eyes to pop open.

Ilya grins, sheepishly hiding the cologne behind his back before carefully sneaking it onto his nightstand. So, maybe he wanted Shane to dream of him while bathing in his scent; sue him. He was in love with a kitten, and kittens reacted to that sort of thing.

After he's finished with all of his nighttime preparations, he crawls into bed beside Shane and pulls the other close to his chest, scratching his fingers through Shane's black fur. He gets a little thrum of a purr in response, and he just hugs him closer, until Shane's highly trained cat ear is pressed right against his heartbeat.

He's been dreaming of this moment for years and years. Having Shane in his space, in his *bed*. Never in a million lifetimes could he have guessed that Shane would be a kitten during his stay, but Ilya wasn't complaining. He loved taking care of him. He loved that Shane trusted him to watch over him. He loved that Shane felt safe enough to be his true self around him.

Ilya presses a round of kisses to his forehead and the top of his head, until he can hear Shane purring soundly against his chest, pressing his little paws into Ilya's skin like he can't get enough. Ilya hopes he never does.

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Shane wakes up warm and cozy to the most heavenly scent he's ever smelled in his life. He inhales deeply and then snuggles closer, wanting that scent to attach itself to every part of his body. He wants to wear it around his neck like an air freshener tag. He thinks it could probably qualify as an official emotional support item.

It's extremely warm, though, almost like there's a furnace lighting up his veins, and something about it feels different than the way the sun normally streams in through the windows of his cottage. He scrunches his nose up and forces himself to blink awake. He's met with the sight of a room he doesn't recognize. His eyes dart around for a moment as he tries to identify where he could possibly be right now, but he's too comfortable to do a thorough investigation. The covers are pulled up to his nose, and the scent is all over him like a marking.

He's alone in bed, however. Toasty, but alone, and Shane is a little nervous to be alone these days because the thoughts can be violent and invasive sometimes. His attention is pulled by the sight of a fire flickering away at the edge of the bed. Mm, so that's where the warmth was coming from. Shane shivers and burrows himself a little deeper. He feels really well-rested, actually. Especially considering he's in a strange bed in a strange house that he doesn't recognize. It's quite the house, though, big and beautiful in a way that makes Shane want to ask to see the entire floor plan. Was it built or bought?

He shakes his head to push those thoughts away and takes another inhale of the intoxicating scent. *So* familiar, but he can't quite place it. It's on the tip of his tongue.

And then, someone steps into the room, and all at once, everything becomes clear to him. He's in Ilya's house, in Ilya's bed, smelling Ilya's mouth-wateringly delicious scent, while Ilya's real-wood fire burns in the background to keep him warm.

"Good morning," a sultry Russian voice greets him. Well, Shane doesn't think he's trying to sound sultry, but Ilya's voice tended to have that effect on him. "How did you sleep, my perfect angel? I made you a very tasty bird food breakfast if you're hungry."

Shane shivers before he can help himself, and he watches as Ilya's eyebrows press together in concern.

"You are cold, котёнок? I do not think I can make it any warmer in here without burning the house down."

He's not cold. Just buzzed a little bit. High on the idea that this is his life. That this *could* be his life. He doesn't think he's ever, in his nearly twenty-seven years, been this attracted to someone. So much so that just the sight of Ilya is setting him off. Making him want to pounce on him. And, it's not sexual; not that it explicitly *isn't* sexual, either, but mostly, he's just overcome with the need to pull him close and touch him all over.

"Baby?" Ilya frowns, and his concern is growing. "Are you okay? Talk to me, please. Use your words."

Shane shuts his eyes tightly. He *can* use his words; he just doesn't particularly want to right now. Sometimes, the silence can be so much more comfortable. Did that make him super fucking weird? Maybe. But lately, drifting closer and closer towards that comfort is all he can think about. It's like his brain welcomed the thought of shutting down, possibly as a coping mechanism, but Shane didn't care.

He's startled by the feeling of Ilya's fingers in his hair, and he lets his eyes blink open.

"Shane, baby," Ilya says again, and there's a tinge of fear there. Like he thinks he's actually broken him this time.

Nope. Maybe Shane was just broken all on his own. Maybe, as Ilya tried to fix him, they were just running into more and more busted parts that needed to be fixed up. Like trying to remodel a house, only to realize the entire foundation is coming apart at the seams. Shane felt like that. Like a broken-down house, incapable of standing tall anymore, and certainly not safe for someone to live in. Still, Ilya kept trying to move in, trying to make a home out of him. But the lights are out, the heating is cut; there's only a locked door and millions of windows that many before him have tried to break down, only to get cut by the shrapnels of glass while searching for a way in. *There isn't one*, Shane wants to yell. Ilya was interested in a house that was in no shape to be on the market.

"You're scaring me, babe." Ilya's looking him over in uncontained worry, which really isn't necessary. Shane was fine. He felt warm and loved and looked after. Was it so terrible to want

to sit quietly in Ilya's warm bed and let his thoughts go blank?

He reaches for him, poking one paw out of the covers to wiggle his fingers at Ilya, almost like a peace offering, but also begging for his touch.

Ilya is still frowning, his face still pinched up as he comes closer to give Shane's fingers a little squeeze.

Shane shuts his eyes and smiles at the feeling of warm skin on his own. He wants to snuggle up in bed all day with him, wants to have the domesticated boyfriend life that he never in a million years thought he'd have. *He still doesn't have it*, a voice reminds him. Ilya isn't his boyfriend, but not for lack of trying. And for a second, Shane wants to give in. He wants to tell Ilya that they can be boyfriends, wants to watch his megawatt smile light up his face and take over his body until he's smothering Shane with kisses and screaming from the rooftop.

God, that would hit so good right now. Instead, he just gives his hand a little tug, silently beckoning him closer.

"Baby, can you give me your level right now?" Ilya prompts as he leans closer, his fingertips grazing Shane's face to reposition the loose pieces of fringe falling in his eyes.

Shane tips his head forward to nuzzle his face a little further into the pillow. He doesn't want to think about stupid things like levels right now. He just wants to go back to sleep and stay in kitten land forever. Wouldn't that just be so much easier?

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Ilya is more than a little concerned. As far as he knows, Shane is deep in level 3 right now. Had he been that deep when they'd gone to bed? Ilya didn't think so, but Shane was known to slip incredibly far in a very short amount of time.

Maybe it was something to do with the fact that he was in Ilya's space, practically bathing in Ilya's scent. Fuck. That had been a bad idea. Scent could be a strong anchor, especially for a cat. Ilya had meant for it to be comforting, to get Shane used to his space, but maybe this was too much. He was really going to have to change how they conducted scenes from now on. It was clear to him now that Shane needed to come way out of it before his head hit the pillow if they wanted to avoid mornings like this in the future.

A horrible lesson learned, but there was no going back. For now, he needed to deal with the problem at hand. Later, he could research a little further, and maybe he could even call someone he really had no intention of talking to, but for Shane, he would.

Shane still seems cold, so Ilya pulls the blankets a little more securely around him. Whether it was actually cold in the room or not, his body was clearly reacting, and Ilya wanted to make sure he didn't get sick.

He doesn't wait for an answer to his question, aware of the fact that it was probably too difficult for Shane to think about things like levels right now. His lack of answer was answer enough, anyway.

Next, Ilya slips under the covers and watches as Shane practically latches onto him like a leech, looking for comfort.

“Hey, baby,” Ilya greets him softly. “I need you to sit up a little for me so I can get some food in your system, okay? Can you do that for me?”

Shane has the cutest little pouty face on his lips, and if it were any other time, Ilya would kiss him until he’s breathless, but there are more important issues at hand right now.

“I know, I know. I’m very evil for trying to feed my grumpy monster, but it’s time to come back up. I need you here with me now, Shane. Listen to what I’m saying, please.”

It’s slow, but it seems to have the desired effect, eventually. He watches on thankfully as Shane carefully starts to meet his gaze, a flicker of awareness appearing in his gorgeous brown eyes.

“That’s very good. Keep looking at me, sweet boy. I made a delicious breakfast for you. You’re going to hurt my feelings if you do not sit up to eat it.”

Shane blinks a few times, and if Ilya didn’t know any better, he’d think Shane is giving him his level 3 kitten version of an eye roll. It’s enough to make Ilya smile. Ultimately, though, Shane rises a little bit, and Ilya reaches for the plate of health foods to start feeding him.

“A yogurt fruit granola bowl, yes? It is very healthy,” Ilya promises, scooping some up onto a spoon before pressing it to Shane’s lips. “Good,” he coos when Shane tentatively opens his mouth to take a bite.

He’s responsive, thank god. He’s still quiet, still hazy, but he’s coming back up; Ilya can see the signs of life in his eyes. He feeds him another spoonful, feeling a little more relief when Shane leans forward this time to take it.

“How is that tasting for you?” Ilya had run out to the grocery store early this morning in order to pick up some supplies, and right now, he’s glad he had the forethought. The act of eating was clearly grounding Shane to reality. That was a very human thing to do, sitting up in bed and eating from a spoon. “Can you give me a nod if it tastes good?”

Shane blinks a few times and then just leans down to rest his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

“Nope,” Ilya shakes his head, slipping his fingers through Shane’s hair to lightly tug him back into a sitting position. “We are not going deeper right now, Shane. We want to come back up. I need you to stay focused.”

Shane just lets out a little huff, but even that is progress in terms of his previous responses to Ilya’s questions.

“Yes, I know. I am being a very evil cat daddy right now, but I need you to pay attention to me. Do you like your food, yes or no? Give me a nod or a shake of your head. I need an answer, please.”

Shane pouts some more and leans forward to accept another spoonful. Ilya takes advantage of the fact that he's still eating and offers him one more.

"Yummy? I cannot understand you if you do not communicate with me," Ilya tries again, keeping his voice calm but firm in hopes of getting Shane back up to at least a level 2 right now. Really, he needed to be more like level 1, but baby steps.

Shane offers him a slight nod to show he does like the food, and Ilya rewards him with a little scratch.

"Good. Can you drink some water for me?" Ilya turns to grab a cup of water from his nightstand and offers the straw to Shane's lips.

Shane doesn't have any trouble following the command this time, sucking from the straw until he's downed at least half the glass. Ilya pulls it away from him before he can make himself sick.

They continue on like that, Ilya prompting him for signs of life, and Shane slowly but surely coming back to himself until he's able to manage a small, "Thank you," after Ilya helps him polish off a piece of toast.

Ilya breathes a sigh of relief and hugs him close to his chest once the words leave his lips. "You scared me," he tells him seriously, rubbing his hands over Shane's arms, which are still covered in goosebumps. "It is not safe for you to wake up this deep in level 3, okay? We are going to have to reassess our aftercare routine."

He feels Shane swallow, almost like he thinks he's done something wrong, and Ilya is quick to pull back and correct that thought process.

"Hey, I am not blaming you. You did nothing wrong. We are still figuring things out, and we are okay, yes?" Ilya reaches for his hand and squeezes it tightly. In fact, if anyone's to blame, it's Ilya. He was going to fix this. He had to.

It was obvious Shane needed some other help, but that was a conversation for a different time. For right now, they were okay. They had run into another problem, but once again, they had come out of it on the other side.

"Shane," he says again when he doesn't get a clear response. "You are alright, yes? Use your words, please."

"Yes," Shane agrees, and Ilya can tell he's embarrassed. He wants to inform him that he has absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. There was no shame in being the best kitten in the entire world, but Ilya needed to make sure they were doing this safely, and while they had survived it this time, there was always the chance that next time wouldn't be so lucky.

"You are perfect for me, okay? I just want to keep you safe. I want you to feel good when you are with me, not drained like you were when you woke up."

“You *do* make me feel good,” Shane says softly, his eyes earnest, and Ilya presses forward to give him a kiss.

“Good. I am glad, but I want to make sure I am not the only thing making you feel good, okay? I need to make sure we’re taking care of you outside of that space, as well,” he offers, petting over Shane’s abdomen. He’s a clear level 1 now, still blinking slow and speaking softly, but *speaking*. That part was important.

What he doesn’t say is that he thinks Shane needs to start seeing a therapist. If he had to guess, anyway. He has a lot that he wants to ask the internet right now, a lot that he hopes to learn from asking around his community at the club. It was a good thing they were in town. Ilya considered himself to be an experienced Dom, but this was way out of his depth. In fact, there was only one person he could think of who had gone through something similar before...and that was Sasha with Ivan.

Sasha was not a model Dom by any means, but Ilya knew Ivan to be a model sub, and he had subbed for many others at the club before. For a while, Ivan had even been their go-to anytime a Dom needed a partner for a demonstration. Once he met Sasha, however, who had—for whatever reason— apparently decided to take up Domming, everything shifted.

“Hockey makes me feel good,” Shane mutters, and Ilya tries to mask his expression to keep from showing his thoughts on his face.

In his opinion, at least, hockey seemed to be one of Shane’s biggest stressors. Maybe it wasn’t hockey *exactly*, but definitely his team. The NHL. The pressure that came with being the best. And Shane was the best. The very best. Ilya could imagine just how heavy that crown was getting to carry.

“I know, sweetheart,” he says instead, and offers Shane a smile. “And you’re the best at it.” It’s worth it when Shane practically preens at the praise, his cheeks a little pink. “Can you eat the rest of your breakfast for me?” He asks, his lips curling even further when Shane nods in agreement. “Good boy.”

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Chapter End Notes

The long-awaited discussion! Looking forward to getting back to the club soon, I know the slow burn has been sloooooow burning, but we have kinks to explore.

I'm so impatient to start writing the Centaurs cause I know they're going to bring the most fun dynamic to this story. Unfortunately, first, we will have to deal with the horrible horrible Voyageurs boooo

As always, would love to hear your thoughts!! Your comments have triggered a lot of ideas for me, so keep them coming!

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

For the sake of how much I want to fit into this story, I have to keep things moving forward, so just another reminder that this is a work of fiction. It is not meant to inform anyone of how to participate safely in BDSM scenes/arrangements, nor is it meant to provide an accurate representation of how typical BDSM scenes/arrangements would play out. I am not an expert. This is purely for entertainment purposes. Enjoy!

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

Ilya has tons to do at the club, and he and Shane can't exactly be spotted in his bright orange Porsche together, so once he feels confident that Shane is good on his own, he heads over with the promise that a private car will be there to pick Shane up later.

Shane doesn't particularly mind having some time alone in Ilya's house. In fact, it gives him ample opportunity to snoop. Mostly, he just wants to explore all the different rooms, wants to take notice of the interior design, and the custom finishes. He fiddles with each fancy setting in Ilya's bathroom, treating himself to a long, relaxing bath in his jacuzzi. It's luxury at its finest, and Shane moans happily at the feeling of the warm jets massaging his sore muscles.

After he towels off, he does his skincare and then heads over to check out Ilya's private gym, taking his time to scope out all the machines and the fancy equipment. He's pleased to find Ilya has a sauna, as well, and it's one he fully intends on taking advantage of during his stay.

Ilya's house is beautiful. Shane could picture himself spending a lot of time here. It's a thought that sparks a feeling of warm desire in his tummy. *His boyfriend's house*. He lets the words roll around his brain, testing them, feeling them out.

"My boyfriend," Shane says, just to taste the title on his tongue. "My Dom." He shudders a little, but it feels good. Everything about Ilya just feels *good*. For a moment, he forgets all about his team, forgets about hockey, and the pressures of winning the Cup. He lets himself process his personal life, his relationships, and he realizes he has a great support system. He has a loving family, great friends in the form of Rose and the Pikes, and now, he has Ilya. Ilya, who could be his boyfriend if Shane wanted. And Shane *does* want. He wants a lot of things, actually, and he wants them quite badly.

He never thought he would get to be a kitten, only now, he is one. He has a collar and everything. Little ears. Maybe even a tail somewhere, because Ilya had promised to get him one, and as far as Shane knew, Ilya never broke his promises. Ilya was endlessly thoughtful. Endlessly sweet. Always coming up with new ways to make Shane smile, to make sure he was comfortable and safe and happy.

God, Shane *loves* him. Not *love* love, maybe, but possibly something close. Shane's never been in love before. He doesn't know what it looks like. But he's also never felt like this before, so maybe it *could* be love. He's not sure. He should probably accept Ilya's offer of being his boyfriend before he falls in love with him, though. There was a proper order to these things, after all, and so far, it seemed like they were going through milestones all out of sorts. Shane had already introduced him to his entire family, to the Pikes. Surely, he could call Ilya his boyfriend without going into Super Panic Meltdown Mode. Still, though, processing things can be hard. Shane just wants to be a kitten again.

He snoops his way through Ilya's closet to find something to wear to the club, something that will hopefully make Ilya want to tackle him out of cuteness aggression. Shane liked riling him up, liked how easy Ilya seemed to be for him. Shane didn't even have to try to turn him on; it's like it came naturally, like Shane just existing could already get him halfway there. Shane is pretty convinced he's somehow landed the best boyfriend of all time.

He has a fucking boyfriendeddd, his brain tells him excitedly. Because Shane never, ever expected to have one. Especially not this soon. Especially not Fetus Gay Awakening, Slavic Man Whore, Russian Love Machine, *Ilya Rozanov*. He can't believe his fucking life as he tugs one of Ilya's tank tops over his head. Ilya's arms always looked *sooo* nice, but Shane had nice arms, too, right? He spends hours in the gym almost every day, eats incredibly clean, and for what? To not show off his body at his hot boyfriend's sex club? Yeah, right.

He grabs a hoodie that smells like *the* most boyfriend jacket of all time, trying not to smile to himself too much when it sits a little oversized on him. He liked that Ilya was bigger, that Ilya could pick him up, manhandle him a bit. God, he's so fucking attracted to him. He really, really should make sure Ilya knows that. He should make sure Ilya knows how fucking *appreciative* Shane is for all the care and diligence he's put into helping him sort himself out. Shane doesn't take any of it lightly. In fact, when the chance next presents itself, he wants to suck Ilya's brains out through his dick. And, at some point, very, very soon...he wants that dick inside of him.

Fuck, just the thought is making him weak in the knees. Ilya being his first sounds like a fucking fever dream. He had said he wouldn't be Ilya's boyfriend until he fucked him, but maybe Shane had it the wrong way around. Maybe if Shane agreed, Ilya would have no choice but to fuck him. Fucking was a very boyfriend thing to do, after all. And Shane wanted to be a boyfriend. Almost as much as he wanted to get fucked.

He thinks about fingering himself before going to the club, but maybe Ilya already had plans for them. Maybe Ilya wanted to do the fingering himself. Shane closes his eyes tightly and gives his hardening cock a squeeze. Something about being in Ilya's space, wearing his clothes, wearing his fucking *collar*, god. Shane was in a perpetual state of horniness since they'd arrived, since he had spent the night practically bathing in Ilya's scent. He wants to do that now. Wants to rub his face all over Ilya's neck and let his tongue hang out and lick him all over.

Shane moans and then forces himself to pull his hand away from his growing erection. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He has a strong urge to get himself off in Ilya's bed, to come all over the sheets, mark his territory for Ilya to find later. He doesn't even think Ilya would mind, really.

In fact, he'd probably get off on it. Maybe he'd punish Shane by making him kneel and then come all over his face. Shane would be so desperate to suck him, but Ilya would just make him watch. It's what he would deserve for being a bad kitty. He feels arousal burn deep within his gut.

Ilya: Car is waiting for you outside whenever you're ready. No rush.

God. Shane is so fucking flustered. He shakes himself out of it long enough to get some pants on, a pair of Ilya's jeans that are so long he has to roll the ends of each leg. The thought makes his cheeks flush. He hopes Ilya likes the fact that he's decided to wear his clothes. A part of him hopes other people at the club might notice, but it's daytime still. They wouldn't open for another few hours. He has no idea what Ilya has in store for them; it's part of the thrill.

He's feeling cute today. And flirty. And like he wants to be a playful kitten, so he sends Ilya a heart emoji, and his tummy flutters when Ilya immediately replies with twenty different kinds of heart emojis. Shane is smiling so big his cheeks hurt. He adds a few hearts next to Ilya's name in his phone, just so he doesn't forget this feeling, in case his brain tries to hunt him down later. Ilya is so, so good for him. He doesn't ever want to doubt that anymore.

Once Shane has everything he needs, he heads out to meet the driver in the driveway and slides into the backseat. The car ride is pretty short, but as Shane looks out the window, he feels like he's looking at Montreal with new eyes. It feels more like home than it has in a while. He tries not to think too hard about what that must mean.

Dmitriy is there to greet him when he arrives, and Shane smiles almost a little too enthusiastically as he lets him in the front door. He feels a thrill run through him at the thought of being in the club again. There's still a list of *maybes* that's a mile long, and Shane wants to get to at least one of them before the night is up.

He freezes up a bit when he spots Ilya talking quietly to someone at the bar. It's a guy he's never seen before. He's extremely small, and he has dark skin, and he's looking at Ilya with this warmth in his eyes that makes Shane feel a bit dizzy. A bit feral.

Ilya is all up in his space, his elbow resting on top of the bar and his chin in his hand as he hangs onto this guy's every word. Shane wants to know what the fuck they could possibly be talking about that's so interesting. What could possibly be so important that Ilya feels the need to practically embed his scent into this guy's nostrils with how close they are? Ilya is standing, leaning over this guy's chair, and Shane...Shane feels like he's about to lose his mind.

"Ilya," he says seriously, and watches as the other's attention immediately snaps in his direction. Shane hates how he makes absolutely no effort to pull away from the guy. "Am I interrupting something?" He crosses his arms over his chest and hopes his face shows how irritated he feels.

"No, not at all," Ilya replies, eyebrows creasing together as he finally, finally stands to his full height. But he's still got his hand in the other guy's space, almost like he must have been

touching him not that long ago. Comforting him. Shane is seeing red. “I thought Dmitriy was supposed to bring you around back.”

“I guess he assumed no one was here. I kind of assumed the same.” He’s being a little cold, but he doesn’t care. Ilya would act the same way if Shane were all over some guy like this. “Are you gonna fucking say hello to me or what?” Because he’s kind of pissed now. Why the fuck was Ilya being like this?

Ilya frowns and walks over to him. “Of course. I just wasn’t sure you wanted to be out here right now. I mean, no one’s here but Ivan, anyway.”

“Why is Ivan here?” Shane feels the need to ask, because nothing Ilya’s saying is making him feel any better. He sort of thought Ilya had asked him here so they could be alone.

Ilya tries to touch him, and Shane can’t help the way he slips out of his grasp, taking a sure step backward. He doesn’t miss the hurt on Ilya’s face. “He’s um, there’s a demonstration tonight. A class, actually. He’s going to be the sub this evening. I was just meeting with him to go over the details.”

Shane raises his eyebrows and tries not to let the sinking feeling in his chest start to consume him. “He’s...” Shane swallows, ducking his head. He hopes he’s misunderstanding. “He’s going to...sub for *you* tonight?”

“Shane, what?” Ilya steps towards him intentionally this time, placing his hands tentatively on Shane’s elbows from where he’s still got his arms crossed over his chest. “Of course not, baby. Of course not.”

“Then...then, why the fuck are you here with him? Where’s his Dom? Why are you all over him?” Shane demands to know, and his chest is tight. He feels like he’s going to cry.

“Baby,” Ilya says softly, soothingly. “I wasn’t, I promise. I was just asking him some questions, okay? Making sure we’re on the same page about his comfort level. I always ask the sub to come in early so we can level-set their boundaries for the club. Especially if it’s a Dom they haven’t worked with before. Okay? It’s just a safety precaution. Ivan is not my sub. He’s *never* subbed for me, and he never will. I promise you that.”

Shane just frowns heavily. He’s not sad; no, he’s angry. He feels possessive, like he wants to stake his claim. So, before he can think better of it, he pulls Ilya into a searing kiss, gripping the back of his neck possessively. He doesn’t particularly care if Ivan knows who he is or if Ivan decides to leave this place and tell the entire world what he’s seen. Let him. Let him tell all of Montreal that Ilya Rozanov is Shane Hollander’s. Let it spread to every news outlet in the city, the country, the entire universe, for all Shane cares.

This kiss is rough, biting, a little punishing, so much so that Ilya is fucking out of breath by the time he pulls back, and Shane is pretty sure his lip is bleeding a bit. He doesn’t give a fuck. He pulls Ilya closer to him by the collar of his shirt. “Don’t fucking get that close to another sub when you know I’m on my way to see you. Don’t *do that*.”

“Okay,” Ilya is nodding fervently against his forehead. “Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry, fuck. I’m sorry, baby.”

Shane just huffs and drops his head to Ilya’s shoulder, turning to press his nose into Ilya’s neck. He’s thankful when he feels Ilya’s fingers carding through his hair. His heart is hammering in his chest. He’s riled up, annoyed, pissed off, and maybe possibly pretty fucking jealous, too. He thinks it’s warranted when he bites down hard on Ilya’s neck.

“Fuck, alright,” Ilya hisses, pulling Shane back by his hair. “Alright, point made, baby. *Down*, boy.”

Shane soothes the bite with a soft lick and then collapses forward into Ilya’s chest, sighing happily when he feels strong arms wrap around him. He takes a deep inhale, letting Ilya’s cologne bring him back to baseline. He’s feeling better, now that he’s claimed his man in front of this other tiny, perfect demo sub. Ilya’s hand is a warm, comforting weight on the small of his back.

“Do you think you could be a good boy for me and let me introduce you to Ivan now?” Ilya has the nerve to ask him, and Shane feels the need to honest-to-god hiss. He digs his nails sharply into Ilya’s back through the fabric of his shirt.

“It’s okay. He doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to,” Shane hears Ivan laughing from somewhere in the distance.

It makes Shane cower a little further into his boyfriend. His owner. Maybe he’s just a shy kitty cat. Territorial in a place that he thought was his own. A safe space to run around in. To be himself. But he doesn’t mean to be rude, doesn’t want to come across as a kitten with behavioral issues who can’t get along with others. He whimpers softly into Ilya’s skin.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Ilya tells him gently, rubbing his back in soothing circles. “Ivan is very, very friendly, baby. He’s a good friend of the club. He helps us to do lots of demonstrations so curious kittens like you can learn more tricks if they want to. In fact, he’s going to do a rope demonstration for us tonight. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Shane’s cat ear perks up in interest. A rope demonstration. That sounded nice. He feels a flicker of desire catapult through his veins. Shane turns his head just slightly to offer Ivan a curious glance over Ilya’s shoulder.

“Mm, see, he’s not so scary, is he?” Ilya coos, pulling back to give Shane’s waist a little squeeze. “Wanna come meet him?”

Shane bites his lower lip, but nods slightly, letting Ilya start to guide him over with his hands firm on his hips.

Ivan is really pretty, Shane notices, as he and Ilya return to where the other is still poised at the bar, one hand delicately twirling a cherry around his drink.

“Do you want to tell Ivan your name, baby?” Ilya prompts, carefully pressing Shane into a chair next to Ivan once they’re close enough. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Shane,” he offers up shyly, glancing over at Ilya to find him watching with warm eyes.

“Very good, baby.” Ilya hasn’t sat down, instead choosing to stand next to Shane’s bar chair with one arm slung around his shoulders.

“Hi, Shane,” Ivan greets with an easy smile. “It’s really nice to meet you. I heard Ilya had taken on a new sub. Everyone at the club has had nothing but wonderful things to say about you.”

“Really?” Shane asks timidly, cause he hadn’t realized he’d become a topic of discussion.

“Oh, totally,” Ivan agrees. “You’re all anyone could talk about after the *Unleashed* event. How you were so well behaved even after Sasha acted up.” He rolls his eyes and waves it off, like he doesn’t want to dwell on the topic for too long. “I wish I could have been there, but I wasn’t feeling up to it at the time. Anyway, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you ever since. I know Ilya is really, really taken with you.”

“Oh,” Shane replies, nodding a little bit. He feels Ilya squeeze his shoulder, and he can’t help reaching to tangle their fingers together, smiling when Ilya leans down to press a kiss into his hair. This was the type of treatment he expected in front of others, especially at the club. “It’s um, it’s nice to meet you, too.” He should maybe apologize for his earlier behavior, but Ivan doesn’t really seem to mind, and Shane isn’t exactly sorry, so he doesn’t. Ilya hasn’t asked him to either.

“So, you’re going to be attending the demonstration tonight, yeah? It should be a really good one. Rope play always does something sinister to me,” Ivan’s lips pull into a grin as he takes another sip of his drink.

Shane looks at Ilya over his shoulder for confirmation, feeling butterflies in his tummy when Ilya gives him a nod in return. “What’s um...what’s the demonstration going to be?” He asks Ivan, while Ilya’s other hand finds his waist.

“Basically, we’re going to show everyone how to engage in rope play safely. Teach everyone a knot, show them how it’s done, some tips and tricks. And then, everyone will get to come forward with their partners and try it for themselves while Cedric and I supervise. It should be really informative and a lot of fun.”

Shane feels his skin go hot with want. “You’re going to tie me up?” He glances over his shoulder once more, eyes wide.

“As long as it is okay with you,” Ilya agrees, pressing his nose to Shane’s hair. “It’s on your list, no?”

“No, I mean. Yeah,” Shane nods quickly, eyes darting back to Ivan for a second. “It’s just, um. Am I going to be...like...” Hidden. Or is he going to be on show for everyone’s prying eyes to see? Since everyone was apparently so curious about Ilya’s mysterious new sub.

“I have something for you, baby, don’t worry,” Ilya promises, and Shane can feel him smiling against his hair. “Mm, you used my shampoo,” he notes, causing Shane to shiver.

“And your body wash,” Shane murmurs, squeezing Ilya’s hand tightly in his.

“You guys are too cute,” Ivan comments, shaking his head as he watches them with a soft smile.

Shane blushes as Ilya wraps his arms tightly around him, pulling him into his chest. “One of us is much, much cuter than the other.”

Ivan just laughs and takes another sip of his drink. “Well, I’m glad we had some time to catch up before the event. I should probably head back and put on my playlist. Helps me get into the mood ahead of a scene. Especially when it’s with a new Dom.”

“Cedric will take good care of you,” Ilya vows, though he doesn’t take his attention off Shane for a single second. “He is new to the scene, but he is very, very thorough. He has become a valued member of this community in a short amount of time. I have heard nothing but wonderful things from the subs he’s worked with so far.”

“That’s good to know,” Ivan huffs a relieved sigh. “I’m sure it’ll be great. He and I have already discussed our boundaries and what we want for the scene, so I’m not too worried. But I appreciate you helping me out with this. And...think about what I said, yeah?”

Shane wrinkles his nose slightly in question, but Ilya is distracting him with a pet to his head before the words find his lips. When he turns to seek Ivan out again, he’s surprised to find he’s already halfway across the room, heading for the door that Shane’s never been through before.

“Are you ready to go to my playroom, baby? I wanted to discuss some things with you ahead of the demonstration,” Ilya murmurs against his ear, his arms wrapped securely over Shane’s chest from where he’s still standing behind him.

“Yes, please,” Shane nods, because truthfully, it’s all he’s been able to think about. He hopes Ilya has something prepared for them before the demonstration.

“God, you look so good in my clothes,” Ilya groans, sizing him up once Shane finally stands from his seat. “Did you roll the fucking jeans? You are so fucking cute.” He pulls him into a kiss.

Shane’s tummy flutters happily in response, glad that Ilya has taken notice of his outfit and all the details. He’s feeling much better than he did when he first entered the club to find Ilya and Ivan together. Thank god it’s been sorted out, because that would have put a real damper on the night, and mostly, Shane just wants to feel good. He wants to get back to exploring new things with Ilya, adding to his repertoire of kinks that he likes. Pretty soon, maybe he’ll be the one helping with the demonstrations.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you Ivan was going to be here,” Ilya sighs as they step through the hallway door that leads to his playroom. “I honestly thought he’d be in the back by the time you got here, and I really wasn’t expecting Dmitry to send you through the main entrance.”

Shane leans in to press a quick kiss to his cheek. "It's okay. I mean, I didn't like seeing you with him, but I don't mind that he saw me, if that's what you mean."

"You are sure?" Ilya double-checks, guiding Shane into his playroom with one hand on his lower back.

"Yeah," Shane agrees, shrugging a little. "I wouldn't want to have people seeing my face at a big club event, but I think I'm fine with meeting people occasionally. Especially if you know them and trust them. I...want to be part of this community, too, you know?"

"You do?" Ilya asks him, and he looks surprised, like he wasn't expecting Shane to want much involvement with the club.

"Of course," Shane nods, reaching for one of Ilya's hands. "I'm like...one of you, right? I mean, I'm kind of kinky. Sort of." He chews on his lower lip in contemplation, but breaks into a laugh when he spots the look in Ilya's eye. One that says, *Oh, you are very kinky, indeed, Hollander*. "Shut up. I just mean, like, I still want to meet people. I still want to be a valued member of the club."

"Believe me, Shane, you are the *most* valued member of this club. You are practically the reason this club exists."

Shane rolls his eyes, even though he's pretty sure Ilya is serious.

"I would love to introduce you to more people, baby. Even if you are covered. I think it's a wonderful idea that you want to get more involved. I know I would like that very much, and Ivan is not lying when he said you are all people can talk about, hm?" Ilya cups his cheek.

"Really?" Shane blushes, trying to duck his head, but Ilya doesn't let him go far.

"Oh, absolutely. Everyone thinks you are the *most* beautiful kitten. So well-behaved for me. Plus, I'm sure they are a little curious who was able to finally lock down *the* Ilya Rozanov. What they do not know is that I have been locked down for a very long time now. Haven't I?"

Shane just surges forward to kiss him, sighing happily when Ilya moans into his mouth. He's kissing his boyfriend inside his boyfriend's club. His boyfriend is going to tie him up later in front of an entire group of people. He's wearing his boyfriend's clothes and, tonight, he's going to go back to his boyfriend's house and go to sleep in his boyfriend's bed. "Please," Shane gets out desperately, because he needs something. "Please, please."

"What are you asking me for, baby?" Ilya tips his head in consideration, eyes grazing over the needy kitten in front of him.

"I—" Shane gasps, feeling frantic. "I wanna be yours."

Ilya furrows his eyebrows. "You are mine, angel. I'm not sure what you mean."

"I want everyone to know," Shane gets out, desperately clutching at Ilya's neck to pull him closer. "Wanna feel like yours. Like...like it's obvious."

“It will be obvious at the event later, okay? No one is going to question whose you are. You’re going to be wearing my collar. I’ll be tying your wrists while you sit pretty for me. We’re going to cover your gorgeous face so you feel safe and comfortable, yes? Does that sound okay?” Ilya tips his chin to pull his focus.

Shane nods emphatically. That sounded good. That sounded really good. “Can I go way down tonight, please? I need it really badly. I want to go to level 3.” He hates the way Ilya’s face immediately pinches up in concern.

“Baby, you are going to go down tonight. I just want to be careful with what happened this morning, okay? You woke up pretty out of it.” Ilya is stroking his cheek. Shane’s sure it’s meant to be soothing, but it doesn’t help the anxious energy thrumming through his body.

“No,” he shakes his head, because that hadn’t felt like kitten space. Not the way he needs it, not the way his body’s craving it. “That...I was just tired. That wasn’t—it didn’t make me feel how I feel when I get to go down.” He watches as Ilya licks his lips in contemplation.

“Can you explain to me what you mean, please?” Ilya requests, and Shane sighs.

“I—” he starts, then pauses while trying to get his thoughts together. “I wasn’t feeling all...fuzzy and good. I was just feeling, like, I dunno. Kind of gone, but not in the fun way. Just sort of. I don’t know. Like I couldn’t—” He closes his eyes tightly, because it’s hard to explain. “*I don’t know*,” he says again in frustration.

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“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay,” Ilya soothes, rubbing his hands over Shane’s shoulders. “Were you feeling stressed? Is that what it is? Maybe you do not speak sometimes because you are stressed, hm?” Because Ilya had done a few google searches before Ivan arrived. He doesn’t know much, but he does know Shane is touching on something important here. Something they maybe haven’t talked about yet.

He watches as Shane huffs, dropping his head in what looks like defeat, but he meets Ilya’s gaze just a second later. “Maybe just like...underneath. I wasn’t *literally* stressed, like. Not at you,” he sighs, pulling his hands up to press his face into them.

“What have you been thinking about lately? What is stressing you out?” Ilya gives his arms another rub in encouragement, blue eyes searching his body language for any hints as to how he’s coping.

“I want to be your boyfriend,” Shane blurts, and Ilya’s eyebrows shoot up. “I *am* your boyfriend. Like, basically, right? I don’t want people to think you’re available, because you’re fucking not.”

“No, I am not,” Ilya says quickly, but Shane isn’t done.

“But, it’s a bad fucking idea. I can’t have *Ilya Rozanov* as my boyfriend. Are you kidding me? I feel like people are going to be able to see it all over my face. Every single person close to me figured it out in two seconds flat. Like, what are the guys going to say? They’re

gonna see me wearing your fucking collar and...and you're going to be my fucking *boyfriend*? How the fuck am I going to win the Stanley Cup if I'm dating Ilya Rozanov? What if I drag you out on the ice like fucking Scott Hunter? Oh my god."

"Okay, breathe." Ilya can't help letting out a small laugh. Who could blame him, though? Shane wanted to be his boyfriend and kiss him on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup. He feels like he's on fucking Cloud 9 right now. "First of all, I think you are majorly overestimating the brain power of your precious team. They are not a very smart bunch. I mean, Hayden Pike literally found me half-naked, cooking breakfast at your cottage, and his first thought was still that I must be fucking Rose Landry. These Voyageurs are not going to be able to put these pieces together."

Shane looks like he's about to hyper-ventilate, so Ilya runs his fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck until he sees Shane start to sink into his touch.

"Second of all, you are much, much hotter than Scott Hunter, so I am pretty sure the entire crowd would be so distracted getting themselves off to the sight of Golden Boy kissing someone that they would hardly even notice if that someone happened to be Ilya Rozanov." He's being silly; he knows that, but it seems to have the desired effect.

Shane breathes a laugh, pressing his forehead to Ilya's chest.

"I think these are things we can figure out, sweetheart. I do not think it is the end of the world if you want to have Ilya Rozanov as your boyfriend. I think there are probably much worse things, yes?" He prompts, smiling when he feels Shane headbutt his chest in what feels like a nod. "It is not worth killing yourself with stress over what *might* happen. I think it is much better to take things one day at a time and do what you feel will make you happiest. Don't you agree?"

Shane exhales heavily and sinks a little closer to him. Selfishly, Ilya wants to hear him say it again. He never thought he'd get to hear the words *I am your boyfriend* leave Shane Hollander's lips. He wants to kiss him until the world stops spinning.

"This stress," Ilya tries to broach carefully. "Do you think it has become a bit...consuming?"

He feels Shane's forehead crease against him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know, baby," Ilya admits, rubbing a hand over his back. "I have not met anyone who carries stress the way you do. Like it is a heavy weight on your shoulders, something you need to escape from sometimes. I am not sure it is healthy."

Shane frowns and pulls back to look at him properly, and Ilya hates how put off he looks. "I just have a lot going on. With the team and this season. I mean, this is a really important one. Do you know what three consecutive Cups would mean for us?"

Ilya doesn't, really. Other than some fantasy that Shane has created in his head, some milestone that he has decided is incredibly important to reach. What would happen if he completed it, though? Would it finally be enough? Or would there suddenly be some new feat that Shane was desperate to accomplish? Something he'd destroy himself in order to achieve.

“I know you have a lot going on,” Ilya agrees, brushing his fringe from his eyes. “I just want you to know that it’s okay to ask for help, yes? You do not have to carry this all on your own. If you start to feel yourself sinking, I hope you know you can come to me. I think there are sometimes more important things in this world than Stanley Cups,” he says gently. “Especially if it is costing you your mental health.”

“It’s not,” Shane says firmly, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck like he wants him to believe him. “Besides, you’re already helping me. That’s...that’s what all this is for, right?”

“BDSM is not a cure for everything, Shane,” Ilya presses his lips together, rubbing over Shane’s side. “It can help you to relax, yes, but if there is something deeper going on, I need you to tell me. You already said you do not think you were in kitten space this morning, hm? You must have slept almost sixteen hours yesterday, between the car ride and my bed.”

“Okay, maybe I was just tired,” Shane huffs a laugh, and he’s being a bit defensive, but Ilya can’t exactly blame him.

“I care about you, okay? I love *taking care of you*. I just want to make sure I am doing that to the best of my ability, yes? As your Dom, it is my job to make sure you are happy, healthy, and safe. And, as your *boyfriend*—” Because, yes, they were doing that now. “That extends past just scenes and things we get up to in the bedroom. Okay?”

His heart flutters when Shane gives him a little smile and a nod.

“Good, then. Now tell me again what you said earlier.”

Shane just tips his head cutely. “Um...that I want to go down tonight?”

Ilya rolls his eyes and gives his hips a squeeze. “Not that, котёнок. You very much know what I am asking to hear.”

He watches as Shane gets a delicious flush on his cheeks, one that makes each freckle shine like a very bright star in a beautifully pink sky. “That I’m your boyfriend?” He questions shyly, and Ilya just hungrily leans in.

“Again,” he requests, watching as Shane’s eyes darken considerably.

“You’re my boyfriend.”

Ilya moans and pulls him into a kiss. “Again.”

“I’m wearing my boyfriend’s clothes. I’m at my boyfriend’s club. Later, I’m going to go back to my boyfriend’s house and sleep in my boyfriend’s bed.” He sounds like it’s doing something to him as well.

“Fuck. *Our* bed, baby. Our house,” Ilya corrects, because everything he owns belongs to Shane now. “What about your neck, kitten? What’s on your neck?”

“My boyfriend’s collar,” Shane gasps against his mouth, and Ilya presses his tongue between his lips until Shane is going weak in his arms.

“Fuck, yes. That’s so fucking hot, oh my god. You’re sure you want to be?” Ilya double-checks, and he’s hard at the way Shane nods fervently against him.

“So fucking badly. I can’t stop thinking about it. I want—”

“What?” Ilya kisses him again. “What do you want?”

“Please, can I go down? Please,” Shane begs.

Ilya just laughs into his lips. “God, you are so delicious. I want to talk about our scene tonight before you go anywhere, okay? Just let me enjoy you a little longer, hm? Do you want to sit on the couch with me while we talk?”

“Can I sit in your lap?” Shane whines, tugging on the fabric of Ilya’s shirt, and how could he possibly say no?

“As long as you promise to stay present with me, yes? You are always welcome on my lap, sweet boy.”

He smiles as Shane preens and then leads him over to the couch, making room for Shane to settle comfortably in his lap. Shane’s arms wrap around his neck once more, and Ilya lays a comfortable, grounding hand on his hip.

“Are you excited for your first demonstration? It will be nice to have someone teach us something we do not know much about. I do not have much experience with rope,” Ilya admits. He’s restrained people before, but never with rope, specifically. Rope was an art form, and Ilya definitely needed to brush up on his skills if Shane wanted to explore it further, but he doesn’t miss the way Shane stiffens in his grasp. “Does that make you nervous, котёнок?”

Shane bites his lip in response. Luckily, Ilya knows him well.

“Cedric and Ivan will be there to guide us the entire time, precious. They are the experts. They are going to supervise everyone when we move on to the group portion of the demonstration. I promise you will be very, very safe with me this evening.” He smiles when he sees Shane visibly relax at the reassurance. “I know you already told me this, but I wanted to double-check that you are okay to go into your kitten space during the event.”

“Yes,” Shane answers without question. “Yes, please. I’ll be covered, right?”

“Of course,” Ilya soothes a hand down his side. “In fact, I got you a new mask to wear this evening. Would you like to see it?”

Shane’s eyes darken considerably, and Ilya takes that to mean *yes*. So, he pets Shane’s thigh and then reaches over to pull the mask out of the drawer.

It’s a classic black eye mask with slits for Shane’s eyes, but poised at the top are two definite kitten ears, one black, the other white with tiny black speckles. The mask will cover Shane’s nose, but leave his pretty lips on show. His identity would be fully concealed, though, unless any of his club members were overly researched on the shape of Shane Hollander’s lips.

Even still, they'd have to get close enough to look, and Ilya was not intending on having that happen tonight. Despite the fact that this was a group event, he and Shane would be off in their own little world. The only people Ilya would allow to interrupt them would come in the form of Cedric or Ivan.

"Please," Shane whispers, his eyes pleading and desperate, and Ilya can't help leaning forward to kiss him because he's just so beautiful.

"Let's finish our talk first, okay, baby? You can hold it and look at it for now, if you want, but make sure you're listening to me, yes?"

He gets a nod in return, so he happily hands over the mask, watching as Shane takes it into his hands with all the care in the world. Ilya's heart is going to beat out of his chest.

"So, during the event, it's going to be very straightforward, okay? You can be down in kitten space. The goal will be to keep you somewhere around level 2, but it is okay if you start slipping. I will bring you back up."

"I want to go to level 3," Shane frowns, before he can finish.

Ilya just smiles patiently at him. "If you will allow me to finish, sweetheart, then you would know that we are saving level 3 for later when we are alone, hm? If you are a good boy for me at level 2, then I may have a fun surprise for you, but you have to earn it."

Shane's eyes zero in on him, and Ilya gives his thigh another squeeze. "What kind of surprise?"

Ilya mimes zipping his lips. "You will have to be a good kitten and earn it. Now, as I was saying, you are okay to slip into level 3 a little, but I am going to bring you back up to make sure we are staying safe while we try something new. It is important that you are able to tell me if the rope is too tight or if it is uncomfortable, so we can adjust accordingly. Level 3 is a little too deep for this activity, especially because neither of us are very versed in it. Does that make sense?"

A jerky nod.

"Good. Now, I know that once you have been in a scene, it is sometimes very hard for you to come out of it, so I want to get a clear idea of your boundaries ahead of time. I am talking about the surprise I have planned for after the rope event."

Shane rolls his hips eagerly, and Ilya grips his waist firmly to get him to stop.

"I know you are eager, but do not be naughty. I need to know what you are comfortable with us doing later."

"Anything," Shane practically pants, and Ilya huffs a laugh.

"I am going to need you to be more specific, please."

“I want to suck your dick,” Shane moans, rolling his hips once more until Ilya can tell he is rock hard in his jeans.

“That is good to know, baby. I am okay with this, too. Are you okay with taking my fingers? Possibly a plug? And, what if I want to get you off?”

“Yes, yes, all of it,” Shane whines, pressing his face into Ilya’s neck this time. He rubs his kitten nose along the underside of his jaw, taking deep inhales of Ilya’s skin.

“What if...what if I don’t want to get you off?” He tries, figuring that might throw Shane for a loop.

It does, and something hot flashes through his tummy at the way Shane pulls back to give him a confused look.

Ilya licks his lips and pets his side once more. “What if...I want to deny you? Just for a little while. Maybe...until we get home?”

Before he can put much thought into that mental picture, Shane is all over him. Licking him, biting him, rubbing his face anywhere he can reach.

“Okay, okay, I am going to take that to mean yes,” Ilya laughs, putting his arms up to try and block himself from further attack. “But only if you behave yourself, okay? I expect you to be an absolute perfect kitten for me. That also means respecting what Cedric and Ivan tell us to do. Yes?”

Shane nods and leans forward to lick his throat once more. “Please, Alpha,” he whispers. “Want it.”

And, *oh*. That was new. Ilya had been testing some different titles, but so far, he hadn’t really thought that Shane had latched onto any of them. Not enough to feel comfortable addressing him that way during a scene. But, Alpha. Ilya could work with that.

“You want me to be your Alpha tonight, baby? It is not enough to own you. You want me to *claim* you, too, don’t you? Mark you as my own,” Ilya hums knowingly.

He’s unsurprised when Shane gasps out a *yes*.

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Shane feels like one pretty kitty in his new mask. Ilya’s got a possessive hand on his back, and they’re heading out to the main area of the club. It’s still a little early, but Shane is eager. He wants to be a kitten, in public, around people who won’t mind that he is one. With his mask, he’s unstoppable. He’s invisible, but also visible, maybe for the first time. At least it felt that way. Ilya saw him, in more ways than one.

Shane wasn’t exactly thrilled to be called on his anxiety, but even he could admit that the thoughts were becoming a bit much. A bit violent, not in nature, but in voraciousness. Deep down, he knows hockey shouldn’t feel like the end of the world, but it does. And that’s the problem. It never stops. Well, it does. Mostly when he’s around Ilya. Ilya makes him feel

good. Maybe it's because he's something more than a Dom, more than a boyfriend, even—fuck. Ilya is everything right now.

Maybe it's because he's petting over the fabric of Shane's tank top like it's a coat of fur. Maybe it's because his voice is doing that low, syrupy thing that makes Shane want to curl up at his feet and *beg*. He really needs something tonight. Not just that, but he's hungry for it. Like his sexual needs are fighting for dominance over his anxieties, and for once, *something* else is winning. Shane is so glad it's this.

"You are comfortable with the coverage of your mask?" Ilya says into his ear.

He's being overly cautious, and Shane wishes he wouldn't, but that's why Ilya is in charge. It's not for him to decide. "Yes," Shane says clearly, but he can already feel himself slipping.

He's in the middle of the room, and through his mask, he can see Ivan and Cedric starting to get set up. They're on a platform, almost like a stage, set up where the dancefloor usually is. There's no DJ tonight, though; just Cedric and Ivan.

On the ground, Shane spots several partners who are already sprawled on the floor, which is covered heavily with padded, sheeted mats and decorative fur throws. There are couches, but most couples seem content on the floor. Shane finds himself eying it, too.

"Do you want to go say hello to Cedric and Ivan, baby?" Ilya asks him, brushing his lips against the shell of Shane's ear.

Shane shivers, but he's nervous. He's still at a level where he feels shy, like maybe he shouldn't be doing this. One rub from Ilya reminds him of why he is.

"No," he forces himself to say, because he's staying present. Like Ilya asked him to. He's a very good cat who badly wants his surprise later.

"Okay. That's okay, baby. We don't have to. Do you want to sit down with me?"

Shane nods.

"On the couch or on the floor?"

Shane's mouth waters. He knows what he wants, but he doesn't know how to ask for it. He can't find the words, or maybe just can't put them into order properly.

"You want to sit on the floor," he decides, probably because Shane is fucking panting at it. But—"I would prefer to sit on the couch."

Fuck. Yes. It's like Ilya lives inside his head, or possibly, Shane is just wearing it all over his face. Either way, he feels very, very noticed and seen. He's *safe*. It makes him slip a little further.

"Are you okay to kneel for me, baby? I can pet you a bit while we wait for them to start."

“Yes, please,” he whispers, and he reaches to tangle his fingers with Ilya’s, pointedly pressing two of his claws into Ilya’s hand. He’s at level 2.

Ilya replies by squeezing two of Shane’s fingers, reaching to tip Shane’s chin up slightly until they meet each other’s eyeline. “Good boy. You are okay. I’ve got you. Let’s go sit down, okay?”

Shane nods and squeezes his hand tightly as Ilya leads him over to where the couches meet the edge of the padded area. Ilya guides him to his knees and then sits on the couch right behind him.

Shane waits to catch his eye once again, a question in his curious brown eyes. Ilya’s lips pull up at the corners in approval, so Shane shifts forward to figure out which part of Ilya he wants to anchor himself to. His first thought is that he would love to have Ilya’s fingers in his mouth. That would be so fucking hot, but Shane has to be good tonight. He would go well past level 3 if he was drooling messily around Ilya’s fingers, and he really, really wanted his surprise. More than that, he *needed* it.

Instead, he wraps his arms around Ilya’s knee, decisively, hugging his leg. The couch is a little lower to the ground than most, enough that Shane is able to lay his head against Ilya’s lower thigh, which in turn prompts Ilya to sink his fingers into Shane’s hair. Shane shuts his eyes and lets himself be for just a few short seconds. He lets himself wade a little further, feels the water getting colder as he gets deeper, but Ilya tugs on his hair and brings him back to the warmth.

“Not too far, котёнок.”

And Shane whines, but forces himself to re-center. He rubs his cheek over the fabric of Ilya’s soft pants. His face catches briefly on a thread; it’s been a few days since he’s shaved. But a thrill reminds Shane that those are just *his whiskers*. He really needs to stop worrying.

Ilya keeps talking to him as other couples continue to filter into the room. He prompts Shane every once in a while with little questions, and Shane answers them because he’s so fucking good. Ilya agrees. He keeps telling him so.

Eventually, though, they are ready to start the demonstration, which, for whatever reason, means Shane needs to come up a little. He’s only mildly devastated when Ilya forces him to sit up straight and fully face the front. Apparently, the demonstration had important information for both of them. Shane isn’t exactly sure why he—a kitten—needs to know this stuff.

He lasts all of five minutes before he’s forced to reach over and grab Ilya’s hand. He needs Ilya to touch him, hates the feeling of being on the floor all by himself unless Ilya’s hand is there to ground him to the moment. He likes when his owner is needy.

Ilya hums in acknowledgement and sits forward a little to scratch his fingers into Shane’s hair. *A good job for asking for what you need, even when you can’t ask for what you need.* Shane purrs and nuzzles up against him, swiping a lick at Ilya’s palm. He finds Ilya smiling down at him before he shakes his head.

“Pay attention to Cedric, котёнок. He is teaching me how to tie you up safely, hm? Listen.”

So, Shane turns around and does. He’s fuzzy, he’s feeling good, but he’s here, nonetheless. He swipes his tongue against the fabric of Ilya’s pants and then returns his attention to the front of the room.

They’re going through some basic physical safeties. Never tie around the neck or in any high-risk areas. Ask your partner if they have any injuries to be aware of. Watch for the warning signs. Tingling, numbness, coldness, or any sharp pain were all bad signs. Check-ins needed to be *constant*.

They talk about safewords and the need for safety shears. Ilya gives his head an intentional rub at that, and Shane’s cheeks burn a little shamefully. Yeah, he had fucked that up at the cottage, but he knows what Ilya is saying. Safety is important. He’s listening.

Their next segment is all about the rope. They’re explaining the length and the material. They’re talking about safety with rope handling: no sudden tightening, and how important it is to keep controlled tension. Shane feels warm all over. And then, they start with the demonstration.

Shane watches, his mouth hanging open a bit as Cedric starts tying off Ivan’s wrists. Cedric is talking about the knots as he’s executing, talking about why it’s important to place fingers under the rope to check for safety spacing. All Shane can see, however, is Ivan’s wrist trapped, more and more as Cedric continues to wrap knots. Eventually, he shows how to untie it, and that makes Shane burn, too. Seeing the control Cedric has over him. The ability to lock him up and then free him once more.

Ilya had that type of control over him. More, even. Shane was so desperate for him. Ten years’ worth of desperate, to be exact. He’d do anything Ilya asked.

His attention is torn from that thought when he hears movement all around him. Ilya squeezes his neck two times to pull his focus back.

“Are you with me, baby? We are going to transition to the partner portion now. Were you watching the demonstration like a good boy?”

Shane nods, because he had been.

“Good,” Ilya smiles, so he must be doing something correct.

Shane watches as Cedric and Ivan start to come around with safety shears.

“Switch places with me, angel. I would like you to sit on the couch now, and I will take the floor.”

Shane pouts, but he lets Ilya pull him to his feet, and begrudgingly sinks into the couch. Ilya is on the ground now, on his knees, and he glances up when Ivan comes by with rope and shears. And for a second, Shane is terrified that Ivan is going to address him by name, that he’s going to have to color out in front of all these people and look like the weakest kitty cat

in the entire world. But Ivan just hands off the supplies with a smile and moves to the next pair. Shane lets out a quiet breath, feeling tension leave his body when Ilya glides a comforting hand over his knee.

“You are safe here, baby. Listen to my voice. Can you take a look at the rope I have here?”

Shane tips his eyes downward to oblige.

“Very good. I am going to wrap your little paws up in rope now if that is okay with you, angel. But I need your color first.”

Green. Green, green, green, green, green. But he has to say it, so he forces his wet mouth to work. “Green,” he finally gets out, and he loses a bit of the high, but Ilya is looking at him like he’s doing so, so good. Until Shane is practically vibrating towards him to lick his neck.

Ilya laughs and grabs him by the scruff of his hair, pulling him backwards again. “You are very sweet and affectionate, котёнок, but I need you to cooperate now. Okay?”

Shane mews happily and holds out his wrists.

And then Ilya starts to tie him, and Shane drifts again. Ilya is wrapping the material around his wrists, placing his fingers between Shane’s skin and the rope, and Shane closes his eyes for a minute so he can just *feel*.

“Is that too tight?” Ilya’s voice comes from somewhere nearby.

Shane shakes his head, and Ilya gives his knee a little shake. “No,” he croaks, eyes blinking open.

Ilya kisses his knee this time and keeps tying him. He checks Shane’s wrists often, turning them in his hands to inspect the color of his skin, to make sure he’s feeling okay. And he is. But something isn’t quite right.

Shane wrinkles his kitten nose in distaste as Ilya ties a knot off, the rope settling unpleasantly over his skin.

Ilya pauses and looks at him. “Does that feel okay? Tell me if something is wrong.”

Shane’s not even sure that something *is*, but he doesn’t like it. The rope is rubbing against his skin in a way that makes it feel like it’s crawling. He doesn’t appreciate the texture; he feels it like nails on a chalkboard. He sucks in an uncomfortable breath.

“Hey, everything all good here?” Cedric, the Dom, steps over to address them.

Shane cowers a little closer to Ilya at the sound of Cedric’s voice, grateful when Ilya places a possessive hand on his thigh to soothe him.

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Ilya isn't really sure what the problem is when Cedric gets to them. Shane's wrists have not been tied very tightly at all. Ilya has made sure to leave plenty of room, checking with the width of two fingers, as instructed. His skin wasn't showing any signs of distress. The only thing Ilya could think of was—...of course. The material of the rope was making Shane uncomfortable. His Shane preferred very soft fabrics, and the decidedly scratchy texture of the rope just wasn't going to cut it for his boy.

Ilya quickly unloops the knot and unties him. "You're okay, baby. That's better now, isn't it?"

And Shane tips his head forward in a nod.

"He is not comfortable with this type of rope," Ilya tells Cedric, but he offers Shane a considerate pet over his leg.

Cedric nods in understanding. "That's okay. I think we have cotton somewhere in the back. Would that be better for him?"

Ilya looks Shane over in careful consideration. His wrists are still twitching like he's feeling the aftershock of the rope fibers on his skin, like it's leaving an uncomfortable taste in his mouth if his twisted expression is anything to go off of.

"No," Ilya decides with a shake of his head. "I think only silk would do right now. That's okay, though. We're happy to sit in either way."

Shane looks confused and a little pouty, so Ilya slips onto the couch next to him and pulls him into his arms, pressing a kiss to the side of his head.

"Your skin is very fragile, котёнок. It is not liking the feeling of the rope right now, but that is okay. We will wait until they close out the demonstration, and then I will bring you back to my playroom. Would you like that, baby?"

Shane nods and nuzzles into his neck. He didn't seem too upset at the prospect of not being tied up right now, but maybe that was because he was too excited for what Ilya had planned for him later.

Once Ivan and Cedric start to wrap up and thank everyone for coming, Ilya takes Shane's wrists into his hands and presses a series of kisses over them. "You did such a good job for me, baby. You're such a good kitten."

Shane purrs and reaches to tug at the fabric of Ilya's shirt. Ilya can tell he's starting to get a little antsy. He looks down and admires the flex of Shane's arms in his own tank top. Lucky for him, he knows he has the prettiest kitty at this entire event, maybe even the entire world.

"Alright, драгоценный. I think we should go say thank you to Cedric and Ivan for leading such a wonderful event, don't you?"

Shane whines, and Ilya can tell he's feeling shy right now, but he doesn't want to be rude to their excellent demo leaders.

“Come on, baby. It will just take a minute, and then we can go get your reward in my playroom, okay? I know you would love to be very polite for me, hm? Show Ivan how good you are. Remember? He has not seen you as a kitty yet.”

Shane seems to perk up at the idea of getting to show off a little, and Ilya smirks, petting intentionally down his side.

“There’s my sweet boy. You want to show everyone how good you can be for me?”

Shane nods and pants into his neck, so Ilya reaches up to give his collar a little tug.

“Alright, angel. Let’s make it quick, yes? We will go say thank you, and then we will go to my playroom. Can we stand up now?” Ilya helps Shane with a steady hand on his back as they stand and then head to the front to greet their hosts.

Shane is all over him, pawing at his waist, nuzzling into his chest, feeling very, very good things despite the rope demo not going as planned. Ilya just shushes him and pets his hair as they approach Cedric and Ivan.

“Hey, Ilya,” Ivan smiles, and Shane can’t help the way he growls a little.

“Hey, be nice, котенок,” Ilya gives him a sharp tug on his hair, tipping Shane’s head back until he can make eye contact with him through the eye mask.

“That’s okay,” Ivan just laughs in response. “Did you guys enjoy the event?”

“Yes, we did. Very much so. It was super informative,” Ilya replies, tucking Shane under his arm.

“Did your kitten like the rope?” He asks, directing his attention to Shane this time.

But Shane pouts and buries his face further into Ilya’s chest.

“He is sensitive to certain textures. He did not appreciate the material of the rope, but I think we will try again some other time with silk.”

Ivan nods in understanding. “Traditional rope isn’t for everyone. I used to struggle with it as well, until I started being able to get to that good place. The bite of the rope can sometimes even be half the fun.”

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Shane huffs, hiding his head fully under Ilya’s arm this time. He didn’t care to hear about perfect Ivan and all the subby things he was so good at.

“Hey, Rozy,” another voice greets them, and Shane assumes it must be Cedric, the Dom.

“Another option for next time could be to tie him over his clothes. Maybe long sleeves so the rope doesn’t irritate him.”

“I think he was a little sensitive already today. The fabric of my jacket was bothering him in the playroom, too. It’s why we took it off earlier.”

He runs an intentional hand over Shane’s bare arm, and Shane shivers at the touch, pressing his face into Ilya’s underarm this time until he can sniff at his heady scent. His mask is coming up a little in the process, but he doesn’t mind. They’re almost done, anyway.

“We will try again at a different time. Anyway, he is impatient cause I promised him something after the demo was finished. We just wanted to say thank you for being our experts today.”

“Well, you’re very welcome,” Cedric says, and Shane can hear Ivan chiming in with his agreement. “Thanks for allowing us to take over the club tonight. And it was very nice to finally meet your котенок.”

“Baby,” Ilya prompts, giving his back a promising rub. “Can you say thank you to Cedric and Ivan, please? They have been very kind to teach us today.”

Shane stays exactly where he is under Ilya’s arm, but he lets out a soft meow intended for Ivan and Cedric. He feels warmth spread through his body when they coo at him in reply.

“He is the sweetest thing, Ilya,” Ivan laughs. “I can see exactly why you’re so taken with him. He’s gorgeous and extremely well-behaved.”

“Mm, he is not usually this shy,” Ilya agrees, and Shane is sick of talking, so he bites Ilya on the sensitive skin under his arm. “Ouch, kitten. You are very territorial today. Okay, we are going, we are going,” Ilya sighs, giving the back of his neck a squeeze.

Shane cheers internally and starts touching Ilya all over as the other maneuvers him in the direction of the playroom. Shane’s skin is buzzing, buzzing, buzzing with anticipation, and once the playroom door shuts resolutely behind them, he presses his nose anywhere he can reach.

The mask has fully slid up his face by now, and he can see much better, but he feels wrong without his kitten ears. Incomplete. Desperate. He wants to hump Ilya’s leg until he gets off and then curl up on the floor next to his feet.

“Calm, котенок. You are very, very hyper right now. I am going to need you to settle if you want what I have for you.”

Shane whines loudly and presses himself into the couch, rubbing his face all over the spot where Ilya was sitting just an hour ago. He wants his owner. Wants his Alpha badly right now. He needs Ilya’s dick in his mouth. *Please*, he thinks, but the words aren’t finding him.

“I know, baby. And I am right here ready to give you what you want, but I am going to need you much more calm. You are moving at the speed of 100 right now, and I need you closer to 50, please.”

Shane huffs and digs his nails into the leather of the couch.

“Hey,” Ilya frowns, walking over to grip his paw tightly. “No scratching at the couch, please. Shane. Are you listening to what I’m saying? I will take you home right now if that is what you want.”

Shane whimpers and brings Ilya’s hand to his face. He needs attention. He needs Ilya all over him, calling him a very good boy. Shane has been good *all* night.

“Oh, I see. You are looking for pets. Will this calm you down, котенок?” Ilya asks, sitting down on the couch, only for Shane to immediately crawl into his lap. Ilya takes the mask off of him fully and sets it somewhere next to him before petting intentionally over Shane’s hair.

Shane leans into it and rubs his paws over Ilya’s chest, very, very happy with the attention he’s getting now. Ilya is smiling at him and petting him all over and saying the nicest things. And the best part is that Shane can barely understand what any of it means. He feels so fucking good.

“Are you ready for your surprise now, котенок?” Ilya questions, and that’s right. Shane is meant to be getting a surprise. He sits up a little in interest as Ilya surveys him. “Hm, where are your cat ears? You cannot have a pretty tail without your ears, baby. One second.”

A pretty tail. Shane was getting a *tail*. His heart is beating at 1329434980 miles per minute. He lets his tongue hang out of his mouth, panting heavily when Ilya starts putting his cat ear clips into his hair. They’re the same ones from the cottage, and Shane wonders whether his tail matches.

He wiggles excitedly in Ilya’s lap as the other leans over to grab a long box, pulling it between them to unwrap the item in front of Shane. The sight nearly takes his fucking breath away.

Shane’s tail is long and *beautiful*. It looks like real cat fur, mostly black with little white speckles all over it, and it’s attached to a fucking *plug*. Shane feels like he’s going to pass out. He’s only brought back to life at the feeling of Ilya’s hand on his thigh.

“You with me, baby?” Ilya asks, eyebrows furrowed a little, and Shane shoots forward to start licking his face.

Long kitten licks with his entire tongue, licking from Ilya’s jawline all the way up to his cheek. Over his eyelids. His nose. His *lips*. Shane wants to bathe him in affection, mark him with his scent.

“Fuck, you are so good, baby boy,” Ilya moans, and Shane can feel him getting hard from beneath him. “As much as I am loving these kitten kisses, I think it’s time we get you out of these clothes, hm?”

Shane whines and circles his hips eagerly, pawing desperately at Ilya’s shirt, but Ilya just laughs and shakes his head.

“I am talking about your clothes, baby. The ones you stole from my closet, remember? Which you are very welcome to, by the way. I love you in my clothes.” He leans forward to press a

kiss to Shane's cheek. "Up out of my lap, please. I would like to finger you now, yes?"

Shane moans, and his paws are trembling as he scrambles to remove himself from Ilya's lap. He's unsteady and nearly falls onto the ground, but Ilya catches him around his hips before he can.

"Easy, angel. You are very excited, I know, but we must be calm. Can you give me another kitten lick on the lips, please?"

Shane falls forward into his chest to comply, licking over Ilya's lips eagerly, until Ilya is laughing once again. Shane lets his tongue loll out, feeling very silly. He wants to roll around in catnip while Ilya helps him with his new toy.

"You're so fucking cute. I can't with you," Ilya shakes his head, and then he's standing to start helping Shane out of his shoes. He unties them, and Shane leans down to paw at the laces with a ferociousness until Ilya is forced to bat him away.

His socks and jeans come off next, and Shane purrs when Ilya folds the jeans before placing them on the couch. He's kissing Shane's thighs as he helps him out of his boxers, and Shane flushes when his erection pops up and hits his tummy. He's hard as a fucking rock. He feels like he's going to burst into flames.

He's still wearing Ilya's tank top, but when Ilya goes to take it off, he growls low in his throat. He likes having Ilya's scent so close to his nose. It's a comfort he needs right now, so Ilya lets him keep it.

Ilya gives him a little pat on his now bare bum. "Come on. To the bed, sweetheart. I'm going to get you nice and open for your plug, okay?"

Shane rushes over to the bed like he has the zoomies and rolls on top of it, scenting the covers all over. He doesn't know who has used this bed before, but he knows that no one else will be using it ever again. As far as he's concerned, this is his bed now.

Ilya grounds him with a firm hand on his hip. "I love that you are so happy, котенок. Can you get on your hands and knees for me, though? The sooner you calm down, the sooner you get your tail."

That causes Shane to immediately comply, and he scrambles to turn on his hands and knees, jumping slightly when Ilya's hand finds his hip once more.

"Calm, baby. I am right here, okay? Can you tell me your color before we get started?"

Shane huffs loudly and leans down to press his face into the pillow. He doesn't want to tell his stupid color. He wants Ilya to finger him and give him his tail. The pinch on his thigh is punishing, however, so Shane forces out a squeak. "Gree," he says without the 'n', because enunciating is hard right now.

Ilya rewards him with a kiss on his right ass cheek, and then he spreads him open to lick over his hole. It's so quick that Shane almost misses it, but his body reacts with a sharp shiver.

“Good boy. We’re gonna take it nice and slow, okay? Keep listening to my voice.”

Shane wiggles in place in anticipation, jolting at the sound of a bottle of lube snicking open. And then...there’s a warm finger circling his hole. Shane jumps so high he nearly catches air.

“Calm,” Ilya tells him again, pressing an intentional hand into Shane’s lower back to keep him from jumping away again. “Put your elbows on the bed, baby. There you go. That’s really good.”

Shane only startles a little bit when he feels Ilya’s finger once more, his skin flickering with intense jolts of electricity. He shuts his eyes and forces himself to get used to the feeling, sinking further into it.

“Good,” comes Ilya’s voice, calm and controlled.

Shane purrs heavily.

“Oh, that’s a good boy. There you go. I’m going to start with one and work you up to three, okay?”

Shane nods and gasps when he feels Ilya’s finger start to push forward. It’s a little uncomfortable to start, a little foreign, but by the time it’s fully in, Shane is already moaning and grinding back against him. Ilya’s fingers are *so* big. Bigger than Shane’s own. He can’t stop thinking about the fact that his boyfriend is inside of him.

“That’s beautiful, baby. You’re taking me so well right now.”

Ilya doesn’t move much, almost like he’s letting Shane get used to the stretch, but Shane knows what’s coming, and he desperately wants more. He circles his hips a bit until Ilya takes the hint and nudges a second finger next to the first one.

Shane whines and pants into the pillow beneath him as he’s forced to stretch further. Two of Ilya’s fingers now, and he’s scissoring them, feeling around Shane’s walls until he finds what he’s looking for and *presses*. And Shane fucking sees stars, his cock leaking onto the bed already, and his hips collapse to grind against the mattress.

“Come on, babe. Stay up for me, please. No grinding,” Ilya tells him sharply, pinching Shane’s leg until he yelps and presses his hips back up again. It only forces Ilya’s fingers further inside of him.

Shane is drooling all over the pillow.

Ilya curls his fingers a little before pulling them out and pushing them back in again. He works Shane open slowly but surely, pressing the occasional kiss to his lower back, sucking the occasional hickey into the backs of Shane’s thighs, licking at Shane around the digits he has inside of him.

Shane meows softly and rubs his face into the drooly mess on the pillow. He’s breathing heavily, meeting Ilya halfway with each additional thrust of his fingers. His mouth drops

open when Ilya works him up to a third finger, the digit slipping in alongside the other two and causing Shane to stretch deliciously.

“You’ve got it, baby. Good boy. Being so fucking good for me. Fuck,” Ilya mutters, and Shane can hear what this is doing to him.

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Ilya can’t help pressing forward to suck another kiss to Shane’s rim once he gets a third finger inside of him. Shane is being the cutest котенок of all time right now, and Ilya is ten seconds away from devouring him whole, but he restrains himself. The point of this is to get Shane ready for his new tail.

Ilya had purchased only the best for his boy. It was a stunning, fluffy tail, one worthy of swishing against his prize-winning kitty. Ilya had made sure the fur would be incredibly soft, the design specific to Shane’s speckled tuxedo cat lifestyle. It would swish against his ass deliciously when he walked, or...crawled. They hadn’t done that yet before, but Ilya was eager to test it out.

The tail comes with a few different plug sizes, ones that Ilya can switch out depending on his kitten’s needs. Right now, his kitten doesn’t need a huge plug. He just wanted to get Shane used to his tail, stimulate him enough to get him off. Not yet, though. Shane still had to earn that.

Ilya stretches his fingers a little wider from where they’re buried within Shane. God. He’s so fucking tight. Ilya’s eyes roll back into his head at the thought of fucking him, but he has future plans for that.

Once he’s sure that Shane is ready for his plug, Ilya pulls his fingers out and surges forward to give him a quick rimjob, mostly because he’s being *such* a good kitty today. He keeps letting out the sweetest little meows, and Ilya had nearly died when he’d gone territorial during the event. As much as Ilya wanted a well-behaved kitty, he certainly had no complaints about Shane’s claiming bites and punishing claws. His kitten was possessive, and Ilya liked him as such.

When Shane is practically a puddle of drool and whines in the middle of the bed, Ilya gives him a light smack on the ass and then leans over to grab the tail. He surveys the plug options. This tail has come with both metal and silicone options, and Ilya immediately passes over the metal ones. They’re gold to match Shane’s collar, but that would be too much stimulation for his котенок right now. He needed something more seamless.

Ilya reaches for the smallest bulb silicone plug and carefully attaches it to the end of Shane’s new tail. Then, he brushes the tail over Shane’s back so he can get used to the feeling of it. So he’s not too spooked once it’s resting against the back of his sensitive, bitten-up thighs.

Shane shivers all over, and Ilya keeps him from jumping up with a firm hand on his lower back. “Sh, you’re okay, baby. You’re still with me, yes?” And Shane nods. “Good fucking boy. You’re being so good for me, angel.”

Shane mews in a way that makes Ilya's cock throb.

He reaches for the lube and starts getting the plug ready, continuing to pet Shane every so often just so he doesn't drift too far into his kitten space. Once the plug is properly coated, he leans down to press a series of kisses across Shane's lower back. God, he's fucking obsessed with this little thing. This sweet little baby kitten who is, for whatever reason, trusting him with everything right now.

"Alpha," Shane pants, and Ilya jerks up to check on him, surprised by the level of lucidity. Shane didn't ever talk when he was this deep in kitten space, not unless Ilya was prompting him to.

"Yes, kitty? Are you okay? You want your tail, baby?" Ilya hums, leaning over to assess Shane's face.

He looks so fucking drunk. Ilya smiles and reaches to wipe at the corners of his drooling mouth, taking a moment to gaze into Shane's beautiful, hazy brown eyes. His tummy warms when Shane zeroes in on him and leans forward to clumsily lick his cheek. "Hi, baby. You are so unbelievably cute. I can't believe how lucky I am to get to take care of you." He presses a kiss to Shane's kitten nose.

Shane scrunches up his nose cutely in response, pulling a laugh from Ilya.

"Are you ready for your tail now, angel? I am going to put the plug in, and then I'm going to give you lots of pets. Does that sound okay?"

Shane headbutts him, knocking their foreheads together.

"I'm going to take that as a yes, my sweet boy. Please tell me if it gets to be too much." He's a little worried that Shane won't be able to use his colors right now, but Ilya feels like he knows him well enough to gauge how he's doing if he starts to feel uncomfortable. Shane's tells were becoming second nature to him.

He carefully pets over Shane's hole to get him used to the sensation of something touching him down there again. Once he seems settled under Ilya's touch, he rubs the end of the lubricated plug against him, sucking in a breath when Shane's hole winks desperately at him.

"Being so good for me, baby. God, you are going to look so fucking beautiful with this tail, hm?" He slides the point of it in a little, petting over Shane's spine with his free hand. "That's it. Nice and slow. There you go."

He keeps working him up to it a little bit at a time, until he's able to press the plug flush against Shane's skin, the soft fur of the tail brushing against the back of his thighs.

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Shane gasps once the plug is all the way inside of him. He can feel the weight of the tail hanging against him, and the tickle of the fur across his skin makes him squirm. His head is a gooey pile of mush right now.

He meows gratefully when Ilya collects him in his arms, wrapping him up and petting over his arms, his sides, scratching through his hair, and behind his kitty ears. Shane rubs his face all over Ilya's chest and neck, letting out soft little whimpers when his tail moves inside of him just right. He feels like a real kitten now, like nothing in the world matters except for spending time with his owner, cuddling up with him, getting the best pets.

Ilya always gives the best pets. Shane moans and rubs his wet nose against Ilya's throat, licking him, nipping him with his little feline teeth. Ilya is smiling at him, talking to him low. His voice is like honey. Shane presses his ear to Ilya's chest to hear the way it rumbles when he speaks.

He wiggles his hips to feel his tail swish against his bare legs, and holy fuck, he's hard. He full-body twitches when he feels Ilya's hand wrap around his cock.

Shane whines high in his throat, tipping his head forward to rub his face across Ilya's shirt, licking at the fabric whenever he gets close enough.

"That feel good, baby?"

Shane moans in response, digging his claws into Ilya's shoulders until he hears Ilya hiss in pain.

"Down, kitty. I am going to have to trim your claws later. You are ripping me up."

Shane frowns and bites into Ilya's collarbone.

"*Careful* now," Ilya warns, giving his dick a single stroke, and Shane's mouth drops open in a gasp.

"Alpha," he breathes out desperately, pressing his tongue to the fabric of Ilya's shirt as he pants into it.

"You're right with me, baby. Focus on my voice."

Shane is finding it incredibly hard to do that with the way Ilya's thumb is gliding over the head of his cock. His other hand is anchoring Shane at the hip, which is helpful when Shane tries to twist away from him; Ilya just holds him close.

That hand slips lower, though, across Shane's ass until he feels pressure against his plug, like Ilya is toying with the base of it.

"Wow, we are having lots of good kitten feelings now, aren't we?"

Shane feels like he's drowning in the deep end, but Ilya is a clear and solid life raft keeping him afloat. He grips onto him a little more tightly and takes a deep breath.

"I'm right here, котенок. Tell me if you need help. I'm looking after you, okay, baby?"

He nods against one of Ilya's massive pecs. Shane can't resist biting him there, too, and he just purrs when Ilya tugs on his fur in reprimand.

“*Kitty*. If you keep biting me, then I am going to start biting you back.”

Shane chirps excitedly and jerks his hips up, his cock sliding against Ilya’s hand.

“Oh, you want this? God, you are too fucking adorable.” Ilya shakes his head, tipping Shane’s chin up to nip at his jaw. He presses a kiss to the same spot and then turns his head to bite Shane’s neck this time, soothing over the area a beat later with his tongue.

Shane vibrates happily at the feeling of Ilya’s teeth in his neck, claiming him, marking him. Shane fucking belongs to him. He wants everyone to know it.

Ilya teases him a little more, stroking his cock so slow that Shane is sure he’s going to go insane. Petting his tail, twisting his plug. Shane feels like a very spoiled kitty. Despite the slow pace, he’s getting sensitive. He’s so close to what he thinks might be the best orgasm of his life, and then, Ilya’s hand is gone. Shane cries out at the loss of pressure.

“A-alpha—”

“You are so good, baby. Look at you. You’re so desperate,” Ilya coos, and Shane gasps at the condescending tone he’s using.

Fuck.

Ilya squeezes his cock firmly around the base, and Shane sucks at the fabric of his shirt, shutting his eyes tightly. His brain is nonexistent. He’s nothing but a mindless toy for Ilya to play with. His chin is covered in saliva.

“I know. You need to come very badly, don’t you? And you will,” Ilya promises, pressing a kiss to his hair. “Once we get home.”

Shane doesn’t know what that means, but Ilya’s hand is gone again. He’s dazed at the loss. Holy fuck. His body is buzzing.

“Shane.”

Shane blinks at the use of his name, tipping his head to look up at Ilya.

“I am going to leave your plug in, but I am going to unclasp your tail so you are not uncomfortable for the ride home. It is a very short ride,” he reminds him, giving his shoulder an intentional squeeze. “Do you think you can wait to come until we get back to the house?”

Shane rubs his lips together clumsily. Ilya is asking him a question. Something about the house.

“Baby. Am I making sense to you right now?” Ilya leans in a little, brushing his knuckles across Shane’s cheek to get his attention. “Listen to my voice. I need you to come up a little bit.”

Shane frowns and jerks his head forward in a nod. Come up. He could do that.

“We are going to the house, baby. My house, remember?”

Shane nods. He knows Ilya’s house. He knows Ilya’s *bed*. Mm. He wanted to roll around in his scent some more.

“I am not going to get you off until we are home.”

Shane pouts.

“I need you to tell me if you are green. If you are yellow, we will stop.”

Shane swallows and presses his face to Ilya’s chest once more. He feels green. His tummy swirls in anticipation.

“Shane, sweetheart. I need your color before we do anything else. Can you nod if I am making sense?”

Shane presses his head forward in a headbutt.

“Good, baby. Now your color, please.”

“Green,” Shane’s lips form around the words, but it comes out as barely anything at all.

Ilya huffs a laugh. “You are trying to get by with the bare minimum today. How about you try that again?”

Shane huffs and nuzzles his head against Ilya’s shirt until the other tugs on his hair pointedly. “Green,” he enunciates a little more clearly, even if his voice is still slurred.

“Very good. You’re doing so well for me, Shane.”

Shane grumbles because he doesn’t want Ilya to call him Shane right now. In fact, he doesn’t like how Ilya’s tone has changed. It’s keeping him from being in that fully fuzzy level 3 kitten mode. He’s up a little now, and he wants to go back down.

“I know, angel. Just let me get you dressed and in the car. Once we get home, you can go back to being your silly kitten self. You can be playful and lick me and bite me all over, hm?”

Shane likes the sound of that. So, he tries not to whine too much when Ilya unclasps his tail, even though Ilya promises he will get it back when they get home. He tries not to be difficult as Ilya gets him into his boxers and jeans, even though his cock is throbbing and the plug is still a constant pressure inside of him.

He holds onto Ilya’s strong shoulders as the other helps him into his socks and shoes one foot at a time. And then Ilya is standing to his full height in front of him and planting a kiss on Shane’s wet lips. He can’t resist nipping a bite onto his cheek.

Ilya scratches behind his ears as they wait for the car. “It is a driver who I trust very much, baby. The partition will be up the whole time. No one will be able to see you while you are

like this, but we are going to put my jacket on you and pull the hood over your pretty ears just so you can feel extra safe. No one is going to see you right now.”

Shane hugs him tightly around his waist, only pulling away when Ilya starts to help him into the hoodie he’d picked out of the closet earlier. *His boyfriend’s hoodie*. A purr vibrates through him when Ilya’s scent wraps all around him, Ilya adjusting the hood over his cat ears.

“Are you okay to go in the car like this, angel?” Ilya ducks to meet his gaze, and Shane’s lips curl.

He feels good. He’s a little more in control of himself. He’s maybe still a level 3, but he’s not out in the deep end anymore. He’s chilling in the shallow end. He nods to answer Ilya’s question, reaching for him once again, until Ilya pulls him close.

“Okay, he is here now. We are going to go through the hallway out the back, and he will be right there waiting for us. You are doing such a good job. Just stay exactly as you are, okay? You’re at the perfect level, baby.”

Shane burrows closer at the praise. He’s so thankful for Ilya. It’s been maybe a month, but they feel a lot closer than that. He feels like he’s known him for years and years. He feels like so much time has been taken from them, but for whatever reason, their hearts never got the memo. Still, he wants to soak up every part of Ilya, examine him under a bright light in extreme detail until he can confidently map out each line, each mark upon his skin. Ilya feels like something that’s always been his, like something that’s always going to be his. It’s an intense thought.

By the time they get to the car, Shane is shivering a little. He’s not really that cold, but he loves the way it makes Ilya fuss over him, so maybe he plays it up a bit in response.

“Oh, baby.” Ilya rubs over his arms and shoulders once they get into the car. “Are you cold, precious?”

Shane pouts dramatically and nods.

“Poor kitten. Come here.” And that’s how Shane ends up in Ilya’s lap for the entire ride home.

Ilya is touching him under his shirt, just soft little grazes that make Shane shiver some more. The plug is secure inside of him, but Shane moans every time they drive over a bump, his cock still heavy in Ilya’s jeans. Ilya shushes him and pulls him closer, petting at him and guiding Shane to rest his head in the crook of his neck.

Shane takes a deep breath, calmed by Ilya’s scent, the mix of sweat and cologne. His boyfriend always smells good, so Shane holds onto him a little tighter. His boyfriend is big and strong, biceps bulging from where they’re wrapped around him. His boyfriend also has a big dick; it’s pressing right up against Shane’s ass right now. He nips lightly at Ilya’s neck.

“Sh, you’re alright, baby. Just a little longer.”

Shane purrs, drawing the tip of his tongue in tiny heart shapes against Ilya's pulse point.

It isn't long before the car comes to a stop, and much to Shane's dismay, that means he has to move, even though he's feeling like such a lazy kitty right now. Maybe if he pretends to be asleep, he can get Ilya to carry him. So, he tips his head forward and shuts his eyes, staying silent when Ilya tries to get him to sit up.

Ilya huffs something akin to a laugh. "You are very cute, but I am not going to be able to carry you all the way in."

Shane can't help the way his stomach drops, his expression falling from where it's pressed against Ilya's neck. The insinuation that he isn't a tiny kitten hits *hard*. Because right. He isn't a tiny kitten. He's a massive, 200 lb, professional hockey player. He's Shane fucking Hollander.

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Ilya has made a big mistake. He can tell it's the wrong thing to say as soon as the words leave his mouth. Shane is tension all over, like he's coming back up hard, and fast, and with a sobering dose of reality.

"I am just kidding, котенок. *Relax*," Ilya presses the words into his hair. "You are a tiny, baby kitten. You weigh absolutely nothing. Can you calm down for me?" He grazes his fingernails across Shane's bare back underneath his shirt.

Shane exhales a heavy, shaky breath.

Ilya scratches his fingers behind one of Shane's kitty ears, petting down his hair and over his cheek until Shane leans into the touch. "Good boy." Ilya presses a kiss to his nose, then his lips, then a little nip to his jaw.

Shane sighs and lets his eyes go closed.

Ilya opens the car door and shifts his grip to Shane's thighs, making sure Shane's arms are looped around his neck before he steps out and forces himself to his full height. It's not terribly difficult to lift Shane, but he's been doing it a lot lately, and his muscles are starting to punish him for it. He makes a mental note to step it up with his weight lifting. Clearly, this was an important piece of the puzzle for Shane, and Ilya could certainly give him that. Ilya would give him anything he wanted.

Shane seems better now that Ilya's carrying him, like maybe whatever anxiety his head had started to assault him with was actually just a baseless fear because Ilya is proving it wrong right in front of his eyes. He likes that he can quell one of Shane's worries that quickly, just by carrying him into the house. In fact, Shane starts to look pretty dazed pretty quickly. Ilya would be willing to bet the small plug shifting inside of him has something to do with that.

His arms are starting to ache a bit by the time they get through the front door, but he knows Shane's mind will start roaring at him if Ilya doesn't get him all the way to the bedroom, so he pushes onward. When he finally gets them to his room, he places Shane down on the

mattress and crawls over him to give him a big kiss. He wants Shane's focus on him right now, not on whatever fake scenario his head is concocting and trying to attack him with.

Ilya ruffles Shane's fluffy black hair. "Everyone at the club is right about you, hm? You are so gorgeous and well-behaved." He smiles when Shane's eyes darken. "I think everyone is very jealous that they do not have a kitten like mine." He leans a little closer to rub their noses together. "But that is too bad. I am very selfish."

A little rumble vibrates through Shane.

There's his good kitty cat. "I think we need to put your tail back on now, котенок. What do you think?" He smiles when Shane nuzzles up into his hand, and glances down to find that Shane is still rock hard in his jeans. *Ilya's* jeans, actually, because Shane had an obsession with wearing his clothes. Not that Ilya was complaining. He was quite pleased with the fact that Shane always tried so hard to look like *his*.

"Mm, you are so desperate for me, baby," Ilya notes with a smirk, rubbing his hand over Shane's clothed erection, and it causes Shane to whine deliciously. He's so fucking sensitive; Ilya can tell by the way he's squirming, scrunching his eyes up like even the weight of Ilya's hand against him is enough to send him over the edge. "Do not come for me yet, котенок. You are almost there, but I want to get my mouth on you first."

Shane moans and writhes against the bed, pressing his face into the comforter like he wants to embed Ilya's scent into his nose.

"I know, kitten. Let me get you out of these jeans, and we will get your tail back on, so you can be the prettiest kitty in the world. You would like that very much, wouldn't you?"

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Yes, Shane would. He would like that so very much. Wearing his tail in his owner's bed. Maybe he can come all over the sheets like he'd wanted to earlier. Or maybe Ilya will come all over him, instead. Part of Shane wants to fall asleep that way, soaked with Ilya's come. He wants it to dry on his face, all over his chest, scar a permanent burn into the lines of his tummy. He wants to swallow it, have Ilya's come live inside of him. He needs a healthy dose of his Alpha's milk, and he needs to drink it fresh from the source every single day.

"Stay with me, baby."

Shane whines. He wants to float away to kitten land until his brain is nothing but mush. He wants to let his tongue loll out of his mouth and get drunk off of the way Ilya is petting him. He wants Ilya to put him on a leash and walk him down the street; he wants every paparazzi in the city to get a picture until it's front page news. Shane could imagine the headlines.

Shane Hollander is Ilya Rozanov's...dog?

Cat, actually, he'd log into his virtually unused Twitter account to correct them. He doesn't care that cats don't go on walks outside. It doesn't have to make sense. It just has to feel good.

And, right now, it feels so fucking good. *So* fucking good that Shane is half-convinced that this is his true purpose in life: to be Ilya's good little kitten and get spoiled, and used, and—hopefully someday very soon—fucked. Shane badly wants to get fucked by him.

He gasps when he feels cool air on his cock—his jeans and boxers out of sight, and out of mind. Where did they go? Shane has no idea. It's not his problem. The only thing he has to focus on right now is listening to Ilya and being a good boy, which is not difficult considering he's the best boy in the world; Ilya tells him all the time, so much so that Shane is actually starting to believe him. He's good at things other than hockey. He's the *best* at something other than winning Stanley Cups. He's the best at being Ilya's котенок.

He arches into Ilya's touch when Ilya gets him on his stomach and starts petting over his back and then—*oh*. His tail is back on him. He swishes it excitedly.

“There's my happy kitty. You look so beautiful with your tail, baby. It matches your fur so well. Especially the cute little speckles.”

Shane preens under the attention and rubs his face happily into Ilya's pillow. It still smells strongly of his cologne. Shane thinks this is going to have to be *his* bed from now on. Screw the renovations on his Montreal apartment. Ilya would go to Ottawa at some point, and Shane would take up a full-time residence as Cat King of Ilya's Montreal house. He moans at the thought of getting to sleep here every day. Every night. Smelling like Ilya. Belonging to Ilya.

“Gorgeous. Absolutely stunning,” Ilya continues to praise him, like he can't help himself. Like Shane is genuinely the most perfect thing in existence. Shane has never, ever been treated so well in his life. It makes tears start to pool in his eyes.

It's that, or maybe it's the burning desire in the gut of his tummy screaming at him that he needs to *come right now*. He sobs out desperately, rutting his poor, leaking cock against the bed, until his pre-cum is smeared all over the sheets. He needs Ilya all over him. He needs Ilya on top of him until he's fucking suffocating under the weight of him, until Ilya is all he can think of, all he can feel, all he can *breathe*.

“I've got you, baby. You are okay. I'm going to suck you off now, and I want you to come down my throat. Alright?”

Shane is blind with desire, but he feels Ilya's hand petting through his fur, so he nudges his nose up against him and licks all over his fingers, sucking them into his mouth and biting them with his sharp teeth. He feels Ilya press a kiss somewhere onto his slobbery tongue, and he moans at how fucking good it feels to be fucking filthy. To have nasty, dirty sex where Ilya is in charge of *everything*, even his fucking thoughts.

He cries out fully when he feels wet heat engulfing his cock. It's too much, immediately. He feels like he's going to piss himself, like he's losing control of every bodily function he has. Like he's just a puppet and Ilya is the master, pulling his strings, sucking his cock, twisting the plug in his ass, and then pulling as he drags his fingers through the soft fur of Shane's tail.

Shane is a mess of drool and sweat and desire, twisting furiously against the sheets, pawing at Ilya's curls, digging his kitty claws into Ilya's shoulder. And when he finally comes, it's

suddenly too much all at once. His body seizes up, his eyes roll back into his head, and for a cool ten to fifteen seconds, he fully blacks out.

When he regains consciousness, Ilya is all over him with concern, petting his hair, trying to get him to focus, but Shane's eyes are *hazy*; his ears barely work. He feels spent and satiated and *so fucking good*. His arms and legs are pinned to the mattress; he couldn't lift them even if he wanted to.

Ilya is saying something to him, but it comes out muffled. Shane doesn't think it's important, anyway. There's not a single thing he needs to know right now. Not when Ilya is there to take care of him and handle everything.

He shuts his eyes and squirms slightly when he feels a warm washcloth gliding over his tummy, cleaning him up. He jumps when it glides over his spent cock, which is still twitching with the aftermath of what Ilya's just done to him. There's movement near his tail, like Ilya's just unclipped it, but Shane doesn't have the energy to protest. He feels himself slipping away.

His eyes snap open at the feeling of water all over him, and for a second, he panics. He feels like he's drowning. But Ilya's hands are on him just as quickly, petting over him, keeping him calm.

"You're okay. I'm right here with you. I'm just cleaning you off, baby. We're in the bathtub. Just try to stay calm."

Shane relaxes almost instantly. He's not aware of much, but he knows that he's safe. He's with Ilya, and he's having bath time. He really likes bath time. Ilya is taking care of him. Shane slaps his paw into the water to watch it splash, mewling delightedly when it flies into the air.

He feels Ilya press a laugh into his neck, his hands keeping Shane close and secure. "No playing right now, baby. I'm right here paying attention to you. Just focus on me."

Shane turns to try and push his head into Ilya's throat, but Ilya just holds him firmly, dragging a loofah across his sensitive skin. Shane shudders and sinks a little further into his grasp, until the warm water is up to his chin. He closes his eyes and lets himself drift off to the sensation of Ilya's hands combing over his wet body.

"I take care of what's mine, don't I?"

Shane purrs in response, thankful for the fact that Ilya is in the bath with him. Holding him, touching him, being so, so gentle with him. Shane feels exhausted and overwhelmed, but mostly *good*.

"That's good, baby. Can you breathe with me, please? In...and out. That's it." Shane feels Ilya's strong hand over his heartbeat; it draws his attention to his chest rising and falling as he tries to match Ilya's pace. "In..." Shane inhales. "And out." Shane exhales. He's drunk off the scent of Ilya's body wash.

“Mm,” he mews happily.

“Come on. Stay with me,” Ilya prompts, reaching to tip his chin this time until Shane is forced to look up at him.

Ilya is upside down from this angle, but even still, he’s so, *so* beautiful. So handsome. Shane is a very lucky cat. He blinks at the piercing blue eyes staring back at him, his own eyes focusing a little more while he tries to figure out the exact shade, just in case he ever has the strong desire to take up painting.

“That’s it, baby. There’s my beautiful Shane.”

Shane’s stomach swoops. Ilya thinks he’s beautiful whether he’s a kitten or not. He feels safe to come back into himself. It’s been a long day.

“Can you tell me your name, precious?”

Shane’s lips pull into a dopey smile, and he tips his head back even further, lifting his fingers to touch Ilya’s pretty lips. His perfect cupid’s bow. He lets out a surprised laugh when Ilya playfully kisses his fingers and then pretends to bite them, making the most ridiculous face.

“Mm, you love having baths with me, don’t you? Probably because I take such good care of you and hold you very nicely, yes? I can still hold you nicely once you come back up, baby. Take your time. I will be right here whenever you’re ready.”

Shane just smiles and holds onto his chin, pressing his thumb into Ilya’s scruff as the other continues to look down at him with genuine heart-eyes.

“Sweet boy,” Ilya coos, reaching for Shane’s fingers. “Can you give my hand a little squeeze so I know you’re with me? Just a little baby squeeze.”

Shane sticks his tongue out and goes to lick Ilya’s hand.

“No.” Ilya pulls his hand back slightly. “We are not licking right now, angel. We are squeezing. Can you give my fingers a squeeze so I know you are back in big boy mode?”

Shane puffs a silly laugh but presses his little claws into Ilya’s fingers.

“Oh, that’s a very good boy. Thank you so much. I am honored that you have decided to join me.”

Shane *loves* him.

“What if I want to hear my sweet kitten’s voice, hm? Does my kitten have a scratchy little voice, or is it all small and sweet? What type of meow does my kitten make?”

Shane shows off by giving his cutest and sweetest meow.

“That’s perfect, baby, but I need you to use your words for me now. What name would I put on my kitten’s collar if I wanted everyone to know he was mine? You will need a name tag so

they know what to call you, precious. What name would they use?”

Shane licks over his lips and presses his face into Ilya’s wet chest. “Shane,” he says shyly.

“That’s right, gorgeous. And it’s such a beautiful name. I thought so when I picked it out myself after adopting you and bringing you home. I knew my kitten had to have the perfect name. Yes, he did.”

Shane grins at how silly Ilya is being. How sweet.

“You’re here with me, моя любовь. We are done playing for now. It is time for us to rest.”

Shane nods and buries his nose into Ilya’s pec, letting his fingers glide all across the other’s skin. He has fingers now, not paws. He’s still a baby kitten, but he’s also Shane, and sometimes, it’s okay to be both. Ilya lets him be both.

After a few more minutes of Ilya’s fingers in his hair, he drains the bathtub and hoists Shane out of it. He wraps him in a fluffy towel and gives him a big hug, tucking Shane’s head against his chest. Shane isn’t purring anymore, but he’s still so happy. He kisses Ilya’s skin wherever he can reach it. He really, really loves his new home. He loves his new owner.

He’s still a little cold and damp, so he’s grateful when Ilya covers him in a giant, soft hoodie that smells scrumptious. He dresses him in thick sweatpants and then pushes some fluffy socks onto his feet. Shane nearly starts crying when he notices the black and white cat face on the top of each sock with 3D ears that stick out where his toes are.

Ilya just kisses him firmly on the mouth and then picks him up like a baby koala to carry him to the kitchen. Shane presses kisses down Ilya’s neck as they walk until Ilya places him on top of the counter. He pouts when Ilya disappears for a second, but the pout dissipates once he realizes Ilya is just turning the living room fireplace on. He returns just as quickly as he left.

And then Ilya is kissing him more, and feeding him strawberries, and pressing the strawberries into his mouth with his tongue, and Shane is moaning and swallowing around them. He drinks when Ilya presses water to his lips, holding eye contact when Ilya commands *more*. He’s lucid, and human, and still in love with him. It feels like a very sobering truth, like the first thing he’s been sure of in a while, and for once, he doesn’t feel like running away. In fact, he only wants to swim closer, deeper, further, until Ilya’s arms are the ones keeping him afloat. He knows he’s not at risk of sinking.

“I’ve got you, baby.”

Shane believes him.

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Should we go on a little trip to Ottawa? :) I think Ilya needs to look for a house, and who better to advise him than Mr. Real Estate?

Would love to hear your thoughts, as always!! I so appreciate all the thoughtful comments you've been leaving. You're giving me the best ideas, so thank you!

Thanks for reading :)

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