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, looooong 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. My characters are flawed. They do mess up, and they do course correct. If that's not your cup of tea, kindly skip this one :)

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!!!

Update: Thank you to Sofi for offering to help me clean up the Russian! (work in progress still)

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 he 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 Captaine 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 говори.”

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. “Будь осторожен с тем, что будешь делать. Мы еще продолжим этот разговор.”

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 povs 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.

“Тебе надо 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.

-

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.

-

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 looooooove it :)

Feel free to share this fic!! The reactions so far have definitely motivated me to keep writing!

@rozyhollanov is doing chapter-by-chapter edits and they are so beautiful!!! See her edits for Chapter 1+2

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 scritch.

"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 партнерском мероприятии? Почему?" 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. "Treat, 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 steadying 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, want clouding 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

происходит на самом деле.”

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.

@rozyhollanov is doing chapter-by-chapter edits and they are so beautiful!!! See her edit for Chapter 3

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 kneelt 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 sniffles 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 sniffles 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 sniffle, 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 sniffle 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.

-

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 sniffles 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 looooot 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 ;)

@rozyhollanov is doing chapter-by-chapter edits and they are so beautiful!!! See her edit for Chapter 4

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, hesitance. “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, sniffling 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.

-

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 sniffles 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 sniffles 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 sniffles 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."

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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 sniffle. 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 sniffles 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, sniffling 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 wowedddddd 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 his. 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. Marlow?”

Ilya just smiles lightly. “Marlow 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 sniffles, 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 *un*official 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 splayed 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 wowedddddd 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 slooooooow 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 boyfriendddd, 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 mewls 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 mewls 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-alph—"

"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 mewls 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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Chapter End Notes

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 :)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life is pretty fucking grand, if you ask Ilya. Sometimes, Shane is a kitten, yes, but sometimes he's just his boyfriend, and they do regular boyfriend things. They argue over what to watch on TV. They get overly competitive with each other in Ilya's home gym. They fight over the covers, even, because Shane is a cover hog; only, Ilya doesn't even mind because he always wakes up in a puddle of sweat with how high he's had to keep the heating lately. Shane makes him change the sheets every single day. And he does it without complaint. In fact, he fucking loves it.

He's starting to be able to picture his life with Shane, and not just as some far-off, distant thing. It's something that's happening before his very eyes. He watches Shane fall a little more in love with him every day, and he's not crazy this time. It's real. He's pretty sure it's always been real. He fell in love with Shane's freckles the very first time they met.

And now he gets to wake up to those freckles every morning. He gets to kiss life into them and watch as the air around Shane starts to get lighter and lighter. He's doing better.

But hockey is still a looming shadow around the corner and, to Shane, Ilya could tell that shadow was starting to feel a whole lot like the Grim Reaper. And the more Ilya saw Shane fall in love with him, the more he wondered how the fuck they were going to pull this off.

The paparazzi have been all over him and Rose for the past week, while Yuna has been hard at work getting everything together for the big announcement of The Irina Foundation. That announcement couldn't come soon enough, though, because, for now, they couldn't be seen together, and that was really starting to fuck with Ilya's plans.

Ilya wanted to take Shane with him for a trip to Ottawa, but he knew Shane wouldn't go unless their charity alibi was up and running. It was too risky. Being seen together and letting everyone assume whatever they wanted. With Shane's refusal to take off his collar, Ilya didn't have high hopes for how that might turn out.

So, he waits. Pretty impatiently. Until one day, he's begging Rose for Yuna's number just so he can see how things are moving along.

Ilya: *Hi, Yuna. It is Ilya. I hope you don't mind I asked Rose for your number. I am just wondering about the status of The Irina Foundation. I am very eager to get started.*

There. That was casual enough, right? It didn't scream, *I am desperate to be seen publicly with your son.*

He presses send and sucks in a breath, wrapping a loose curl around his finger as he stares at the screen. She wouldn't reply right away. Yuna was a very busy woman managing all of

Shane's brand deals and important contracts. He freezes, however, when the phone buzzes to life in his hands.

"Hello?" He says, tentatively picking up the phone, like maybe Yuna has butt-dialed him by accident amidst all of her more critical to-dos.

"Ilya," she replies cheerfully. Not a butt-dial, then. "I am so glad you texted. I was going to ask Shane for your number."

"Really?" He asks, surprised. "Um, what for?"

"Well, with all this charity stuff, I just thought it would be a good idea for us to get on the same page."

"Okay," Ilya replies nervously. "The same page about what?"

"It occurred to me that you probably don't have an agent."

"An agent," he repeats, frowning to himself. "What is an agent for?"

"What isn't an agent for?" He hears Yuna laugh. "They help with PR, legal negotiations—things like contracts, salary, bonuses. They can offer career advice. It's nice to have someone in your corner to represent you. Especially when you're dealing with something like this."

Ilya still doesn't understand. "Something like what?"

"Well, this thing with Shane and you, I mean," she clarifies.

"The charity?"

"Yes. That, too. I was talking about your relationship, though. I think it's important to have a statement prepared in case anything leaks, you know? An agent would be able to help with something like that."

Ilya just blinks in surprise. He hadn't really thought about the business side of things, of why it might be important to get ahead, just in case something did get out to the public. It was very possible, with the way Shane insisted on parading around in flashy clothes that were obviously too big on him.

"Anyway, I was thinking that Shane's agent, Farah, could take you on," she offers, and Ilya raises his eyebrows. "It would be helpful to have you two under the same agency, since you would likely need to put out joint statements involving the charity."

"Oh," Ilya comments, unsure of how to respond. "Um…and it would be okay? For us to have same agent?" The last thing he wanted to do was step on Shane's toes—and certainly not regarding anything that surrounded hockey.

"Actually, it would make things *a lot* easier," Yuna laughs. "If I had known about you guys sooner, I could have had Farah help with your contract for Ottawa. She's helping Shane with his new one for the Voyageurs right now."

Ilya feels his throat go tight. “Oh yeah? Seems like that one should be pretty straightforward, no?” As far as Ilya knew, anyway, Shane had no intention of leaving his precious Voyageurs anytime soon.

“For the most part. I think it’s important that we disclose Shane’s sexuality to, at the very least, his coaches. I mean, now that you two are getting more serious, we need to prepare for every possible scenario.”

Ilya scrunches his eyebrows up. “What do you mean? What scenario?”

“Well, suppose Shane gets outed, and his team doesn’t take too kindly to it,” she muses, as if it’s the most casual topic in the world—just business to be discussed. As if it wasn’t Shane’s biggest and most looming waking nightmare. “We have a pre-negotiated understanding that he can request to be traded at any time if he’s uncomfortable. With Shane’s stats, practically any team in the League would want him, so it’s just a matter of making sure they know he’s in control here. Shane can pretty much leave immediately, on his own terms, if anything like that happens.”

Ilya’s heart hammers loudly in his chest. Shane was making plans just in case. Just in case things didn’t work out with his team. In case they got outed and he had to jump ship. “Ottawa,” he blurts before he can help himself. “We need more depth at center. If…if Shane needs to leave for whatever reason,” Ilya swallows and forces the words out. “He should come to Ottawa. I will make sure we have space on the roster.”

“Oh, Ilya, that’s very sweet, but I don’t know if—”

“I will take a pay cut. I will move to line 2. Whatever he needs. I will make it happen.”

He can hear Yuna’s smile through the phone. “It’s up to Shane, sweetheart. But I’m happy to know you are thinking about this long-term. I have to admit, David and I were a little nervous when you two first came to us, but it’s clear to me now how serious you both are.”

“I cannot speak for Shane, but I am very serious about him. I have never been more serious about anything in my life,” he admits through a breath. “I love your son very, very much.”

“I can see that,” she says softly, fondly. “Have you told him yet?”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “Not yet. Your son is very, very anxious. He can…get in his head about these types of things.”

Yuna just laughs in return. “You clearly know him well.”

He wants to tell her more, wants to let her know that her son wasn’t just in his head; he was a nervous wreck, actually—anxious beyond belief. For now, though, it doesn’t feel like his place. This was Shane’s private business, and Ilya would not break his trust without talking to him more first.

“I, um,” Ilya says nervously. “I would like to bring him with me to Ottawa to look at houses. I figure…if we are going to continue being together—which I hope we will—then it is

important for him to feel at home with me. In Ottawa."

"Oh?" Yuna's voice rings out in surprise. "I didn't realize you guys had made it official."

Ilya can't help the way he smiles. "Yes. We are boyfriends now."

"Oh, Ilya, that's wonderful," she cheers. "David, did you hear that? Shane and Ilya are boyfriends!"

His heart swells to ten times its size. Shane's parents were so delightful. Ilya couldn't wait to get to know them more. "Yes. It is very exciting," he lets himself grin. "But I am worried it will not go over well if I bring him before we announce the charity. The paparazzi have been relentless lately. The last thing I want is for us to get spotted and have them jumping to conclusions before the official statement."

"I see. Understood," she says seriously, like she's entering back into Momager mode. "We'll have to speed things along, then. I'll talk to the sponsors who are interested and get back to you soon. In the meantime, let me connect you with Farah. You may want to talk to Shane first, but I think it would be a good idea for you two to disclose your relationship with her. Shane already came out to her, so I know she will take it well."

Ilya couldn't believe Shane was making all these plans. Coming out to his agent, to his coaches, setting up his contract in a way that would allow him to be traded if shit hit the fan. These were not tiny kitten steps; no, these were gigantic human steps. And as proud as Ilya was of him, he also knew that the implication behind a lot of these plans had to be weighing pretty heavily on him. He makes a mental note to check in with him later. Once he gets back from working with his fancy hockey trainer.

"I appreciate all that you are doing to help us," Ilya tells her softly, because he has never met anyone like the Hollanders before. They were so selfless, so welcoming to someone who, just weeks ago, they assumed to be their son's biggest rival. Now, Yuna was offering up Shane's agent, Shane's sponsors, Shane's resources, *Shane*.

"Of course, honey. It's no trouble," she assures him warmly. "You know, we originally thought about going for two kids, and we had always hoped for another boy. Another hockey star," she laughs. "In a way, it's like we finally have that. Only better. All we want is for Shane to be loved deeply. And I think, with you, he is."

Ilya pinches the bridge of his nose to keep from crying. "I love him with my whole heart. Do not tell him, though. I want it to be special." He hears her voice her agreement from the other end of the line. "And, please, do not tell him about Ottawa. I do not want him to think I am plotting his downfall on his current team. I just…want to make sure he knows he has options. Somewhere he will be safe if he needs it. I am Captain now, and I will not tolerate disrespect on my team. I only wish the Voyageurs felt the same."

"Sweetheart, he could never think you were plotting against him. He knows you only want the best for him," Yuna smiles through the phone. "I'm glad he has someone in his corner. I think Ottawa will be perfect for you. David and I are excited to have you over for dinner

sometime once you get settled in. And, congrats, by the way! I didn't realize you'd made Captain."

Ilya chuckles slightly. "Thank you. I am excited to have dinner as well. And yes, I made some negotiations of my own when signing. I will have a big say in the roster, so. I meant what I said about keeping room for Shane if he decides he needs to jump ship. I am a little worried with the things he has said about the way his team talks to him," he admits, chewing on his thumbnail.

"I know he's feeling conflicted, but he loves those boys more than anything. I honestly don't see him leaving anytime soon, even if things do get worse," she sighs, and Ilya gets that feeling in the pit of his stomach again. "But we have to trust him to make the right decision for himself."

Ilya chews furiously at his lower lip. His Shane did *not like making decisions*. In fact, decisions were the root of the problem, the root of all his anxieties. The thing he feared most was the consequences of his actions and the decisions they stemmed from.

"Alright, darling, well, it was great catching up with you, but I've got to make some phone calls about the charity. I'll shoot over Farah's number. In the meantime, please get in touch with her, and I'll let you know once I hear back from our proposed sponsors."

"Okay," Ilya nods at the instructions. He was glad he and Shane had people in their corner, people who were determined to help them, who wanted them to succeed at this. He did not take the Hollanders' support lightly, especially when he knew they were counting on him to take care of their son. He would, of course. He'd take care of Shane to the best of his ability. "Thank you again for all your help. I cannot thank you enough."

"Don't even worry about it, Ilya. You're family now. I just want what's best for you boys."

Not just Shane, but *the both of them*. Ilya swallows around the emotional lump in his throat, trying to keep it together as they say their goodbyes. She promises to reach out soon about the charity, so Ilya busies himself with finding the best realtor in Ottawa.

When Shane comes home a few hours later, Ilya is waiting for him, Farah's number burning a hole in his pocket. He wants to check in before he does anything else, before he twines his and Shane's careers indefinitely by signing on with the same agent. Ilya wonders if Shane's mom has already talked to him about all this, or if he'll be hearing it for the first time.

"Hi, baby. How was training?"

Shane is breathless and grinning the way he always is when he's sufficiently hockey-ed out. His kitten has just come from his most favorite playtime activity, and Ilya can't help but smile at the fact that hockey could still make him this happy, despite everything.

"It was good," Shane huffs, dropping his bag to the floor. His hair is damp from the shower, and Ilya doesn't have to get any closer to know Shane smells like him. He'd already covertly swiped some of Ilya's products and claimed them as his own. Ilya had pretended not to notice

and slyly replaced the missing bottles, but secretly, he wondered what else of his would disappear next. Shane was proving to be quite the cat thief.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” Ilya smiles, patting the kitchen barstool next to him. He appreciates the way that sentence doesn’t immediately send a panic through Shane like it maybe would have a week ago. Progress.

“Everything alright?” Shane’s eyebrows pinch together as he slips into the chair.

Ilya can’t help reaching over to sink his fingers through the hair at the nape of Shane’s neck, watching in delight as Shane relaxes into his touch. “Everything is perfect, моя любовь. I was just on the phone with your mother about the charity.”

“Oh?” Shane raises his eyebrows, his hand slipping across Ilya’s knee. Ilya liked that, too. That Shane was becoming more touchy with him, more affectionate, even when they weren’t in a scene. “It’s coming along, then?”

“Yes, as far as I know. Your mother is wonderful. She is handling all the details,” Ilya promises, giving his head a little scratch. “She mentioned that I should probably sign with an agent. Someone who can help with my contract and statements. Just in case anything gets out.”

He watches Shane’s reaction, the little uncomfortable twist of his lips at the thought of things not going perfectly according to plan.

“She said it might be helpful for us to have the same agent. And for us to let her know that we are together, so she can properly assess the situation and react accordingly if needed. But I wanted to get your thoughts before I reached out to her. I will not sign with your agent unless you are comfortable.”

He feels relief as Shane just smiles again, his face easy and unbothered by the news, like Ilya isn’t invading his life by latching onto all of his people, even if Ilya sort of feels that way. “Farah is great. I think you would really like her. I came out to her, and it went really, really well.”

“Mm, I heard. This made me very happy. I am glad you felt comfortable enough to come out to her,” Ilya hums.

Shane laughs. “Well, it’s kind of necessary. It wouldn’t be super helpful if I kept this sort of thing from her. That’s her whole job, you know? Making sure my image stays protected.”

From Ilya’s understanding, at least, that wasn’t Farah’s job. Farah’s job was to protect *Shane*, not his image, but Ilya could understand why Shane thought that way.

“So, you are okay with us sharing an agent?” Ilya double-checks.

Shane rubs his knee in encouragement and leans in to kiss him. “Of course, I’m okay with that. We’re in this together now, yeah?”

Ilya just smiles and pulls him in for another lip-lock. “Yes. Absolutely. I will give her a call. How do you want to handle telling her about us?”

Shane shrugs and leans in to rest his chin on Ilya’s shoulder. “We could just tell her now, if you want. I mean, she probably knows something is up. With the charity and me coming out and everything.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows, gently running his fingers through Shane’s hair. “You want to tell her right now?”

“Sure,” Shane agrees nonchalantly. “Why not?”

Ilya is stunned. His Shane has never been nonchalant about anything before, let alone things that had to do with hockey.

“Why do you look so shocked?” He laughs, tipping his face up to look at Ilya from where they’re only inches apart.

“I do not know. You’re just being very…chill about all of this.”

“Should I not be chill?” Shane watches him in amusement.

“Hollander,” Ilya levels him with an unimpressed look. “I have never known you to be chill in the entire ten years I have spent studying you.”

Shane chokes out another surprised laugh. “Well, maybe I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

Ilya is highly doubtful of that. If anything, he thinks this can only mean trouble, delayed chaos brewing from somewhere deep within. The weather forecast was still showing cloudy skies up ahead, but they’d turned off all the storm warnings. Ilya was not going to let himself be caught off guard by falling for the false sense of security Shane was trying to push on him for whatever reason.

“Okay,” Ilya breathes out carefully. “Then, I’ll call her right now.”

He waits until he receives a sure nod from Shane before reaching for his phone. A FaceTime call would probably be best. It would give him a chance to introduce himself properly, and it would give Farah the opportunity to see how happy he and Shane were. How serious. From their experiences with coming out to people so far, he liked to think it was easier to see than it was to explain.

She must be expecting the call because she picks up so quickly that Shane barely has time to lift his head from Ilya’s shoulder before her face is on the screen. She’s pretty, Ilya notices. And young. Maybe only ten years older than them, but she’s got the air of someone who is much older. Much more serious.

“Hi, Ilya,” she greets him with a smile. “Ms. Hollander told me she had passed my number along to you. I wasn’t expecting you to get in touch so soon, though.”

“Sorry,” Ilya says sheepishly. If she has noticed Shane at his side, she hasn’t said anything yet. “Is now a bad time?”

“Not at all! I’m happy to chat with you right now. I heard you are on the market for an agent.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees with a soft curl of his lips. “You came highly recommended by Yuna. She thought it might be helpful if Shane and I were signed to same agency. With the charity and all, I am sure you’ve heard.”

“Absolutely,” she confirms warmly. “I think the charity is a wonderful idea. I have to admit I was a little shocked when Shane first came to me about it, but the message is really something special. I can see why you boys are so passionate about it. And I see Shane is there with you, too. Hi, Shane,” she waves.

“Hi,” Shane pokes his head into the frame to be seen a little more, leaning with his hand still on Ilya’s knee for balance.

“Yuna mentioned you are signing with Ottawa, Ilya. Is that right?” She double-checks, and Ilya can see she’s taking notes on her laptop as they chat.

“Yes, it is official,” he grins, unable to resist poking Shane excitedly. He was very much looking forward to meeting his new team soon. Very much looking forward to getting settled in his new town of Ottawa.

“That’s awesome. Well, lucky for you, I am based in Canada, which will make things a lot easier for us. It will also give us a good central location to conduct any charity-related business.”

“Perfect,” Ilya agrees. He liked this Farah woman already. “Actually, there is one more thing we were hoping to talk to you about.”

“Sure.” She leans forward in interest. “Does this have to do with the charity?”

“Sort of,” Ilya replies slowly. “Well, it is more to do with Shane and me.”

Her expression doesn’t falter in the slightest. “Okay. Sure.”

“Well,” Ilya puffs a breath, looking over at Shane to make sure he doesn’t find any hesitation in his eyes, and he smiles when Shane just nods for him to go ahead. “Shane and I…we are sort of…together.”

“Together?” She raises her eyebrows, looking between them. “Together like dating?”

“Correct,” Ilya nods, and when he risks another glance at Shane, he finds the corners of his lips turned up in agreement.

“Wow,” Farah laughs. “And here I was thinking you were dating Rose Landry.”

Ilya feels the way Shane digs his nails harshly into his leg. He carefully removes them and gives Shane's hand a squeeze, lacing their fingers instead.

"I suppose the charity makes a little more sense to me now. I will admit, I was wondering how this pairing came up." But, she still has a smile on her face. "Excuse me if this question is inappropriate, but…you two are serious, right?"

Ilya squeezes Shane's hand intentionally. "Yes, very." He's not leaving any room for argument on Shane's end, no matter how much his anxious brain may or may not want to push.

"Great. I just want to make sure so we can come up with the proper long-term plan."

"We're not—" Shane cuts in. "We're not looking to like…come out or anything. Not right now. We just…" he pauses, sighing in frustration like he's having trouble finding the words. But Ilya knows what he's trying to say.

"We want to make things a little easier on ourselves. I would love to go out in public with Shane without everyone making a big deal about it. In an ideal world, we are hockey enemies turned friends, and now, collaborators on a cause we both care deeply about."

Shane's ideal world, not his. In *Ilya's* ideal world, they would obviously be husbands with a bunch of tiny, panicky cat kids running around. Well…hopefully not too panicked. Ilya wasn't sure how much more he could take.

"I see," Farah nods seriously. "I can't help but notice that Shane is also wearing your necklace."

Ilya sighs heavily. A simple piece of jewelry that had gone mostly unnoticed for his entire career, and now, it was all anyone could seem to talk about.

"Sorry," she has the decency to apologize, like she's somehow intruded on something private. "It's just that this has been a big topic in the press. I want to make sure we're prepared for anything they might throw at us."

"It's the symbol for the charity," Shane chimes in. "Once we announce the charity and the symbol, people aren't going to question it."

Ilya watches Farah's face, which is still looking incredibly doubtful.

"As nice of an idea as that is, I don't know that the press are going to buy it. In fact, I think this will be the biggest part of the story to them. It would be one thing if you were both going to wear the necklace, but I think the huge thing is that Ilya's has disappeared and now reappeared on your neck, Shane. Especially since people are already linking it to Rose. They're going into this with the idea that Ilya has given the necklace to someone special. Like a partner."

Ilya presses his face into his hands momentarily. She wasn't wrong. He'd been thinking it for the better part of two weeks now. He had little faith that Shane's cover story was going to cut

it, but he also knew how important it was to Shane that he be able to wear his collar in public. And he was dead-set on Ilya's necklace being that collar.

"Well, then, we will just spin it in a way they are familiar with. I will tell them that arch rival Hollander is super boring for trying to steal my signature fashion trend, and so now, it is of no interest to me to wear this necklace. I can represent my mother in some other way that has not been poached by hockey's Golden Boy."

Farah looks like she has a lot more to say on the matter, but Shane is smiling at him so gratefully that Ilya can't resist turning to press a reassuring kiss to his lips.

"The necklace stays," Ilya says decisively, despite the known risks. Shane wasn't going to part with the necklace, even if that meant outing himself in the process. They would simply have to prepare for the worst.

And, if the worst is that Shane gets booted from his asshole team and has to come to Ottawa instead, well then, selfishly, that was a risk Ilya was willing to take. But only because Shane, himself, was *insisting* on it, and Ilya could never deny Shane anything he wanted.

"Got it," Farah says without another word on the matter, and Ilya can immediately tell he likes her. Whether she was as good at her job as Yuna was claiming was still up for debate, but for the time being, at least, they had a plan.

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Shane feels like he's about to buzz out of his skin when the news about the charity finally hits. It's only been a couple of days since they talked to Farah, but for whatever reason, Ilya wanted to move fast. *Like ripping off a band-aid*, he had said, *before anyone sees something they won't be able to explain.*

And, well, he had a point about that one. It was only a matter of time before pictures of Shane in Ilya's necklace leaked. If the news about the charity didn't drop first, it would look like a cover-up, like they were trying to hide something, save their own asses. Whatever people believed first would be the story the press would run with.

So, Ilya has the brilliant idea to address the necklace immediately. Trying to hide it would only raise suspicion. Which must be why Shane is logged into his Instagram for the first time in years. It's why his thumb is hovering over a post that very clearly identifies him as having Ilya's necklace, only that's not what they're saying. They're going with Ilya's version of the story, that Shane has stolen his signature look, and in true Rozanov fashion, Ilya has now decided he's too good for it.

It's not the *worst* plan, but it still makes Shane feel like he's going to throw up.

"We don't have to do this," Ilya reminds him, his arms wrapped around Shane's waist, his chin hooked over Shane's shoulder.

They each have a different version sitting in their drafts, along with Farah's version, which is ready to go for the official Instagram of The Irina Foundation. Shane and Ilya's posts will, of

course, direct people there, seeing as Farah's version has all the pertinent information. In fact, the posts on their personal accounts were mostly just there to help cover up the necklace. *By revealing it.*

Shane's version is a picture of him proudly repping the necklace while holding up the official branding for the foundation, which very clearly features Ilya's mom's cross pendant. He's smiling in polite, true Shane Hollander fashion. The kind his sponsors pay the big bucks for. The kind that says he's wholesome. Trustworthy. A good role model. Someone you should believe when they say they're wearing a necklace for charity.

Except Shane isn't wearing the necklace for charity. He's wearing the necklace because he's a cat, and this is his collar. He feels like he's lying for selfish reasons. He feels like he's shining a bright spotlight on something that could, still, just as easily, remain a secret. He feels like he's in over his head.

"Jesus, fuck," he mutters, dropping the hand that's holding his phone. He doesn't want to look at it anymore. Doesn't want to question it. He just wants it done. "Post it for me. I can't do it."

He's glad his eyes are closed so he can't see the concerned look Ilya must be giving him.

"Shane, I'm not going to do that," Ilya sighs, giving his tummy a little pet. "It is completely up to you whether we post it or not. If you do not want to mention the necklace, then we shouldn't."

"But I'm not going to stop wearing it," Shane reminds him, because that was pretty much the one and only problem. He refused to take it off. The thought made him positively sick to his stomach. Ilya had given him something important, had trusted him with it, and Shane wanted to honor Ilya by wearing it. It was a reminder of Ilya's feelings for him, of how strong their bond was, of how deep this went. It was a reminder that Shane didn't have to do it alone anymore. He had a partner in this. Maybe a partner for life. "They're going to find out at some point. Farah said it's better to get ahead of it."

"This was my idea, and I do not want you to blame me if it goes badly," Ilya presses into his shoulder.

Shane frowns and turns in his arms, cause that's not where his head is at all right now. "Hey," he says softly, cupping Ilya's cheek with the hand that isn't holding his phone. "I would never blame you. It's a good idea. And it's a whole lot better than people seeing it and jumping to conclusions."

Ilya still looks pensive and worried, and for once, Shane feels like he has to be the one to get them safely to their destination. He needs to take control, and he needs to make this decision right now.

So, without another thought, he looks down at his caption one more time and then hits post.

Ilya's a bit frozen in shock, like he wasn't actually expecting Shane to put up a clear picture to the entire world of him wearing Ilya's signature gold necklace. So, maybe Shane is acting

insane right now. He doesn't care. Shane was insane. Insane for Ilya.

"Post yours, too," he tells him, because Shane's post is only half of the story.

Ilya's post is in true Rozanov style. He's shirtless, partially to draw attention to his missing necklace, partially to draw attention *away* from it. There's a joke about Shane being the worst boss ever. How Shane demanded the necklace from Ilya before informing him that he would be the official head and face of the charity. Something about Ilya being too cool for the necklace now that boring Shane wants to wear it. Everything they could think of to sell the whole arch rivals story, which was about to become their lifeline.

Once Ilya posts, Shane will comment something to play into it. Something like:

ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer: *Okay that's not what happened…*

And then…they wait. Wait for what exactly? Shane isn't sure. Chaos. The end of the world. Maybe the MLH Commissioner will arrive with the police and have them arrested. He doesn't know. All he knows is it's out there now. There's no going back.

The group message with his team is always muted these days, but something within Shane beckons him closer. Urges him to take a peek.

🏆🏆MTL VOY BOYS -> 5th Stanley Cup🏆🏆🏆

Comeau: *So Hollzy's whole camp is shacking up with Rozanov now??*

JJ: *Why are you working with that Russian piece of trash??????* 😭😭😭

Drapeau: *Bro take that shit down, it's fucking embarrassing*

Wilson: *I literally thought it was fake…r u srs?*

Hayden: *Shane…what the hell man?*

Shane swallows and immediately swipes out of his messages, but when he looks up, Ilya is watching him with these god-awful puppy dog eyes. Almost like he thinks they've just made the biggest mistake of their lives. And Shane hates that. He doesn't want Ilya to think that Shane thinks any part of this is a mistake.

"Hey," Shane forces a smile. "It's fine. Everything is okay."

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Ilya does not think everything is okay. Shane looks like he's very close to his breaking point, despite the brave face he keeps trying to pull for Ilya's benefit. They need to get out of Montreal. They need to do it immediately.

“How would you feel about coming with me to Ottawa for a few days?” Ilya asks, straight to the point. He needs to do something before Shane melts himself into the floor. His thoughts are ricocheting loudly around his head like helicopter blades, choppy and cutting. Ilya feels the threat radiating off of him, feels himself stepping boldly into the danger zone, daring Shane to either cut the engine or strike him down.

“Ottawa?” Shane tips his head, like Ilya’s just brought up the most random topic in the world.

“Yes. I will be heading out soon to start summer practices, and I still have not found a place to live. I figure you’re the real estate expert, no?” He tempts, playing to his strengths. His Shane *loved* real estate. “Mr. Real Estate,” he teases, slinking closer to try and lighten the mood. He hasn’t checked a single comment on his post.

Shane just scoffs. “Shut up.”

“Come on. I am serious,” Ilya pouts, pulling Shane over to him by his hips. “Ottawa is your hometown. You know it better than anyone, yes? Plus, we are only going to be two hours apart all year round. I want to make sure you are comfortable in my new house. It’s going to be yours just as much as it is mine.”

Shane flushes, like the thought of Ilya wanting to share everything he owns with him is overwhelming. Ilya doesn’t care. Shane should get used to it. “We can’t be seen in Ottawa together.”

“Why not?” Ilya raises his eyebrows. “We just told everyone we are charity buddies now. For all they know, we have business in Ottawa. Isn’t the whole point of the charity to allow us to be seen together? We even addressed the necklace. We are *free*. To do whatever we want, Shane.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. They weren’t free to hold hands, or kiss in the street, or go out to nice, romantic dinners together like Ilya wanted. But they were free to exist. Together. Certainly, in the same city.

“Look, I have hired the most prestigious realtor in all of Ottawa. I have paid triple their asking price to ensure total confidentiality.”

Shane is just watching him with a half-fond, half-curious look. “You’ve been planning this for a while, haven’t you?” He asks knowingly.

Ilya licks his lips and tries to remain casual. “Well, I only spoke to the realtor a few days ago…” he trails, but Shane must know him better than that because he captures his lips in a tender kiss. A kiss so soft it could have only been initiated by a tiny baby kitten.

“You’re extremely cute,” Shane tells him affectionately, bumping their noses together.

Ilya wants to eat him alive. “I am not cute. I am very tough Russian mafia type. The kind people run from and fear on the ice,” he insists, puffing his chest a little, but he folds when Shane pulls him into another kiss. Yes, he could be very soft, indeed. But only for his

котенок. “Does this mean you will come with me?” He clarifies when Shane pulls away, his brown eyes all easy and warm.

“Only because I can’t imagine going a few days without kissing you.”

Ilya kisses him again. His Shane was growing more bold with his affections, and admittedly, Ilya wasn’t sure how they were going to fare when they were long-distance. Ilya was attached already, but now, they both are. They’re attached at the hip, to be exact. And wouldn’t it all be so much easier if Shane had every intention of moving to Ottawa with him?

God. Ilya could only dream. But they’d be such a powerhouse together. Playing with Shane in the most recent All-Star Game had been electric. If Ilya thought they had chemistry before, he was wowed at what they could do on the ice together. Two players who everyone had just assumed would clash, because the media had painted it that way. Because the League had taken advantage of two young kids, who were just finding their footing, so they could sell a story. So they could sell more tickets. So they could profit off their backs while Ilya and Shane suffered for ten years because of it.

Ilya wonders if things might have turned out differently had the League not been so intent on making their lives a nightmare soap opera. Maybe he and Shane would have connected earlier. Maybe Shane wouldn’t be ten years deep into his gay panic. Maybe they’d be out and proud and already working on a family.

Ilya swallows and tries to put that thought aside. He can’t mourn what could’ve been anymore, not when he has something so strikingly beautiful right in front of him. This version of Shane is the one he actually gets to have, which makes him the best version of all. Ilya just hated that he was going to have to continue to love him from afar right after they’d just made it official. As much as he was excited about the new season, he was also already counting down the days until he’d get to see his Shane again.

They leave for Ottawa bright and early the next morning. Ilya rents a car, just so they have more privacy, cause apparently, all of Ilya’s cars are decidedly ‘flashy’. At least according to Shane. Whatever that means. He insists on driving because he knows they’ll get there sooner, and so he can watch Shane be the prettiest passenger princess of all time, of course. Ilya keeps a hand on Shane’s thigh the whole way over, and Shane stretches his leg out ridiculously far in order to let him.

“Yes, Mom,” Shane sighs into his phone.

Yuna is calling to check in about the announcement. Ilya still hasn’t looked at any of the comments, because he doesn’t really care what people are saying, but he knows Shane is worried. He also knows Shane has been secretly checking his phone when he thinks Ilya isn’t watching. Bold assumption on his part. Ilya is *always* watching.

“They took it about as well as can be expected. I mean, they’re going to have to get over it.”

He’s talking about his team. His terrible, awful fucking team. Ilya was going to hunt down and injure every single one of them until Shane didn’t even have a team to *go back to* by the time the season started up again. He would be forced to come with Ilya to Ottawa, and they

would both live happily ever after. Not to mention, Ilya was pretty damn certain he and Shane could bring home lots of Cups together. And his Shane liked Cups. He was a prize-winning kitty, after all.

All of a sudden, Shane sighs and holds the phone out to him. “She wants to talk to you.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows in surprise and scrambles to take the phone from him. For whatever reason, Yuna still made him nervous. He never knew if she was coming to him with business or with something Shane-related. Often, sometimes, they were one in the same.

“Hello?” He says into the phone, having had to let go of Shane to answer it. His boy is pouting pathetically, so Ilya is determined to make this quick.

“Hi, Ilya,” she greets. “I just wanted to see how you’re doing on your end. I’m not sure if this is something your team would care about.”

Ilya didn’t know, actually. He was aware of his new teammates, of course—he’d hand-selected many of them—but he hadn’t officially met them yet. All Ilya knew was that he wasn’t going to allow hatred of any kind from his team. And being the Captain he was, with a large say in Ottawa’s final roster, he didn’t think they were going to have any problems.

“Oh, I don’t know. I am not too concerned,” he admits honestly. Shane’s team was the main issue here. The only issue, in fact.

“Well, you boys let me know if you need anything, okay? Most of the public response has been good, but you know how hockey fans can be.”

Ilya did know, unfortunately. He also knew that he didn’t care. The only thing he cared about was the sweet creature making eyes at him from a few feet away.

“Just make sure you’re looking after Shane for me, alright? He might act like it doesn’t bother him, but I know deep down he really cares what those guys think of him. He feels like he’s failing them as their Captain.”

Ilya wedges the phone into his shoulder and leans over as far as he can without crashing the car to put his hand back on Shane’s leg. *His Shane*. Failing his four-time Stanley Cup winning team as their Captain all because he wanted to be a little black and white kitten wearing his arch rival’s *collar*. Yeah, right. Ilya wasn’t going to let that thought fester for long. He would fuck it right out of Shane if he had to.

“Of course, I will. You don’t have to worry about that. I will make sure that everything is good over here.” He glances over at Shane intentionally, and his boy greets him with a soft smile, slipping his hand soothingly over Ilya’s. Ilya’s heart pounds against his ears at the sight.

“Thank you, honey. Well, have a safe rest of your trip. Please send us pictures of the new house if you find anything you like!”

“I will,” Ilya smiles, eyes darting between Shane and the road. “Thank you for checking in on us. Is very sweet. I will shoot you a text once we arrive to let you know we got in safely.”

“You’re a doll. Can you pass the phone to Shane one more time so I can say goodbye?”

“Of course,” Ilya agrees, and since he refuses to let go of Shane’s thigh, he just leans his head over until Shane gets the hint and takes the phone back from him. Shane’s laughing as he does.

Ilya smirks and gives his thigh another squeeze.

When they finally get to Ottawa, they head straight to the first listing. As far as Shane knew, this was just a day trip. They’d drive in, look at some houses, and then they’d make the late drive back. Ilya, however, had packed both of them a bag just in case. If they found something they really liked, there was no reason they couldn’t spend the night there and christen the new house, right?

Ilya didn’t know much about real estate or housing contracts, but they would mostly be looking at new builds today—houses that, ideally, would be available to them immediately. Ilya wasn’t sure how he was going to pull it off, but somehow, if it happened for them today, he was going to find a way to make their first time a reality. Their first *real* time. Ilya was fucking dying to fuck him.

The thought that Shane has never been fucked before plagued his mind at all hours of day. But it also meant there was a lot of pressure to make this fucking perfect for him. Shane was not only the love of Ilya’s life, the future father of his children, and the most precious thing on Earth, but he was also an *anal* sex *virgin*. Ilya could not, under any circumstances, screw this up.

“You ready?” Ilya asks as he pulls into the driveway of the first listing. This one is a little bit more remote, a little more private. When the realtor had sent over some options, Ilya picked this one because it reminded him most of Shane’s cottage. He had a feeling Shane was going to like this one.

Shane seems pleased by how remote the house is, and Ilya can already see him perking up a bit. From the looks of it, this property was definitely feeding his Real Estate fetish.

Ilya holds his hand as they stroll up to the house, but Shane drops it like ice once they spot the realtor. It’s a woman. Ilya has already spoken with her in-depth over the phone and had her sign additional confidentiality papers. She didn’t seem like someone who had any reason to sell their story, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Either way, Ilya really wished Shane would let him keep holding his hand.

“Holly Walters,” she introduces herself, shaking Ilya’s hand first. “You must be Mr. Rozanov. It’s great to meet you. I’m certain we’re going to be able to find you a home today.”

Ilya smiles elatedly as he shakes her hand back. “I really hope so. I’d love to lock one down so I can start getting settled ahead of the move.”

“Of course. Well, we’ve got some incredible properties to look at today. And, you are?” She asks, reaching out for Shane’s hand next.

“He’s a house connoisseur,” Ilya claps him on the back in a way that he hopes screams *no homo*. In all honesty, Ilya wasn’t sure if house connoisseurs even existed or what they actually did, but for today, at least, Shane could be that.

“Yeah. Um. What he said,” Shane plays along, shaking her hand as well. He doesn’t introduce himself further, and she doesn’t ask him to, which Ilya is grateful for.

“Amazing. Are you ready to head inside and take a look?”

Ilya nods and follows after her, turning to give Shane an excited thumbs-up. Shane is giving his slightly grumpy kitty look, so Ilya pokes him in the stomach until he starts to get ticklish and lets out a laugh. He returns to being a grumpy kitty just after. Ilya wants to kiss him all over.

“So, the main highlight of this property is how remote it is. You’re going to have extremely quiet mornings and even more quiet evenings. You have tons of land, you can see the massive backyard from almost every room in the house,” she explains as they walk through it. “As we talked about, this is a brand-new model. It’s never been lived in. You’re going to see all updated finishes.”

“What’s the bathroom count?” Shane asks, eyebrows pressed together, and god, Ilya was actually going to eat him alive. He couldn’t believe he was going to get to see Shane in full-on Mr. Real Estate mode. His mouth is watering already.

“Here we have a three-bedroom, three-bathroom concept. That’s one bathroom on the main floor, the master bathroom, and then another bathroom on the second floor.”

Ilya feels his dick twitch as Shane scrunches his eyebrows up and shakes his head.

“This isn’t going to work,” Shane says decisively, turning to look all around the space.

Ilya didn’t really know why he didn’t think it was going to work—they’d barely seen anything yet—but he didn’t care. Shane’s word was the law, as far as he was concerned, so they leave.

The next four properties go pretty similarly. Shane doesn’t like something within the first ten or fifteen minutes, and then Ilya tells the realtor they’re done with that house. Eventually, Holly stops looking to Ilya to get his opinion; her only motive is to appeal to Shane, which Ilya fucking *loves*. He loves getting to see his man act all bratty, walking through multi-million-dollar properties while citing everything that’s wrong with them. Not enough natural light, *too much* natural light, not enough amenities. One time, Shane even shuts down a property before they get through the door because he doesn’t appreciate how much upkeep the landscaping is going to require. Ilya is going to eat him out for hours, until he’s a whiny little kitten-y mess.

He can tell that Holly is starting to lose steam. She probably thought this was going to be a breezy day, considering how their initial phone call had gone. In her eyes, Ilya was probably just a dumb jock with way too much money to spend and not a lot of knowledge about houses. There's no way in hell she could have anticipated Mr. Real Estate, though. He was giving her a run for her money, and it was turning Ilya on.

By the time they get to their last property, Ilya is convinced they're leaving without a house today, but he doesn't even care. He's having so much fun. He's hardly said a word as Shane yipped and yapped with the realtor, and he can see why sometimes it could be nice to be quiet. It was relaxing, letting Shane take charge of something he clearly knew more about. Clearly *cared* more about, too. Ilya just wanted him to be happy. As long as Shane was happy, he'd be fine wherever they ended up.

This property has a little gate out front, and the first thing Ilya notices are the two giant S's on either side. It feels like they're about to enter Shane's Cat King Oasis. There are lots of plants and trees out front. They make the property more private, hide the view of all the massive floor-to-ceiling windows that Ilya can see peeking through.

"S for Shane," Ilya whispers to him excitedly, poking at his back.

Shane scrunches his eyebrows up and glances at the gate. "Ilya, it's 55. It's just the house number."

Ilya pouts. It still looked like two S's to him.

They walk into a massive kitchen, and Ilya nearly moans at the size of the counter. It's all he can think about today. Fucking Shane. Laying him out and devouring him. Maybe even right on this kitchen counter. His boyfriend had the best body, and Ilya wanted to worship it. He wanted to make Shane come until he was a whiny, writhing mess. He wanted to call him Mr. Real Estate while he did it.

"I really love how open this is," Shane comments lightly, and Ilya feels a glimmer of hope. He hasn't said a single negative thing so far, which was more than Ilya could say for any of the other houses, with Shane often citing something he didn't like before they even got through the door.

He watches Shane's eyes glaze over the fireplace, almost like he's trying to picture himself basking in front of it. Ilya can picture it. He can picture Shane curling up next to it on a cold winter night, Ilya coming over with two hot teas before wrapping Shane in his arms and holding him close.

The master bedroom doesn't have floor-to-ceiling windows, which Ilya can tell Shane appreciates, but it's the bathroom that really seems to take his breath away. A massive gray-tile shower and one of the longest bathtubs Ilya thinks he's ever seen. He could stretch out fully in this tub if he wanted to. So could Shane. And Shane *loved* bath time. Ilya can tell he's having a hard time finding anything wrong with this place.

They explore the other bedrooms. There are 5 total, including the master, and 6 bathrooms. Holly keeps using the term 'guest bedroom', but all Ilya can think of is one day settling down

and having some kids with Shane. It's far off, probably, but this would give them the space. His heart hammers with want in his chest. It doesn't help that the house has obviously been staged with a family in mind. One of the rooms is decked out with pretty, pink princess furniture; the other was fit for a future hockey star.

Eventually, they get to the gym, and that's when Ilya knows this place is theirs. The gym is absolutely gorgeous, sure, but the thing his Shane can't stop staring at is the massive indoor lap pool. He never knew Shane was that much of a swimmer, but maybe he should have guessed by the amount of time Shane spent bathing himself. And here Ilya had thought he was just a very clean type of kitty.

"You like to swim?" Ilya asks when Shane still hasn't looked away.

He turns sharply at the question, like he hadn't realized anyone was there watching. Which is, again, pretty ridiculous, if you ask Ilya, considering he was *always* watching Shane.

"Oh, um. Not really. I mean, my gym has a pool like this. I've only used it once or twice, though. I don't like to swim if too many people are in it."

Ilya can't help but smile. Of course he didn't. Shane was endlessly fascinating to him.

"You would not have to worry about people swimming in the pool if you had your own pool," Ilya tempts, because something tells him it's going to take a lot of nudging to get Shane to admit he wants this house.

Shane just blinks at him. "It's not like this is my house. You're the one who's going to be living here."

Ilya wants to laugh. Now it's not Shane's house. After he spent the entire day gabbing with Ilya's realtor about *his* must-haves as well as *his* absolutely-nots.

"Shane," Ilya says patiently. "This will be just as much your house as it is mine. I am not going to buy something that you don't absolutely love."

Shane worries his lower lip between his teeth and glances down at the pool. "What do you think of the house?" He asks, so quietly that Ilya almost misses it. God, he was so fucking cute.

"I like that there are extra bedrooms," Ilya blurts, his cheeks flushing slightly once he realizes what he's just let slip, but he recovers quickly. "That way…your parents could stay over if they needed to. Or Rose, or Svetlana. The Pikes. Maybe even some of my teammates if they get a little too drunk off my strong Russian vodka."

Shane's lips twitch, so Ilya keeps going.

"I like how big the kitchen counter is. It'll be a great space for hosting. The fireplace in the living room is nice, too. I could see you curling up there."

It's Shane's turn to flush this time.

“I really like the master bathroom,” Ilya says, his voice a little lower. “I’ve never seen a bathtub like that. Imagine being able to stretch out when you’re all loose and fuzzy, hm, baby?” He keeps his voice quiet in case Holly is somewhere nearby listening.

Shane visibly shivers.

“The shower is great, too. Lots of counter space in the bathroom and storage behind the mirrors. I’ll bet you could fit a lot of skin products in there. In fact, we might even need to buy you some more just so you can fill up all the space.”

Shane’s eyes darken.

“The gym is set up great. We could totally deck it out. Put a sauna in there if you want.” Ilya knew how much Shane loved his sauna. “And I’ve always wanted a pool. Even better that it’s indoor. We could use it year-round.”

Shane swallows, giving the pool one last meaningful look before he collapses into Ilya’s chest, hugging him tightly. Ilya is only a little confused because Shane has been pretty intentional about not touching him so far today, but he doesn’t hesitate at the opportunity to pull him close. He rubs Shane’s back and waits for the words to find him, burying his face in Shane’s hair.

“It’s too expensive,” Shane mutters into his chest, and Ilya actually does laugh this time.

“Shane, it is fine. I can sell my Montreal place if I need to.”

Shane pulls back with a scary look in his eyes. “*Sell* it?”

Ilya blinks at him in confusion. “Yeah.”

“But…but the club. Svetlana. You’re still going to need a place there.” *Me*, he doesn’t say, but Ilya hears it anyway.

He reaches up to brush some of Shane’s hair out of his eyes. “I could always get something a little smaller. I’d still have a place there, of course.” But Shane looks like he wants to protest. “Unless…” Ilya trails, not really sure what’s going through his baby kitten’s head right now.

Shane isn’t meeting his eyes, instead glaring off somewhere in the distance.

“Baby, I’m not a mind reader. I need you to tell me what you’re thinking, please,” Ilya requests, cupping his chin to redirect his attention.

“I just thought—” Shane scoffs, shaking his head as he tries to avoid Ilya’s gaze again, but Ilya isn’t having it.

“Thought what, angel? Tell me.”

“I just *thought*,” Shane tries again, looking frustrated with himself for not being able to get the words out. “Since you’re going to be gone anyway…”

Ilya presses his eyebrows together, trying to read between the lines of what little Shane has said to him. “You just thought…” he repeats, willing the answer to find him. A beat later, it does. “That, what? You were going to stay there while I was gone?”

Shane huffs and crosses his arms over his chest, and Ilya can’t help the large smile that takes over his face. When Shane meets his eyes to see it, he rolls his eyes, but his cheeks are flushed.

“Aww,” Ilya coos in realization, squeezing Shane’s arms before giving him a heavy shake. “You want to stay in my Montreal house, baby? What about your place?”

“I—” he stutters, shaking his head. “I don’t know.”

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Shane hadn’t really thought about what he was going to do with his place in Montreal. Renovations would still go on for another month or so, but after that, he supposed he could rent it out. It didn’t make sense to sell it quite yet. All Shane knew was that he liked being in Ilya’s space, liked knowing that Ilya had picked everything out according to his style, liked the fact that it was his *boyfriend’s house*. Something about it made butterflies flap in his stomach.

“Shane, of course you can stay there while I’m gone,” Ilya tells him seriously, and he’s still got that giant smile on his face, like Shane’s said something he could have only ever dreamed of him saying. It makes his cheeks flush a little more. “I didn’t realize you liked it so much.”

“Course, I do,” Shane mutters petulantly, poking his lower lip out a little as he meets his boyfriend’s gaze once more. “I like sleeping in your bed. I like that everything smells like you. I like that it’s *yours*.” He liked that it made *him* feel more like Ilya’s as well.

Ilya looks so incredibly fond that Shane has no choice but to hide his face in the other’s chest to keep his heart from exploding.

“It’s not a big deal,” he says to Ilya, or maybe to himself.

“Baby, I would *love* for you to stay in my Montreal house. That sounds like a dream come true. Would love to have a little kitten waiting for me in *my* bed every time I come in town.”

Shane shudders in his arms at the possessive tone.

“But we can still get this house, too,” Ilya cuts in. “It is a good thing your boyfriend is a big hockey star, hm? He can afford to buy you many nice things. Like as many beautiful properties as you want.”

Shane can’t help the little moan he lets out in appreciation. He was quite the hockey star himself, obviously. He had plenty of money of his own, but there was something about the idea of Ilya paying for things. Buying them a house. Telling Shane to order whatever skincare products he wanted on Ilya’s credit card. Picking up the check without even giving Shane a

chance to offer to pay. Ilya liked to take care of him, and Shane hated how much he liked being taken care of.

“Does that mean I can tell Holly that we will take this house, precious?” Ilya asks, pressing a kiss into his hair whilst rubbing his back.

Shane buries his nose a little further into Ilya’s shirt, trying his hardest to ingest his scent, to hypnotize himself into saying what he knows, deep down, he really wants. “Yes, please,” Shane finds himself whispering, so quiet that he’s not even sure Ilya has heard him.

The only indication he gets that Ilya *has* heard him is in the form of Ilya hugging him so tightly that his feet actually lift off the ground. Shane laughs wetly despite himself.

“Fuck, Shane.” And Ilya sounds like he’s getting emotional as well.

Their house, Ilya had said. It would be under Ilya’s name, sure, and Ilya was the one who would spend most of his time there, but Shane knew that Ilya wouldn’t have picked this house if Shane didn’t love it so much. And that makes his heart hammer loudly in his chest, working overtime to get blood into all the right places, to keep him from passing out. *He was getting a house with his boyfriend.*

“It’s exactly 2 hours from my place in Montreal. I mapped it,” Ilya tells him, and that actually does make Shane start crying. Ilya was already planning their life together. He saw Shane as a permanent fixture, not just a temporary fixation. Shane had known that, of course, but investing in a house was a whole different ball game. *A house they could grow into*, Shane’s head reminds him, and it’s not meant to be a scary thought. He cries harder.

Ilya just shushes him and pets at his hair, but Shane can hear in the wobble of his voice that his own eyes are wet, that he’s just as affected by this as Shane is. And then, since they’re clearly not being that cognizant of Holly anymore, Shane presses up to kiss him deeply.

It’s messy. There are tears streaming down both of their faces and slipping onto their lips, but Shane doesn’t care. He’s in love with his boyfriend, and they’re getting a house together. It feels like a reason to celebrate.

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Once Ilya and Shane are able to collect themselves enough to find Holly—who has conveniently disappeared back to the front of the property—they’re unable to detach. Ilya can tell Shane doesn’t care about hiding anymore. Holly would have to be pretty thick to not see this for exactly what it is, anyway.

They find her with linked hands and big smiles and tears still in their eyes when Ilya lets her know that they’ll take the property. There’s usually an order to how these things go, but Ilya doesn’t care. He wants this house, and he wants it tonight. He wants their first night in their new home to be special. It didn’t even make sense to move in without staying the night here with Shane first.

So, he sends Shane on a ruthless mission to get them some food, citing that the contracts will take a while, and he was starting to get hungry. They could eat their first meal in their new house before making the drive back to Montreal. Only, Ilya had no intention of heading back to Montreal tonight. They had a perfectly good master bedroom that had never been used, and while Ilya would absolutely be replacing the staging furniture at a later date, he had every intention of getting his use out of the massive king-sized bed this evening. The furniture came with the house anyway. Ilya was paying extra, and all in cash, to ensure this place would be theirs before the hour was up.

Luckily, it's a new build, and Holly already has all the papers with her. Luckily, Ilya has already had the forethought to pack their overnight bags, so Shane doesn't have to go a single evening without his precious skincare routine. Luckily, he's got a florist on call ready to deliver a small fortune's worth of flowers.

Ilya's embarrassed by how much research he's done on the flowers, actually, because flowers have meaning, apparently, and tonight is supposed to be meaningful. Roses, while a nice option, were too generic for his special boy. Ilya needed something with depth. Something that would show Shane just how much thought he'd put into all of this.

He's settled on calla lilies for a variety of reasons. Google had said calla lilies were meant to represent *a quiet, enduring love*. Ilya liked that because his Shane could be very quiet, and Ilya had known his love for Shane to be very enduring. He'd had to look up the actual meaning of that last word, but apparently, it meant something along the lines of *long-lasting, persistent, often remaining strong or meaningful over a significant period of time.* And, well, wasn't that the truth? Ilya has spent the last ten years pining, dreaming of this moment. If that wasn't enduring, he didn't know what was.

The shape was symbolic, too. *Trust. An emotional openness. Transformation in the form of new beginnings.* The petals were actually called *spathes* that wrapped and then opened to reveal what was inside. Ilya liked to think that was kind of like Shane, too. Something hidden until it felt safe to slowly reveal itself. Ilya was a very patient man, and thankfully, that patience had paid off in the form of the most beautiful person he's ever had the privilege of knowing.

Lastly, calla lilies were known to *mark moments where something deeply personal and irreversible is happening*. They were used a lot in weddings and funerals, which, to Ilya, symbolized *crossing from one state of being into another*. And their first night together in their shared home—Shane's first time *ever* with a man—was definitely worthy of that weight.

So, yeah. He's ordered about 200 bulbs. Some of them are light pink like Shane's pretty kitten claws. Some of them are deep purple because the florist had said it represents *passion*. Some of them are white to symbolize the new chapter they're about to embark on. And, then, just because Ilya is a sap who knows his boy so well, some of them are even blue and red for the fucking Montreal Voyageurs, with five yellows scattered throughout to represent Shane's soon-to-be five Stanley Cups. Ilya was a goner.

He's beyond grateful that the flowers arrive before Shane gets back. It gives him ample time to get them set up all over the bedroom. They're in big vases, catapulting up towards the

ceiling in a way that makes the room look a lot fuller, a lot more lived in. Ilya also bought silk sheets ahead of time, because he knows Shane and Shane is absolutely not going to want to sleep on some disgusting staging sheets. Ilya didn't blame him. His kitty was pristine, after all.

But Ilya's really thought of everything. He's got all of his shower products in his bag in case Shane fancies a bath later. He's got a case of ginger ale sitting in the backseat of the rental car. He's even got some premium Russian vodka in case Shane is feeling a bit wild. With Shane, Ilya has realized it's always better to come prepared, and he loves that about him. During scenes, the Dom in Ilya is attentive to every detail, and being Shane's boyfriend is no different. Ilya has trained his whole life to be able to give Shane the best first time he could ever possibly imagine, and that night has finally arrived.

Ilya jumps up when he hears the door open, signaling that Shane is back from picking up dinner. It must have been rush hour or something, because it's taken him a while. Maybe he got stuck in traffic.

When Ilya gets to the kitchen, he stops dead in his tracks. Shane is standing there looking quite sheepish with his own bouquet of flowers. A soft green bag on the counter next to him that suggests he even went to the same florist.

"Um," Shane stutters, and Ilya feels like he's going to die. "Sorry. I don't know if you even like flowers or…or if you would have preferred a different kind, but the florist said ranunculus would be more thoughtful than just basic roses. I dunno. Something about the color and all the layers, it just…it made me think of you. Maybe it's stupid, I don't know."

Ilya's heart is in his throat. God, they were so on the same page it wasn't even funny.

"I just, um. Wanted to say thank you. For offering to let me stay at your place in Montreal. And letting me help pick the Ottawa house. I know you pretend it's not a big deal, and maybe it isn't to you, but it is for me. And I wanted you to know how much it means to me. How much you mean to me."

Ilya swallows thickly. No one's ever gotten him flowers before. No one's ever really gotten him anything before. He's always been the provider. For his family, for past partners, even for his patrons at the club. But this…this was a gesture. A promise of something serious.

The ranunculus are a deep red, almost burgundy. They look like roses, only a lot more intricate. The color gets deeper further down into the flower, almost black at the center. It reminds Ilya of his club. It reminds him of the colors of his new team. It reminds him of him and Shane.

He still hasn't said a word, and Shane has started to shift anxiously.

"Baby," his voice cracks as he pulls Shane into a crushing hug. He can feel Shane adjust the flowers as he tries to keep them from getting smushed, all the while burying his face in Ilya's chest. "Fuck. I love you so fucking much."

He hasn't even realized he's said it; it just slips off his tongue. The only indicator that something's changed is the way Shane freezes up under him, his grip on Ilya going lax.

Ilya furrows his eyebrows and pulls away to see what the problem is. "What's wrong?" He asks, cupping Shane's neck and jaw in one big hand.

"I—you said you love me." Shane just looks shocked, like he never could have guessed those words would leave Ilya's lips. Like Ilya hasn't just bought a house for them with extra bedrooms for their future kids.

"Oh," Ilya says, the realization hitting him. But before he can try to take it back or explain it away, Shane is surging forward to kiss him, the flowers falling out of his grip and making a mess on the floor below them. Ilya doesn't care. He pulls him in tighter than he ever has.

Shane's got one hand in his curls, the other pushing up under his shirt as he walks them backwards. Ilya has no fucking idea where they're going, but he lets Shane lead the way. He's dazed and confused and really turned on by the time they finally arrive at their destination, and when he takes a look around, he realizes they've ended up back at the master bedroom.

Shane is looking at him in disbelief, and for a second, Ilya forgets why. And then— oh, right. *Duh.* The flowers. Shane lets out a laugh.

"You're fucking kidding me," he says, and Ilya laughs, too.

"Uh. I can explain," he replies, but Shane is kissing him hard again before any such explanation can leave his lips.

"Did you seriously fill this whole fucking room with flowers?" Shane gasps against his mouth.

And if this is all it takes to get Shane riled up, Ilya will happily fill their house with fresh flowers every week for the rest of their lives. He'd do anything to make Shane happy. To see Shane smile.

"Mm, I was *really* hoping we could find our home today. I thought we could…spend the night here. Christen the new house," he hums, scratching his fingers through the hair at the nape of Shane's neck.

"You changed the sheets," Shane whines, like it's the sweetest thing Ilya could have possibly done for him.

"I have our bags packed in the trunk of the car. Some ginger ale. Some vodka. Your skincare," he adds lowly.

Shane's pupils grow considerably.

Ilya smirks and brushes his knuckles over Shane's beautiful freckles. "I even brought all your cat stuff, baby."

Shane presses his face into Ilya's neck and licks broadly over his skin. "You're so good to me."

"I'm fucking obsessed with you," Ilya hums his agreement, letting his hand glide under the fabric of Shane's shirt and over his bare back. He knows they have a lot to deal with still, that not everything is going to be peaches and roses from here on out, but it feels like they've taken some monumental step forward. Like they're finally about to get to the good part after several weeks of growing pains.

Shane pulls back to press their foreheads together, looking at Ilya from under his eyelashes. "I love you, too," he whispers intentionally, scrunching his hands up in the fabric of Ilya's shirt.

And Ilya just…loses it. His face is crumpling before he can help himself. He hadn't expected Shane to say it back to him. Not now, maybe not for months, or even years to come. But they're in their new bedroom, in their new house that they now share, and they're in love. They're *both* fucking in love with each other. Ilya sobs as he pulls Shane in for another wet kiss, but the tears are so much that they're choking on them.

And Shane is wiping his eyes, being the strong one, for once, because Ilya can never let his guard down. Not fully. Not without fear of someone suffering because of it. Except Shane's got him this time. Shane's holding him together so he doesn't come apart at the seams, wrapping him in his arms, whispering in his ear, clutching him so fucking tightly. Shane's kissing him, and loving him, and *seeing* him *fully*. Probably more than anyone has since his mother died.

Ilya wraps his hand tightly around the cross pendant on Shane's neck, and Shane ducks down to kiss his closed fist. Whatever comes next, they're in this together.

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Chapter End Notes

For anyone interested, **this is the house I used for inspo for Ilya/Shane's new Ottawa house**. You'll see some of the staging furniture they likely saw, but of course, they will be getting new furniture at some point that fits their style more (Shane is going to have a blast with that).

I wound up having to split this chapter in half again since it was way too long, so part 2 of this chapter will be up very soon!

Some of you may have noticed we're entering events from The Long Game now!! Like with the first book/season, we're going to continue to see some parallels to the real story. The Long Game is my absolute favorite book of the series, so I'm very excited to dive into some of those characters/themes.

As always, would love to hear your thoughts!!! Thank you so much for being such amazing and voracious readers :)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A few mentions of blood throughout the chapter, nothing super graphic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Shane gets Ilya to calm down, they head out to the car to grab their bags and bring everything into the house. He can't believe Ilya planned all of this for him. Well— actually, he can. Ilya had a knack for planning things with Shane in mind, and he knew how much Shane liked surprises because it meant he didn't have to think through every detail. Luckily, with Ilya, Shane was usually pleased to find that every detail had already been thought through on his behalf. It's a comfort he does not take lightly.

Shane reaches for one of the bags, but Ilya grabs them both before he can, citing that Shane is on ginger ale duty, because apparently, there's been a whole case of them flying around in the backseat. Shane had been so caught up in Ilya and the houses that he barely noticed. Maybe he's starting to get tunnel vision. He never thought he'd be one of those people who are so ridiculously in love that they can't see anything outside of their partner, but with Ilya, he was.

When they get to the front door, Ilya surprises him again by dropping their bags in favor of carrying Shane over the threshold. Shane laughs wildly and tells him he thinks that's only for marriage, but Ilya doesn't care. He deposits Shane inside with a smacking kiss and then retrieves the rest of their luggage.

They eat dinner on the couch because Ilya says he fully intends on replacing all the furniture, anyway, so Shane doesn't have to worry about either of them accidentally spilling something on the nice leather. He secretly hopes Ilya will let him play a hand in decorating, but when he tries to bring it up casually, Ilya just gives him a deadpan look. Something that reads along the lines of, *Obviously, we're going to be picking out this furniture together, silly kitten.* Shane grins as Ilya ruffles his hair fondly.

It feels like they're safe from the world here. They're young, and in love, and they don't have to worry about anything. Not hockey, not Stanley Cups, not even what people may or may not think about their relationship.

"How's your dinner, baby?" Ilya asks him.

Only Shane doesn't want to talk about his dinner. He wants to know what else Ilya has planned for him this evening. He sets his plate aside and then reaches for Ilya's to place it on the table as well. Ilya is just blinking at him in confusion as Shane crawls over to him and settles in his lap.

"Well, hello there," Ilya says in delighted interest.

Shane smiles at him with the most honest-to-god heart eyes. “So…” he says casually, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck. He feels Ilya’s hands slide across his hips.

“So,” Ilya repeats, his expression amused as he catalogues Shane’s face like he’s waiting to see where this is going. Shane can relate.

“Did you…have any other plans for this evening?” Shane wonders aloud, sinking his fingers through Ilya’s curls. His boyfriend is so fucking handsome.

Ilya hums, scrunching his face up in thought. “Other plans…” he speaks, like he has no idea where Shane could possibly be going with this.

Shane levels him with an unimpressed look until Ilya starts to tickle his sides. “Hey, hey,” he laughs, scrambling to grab Ilya’s hands.

“Hi, hi. Yes,” Ilya mimics, watching him with so much adoration, it makes Shane’s stomach swoop. “Of course, I have other plans for us, baby,” he teases, pressing a kiss to the top of each one of Shane’s hands.

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His nosy kitten was so fucking cute. Shane wanted to know if Ilya was going to fuck him tonight. And, assuming everything went according to plan, Ilya would.

“Are you all finished with your dinner, angel?” Ilya checks, even though he can tell Shane is buzzing out of his skin with the desire to get to the bedroom. It had been a long day of mostly not touching each other, which was starting to become incredibly difficult for them.

Ilya didn’t even want to think about how difficult it was going to be when they were two hours apart for most of the season. Two fucking hours away from his baby at all times. What if Shane needed him? How was he going to get there in time? How was he going to keep Shane from spiraling? Especially once he went back to his awful team.

Ilya pulls him close for a tender kiss, but Shane is smiling so much that it doesn’t last long. So, Ilya scoops him up and carries him to the bedroom, pressing him down into the black silky sheets as Shane squirms happily in his grip.

“Silk feel nice, baby?”

Shane nods profusely. Ilya smiles and caresses his speckled cheek.

“Do you wanna sit in my lap again, beautiful boy?” It’s a trick question, because Shane *always* wants to sit in Ilya’s lap. He still appreciates the way his eyes spark eagerly at the suggestion.

He carefully sits back against the silk pillows and slides his hands over Shane’s thighs as the other settles on top of him.

“Did you like your flowers, baby? I got 5 yellow ones for your 5 Stanley Cups,” he tells him, just in case Shane hadn’t noticed.

Shane blushes and turns to spot the yellow calla lilies scattered somewhere near the red and blue ones. “I don’t have 5 Stanley Cups,” he says lightly, and Ilya just rolls his eyes.

“You will.” He squeezes his hips intentionally. He knows it for a fact.

He tells Shane about the rest of the flowers because he wants Shane to understand how thoroughly he loves him. How much he thinks about him. How much he wants for him.

“And they don’t have a scent, really. I know you’re really sensitive to scents sometimes, right, kitty?”

Shane nuzzles into his neck, pointedly sniffing at his cologne. Ilya had reapplied it an hour ago and sprayed the pillows. He figured it would help Shane go down in a new, foreign space —one that didn’t have the comfort of Ilya’s things.

But maybe talking about the flowers has actually turned into a bit of a warm-up, because he’s slipping into his Dom voice without meaning to, and Shane is reacting, already sinking to a clean level 1.

“Do you want to talk about our scene for this evening, котенок?”

Shane whines, and Ilya can tell he’s desperate tonight. Probably worked up from looking at nice houses all day, his gorgeously complex boy.

Ilya smiles and cards a hand through his hair. “How would you feel about me fucking you tonight, baby?”

Shane freezes in his arms, like he’s not sure he’s heard him right.

“I was thinking I could get you all fuzzy in your kitten space. Finger you and get you nice and open with your plug. You could swish your pretty tail for me,” Ilya walks him through his plans. “I wanna rim you for a bit. If you’ll let me.”

Shane’s eyes are dark and hazy, but he’s silent, which is usually a good sign during these conversations, so Ilya continues.

“How many times do you think you can come in an hour?”

Shane swallows thickly, his eyes darting over Ilya’s face. “Um. I don’t know. Maybe twice?”

Ilya gives his hip a rub in approval. “Let’s shoot for twice, then. What do you think of that?”

“Fuck,” Shane curses, leaning down to rub his nose over Ilya’s chest. “Can I…can I—”

“Use your words, baby. Can you what?” Ilya presses, pulling at his hair until he’s forced to meet his eyeline.

“Suck you off,” Shane pants, and he looks like he’s fucking frantic for it.

Ilya smirks and pulls him close to press his tongue into Shane's mouth, moaning when Shane sucks at it deliberately. God, Ilya was in possession of the most seductive creature alive.

"Of course, you can, babydoll," Ilya says low in his ear, taking pleasure in the way Shane shivers against him. "You wanna rub your pretty face all over my cock? You're gonna be very cock-drunk tonight, aren't you? My pretty kitty."

Shane is breathing heavily, wiggling his hips in little circles like he thinks Ilya won't notice. Ilya squeezes him in place to get him to stop.

"Pay attention to me, baby. I still have a couple of questions. And I want you to answer me honestly, okay?"

Shane nods, gripping onto Ilya's shoulders tightly like he's trying to ground himself.

"You haven't done this with anyone else before, right?" He double-checks. He knows the answer, but he wants to be sure.

Shane sucks his lower lip between his teeth like he's embarrassed.

"Hey, I'm not asking to be mean. I'm asking to be safe, okay? You haven't?"

"No," Shane says softly, scraping his nails over Ilya's collar bones now.

"Okay. I have been tested recently, and I am all clean," he offers, letting his fingers slip across the span of Shane's lower back. He finds two prominent back dimples and presses his thumbs into them.

Shane sucks in a jerky breath.

"I am not trying to pressure you. I am just wondering if you would prefer for me to wear a condom or if you would prefer for me not to."

He thinks back to Shane's kink list of maybes. A good few of them would involve not wearing a condom, but it was hard to tell whether that was a specific turn-on for Shane, or perhaps just something he wanted to try once. That was sort of the problem with having a kink list full of only maybes.

"Oh, fuck," Shane moans, rolling his hips against Ilya's like he can't even help himself. Okay. Maybe a turn-on, then. "Yeah. Want it without. Wanna feel you."

"Jesus," Ilya lets himself utter, eyes going dark at the heavenly thing in his lap.

"My ears, Alpha, please," Shane whines suddenly, and Ilya can't resist pressing a line of kisses down his neck, pausing to suck at one of the bruises that has started to fade.

He gets Shane out of his shirt first because he plans on worshipping every inch of his body tonight, and he wants a sneak peek at the main course. He presses an intentional kiss to the right side of Shane's chest, using his teeth a little, because, yeah. Shane was into that. His boy liked being marked and claimed.

“Tell me your color, angel,” Ilya requests, just to check in. He’s more looking for Shane’s level, but he figures he’ll get his answer either way.

“Green,” Shane insists.

Still level 1. He wasn’t having trouble with his words yet. Good. Ilya knew he was at risk of going pretty far down tonight, so it was nice to start slow.

“Okay, драгоценный. Let me up for a second so I can grab all your kitty toys, hm?” He doesn’t have to tell Shane twice before the other is scrambling off his lap. “Good boy,” Ilya smiles, ruffling his hair.

He hoists Shane’s suitcase onto the couch and unzips it, reaching for the box with Shane’s tail first. They would try the largest plug tonight, since Shane had done just fine with the middle size a few nights ago. Ilya had been getting him ready for the past week or so, unbeknownst to Shane. Or maybe Shane did know. Ilya wasn’t sure. All he knew was that his kitten had a very hard time thinking when his brain was all full up on milk and catnip.

He’s got Shane’s favorite kitten ears with him, the clips—one white ear and one black ear with white speckles. He’s got little kitten paws for him, too. They’re nothing serious, just fluffy little gloves that he may or may not like depending on how he feels about the fabric. They leave room for his fingers to peek through because Ilya knew his kitten liked to leave a mark.

He takes a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for what’s to come. They’d crossed a lot of milestones today—saying I love you, buying a house together—but for some reason, this one still feels like the most important.

Shane makes an impatient noise from the bed, and Ilya turns over his shoulder, his eyes soft at the sight of him. He looked like he was already getting deeper into kitten mode, batting his big eyelashes and using his brown Bambi eyes to tempt Ilya closer. Good thing Ilya was so fucking easy for him. He smiles and shakes his head, bringing the ears, the box with the tail, and the gloves over with him.

Shane mewls as he gets closer. “Please,” he’s murmuring. “Please, please, please.”

He’s a lot more vocal than he usually is, which Ilya takes to be a good sign. Sometimes, the more silent Shane was when he went down, the more in his head he was. He doesn’t seem in his head tonight. In fact, he seems extremely present.

Ilya cups his cheek as he approaches. Shane is already on his hands and knees, like he’s ready to enter full-on cat mode. Ilya loves him endlessly, so he gives him a friendly hello, offering his hand for Shane to sniff.

Shane takes the bait and starts scenting him. Ilya can see the exact moment he gets a strong whiff of his cologne.

“Mm, you love how I smell, don’t you, baby?”

Shane responds by licking repeatedly over the inside of his inner wrist.

“Good boy. You’re in your new house, kitty,” Ilya says as he reaches for the ears. Shane immediately sits up, eyes alert and darting down to them. “We’re going to have to get you lots of new things, hm? Maybe a scratching post?” Ilya clips Shane’s right ear on, then his left.

Shane is watching him like a brainless little mutt, like the weight of his cat ears combined with Ilya’s words was enough to send him straight past level 2 and right through to level 3.

“My kitten likes to scratch things. Mostly *me*,” Ilya scolds playfully, reaching out to give Shane’s chin a sly nudge. He smirks when Shane attacks him with a nip to his hand. “What am I going to say when my new team sees their captain all scraped up? I will have to tell them it is just my kitty Jane. She can be very territorial.”

Shane tips his head at him, but his eyes are filled with pure want.

“How are you feeling, angel?” He smiles, giving him an intentional pet over his hair, pushing his fingers through Shane’s cat ears.

He receives a rumbling purr in response, and then Shane rolls over onto his back, holding his little paws in the air like he wants a tummy rub.

Ilya raises his eyebrows in surprise. “A tummy rub, котенок? Oh, you are being very sweet, indeed. Goodness,” Ilya keeps his voice light, following Shane’s lead. He had clearly caught a vibe, and Ilya was happy to let it play out. He glides his hand purposely over Shane’s tummy and watches in fascination as Shane’s eyes slip shut.

Shane’s rubbing his face against the silk of the sheet, and Ilya is instantly glad he brought them. Clearly, the silk was doing something to Shane, feeling very, very nice on his precious skin, no doubt.

Ilya lets his hand slip a little lower, rubbing over Shane’s navel. He throws his head back like he’s in fucking bottom heaven, only Ilya’s hardly even done anything. Ilya huffs out a breath and climbs onto the bed to fasten his lips around one of Shane’s nipples. It was time to get to work.

He makes good use of his tongue, taking a few pages out of Shane’s book by laving it all over him. He presses kisses to each inch of his baby’s precious skin. It’s skin he hopes he’s going to be kissing for the rest of his life. “I’m so in love with you,” he lets slip, because he’s allowed, and he can’t help the pleased sound that escapes him when Shane tugs him into a tongue-heavy kiss.

Ilya meets him with the same enthusiasm, happily letting Shane paint his face with kitten slobber. Shane was leading tonight, to some extent, whether he knew it or not. Mostly, Ilya just wanted him to have whatever he wanted.

“Do you wanna try the kitten paws I got you?” Ilya gasps the moment that Shane lets him come up for air. His kitten needs to get out of his jeans soon, if the way he’s bucking his hips

up against the air is anything to go off of.

Shane whines loudly, so much so that Ilya frowns and leans in to check on him. He's okay. He's just clearly feeling a little more feline today. Maybe it's a territory thing. Shane really loved being in Ilya's house, but this was *their shared house* now. He was a kitty with a brand-new home, and it was clear he already felt comfortable in it.

Ilya shushes him, petting down his muscular arms as he grabs the gloves. One is white with black paw pads, the other black with white paw pads. He takes one of Shane's hands in his, kissing across the flushed skin before carefully slipping the paw onto him. He waits for a beat, letting Shane flex his fingers and test the fabric. His reaction isn't alarming in any way, so Ilya takes that as permission to put the next one on, until his kitten is sitting pretty with his new paws.

Shane turns his hands over to look at the little pads on his palms now. He still has access to his fingers, can still scratch and grab Ilya as needed, but now he has paws, too. Like a real kitty cat.

"How does that feel, little thing?" He hums, petting over the fur on one of Shane's new paws.

Shane sticks his tongue out and reaches to bat at Ilya's chest.

Ilya smirks and leans down to suck on his neck, humming when it earns him another whine. Who knew cats could be so fucking sexy? He takes Shane's paws and pins them above his head, reveling in the way Shane's cat eyes turn to slits.

He sucks another bruise into his neck. A third on his jaw. A fourth on his shoulder. He was technically permitted to be seen with Shane now, sure, but only just barely. The thought makes him angrier than it should. He should be allowed to parade around with what's rightfully his. Walk Shane around on a Stanley-Cup patterned leash if he wants to.

So, maybe he was a little territorial tonight as well.

"Off. Off," Shane pants, and Ilya pulls back to look at him in inquiry, giving his wrists an intentional squeeze. A question that Shane won't even have to answer, but will tell Ilya everything he needs to know.

Shane lets out a soft moan. He doesn't mind being restrained. He's talking about something else. Ilya wracks his brain and looks Shane over in careful consideration until…bingo. Shane wanted out of his jeans.

Ilya lets go of his wrists to unbutton them, pulling Shane out of his jeans and his boxers in one go before hastily folding them and tossing them onto the nearby couch. When he glances back, his Shane is stretched out in all his glory. He's made his limbs long, like cats often do. But it's not just that. He *loves* the feel of the silk on his skin. Ilya can tell. He's bathing in the scent of his cologne, rubbing his bare skin all over the black sheets, and looking like he's in total kitten heaven.

He seems a lot more comfortable now that he's naked. *Cats did not like to wear clothes*, Ilya remembers. He feels his throat go dry at the idea of Shane crawling around the house all bare-skinned and gorgeous. Maybe they could attach a bell to his collar when he was home, so Ilya always, *always* knew where he was. With them having to be long-distance soon, he has half a mind to get Shane fucking microchipped. He would not lose his precious котенок.

Ilya glides his hand over Shane's erection, pleased when he gets a responsive little yip. God, Shane was such a talkative kitty today, but Ilya wanted him howling by the time he was done with him.

"What's your color, baby?" Ilya tries, though they have new rules in place now, since sometimes Shane can't talk, and sometimes it has nothing to do with what level he is. Sometimes the stress just gets in him too deep, and all Ilya can really do is follow his cues, try to make sure he's comfortable. As his boyfriend, that was fine, but as his Dom, they needed another way to communicate with each other. So, now, they also do hand squeezes.

Ilya would prefer a color, but Shane gives him one hand squeeze today, which means green. He doesn't think Shane actually needs the hand squeezes right now—maybe he's just indulging his inner-kitten because he wants to be quiet, wants to go deeper—but sometimes, it was hard to tell. Sometimes Shane did carry a lot in the background, and sometimes it showed up even when Ilya thought him to be perfectly fine.

He accepts the hand squeeze with a kiss to Shane's lips, giving his cock another squeeze before he reaches for the box that contains Shane's tail. There's special lube in there, too, because Shane had reacted oddly to the texture of the old one the last time they played, so Ilya bought him ten new ones and worked with Shane to test them all over the course of three days. His rim had preferred lucky number 7. Ilya snicks it open now.

He coats his fingers and warms the lube up against his thumb, all the while petting lightly over Shane's pretty hole with two fingers from his free hand. He's hard as a fucking rock at the thought that his dick will be going in that hole tonight.

Ilya didn't consider himself a pleasure Dom necessarily, but he definitely found it hard to focus on anything but his partner during scenes, especially when that partner was Shane. Shane required a lot more care, a lot more attention to detail, than anyone Ilya had ever met. His own pleasure was always going to come second to Shane's safety. And, even then, Shane's pleasure would still take priority over his own.

The point was that sometimes Ilya didn't get off during his scenes with Shane. Sometimes the task at hand was too pressing, like when Shane fucking blacked out after his orgasm a week ago. He was only out for ten to fifteen seconds, but still. Ilya needed to be all over Shane so constantly that, sometimes, he neglected himself. Tonight, that would not be the case.

He didn't mind not getting off, usually. He got so much more out of his and Shane's dynamic than just orgasms, but getting to fuck Shane was something else entirely. And, right now, Ilya needed it *bad*. Not only that, but he needed everything to go perfectly.

Before he gets to the lube, Ilya can't resist ducking to give Shane's rim a kiss hello. Shane cries out and jolts against the sheets, so Ilya huffs and lies fully on his stomach, wrapping his

arm under and around Shane's thigh to pin him in place. Daddy wants his fucking snack.

He pulls Shane's right cheek aside with his fingers to nuzzle in close and lick him properly, nudging his nose up against Shane's scrotum until Shane is gasping and struggling to grip onto Ilya's curls with his clumsy kitten paws. He loves rimming Shane, loves the noises he makes, loves the way he thrashes his body around like he doesn't know what to do with himself. It makes him even more mindless, even more susceptible to whatever delicious plans Ilya has in store for him.

He licks him in broad swipes, circling his tongue around Shane's hole before flicking upwards. He gets close enough that all he smells is Shane, all he can breathe is Shane, all he can *think* about is Shane. He's in Shane heaven. Shane looks like he's in Shane heaven, too, when Ilya risks a glance up at him to see his head thrown back, his eyes shut tight in ecstasy. So, Ilya gets him wet, lets his saliva start to drip down his chin, and presses his scruff against Shane's thighs until he's soaking with it. Until he's filthy. He fastens his lips and sucks intentionally, pulling Shane closer when he tries to jerk away. He bites his inner thigh punishingly. He wants Shane to feel him all over tomorrow morning.

"Fuck," Ilya gasps when he pulls away to see Shane's puffy, wet rim winking for him. His kitty is whining pathetically. Ilya dives forward to suck on his balls while Shane's cock twitches against his tummy. He creeps his fingers across Shane's rim as he does, rubbing the lube into his sensitive skin, his eyes trained on his kitten to watch for his reaction.

Shane is whimpering again, and Ilya is pretty sure it's his favorite sound in the world—Shane falling apart beneath him. Ilya starts pressing one finger inside of him, dipping back down to swirl his tongue around Shane's entrance to make the glide a little easier.

"Ah," Shane cries out, and Ilya feels him pull hard on his curls with a fucking vice-like grip. He moans loudly against him, his hard cock begging for attention from where it still rests within his jeans. All of a sudden, it's much too hot, and Ilya quickly removes his finger—much to Shane's dismay—so he can strip himself out of his tank top. He's back before Shane can protest, and he shoves his thighs up with vigor, pressing his finger deep into him once more. He crooks it so Shane can get used to the feeling.

When Shane is a mewling, drooly mess, Ilya adds a second finger and scissors them, fitting his tongue in the small space between. He alternates between slurping at Shane's rim and pressing wet, biting kisses all along his sensitive thighs. He's a man possessed, and it's then that he reminds himself he could probably come like this, could come by making Shane fall apart with his fingers and tongue.

He doesn't want to come like this, though. He wants to come when he's nine inches deep in his kitten's tight hole. So, after Shane is gasping like a pornstar above him on three of Ilya's thick fingers, he carefully removes them in favor of lubing up the plug. He's going for the thickest metal one today, mostly because he wants to watch Shane fall apart until he's just a little toy. A little doll for Ilya's amusement. He wants his precious pet to entertain him.

He watches Shane intentionally as he presses the cool metal to his ass, putting a firm hand across Shane's tummy when he jolts ten feet in the air. His kitty could be so jumpy sometimes.

“Easy, kitten,” Ilya reminds him, his voice low in tenor. “You’re going to look so beautiful with your plug matching your collar, hm? My pretty kitty. If only everyone could see you like this. Could see how fucking good you are for me. How fucking *docile*.” He groans to himself, pushing the point of the plug in a little to watch Shane try to curl in on himself. “No,” Ilya tells him firmly, because clearly Shane needed a bit more guidance, a bit more instruction right now, and Ilya was happy to lead him. “No hiding from me, baby. I want to see all of you.”

Shane pants and presses his wet tongue into the silk of the pillow, mouthing at the fabric like he needs something to ground him to the moment. Ilya notices and reaches to tangle his fingers with Shane’s, squeezing once to anchor him to reality. He presses the plug in a little further, watching as Shane adjusts to the cool of the metal starting to warm against his skin. Ilya kisses all across his V-line, sucking little marks into his sharp hip bones, laving his tongue through Shane’s neatly trimmed pubic hair. God. Ilya wanted to *shave* him. He sucks a kiss into each of Shane’s testicles.

“Nghh,” Shane whines deliciously above him, and Ilya can tell he’s getting overwhelmed, so he doesn’t drag it out any longer. Once it’s clear Shane is ready for it, he pushes past the widest bit of the plug until the pretty gold gem is nestled right up against his needy hole. Shane gasps, eyes wide at the feel of the weight of the plug inside him.

Metal plugs were heavier and didn’t have a lot of give. It would be a relentless pressure inside of him, getting him nice and ready, nice and open for Ilya’s throbbing dick. He wants Shane’s sloppy, wet mouth on him *now*.

But first, he reaches over to ceremoniously clip Shane’s gorgeous, stunning tail onto the end of his plug. Shane is crying from overstimulation.

Ilya smiles lightly at the sight and pets over Shane’s tummy, crawling up his body until he’s hovering over him. He presses a kiss to each of Shane’s teary cheeks. He *loved* how weepy Shane could get during sex, how overwhelmed he became just from Ilya working him open on his fingers and tongue. He fastens his lips to Shane’s and sucks his kitten’s scratchy little tongue into his mouth, cupping his cheek intentionally to keep him in place. Shane was losing control of his motor functions, mostly because he was losing control of his brain. Ilya pets across his hair while staring into his hazy eyes.

“You with me, baby?” He hums, taking pleasure in the way Shane looks like he barely knows where he is right now. This was the good kind of subspace, the kind that made Ilya feel like he was doing his job correctly. And Shane looks so beautiful with hundreds of flowers around him. Ilya is convinced he’s the prettiest boy in the entire world.

He brushes his thumb across the speckle spots on Shane’s cheek, pressing a series of kisses to each one until Shane is breathing heavily beneath him. “I love you so fucking much,” he tells him, squeezing Shane’s cheeks until his lips are pursed in a fishy face, his brown eyes catching on Ilya’s blue just enough to tell him that Shane’s there. That he’s listening. “More than anything in this world. More and more every single day, if it’s even possible. Sometimes, when I look at you, I think my heart is going to explode out of my chest.” He feels that way now.

He reaches down to press on the plug slightly, licking his lips at the way it causes Shane to mewl beneath him. He's feeling a little animalistic himself, so he swipes his tongue across Shane's nose. Across his lips and his cheeks. He wants Shane to bathe in his saliva, to forget every word except his name. He wants Shane to sit at his feet all day long, mouth at his boxers, warm his cock like a perfect cock-drunk little kitty whose only purpose is to serve. Not only that, but he wants his new team to witness it. He wants everyone in the NHL to watch what he can do to superstar Golden Boy Shane Hollander in just fifteen minutes' time. He could make Shane a sloppy, drooly mess just with the sound of his *voice*. All it took was the press of Shane's kitten ears on his fluffy black hair to make his head go empty, to make his mind go blank.

If Ilya asked Shane to jump, Shane would let his tongue loll out until Ilya instructed him how high. If Ilya told him to go to practice with his plug and tail hidden underneath his protective padding, Shane would, and he'd be desperate to do it right. He was desperate to please. To be the best. To be the best boy for *Ilya*. Ilya wants to worship him for the rest of time.

"You wanna suck on my cock, baby?" Ilya purrs, licking into Shane's mouth just to hear him whine high in his throat. Ilya has half a mind to restrain him and fuck his face, but there was something about the way Shane was so eager when it came to dick. When it came to *Ilya's* dick, specifically, he reminds himself. Because Shane has never had anyone else's dick before. Ilya was going to ruin him.

He rises to start pushing his way out of his jeans, smirking when Shane's heady gaze tracks the movement, his dazed brown eyes coming to life at the thought of getting to rub his sloppy, wet mouth all over Ilya's big dick.

Ilya strips fully out of his jeans, but he leaves his boxers. "Come on, boy. Pspsps," he calls him over, trying to get his kitty's attention. He doesn't miss the way Shane scrambles to comply, nearly giving himself whiplash as he dives onto his stomach to press his face into Ilya's crotch like a man possessed. Ilya just rests on the backs of his elbows and watches with a heated gaze.

Shane rubs his nose all over Ilya's clothed cock, sniffing, scenting him like a perfect little kitten. Ilya places a possessive hand in his hair, gripping him tightly to press him closer. And Shane just goes down, letting Ilya rub his dick all over him, wetting the fabric with his panting mouth and hot tongue. Ilya moans and doesn't let him come up for air, instead grinding openly against Shane's face.

"Put your hips in the air for me, kitten. Daddy wants to see your pretty tail swish." Shane complies instantly, and with his ass up like this, it only brings his face closer to Ilya's cock. "I said *swish*, котенок." Shane whines pathetically and gives his hips a little wiggle until Ilya can see the fur of his gorgeous tail moving behind him, tickling against Shane's sensitive, bitten-up thighs. "Is your Alpha gonna claim you tonight, hm? Fuck that pretty hole until you're nothing but a sloppy mess with my come dripping out of you." His tone is a little condescending, but Shane *loves* it. His stupid, useless cock is leaking against the silk of the sheets. Ilya's going to have to punish him later for ruining them. Threaten to neuter him if he didn't cut it out.

Baby kittens didn't need cocks, anyway. Not when they had owners to serve. Ilya wanted Shane as nothing but a pretty hole for him to sink into. He wanted him smooth and bare all over, nothing but a sex toy existing for Ilya's pleasure. Ilya was going to make him quit hockey and become a full-time fleshlight for his amusement.

It's been a while since he's fucked someone, and it's messing with his head. He's so turned on he can't think straight. He never thinks straight when Shane is around, the little minx. He only thinks gay.

He's fucking enamored with him, has to shut his eyes as he tugs his boxers off, because Shane's teary, wet face rubbing over his bare cock is just too much. He's going to come before he even gets inside him at this point.

Shane licks him with tiny, little baby kitten licks. Ilya is letting out these grunts that he's pretty sure he's never heard come out of himself in all his twenty-seven years. Shane was sending him places he'd never been before, places he'd only ever dreamed of going. If there is such a thing as Domspace, he's in it right now. He's sensitive, hyper-focused on every flick of Shane's tongue, every swish of his soft, soft tail. Ilya sits up a little to pet at it now, to tug on it a little bit, gasping at the way it makes Shane's face press deeper into his crotch.

His whines are vibrating against the head of Ilya's dick as he mouths at it, Shane's little tongue wiggling back and forth over his sensitive slit. "Fuck, Shane," he groans, as Shane noses at his balls next, like he wants to get where Ilya's scent is the strongest. Like he wants to suck his cum right out of the source.

"You love how fucking big I am, don't you? You want these heavy balls smacking against you while I fuck into you," Ilya tells him desperately, because he needs Shane to hear the thoughts that are running through his head right now. He needs to see the effect they have on his tragic, whimpering angel face.

"Please, please, please, please, please," Shane whispers against him, and Ilya hauls him up by his shoulders to kiss Shane furiously. He cups his ass in one big hand, holding his chin in place with the other as he licks into his mouth, trying to suck the taste of himself from Shane's tongue. Ilya gives his ass a hard smack because he can't even help himself. It makes Shane cry out deliciously, and Ilya just steals the sound from his lips.

"You want me to fuck you now, baby? Want me to ruin you for anyone else? Once I fuck you, you're mine *forever*. Do you hear me?" He says to Shane seriously, holding him close as he stares intentionally into his eyes.

Shane just sobs and nods, his teary eyes full of want and desperation.

"God, the things I'm gonna fucking do to you," Ilya laughs darkly, looking over Shane's wet cheeks with nothing but admiration. His freckles are glistening from each tear track. Ilya's had ten years to think about this moment, and yet somehow, it's still better than he could have ever imagined. Ilya tugs at Shane's collar intentionally. "Tell me you're mine," he commands, digging his nails into Shane's right ass cheek as he pulls him impossibly close.

“M’yours,” Shane cries out, his lips trembling, his voice shaking. “Please, I’m yours. I’m yours. I’m yours.”

“Desperate little baby,” Ilya coos and gives him another kiss on the lips, then one on his wet nose. He’s pretty sure everyone in the world has dreamed of what he’s about to do. Dreamed of having the Golden Boy laid out in front of them, begging to be fucked, begging to be ripped apart.

He sits up and helps guide Shane onto his back, setting the pillows up behind him in a way that will ensure he’s comfortable. Ilya feels a little feral right now, but above all, he wants to make sure his baby is safe and comfortable, if not a tad overwhelmed. He presses a path of kisses down his body, licking across the prominent lines of his abs before swirling his tongue inside Shane’s belly button. Ilya would actually devour him whole if he could. He’d eat him and chew him up so Shane could live directly in his body. Ilya would be a better person because of it, with Shane living inside of him. He’d probably win more Cups, too.

He sucks Shane’s mostly ignored cock into his mouth once he gets to it, but Shane is so sensitive that he doesn’t spend long there, instead moving to lick around the metal of his plug.

“Are you alright, angel? Can you give me your color, please?” He double-checks, twisting the plug slightly.

“Green,” Shane practically bellows, and Ilya rewards him with a hickey on his inner thigh. It soon turns into a bite so severe that Shane is crying and pushing him off, but Ilya doesn’t care. He’s marking his property.

Once he’s satisfied with the way his teeth have left large indents in Shane’s perfect skin, he kisses his balls and then carefully starts to pull the plug from his puckered rim. Ilya watches in fascination as he stretches around the base, listens to the way Shane is letting out the most ridiculously breathy sounds, his chest rising and falling from all the sensations Ilya is putting him through.

The plug comes out of him with a pop, and Ilya immediately soothes his hole with a round of licks. Lapping over him until all he can hear is the sound of wet skin on skin. He squeezes Shane’s hand tightly in his when he feels the other start to reach for him, and moans when Shane digs his claws in hard. So maybe they’re both feeling a bit possessive this evening.

“Best kitty in the world for me, you know that? I would do anything you asked, Shane, *anything*. I’m gonna marry you one day,” he vows, just in case Shane ever has to question it. “And we’re going to have a huge family with lots of kids. And they’re probably going to be half cat or whatever, and I don’t even fucking care. We’ll make a nest for them. We’ll clean them with our tongues if we have to. I want this more than anything.”

Shane is sobbing in a way that suggests he’s more emotional than turned on right now, and Ilya discards his kitty’s tail on the nightstand before tugging him into another passionate kiss. A kiss that’s slower, more languid. He sucks on Shane’s tongue and feels every ridge of it as they spend a few moments just inhaling each other, breathing each other in. Ilya’s cheeks are so wet; he doesn’t know when he started crying, too.

He gives Shane's hair a ruffle and then presses Shane's legs up a little to get him into a better position. Shane's eyes are wide as he watches him from the head of the bed, Ilya rubbing the tip of his cock over his puffy hole.

He can't decide whether he wants to look at where his dick is pressed against Shane or if he wants to look at his baby kitten's wet eyes, so he takes turns looking at each. He holds Shane's right leg by the crook of his knee and presses forward so Shane can feel the pressure of the head of Ilya's cock against his entrance.

"Good boy. Deep breaths," he murmurs to him, while pushing in a little more, until the head of his dick disappears inside Shane. He's so fucking tight, Ilya's chin drops down to his chest in a gasp. "That's it, baby. I'm gonna go slow, okay? Just squeeze my hand if it's too much. I'm right here with you," he reminds him, because honestly, he has no idea where Shane's head is at. All he knows is that Shane is in heaven, if the way his eyebrows are pinched up right now is anything to go off of, his head thrown back, neck exposed. Ilya can already see his tan skin covered in fresh bruises.

He presses in a little further, mouth dropping open at the sight, and he has to lean forward to press his face into Shane's chest, to keep from furiously jack-rabbiting into his tight heat. He mouths at the tight muscle of his abdomen.

"You feel so fucking good, baby. *So* fucking good. Does that feel good for you, too?"

Shane doesn't answer, but he does start pawing delusionally at Ilya's shoulders like he doesn't know what to do with himself. Ilya presses a round of kisses to his chest.

"It's halfway in, babydoll. You're doing so well. Tell me if you start to feel any pain."

Shane frantically starts to pull Ilya closer by the neck, so Ilya showers him with more kisses, pressing their foreheads flush together as he incrementally inches in, fucking forward a tiny bit at a time.

"Ilya," Shane whines, panting against his mouth, and Ilya sucks at his lower lip before licking all over his face.

"You're mine," he reminds him, because he thinks Shane needs to hear it. Or possibly, Ilya just needs to say it. He wants to tattoo 'Property of Ilya Rozanov' right across Shane's chest. One glance down at the collar tells him he already has.

Shane clenches around him, and Ilya moans loudly against his mouth, fucking deeper inside of him until Shane's lips fall open in a gasp. And holy fucking shit. Ilya sees white. His balls are pressed right up against Shane's ass. He's fully inside of him. It's all of his wildest dreams come true.

He shushes Shane, who is mewling deliciously beneath him, squirming on Ilya's cock in a way that's sending pleasure through every bone in his body.

"I love you," he reminds him, nosing at his cheek, dropping a kiss to his chin and the corners of his mouth.

“Love you so much,” Shane whimpers, gripping Ilya’s face with his tiny paws until Ilya kisses him properly. And then, because Ilya can’t help himself anymore, he fucks forward, and Shane…Shane moans brokenly.

“That’s it, baby kitten. Take all of me,” he says lowly, his face red from holding himself still, hovering over Shane for so long while Shane’s tight, wet heat sucks him in closer. “You’ve been wanting it for so long, haven’t you? You’ve been begging for it. Begging your Alpha for his cock, hm?” Ilya thrusts into him again. “Tell me how desperate you are.”

“I—I’m desperate,” Shane agrees, sniffling pitifully, but he gasps when Ilya pushes up inside of him.

“You’re my little kitty slut, aren’t you?”

Shane nods, and the tears are starting up again.

Ilya wipes them with his thumb and kisses him once more. “Can I go faster, baby?

“Yes,” Shane hiccups, twisting to rub his face against the silk pillowcase. “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.”

It only takes a couple of hard thrusts for Ilya to settle on the fact that Shane was born to do this. He’s taking all of Ilya’s nine glorious inches like a fucking pro, whimpering like a kitten pornstar as he lets out moans that Ilya’s pretty sure people would pay to hear. In fact, Ilya himself is going to send Shane a million dollars after this to thank him for making all of his dreams come true. He feels like a fucking Make-A-Wish kid who’s finally, finally gotten their wish.

The moment that Ilya hits Shane’s prostate, he watches as his котенок’s eyes roll back into his head. Ilya’s mouth drops open as he starts jack-hammering into him, gripping Shane’s hips tightly with the intention of nailing the spot every time. Shane is talking more than Ilya’s ever heard him during sex, random babbles of nothingness spilling from his lips.

Please. More. Fuck. Love. I— ahhh.

Ilya clutches one of Shane’s tits tightly, digging the nail of his finger into his nipple until Shane screams out. He’s being fucking loud, so Ilya makes the decision to shove three of his fingers in Shane’s mouth instead, moaning when Shane immediately starts drooling all over him. But when Ilya hits his prostate just right, Shane bites down hard enough to draw blood, and Ilya yelps painfully, smearing the blood across Shane’s lips before gripping his cheeks tightly between his fingers.

“Eyes on *me*,” Ilya pants out, pretty sure that the vein on his forehead is about to burst, his cheeks flushed as he tries to keep up the pace. But he’s a weak man when it comes to Shane Hollander, and the sight of his baby kitten getting fucked for the first time and *loving it* is enough to have him so close to the edge.

Shane must be close, too, with the way Ilya’s been working him over for the better part of an hour now. But he’s been ignoring his poor cock, and quite honestly, getting off on the fact

that he hasn't given him a single stroke. Shane probably could come untouched if Ilya wanted him to, but this would still only be orgasm one. And Shane promised him two orgasms, so Ilya reaches down to finally, finally relieve some of that pressure.

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Shane can feel the drool pouring out of his mouth as Ilya fucks him absolutely senseless. He doesn't have a single thought in his head other than he wants this *for fucking ever*. Ilya wasn't lying about ruining him for everyone else. It's his first time getting fucked by another man and there's blood smeared across his lips, hickeys bitten and sucked onto every inch of his thighs, his neck, his chest.

Shane knew Ilya was possessive, but there was something about the fact that this was *their* house now. Ilya's house, really, because Shane liked the idea of being a possession of his as well. Shane was just the pet of the new house. The family kitten. He's so, so good for his daddy.

Ilya's hand on his cock takes him by surprise, so much so that he instantly starts gasping into the pillow. The pressure building inside of him feels like more than an orgasm; it feels like a fucking atomic bomb. He doesn't know how many pieces of him will be left after it explodes, but Ilya was so good at putting him back together again. He sticks his tongue out and pants hungrily, whining when Ilya leans down to lick messily into his mouth. "Uhhh," Shane whines desperately, because he has no problem talking; he just can't remember a single human word right now. His brain is a bottomless pit, and all he can see is *Ilya*.

Ilya, who looks fucking insane right now. His eyes are nearly black, and for a second, Shane is scared, like he doesn't even recognize the person above him who is so driven and taken with pleasure. But, then, Ilya is ducking to whisper filthy things into his ear, and Shane scratches his nails down Ilya's back until he's sure he's drawn blood there, too. Good. He wanted people to know Ilya was a taken man. Taken by Shane Hollander, Cat King Extraordinaire. He licks messily over Ilya's cheeks and his lips, feeling a thrill run through him when Ilya just meets him with the same energy and licks him back.

Shane gasps, feeling the mix of saliva over his face, the mess of lube and spit still drying on his thighs, against his ass. He's never going to be the same after this, he realizes. He's never going to be able to get this out of his head. How the fuck was he going to go weeks on end without Ilya to tether him to reality? To bring him back down every time Shane's head tried to make him float away.

Ilya twists his hand just right and fucks into the spot inside Shane that makes him see stars, and for a second, he's pretty sure Ilya has fucked him to death. It's the only excuse for the way his soul leaves his body, the way his eyes roll back into his head, and he starts levitating like he's fucking possessed. Ilya is whispering a mess of filth and praise into his ear, something about keeping Shane on his cock for the rest of eternity, how they were going to have to file as conjoined twins to keep anyone from ever trying to separate them. Shane is enamored by his level of insane obsession. In fact, he, too, wishes they could somehow find a way to become surgically attached to one another. He thinks that would probably make his life infinitely better.

“Ah, fuck. Nghh,” Shane babbles as he convulses under Ilya, licking across his neck and rubbing his nose against any area of skin he can reach. He’s biting and sucking and smearing his face across the love of his fucking life. The future father of his kids. The man he’s going to spend the rest of forever with. And, in this moment, he’s so glad to be able to give Ilya this. Ilya was going to be his first and last.

Just when he thinks he can’t possibly feel any more, Ilya is shuddering and shooting off inside of him, painting his inner walls with white, hot cum. And Shane…Shane wishes it were possible for Ilya to get him pregnant. He clenches hard around him, milking Ilya’s big fucking alpha cock for all its worth as his own pathetic omega dick starts to soften against his tummy, spent and overworked. Shane pushes his kitty claws through Ilya’s curls and tugs until Ilya is panting hotly into his mouth, until they’re breathing each other’s air, so fucking high on each other’s pheromones.

“Mine, mine, mine,” Shane gets out desperately, still grinding down on Ilya’s dick like a needy, brainless little kitten. Ilya shuts him up with a tongue-heavy kiss.

He’s sore, and spent, and he’s pretty sure his entire body is going to ache tomorrow, but something about the way Ilya reaches for his cock once more tells Shane that they’re not quite done yet. He whines at the overstimulation of it all, the way he can still feel Ilya’s dick and cum inside his hole, like Ilya was planning on making a home out of it.

“You were fucking made for me,” Ilya hisses, closing his fingers around Shane’s throat. Not pressing, not squeezing, just holding his neck in a claiming gesture. Shane finds himself tipping his head back to give him more purchase. He watches in dumbstruck fascination as Ilya leans over to grab something from the nightstand, his dick pulling out of Shane slightly as he does.

Shane whines at the possibility of loss, but Ilya is back on him before he can even properly form his lips around the sound, and then he starts pulling out fully.

Shane gasps out a panicked sound, scrabbling desperately to grab on anywhere he can reach to keep Ilya inside of him, to keep his precious cum from spilling out. He needs to feel *owned* right now. He doesn’t want any room to breathe.

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“You’re okay, baby boy,” Ilya coos, letting go of his throat in favor of soothing a hand down his bitten-up chest. He pulls fully out and watches in fascination as his cum starts bubbling to the surface, groaning at seeing traces of himself *inside* of Shane. He wants it to live there forever. He rubs his thumb across Shane’s hole just to see his cum smeared all over his dirty boy, and then carefully twists Shane’s plug and tail back inside of him. Shane is watching him with barely identifiable slits for eyes. Like he’s high on fucking catnip and Ilya’s milk.

“You still owe me one more orgasm,” Ilya reminds him darkly, smirking as the realization settles over Shane’s blurry, fuzzy head. If he’s been more coherent than usual this scene, that was all about to come to an end.

Before Shane's slow brain can react to what Ilya's just said, he scoops his warm, pliant body into his arms and drops himself into the sweaty spot where Shane previously resided. He plops his silly, messy kitten right on top of his lap, his mouth going dry when that only seems to drive Shane's plug further inside of him by the way his entire face tenses up.

Ilya is feeling beyond satiated from his own orgasm. In fact, he feels like a fucking king for bagging this absolute vision. His new team could brag about fucking all the bitches they wanted, but Ilya would know nothing compared to *his* bitch. His bitch was not only the baddest in the game, but he was also the *best* in the fucking game. Quite literally. Shane had more Stanley Cups and goals than anyone. His prize-winning kitty.

"Aw, are you sensitive, baby?" Ilya tuts, watching as Shane pouts and nods miserably, leaning forward to press his face into Ilya's muscular chest. He whines at the way his tail moves inside of him. Ilya doesn't care, though. He wants to watch him work himself into a sloppy, drooling mess. He wants his kitty completely braindead before the night is up, and then he wants to bathe him and shower him in kisses until he's nursed back to life.

Ilya grips him by his hips, lifting his delicate baby Shane until he's sitting on top of just one of Ilya's big thighs. He cards his fingers through Shane's hair, ignoring the blood still drying on them. It's just a tiny scratch from his kitty's fangs. He scritches behind Shane's white ear, and then his black one, watching in fascination as Shane sinks into the touch. As his breathing steadies from the simple act of Ilya petting at him. Ilya presses a kiss to the top of his head and then glides one hand down Shane's body to squeeze his ass. It rips a moan from him, so Ilya pulls Shane closer, until Shane's spent cock is dragging deliciously across his thigh.

"C'mon, desperate baby. Hump my thigh," Ilya urges, keeping his voice low and sweet. "Don't you wanna be good for me so we can go have bath time? And then I can clean your precious fur while I hold you close and tell you how special you are. Hm?" Ilya rubs his chin across Shane's fluffy hair, encouraging the other to nuzzle against him.

Shane sucks in a breath, and Ilya can feel him starting to get hard again, like a good, good boy.

"That's it, angel," Ilya hums, his tone light and so different to the way he was talking to Shane just ten minutes prior. He cups Shane's beautiful ass with both hands, forcing Shane to grind against him as Shane just gasps and shakes his head.

"I can't, I can't," he hiccups desperately, but Ilya doesn't believe him with the way he's already squirming like he wants more.

"You can, baby," Ilya replies patiently. "You're my very good, prize-winning kitten, aren't you?"

Shane sobs and mouths at his chest, practically nursing at one of Ilya's nipples as he tries to soothe himself while working his hips in eager little circles.

"Oh, look at that. You're so fucking good. Always so well-behaved for me, aren't you? Even when you're scratching me up. Making me bleed. You're a possessive little kitty, hm? I think

you want everyone to know who you belong to."

"Please," Shane begs, and Ilya presses his thigh up into him to give him more to rut against.

"Mm. Good kitties can come hands-free. Just by humping, can't they? Can you show me what a good kitty you are?"

He's talking to him in that slow way that always turns Shane to mush, always sends him into another dimension that sometimes takes ages to get him back from, but Ilya had all the time in the world this evening. He was going to take him apart fully, piece by piece, and then spend as long as he needed putting him back together.

He can tell Shane is close when he starts crying again, his pretty face pinched up in desperation. He was just a baby kitten, after all, with a heart too pure for this world. For whatever reason, that just made Ilya want to do filthy, filthy things to him, and he watches in extreme fascination when, several minutes later, Shane's mouth drops open and he comes for the second time that evening, his poor cock spewing blanks against Ilya's meaty thigh.

Ilya just collects him in his arms while he sobs, his body going absolutely bone-dead in Ilya's grip, and Ilya has never loved anything so much in his entire life. Except maybe his mother, of course, but he had only spent twelve short years with her, and he's already been in love with Shane for ten. As much as it pains him to admit, it's also a comfort to know that, pretty soon, his love for Shane may surpass even that which he had for his mother. But the idea of having a love that powerful, one that's still alive and well in his arms, makes his heart soar. Shane would one day completely heal the hole inside of him, Ilya was sure of it. He was already well on his way to doing so.

"I love you so much," he whispers into Shane's skin, combing his hands all over him while Shane just cries into his chest.

"Love you," Shane chokes out, sniffling heavily as he presses himself closer to Ilya, tucking his face right into the spot under Ilya's chin. Ilya squeezes him until he's sure he's going to cut off his circulation.

After several more moments of soaking up the aftermath of what they've just done, Ilya carefully removes Shane's tail, petting over him when Shane just sobs and whimpers from overstimulation. He was going to be sore tomorrow, but that was okay. Ilya would spend all day taking care of him, kissing him, loving on him. He would spend the rest of forever doing so, actually.

He scoops Shane up into his arms, smiling at the way Shane wraps all of his limbs around him like a needy little baby, and carries him into the bathroom. *Their* bathroom. Of the house they just bought. The house where they may very well raise a family together one day.

He goes to put Shane down on the bathroom counter so he can fill the bathtub, but Shane simply isn't having it, starting to hyperventilate at the mere suggestion of Ilya letting go of him. So, Ilya huffs an amused sigh and heads back towards the bathtub, using his foot to flip the water on as he keeps a tight grip on his baby. He ignores the ache of his arms—deciding

there's nothing more important in the world right now than Shane's comfort—and holds him until the bath is all the way full.

Once it is, he steps into the warm water with Shane in tow and carefully lowers them both down into the tub. Shane is still crying, although it's tapered off a bit. Where he was gasping out big sobs before, now he's only sniffling softly and wiping his teary eyes against Ilya's neck. Ilya just smiles and rubs through the back of his hair.

Then, because he'd had the genius forethought to bring some of their bathroom supplies in here ahead of time, he reaches for his body wash and starts to scrub Shane clean. He lets his soapy fingers dip into Shane's hole, carefully cleaning the cum out of him as Shane gasps and whimpers into his neck.

"You're okay," Ilya murmurs into his ear, still petting his hair with his free hand. "You did so, so good for me," he whispers, gently pressing his lips to Shane's forehead. He washes his cock next, being incredibly cautious not to do anything that might overstimulate him further. Shane just shudders lightly and refuses to lift his face from Ilya's skin.

They continue on like that, slow touches and soft words to bring Shane back up. He's not as far in kitten space as he's gone before, and in some ways, Ilya thinks the intensity of losing his virginity has kept him present, which he thought was a good thing. He wanted Shane to remember this. He hoped, at least, that he would remember it fondly. His first time had been with someone who loved him deeply, after all.

After he's done cleaning every inch of Shane's precious body, he reaches to remove his cat ears, placing them safely off to the side before washing his hair next. He kisses him often, telling him over and over again how good he is, how much he loves him, how this has been the best night of Ilya's life and he knew it was only going to get better from here on out. He pets him until Shane is smiling in a way that suggests he's sleepy and satiated, until his kitten can barely keep his eyes open because he's so soothed by the way Ilya is doting on him.

Once they're done in the bath, Ilya picks him up and wraps him in his fluffy kitten towel, the one with the hood and the ears on top. He helps Shane into some very boyfriend-coded, oversized sweats and a matching hoodie, finishing up with his black and white kitten fuzzy socks. He brushes his teeth for him, does his skincare, and doesn't stop praising him the entire time.

Then, he forces Shane to drink an entire bottle of water and even holds his dick for him while he pees into the toilet because Shane can hardly keep his eyes open. Ilya doesn't care. He loves it. He loves all of it.

Only when they're in bed, Shane more than halfway asleep on his chest, does Ilya finally let himself relax and process the day they've had. Buying a house, saying *I love you* and getting to hear Shane say it back, having sex for the first time. It's undoubtedly the best day of his life so far. Nothing in the world can ruin the high he's on.

He smiles to himself and reaches for his phone on the nightstand to plug it into the charger. He has nowhere to be tomorrow, so he doesn't set an alarm, prepared to spend all day pampering Shane and making sure he felt every ounce of Ilya's love for him.

He briefly goes to check his messages when he spots a few from Svetlana. She was back in town after visiting her father in Russia, which meant she'd be good to take care of things at the club for the few days Ilya would be gone. She was probably just letting him know that she'd made it in safely.

But no. The messages are not about Svetlana getting in or her father or anything related to the club— well, sort of. Actually, they were all related to Shane. Shane, and everyone's reactions to finding out who Ilya's mysterious sub really was. The person who had just posted on social media one day prior, bearing Ilya's collar for all the world to see.

Svetlana: *Was your intention to out Shane to everyone at the club? Because the secret is very much out.*

Svetlana: *What is the reason for posting him wearing your necklace?? Obviously, they will know he is your* котенок.

Svetlana: *Everyone is asking me questions. I need to know what you want me to say, but there is no hiding this.*

Ilya swallows thickly and quickly goes to check his other messages, feeling like a fucking idiot for intentionally ignoring his phone the past two days.

Zeba: *Shane fucking Hollander????? How did you manage to bag that???*

Sasha: *So, your new whore is your arch rival? Very classy, Ilya. I can't wait to learn more about this fascinating development.*

Stas: *I did not know Shane is your sub. Are you intending to share him for a scene? Because a few of us may be interested.*

Nikolai: *Rozy, you have been holding out on us. Watching your* котенок *crawl around and now knowing it was Shane Hollander…I hope you are planning on using him for a demonstration.*

Natalya: *Congrats, Rozy. I can't wait to see you both the next time you come in. We are all dying to get a look at him up close.*

And for the first time in his life, Ilya has never felt so disgusted by his community. His *family*. Sure, maybe they didn't realize how big of a deal this was, how much Shane valued his privacy at the club, how big a trigger it could be for him. But still. The way they were talking about Shane—like he was just a piece of meat to be enjoyed rather than an actual human person who Ilya was devastatingly in love with—was enough to send a slimy feeling through every part of his body.

He places his phone down and pulls Shane a little tighter to his chest, smoothing a hand through his hair. Shane's expression was so peaceful, so sated, his lips curled just slightly, as if Ilya was his favorite person in the world. Ilya wondered if he'd feel the same when the morning came and Ilya had to break the news that his identity had been exposed. That Ilya's stupid fucking idea was the reason everyone at the club now knew that Shane Hollander liked

to be a good, little kitty cat in his spare time. That, on his neck, for all the world to see, Shane wore Ilya Rozanov's collar, and—at least to some—it wasn't a secret anymore.

If they were in a scene right now, Shane would color out. Not yellow, but a hard red. He'd have to use his very unimaginative safeword for the first time, and it was Ilya's fault. All of this, everything, including whatever happened next, would be Ilya's fault.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and sharing your thoughts!

Let me know what you think :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Sveta, I do not care. You should hear the way they were talking about him. It is a matter of respect. I won't tolerate this behavior. We are offering a safe space, but not at the expense of others' comfort."

Shane scrunches his face up at the way the sun streaks in through the windows. They were going to need to invest in some better blinds, or perhaps some tasteful blackout curtains.

The bed is empty next to him, and Shane frowns, hearing Ilya's voice coming from somewhere else within the house, but he can't make out his words.

"I will ban anyone I please, actually. I will give everyone some time to settle with the information, but I better not hear another word. Asking me to *share*. Talking about him like he is nothing but an object I own. A sex toy for them to marvel at. I swear, Sveta, I am not playing around. This is my mistake, but the reaction is unacceptable."

Whatever he's saying, he's upset, and Shane is immediately at unease. He pushes himself to sit up, wincing at the pain he feels all over his body. He's bruised, he realizes. Not just because of the fucking, but because Ilya had, for whatever reason, turned into a wild, rabid dog, licking him and biting him all over. The backs of his thighs have taken the worst of it, Ilya's stubble relentless against his sensitive skin.

Shane huffs and flops into the spot Ilya has departed from, rubbing his nose all over to try and track his scent. The bed still smells like him, which means he hasn't been gone for long. Unfortunately, it still means Shane is going to have to go find him.

He groans lightly at the way his lower half is screaming at him to take it easy. But he's going to die if he doesn't get a cuddle in the next ten seconds, so he pushes himself into a standing position and stretches his arms high above his head just to feel the ache all over. It's the same as being roughed up after a tough hockey game; only, Ilya has done this to him, and that makes quite the difference.

Shane strides out of the bedroom in search of Ilya, shutting his eyes tightly every few seconds when the pain decides to radiate through him in warning. Telling him to *please stop now*. Shane doesn't listen. He needs Ilya. Ilya will know what to do. Ilya will know how to fix him.

He finds Ilya in front of the stove in the kitchen, his phone pressed to his ear while steam rises from whatever he's just finished cooking.

"Well, lucky for me, I am not scared of Sasha. He is just trying to get my attention, as usual. Actually, his message was the very least of my concerns."

Shane stiffens and walks purposefully into the kitchen, not at all happy to be hearing about Sasha texting his boyfriend the *first* morning spent in their new house. He doesn't stop till he's standing right at Ilya's side, with Ilya jumping in surprise upon spotting him there.

Shane reaches his hand out for the phone, a look on his face to let Ilya know he is *not* messing around right now. Ilya just stares at him for a few seconds before slowly handing over the phone. Shane snatches it from his hand and presses it to his ear.

"Who is this?" He says into the phone.

"Shane?" Comes a distinctly female voice. "Uh, it is Svetlana. Is Ilya—"

"Hi, Svetlana. And why is Sasha texting my boyfriend's phone?"

"Babe, I can explain," Ilya attempts to interrupt, but Shane just holds a hand up to get him to stop.

"Sasha saw your post on Instagram. With Ilya's necklace," Svetlana says pointedly. "A lot of people from the club have seen it, actually. They know you are Ilya's sub."

Shane feels something sink low within his chest, all the way down to the pit of his stomach. He's been in a lot of pain this morning, but this revelation cuts the deepest of all. Ilya is looking at him with so much regret in his eyes, his arms out like he's ready for Shane to fall into him at any moment.

"Are they…" Shane swallows as he tries to get his words together, tries to ask the horrifying thing he wants to ask. "Would they…I mean, are they going to—"

"No one from the club will say anything," Ilya fills in, seemingly aware of where Shane's head is going. "Nothing has ever leaked before. Our confidentiality agreements are air-tight. I will make damn sure that no one says a thing, Shane. I promise you. You have my word."

Shane places a hand on his hip and looks up to the ceiling for a second, shutting his eyes tightly.

"Ilya is right," Svetlana says in his ear. "There have been no scandals. Our guests value their privacy, and they are respectful of others'. Discretion is policy. I can assure you no one will share this secret."

"Still, though," Shane sighs, pushing his fingers through his hair out of stress. "They know it was me who…"

Svetlana's reply comes slower this time, but it lands all the same. "Yes. They know you are his котенок."

"Fuck." Shane pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling his shoulder blades rise up to his ears. Ilya is on him in an instant, but Shane doesn't want to be touched right now. He doesn't miss the hurt on Ilya's face when he pushes him off. "And Sasha? Will he do anything?"

Ilya tenses but doesn't say a word. He understands that Shane isn't talking to him.

“He is…unpredictable,” Svetlana supplies. “For the most part, I would say he is harmless, but he acts irrationally. I do not know where his head is at with Ilya, though he is definitely annoyed that Ilya has been talking to Ivan so much.”

Shane’s eyes dart to Ilya and narrow slightly. Ilya just gulps like he has something to be guilty of.

“And why has Ilya been doing that?” Shane breathes.

“Look,” Svetlana sighs. “You will have to ask him. I’m sorry for what has happened with the club, but you two are very stupid for posting that necklace. The story is barely believable as is; the necklace makes it even less so.”

“I’m not going to take it off,” Shane tells her seriously. “It was an attempt to save my own ass before people could jump to conclusions, okay? It sucks that everyone at the club knows, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“We don’t even have to go to the club again if you don’t want to,” Ilya offers. “We can just use my private playroom. No one has access to the back hall except staff. No one will know you are there with me.”

“They *already* know,” Shane shoots back, but his heart sinks at the thought of never getting to go to the club again. He’d wanted to be more involved in the community. Plus, he had already met some people. Like Angel and Ivan. Speaking of Ivan… “Is there a reason you’ve been talking to Ivan so much?” His tone is accusatory, but he doesn’t care. Ilya has been lying to him by not telling him he’s been *texting* with another sub. A lie by omission is still a lie in Shane’s book.

“This seems like a private conversation, so I am going to hang up, but I am completely on top of things over here, Shane. You don’t have to worry. This will all be handled.”

She hangs up, but Shane doesn’t really know what she means by *this will all be handled*. What will all be handled? Was something *not* handled? He thought neither her nor Ilya was concerned about his secret getting out. Now something had to be *handled*?

“Shane, it is not what you think, I swear to you,” Ilya rushes to explain. “I only went to Ivan because I was struggling with how often you were going into subspace, and I know he has experienced something like this before.”

“*Struggling* with how often I go into subspace?” Shane asks incredulously. “Jesus. I didn’t realize it was such a fucking burden for you.”

“That is not what I mean, and you know it,” Ilya is shaking his head profusely. “I have never had a sub wake up in subspace before, and it scared me. That is all.”

“You’re still sharing my private business with someone without even asking me,” Shane raises his voice. “Since when is it okay for you to go behind my back like that?”

“Ivan is someone we can trust, Shane. I swear to you. I only did it because I was concerned. I wanted to see if there was a way I could help you, and I did not want to embarrass you.”

“I’m not a fucking child, Ilya,” Shane scoffs, tossing Ilya’s phone onto the kitchen counter before heading back in the direction of the bedroom.

Ilya catches him around his waist before he can get there, and Shane jolts at the combination of pain and overstimulation. He pushes out of Ilya’s arms and pauses, his eyes shut tightly, his hands held up to keep Ilya from coming any closer.

After a few moments like that, Shane carefully opens his eyes again, and he’s surprised to find a very concerned Ilya hovering just a foot away. His eyes are flitting over Shane like it will help him be able to anticipate Shane’s next move, like he’ll be able to spring into action and fix everything just like that.

Shane groans and lets himself drop to the ground, all at once, in a pile of limbs. He’s resting on his knees with his fingers laced behind the back of his neck, his head dropped forward while he tries to regulate. He sucks in a few heavy breaths.

“Shane,” Ilya’s voice rings out above him, and he can feel Ilya get closer, like he’s sitting on the floor with him now. “You’re okay, baby. Just take a deep breath.”

Shane listens, following his instruction. He tries to make his breaths deeper, longer, not as ragged. It’s helping. It’s making him feel more like a person, and less like an explosion. What isn’t helping is the way his heels are digging into the backs of his thighs, which Ilya completely ripped up last night.

“Are you hurt?” Ilya asks, like he’s noticed Shane shifting in discomfort.

Shane’s lower lip wobbles as he nods, and suddenly, all of this is entirely too much. He presses one hand over his eyes as the tears start up, attaching his thumb and pointer finger to each inner corner to collect the tiny droplets before they fall. To keep Ilya from seeing him like this. Of course, no such luck.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Ilya says pitifully. “Can I get you some pain medicine? I have some in my bag,” he offers softly, and Shane appreciates how he’s speaking to him. How he’s saying all the right things.

“Yes,” he whimpers, because that would at least take care of one sensation right now.

“Okay, моя любовь. I will grab it for you. Stay right here for me, okay?”

Shane sniffles wetly and nods, rubbing his fists fully against his eyes as Ilya darts off. He returns only a minute later with a water bottle and a few pills. Shane just blinks blearily at the items and carefully takes them from him, throwing the pills back without a second thought. He already feels a little calmer knowing that the medicine is in his system. That the pain will slowly start to fade away as time goes on.

Ilya is still next to him, still alert, like Shane will demand something else and send him off on another mission. But Shane is exhausted. He doesn't want to do this right now. He hates that every day is either an extremely high high or a horrifyingly low low. He wishes he and Ilya could meet somewhere in the middle, that some days could just be boring like how his life used to be.

"Do you want me near you right now, or do you want me to give you some space?" Ilya has the decency to ask, and Shane *melts*. He's not really mad at him; he can't be. Ilya is still saying all the right things, doing all the right things, meeting him exactly where he needs to be met.

Shane just starts crying again. He wants Ilya all over him. He wants Ilya to steal all the anxiety, all the sadness from him. He wants to be brave and nonchalant, and not care what anyone thinks, but he *does* care. He cares way too much, and sometimes it eats him alive. The feelings stampede right through him, crush him like an empty soda can until he's nothing but spent and caved in. A vessel that can no longer do what it's meant to.

"Please," Shane begs, and Ilya speaks his language. He's on him instantly, without Shane having to put it into words. He's holding him against his chest in a way that doesn't cause any pain, in a way that only brings him immediate comfort.

"I love you, angel," Ilya reminds him, pressing it into his hair.

He's rubbing Shane's back just right, with just the right amount of pressure, his hand moving up and down in perfect timing. Shane burrows his wet face into Ilya's neck to find the soothing scent of his cologne, and it's there, like always. The beat of Ilya's heart underneath his fingers is a constant reminder, like a metronome to keep him in count.

And just like that, Shane feels his nervous system take a rest, step back from the line of fire because the army in his head was no match for whatever existed out there. He was sacrificing himself, and for what? The club knowing was not the end of the world. They were open-minded individuals just like him and Ilya. Shane was sure they could keep this to themselves. Like Rose and the rest of her cast, there were other celebrities who went in. Discretion was their policy, after all.

He takes a deep, grounding breath and lets Ilya's voice lull him further.

"There you go. That's it. You're safe, okay?"

Shane nods. He is safe. He's okay. If the club had to know to ensure everyone else didn't, then that was okay. Shane could live with that. He'd just have to come to terms with his new reality. Some people were bound to know. And the club was Ilya's *family,* anyway. They would be accepting. He trusted Ilya and the company he chose to keep. If Ilya trusted them, then Shane did, too.

"Would you like to eat some breakfast right now?" Ilya asks him. "I made some protein pancakes. They're in the kitchen, but we can go eat them in bed if you like. I could cut them up for you and feed you so you don't feel overwhelmed."

Shane hugs him closer, rubbing the tip of his nose against Ilya's neck. That sounds really nice. Only if Ilya holds him the whole time and pets his hair, but Ilya would if Shane asked. He probably would even if Shane didn't ask. He'd just read his mind like he's been doing lately.

So, Ilya gives Shane a piggyback ride back to the bedroom since the backs of his thighs are still hurting him, and then Shane lies on Ilya's shoulder while he feeds him little syrupy bites of pancakes. He doesn't want to talk, and Ilya doesn't make him. They eat in comfortable silence, with Ilya pressing gentle *I love you's* into his hair, and Shane rubbing his fingers over the soft fabric of Ilya's pants. It's still a good day. The world doesn't come to an end.

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After a few days spent in Ottawa, Shane is antsy to get back to Montreal. Practices are going to be starting back up again soon, and he has to re-center himself, has to put himself in the mindset to be the best Captain for his team.

The entire drive back, Shane looks for furniture for his and Ilya's new house. He keeps showing Ilya options, but Ilya doesn't really seem to care how the house is decorated. In fact, he only seems to care about one thing.

"A custom playroom."

"A what?" Shane frowns and looks at him incredulously. "You can't put a playroom in the house."

"Why not?" Ilya shrugs, his eyes still on the road. "It is our house, no? We can do whatever we want."

"I mean," Shane huffs, turning to face him a little. "How are you going to explain it to people?"

Ilya does actually turn to look at him this time, a deadpan look that says Shane is being stupid. Shane bristles at the insinuation.

"Why do I have to explain something that is in *my* house to people? I will just keep the door locked."

"What do we need a playroom for anyway? We'll have the bedroom," Shane points out.

"Ah, yes. Should I keep all of your sex toys in the bedroom? All of your kitty supplies?"

"I don't even have that many sex toys," Shane grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ilya just smirks at him and reaches over to give his thigh a squeeze. "Does my pretty котенок want more *toys*? All you had to do was ask, baby."

Shane rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying it's not that crazy. My stuff can go in a drawer somewhere."

A flicker of something sharp flashes through Ilya's eyes at that, and he gives a stern shake of his head. "Absolutely not. You are not going to hide in your own home. You're going to have your own dedicated kitty space and, that way, whenever you're feeling overwhelmed, you have a place you can go and play and feel safe in."

Shane's face softens at his declaration.

"Besides, it is not just for you. There are things that make a playroom special, котенок. Safety rigs in case I want to restrain you," he offers an example. "Padded surfaces to keep you from hurting yourself if I want you to kneel. Soundproofing, dimmable lights, better temperature control," Ilya lists off. "Plus, it will be nice to have a dedicated space so we are clearly able to identify when we are in a scene versus when we are not."

There's a lot Shane doesn't know still, apparently. All along, he'd thought Ilya's playroom was just a normal room with a bed. He hadn't realized so much thought went into the actual structure of the space.

When they get back to Montreal, Shane heads over to his place to pack up some more things to bring to Ilya's. He can't sell his apartment, he realizes. Not if he wants to keep up appearances. As Captain, he'd like to have the team over sometimes to watch games or catch up. They used to do things like that. Shane isn't sure when they stopped being so close.

Maybe they all just have families now. Lives outside of hockey. Shane hadn't really had much of that before this summer, but now, he's pretty sure he does. He has Ilya. He has Rose. He even has the club. The club that Ilya has been not-so-subtly trying to keep him away from for the better part of a week. And Shane isn't really sure why.

But there's an event tonight. One that he's dying to go to. He's been texting Ivan about it, actually. Because if Ilya was allowed to text Ivan, so was Shane. And they've actually started to become decent friends, as far as being texting buddies can go. Shane liked to think they were friendly, at least.

"I want to go to the club tonight," Shane tells Ilya bluntly, as they're finishing up their workout. Shane had finally, finally beaten Ilya's best sprint time, but only just barely; meanwhile, Ilya was going up on his max lifting weight nearly every time they worked out. Shane didn't know how he was doing it, but he was putting on muscle fast, specifically in his arms. He finds himself staring at them now, Ilya's veins bulging deliciously against his skin after the hard pump.

"Mm, is too last-minute," Ilya dismisses, and he hardly even looks at Shane. "Event list is all filled up."

"Ivan said he put us on the guest list no problem," Shane informs, crossing his arms over his chest. "You own the club, after all. No one's going to kick you out of your own club. Unless you're not in charge anymore?" Shane raises his eyebrows in challenge and watches as Ilya's gaze drifts to him intentionally.

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Shane is being a little brat right now, Ilya realizes as he turns to address him. He's got one of his hips cocked out, his eyebrows raised expectantly, voice dripping with attitude. Ilya ought to spank him until his ass is bright red.

"Not in charge? Oh, I am very in charge. I am so in charge that I have decided we're not going. End of story."

Shane just scoffs, and Ilya can't help the way he smiles in interest. Did Shane want to challenge him? *Go ahead*, Ilya thinks. Watch what will happen.

"Fine. I'll go by myself, then. I already told Ivan I would come."

"By yourself?" Ilya laughs, his face open in amusement. "And what are you intending to do at the event by yourself, моя любовь? It is partner event, no?"

"Why are you fucking doing this?" Shane's eyes narrow, and he looks pissed. Ilya doesn't understand why he's so intent on going, though.

"I don't understand why you want to go there. You know your secret has been exposed. It is one of your hard limits. Should I not be concerned about this?" Ilya asks him honestly. "Because I do not see how this is going to go well."

"I thought the whole point of the club is that it's private. What happens inside of it stays inside of it, right?" Shane looks to him for confirmation.

And, yes, that was the idea, sure. But Ilya had a lot less faith in people when Shane was involved. Shane was too fragile, too skittish. Ilya couldn't take dumb risks with him, especially when he knew everyone at the club would be dying to get their hands on him.

Svetlana had already sent out an email to all members, reminding people about confidentiality and respecting others' privacy. Shane had conveniently been left off that email list; it was obvious who the email was about. But Ilya still felt unnerved by the text messages, by the slimy way his so-called "friends" spoke of Shane. The way they said it without hesitation, like they expected Ilya to take it in stride, like that was the type of guy he was. Perhaps, his friends did not know him as well as he thought they did.

"Yes, of course, Shane," Ilya sighs, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Shane's eyes track the movement. "But, I don't crave putting you in situations that I know are going to make you uncomfortable."

"It's a growing pain," Shane argues. "Like ripping off a band-aid."

And, Jesus. Ilya really regretted using that line on him. *Like ripping off a band-aid*, Shane would say anytime he wanted to dive into an issue head-first to avoid having the decision loom over him like an obsessive ghost. Ilya was usually left to deal with the consequences. Sometimes, Shane seemed to forget that every time he fell apart, Ilya was the one who bent over backwards trying to put him back together. It was starting to take a toll on him, how much of Shane's weight he had offered to carry.

“I am very concerned,” Ilya tells him seriously, imploring Shane to hear him. He hadn’t told Shane about the vile messages he’d received. He didn’t see a reason to share them. They would only upset him, surely, and Ilya had no intention to follow through with any of the despicable, greedy requests.

Still, it was like Shane wanted to overcome this, wanted to prove he could exist in a space where someone knew fully what he was. Maybe, in some ways, it was even a way to punish himself. A way to feel the pain of what he was, to know that there were true consequences to feeling this way, just as his anxieties had always warned him about. It would validate his fears, validate the fact that he could never be Shane Hollander and a baby kitten all in one breath. Ilya, however, did not want to shatter that dream. Especially, not so soon after proving to Shane that it *was* possible to have both.

Shane frowns and steps closer to take his hands. “Ilya,” he says, and Ilya inhales in preparation for whatever adorable argument he’s about to make. The argument, however, never comes. Instead, Shane leans in until their faces are incredibly close, until his eyelashes are brushing over Ilya’s cheeks with every blink. Ilya nearly moans. They’re both covered in sweat, but Shane smells *good*. He wants to clean every inch of him with his tongue.

Shane ducks closer, until his breath is on Ilya’s ear, and Ilya sucks in sharply. “I’m fucking horny,” Shane whispers, his voice raspy and dry from running just minutes prior. “And I really get off on other people knowing I’m yours.”

Ilya does moan this time, a low sound in the back of his throat that makes Shane sway a little closer to him. And Shane isn’t the only one who’s been missing the club; Ilya feels it, too. He used to love showing his partner off in public scenes, but with Shane, he’s never been more possessive. He feels feral at the thought of someone intruding on their private moment, of someone getting a piece of something that belonged to *him*. The noises that left Shane’s mouth were *his*, Shane’s body was *his*, even the look in his desperate boy’s eyes when he reached that good and fuzzy place—it was all his. He didn’t want to share. He didn’t even want anyone to see. Not after he knew what they were all thinking.

But he couldn’t tell Shane that. And he was running out of excuses to keep him away from the club. Ilya, himself, could not avoid it forever. So…after a long shower and a quick dinner, they head over for *Fire and Ice*.

Ilya is on high alert. He’s on guard, territorial—even more than usual—and Shane can tell. Maybe he thinks Ilya is just worried about him, and he is, but more than anything, he’s worried about everyone else. He doesn’t want anyone to stand near Shane, or breathe near him, or even look at him for too long. In fact, Ilya is ready to use his colors tonight if he needs to. Because if anyone does or says anything to Shane, anything at all to suggest he’s anything other than the love of Ilya’s life, Ilya is going to lose his fucking mind.

The club is not a free-for-all. Certain rules still had to be followed, but there were no rules about gawking, and from the moment they walk in, everyone is. Gawking at Shane very openly, in fact. Maybe Shane gets gawked at a lot, though, because initially, he doesn’t seem phased. Ilya hasn’t actually spent that much time with him in public before. They’re both a little out of their depth.

But, during their talk in Ilya's playroom earlier, Shane hadn't seemed out of depth. He seemed confident, like he was ready to take it on, to prove to himself that he could live fully without fear. It's a stark contrast to the Shane who used to bolt from Ilya's playroom at the slightest tinge.

"You will wear your cat mask," Ilya had told him decisively. Shane opened his mouth to argue, but this was a hard limit for him. "I know you think it will not make a difference in how you feel, but trust me on this. It is one thing for them to know who you are, it is another to see people looking at you like you are Shane Hollander when you are supposed to be my котенок."

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And well, Ilya had a point there. The look in his eyes had scared Shane a little, like there was something Ilya wasn't telling him, a game of telephone that he hadn't quite crossed paths with yet, almost like someone was skipping his turn.

Still, Ilya won't do the scene unless Shane wears a mask, so Shane does. Ilya kisses him and tells him it's because he's possessive of Shane's freckles and doesn't want anyone to see them, which Shane actually believes, so he doesn't try to negotiate any further. Ilya would see he was just fine being "out" at the club.

Shane is dressed in Ilya's soft, ripped blue jeans. They're hanging off of him in a way that makes him feel small. He feels good when he's small. He's also got a sheer baby blue button-up shirt on, one that hangs off him like he's some kind of medieval pirate. The shirt has a loose scarf-like element that gives it a more feminine feel, and Shane instantly knows this is not something Ilya would wear. He must have bought it for him once upon a time, maybe even for this exact event. And for a brief moment, Shane feels warm and fuzzy all over, clutching onto Ilya's hand tightly as they step into the main room.

Ilya is talking to him a lot, touching him a lot, like he's trying to distract Shane or maybe just distract himself. Shane isn't really sure what's going on. All he knows is he feels midway between fuzzy and alert. He's bouncing back and forth, and it's a little uncomfortable. Ilya is not making him feel comfortable.

Shane whines, and it's enough to get Ilya to freeze on the spot. They haven't even made it to the bar yet, but Shane desperately needs a drink. He feels halfway between man and cat. He's weirded out. He needs to feel less.

Before Ilya can say anything or make his next move, someone touches Shane on the shoulder, and Shane immediately turns, his eyes wide. It's just Ivan, though, and he's smiling in a way that makes Shane want to hug him, so he does.

"Hi, kitty," Ivan greets him warmly, hugging him in a way that is so, so welcome.

Shane's stomach swoops at how much it works to instantly correct his dysphoria. "Hi, Ivey," Shane says softly, and even though Ivan is shorter than him, he feels much smaller right now.

“I’m so glad you were able to make it. You look great, too. Very on theme,” he laughs, pulling back to look at Shane fully. He’s still holding his hands, and Shane blushes under the attention. He’s a kitty who could use some praise right now. “Oh, and your nails. Wow,” Ivan notices, lifting Shane’s paws to inspect them up close. “These are just gorgeous.”

Shane had gone with Rose recently to get his claws freshly done. He’d gone with virtually the same as last time, but a little more pink, a little more glimmery. Ilya had yet to notice.

“Did Ilya take you to get these done?” Ivan asks, offering Ilya a smile as he looks to him.

Shane juts his lower lip out and shakes his head. “No. I went with a friend.”

He can’t see Ilya standing behind him, but he feels when strong arms wrap around his waist, when plush lips press against his cheek. Shane sighs as the butterflies start back up again.

Ilya takes one of his paws from Ivan and brings Shane’s nails right up to his eyeballs, inspecting the color in great detail. “Oh, princess,” Ilya coos, smiling suddenly down at him. “These are absolutely beautiful. Did you get these for me?”

Shane swallows the warm feeling in his throat, forcing it to his tummy. “Yes,” he says quietly. They had been for himself, mostly, but they had been for Ilya, too. Everything these days, everything he lived and breathed, belonged to Ilya.

“Oh, baby, thank you so much. You are the sweetest thing. I am sorry I didn’t notice. It has been such a busy week. I should have been paying better attention.”

It had been a busy week. Ilya was preparing for hockey just as much as Shane, as well as trying to make sure everything would arrive for his house in time. Shane tried to help where he could, but mostly, he felt like he was getting in the way. Ilya touched his waist half-heartedly when Shane approached him for attention, like he was too preoccupied to notice Shane needed him. Maybe Shane was being clingy; he wasn’t sure.

Still, though, it felt nice to be seen by him, especially after Ilya had responded so coldly to the idea of coming to this event. Part of Shane just wondered if it had lost some of the allure for him, now that people knew who Ilya’s sub was. Maybe he didn’t find it as exciting; maybe he didn’t need it as much. He hadn’t done long-term arrangements before, and maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe he wasn’t built for them.

His doubts are getting the better of him; he can tell by the way Ilya is looking at him nervously, like he’s at risk of being swallowed whole any moment. Shane looks back at Ivan, finding relief in how at ease *he* looks, at least. Shane wants to snuggle up with him and fall asleep in his lap. Ivan is making him feel so cozy. Ivan is definitely, definitely one of Shane’s friends. If he ever feels scared, he knows he can always look to Ivan for comfort.

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Ivan’s eyes dart to Ilya when Shane sways a little closer towards him. A look that says, *is he okay?*

Ilya offers one back with his jaw tight, *I don't know.*

Shane is acting odd, but he doesn't even seem to take note of the group of sharks who have laid eyes on him. One by one, they start to notice, smiling at Ilya, waving him over to say hi. Ilya feels white-hot anger in his belly. He pulls Shane closer to himself and away from Ivan; Shane whines.

"Baby, I want to get you a special drink for tonight, yes? Ice, remember? You are on Team Ice, like hockey," Ilya reminds him, squeezing the back of his neck a few times, like a mini massage. Shane leans back into him a little, and Ilya presses a kiss behind his ear. He smiles at Ivan, *I've got this.*

Ivan gives Shane's hand another squeeze and then offers him a wink. "I'm going to make my rounds, but it's good to see you, котенок. I'll catch up with you later in the evening, yes?"

To his surprise, Shane purrs in Ilya's arms. "Ah, you like Ivan, don't you, baby?"

Shane nods and wraps his arms around Ilya's neck. Ilya smiles and lets everything else fade to the background. He's back in his home, back in his element. His job is to make Shane feel at ease, so he puts his focus into doing that.

They head over to the bar to meet Angel. Shane is in a much better mood after his interaction with Ivan, and Ilya is glad he has someone else here that he feels like he can trust. Ivan was another sub, so Ilya had no reason to be jealous over their relationship, but it hurt to see the way Shane seemed to soften up for him. He had not been that way tonight with Ilya so far. So, Ilya makes an effort to be extra good with him.

"Hi, Rozy," Angel greets them happily. "It's been a while."

"Mm, yes. I was looking for my new house in Ottawa," Ilya fills her in, rubbing a hand over Shane's side as the kitten nuzzles into his shoulder. "Lucky for me, my pretty kitty was willing to lend his incredible real estate expertise to ensure we landed the best possible home."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Angel claps excitedly. "Are you two moving in together?"

"We will be long-distance for a little bit," Ilya says regretfully, and he doesn't miss the way that Shane whimpers before hiding his face. It was good to know that the thought of being apart was upsetting him as well. "But, it is only two hours away from my Montreal home. And my котенок has *insisted* on taking over my house here and turning it into his Cat King Paradise."

That prompts a happy mewl and a little lick from Shane. Ilya slips his hand into the back pocket of Shane's (his) jeans and pulls him closer.

"I'm so happy for you both," Angel says honestly, and Ilya smiles at the reminder that not all of his family at the club fell into the category of the ones who texted him about Shane. Some were simply happy for him and his newfound life path. Some saw Shane for what he was, the kitten love of Ilya's life.

“Thank you, thank you. We are very happy as well. Would you mind grabbing me the special Ice drink for my котенок this evening?” Ilya requests, turning to brush his fingers through Shane’s hair with his free hand. His kitten responds by pressing up desperately into his touch, and Ilya rewards his cuteness with a kiss on the nose.

When Angel disappears to fetch Shane his drink, Ilya turns to him fully, cupping Shane’s chin in his hand to assess his eyes. Brown and a little hazy, but he’s present. Ilya is very on edge about colors tonight, but a part of him doesn’t think Shane will be the problem. Ilya has never ever colored out with Shane, and the last thing he wants to do is ruin his kitten’s high if he’s having a good time, but he also knows that they can’t avoid the Fire and Ice station side of the room forever. He can still see Stas and Nikolai staring him down, almost as if willing Ilya to come over and bring Shane into the shark pit. Luckily, Sasha is nowhere to be seen tonight; As far as Ilya knows, at least, Ivan is here with someone else.

Angel comes back momentarily with Shane’s drink, a blue glass that’s smoking slightly from dry ice. Ilya doesn’t hesitate before lifting it to Shane’s mouth for a sip, waiting for his reaction. It must be sweet because Shane licks his lips happily and tips his head forward for another, which Ilya gladly grants him.

“Yummy, baby?” Ilya double-checks, but the answer is obvious by the way Shane tackles half of the cup in one go, only stopping when Ilya pulls the treat away from him. “Slowly,” he reminds his kitten, and he smiles when Shane head-butts his chest in response. “Do you want to go check out some of the stations?”

Shane moans lowly in reply, pressing his hips forward so Ilya can feel how hard he is in his jeans. Ilya smirks in interest, petting his thumb over Shane’s mask where his freckles are undoubtedly flushed a delicious pink.

He reaches for Shane’s drink and then whisks him off to the Ice section of the club with a firm hand on the back of his neck. He holds Shane slightly in front of him so Ilya can keep a sharp eye on anyone who dares to approach, his gaze shifting minutely across the room, but the sharks seem to be occupied for the time being.

The Ice section is done up beautifully, and Ilya has to take his hat off to Svetlana for nailing the atmosphere so well with this event. The space is immersed in a cool blue lighting, with several soft, blue, fluffy bean bags on a soft white carpet for sitting. Surrounding the sitting area were large metal ramekins filled with ice and other fun toys. Ilya catches Shane eyeing the one with wrapped chilled metal plugs. Maybe he could help Shane recreate that fantasy later, but in front of all these people? Absolutely not.

Shane had a tendency to want to push himself outside of his comfort zone, Ilya noticed, especially in times of unease. Like he was trying to prove to himself that he could go past his limits. As much as Ilya appreciated his enthusiasm and his willingness to try something new, it often ended in disaster more often than not.

But Shane isn’t very vocal right now, so Ilya uses that to his advantage, whisking him right past the metal plugs and on toward the glass table of floating ice cubes. He sits down on the floor in front of it and pulls Shane into his lap, putting Shane’s icy drink on standby in the middle of the table before wrapping his arms fully around Shane’s waist.

Shane is much happier kitty now, and it's making Ilya more attentive as well. He feels more at ease, like he typically feels at the club. He has an activity at hand and a warm kitten in his lap who keeps licking his neck in a way that's making his heart swell.

"You're being such a good boy for me, котенок," Ilya praises, petting intentionally behind Shane's white ear until he feels all of the tension start to leave his boy's body. Good. Shane deserved to feel relaxed in Ilya's club, outing be damned. This was supposed to be his home away from home, the same way it was Ilya's. A place where he was free to be himself. "Do you think it would be okay if I run some ice on your pretty fur?"

Shane sucks in a breath that tells Ilya he's *very* interested in that endeavor. They haven't done anything with temperature play so far, mostly because Ilya was concerned about Shane's sensitivities towards certain textures and fabrics, but the *Fire and Ice* event would be a perfect, low-stress way to dip their toes in. If Shane hated it, they could always leave and enjoy the rest of their night in Ilya's playroom. Or, they could go back home and drink hot chocolate in front of the fire while Shane purred and burrowed into his chest. Ilya didn't care what they did, really; he just liked being with Shane.

They had already discussed their limits earlier this evening, so Ilya feels confident as he reaches for a piece of ice and presses it intentionally to the skin behind Shane's ear. Shane gasps and leans towards him, eyes shut at the cold sensation, and Ilya traces the ice further down his neck until Shane is shaking with it.

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The ice is cold all over, so much so that it's making Shane's nipples tingle, his dick throb. Some part of him loves that people could be seeing this, that everyone in here might actually know who he is, might actually know what Ilya does to him behind closed doors. Ilya fucked him *good and hard*, Shane wants to say to anyone who will listen. Especially if anyone has had the pleasure of Ilya's dick before, Shane wants them all to know that the Head Honcho around here, Mr. Rozy, yeah, he was all Shane's. Let this be a public service announcement.

Shane moans without realizing. Just the thought of people looking at him and Ilya, seeing them in their element, has him rock hard in his fucking jeans. He grinds himself into Ilya's lap.

"Easy, baby," Ilya's calm voice steadies him.

It only makes Shane harder. God, he was in *love*. He wanted Ilya to take him right here for everyone to see. It helps to picture it with his eyes closed, though, because he's scared to open them and find someone *actually* looking.

A voice next to them appears suddenly.

Shane shivers at the ice and presses his face into Ilya's neck to avoid being seen on instinct. Almost just as quickly, the ice is gone and replaced with one of Ilya's warm hands on his skin, pulling him close and shielding him even further from view.

“Rozy, there you are,” comes a laughing female voice. “Were you not even going to come say hi? I haven’t seen you in over a week. You know I have to get my fill during the summer before you leave us.”

Shane’s heart pangs at the thought of Ilya leaving, and he burrows a little further, whining softly.

Ilya pets his hair and keeps his head low.

“Hi, Zeba. You’ll have to excuse me. I am more on guard than usual tonight.”

“On guard?” Zeba repeats in amusement. “Is there reason to be on guard?”

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Ilya’s face hardens. “Yes, Zeba. There is reason to be on guard,” he hisses, leaning forward to speak directly into her ear. “I do not take kindly to how some of my *friends* have reached out to me about my котенок.”

Zeba’s eyes dart to Shane in his arms, and Ilya’s grip tightens like she’s going to try and take him from him.

“I think they are just curious, Rozy. He has been the talk of the club since you first brought him to *In the Dark*.”

Ilya slides his hand over Shane’s ear, hiding the kitten further in his chest as he says under his breath to Zeba, “Asking me to share him, talking about him like he is nothing but an object, like he does not deserve privacy just because he is a celebrity. It is unacceptable. If he cannot feel safe here, I will be making some serious changes, so you better pass along the message.”

Shane makes a curious noise and starts to poke his head out a little, his cat ears sticking out from under Ilya’s arm.

Zeba blinks in surprise. “I did not realize people were saying these things to you.” She glances back over to her table, where Stas and Nikolai are still watching them with interested eyes. “I agree it is unacceptable. I will have a word with them.”

Ilya lets go of a breath he didn’t realize he was holding in. “Thank you, Zeba. I will not tolerate disrespect towards my partner or anyone in here, for that matter. We have policies for a reason.”

“I understand,” Zeba nods curtly. “I will pass along the message, Rozy. Excuse me.”

And then, she disappears from Ilya’s sight.

“You’re okay, angel. Zeba is gone now,” Ilya tells Shane softly, petting over his fur. “Can you tell me your color, please?”

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Shane takes a deep breath, his fangs catching on his lower lip as he nuzzles under Ilya's arm.

"Baby," Ilya chides, pulling him out by the scruff of his neck. "I need to know your color, please."

His color is…fuck. His color is not good. But he's been looking forward to the ice. He's been looking forward to the fire…the wax. He'd really wanted to try the wax. And he'd been looking forward to spending more time with Ivan. He didn't want to leave the event. Shane sucks in a panicked gasp.

"Котёнок," Ilya says sharply, and all of a sudden, Shane can't breathe. He feels trapped inside his body, like the walls are closing in around him. He feels like he's causing a scene, like people are staring at him, like maybe they've been staring at him since he walked in.

"Okay, we are going," Ilya tells him decisively, hoisting him off the ground before Shane can argue one way or the other. He doesn't *want* to go, but no oxygen is getting to his lungs right now. "Shane, breathe. I need you to breathe for me. Fuck," Ilya curses, and then they stop. They're not moving anymore. Shane doesn't know what's going on.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Shane hears another voice nearby, a calming voice. It's Ivan's.

"He's having a panic attack," Ilya tells Ivan shakily. "I need to get him out of here. He's not going to want people seeing him like this, but I need to get his breathing under control first. Fuck. Shane," Ilya's voice closes in on him again.

"Okay. That's okay. Just try to calm down," Ivan says, and Shane isn't sure who he's talking to, but then, there's a hand squeezing his fingers. "Hey, kitty. It's Ivan. Can you take a deep breath for me? The sooner we start breathing, the sooner we can go someplace quiet."

Shane focuses on his voice, on the steady heartbeat under his hand that he's sure is Ilya's. Fuck, he was probably freaking Ilya out. He was probably freaking *Ivan* out. The whole thing just freaks *him* out even more.

"Shane, baby, you are safe. I need you to listen to me. In…and out."

Shane forces himself to follow along. In…and out. The hand that's holding his gives him another grounding squeeze.

"There you are, angel. Come on. Keep going."

Shane wants out of his mask immediately. He wants his shirt off, his pants off. He doesn't want any of these people touching him right now, but he still can't catch a breath. He's at war with his own body, and he's losing. He thinks maybe he's been losing for a long time now, but the revelation doesn't make his current situation any easier. Doesn't give him the strength to breathe any better.

"Ilya, your hoodie. Put it around him and pull the hood up. It'll give him some more privacy."

Shane feels shuffling all around him, and then he's being enveloped in the most comforting scent in the world. He breathes in deeply to get more of it into his system.

“Good job, baby,” comes Ilya’s voice, relieved now. “Just like that. Three more for me.”

Shane’s nervous system starts to relax, unarm, and step down from its guard. He’s safe. He’s with Ilya, and he’s safe.

“Will you help me get him to my playroom?” He hears Ilya ask Ivan.

“Of course. Lead the way,” Ivan responds, kind as always.

Shane groans miserably and turns to what he knows to be Ilya’s chest.

“I know, kitten. We’re almost there. Just stay calm for me.”

There’s some shuffling, the sound of a door unlocking, some more shuffling, then the sound of another door unlocking. He’s barely felt his feet against the ground. The air changes around them, suddenly, and it’s quieter. Shane can breathe a little easier. He’s still so uncomfortable, though, so he pushes at his cat mask until it comes off. Ilya slides a hand across his knee, and Shane pushes that off, too.

“Okay,” Ilya murmurs, taking a step backward. “You’re okay. You’re okay. It’s just me and Ivan.”

Shane risks a glance at Ivan and is surprised to find him sitting on the leather couch next to him, a patient smile on his lips. Shane swallows thickly and pushes a hand through his hair. He’s embarrassed to have made a scene. God, he didn’t even want to know what people thought of him. He ducks forward to press his head into his knees.

“You’ve got total privacy. It’s just us here. You’re safe,” Ilya reiterates, and Shane tries his best to soak it in. He turns to press his nose into the neckline of Ilya’s hoodie, which somewhat does the trick. It forces him to keep his breathing regulated, forces him to feel calm, even while his body is telling him to be on high alert. “Do you want any water, драгоценный?”

Shane nods. Water would be grounding right now.

“Ivan, do you mind?”

“On it.” Shane feels Ivan’s side of the couch dip before he retreats to get Shane a bottle of water.

The couch dips one more time to signal that Ilya has sat in his spot. “Can I pet you, baby?” Ilya asks nice and slow, and Shane feels his lower lip wobble as he nods emphatically. “Oh, it’s okay. Come here. You’re alright. You did such a good job for me.”

Shane huffs because this night has felt like nothing but a failure. If anything, it just proves how much power people’s perceptions have over him. He’s weak, and he thought he could do this no problem, but he can’t. And Ilya’s leaving soon, and how is he going to do that either?

“Hey, none of that,” Ilya redirects his bad train of thoughts before he can start spiraling again. “You’re here with me. Focus on me, моя любовь. Look, Ivan brought you water. Can you

say thank you to him?"

Shane sniffles and presses his face to Ilya's neck. "I need my clothes off," he murmurs desperately, because the fabric is not sitting right with him right now. He needs to feel Ilya's skin on his.

"Okay, angel." Ilya nods, and Shane can hear the crinkle of the water bottle as Ivan passes it over. "Thank you, Ivan."

"Of course," Ivan replies softly. "Text me later once he's okay."

"For sure," Ilya promises, and then the door is snicking shut once again. "Alright, sweetheart, he's gone. It's just you and me. Let's get you out of these clothes."

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Once Shane is just in his boxers, Ilya helps him back into his hoodie because it was clear Shane was comforted by his scent. He's still fussy, though, so Ilya strips out of his clothes as well, all while trying to hold the kitten that keeps whining and sniffling and crawling all over him. He's needy, but overstimulated. He wants attention, but not too much. Ilya is just trying to meet him where he's at, but the cues are subtle and hard to follow.

"It makes sense why you were overwhelmed, okay? It's nothing to beat yourself up over," Ilya tells Shane softly, rubbing a hand up and down his back under his hoodie. "You did absolutely perfect for me, as usual."

"I wanted to stay for the event," Shane says into his skin, like he's devastated.

Ilya just gives him another rub. "I know you did, precious. I promise we will find some other way to do it, alright? I'd much rather you feel comfortable and safe."

But Shane is being too hard on himself, like always. Ilya wishes he could kiss comfort into his skin like fluids from a hospital, wishes he could inject safety into Shane's veins so he could feel it all the way in his core. He wishes his voice could play on a loop in Shane's head instead of whatever terrible things his mind keeps telling him. Sometimes Ilya thinks the panic is temporary, but it's moments like these when he fears it got into Shane too young, too deep. There's panic threaded through every fiber of his genetic makeup and, no matter what Ilya does, he can't make it go away; he can only temporarily redirect it.

He worries about leaving Shane, too. He and Shane had only started seeing each other during the off-season, but summer practices were right around the corner. And if Shane was hard on himself during a normal season, he would be *extra* hard on himself this season. The Voyageurs were up for their 5th Stanley Cup, their third in a row—which was important to Shane, for some reason—and with the added pressure from the charity, Ilya did not have hopes about Shane's mental health. A part of him wants to beg Shane to come to Ottawa with him, to choose his own happiness over his desire to be the best, for *once*. Ilya thought Shane deserved to be happy, and selfishly, he thought he deserved to be happy as well.

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Chapter End Notes

Hi, lovely readers!! I wanted to let you all know that I am not happy with this chapter at all :(it feels a little awkward, stilted, and all over the place to me. Probably because I needed to tie off some loose ends before moving on to the next major plot point of this story, which will, of course, be the start of the hockey season. This story has been flowing through me very easily, and so far, that has allowed me to update at such a fast rate, but I just wasn't feeling it with this one. So, rather than try to rewrite it to perfection, I decided to simply post it and keep moving forward, as I have so many ideas for the next chapter.

I'm sorry to leave things on such a sour note before Ilya heads off to Ottawa, but in some ways, I think it does set the tone for them being apart. I am not intending to leave Shane's mental health issues untouched forever (obviously, he needs additional help), but I'm going to continue to let the story play out naturally rather than trying to rush anything! Everything will be addressed in due time :)

With that being said, I am absolutely invigorated by the new characters and plot points I will be introducing in the next half of the story! I am already a good 5k into the next chapter, and I'm really excited for you all to see how Ilya and Shane continue to develop within themselves and with each other.

Exciting things to come:
- finally, finally, I have started writing the Centaurs!!! I am soooo excited for you all to meet these boys and for Ilya to have a safe space within his team. For those of you who have not read The Long Game, trust me when I say you're going to love them almost as much as I do.
- Captain Shane Hollander is back as The Machine
- more to come with Shane and Ivan! Shane will be leaning heavily on his Montreal safety nets (Hayden, Rose, even Svetlana as time goes on), and despite the horrors of this chapter, there is still so much more to come with the club
- eventually, Ilya intends to open a club in Ottawa (though not sure when that will come into play just yet!)

Also, to the person who suggested the Fire and Ice night, I promise you there will be a redemption arc for this event!!! I totally did not intend for it to crash and burn the way it did (I often have no control over these characters and cannot in any way predict how they'll react until the words literally flow from my fingertips lol. They tend to surprise me just as much as I'm sure they surprise you all). Either way, I will definitely be returning back to this at some point because I absolutely want to explore temperature play with these two, and your event idea was genius (possible first event for the new club??? I already have a whole theme planned out for the vibe of this club, you guys are going to love it)

Anywayyyy, let me know your thoughts, and please don't hate me for leaving things where I did! I promise to make it up to you with the next chapter :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for sexual harassment and non-consensual groping!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya feels like a new man stepping into the Ottawa rink for the first time. It's his year, he can feel it. He's got a new house, a new team, a new baby kitten that's been calling him to have phone sex every single night. God, he feels good. For the first time in his life, things are pretty close to perfect.

He's got a new necklace now, a gold one that lights up every time Shane touches the matching charm. Shane's been touching it a lot lately, letting Ilya know that he misses him. Ilya can relate. But the necklace also serves a dual purpose, because if Shane holds down on the charm, then Ilya's will start to vibrate, and that means Shane needs him. If Ilya's at practice or somewhere he can't get to his phone right away, they still have a way to contact each other. It's a comfort they both need right now.

Ilya claps his hands together as he steps into his new locker room. He's a Centaur now, and like Shane, he's hungry to get back on the ice, to start winning some games, and possibly even a Cup. He's Captain. He's in his element. He's eager to meet his boys.

Coach Wiebe is there to greet him with a hug and a smile, and Ilya instantly likes him. They've been chatting a lot over the last few weeks about things like the roster, ways to get the team motivated, how they want to run practices moving forward. Coach Wiebe is very collaborative, which Ilya appreciates. He has a mindset that tells Ilya they're in this together, which is very different to his time spent with the Boston Bears.

As the boys start trickling in, Ilya introduces himself with a handshake and a big smile. Some of them are nervous, he can tell. Like rookie, Luca Haas, who nearly faints when he comes face-to-face with Ilya.

"Oh, wow! I'm a huge fan. I—well, I probably shouldn't say this, but I had your poster on my wall when I was younger!"

Ilya just laughs. The kid hardly looks seventeen. How much younger could he have been?

The rest of the guys show up one by one, all a little star-struck and eager to get started if their nervous, smiling, twitchy faces are anything to go by.

Then, there's Troy Barrett, who immediately sets Ilya on edge. Troy hadn't been Ilya's pick; rather, he had been a last-minute trade from his previous team after picking a fight with his teammate, known rapist and homophobe, Dallas Kent. Ilya knew Kent and Barrett to be good

friends prior to the fight, which doesn't sit right with him, especially not for this team. Ilya would not be tolerating behavior like that of any kind, and he *never* appreciated a fighter. Still, this is a fresh start for everyone, and Ilya intends to give him the benefit of the doubt while simultaneously keeping an eye on him; however, one wrong move, and Ilya would send Troy back to whatever hellhole he came from.

Once everyone has arrived and settled into the locker room, Coach Wiebe takes front and center to give his big welcome speech. He talks through team expectations, what he anticipates in terms of attendance, their practice schedule, some of the roles and the culture they expect to build. Ilya nods along to show that he and Coach Wiebe are a united front. He did not want any disrespect for Coach Wiebe, just as he did not want any disrespect for himself or anyone else on the team, for that matter.

When it's Ilya's turn to speak, he steps onto one of the benches and looks around the room, offering his boys a pearly white smile. He would turn this group of misfits into a winning team; he was sure of it.

"Hello, Centaurs. It is very good to have all of you here with us today. I'm sure most of you know me by now, but I am Ilya Rozanov. I'm going to be your Captain, and I do not take my job lightly," he tells them seriously, making eye contact with each and every one of them. He narrows his eyes a little when he gets to Troy, before swiftly moving on. "We've got a great group here. There is a lot of talent, but we will have to work hard to come together as a team. In all my years playing hockey, the biggest mistake I have seen is a lack of trust, not just on the ice, but outside of it as well. I do not expect you all to be best friends, but I do expect participation. Respect. A sense of belonging for everyone here."

He looks out to some of the more experienced players, catching eyes with Zane Boodram and Wyatt Hayes.

"Take note of the rookies around you. Rookies, take note of the vets. I expect you all to mentor each other, to ask questions or speak up if you're unsure. We have open communication here on this team. There is no judgment. There is no room for ego. When you are out on the ice, you are only as good as the person next to you. Star players do *not* win Stanley Cups," Ilya reminds them. "Stanley Cups are only won by teams who have each other's backs."

He can see a flicker of excitement run through his boys at the mere mention of winning a Stanley Cup. He smiles at their eagerness.

"I am very excited to start working with you all. All I ask is that you show up ready to work, and I am positive the results will come. We have the chance to create something special here; I would not have come to this team if I did not believe that with my whole heart. You may not know this, but many of you were hand-selected by Coach Wiebe and myself."

He watches the wide eyes he gets in return.

"You are here for a reason. You are here because you are talented, but we will not get by on talent alone. So, to officially kick off the season, I would like to invite everyone out for drinks on me tonight," Ilya declares. "This will be the first of many team-bonding get-

togethers, and while they are not mandatory at this time, I do expect to see you making an effort to be part of this team. Like I said, it is important to build trust. And I am supplying you fuckers with free alcohol, so it would be stupid not to take advantage of that."

He offers another toothy grin when that earns him a bout of laughter from the group.

"Amazing. Now, another thing that I have not mentioned is that we will be getting a team social media manager soon. Part of rebuilding Ottawa's image has to do with our brand. We need fans to come out and support us, to get the energy up. It is very hard to be a winning team if no one cares about us. That being said, if you do not have a social media account, please make one. That is your homework for this evening. I expect everyone to follow the official Ottawa account on Instagram, as well as yours truly, Ilya Rozanov. I am always in need of new Rozanavis."

More laughter. Ilya feels his heart warm in his chest. They were off to a very good start, indeed.

He hangs around to chat with some of the guys who he didn't get to speak to before the meeting, wanting to make a good impression on everyone. He took his role as Captain seriously, and although there would come a time when he needed to be stern, he also wanted to make sure his teammates knew they could come to him with whatever they needed. He would be an approachable Captain, someone his team felt they could count on in times of stress.

He's thankful that Troy Barrett seems to be taking his sweet ass time setting up his locker, because Ilya was really hoping to get a chance to talk to him privately. That chance comes sooner than he was expecting, and Ilya approaches him intentionally when the rest of the team has fully cleared out.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" He says gruffly, and he can tell it has an effect by the way Troy stiffens as he stands up straight.

"Uh, sure, Cap. What's up?" Troy asks, shuffling a little nervously in place.

Ilya presses his lips together in a firm line. "I want you to know that it was not my decision to have you on this roster. I am aware of your history with Dallas Kent, and I am also aware of the horrible things he is being accused of."

He watches in satisfaction as Troy swallows thickly.

"I want to be clear that I will not tolerate disrespectful behavior of any kind. Not towards another teammate, not towards anyone you choose to associate with outside of the ice, either. We have zero tolerance for fighting, homophobia, or hate speech of any kind on this team. Do you hear me?"

Troy nods profusely.

"Good," Ilya crosses his arms over his chest. "I do not want to have to speak to you again. There will be queer people in this locker room, and I expect you to act with the utmost

amount of respect towards them. I am friendly, yes, and I believe in giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, but I think you will find I am not so forgiving the second time around. One peep out of you, and I will have you traded so fast your head will *spin*. Got it?"

"I—yes, absolutely," Troy stutters, his eyebrows drawn together in what looks like confusion. "Did you…did you say, um," he blinks, as if trying to get his thoughts together. "There will be gay people in the locker room?"

Ilya raises his eyebrows. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No," Troy scrambles to reply. "Absolutely not. I just—I didn't realize we had any out players on the team."

Ilya licks over his lips. "Our social media manager, Harris. He is gay. He will be around the team quite often, helping us get our image up. He is just as much a part of this team as you or I."

"That's—hey," Troy raises his hands up in defense. "That's totally fine with me. I'm not sure what you heard, but my fight with Dallas was because I'm *against* his views."

Ilya just scoffs, unimpressed. "Yet, you were his right-hand man for years. Am I supposed to think you are a good guy just because you finally noticed your buddy is a fucking scumbag?"

Troy flinches slightly and ducks his head. "It's…it's complicated, okay?"

And Ilya doesn't doubt that, but his point still stands. "I do not care. And it is not something I intend to dwell on. Just get your act together, alright?"

"Yes. Heard," Troy acknowledges seriously. "I'm ready for a fresh start. I, um. I have a lot of admiration for you, and I'm ready to step up and do whatever is needed to help this team. I really, really want to do well here."

Ilya offers him his first real smile of the day. "Great. Then, I think we are going to get along just fine."

He claps Troy on the back as Troy offers him a tentative smile in return.

-

Shane Hollander is back in Captain mode. Nothing matters right now except for getting his team in peak condition to win their 5th Stanley Cup. They've got a title to defend, a chance to win 3 Cups in a row, which, to Shane, meant the markings of a *true* Dynasty. His Voyageurs were the team to beat, which meant other teams would be coming at them with a vengeance this year, eager to knock them of their title. But Shane was committed. If he won this one, he would be halfway to his goal of 10 Stanley Cups. He'd be a shoo-in for the Hall of Fame. He'd go down as one of the best hockey players of all time. The thought activates a fire in him that he hasn't felt all summer. He feels invigorated. He's eager to win. He *needs* to.

He strolls into their first summer practice with a revved-up desire in his belly. The practice is optional, but knowing his boys, most of them will be in attendance. He wasn't the only one

gunning for the Stanley Cup, and with that, he's reminded exactly why he loves his team so much. They share his desire to be the fucking best. Not just that, they're committed to doing whatever it takes to achieve it.

He's surprised to find Hayden is already in the locker room when he arrives, which is sort of a little odd because Shane usually likes to get there earlier than the rest of the team. He pulls his lower lip between his teeth when he notices Hayden sitting down with something like nerves in his eyes, his knee bouncing somewhat restlessly, like he's waiting to deliver some unfortunate news.

"Hey, Hayds," Shane greets casually, hoping he doesn't have to prepare for the worst.

Hayden jumps at the greeting. "Hey, Shane," he replies, and nothing about his demeanor changes. "I was hoping to talk to you before the guys got here."

"Okay…" Shane trails, setting his bag down in front of his locker. "What's going on? Is Jackie alright?"

Hayden puffs a small laugh and waves him off. "No, it's nothing like that. Jackie and the kids are all fine. It's um…more to do with the team."

Shane steels himself for what's to come. "What about the team?"

Hayden looks nervous out of his mind, and Shane wishes he would just rip the band-aid off already and spit it out.

"Hayden," Shane says seriously, because he can't take any more of the anxiety radiating off of him.

"Fuck, okay. So, remember how you told me that the team's comments were bothering you a bit?" Hayden starts, wringing his hands together.

Shane just blinks at him. "Yes?"

"Well, after the whole charity thing," Hayden says tentatively, like he isn't sure how Shane will react. "Someone made a separate group chat. And they were saying all sorts of vile things in there, about you…about Rozanov…not anything about you two *together*," he's quick to add.

And Shane relaxes just a fraction.

"But, I took what you said to heart about like…sticking up for you, you know?"

Shane feels his stomach drop.

"Maybe the timing was bad, I don't know. But I told them to knock it off, that they shouldn't be saying stuff like that about you, no matter *who* you were working with, you know? Rozanov, or anyone, it shouldn't matter. At the end of the day, you're our Captain, and we should respect that. And *you*."

“Hayden,” Shane says impatiently.

“Fuck,” Hayden runs his hands through his hair. “Basically, I guess Coach sent out an email right around the same time about language in the locker room and…well. I think the guys sort of put two and two together, and now. I don’t know. I guess…Well, I guess they sort of have an inkling. On like, who those communications were about.”

Shane’s heart is hammering loudly in his chest. “What are you saying?”

Hayden huffs a heavy sigh, his eyes sad as he looks up at Shane seriously this time. “I’m saying I think the guys know. About you being gay, at least. Not that you’re with Rozanov.” His eyes dart meaningfully to Ilya’s collar on Shane’s neck. *At least, not yet,* Shane takes it to mean.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

If a perfect storm were to ever exist, Shane’s in one now. He feels the wind against the back of his neck, feels the ocean waves picking up speed as they rise higher and higher, drifting from his toes all the way up to his calves now. Pretty soon, the water will be at his waist, and then his chin, until it’s fully trying to pull him under. Until Shane is gasping for air, looking for his lifeboat, only to find that Ilya is hundreds of miles away.

“Shane,” Hayden brings his attention back to the matter at hand. “Look, I’m really sorry, buddy. I was just trying to be a good friend. I didn’t think they would, you know, actually think you were gay.”

“No, I know,” Shane sighs, clasping his hands behind his head for a moment as he tries to catch his breath. “It’s not your fault. You did the right thing, Hayds. Really.”

He was going to have to face this at one point or another. Now that he and Ilya were getting serious, it was only a matter of time before people started putting the pieces together. He just hadn’t actually expected for it to happen so soon. He thought he’d have at least one more season to figure it out, one more chance at the Stanley Cup before life, as he knew it, started to fall apart. He presses into the charm keychain on his house keys, a signal to Ilya that he’s thinking about him, that he misses him. His heart swells when he receives a flash in return.

Ilya was there with him, maybe not physically, but…spiritually? That was dramatic. Shane huffs a laugh to himself and then looks up to find Hayden just staring at him like he’s having a manic breakdown. Maybe he is.

“I’ll deal with it, okay?” He tells Hayden seriously, because enough was enough. It shouldn’t fucking matter to any of the guys whether he’s gay or not. The only thing that mattered was whether Shane could take their team to another Stanley Cup victory, and he intended to do just that. “Thanks for having my back. I mean it.”

He smiles when Hayden pulls him into a massive hug, laughing when he squeezes him and tilts him in both directions.

“Also, I don’t know if you know this, but Jackie has been texting up a *storm* with your boy,” Hayden huffs. “I’m pretty sure he sent all of the kids custom Rozanov Centaurs jerseys. Jackie’s been hiding them from me so I can’t throw them out.”

Shane grins brightly because he can’t help himself. Not when it comes to his boyfriend trying to make nice with his best friends, the Pikes.

“Sounds like him,” Shane says fondly.

Hayden rolls his eyes. “God, you two have the most *disgusting* heart eyes for each other, I swear. I can’t believe it’s gotten even worse since he went to Ottawa.”

Shane sighs, because, yeah. Ottawa was taking a toll on him already. Despite their near-*constant* communication, Shane was going through Ilya *withdrawals*. It was getting worse and worse by the second. He presses his charm again, only this time, he doesn’t receive a light back. He tries not to let the sinking feeling in his stomach consume him.

“Sorry, buddy,” Hayden winces, like he can see the physical toll the long-distance is taking on him. “But, hey. I heard about the new house. How is it?”

Shane’s expression softens minutely. “It’s good, yeah. I’ve been getting settled in. Moving some of my stuff over slowly. I’m planning on keeping my old place for now, but you know. Eventually…” he trails off.

When he looks up, however, Hayden’s eyebrows are pressed together in confusion. “Uh, I was talking about Rozanov’s new house in Ottawa. What are you talking about?”

“Oh!” Shane exclaims, his cheeks flushing slightly. “Yeah, right, that. No, the house is really great. It’s beautiful. Really big. Lots of space,” he nods quickly.

“Are you moving out of your Montreal place? I thought you just had it renovated.”

“Um,” Shane stutters, scratching at the back of his neck. “Not exactly? Or, not yet, you know. I still have it, of course. I just…haven’t been staying there.”

“Oh,” Hayden frowns. “So…where are you staying?”

Shane stays silent, but he assumes his red cheeks do enough talking for him because, suddenly, Hayden is making a face in understanding.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. He knows how it looks. He’s down bad for Ilya Rozanov. He won’t try to deny it.

“You two are like…living together, then?” Hayden checks.

Shane chews nervously on the side of his cheek. “Well. Not technically, I guess. Since he’s, you know…there. While I’m here.” He tries not to sound too depressed about it, but it seems Hayden knows him too well, because he’s pulling him into another hug almost immediately.

“Fuck. I’m sorry, buddy. I can’t even imagine having to do long-distance with Jackie. I mean, it’s hard enough being away from her and the kids for away games, but like. During the *whole* season?” Hayden shakes his head in pity.

Shane just squeezes him back and tries not to let his emotions get the better of him. It’s only been a week. His relationship was strong enough to survive this; Shane knew that for a fact. But as each day goes by, it’s not his relationship that Shane is starting to doubt. No. It’s himself, his own mind. He and Ilya might be strong, but *Shane* didn’t feel that way lately. He feels like he’s crumbling apart.

He presses his face into Hayden’s neck and swallows thickly when he doesn’t catch a whiff of Ilya’s cologne. The bed had already stopped smelling like him, all of Shane’s favorite articles of Ilya’s clothing, too. It didn’t matter how many times he rinsed his body with Ilya’s body wash or spritzed Ilya’s cologne onto the freshly washed sheets. Nothing compared to the real thing holding him, touching him, telling him he was going to be alright. The key chain flashes in Shane’s hand, and his heart kickstarts again. It gives him the motivation he needs to get through the rest of the day.

As the team starts heading into the locker room, Shane is met with some pretty unfriendly faces. Part of him wants to scoff. Who did these guys think they were? It was one thing to have a problem with his personal life, but it was quite another to step into this rink with anything other than a desire to take their team to another Championship. Shane schools his own expression into a hard line. Personal feelings be damned. He wasn’t going to let some stupid drama hurt his team’s chances at a 5th Stanley Cup. The stakes were simply too high this year.

“Alright, listen up,” Shane says loudly, once the last few remaining members have strolled in. Everyone turns to him with slightly narrowed eyes, some of them standing defensively with their arms crossed, while others look to each other like they’re eager to see where this will go.

“I want to clear some things up now so it doesn’t become a problem later on. Because the truth is, we’re here to play hockey, not sit around gossiping like a bunch of school kids.”

He watches as some of the players stiffen in place.

“Shit-talking in the team group chat and the locker room ends today. I don’t want to hear another word. Frankly, I don’t give a fuck what you guys get up to in your personal time. But, in this room, in team spaces, you represent the Voyageurs. And this team…doesn’t sound like that. Not under my leadership,” Shane tells them seriously.

He takes another cursory glance around.

“If anyone has a problem with that, feel free to take it up with me, but understand something,” he pauses for effect. “*Nothing* about how I’ve led this team is up for debate. Four Cups doesn’t happen by accident. It happens because of high standards every day, in everything that we do. I’ve shown you exactly what that looks like for years.”

He hears a grumble of agreement from some of the guys, which pushes him to finish strong.

“I’m here to win. That’s it. Same as all of you. Everything else is just background noise. So, either drown it out, or be the reason this team doesn’t get the 5th Stanley Cup that we *absolutely* deserve. It’s up to every single one of you to stop clowning around, get your shit together, and get your head in the fucking game. Because, regardless of what you may think, my head’s been there all summer. Understood?” He barks loudly.

He hears a few guys chime out with, “Yes, Cap,” but others still look skeptical. They’re still glaring at Shane like he’s personally offended them by wearing Roz’s necklace, even though it’s neatly tucked away and even *taped* to his chest to keep from accidentally falling over the fabric of his shirt.

His team was being hostile to him over a fucking necklace. After all the years Shane had dedicated himself to them. After leading them to victory after victory, mostly with goals that *he* scored. He has half a mind to tell them all to fuck off. To say, ***you*** *try getting that Stanley Cup without me*. But it’s his hard work, too. And he won’t throw all of it down the drain just to prove a point to a couple of homophobic assholes.

So, yeah. JJ shoulder checks him a *little* too hard on their way over to the rink; A couple of the guys *don’t* pass to him in drills when he’s wide open. But Hayden is still there. He’s still telling the guys off when they make stupid choices that will *absolutely* affect their gameplay come the start of the season. And by the time practice is over, they’re *almost* back to normal. On the ice, at least. Progress is still progress.

Later that evening, Shane starts to feel the walls closing in on himself again. He’s no longer comforted by Ilya’s house. Instead, it’s more like a constant reminder of what he’s missing. Of something that’s so close, but yet still so far away.

He hasn’t been to the club since *Fire and Ice*, but Ivan has been talking him up to it. Slowly making him want to give it a try. And there’s no event tonight, which takes the pressure off a little bit. He doesn’t need to go as Ilya’s sub, as Ilya’s котенок. Tonight, he can just be a regular guest. Shane Hollander. It’s a role he needs to get more comfortable with, seeing as he’s spent most of the summer trying to escape it.

But Ivan is going. Svetlana is going. Rose might even make an appearance if she finishes filming in time. So, with the weight of a thousand suns beating down on him—threatening to burst him into flames should lightning strike just right—Shane begrudgingly gets dressed to go to the club.

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So far, Ilya is loving his fucking team. They’re good guys, from what he knows of them so far. In fact, they’re only one beer in, and already, they’re laughing like they’ve known each other for years. Some of the rookies are pretty shy still, but Ilya does his best to make them feel included. He remembers being that young, how much pressure he had felt to make his family proud. Being in a new country didn’t help either. He makes a note to himself to spend some time talking to Luca later.

The guys who have been around a little longer are steering the convo, for which Ilya is grateful. He’s happy to be here with them, but it’s also been a long day, and secretly, he can’t

wait to get home and talk to Shane later.

“So, Rozanov, I’ve gotta know,” Zane Boodram leans in to ask him a question. Ilya recognizes him as being one of the longer-standing Centaurs. “What kind of midlife crisis are you going through that you gave up a spot on the Bears to come play for our humble abode?”

Ilya chuckles and takes a swig of his beer. “I guess you could say I enjoy a challenge,” he shrugs, offering up a grin when it earns him a round of laughter in response. “No, I am only kidding. It is mainly because I have family in Montreal. I spend my summers in Canada, so I figured it would be nice to play for Canadian team. Get Canadian passport. It will allow me to be closer to my loved ones.”

“Why not just play for Montreal, then?” One of the newer, and, admittedly, dumber, rookies blurts out.

Wyatt Hayes smacks him on the back of the head in reprimand. “Probably because Montreal already *has* a star center. Or have you forgotten about the best player in the league, Shane Hollander?”

Ilya’s eyebrows raise high on his head. Oh*, yes*. He fucking loved this team, indeed.

“Shut up,” the rookie shoves Wyatt back. “*Obviously*, I know Shane Hollander.”

“Wait,” Luca says excitedly, his eyes lit up like a fucking kid on Christmas morning. “*You* know Shane Hollander, don’t you, Rozy?”

Ilya watches in fascination as the entire team turns to him with wide eyes, like they were simply dying to hear Ilya regale them with his tales of *The* Legendary Shane Hollander.

“Yeah,” Troy agrees shyly, speaking up for the first time that evening. “What’s he like?”

“You guys want to know about Hollander?” Ilya double-checks, because in some ways, he thinks he’s somehow entered into some dream portal where everyone wants to hear him wax poetic about his ten-year obsession with Shane. He would gladly do so, even if that were the case. He just didn’t want to get his hopes up if he was going to come crashing back to reality any second now.

Nevertheless, every single head on his team is bobbing in an affirmative *yes*.

Ilya laughs. He can’t believe his fucking luck. He’s somehow come into possession of a team full of mini Shane Hollander fans. Together, they could literally be *Team Hollander*. Now, just imagine if Ilya could get Shane Hollander *on* that team. Shane’s new teammates would fucking worship the ground he walked on. And Shane fucking deserved to be worshipped. *Especially* by any team he was leading to Stanley Cups.

“Well, he is very anxious, for one. He is always, always thinking about Stanley Cups,” Ilya starts off, because that’s the most appropriate Shane thing he can think to share with them right now. Of course, the first thing that pops into *his* head is that Shane is a cat. But his team certainly didn’t need to know that right now.

“Must be why he has so damn many of them,” one of the guys huffs a laugh.

“But, is he nice?” Luca chimes in again, and he’s so innocent. Like he just wants to be told his childhood heroes are exactly like he’d always dreamed they’d be. Ilya has no intention of raining on his parade.

“He is the nicest, yes. He has a heart of gold. Could never hurt a fly,” Ilya replies with a smile.

“But, how’s he so good at hockey, though?” Troy asks next.

“Because he works harder than anyone,” Ilya says fiercely. “You do not get to four Stanley Cups by accident. I know I said a team is more than its star player, but in Hollander’s case, that is not true. Hollander could have won those Stanley Cups all on his own. He certainly did not need Hayden Pike or any of those other Voyageurs to do it.”

His team is looking at him with wide, curious eyes. Like Ilya is telling them all the secrets to the universe, or the secrets to winning Stanley Cups, at least.

“Could we…meet him sometime?” Wyatt questions slowly.

It’s almost like they’re afraid that Ilya is going to take offense to their fascination with Shane, like he’ll be upset that *he’s* not the center of their attention. Little did they know, Shane was Ilya’s favorite topic in the entire world.

“I mean, you guys are friends, right?” Zane chimes in. “Didn’t he like…take your necklace or something?”

Ilya laughs loudly. “Yes, Hollander and I are good friends. The whole arch rival nonsense was shoved on us by the media, anyway. I have always secretly liked him. He is good at hockey, yes, but he is funny, too. He is the Golden Boy. What do you expect?”

Ilya’s rambling now, but the guys don’t seem to mind. If anything, they’re egging him on. Asking him more questions, until Ilya barely even has time to miss Shane, because it feels like Shane is right there with him. He could picture Shane so easily with these guys. Shane would flush at the compliments, but he’d secretly love the praise. He deserved a team that would sit around and worship him the way this one did. And Ilya would be *so* proud to be its Captain.

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Shane gets to the club around 9pm. He’s sick of sitting in his house, sick of missing Ilya so terribly. They have a FaceTime call scheduled for later, if Ilya is feeling up to it, but Shane wouldn’t blame him if he was tired after going out with his team. Shane knew he was under a lot of pressure to be a good Captain, to turn Ottawa into a team that could at least make the playoffs. Shane did not envy the journey he had ahead of him.

But Shane also can’t sit inside alone anymore, letting his thoughts rip into him like ravenous dogs looking for scraps. And as much as he worries about how he’ll feel when he gets to the

club, the urge to overcome his fear of it is much greater than the desire to stay away. Plus, he really wants to get to know Ivan better. It was nice to have someone he could talk to, another sub who knew about him and Ilya, especially one that Shane trusted.

He's in a white fitted tee and a caramel brown leather jacket, with dark pants. He's not wearing anything of Ilya's tonight, because mostly, he intends to be himself at the club. Not Ilya's. Of course, he still has his collar and his new key chain to remind him that he's *always* Ilya's. But that was beside the point.

Shane sees Angel first when he walks in, so he goes over to greet her with a smile. He definitely needed some liquid courage tonight; performance diet be damned. It would be worth it to feel like he could get over this hump. The hump of surviving a night at the club without going into a full-on panic meltdown, that is. Shane feels mildly hopeful.

"Shane!" Angel greets him enthusiastically, and Shane laughs when she leans over the bar to give him a hug. "Oh my god. You have no idea how good it is to see you. Rozy was acting like you wouldn't be back for *ages*."

"Yeah, well," Shane huffs in amusement. "Rozy can be quite dramatic, don't you think?"

Angel laughs loudly at his joke and nods her agreement. "I'm so glad he's not here, honestly. I never get to gossip with you. I'm sure you know all the dirt. What would you like to drink?"

"I'll take some of Rozy's special vodka," Shane tells her with a smile, feeling pretty at home right now, all things considered. "What kind of dirt are you looking for?"

"Honestly, I have no idea," Angel admits around a grin. "I'm just scouting for material in case I ever need to blackmail him into giving me a raise."

"Hm," Shane thinks, tapping his fingers against his chin. "Well, he says my name in his sleep, sometimes. With a bunch of other Russian I can't understand. Does that count as blackmail material?"

"It just might," Angel winks as she slides over Shane's glass of vodka.

He takes it gratefully and leans down to sip out of the rim while simultaneously reaching for his wallet.

"You put that away right now," Angel tells him before he gets the chance. "Rozy would probably fire me on the spot if I tried to charge you for that."

"He's not the only one," comes a female voice behind him, and when Shane turns, he's delighted to see Svetlana in the flesh. "Hi, Shane. Ilya did not tell me you would be in tonight."

Shane blinks and quickly straightens up, wiping the liquor from his lips. "Um, maybe…don't say anything to him?" He requests, his expression slightly pleading. "I just wanted to prove to myself that I could come here without it being a huge deal."

Svetlana levels him with an unimpressed look. “You should not lie about things like this. He is going to lose his mind when he finds out.”

“I’m going to tell him as soon as I get home,” Shane promises, swallowing thickly. He really didn’t need the guilt trip. He just needed to do this on his own. Ilya had his own things to deal with, anyway. “I have a FaceTime call scheduled with him later.”

Svetlana arches an eyebrow. “Fine, but if anything happens, it is on you. Ilya will not take kindly to knowing his pet is on the loose. Just be careful of the company you keep.”

Shane nods quickly. “I’m only here to see Ivan. I’ll be in and out. Two drinks tops.”

He shrinks as Svetlana gives him one final once-over, before she stalks off to do whatever it is that club owners do on a Thursday night. Luckily, he spots Ivan waving him over from the booths, and Shane quickly diverts before he can run into any other unexpected characters this evening. The goal was to stay as lowkey as possible.

“Shane,” Ivan smiles at him once he’s within earshot. “You made it. Finally. I was beginning to get *so* bored with all the Dom energy in this place.” He rolls his eyes, like Shane will know exactly what he’s talking about.

Shane doesn’t, really. Doesn’t recognize anyone in this place apart from Ivan, Angel, and Svetlana, but he laughs and nods along, anyway. He and Ivan were *subs*, after all. At the very least, they had that in common, which meant that Ivan could relate to him on some front that a lot of people Shane had run into *couldn’t*.

“Are you feeling alright? Just let me know if you start to feel weird out here, and we can *totally* go to one of the playrooms,” Ivan offers.

“One of the playrooms?” Shane raises his eyebrows in interest. He had only ever been in Ilya’s private playroom before.

“Oh, yeah. You’ve never been?” Ivan raises his eyebrows in surprise before understanding washes over him. “That’s right. I forgot Rozy snapped you up like the *second* you joined. You’ve probably never been with another Dom here, have you?”

Shane flushes a little and shakes his head. “Um. I’ve never been with another Dom at all, actually. Not outside of Ilya.”

“Wow,” Ivan laughs, his face lighting up in shock. “You really nailed it on the first try? Damn, that’s impressive. Sit down, sit down,” he encourages, and Shane realizes he’s still standing awkwardly with his drink, so he quickly sits across from Ivan on the other side of the booth.

“Impressive?” Shane wonders aloud, not quite understanding what exactly was so impressive about it.

“Extremely,” Ivan validates, watching Shane with his chin in the palm of his hand, his elbow on the tabletop. “It took me ages to find Sasha. And look how that turned out.”

Shane frowns and leans forward in interest. “What happened with you and him?”

Ivan sips from his straw for a minute, eyes grazing over Shane in assessment, before he swallows and speaks again. “I heard you’ve been going into subspace pretty deep sometimes,” he broaches lightly, almost conversationally.

Shane tenses slightly, but tries not to let it show on his face.

“I’m the same way,” Ivan offers, before Shane can lose his cool. “But, only with Sasha. I’ve never gone as deep as I go when I’m with him. Something about his voice is just like… hypnotizing to me,” he explains, a soft smile on his face while he does it, like he’s picturing the feeling. “I can completely lose myself in him. It’s the best feeling in the world.”

Shane’s stomach swoops because he knows that feeling, too.

“Some people just fit better than others, you know? I think we’re all searching for the perfect one. You got lucky with Ilya,” Ivan tells him, eyes sparkling like he’s genuinely glad for Shane. “But you never really know what you’re going to get with Sasha. He does what he wants, and that makes for a pretty scary scene partner. The Dom is supposed to read the sub, always,” he says seriously. “I love going down as much as the next guy, but I won’t put myself at risk like that,” Ivan shakes his head.

Shane swallows at the horror story. He can’t even imagine Ilya doing something that would make Shane feel unsafe with him. Most of his fears were internal, coming from within; a lot of times, it had nothing to do with Ilya at all. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Shane replies. “He said some really awful stuff to Ilya at the club one night. I can’t imagine feeling safe around him, let alone submitting to him.”

Ivan sighs and goes for another sip of his drink. “Yeah. He’s on thin ice here. One wrong move, and they’re probably going to ban him.”

“Do you know why they haven’t already?” Shane asks bluntly.

Ivan rolls his eyes like he’s bored of the subject, but he answers anyway. “Ilya and Svetlana have been friends with Sasha since they were really young. Sasha is the son of Ilya’s old hockey coach. I’m pretty sure Sasha was even Ilya’s first sub. Definitely his first time with a man. His family is still super close with Svetlana’s.”

Shane just blinks at the onslaught of information. “So, they won’t ban him because…”

“I guess it’s just hard to cut someone like that off,” Ivan shrugs, twisting his mouth like he knows it’s an unsatisfying answer.

Shane furrows his eyebrows. Was Ilya really letting Sasha stay at the club over some childhood memories? Or was it Svetlana who was keeping him around? Did Ilya maybe have a soft spot for Sasha because he was his first sub? Was he still sentimental about it? Nostalgic? Was Shane not enough for him? Was Ilya keeping Sasha around just in case? And why would Ilya—

“Shane,” Ivan snaps to get his attention. “Whatever you’re thinking, don’t go there, okay? Ilya is crazy about you. *Trust me*,” he laughs like it’s so obvious. “I’m pretty sure he wants absolutely nothing to do with Sasha, honestly.”

Then, why won’t he ban him, Shane thinks, but doesn’t ask. It was clear Ivan didn’t have a real answer either. He takes a long sip of his vodka and then signals to the waiter for another one. He happily tells her to put it on Rozy’s tab. He’d promised Svetlana he wouldn’t have more than two drinks, and he intended to keep that promise.

“Ivan,” a voice purrs from nearby, and Shane has to lift the glass away from his lips to look at the person properly.

“Stas,” Ivan bats his eyelashes up at the other.

“Did Hush really grant me the pleasure of seeing you on a Thursday night? You can be so elusive, my dear.” Stas reaches for Ivan’s hand and presses a kiss to the top of it.

“Some of us actually have to work for a living,” Ivan shoots back, but there’s an air of seduction to it.

“I keep telling you, darling. Come with me and you won’t ever have to lift a finger.”

Ivan just huffs in amusement, shaking his head. “Oh, Stas. One of these days, Daddy’s money *is* going to run out, you know?”

“Lucky for us, that day is a long ways away, isn’t it, brother?” A new person steps into the mix, and Shane’s eyes dart between them.

He doesn’t recognize either from any of the prior events, but he also doesn’t recall much of those nights, except the parts spent with Ilya. The first man is of average height, a little extra broad in the shoulders, with dark black hair and sharp blue eyes. The second man is much bigger, not just taller, but physically big. Muscular. Wide. Even through his tan suit, Shane can see the width of his arms in great detail, especially with the way he’s standing so close to their table.

“Nikolai,” Ivan greets plainly.

The man just smirks in reply before his eyes rest on Shane. His features are a little less sharp, eyes warm and brown, hair lighter than his brother’s.

“Ivan, aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend here? Or does Sasha not teach you manners?”

Ivan scoffs, but Stas cuts in before he can utter whatever is hanging from his lips.

“Niko, Niko, please. I’m sorry, gentlemen. You’ll have to excuse my brother here. He has just indulged in one of Angel’s special fire shots. He is a big guy, but he can be such a lightweight sometimes,” Stas explains good-naturedly.

Shane lets out an understanding laugh. He, too, had fallen prey to Angel's strong fire shots before. "If it makes you feel any better, those shots *are* strong."

Nikolai raises his eyebrows in happy surprise. "You see?" He turns to elbow his brother. "I am not the only one affected by this bar and its crazy alcohol." He redirects his attention to Shane this time. "I am always telling him they are putting something in the drinks, but he doesn't believe me. *You* are going to be my proof," Nikolai tells him with an appreciative leer, like Shane has just helped him to complete some kind of covert mission.

Shane giggles softly at the attention. He was making friends. He was feeling good and buzzed from his alcohol. And the fact that Ivan knew everyone made him feel insanely safe.

"Alright, fine. I want to see what all the fuss is about these fire shots," Stas says decisively, and he's got a hand on Ivan's shoulder. Shane glances over at him to see if he minds, but Ivan is just grinning while rolling his eyes. It makes Shane smile, too. "Angel, we will need a round of fire shots over here!" Stas bellows to her from across the room.

"Coming right up!" Shane hears her voice from over his shoulder.

And before he knows it, they're taking fire shots. One round. Then, another, because Stas doesn't believe they're that strong. Only, Shane doesn't know how, because the room is practically spinning around him. He's laughing harder than he's laughed in a while. He feels really, really good.

Ivan and Stas are on one side of the booth, and Nikolai, at some point, has slid into Shane's side. And they're talking about hockey, of all things. Because Nikolai, it turned out, was a huge hockey fan. And he has all kinds of questions for Shane. And, for a minute, Shane forgets all about the fact that this is a BDSM club. He forgets that he's a sub who has a Dom. And he even forgets that he's a kitten. Because, right now, he's just Shane Hollander enjoying a night out. He's being normal, and he's making friends, and his anxiety hasn't crept up on him at all the entire time he's been here. Not even once.

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They're at least three or four rounds in when Ilya looks down at his watch. It's nearing 10:30pm, and he had a call with Shane scheduled at 11:00pm, but he was having a lot of fun with his team, so he shoots Shane a text letting him know he might be a little late. He still wanted to talk to him before bed, though. It was becoming their nightly routine.

He doesn't receive a text back, but his necklace does light up, which Ilya takes to mean Shane has received his text. He smiles to himself and pulls the necklace from his shirt to send a tap back, hoping that Shane can feel the underlying kiss that Ilya would much rather be pressing into his skin right now.

"Hey," Bood proclaims, pointing drunkenly at Ilya's shirt. They're all more than a little tipsy, at this point, and Ilya would argue that some of the rookies were even approaching their limit. Possibly even their bedtime. Still, though, Ilya raises his eyebrows in amusement at Zane's inquiry. "My sister used to have one of those necklaces! It's one of those light-up ones, right? Her boyfriend gave it to her before she went away on her study abroad."

“Oh, I’ve seen those!” Dykstra, one of their defensemen, calls out. “It’s for long distance, right?”

“No fucking way,” Wyatt leans over to grab Ilya’s shoulder, giving him a good-natured shake. “Our boy Rozanov is a *taken man*? Since when? Dude, I thought you were like *the* ladies’ man. Are you seriously telling me you’re all locked up?”

Ilya huffs a laugh, raising a hand up in defense as he polishes off another beer. “Wow, you fuckers are jealous, huh? Don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love with me already,” he teases, grinning when it earns him a few playful shoves.

“Are you really seeing someone, Roz?” Troy leans in with interest, like he hadn’t expected someone with Ilya’s rep to be capable of settling down.

Ilya rolls his eyes fondly. “Yes, okay. It is true. I admit it. Ilya Rozanov is a taken man.”

The boys absolutely lose it at that, going into different bouts of whoops and applause.

“Aye, aye, Cap!” Holmberg, one of the younger players, shouts with glee.

“Well, go on, then,” Bood urges. “Aren’t you going to tell us about her?”

“Oh, this, I’m *dying* to hear,” Wyatt agrees, grinning wildly like Ilya’s about to tell them the craziest story of all time.

Ilya just smirks and shakes his head. “You are not getting anything out of me. Моя любовь values privacy.”

“Come on, Roz,” a voice from the back of the group begs. “Give us something.”

As flattered as he is by their interest, and as much as Ilya *wishes* he could tell them about Shane just to see their reactions, he has no intention of spilling his guts tonight. In fact, he should probably start wrapping up here if he still intends to catch Shane before his kitten falls asleep. His necklace lights up again.

“Would you look at that?” Wyatt whistles. “Mrs. Rozanov is lighting that thing *up*.”

Ilya rolls his eyes once more, but he presses the necklace back because he knows Shane will be upset if his signal goes unanswered.

“Rozy’s fucking whipped,” Bood cheers loudly, and the others chime in with celebratory laughter.

It should feel like they’re making fun of him, but it doesn’t. In fact, Ilya can’t help but watch on with a smile. He was fucking whipped, actually. There was no lie in that. No shame, either. He wears the title like a badge of honor. And, if his team knew it was *Shane* lighting up the other end of that necklace, they’d certainly understand why he was so smitten.

For a second, he pictures a world in which he can come out to his team. They seemed supportive, like they wouldn’t care one way or another if Ilya was dating a man. But it’s not

just his secret to tell anymore. He has Shane to think about, and as far as Ilya knew, Shane wouldn't be ready to come out for a long time. And if Ilya couldn't tell the boys about Shane, then what was the point, really? Ilya just wants to be able to talk about him for hours, and tonight, he's done that. He has more than he could have ever asked for, and the thought nestles warmly within him.

Suddenly, the necklace starts buzzing against his chest, though, and Ilya reaches for it instantly, eyebrows creasing like he hopes it's a mistake. Like he hopes Shane accidentally just pressed on it for too long. Maybe he was up waiting for Ilya and he was getting impatient. Maybe he was just horny. He tries not to jump to terrible conclusions.

"What's that one mean?" Luca asks brazenly, slurring his words around the alcohol in his system.

"That one means I need to close our tab and get the hell out of here," he tells everyone, receiving a dejected groan from the larger group.

"Guys, guys, leave him be. Our Cap is going to get laid," Wyatt declares, but Bood just rolls his eyes.

"He just said he's fucking long distance, bro. He ain't getting shit."

Troy is the one to laugh this time. "Who says you can't get laid if you're long distance?"

"No way Barrett just said Roz is going to have phone sex," Holmberg cackles hysterically.

And as much as Ilya would love to stay and chat some more about the joys of being with Shane, the necklace is still buzzing like crazy against his chest, which clamps down on any hope Ilya had that maybe the signal was a mistake.

"Okay, love you all, but I really do need to get the hell out of here. Duty calls," Ilya brushes them off and stands quickly to settle their tab. He's honored that his team is having so much fun with him, that they seem to be bonding almost more than Ilya's old team ever did, but he feels panic start to rise in his chest as the necklace keeps buzzing. Keeps thumping loudly against his rapidly beating heart.

Come on, come on, he thinks to himself as the bartender takes their sweet team swiping Ilya's card. It was the first time Shane had to use the bat signal (cat signal), and Ilya really didn't want to drop the ball on this one. He had to prove to Shane that he could be there for him even if he was far away. So, the second he gets the receipt back, he scribbles his signature, adds a ridiculously large tip, and then practically runs out the door as his team yells their goodbyes.

He didn't drive, obviously, but he doesn't feel comfortable getting into an Uber without knowing what he's walking into with Shane, so before he can do anything else, he takes his phone out of his pocket and dials Shane's number.

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Shane blinks dazedly as he looks around the room. The club is in full swing right now, and he's, once again, amazed at the fact that Ilya is in charge of something like this. That Ilya helped build this place from the ground up. His boyfriend was a hot piece of shit.

"So," Nikolai says to him, suddenly much closer to his ear now.

Shane laughs at the way the other's breath tickles his neck, but he leans back a bit at the smell of alcohol. He's sure he smells the same.

"When did you join the club? I've been a member for years, and I've never seen you until recently."

Shane smiles and turns to answer, finding Nikolai's eyes trained to his mouth. Shane did that, too, sometimes. Especially when he was drunk. He found it so much easier to avoid eye contact when he was nervous or overwhelmed. He hopes he's not making Nikolai nervous.

"I joined this summer," Shane agrees, taking a sip of water when Ivan passes one to him. It's a welcome change from the endless fire shots they've been throwing back.

"That's such a shame. We totally could have met like way earlier," Nikolai grins, and Shane feels warmth at the prospect of having made a new friend. Ilya was going to be so proud of him for coming here on his own, for hanging out with Ivan, and Stas, and Nikolai, without going into panic mode even once.

"Yeah, well, I didn't even know this place existed. Not until my friend Rose told me about it, anyway," Shane hums, sipping some more water before reaching for the rest of his vodka. He'd told Svetlana he would only have two drinks, and technically, he was still nursing his second. Technically, she didn't say anything about fire shots.

"And now, look at you. You're like a regular," Nikolai teases, reaching down to squeeze Shane's knee playfully.

Shane flushes under the attention, but it was nice to feel seen after a stressful first day back at hockey. He relaxes a little into the touch, feels the alcohol working its way into his inhibitions, pushing them aside.

"Yeah," Shane breathes, tipping his head in consideration. "I guess I am, kinda. I don't know if I really like…fit in though. Everyone's so…" he trails, pressing his tongue to the inside of his upper lip thoughtfully. "Confident, I guess."

"You're confident," Nikolai assures him, and Shane barely notices as his hand slips a little higher up his leg. "Couldn't take my eyes off of you when I walked in. Those freckles."

Shane laughs and reaches up to touch his freckles. "Really? Oh my god, I hate them."

"What? Absolutely not," Nikolai shakes his head, lips pulled into a half smirk as he pulls Shane's hand from his face, holding on to his fingers a bit longer than necessary. "I've never seen freckles like yours. You could drive a man crazy with beauty like this." And, suddenly, Nikolai is a lot closer. And Shane's vision is sort of blurry around the edges.

He glances over to see Ivan completely caught up in Stas, laughing loudly at something he's said and shoving at one of his broad shoulders. He turns back to Nikolai and realizes, maybe for the first time, just how massive he is. He's taking up the whole width of the booth, completely blocking Shane's view of the rest of the club. Blocking Shane from view of the rest of the club. Maybe even from view of Ivan. It makes him feel a little trapped, a little on edge, so Shane presses his keychain for comfort. He calms down once the keychain lights up in response. Ilya is right there if he needs anything. Ilya would always be there if he needed anything. He lets himself relax.

"I—thank you," Shane stutters softly, and he places a hand on Nikolai's to try and push him off, but it's like Nikolai barely notices. He's too caught up in staring at Shane, his eyes cataloguing Shane's face. "Um," Shane lets out an awkward laugh.

"You are Rozy's sub, yes?" Nikolai asks him, his Russian accent strong, and Shane breathes a sigh of relief. Nikolai knew he was Ilya's sub. Good. That made him feel a lot better. At least Shane knew he wasn't going to try anything.

"Yes," Shane agrees, offering him a soft smile. Nikolai is staring at his lips again. Shane presses his keychain to let Ilya know he's thinking of him. He gets a little buzz back.

"And, how is that going? Has he been training you good and well?" He's closer, maybe. But Shane writes it off as them just being drunk. They've had a *lot* of alcohol tonight. He couldn't exactly blame him. Shane was going to be suffering through his workout tomorrow.

"I think so," Shane gets out a little nervously. "I mean, he's…he's a really good Dom."

"I'm surprised he hasn't offered to share you yet," Nikolai looks him up and down in interest, and his hand is on Shane's stomach now, a massive thing that spans across nearly his entire abdomen. Shane, again, tries to push his hand away, but Nikolai is watching him like he's hypnotized. He's so strong that Shane can barely get him to budge.

"Um. Yeah. I don't think—" Shane tries, pausing to suck in a breath as Nikolai leans even closer. And then, before Shane can make sense of things, Nikolai is kissing him, pulling Shane close by the back of his neck, and his grip is relentless.

Shane pushes at his chest to get him to back off, but Nikolai is massive like a bear, and he's closing in on him, pressing Shane deeper into the booth with a big knee that wedges between Shane's thighs, keeping him pinned there. Shane can't fucking breathe. And not like a panic attack, no. He literally can't fucking breathe. Nikolai is kissing him roughly, holding him down, not letting Shane come up for a single second of air. So, Shane does the only thing he can think of and presses down on his keychain hard.

And then, he waits. Waits for Ilya to swoop in and save him. Waits for the phone to ring, to give him an excuse to get the hell out of here. He's holding, and holding, and *holding his breath*. But nothing happens. Nothing changes.

Until he hears Ivan from across the booth causing a big commotion.

“Hey, get the hell off of him. What the fuck are you doing? He’s fucking taken, Niko. Stas, fucking *do something*.”

And then, Nikolai is being hauled off of him, only he doesn’t take kindly to this. He’s still grabbing Shane, touching him in places he does *not* want to be touched, groping his thighs, his ass, his *dick*. He’s aggressive, surging forward to pull Shane into another kiss that sends a slimy feeling all throughout his body. Lips are on his neck, his cheek, dipping down across his chest. But there’s more shouting, more people calling out and adding to the commotion.

He hears people shouting in Russian, but he can’t make sense of it one way or another. His phone is vibrating loudly in his pocket.

Shane is too drunk for this. There’s people all around him as Nikolai is hauled off of him and pulled away by security. He can see their mouths moving, but no sound is coming out. Shane feels like he’s spinning. The crowd is closing in on him, and he backs himself further into the booth, eyes wide. He sees Ivan saying something frantically to a woman he doesn’t recognize. It’s so fucking loud, and his ears are buzzing, and he can’t hear anything. He feels his phone vibrating more incessantly against his leg.

He can’t fucking handle any of this right now. He puts his hands over his ears to try and block the noise. Someone tries to reach for him, and he instantly flinches away, feeling panic rise higher and higher in his chest.

“Shane. Shane. Listen to me, please. Can I help you get to Ilya’s playroom?”

It’s Ivan’s voice near him this time. Not too close, but close enough that Shane can pick it out over the rest of the chaos. He sucks in a jagged breath. Fuck. Fuck, he needed Ilya bad.

“Svetlana is getting him on the phone for you, okay? Everything’s gonna be okay.”

And Shane takes a few seconds to try to absorb the information.

“You’re okay,” Ivan says again, and Shane is grateful that he’s not touching him. There’s someone further away telling people to back up. Shane distantly recognizes it as Svetlana. “Just take a deep breath.”

Shane listens to the instruction with ease, grateful that the air no longer feels like molten lava around him. He breathes in…and out. He feels his charm lighting up repeatedly in his pocket. Ilya’s with him. Ilya would keep him safe. He needs to hear his voice.

“Ivan, tell Shane I’ve got Ilya on the phone, please,” Svetlana says calmly, and Shane appreciates that, too. He’s okay. He’s going to be okay. He really wants to talk to Ilya.

“Shane, sweetheart. Are you okay if I help you get to Ilya’s playroom now? Svetlana has him on the phone. He would love to speak to you if you’re up for it.”

Shane’s expression crumples, and he nods quickly. He wants that so badly. So, he doesn’t fight it when Ivan starts maneuvering him out of the booth. He accepts the gentle hand on his back, accepts when Svetlana follows them with one of the security guards to make sure no

one else approaches. He even accepts the bottle of water Ivan hands him as he's pressed into the familiar leather of Ilya's couch.

He's still pretty unaware of his surroundings, but he knows he's in the room with Ivan alone. He knows Ivan is saying something softly into what must be Svetlana's phone, if the blingy, pink case is anything to go off of. And then, before he knows it, Ivan is offering the phone to him with gentle eyes and a soft smile.

"It's Ilya," he says, and gently places the phone in Shane's shaky hand.

Shane carefully presses the phone up to his ear, sniffling slightly, but he's not crying. He hasn't even begun to process everything that's just happened.

"Hi, baby," Ilya greets him, his voice slow and calm like it always is. It's an extremely welcome comfort right now.

Shane doesn't say anything back, but he feels his heart in his throat. He misses him so much.

"I'm in the car on my way to you right now, okay?" Ilya hums, like he can read Shane's mind. "I'll be there very soon. Can you take a deep breath for me?"

Shane shuts his eyes and does as he's told, taking a deep inhale through his nose before slowly letting the air out through his lips.

"Good boy. You're safe with Ivan, okay, angel? He's going to stay with you until I get there," Ilya tells him, and Shane nods even though Ilya can't see him. "I'm going to be here on the phone with you the entire time. Whatever you need, I'm right here."

The time passes like that. Shane doesn't say anything, but Ilya doesn't seem to mind, talking to him gently and often, but not too often. Just in that sweet spot that can usually send Shane straight to level 2 if he lets himself relax enough. So, he does. He shuts his eyes, and eventually, the lights in the room dim to almost nothing. He can still hear Ilya's voice, even though it's distant. There's warmth all around him, like someone's put a blanket over him. And after some time, Shane drifts off to sleep with Ilya's voice guiding him into the sweetest, most present dream he's had since Ilya left for Ottawa a week ago.

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry to leave you on this cliffhanger! Don't worry, everything will be handled. Shane will be getting the help he needs and Ilya will do what needs to be done!

If you're interested in seeing more about the long-distance necklaces, here's an example of what that might look like.

Thank you for all the nice comments on the last chapter. I think I was having a Shane moment and being too hard on myself, but I appreciate all the support on this fic!! You all are so lovely, thank you for sharing your thoughts!

As always, can't wait to hear!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Ilya Rozanov finally steps into his club, it's with a fury. Two fucking hours trapped in an Uber while trying to comfort Shane from hundreds of miles away. Two hours of having to keep his voice calm and level, while underneath the surface, he was vibrating with rage. But he had to keep his cool for Shane, had to be strong and collected to ensure his baby wouldn't lose it before he got there.

He doesn't even have the full story. Svetlana's phone call had been quick and to the point before she was passing him off to Shane. Something happened, an altercation with one of the sharks that Ilya did *not* trust, and Shane needed him. Ilya didn't have time to get more details before he was in full caregiver mode, talking Shane down from whatever terrible ledge his head would be leading him to tonight. He's since hung up the phone after Ivan informed him that Shane was happily snoozing away like a sleepy little kitten. Ilya is glad to know at least one of them will be able to rest peacefully tonight.

"What the fuck happened?" Ilya demands to know once he gets through the door. It's hardly 1:30am, but the club has closed early tonight. All of the lights are on, with most of the people having cleared out, save for a few remaining members of the staff.

"Ilyusha, calm," Svetlana tries to level with him, but Ilya isn't having it.

"Where is he? Who was it? What happened? Someone needs to tell me right fucking now."

"You need to get your voice under control. He is sleeping in your playroom," Svetlana tells him calmly, but it does little to soothe the electricity running through Ilya's veins. "He is okay."

"Where is Ivan?" Ilya asks furiously, eyes landing on the sub who is sitting at the bar, nursing a glass of water. "You better start talking right now."

Ivan sighs like he's tired, but Ilya doesn't care. He's been keyed up in the car for two hours, a million different horrible scenarios running through his brain.

"Look, it happened out of nowhere, okay? As soon as I realized, I got help."

"Who was it?" Ilya says again, because everyone seems to be deliberately avoiding his questions.

"Nikolai," Ivan fills in softly, and Ilya sees red.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Sveta?" He turns his attention to her this time. "After everything? How the fuck did this happen? All of you in this fucking club, and no one was watching him? Why the fuck was he here?"

“I invited him,” Ivan says defensively. “He’s been hard on himself about how he had a panic attack last time. He wanted to prove that he could come here and have a good night. I thought it would be a lot easier without the pressures of an event.”

“He should have never been here alone without *extreme* supervision. Nikolai and the rest of those fuckers have been circling him for weeks now. You should have seen the vile text messages they sent me. Making disgusting comments about Shane. Asking me to share him.”

Ivan narrows his eyes at Ilya. “Are you fucking serious right now? If you knew Nikolai was a problem, you should have *banned* him immediately. If anyone had told me this, I would have never let Shane be around those guys.”

Ilya feels guilt pour into his stomach, his eyes drifting helplessly to Svetlana, but she looks pretty guilty as well.

“I was keeping an eye on him, Ilyusha, I swear,” she replies softly, almost apologetically. “I told him I did not think it was a good idea for him to be here without you, but he is capable of making his own choices. He said he was going to tell you as soon as you got home from drinks with your team.”

Ilya presses his hands to his eyes and takes a deep breath, trying to force himself to remain calm. “Please, just. Tell me. Tell me what happened.” He watches on pitifully as Ivan and Svetlana share a look with each other before Ivan licks his lips and starts speaking.

“I was sitting with Shane over at one of the booths. Stas came over. He was being flirty. You know how he is,” Ivan waves off. “But, he was harmless. He’s been trying to get me in a scene for ages now, so I didn’t think anything of it.” He pauses to take a breath, almost like he’s steeling himself for the next part.

“Please,” Ilya begs, because he can’t take the anticipation anymore.

“Nikolai came over, and he was a little drunk. They were talking about how strong the fire shots were, and so we asked Angel to bring us some. It was only supposed to be one round. I was keeping an eye on Shane and…he was fine, you know? He and Nikolai were talking about hockey. Obviously, Niko *knows* Shane is your sub, so I didn’t think it was a big deal. I thought he was just being friendly. A little flirty, maybe, but Shane was having a good time.”

Ilya shuts his eyes tightly for the part that he knows is coming.

“And then, before I knew it, Nikolai was kissing him. And Shane tried to push him off, but he’s a big guy. And he was fucking wasted, apparently. As soon as I noticed, I told Stas to fucking do something about it, and security immediately came over, but Niko was relentless. He kept grabbing Shane, maybe trying to take his clothes off— I don’t know,” Ivan sighs. “He was kissing him and groping him, but security got him off pretty quickly. It was ten, maybe fifteen seconds *tops*.”

“God,” Ilya groans, feeling sick in the pit of his stomach. The thought of Nikolai’s grimy hands all over Ilya’s scared little kitten revs up something sinister inside of him. Ilya did not consider himself to be a violent person by any means, but this made him want to become one.

He wanted to hunt Nikolai down and cut off his hands, gouge out his eyes. Whatever it would take to ensure this didn't happen to anyone else ever again. "Where is he? Where the fuck is he?"

"The police took him in," Svetlana replies curtly. "And it is for the best that they did."

"He will be out in a second," Ilya hisses at her. "His father has cops on fucking retainer. There will be no punishment for this. He will skate by, as usual."

"Well, obviously, he is banned," Svetlana says, narrowing her eyes slightly. "And Ivan is right. He should have been banned ages ago if we thought him to be a risk. We are not doing our jobs correctly if we are willfully ignoring red flags. I think it is time to do a serious look through our members to make sure nothing like this ever happens again."

"And while we're on the topic, for that matter, why the fuck has Sasha not been banned?" Ivan asks defiantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ilya's eyes flicker with something ominous. "Sasha is best left as is. You know how he can be. Reactionary. I will not do something to force a rise out of him. If we ban him, he will immediately retaliate."

"I don't feel safe with him being a member here, and neither does Shane. Whatever you think you're doing to *protect him* isn't working. This whole evening could have been easily prevented if you had banned this group from the start. They cause problem after problem, and you still give out second chances, for what?" Ivan challenges.

And Ilya doesn't have time to question his own choices right now. He could let the guilt eat him alive later, but right now, he needed to get to Shane. He needed to make sure Shane was okay. Which, fuck, *obviously* Shane *wasn't* okay. Maybe he was sleeping peacefully for the moment, but Ilya knew how his brain worked. Shane's head would not take kindly to the events of this evening, and Ilya needed to get in front of it.

"You are right. We will need to make some big changes here," Ilya agrees, placing his hands on his hips. "Club is closed this weekend until we can take a proper inventory of the current members. I will not let something like this happen again. It is negligence, and it is 100% my fault."

His eyes flicker between Svetlana and Ivan, both of them staying quiet in their respective spots, but Ilya can't wait for a response. He needs to get to his playroom right now. Part of him is stalling, though, like he's scared to face whatever awaits him on the other side. He feels like he's failed him.

"I am sorry for screaming. I know it is not one person's fault when something like this happens. And I know you both care about Shane and would never intentionally put him in a dangerous scenario. I am just—" He pauses, sighing heavily before pinching the bridge of his nose. He feels like he's going to cry.

"He is okay, Ilya," Svetlana reminds him, her voice delicate like she's afraid of setting him off. "He is scared. A little violated, yes, but he will be okay. He is not hurt. We got to him in

time."

Ilya swallows and nods, trying to hold onto that fact. She was right. Shane would be okay. They intervened before anything worse could happen. He tries not to let his mind wander to other, more darker scenarios.

"Go in and see him," Ivan nods towards the back hallway. "He'll be happy you're here. I think he mostly just misses you."

Ilya wants to laugh. Of course, Shane's focus would not be on himself—and the probably, very traumatic event he's just been through—but rather, his desire to see Ilya. Ilya wanted to see him, too, though. He just wishes it were under slightly better circumstances.

When he steps into his playroom, the lights are off, and Shane is a warm, sleepy pile of kitty on his couch. His heart melts at the sight. Shane's still got Svetlana's phone next to him, his little paw wrapped around it like a lifeline. Like he'd been listening to every single reassurance Ilya pressed into his highly trained ears, even after he'd been taken captive by his slumber. Ilya hopes it has been restful.

Part of him is fearful to even wake Shane, like it might somehow trigger the Big fucking Bang he's been waiting for, but he has to let Shane know he's shown up for him. That Ilya would cross every ocean, battlefield, all the heavens, and planets to get to Shane.

He carefully lowers himself to sit on the edge of the couch, gently petting over Shane's hair so as not to spook him. Shane's face pinches cutely in his sleep, and Ilya has half a mind to wrap him up and simply never, ever let him go again. He'd been gone for one week. One singular week, and somehow, Shane had gotten hurt. His heart pangs at the fact that he's the cause.

Slowly but surely, Shane starts to blink himself into awareness, his eyes struggling against the darkness of the room. Ilya smiles down at him once he meets his gaze.

"Hi, my perfect boy," he greets, and his heart thumps loudly against his chest when Shane's face crumples all at once before he surges forward to hug him. "Oh, baby. I know," he soothes, pulling Shane close to his chest, inhaling the scent of him with the hopes that he never has to forget it. "You're okay. I've got you."

"You came," Shane mutters, almost like he wasn't expecting him to.

"Course I did. As soon as you buzzed," Ilya vows, because it hadn't even been a conscious decision. If Shane needed him, he would find a way to be there. There wasn't a single thing in the world that could ever be more important than showing up for him.

"I missed you," Shane whispers, like he still hasn't come to accept it, yet. Like he thinks Ilya is some figure from his dreamscape that could up and disappear at any moment now.

"I missed you so fucking much. You have no idea," Ilya shakes his head, squeezing him tighter. "I hate not sleeping next to you every night. I am even starting to miss your little ice cube feet that scare the shit out of me every morning."

Shane huffs a wet laugh, burying his nose into Ilya's neck. Ilya feels Shane's back rise and fall as he takes a big inhale, a shuddering exhale wracking through him a second later like he can finally relax with the smell of Ilya's cologne to lull him back to a comfortable resting state.

Shane seems okay right now, and the last thing Ilya wants to do is disturb his peace by bringing up the events of tonight, so he lets himself hold Shane a little longer. He lets himself be held in return.

"Do you have to drive back tomorrow?" Shane asks him quietly, like he's scared of Ilya's answer.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby," Ilya promises, and he feels tension leave Shane's body at the reassurance. "I'll stay as long as you need me to."

It's not entirely truthful. Obviously, Ilya would have to leave at some point. But he's happy to placate Shane in any way he needs right now. His boy has had a rough day, and all Ilya wants is to hold him for the next 24 hours. To let his mind get some much-needed rest. Ilya feared he, himself, would not be so lucky.

After several more minutes spent wrapped up in each other, Ilya finally pulls away to get a proper look at him. His heart pangs with the thought that Shane's lips have been touched by another tonight, that his body has been plagued by the ghost of someone who only intended to cause him harm. He thinks about how much worse it could have been, and for a second, he's glad this happened the way it did.

Imagine if Nikolai had somehow gotten him alone, Ilya's mind supplies recklessly. *What if Ivan hadn't been there to intervene? What if Svetlana had been back in one of the offices? What if Shane had been slightly more drunk? What if Nikolai had managed to slip something into his drink?*

Ilya lets his eyes graze over Shane's searchingly. He was lucid. Tired. Feeling effects from the alcohol still, maybe. But he hadn't been drugged. It was a relief to know Ilya's club had not failed on *that* grand of a scale. No. Only Ilya himself, by not banning Nikolai from the start. It's a mistake he won't let himself make again.

"I love you," Shane says suddenly, and Ilya's chest aches at the look in his eyes. Like he feels like he needs to convince him. Like Ilya would somehow believe that anything that happened tonight was his fault. That he'd wanted it in any way.

"I love you, too," he says back unflinchingly, letting his fingers slip soothingly through the hair at the nape of Shane's neck. "You're mine, you know that? Always," he adds. "Nothing could ever change that."

Shane swallows, but nods, like he understands the deeper meaning of what Ilya's trying to say to him. This *wasn't* Shane's fault. Ilya didn't blame him. Ilya wasn't going to look at him or treat him any differently because of it.

He smiles lightly and leans in to bump their foreheads together. “Do you want me to take you back to the house, or would you rather sleep here tonight?”

Shane frowns and reaches for the fabric of his t-shirt, like he actually thinks Ilya is going to go to the house without him if he wants to stay.

“I’m not going anywhere, baby,” Ilya assures him, holding Shane’s gaze. “I’m right here, okay?” He reaches to squeeze Shane’s knee, and Shane flinches slightly, causing Ilya to freeze in place. His eyes flick over him, searching for any signs of pain, but there are none. Ilya hesitantly removes his hand, hovering just slightly over Shane’s skin.

“Sorry,” Shane whispers, closing his eyes.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Ilya whispers in return, but the truth is, he’s terrified. He has no idea what this means for them going forward. He has no idea how affected Shane is, how traumatized. Maybe he wouldn’t want Ilya to touch him for a long time. Maybe he’d have nightmares about it. Was he going to be okay for hockey? What if another player checked him? Would it take him back to this night? Would it become another thing for his mind to lord over him?

But before Ilya can figure out what to do next, Shane is reaching for his hand and pressing a kiss to the top of it, and Ilya relaxes. They were going to be okay. Maybe not perfect. Maybe not right now, or tomorrow. But eventually.

Shane is still sleep-rumpled and warm, and he doesn’t feel like going back to the house, so Ilya helps him migrate over to the bed. He carefully assists Shane with getting out of his clothes, and then, one by one, replaces each article with one of his own. Until Shane is practically bathing in his scent. Until Ilya is wrapped with a possessive arm around him, pressing kisses into his shoulder and onto his cheeks until Shane turns to meet him in a lip-lock. He still tastes the same, and Ilya hums into it. He can’t resist slipping him a little tongue, but it just makes Shane laugh until Ilya is tickling him all over.

They fall asleep like that, their feet tangled together, their fingers linked across Shane’s abdomen, Ilya’s face buried in his hair. As far as evenings go, ultimately, it ends up being a pretty good one. Ilya has his boy in his arms, which was more than he could say for the other cold, lonely nights he’d spent in bed alone. The feeling sparks a small flicker of hope within him, like maybe everything will be okay, after all.

When Ilya wakes up, he’s blissfully unaware. The only thing the registers is the godly feeling of Shane’s body against his. Ilya smiles before he’s even opened his eyes, absentmindedly rubbing the scruff of his chin against the crook of Shane’s neck before tipping his head forward to nuzzle into him.

Shane jolts suddenly from his sleep, pushing out of Ilya’s arms before Ilya can even process that he’s awake.

“Mm. Shaney,” Ilya murmurs, rubbing at one of his eyes. “Come back,” he whines, grabbing at Shane’s forearm to get him closer, but Shane just shakes him off. And it’s only then that a very harsh reality comes crashing down on him.

Ilya blinks fully this time, with a renewed awareness, and pushes into a sitting position with one arm.

Shane is watching him with a semi-startled expression, his body poised defensively like he expects Ilya is going to try and reach for him a third time.

Ilya can't help the way his chest pangs in hurt. He presses his lips together, eyes grazing over Shane in calculation, in an attempt to figure out what to do.

Shane swallows and shakes his head, almost like he's trying to shake himself out of a stupor.

"You're okay," Ilya whispers. He has no idea what's going through Shane's head right now, but he has to remind him. "You're safe. I'm right here."

Shane's face crumples all of a sudden, and he hiccups a panicked gasp.

"It's okay, Shane. Everything's okay," Ilya rushes to remind him. He reaches out to rub his back before he remembers, and he clenches his fist by his side to keep from reaching for him again. "Just take a deep breath, baby. That's it."

Shane follows the instruction like it's instinctual—like he's programmed to respond to Ilya's voice, to his commands—and he forces himself to regulate his breathing. Then, unexpectedly, Shane grabs onto his shoulder like he needs something to help stabilize him. Ilya stays very still, content to be Shane's guardrail as long as he needs.

"I—" Shane starts, and just from that first syllable, Ilya can sense where this is going.

"No," he says firmly, unwilling to let that thought sit with him for even a single second.

Shane closes his eyes tightly, takes a beat, and then opens them before he tries to speak again. "But, I—"

"No," Ilya cuts off just as quickly. He would not let Shane take the blame for this.

"Ilya—"

"***No***," Ilya tells him, until he's forced to listen. "Nothing that happened last night was your fault."

"You don't know that—"

"Yes, I do," Ilya continues sharply. "You could never do anything wrong. I don't care what happened. I don't care how. This is *not your fault*. Do you hear me?"

But Shane doesn't believe him. He can tell from his face. And Ilya wants to suffocate him with words until it's seared into his skin.

"I drank too much."

"And that gives someone permission to touch you without consent?" Ilya asks incredulously.

“I didn’t tell him to stop—”

“It doesn’t matter, Shane. He knew exactly what he was doing. He is 100% at fault here.”

Shane huffs and ducks his head slightly, letting his hand fall from Ilya’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have come here without telling you.”

Ilya just patiently continues to talk him down. “You are allowed to do whatever you want. You do not need my permission to go out.”

“Well, clearly I do! Since I keep making the wrong choices.”

“Shane,” Ilya’s eyebrows press together in concern. “Baby. I need you to understand that this has nothing to do with anything you did or any choice you made.”

“I walked into a BDSM club without my Dom, and I drank way too much,” Shane deadpans, like that will make it land for him.

“You are a human person,” Ilya replies slowly. “You are not a *thing* to be *claimed*. The fact is that no one should ever lay a hand on you without your permission. It does not matter how much you drink.”

“I was leading him on,” Shane presses.

And Ilya cannot take this anymore. “Shane, Nikolai is not a good person. He knows you are my sub. He has made comments about you before. Okay? I am completely certain that he is entirely to blame. It does not matter what you did or didn’t do. This is about *his* actions, and he should not have been anywhere near you, let alone *touching you* without your consent.”

Shane’s eyebrows furrow slightly. “What do you mean he’s made comments about me before?”

Ilya just licks over his lips and lets out a heavy sigh, gaze dropping to the bed momentarily. “When we posted about the necklace. When you got outed to the club,” Ilya starts, looking back up to find Shane staring back at him. “A couple of members reached out to me about you.”

“Reached out to you about what?”

Ilya exhales roughly. “About sharing you. Showing you off to them. Letting them have a turn.” He feels disgusting as he says it out loud. “It’s—” he pauses, taking another deep breath. “It’s why I was so weird about coming back to the club when we returned from Ottawa, okay? I am sorry for not telling you, but I was just—” he scoffs, shaking his head. “I was so disgusted with my community. With these people that I considered to be my *friends*. I did not want to upset you or make you feel unsafe. You were already so scared that you’d been outed. I just thought...I thought I could handle it.”

“Jesus, Ilya,” Shane shakes his head.

“I am so sorry, Shane,” Ilya drops his chin to his chest. “If this is anyone’s fault, it is mine. I should have banned Nikolai the moment he said something. I never in a million years thought anything like this would happen, and I am just—” he runs a hand through his hair. “I am so sorry.”

Shane is silent for a few moments, and amid that silence, Ilya is somehow certain he’s going to end things between them. Tell him off. Break down crying. Something. He braces for impact, but…it never comes. He’s stunned, however, when, instead, Shane’s arms come to wrap around his neck, and Ilya doesn’t hesitate before swiftly pulling him close, pressing his face securely into Shane’s shoulder.

“Fuck,” Ilya curses as his eyes start to water. “I’m so sorry, Shane. This is all my fucking fault.”

“S’not your fault,” Shane says softly, but he sounds like he doesn’t want to talk, and Ilya doesn’t want to make him.

“I am so sorry this happened, baby. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Hey,” Shane chimes in again, and Ilya straightens when gentle fingers card through his hair.

Fuck. He was supposed to be comforting Shane right now, not the other way around. He was putting his guilt on Shane, and that was asking for too much. He needed to be the one holding it together for both of them. That was his job. As Shane’s Dom, and as his boyfriend.

“This isn’t about me, though,” Ilya backtracks, hyper-aware of the mistake he’s just made by steering the conversation to his needs. “This is about you. You’re my priority. I want to make sure you’re okay. Just…just tell me what you need,” Ilya pulls away to cup Shane’s cheek.

Shane blinks up at him slowly, and Ilya wants to cry because he’s just so fucking beautiful. The thought of anyone trying to hurt his gorgeous, sweet, precious little boy makes a fire burn deep within his belly. He would do absolutely anything to protect him going forward.

“I, um,” Shane starts, dropping his gaze as he nervously bites at his lip. “I just really want to…”

“Want to what?” Ilya prompts, because whatever it was, Ilya would make it happen for him.

Shane huffs like he’s embarrassed, and he drops his forehead to Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya takes that to mean he might want to be touched some more, so he rubs a gentle, tentative hand over Shane’s back.

“What is it, baby? You can tell me.”

“I wanna be your kitten,” he says softly into Ilya’s skin, rubbing his nose against him.

And, god, Ilya is so fucking in love. “You wanna be my little котенок?” He hums, pulling back a bit to assess Shane properly. Fuck. Ilya could give him that. Ilya could give him that so easily, no problem. In fact, he needed it, too. A week without getting to sit with Shane while he was all nice and quiet and fuzzy and down. A week without petting his soft black

hair. A week without his punishing kitten bites and his super sweet, soft kitten licks. A *week* without him purring up a storm in Ilya's lap.

Shane nods against him, and Ilya's heart throbs with want.

"Course you can, sweetheart. You just wanna be pet a bit? Relax in my arms?"

Ilya smiles when Shane nods again. He's still hiding his face, which must mean he's feeling like a shy kitten. Ilya could work with that. He was very good at meeting Shane wherever he was at. Sometimes Shane could be a very shy kitty, but other times, he wanted to show off. Wanted attention. Right now, he just wants to bury himself in Ilya's chest and shut his head off for a while. It's a pretty reasonable request, considering what he's been through in the past twelve hours.

"You are okay if you would like to go down. I promise I'll take care of you," Ilya vows, being a bit more intentional about his back rubs now. He slows his hand, starts to sync his pets in time with trying to slow Shane's breathing, and he can feel the effect almost instantly. "Good boy. Just relax for me, okay? I've got you."

Ilya can feel Shane putting a bit more weight on him, like the words were already starting to allow tension to bleed out of his shoulders, and Ilya revels in the way he can make a physical difference in Shane's stress. Just by talking to him. Just by rubbing him.

There was still a longer conversation to be had, of course. Shane needed to talk to someone about this. Probably someone who was a lot more qualified than Ilya. His mind wasn't a safe space to process an assault like the one he had just gone through. His mind was barely a safe space to process anything these days. But for now, Ilya can offer him this. He wasn't going to force Shane to come to terms with everything right this second. For the time being, all Ilya needed to do was make him feel okay again. Give him the strength to tackle these topics at a later date, when he was better armed to take them on.

"You are just the sweetest thing, котенок," Ilya sighs at the heavenly creature leaning against him. "I have been missing my baby kitten so much. It is unbearable having to sleep without my fluffy boy."

Ilya feels Shane smile into his shoulder. He grazes his nails up and down Shane's back through the fabric of his shirt—Ilya's shirt that he had given Shane right off his back last night.

"Nothing at the house smells like you anymore," Shane murmurs poutily, and Ilya just *yearns* to be around him all the time, always.

"I will ship over a fresh box of my things every week if you wish, my sweet, little omega."

He means it jokingly, but Shane's whole body reacts, and Ilya raises his eyebrows in delighted interest.

"Would you like that, kitty? You are so comforted by your Alpha's scent."

And Shane rumbles against him, nuzzling into Ilya's neck with a big inhale.

Oh, *wow*. Shane really liked that. It hadn't been something on the original kink list Ilya had given him. He wasn't sure Alpha/omega roleplay *was* on most kink lists, but it definitely made sense based on what Shane was into. It wasn't too different from their dynamic already. Just another road to turn down. More to explore. Ilya was not complaining. He knew he still had so much more to discover with Shane, but luckily, they had the rest of their lives to do so.

"Sweet baby," Ilya coos. "Here, why don't I lie down and have you come curl up on my chest?" He suggests, carefully moving to adjust them into a more comfortable position. He presses himself back into the pillows and then pulls Shane into his side, pressing his little kitten's face back into his neck. "Mm. My scent is so calming to you, isn't it? I can practically feel your kitty brain melting when you are sniffing me. Do I smell that good?"

Shane whines and presses closer, pressing his paws against Ilya's chest, kneading them into his skin.

Ilya smiles at the new kitty behaviors he was unlocking. Shane was growing into the most beautiful, most well-behaved kitten in the entire world.

"I am so excited for you to see the things I have bought for your special kitten playroom, baby," Ilya hums, gliding a hand soothingly over his side.

He had so much that he wanted to tell Shane about, really. He wanted to tell Shane about his idea for a new club in Ottawa. He wanted to tell Shane about his team, how much they fucking *loved* him. He even wanted to tell Shane about his new best friend, Jackie Pike, and how he was starting to actually see a universe in which he was someone's Uncle Ilya. All of that would be too much for Shane's kitten brain, though, so Ilya sticks to cat-related topics for the time being.

It turned out that not being around Shane 24/7 left him with a lot of free time. He had hockey, yes, and now his new boys, but in the evenings, Ilya had taken on a new hobby. And that hobby was buying Shane toys. Not just toys, necessarily. But clothes, too. Skincare products. Fancy snacks for his special diet. Anything he could think of that his kitten might need, or even just want.

He took pleasure in the idea of taking care of Shane fully. Like he was Ilya's real cat. Cause cats didn't have money. They didn't buy things. They were merely spoiled by their owners. And Ilya wanted to spoil Shane rotten.

There were two sides to this kitten thing with Shane. There was taking care of him. The comfort. Offering emotional support. Keeping Shane happy. Ilya loved all that. But there was also another side that was much dirtier. The side that enjoyed seeing Shane all brainless and helpless in his lap. Licking and biting possessively. Shane rubbing his face all over Ilya's cock with the cutest pair of ears and the scratchiest little tongue. And, sometimes, Ilya thought that buying things for Shane almost fit more into that second category. The kind that made Ilya's pants start to get tighter around the crotch.

He hadn't given Shane his kink list yet, but his list had a lot more than just the three pages he started Shane off with, and Ilya had been going over it a lot recently. It was different, looking at kinks through the eyes of a committed relationship, now. Through the eyes of *his* committed relationship, specifically.

Because he hadn't done long-term arrangements before, there were some things that simply never really applied. Like Financial Domination, for example. It wasn't something he had ever been able to partake in before; it wasn't something he thought he'd be into—only now, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about it.

After paying for his and Shane's Ottawa house, Ilya felt unstoppable. There was something about being the provider. It was a role he'd been forced to play his whole life, but in kink, he could choose to provide on his own terms. And he could find powerful, powerful joy in it. Especially when it came to Shane, who gave him so, so much in return. So, yeah, maybe he wanted to buy Shane lots of things. For the time being, that came in the form of lots of online shopping. But eventually, Ilya wondered if Shane would let him pay for more things. In fact, Ilya wondered if Shane would let him pay for everything.

"Mm, I have bought you a scratching post. Since you are always scraping me up." Ilya takes one of Shane's paws into his hands in admiration, eyes flickering over his pretty kitty manicure. "And some little mice, baby. What do you think of that? I have a laser pointer that I think you will go crazy for," he tells him excitedly. "It could even be like your new kitten workout routine. Kittens get lots of exercise when they play, yes?"

He presses a kiss to Shane's fingers and then scratches lightly through his hair, watching in satisfaction when Shane's eyes slip shut at the thorough petting.

"I will have to get you some things for the Montreal house, too," Ilya realizes, a little thrill running through him at the thought of buying more stuff for Shane. "And I will figure out how to get my scent fresh for you, sweet котенок. I will send my clothes to you directly after I wear them. Maybe you can even make a cute little omega nest on the bed, hm? It will feel like your Alpha is right there with you."

Shane is hard against his thigh, and Ilya just smiles and holds him closer, petting over his hair, scratching at the ears that weren't physically present right now, but always existed, in Ilya's mind, at least.

Shane lets out a soft breath, like he's actually relaxed. Like Ilya has actually solved the unsolvable by getting Hollander's never-ending stream of consciousness to finally cease. So, he just keeps talking, keeps creating a new stream of consciousness for Shane to sink into. One that's full of lovely kitten things and all of the Shane-related thoughts that are constantly rattling around Ilya's head. Shane may not seem present, but Ilya was sure his highly trained cat ears were listening, so he keeps going until the stillness of Shane has started to send him into his own sort of trance. Until he's run out of words and all he can do is hold Shane as close to him as he possibly can.

Shane wasn't the only one who needed this. This uninterrupted quality time that fed a deep need within both of them. Not the same need, but rather, two equally important halves that, together, made up a much greater whole. They were a team. And a damn good one, at that.

But they weren't faring well apart. Shane certainly wasn't, and Ilya…well, sometimes Ilya's pain crept up on him. He could go from being out of his mind, insanely happy, to feeling, all at once, an all-consuming pit within him. A vortex that was sucking him in. It didn't happen often, but when it did, it could scare him with its intensity. Going from seeing Shane every day to suddenly not at all had been a harder drop than his system was prepared for. And even though he loved his new team, loved his new house, and his new city, he still recognized that a very prominent something was missing. If he thought long distance would be any easier because of his experience pining for ten fucking years, well, he was sorely mistaken.

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Shane has one more practice left this week, and it's optional, technically, but his Shane is a very dedicated Captain to a very evil team, so Ilya doesn't try to convince him to skip it. Part of him thinks it's a welcome distraction to what happened at the club, anyway. But still. Montreal is not feeling like the safest place for either of them right now, so after Shane wraps up with his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad team, Ilya catnaps him and whisks him off to Ottawa for a few days.

Ilya has a whole weekend of fun lined up for him, a way to get Shane's spirits up after his tumultuous experience at the club. He wants to introduce Shane to his team, for one. Ilya would be surprising them big time by having Shane show up at their emergency *mandatory* team dinner at his and Shane's Ottawa house. He wants to show Shane all of his new toys in the playroom, wants to show Shane all the new furniture, and maybe more than anything, he wants to have a much more serious conversation with Shane about his mental health and how Ilya was pretty sure his coping mechanisms were failing him.

At least in terms of this most recent thing at the club, Shane needed more help than Ilya could provide. He figured having the conversation in their new home—a space where Shane clearly felt comfortable and safe—would make for a much easier task of trying to ease him into it. He's a little scared of how that conversation might go, but it was past the point of Ilya's control at this point. They needed to talk about it. They needed to do something differently, or Shane would continue to suffer. And Ilya hated having to see him suffer. It was starting to make him suffer as well.

As they're setting up for dinner, an optimistic part of him is hoping that Shane spending some time around the Centaurs will somehow help clue him into the fact that his own team fucking sucks. He hasn't brought up the idea of Shane joining his team yet, of course. Ilya didn't think Shane would take too kindly to it. But if he could show him what a good team looked like, then maybe, just maybe, Shane would start to realize it himself.

"Are you sure this isn't weird?" Shane asks as he helps Ilya set up the large platters of food across their massive kitchen counter.

"Why would it be weird?" Ilya shrugs, rubbing his hands together while surveying the room. He had alcohol, too, of course, though he'd need to keep an eye on the rookies, since they had proven to be quite a couple of lightweights when Ilya took them out the other night.

"I dunno. Cause I'm not part of the team," Shane says, like it's obvious.

What Ilya doesn't tell Shane is that he actually *is* part of the team. Or will be, one day. Hopefully. Either way, he was certainly part of the heart of this team. Ilya's heart, at least. And Shane was a fucking hero to these guys, whether he realized it or not. Ilya was going to make sure Shane at least realized how fucking amazing he is, and how much every single person in the world seemed to think so. Shane didn't have to try so hard to be perfect. He didn't have to worry so much. He was already the person he struggled so hard to be. If he learned to relax, he would still be that person. Ilya was sure of it. He'd just be a more at peace version of that person. And Shane deserved that. He deserved to feel at peace.

"Shane, these guys were fucking begging to meet you. You should have heard how many questions they asked me at drinks the other night. I mean, it was practically a Shane Hollander Q&A," Ilya tells him seriously.

Shane flushes and makes the cutest little pinched-up face. "Really? I mean, like…why, though?"

Ilya levels him with a look that says *are you fucking nuts?* "Because you are the best player in the entire league, Hollander. They are obsessed with you. It is hilarious, actually. It is like a bunch of mini versions of me. Together, we are literally a Shane Hollander fan club."

"Shut up," Shane scoffs, like he thinks Ilya must be exaggerating. Whatever. Shane would see once the boys got there.

So, when the doorbell rings for the first time, Ilya jumps up excitedly. But not before stopping to give Shane a deep kiss, because he's well aware they have to play platonic tonight, and the thought of not touching his perfect kitten for a whole evening was fucking devastating.

The kiss, thankfully, makes it slightly less so. Especially when Shane looks at him all spit-slick and dazed. God, Ilya was going to ruin him later. He couldn't wait to spend an entire evening watching his boys obsess over Shane, watching Shane be forced to soak in his greatness. It was like Ilya's waking wet dream.

He's unsurprised when he opens the door to find Luca Haas looking wide-eyed and nervous. Ilya just smiles and opens the door wide. He really liked Luca so far. The fact that Luca was apparently a huge fan of him certainly didn't hurt either.

"Hey, Luca. Thanks for coming. Come on in," Ilya greets, gesturing for him to step inside.

"Of course," Luca nods and quickly steps inside. "I mean, you said it was mandatory, right? Not that I wouldn't have come if it wasn't," he rushes to add, and Ilya laughs.

"You are very funny with how nervous you get. It reminds me of someone else I know," Ilya tells him, clapping him on the back as he walks Luca further into the house. He can tell the exact moment Luca realizes who else is in the house with them by the way his entire body freezes up, almost to a degree where Ilya is concerned with whether he still has a pulse.

"I—" Luca stutters, his entire face painted in shock, like he can't actually believe who is standing in front of him.

“Hey,” Shane acknowledges him with a soft smile, and Ilya holds onto Luca tightly to ensure he doesn’t faint on the spot.

Luca swallows, his eyes darting between Ilya and Shane for a moment, almost as if he’s waiting for Ilya to say *just kidding* and admit that he’s pulled off one of the greatest pranks of all, somehow. That Shane Hollander was not actually standing in front of them. That Ilya was hazing the team as a sort of welcome joke.

But Shane is very much real. And he’s very much there. And Ilya is very, very ecstatic to be able to give them this. He was about to be the coolest fucking Captain of all time.

“You’re…you’re Shane Hollander,” Luca finally gets out, when Shane has failed to evaporate into thin air.

“I am,” Shane laughs, his gaze darting to Ilya, and there’s that spark in his eyes that Ilya has missed these past few days. The spark that only came from being the fucking best at hockey. And Shane *was*. “You must be Luca, right?”

Luca’s knees wobble, and Ilya immediately steadies him with a hand on his back. He did not need any injuries before the season had even started.

“You…you know my name?” Luca asks. He’s still so stunned. Still so starstruck, and Ilya is enjoying this so, so much already.

“Yeah,” Shane affirms kindly. “Ilya was telling me all about you. You’re the one who had his poster up on your wall, right?”

“I had two of you,” Luca blurts out before his cheeks burn a bright red.

Ilya and Shane both grin at each other, and yeah. This was going to be a great fucking night.

Most of the rest of the introductions go like that. The guys trickle in one by one and promptly lose it when they realize *The* Shane Hollander will be having dinner and drinks with them tonight. Ilya is just pleased to see many, many smiling faces filling his new house. Shane’s included.

“Best Captain of all time,” Bood practically tackles him in a hug, while Troy Barrett just stands in the entryway in amazement.

“Dude…” Troy’s jaw drops, and for a second, Ilya is sure he knows that look, but it’s gone almost as soon as it arrived.

Ilya’s attention is pulled back to the other side of the room, where Wyatt is getting a little too handsy with Shane, especially considering the week he’s had, so he promptly claps his hands to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, Centaurs. Pipe down and listen up. I know you are all very excited, but let me give my Captain speech first, and then you can eat and drink and harass Hollander to your hearts’ desire.”

Shane is watching him fondly, his arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the kitchen counter. Luca and Troy are on either side of him, still looking like they've just met God himself.

"Thank you all for coming this evening. I would like to welcome you to our very first team dinner. The first of many, I hope. All I ask is that you fuckers respect the house, please. She is brand new."

That earns a laugh from the group, but Ilya has trouble looking at anyone except Shane. Shane smiling in their home, Shane surrounded by a team who fucking loves him. It's how things should always be. Shane belonged here with him in Ottawa.

"I am sure you all have noticed we have a very special guest here with us tonight."

The entire group whoops loudly, and Ilya watches in mild annoyance as Wyatt gives Shane another shove. Shane doesn't seem to mind too terribly, though.

"Yes, yes, it is the one and only, legendary Shane Hollander."

And then, the guys honest-to-god break into a round of applause, causing Shane's freckled cheeks to blush like crazy. He gives a shy wave, and Ilya's heart hammers rapidly in his chest.

"I figured what better way to motivate you than to show you what true greatness looks like. That is a Four-time Stanley Cup winner right there. And he will likely win a 5th unless we can get our act together."

More laughter, even from Shane this time. Paired with a shake of his head, of course. Ilya just smirks in response.

"Anyway, be respectful, try not to crowd him too much. Absolutely no touching the Golden Boy!" He adds. The team must think he's joking because they're still grinning brightly, but Ilya is being completely serious about that last part. He'd certainly be hovering around to make sure no one got too close.

Shane seemed okay, for the most part. He'd warmed back up to Ilya touching him pretty quickly, and he didn't seem particularly out of sorts after hockey practice, but Ilya still worried. He wasn't sure what effects were lingering from the assault, wasn't sure which still had yet to surface.

"And last but not least, let's have a great night and an incredible season! Cheers!"

They all raise their glasses in a toast, while Shane raises his ginger ale. Ilya watches in amusement as all his boys go out of their way to clink cups with Shane, like they think some of his Stanley Cup-winning talent might potentially rub off on them by the simple touch of a glass. Like it will somehow grant them with good luck for the rest of the season.

Unfortunately, Ilya is still on Captain/hosting duty, so he can't get to Shane right away like he'd like to. Shane's got a fucking line of guys waiting to talk to him, anyway, so Ilya busies

himself by helping with the food. Passing out plates so the guys can help themselves to the build-your-own taco bowl station. Pointing people in the direction of the bathroom. He tries to start pushing everyone towards the dining room, with the hopes of catching some time alone with Shane in the kitchen, but the boys won't leave his side. Not just that, but they're offering to refill his ginger ale for him. Offering to grab him a plate. Standing at his side like they're ready to grant his every wish.

This was how the world should be. Shane should have a million little worshippers—who Ilya is in charge of, of course—and Ilya should get to witness him smiling and sated in their home every single day for the rest of forever.

After an hour or so, Shane actually does look like he's starting to get a little overwhelmed, so Ilya slyly slips into the space next to him, forcing a grumbling Troy out of the way with a small shove.

"Alright, boys. Give him some room," Ilya informs the crowd, who have gotten somewhat more rowdy as the alcohol continues to flow. "Golden Boy needs optimal breathing space."

"What are you doing in Ottawa, anyway?" Bood asks, once Ilya has sufficiently gotten everyone to back up a bit.

"My parents live here," Shane says without effort, and Ilya can tell he feels at ease around them. He's not putting too much thought behind his answers. He doesn't look worried that they'll accidentally get outed. He isn't even radiating any anxious waves right now. "Figured I was due for a visit. Plus, Ilya and I have some stuff to sort out with the charity still."

"I still can't believe you guys are like…friends," Troy says in amazement, and he hides behind his drink when Shane directs his attention to him.

"Yes. *Very good friends*," Ilya grins, wrapping an arm around Shane to pull him into his side.

Shane just rolls his eyes and shoves him off. "I don't know if friends is the word I would use."

He's playing up their rivalry as a defense, making sure the cover stays in place, but Ilya can see the double meaning behind the twinkle in his brown eyes. Fuck. Shane was so seductive sometimes without even trying. Ilya sips at his water to avoid doing something he'll regret. Well…*he* wouldn't regret it, per se, but Shane would probably get mad if Ilya jumped him in the middle of this team dinner, so he forces himself to stay put.

"The charity is cool, though," Luca offers sweetly. "My sister suffers from depression. She used to like…self-harm and stuff," he admits openly, and Ilya straightens up. "So, it's cool that you guys are supporting mental health issues. I never knew hockey players could like… speak up about stuff like that."

"I am sorry to hear about your sister," Ilya frowns.

"Oh, it's okay," Luca smiles. "She's doing a lot better now. She has a therapist and, like, medication and stuff. So, it's all under control."

“Wow. And she is totally better?” Ilya questions, thinking of Shane, who is standing next to him, listening along, his brain quiet for maybe the first time in days.

“I mean, not completely,” Luca admits lightly. “She still has her moments. But it’s a lot better than she used to be. Some days, she used to not even be able to get out of bed. Now, she’s pretty good most days. She’s definitely a lot happier. And she hasn’t self-harmed in years.”

“It is because of the therapy or the medication?” Ilya scratches at his chin in consideration.

“Both, I think,” he shrugs. “Or, it depends on the person, I guess. But, with her, at least.”

Ilya nods to himself, but before he can say anything else, Holmberg and one of the other rookies come stumbling into the living room with laughing tears streaming down their faces.

“Rozy, Rozy,” Holmberg calls out hysterically. “Why do you have a room with a fucking facial recognition lock on it? I thought you said you weren’t in the Russian mob, bro!”

“Oh my god, shut up,” LaPointe elbows him hard. “Don’t upset him, dude. Do you *want* the Russian mob coming after you? Because that happened to my cousin, okay? *Not* fun.”

Ilya just rolls his eyes. “Are you idiots snooping around my house?”

“Absolutely not!” Holmberg holds his hands up in defense. “We got lost on the way to the bathroom.”

“Why the fuck were you going to the bathroom together?” Dykstra snorts, which pulls a reaction from the rest of the group.

“Because, dude,” LaPointe throws his hands up in exasperation. “I’m scared to walk around this house alone. And, for good reason! Who knows what Roz is keeping in there?”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “You are so dramatic. Do not be ridiculous.”

“So, what’s it for, then?” Troy asks curiously, and Ilya internally curses him for it. He really didn’t feel like going into the details of his custom playroom with the team right now.

“It is just for my cat’s things,” he says nonchalantly, but he doesn’t miss the way Shane stiffens next to him.

“You have a cat?” Luca gasps, his eyes wide as he looks around the room, like the cat will suddenly come running in. “Where is it?”

Ilya’s lips twist upward. Little did they know the cat was already in the room with them. Ilya places his hand on the counter behind Shane, letting his fingers brush against the other’s arm as he does so, and a thrill runs through him when his kitten shivers in response.

“Mm, my kitty is very shy. She does not like to come out when I have company over.”

“So, what’s with the lock on the door?” Troy presses. Ilya really was going to kill him.

“It is to make sure the stupid rookies do not go messing around her stuff.”

“I’m not buying this for a second,” Bood laughs loudly. “It’s probably just where he and his girlfriend keep their sex toys or something.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows, but Shane turns to Bood in interest.

“His girlfriend?” Shane double-checks. *Uh oh.*

“Oh my god, yeah. I bet Hollander knows about Roz’s girlfriend!” Wyatt shouts his agreement.

“Yeah. Do you know her name, at least? This dude won’t tell us anything,” Bood scoffs, shaking his head. “He’s so secretive.”

“Well, he clearly told you something if he told you he had a girlfriend.” Shane crosses his arms over his chest, and Ilya quickly chimes in to address it.

“I did no such thing. It was Bood and Hazy who were harassing me about my necklace because apparently they are necklace experts who know everything about being long-distance —”

“No,” Dykstra snorts. “That was Barrett who accused you of going to have phone sex when you ran off after drinks.”

“Whatever. The point is, I never said anything about any girlfriend,” Ilya makes it very clear, eyes drifting over to Shane to find him already watching him back.

“So, what *is* her name?” Troy presses his eyebrows together.

“Barrett, I swear to god—” Ilya almost rips into him, but Shane cuts him off before he can.

“Jane,” he offers simply. “Her name is Jane.”

“Jane!” The guys holler excitedly, and Shane is just smiling, watching them. “Rozy, when do we get to meet her? The future Mrs. Rozanov!”

They’re laughing and joking like it’s the funniest thing in the world, but Ilya can’t look away from Shane. They were meeting the future Mr. Rozanov right now, actually. At their very first team dinner, cause Ilya couldn’t stop thinking about how perfect everything was when Shane was around.

“I just know this Jane is a freak,” Wyatt smirks, and Ilya frowns, furrowing his eyebrows.

“What the hell are you talking about, Hazy?”

“Oh, come *on*, Roz. You can’t expect to wear tank tops all the time and think we’re not going to notice the scratches all over you.”

Ilya looks down at his arms. It's nothing crazy, but there are marks on his shoulders. Down his arms. Probably on his back, too. His kitty could do quite a number on him with those claws.

"Don't be ridiculous. It is from my cat, I told you," Ilya rolls his eyes, but he shifts so his shoulder brushes against Shane's. He can practically feel the heat radiating off of his kitty's flushed skin.

"*Right*," Bood nods in a way that suggests he doesn't believe him at all.

Ilya tries to bite down on his smirk as he takes a sip of his drink, lightly knocking his hip into Shane's.

As the night starts to come to a close, the boys slowly say their goodbyes. Ilya checks to make sure they all have a ride home and don't intend on getting behind the wheel after drinking. He's in the process of ordering an Uber for Luca when he notices Troy hovering around Shane in the kitchen.

He's talking to him lowly, and Shane is laughing, leaning closer to hear him, like Troy is telling him some sort of insane secret. Ilya narrows his eyes and helps usher Luca out of the house and into the car before strolling over to them, clearing his throat loudly.

Troy steps back in surprise, like he hadn't expected anyone else to interrupt them. Like he assumed he and Shane were off in their own little world.

"I think it's time for you to get going, Barrett. Don't you?" Ilya raises an eyebrow and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Definitely," Troy agrees, turning back to Shane to offer him a warm smile. "Do you need a ride to your hotel or anything? I drove here, and I haven't had anything to drink for an hour or so…" He offers, and both of Ilya's eyebrows are raised high on his head this time. "It's really no trouble."

Shane just laughs and shakes his head. "I'm alright, but thank you, though. I still have to talk to Ilya about some stuff for the charity."

"If you're sure," Troy nods his agreement. "It, um…" he hesitates, eyes darting over to Ilya, who is still watching them like a hawk. "It was really nice to meet you. I hope, maybe, we'll be seeing you around?"

"Absolutely," Shane smiles in response, and then Troy pulls him into a fucking hug, which Shane happily accepts.

Ilya coughs roughly, causing Troy to immediately step back, his cheeks a little red.

"Thanks for coming, Barrett," Ilya says pointedly, and Troy nods, eyes dragging over Shane as he reluctantly reaches for his jacket.

"Course. Thanks for having us, Cap." Troy steps over, looking like he might try to hug Ilya next, but something about Ilya's stance must put him off, because he ends up giving him a

light punch on the shoulder instead. “Looking forward to the next one.”

Oh, I’m sure, Ilya thinks to himself, still glaring at him a little for the way he was all over Shane. When the door finally closes behind him, Ilya lets out a sigh of relief. He loved his team, but it was insane how much effort was required to not touch Shane all night. He felt like he was about to jump out of his skin. His eyes soften at the sight of Shane starting to clean up the leftover food and the mess in the kitchen.

Ilya strides forward to join him, stepping up with his arms wrapped around Shane’s waist as the other washes something in the sink.

“Thank you for letting me show you off,” Ilya presses into his skin, and Shane turns to meet him with a smile.

“The guys are really great,” he hums, and Ilya sighs contentedly, rubbing the scruff of his chin over Shane’s shoulder.

“They cannot get enough of you. They are just as obsessed with you as I am.”

Shane lets out a warm laugh. “Mm, I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t? Don’t think I didn’t notice Troy flirting up a storm with you.”

Shane just rolls his eyes. “He was not. He was just being nice.”

Ilya hums in response, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew the look of a man enamored by Shane’s beauty. He saw it in the mirror more often than not.

“Luca seems really sweet,” Shane comments, turning in Ilya’s grip to wrap his arms around his neck.

Ilya takes advantage of the new position and slides his hands possessively across Shane’s hips, ducking to be closer to him.

“He really idolizes you. It’s cute,” Shane teases, but all Ilya can think about is what Luca was saying about his sister.

“I, um,” Ilya starts nervously, slipping his fingers underneath Shane’s shirt to glide across the bare skin of his back. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Shane furrows his eyebrows slightly, his brown eyes narrowing a bit. “Okay. What is it?”

“I just,” Ilya sighs, and he hates the way Shane stiffens in his hold. “I’ve been thinking about everything recently. The thing that happened at the club, and…the charity, coming out to your family. It’s all a lot, you know?”

Shane frowns like he doesn’t understand where Ilya is going with this. “What do you mean?”

Ilya swallows and squeezes his hips a little more tightly. “I’m just worried about you. You’ve been having panic attacks more often, and with us being long-distance and all, I…want to

make sure you're okay. That you have a solid support system behind you. Especially since I can't always be there."

Shane's face softens a fraction. "Hey, I'm okay. I've got Rose, still. And Hayden. Ivan and Svetlana, too. Plus, you take good care of me," Shane says, like he's trying to reassure him.

"I know," Ilya relents. "And that's all great. I'm very happy you have people you can count on. Myself, included. I just wonder if, maybe, this…goes a little deeper than that," he phrases carefully, blue eyes searching brown.

"Deeper like how?" Shane voices in confusion.

Ilya licks over his lips in contemplation. "I know I am good at making you feel nice and fuzzy, but recently, you have been…freezing up, sometimes. Disappearing inside your head. I just worry that maybe I am…not the most qualified person to help with something like that. And I worry that something will happen, and I will not know what to do, and you will get hurt because of it. And that is the last thing I want, Shane. I care about you so, so much." Ilya rubs over his side soothingly.

Shane lets out a small huff, like he's growing impatient. "So, what are you trying to say, Ilya?"

"I am trying to *say*," Ilya attempts, leaning his forehead closer to Shane. "I am wondering if you would consider talking to someone. A professional. Someone who knows more about this type of thing than I do and may actually be able to help you."

Shane just blinks, his face pinching up slightly.

"I am not trying to hurt you by saying this," Ilya chimes in before Shane's head can twist his words. "I just want you to be as happy as possible, okay? And recently, you have seemed stressed. I know you are not in the best situation with your team. I know the charity has put a weird spotlight on us. And now, this thing at the club. It's a *lot*, Shane. You should not have to carry it all on your own."

Shane frowns and ducks his head a little, pulling Ilya closer by the back of his neck. "I'm alright, you know? I mean, I know I've been sort of…a lot lately."

"Hey, no," Ilya shakes his head, reaching to tip Shane's chin up slightly. "You are perfect. I am only saying this because you deserve to wake up every morning feeling light and stress-free. I only want the best for you. And with everything that happened with my mother, with all the research I've been doing for the charity—" Ilya pauses, brushing his thumb across Shane's chin. "I just worry, okay? I do not want anything bad to happen. I—I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

His lower lip wobbles, but Shane is pulling him into a hug before he can say anything else, so Ilya just clutches onto him tightly and sucks in a deep breath.

"I never want to scare you," Shane whispers into his neck. "I'm sorry for freaking you out."

“Don’t apologize,” Ilya shakes his head. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. I love you so much.”

“I know,” Shane agrees, rubbing a hand over his back. “I love you, too. I—” he starts jerkily. “I’ll talk to someone. If…if it’ll make you feel more at ease. I’ll see someone as soon as I get back to Montreal.”

Ilya chokes out a gasp and buries his face against Shane’s neck, squeezing him tightly. “Please,” he nods profusely, because he hadn’t realized how much it would loosen the knot in his stomach to hear Shane agree. “It would make me feel a lot better. Fuck.”

“Okay. Okay, I will,” Shane vows, and he must be able to tell how much Ilya needs this. Must be able to see how Ilya’s trauma with his mother is resurfacing, maybe even more than Ilya realized, himself. “You’re okay. I’m okay.”

Ilya takes a few greedy inhales of Shane’s scent and lets himself be held for a bit. It could be so exhausting, always having to account for every detail. He loved taking care of things for Shane—for everyone, really—but there was so much pressure to get it right. The last thing Ilya wanted was to contribute to another mistake. He had failed so many people in his life, but Shane was different; Ilya couldn’t mess up with him. He had survived losing his mother, losing his father and his brother in the same year, but Ilya would *never* survive if he lost Shane. He couldn’t fail him. But Shane was up against so much, and the more that he took on, the more Ilya worried he couldn’t help him, either. Not fully. Not the way somebody else might be able to.

Eventually, they’re able to migrate to the bathroom for a shower, and they take their time washing each other. Ilya presses kisses down Shane’s neck as he soaps up his body, while Shane scrubs shampoo into Ilya’s curls. It’s soft, and intimate, and it’s something Ilya hadn’t even realized he needed.

They haven’t been physical in a few days. Not past some light kitten play. Ilya was worried about diving into something so soon after the assault, but he could tell Shane was getting antsy. Especially by the way Shane is all over him when they start to towel off.

“Shane,” Ilya warns, and Shane just whines softly.

“Please,” he begs, using his best and most sweet kitten voice. Ilya closes his eyes at the way it immediately has an effect on him. “I need it. I need it so bad.”

Ilya lets his eyes snap back open and graze over Shane’s face in front of him. “What about it do you need?” He questions.

Shane’s face falters slightly in confusion. “Um. I need to…be…a little mindless right now.” And Ilya raises his eyebrows at the choice of words.

“A little mindless,” he repeats. “Like something that will make you relax and not have to do anything?”

Shane’s lips twist downward. “I was thinking…something a bit more sexual.”

Ilya presses his lips together. He was uncertain about crossing any sexual boundaries right now. In his mind, all he could think of was accidentally triggering Shane. Shane probably wouldn't even realize it was happening until it was too late, and he was too fragile right now. Ilya needed to know his limits for him.

"It doesn't have to be anything crazy," Shane adds lightly, like he can read Ilya's mind.

Ilya wracks his brain for anything he can think of that might give Shane what he wants without sending him into another panic attack or shutdown. The idea jolts through him like a lightning bolt, his eyes going a bit dark at the thought.

"What is it?" Shane presses against him eagerly because, apparently, Ilya is wearing his thoughts all over his face this evening.

Ilya just looks him over carefully. "I have a bit of work I need to do."

He watches the way Shane deflates almost instantly, and Ilya smiles, cupping his chin to redirect his gaze.

"I was thinking maybe…" he trails, watching as Shane's eyes dart to his lips. "We could go into my office, and you could warm my cock for a bit?" Ilya glides his thumb across Shane's lower lip, watching in fascination as Shane hiccups a gasp before nodding eagerly. His eyes are already half-lidded with the mention. "Yeah? You wanna be a good boy for me? Keep me nice and warm?"

"Fuck," Shane stutters a moan, falling a little further into Ilya's chest.

Ilya steadies him with a warm hand on his hip. Cockwarming would be a good way to quiet Shane's head while, simultaneously, giving him some control. Ilya would pet him, of course, make him feel nice and good, but it was mostly on Shane to sit quiet and pretty for him. It seemed like a good compromise to keep the assault far from his mind, especially because it wouldn't directly mimic anything that happened to him.

So, without the need for any clothes, they head into Ilya's newly furnished office. So far, he had only used it to buy stuff for Shane on the computer, but it had served its purpose. The playroom was well underway. Ilya had a whole supply of face masks for Shane in the cabinet. He was even in the process of trying to figure out which lacy undergarments Shane might look best in. *All of them*, his mind supplies.

Ilya grabs a cushion from the couch and plops it under his desk, carefully guiding Shane under it to rest on his knees. He sits down bare-assed into his office chair, reaching to press his thumb against Shane's mouth, and Shane happily sucks the digit between his lips with a moan, swirling his tongue around Ilya's finger.

"Your job is not to get me off," he reminds him, holding Shane's gaze. "You are just there to hold me in your mouth. I expect you to stay still and be quiet. I do not need distractions while I work."

Shane sucks harder at his thumb, so Ilya pulls his hand away and grips Shane's face between his wet fingers.

"What is your color, precious?"

"Green," Shane says dazedly.

"Your mouth is going to be busy, so I want you to squeeze my ankle if you need anything from me, okay? If you need to get my attention. If you need to color or use your safeword, of course, you are free to come off and do so," Ilya informs him, petting gently over Shane's cheek as he receives a nod in return. "Good boy. You may nuzzle into me a bit before you start, if you would like. I know how my kitten likes my scent."

Shane mewls softly, and Ilya can tell he's starting to go down, so he slips his fingers through Shane's hair and then scoots his chair up so he can get to work. He tries not to react when he feels Shane start to press against him, his soft cheek gliding across Ilya's soft cock. It will be hard soon, if the way Shane's nails are digging into his thighs is anything to go off of. Ilya exhales lightly.

He's still going through his kink list, so he pulls that up to see where he left off. He's on page eight out of eleven, but he's taking his time. He's trying to be diligent.

Chastity gear. A flicker of arousal rolls through him as Shane buries his nose against Ilya's balls, Shane's soft hair tickling across his shaft. Ilya scratches against his scalp.

The idea of Shane in a cock cage was unbelievably hot, but he wasn't certain whether Shane would take well to the physical sensation of being locked up. The rope had been a bit of a bust, due to Shane's skin sensitivities, and part of Ilya wondered if they'd run into the same issue here. Still, Ilya marks a big yes next to it and then browses a couple of sites to see what options exist. Of course, he would still need to see if Shane even had an interest in trying, but something told Ilya he would.

Ilya sighs as Shane starts to take him in his mouth, letting his eyes slip shut briefly while he focuses on the soothing sensation of Shane sinking down, down, down. Until Shane's nose is pressed neatly against his pubic hair. He comes up a half second later with a choke and a cough, and Ilya pulls him off by his hair to address him.

"Not all the way down, baby. You're going to hurt your jaw. Just as far as you can go while still being comfortable, okay? You're doing so well for me," Ilya tells him, rewarding him with an intentional pet. He smiles when Shane follows the instruction, sinking back down to a reasonable level, and Ilya just strokes his hair gently. "Good boy. Be a good kitten for me and stay just like that. That's my boy."

Shane moans softly in response, and Ilya can feel his hands starting to go lax against his thighs.

He turns his attention back to the list in front of him. He wouldn't expect Shane to wear the cage all the time, necessarily. Not if it was going to interfere with hockey, but Ilya liked the idea of being in control of his orgasms. Of Shane needing permission in order to come, even

if Ilya was far away. Ilya was his owner, after all. It was his job to decide certain things that his kitten just shouldn't have to worry about. Ilya wanted to take away his decisions, to take away the anxiety that went into making them.

Ilya bites his lip, feeling Shane's mouth start to water around him, drool dripping from his lips down to the rest of Ilya's cock where Shane couldn't comfortably reach. He was definitely hard now, but he makes no move to do anything about it, content to sit there and have his kitten serve him a while longer. He wonders if Shane's hard, too. He gives his hair a little scratch and smiles when Shane just suckles softly in return. He's present. Mindless, maybe, but in the good way.

Time passes by just like that. Ilya goes through the rest of his kink list with the due diligence of a small army, while Shane sits pretty and brainless at his feet. Ilya keeps rubbing him, keeps petting at him as Shane just hums and nuzzles against him. He's hard, but it's not sexual. It's more grounding than anything, having Shane as a comfortable weight against his lap. Having Shane show his love by servicing him.

"Feeling good, baby?" Ilya asks him after about twenty minutes have gone by. He doesn't get an answer right away, so he shifts his torso back a bit to peek at him from under the desk.

Shane's eyes are closed serenely, his cheek pressed against Ilya's thigh as Ilya's cock hangs loosely from his mouth. He's drooling a bit, his own cock half hard from where it's hanging between his legs.

Ilya smiles at the sight, but it was probably time to call it for the evening. Shane was drifting further, Ilya could tell, and he knew his jaw would ache tomorrow if they kept going for much longer.

"Shane, baby," Ilya coaxes him back to life with a gentle hand in his hair. He waits until Shane slowly blinks up at him in awareness, his gaze still hazy and far off. "Hi there, princess. You did such a good job keeping me warm while I finished my work. But I am all done now. It is time for us to get ready for bed."

Shane wiggles his tongue in loose cognizance, as if figuring out how to work his mouth again after a good amount of time spent in disuse.

Ilya cups Shane's chin in one hand and then carefully uses the other to pull his cock from Shane's lips, watching in fascination as Shane's messy tongue lolls after it. Ilya presses his thumb against that tongue, petting across it for a moment before smearing saliva across Shane's lips.

Shane is a messy little kitty right now. His lips are puffy and red, and Ilya revels in the knowledge of where they've been for the past half hour. If only his team could see Shane like this. Then, Troy Barrett would have *never* asked Shane if he needed a ride. Hazy wouldn't have felt comfortable putting a *hand* on him. Bood wouldn't feel the need to pry for details about Ilya's *precious* Jane. Instead, they would know that Ilya is the one who landed the legendary Shane Hollander. Shane may have four Stanley Cups, yes, but Ilya had *Shane*. So, who was the real winner?

Ilya helps Shane slowly rise to his feet and then pulls him in for a wet kiss, hugging him tightly around the waist as Shane collapses into him. He's only half aware, only half kissing back, but Ilya loves him *endlessly*. He needs Shane more than he needs the sun, more than he needs money, or even air to breathe. Ilya's love for him is so fucking powerful. It makes him feel invincible. It makes him feel like they can get through anything.

He has to remind himself, though, that his love for Shane isn't a catch-all. That, regardless of how good things are between them, Shane still needed help. Therapy. Possibly even medication. Ilya didn't know what that would look like for them, but he did know that he was in this 100%. Whatever Shane needed from him, Ilya would provide. He'd bend over backwards, twist himself into knots, drive himself insane if that's what it took. He wouldn't make the same mistakes with Shane as he had with the rest of his family; no, Ilya would leave Shane in better working condition than he found him. He would fix him up until every single day felt as good to Shane as winning a Stanley Cup.

He helps Shane to the bathroom with an arm around his waist to keep him supported. He was still a little wobbly from kneeling. So Ilya picks him up and places him to sit on the bathroom counter, reaching for a washcloth to start cleaning up the drool from Shane's face. When he's done, he opens the bathroom cabinet and selects one of the fancy new face masks he bought for Shane.

He unwraps the fuzzy cat ear headband he'd purchased and carefully slips it over Shane's head. Ilya pulls it up over his face until it's pushing his hair out of his eyes, the pink fuzzy ears settling cutely over his head.

Ilya smiles at the sight and then opens the sheet mask to gently press it against Shane's skin. The face mask has a cat face over it, too, and Ilya can't help but laugh at the full picture. Shane turns to look at himself in the mirror, his lips lifting slightly in appreciation once the realization hits him.

Ilya can't resist ducking forward to kiss his cheek, despite the way the serum from the mask sticks to his lips. He rubs his hands soothingly over Shane's thighs. "You're so beautiful, kitten. Such a good boy for me, little baby." Shane preens at the attention.

And then, Ilya watches in fascination as Shane reaches for a second sheet mask and carefully starts laying it over his face. Ilya can't tamp down on his smile the entire time, tipping his head back to give Shane full reign of his skin. When he looks in the mirror, he's delighted to see that his face mask is a puppy. A laugh tumbles out of him at the sight of them together, and then, before he can even process what he's doing, he reaches for his phone and snaps a picture. The first picture he's ever taken of him and Shane as boyfriends.

Shane just giggles when Ilya leans in to press their faces together, his arms coming to wrap around Ilya's neck, his legs around Ilya's waist from where he's perched on the counter, as Ilya takes more pictures. They're still naked. Ilya can see Shane's pretty back dimples in the mirror. His ass pressed against the counter. The beautiful arch of his spine.

Ilya puts the phone down in favor of nuzzling his curls against Shane's neck, reveling in the way Shane just pulls him closer. He's somehow come into possession of the best thing that

exists in this life. He doesn't know why he's been chosen to receive this gift, doesn't understand what he's done to deserve it, but it is not a responsibility that he takes lightly.

So, after fifteen more minutes pass, Ilya discards both of their face masks and then helps Shane with the rest of his skin care routine. He runs to the kitchen to get him some water, helps Shane into a pair of strongly-scented Ilya clothes, and then picks him up and carries him to bed.

Shane is a warm pile of kitten the entire time, nuzzling against him, purring whenever Ilya pets him just right, preening under all the attention. He's a spoiled kitty, but he wears it well.

"Thank you for always being so good for me, котенок," Ilya presses a kiss into his hair once they've settled.

Shane hums, grazing his nails down Ilya's bare torso. He's tired; Ilya knows that, but he also has so much he wants to say. It's not the right time to bother Shane's head, though. Especially not after Ilya has spent the last hour clearing it for him.

Sometimes, he wished he had someone he could talk to *about* Shane. Someone he could run ideas by, get their opinion—someone who had a deeper understanding of what Shane was going through and could offer advice so that Ilya knew he wasn't doing the wrong thing. So that he would never have to risk messing up with Shane.

He has a million thoughts running around his head right now, but the sleepy kitten in his arms is desperate for attention, so Ilya smiles and shoves them all aside in favor of pulling Shane close to his chest. He presses a round of kisses across his face, stopping when he gets to Shane's lips to kiss him properly, and somewhere in the midst of their makeout, they both fall asleep like that—their foreheads pressed together and their ankles linked, arms curled loosely around each other with an awareness that they might actually get to have this forever. It's all Ilya dreams about.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments! It is so interesting hearing your thoughts and which parts you connected to the most. I try to reply to them all as I have time, but please know I am absolutely reading each and every comment even if I have not replied yet. I really do appreciate you taking the time!

Would love to hear your thoughts, as always :) also interested to know what you think of Ilya's impending kink list!!

More to comeeee, thank you thank you for reading!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane can't explain how good it feels to wake up in Ilya's arms in their bed, in *their* house. The house already looked so different from the last time Shane had seen it. It looked more like them. He smiles when Ilya subconsciously tugs him closer, his breathing falling back into rhythm as Shane nuzzles into his chest.

His insides feel so warm and cozy. Ilya cared about him *so* much. Sometimes, Shane's thoughts got the better of him, and he couldn't see what was right in front of him, but other times, he understood perfectly. The way Ilya had spoken so highly of him to his team, like he was proudly showing Shane off. The way Ilya usually understood Shane's needs before Shane did himself. The way he would do absolutely anything for him.

Shane sighs happily and winds his legs further around one of Ilya's thighs, his paws clamped securely behind his neck. Shane rocks his hips forward intentionally, eyes falling shut at the feeling of his dry cock dragging over the material of his (Ilya's) sweatpants. The feeling is intense, though, causing Shane's eyebrows to press together in discomfort, so he carefully unwinds himself in order to strip out of them.

Once he's in nothing but Ilya's big Centaurs hoodie, he resumes his position, his mouth dropping open in a moan at the much better feeling of rubbing his bare cock against Ilya's bare thigh.

"Oh, fuck," Shane whispers, using his grip on Ilya's neck to help guide his rocking hips. It's a little painful without any lube to make the glide easier, but Shane likes how desperate it makes him feel. Especially when Ilya is still snoozing away.

Shane gasps at the idea of humping his leg to get off like a needy kitten and then just curling up next to him and falling right back to sleep. He moans a little louder as one of his hands falls to Ilya's pec. Shane grips onto him and squirms against him, his mouth formed around a continuous *ah*.

Oh, god. Ilya was so pretty. Ilya was so *nice* and…and dominant. He took care of Shane so well. Shane just wanted to sit underneath him and serve him. Give him everything. Dedicate his whole life to Ilya. His whole body.

Shane starts panting the way he does when he begins to go a little deeper into that headspace. He could feel himself slipping. He grips onto Ilya's waist and nuzzles desperately into his abdomen. Ilya needed to wake up to take care of him now. Shane was feeling like a needy, needy kitten.

"Моя любовь?" Ilya mutters sleepily, and Shane licks at his chest excitedly. He's rock fucking hard against Ilya's thigh, and he presses into him to show him. Shane watches as

Ilya's tired eyes slowly come to the realization, and then, settle into something else. A relaxing type of look that has Shane feeling hypnotized. "My dirty little kitten."

Shane whines and buries his pink, speckled cheeks in embarrassment. He was not dirty. He was a very clean, pristine type of kitten, in fact. Ilya always said so.

"You hide from me and do not even give me any good morning kitten licks? What did I do to deserve this kind of behavior?"

Shane rushes to lap at his skin, laving his tongue further up Ilya's chest and between his pecs before Ilya hauls him into a tongue-heavy kiss. Shane whines into his mouth, his hips stuttering forward once more. He gasps when Ilya squeezes his ass and pulls him closer.

"Oh." Shane tips his head forward to rub his nose all over Ilya's chest, sniffing every so often as his hips move in intentional ruts forward.

"That's right, baby. You wake up all horny and have to hump your owner like a desperate little pet, hm? Poor baby. You couldn't get any relief on your own, could you? You need me to do everything for you, sweet boy." His hand is in Shane's hair, tugging slightly to let Shane know he's in control.

Shane was well aware. In fact, he was so fuzzy in pursuit of his orgasm. Memories from last night are still fresh in his head. He'd felt like a mindless fucking mutt drooling all over Ilya's cock, his eyes closed, his brain *off*. He wanted Ilya to use him more. Use him in ways that were maybe almost…primal?

Shane's obsession with Ilya could make him think crazy, crazy thoughts. And do crazy, crazy things. Like humping on him first thing in the morning. Shane doesn't care, though, because it feels good. And he loves being a kitten sometimes. And Ilya seemed to love it, too.

He laps some more at Ilya's bare chest, gasping when he feels Ilya's fingers slip lower on his ass and glide over his hole.

"Oh, fuck," Shane whines loudly, his hips stuttering as he tries to decide whether he wants to rock his hips forward to feel Ilya's thick thigh against his stupid cock or if he wants to rock backward to get Ilya's fingers closer to his hole.

Ilya is just smirking at him like he's enjoying the show. He pets across Shane's hole whenever it brushes across the pads of his fingers, but other than that, he doesn't move. Shane is going to start crying with how desperate he is.

He *loves* crying when he's with Ilya. It's a release he never really let himself have until recently. Boys didn't cry. Especially not big, macho, Stanley-Cup-winning hockey players. But Shane felt so good when he cried. He felt even better after a cry, letting all of his emotions pour out of him, all of his stress. Until he was spent and left without any other thought in his mind. All cried out.

He also liked that Ilya didn't make a big deal of it. Ilya didn't fuss at him for crying, instead just usually smiled and wiped his tears with gentle fingers. Shane thinks Ilya secretly likes it

when he cries, too. Likes when Shane is vulnerable around him. Likes when he gets to see sides of Shane that no one else gets to see, and then gets to put him back together after.

"I wish everyone could see you like this," Ilya tells him longingly, petting at his hair. "You're so fucking beautiful with how desperate you get for me. I wish I could tell everyone about how good and pretty my kitten is. Wish I could walk you down the street for everyone to see. Have you hump my leg while we're waiting in the grocery line to check out. Have everyone comment about how adorable and silly you are."

Shane closes his eyes tightly and lets the tears flow. God, he wants that so badly, too. Wants to be a kitten, not just in the confines of his and Ilya's home, but everywhere. He wants to be the first Stanley Cup-winning kitten of all time. He wants to be the first hockey player to identify as a black and white cat. He wants Ilya to show him off, make him do tricks in front of the Centaurs, so Ilya can call him a very good boy, and the Centaurs would all cheer and agree. They'd pet Shane happily and praise him for being the best cat. Fuck. Shane could be the team cat. He could travel with them, move around the plane, and demand pets from everyone with some incessant head butts, all before finding his way back to Ilya and curling up in his lap again.

Shane comes with that thought on his mind, crying out as his hips stutter and he shoots off all over Ilya's thigh. Ilya's hand is in his hair, petting him soothingly, but Shane pretends it's not just him. He pretends it's Wyatt calling him a *good boy*. He pretends Troy is smiling down at him, talking to him with words Shane can't even understand because he's just a little kitty. He pretends Luca is watching him with wide eyes and flushed cheeks as Shane collapses onto Ilya's chest and starts licking him appreciatively all over.

He licks at Ilya's nipple, sucking intentionally before gliding his tongue across the hard lines of his abs. Ilya was in better shape recently, if that was even possible. He'd only had one hockey practice back, but already, he seemed stronger. More toned. Shane whines and rubs his wet, teary face all over Ilya's chest.

Ilya is just watching him with a stunned expression, like he doesn't know what to make of Shane attacking him so ceaselessly first thing in the morning, but Shane *needs* more attention. So, he does the one thing he can think of, and he meows loudly, several times in a row, in fact, until Ilya's eyes go wide.

"Oh, someone is being a very vocal kitty for me this morning. You need lots and lots of attention, don't you, sweet boy? My teary, messy boy. You are so fucking precious. Come here."

Shane practically dives headfirst into Ilya's arms, rubbing his head all over Ilya's neck and chin as he feels the other's hands comb over him. He's vaguely aware of Ilya's dick poking into him, and Shane lets himself cry a little more as he ruts down against it. His own cock is still recovering from his orgasm, but he wants to please Ilya so badly, so he places his paws on Ilya's chest as he humps against him.

"Fuck," Ilya mutters, cupping his chin to look into his hazy eyes. "You are so far gone right now, baby. You are okay, yes?"

Shane nods fervently and wraps his lips around Ilya's thumb, sucking the digit into his mouth. He's okay. He just *needs*. He needs everything Ilya is willing and able to provide. Shane circles his hips in order to pull another moan from him.

"I am going to need you to calm down for me, please. If you expect me to give you what you want," Ilya says seriously, and Shane just freezes in place, his face expectant as he watches him with a dazed expression. "You are making a mess, kitty. I just washed these sheets for you."

Shane sniffles and rubs his paw against one of his wet eyes.

"It's okay. You are not in trouble. I just need a moment to adjust to being awake, okay?" Ilya rubs his hands over Shane's thighs, attempting to get him to calm down. "You are so frantic for me. I do not want you to hurt yourself because you woke up with the zoomies."

Want curls in Shane's belly at the cat-language, and he can't help kneading his paws into Ilya's torso intentionally.

Ilya yawns and watches him fondly, but Shane is impatient. He wants to know what Ilya plans on giving him. He needs something to release his energy on. He needs to run around and scratch at something, or paw at a string, or chase a mouse around the floor. He needs so many things. So many things they've never done before. So many things he isn't sure if he'll get the chance to do.

Shane's tears are still flowing, so Ilya sits up and pulls him into a big hug, letting Shane press his wet kitten nose to the crook of his neck, which Shane appreciates. He's a fragile kitty, recently. The idea that Ilya thinks he needs therapy weighs heavy on him. Was Shane that fucked up? Did Ilya think that because he'd been wanting to be a kitty more and more lately? Shane doesn't know. All he knows is that Ilya cares about him so, so much. Ilya wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, if he didn't have a good reason for it.

Maybe it was like kitty training school. Obedience training since his kitten mind could be so bad sometimes. It could lead him to terrible, terrible places, like imagining his team finding out about this. Imagining the whole world seeing him do embarrassing, embarrassing things to Ilya. Seeing Ilya doing embarrassing things to him.

There was the good kind of embarrassing and the bad kind. In fact, the good kind wasn't even meant to be *embarrassing*; it was just something Shane desperately wanted. He desperately wanted to be Ilya's fucking kitten and have someone know about it. Someone who wasn't going to ridicule him, or try to take advantage of him, or try to ruin his life. Ruin his career.

"You are alright, baby. Take a deep breath for me," Ilya tells him, rubbing over his back, and Shane inhales deeply.

He tries to remain calm, but there's a nervous energy buzzing inside of him. Sometimes his stress manifested differently. Sometimes it made his brain run a million miles a minute, but other times he felt it as a deep dissatisfaction under his skin. Sometimes he needed to physically burn it off. And that came in the form of his training. His exercise. Controlling his diet, even, could sometimes give him the same relief.

But this comes with a need to be *seen* by someone. Cause Shane had figured out that was possible. He didn't have to tackle everything alone anymore. He had Ilya. He was a member of a club that consisted of other people who could relate to his urges, at least in some capacity. His coping mechanisms didn't have to be paired with intense bouts of isolation anymore. Now, he could release his energy on Ilya. He could do so by being the most playful and perfect kitty cat who was absolutely obsessed with their owner.

Shane licks over his neck happily, feeling warmth in the pit of his stomach. He's on a high. He's horny, and he loves their Ottawa house, and he loves Ilya's new team. He loves watching Ilya lead them. He loves how being in Ottawa makes him feel. It makes him want to stay forever, but for right now, he just wants to show his appreciation for his owner. He's so happy. He's so *good*.

"Oh, yes, you are being such a lovely, good boy for me today, aren't you? Alright, angel. Do you think you can hold still for me while I finger you open?"

Shane nearly jumps ten feet in the air at the revelation that he's going to get fingered. He starts panting heavily, squirming in Ilya's lap, rubbing his face and nose anywhere he can reach. He grinds his ass down against Ilya's hard cock, mouth dropping into an open-tongued gasp at the thought of that cock going in him soon. Well, Ilya didn't say anything about that, actually. Maybe Ilya just wanted to give Shane his tail. *Oh*, yes. Shane wants his tail and his ears badly. He wants to be a full-on cat today. *All* day.

"Calm, котенок," Ilya warns, pressing a firm hand against his back to get him to stay still. "You are very, very hyper right now. We are going to have to stop if you can't control yourself."

Shane whimpers in devastation, not understanding why he can't just *have* this. All the time. As much as he wants.

"I did not say we *are* stopping, I said we will have to if you cannot be calm. Okay? Try to relax yourself for me, please. Deep breaths."

Shane huffs and sucks in a big inhale, trying to slow his breathing at Ilya's request. His heart is beating fast. He's just an excited kitty. He pouts and presses his face back into Ilya's neck. Ilya isn't wearing cologne, but he still smells good. Shane thinks he naturally just smells good. He rubs his face against him slowly.

"Good, good boy," Ilya smiles, petting over him as Shane starts to calm down. "You are a very sweet boy for me, good. Doing exactly as I asked. Just sit quietly for a minute, and then I will get you ready."

Desire flickers in his belly. *Get him ready*, Shane thinks. Ready for what? He mewls softly, but he doesn't feel like using his words to ask. The surprise was so much more alluring, anyway.

Eventually, and much to Shane's dismay, Ilya starts maneuvering him off his lap so he can get the lube. Shane whimpers and cries pathetically for the entire time he's away, but he's

pleasantly surprised when Ilya comes back with a set of cat ears that he promptly clips into Shane's hair.

Shane yips happily and rolls around on the silk sheets, nuzzling his bare skin against it. He's still in Ilya's hoodie, feeling like a proper Centaur, and he fully intends to steal this for his nest he's going to make back in Montreal. He wonders if he can nick one of Ilya's jerseys, too. He'll have to get him to wear it first.

Ilya is just watching him fondly, but Shane remembers he's supposed to be calm if he wants Ilya to finger him, so he obediently gets on all fours and presses his hips high in the air, ducking to rub his cheek against the sheets.

"There's my good boy," Ilya coos, cupping Shane's ass in one hand.

Shane moans and starts panting again in anticipation. He keeps his eyes closed cause he wants to be surprised, and he gasps when he finally feels Ilya petting over his hole with one lubed up finger. Ilya holds him in place with one hand firmly wrapped around his hip as he slowly works him up to three fingers. Then four.

Shane feels like his brain is a giant puddle of mush. He doesn't know up from down. He's drooling onto the sheets; he can barely hold himself up anymore, relying only on Ilya's voice to keep him from dropping off into the deep end. He can't remember the last time Ilya let him go this deep. It's fucking godly. Shane prays that he lets him stay there a little longer.

Ilya is talking to him, but Shane doesn't wanna listen, instead focusing on the deep timbre of his voice and the way it glides up and down over the vibration of sound pouring out of him. Shane wants something in his mouth to suck on. He uses the closest thing he can find and wraps his lips around the fabric of the sheets.

"Shane, baby, listen to me. If you want the rest of your treat, I am going to need you to come up a little. I would like to carry you to the kitchen whenever you are ready to come back up."

Shane's ears twitch a little. The kitchen? What was in the kitchen for him? Ilya was going to carry him?

He carefully lets the sheets fall from his mouth and turns slightly over his shoulder to regard Ilya with a head tilt. And when Ilya carefully pulls his fingers out of Shane's hole, Shane whines distressingly at the cosmic, cosmic loss.

"There's my kitty. Now, would you like me to carry you, or would you like to walk on your own?"

Shane sits up abruptly at the risk of not being carried. He really liked when Ilya carried him. It made him feel so, so small. Like he was actually a tiny baby kitten, and Ilya was his big, strong human who was supposed to take care of him and keep him safe. Shane was just a little animal who didn't know any better, anyway. Ilya *always* knew what was best.

Shane weakly pushes himself into a sitting position, his knees a bit wobbly from how turned on he was. His cock is hard against his tummy. Shane uses the sweater paw of Ilya's

sweatshirt to rub at his drippy eyes.

“You are so handsome, baby. My gorgeous angel, oh my goodness. Look at you.”

Shane flushes at the praise and gets back on his hands and knees to crawl to the edge of the bed towards Ilya. He doesn’t stop until he crashes head-first into Ilya’s stomach, Ilya’s hand coming to settle in his hair, scratching behind his ears. Shane moans and rubs his face against him.

“You are so hot when you are like this, god. I am so lucky I get to take care of a gorgeous little kitty cat. Holy fuck,” Ilya mutters, shaking his head like he can’t believe it.

Shane loves him more than anything in the world.

Eventually, Ilya does pick him up to carry him to the kitchen, and Shane spends the entire ride over licking and nuzzling into his neck. He bites at Ilya’s ear until Ilya is snickering and trying to push him off, and even then, Shane just latches onto him even more, sucking marks into his jawline.

“Okay, needy kitty. Here, I am going to put you down for a second while I make us a quick breakfast.”

Shane whines as Ilya puts him down on the counter next to the sink. Ilya just gives him a little head rub and then starts on making them high-protein yogurt bowls. Shane growls once or twice when Ilya needs to move his leg out of the way to get into one of the drawers, but Ilya soothes him with a kiss to the nose every time, and Shane always gets so distracted that he forgets what he was even mad about in the first place.

After Ilya places their bowls over near the bar stools, he steps back over to Shane and starts stripping out of his boxer briefs. Shane watches him in hungry fascination, remembering how Ilya had still promised him something and had fingered him with four fingers in preparation for it. Shane gasps out a moan when Ilya holds his hand up to Shane’s mouth, and Shane instantly dives forward to lick over it wetly. Holy shit. Ilya was going to fuck him. Ilya was going to fuck him in the kitchen. On the counter, maybe. Shane wriggles excitedly.

Ilya smirks at him and pulls his hand back to start pumping his cock, while Shane just open-mouth heaves. He’s hypnotized, cat eyes zeroing in on Ilya’s big hand gliding over his big cock. The cock that he was going to shove inside Shane any second now. Shane needs it so bad. He whines desperately.

“You want this, baby?” Ilya asks him, his eyes going a little half-lidded as Shane mewls desperately. “Good boy, come here.”

When Ilya gets close enough, Shane instantly latches onto him, letting Ilya pick him up by the backs of his thighs as he wraps his arm around his neck. And then, Ilya walks them over to the barstools, sits down, and proceeds to start guiding Shane right on top of his cock.

Shane groans, letting his head drop to Ilya’s shoulder, his knees settling on the chair on either side of Ilya’s thighs while he sinks lower. Until he’s completely flush with Ilya’s lap, Ilya’s

big cock nestled inside of him. Shane moans and presses his tongue flat to Ilya's pulse, nipping slightly with his teeth.

"Good boy," Ilya says, and he sounds a little out of breath as well. "Stay just like that. In my lap. Like a good kitty."

Shane moans once more, circling his hips slowly.

"None of that," Ilya cuts him off with a sharp squeeze of his hips. "It is time for breakfast. You are going to keep me warm while we eat."

Shane whines, rubbing his nose over Ilya's neck to try and soothe himself. His cock is hard between him and Ilya. He leans forward to relieve a little tension, but Ilya pulls him back by the fabric of his sweatshirt. He pulls him back until Shane is forced to look into Ilya's sharp eyes, his own bleary and unfocused, still wet from crying earlier.

"You are with me, baby?" Ilya checks, looking him over carefully. Looking him over with *so much* care, in fact, that Shane gets butterflies in his stomach.

He leans forward to lick over Ilya's lips meaningfully, hoping the *I love you* comes across. He thinks it has when Ilya's eyes soften at the corners, and he pulls him to kiss him gently across his freckled cheeks.

Shane relaxes into his touch, sighing at the feeling of Ilya's hand rubbing over his back, sometimes all the way up to pushing his fingers through his hair. Ilya reaches for something behind them and then returns with a spoonful of yogurt, which he promptly presses to Shane's lips. Shane sniffs in interest and slurps the yogurt into his mouth, humming at the taste on his taste buds.

"Yummy, котенок?" Ilya checks, and Shane rubs his head against Ilya's face.

So, Ilya keeps feeding him, trading between offering Shane bites and eating some of his own. Sometimes, Shane will surprise him by leaning forward to steal the yogurt from his mouth, sucking on Ilya's tongue to chase the taste of it. Then, Ilya will moan and try to steal it back, and they'll kiss until they're breathless and giggling against each other.

Shane mewls and wiggles happily, content to sit with Ilya like this and feel so, *so* close to him.

"You are so silly, baby. My precious kitty," Ilya smiles at him fondly, rubbing behind Shane's ears and petting over his tummy.

Shane feels so warm, and doted on, and in love.

After they've eaten, Ilya carries him back to the bed with his dick still inside Shane and fucks him until he's a sobbing mess. Ilya combs over his hair with his hands, pressing kisses across Shane's teary eyelids, and over his cheeks, and all down his neck. He drives into Shane's prostate until Shane is in that melty place, where his brain is squishy like a toasted marshmallow and his thoughts are too trapped inside the stickiness of his head to access.

When he finally comes, he does so untouched, his dick shooting off pathetically onto his stomach. His second orgasm of the day. Ilya's first, and Shane moans weakly when he feels the other's hot come inside of him. And then Ilya is kissing over his chest, rubbing his muscles, petting Shane all over.

Shane paws at him as the sated mindlessness washes over him. All he knows is that Ilya feels so good against him, inside of him, right next to him. Ilya has the softest skin, the sweetest tasting lips. Shane wants to kiss him in front of everyone.

He gets his wish several hours later when they head over to his parents' house for dinner. After Ilya had bathed and dressed him like Shane was his own little doll, after spending the whole day looking after him and treating him so, so sweetly.

Shane is still a little quiet, still a little needy and affectionate, but he's feeling good. He feels safe around his parents, anyway, and Ilya had said they could leave whenever Shane wanted. If Shane was overwhelmed, all he had to do was press into his keychain, and Ilya would make up an excuse to get them out of there. But Shane just feels good. He's surrounded by his family, surrounded by his loved ones, and he's having a damn good day.

"Here, baby. Why don't you have a bit more meat? You need some extra protein after the day you've had." Ilya slides Shane's plate over to load some more chicken onto it. Shane doesn't miss when he adds a couple of extra green beans as well.

"What did you boys get up to today?" Yuna asks, taking a bite of her own food as she watches their interaction.

Ilya looks up, raising his eyebrows. "Oh, today? Not much, really. But, you know, we drove in yesterday, and we had a long night with the team dinner and all."

"Team dinner?" Yuna hums in interest. "Did Shane go to your team dinner?"

Shane smiles dazedly and nods, directing that smile to Ilya when he places Shane's plate in front of him.

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"Yes," Ilya agrees with a small smirk. "My team is *obsessed* with Shane. You should see the way they act around him. They are completely starstruck."

Yuna laughs and shares a warm look with David. "That's very sweet. I'm glad to hear everything's going well. Shane, how was your first practice back?" She asks, and Ilya can tell she's trying to be nonchalant.

Ilya slyly slides his hand across Shane's knee, giving him a soft squeeze there.

Shane stiffens slightly. He's still blinking slowly, moving slowly, choosing to be quiet more often than not, but he was definitely present. Definitely following along with the conversation.

"Fine, I guess," Shane mutters, shrugging.

Ilya does not miss the way Yuna shoots him a glance, like Shane must have told him more than that in the few days they've spent together, but Ilya had been so caught up in what happened at the club that he honestly hadn't asked Shane about his team yet.

"Just fine? They're not giving you any trouble, are they?" Yuna presses, and Ilya watches him carefully. Tries to look for the truth in the micro-expressions that flicker minutely across Shane's face. Tries to see if there's something hidden in the silence of what he's not saying.

Shane huffs, and Ilya can tell there's weight there, can see the way it fills his shoulders and his neck with tension. Ilya fights the urge to immediately take it away, to soothe it with his touch, well aware that they are amongst company right now.

"It's fine. I mean, Hayden said something that caused some problems, but I'm handling it."

Ilya straightens immediately, eyebrows drawn together in concern. "What do you mean? What did Hayden say?"

Shane's eyes pass over him slowly, and Ilya can tell it's taking a lot for him to converse right now, his brain still slow from earlier, but it was important to keep him here. It was important to keep him from wanting to go back down again as a way of escaping tough topics, like this one was shaping up to be.

"Nothing. He was just defending me in some stupid group chat they started. Which, like, I kind of told him off for *not* doing a few weeks ago," Shane relays lightly.

"And, why did this cause problems?" Ilya follows the thread.

"Because," Shane sighs heavily, like it's becoming a hardship to have to keep explaining this. "I guess Coach sent out an email around the same time about, like, the talk in the locker rooms, and like, yeah. I don't know. They all know I'm gay now, I guess."

"*What*?" Ilya asks incredulously, his heart beating loud against his chest. Shane had been outed to his team? And, he hadn't said anything? Okay, now Ilya was really fucking worried.

"It's not a big deal," Shane mutters, but that's a lie. It *is* a big deal. Especially to Shane.

"Babe, why didn't you say anything to me earlier?" Ilya turns to slide his hand across Shane's back this time, taking comfort in the way some of Shane's tension seems to bleed right out of him.

"Because it's not a big deal," he repeats, almost like he's trying to convince himself.

Ilya swallows, but he knows Shane isn't going to want to get into this in front of his parents. Meanwhile, David and Yuna are just watching them carefully, like Ilya is clearly better suited to steer this conversation where it needs to go; admittedly, he agrees.

"You will tell me if something happens, yes?" Ilya leans closer to him, squeezing his shoulder to direct his attention.

He catalogues him as Shane tugs his gaze up, brown eyes meeting blue with an intensity that makes Ilya's chest ache. He smiles when Shane reaches over to link his fingers with Ilya's free hand, and Ilya doesn't hesitate before pressing a kiss to the back of his knuckles.

"I am going to take that to mean yes," Ilya shares quietly, grateful when he gets a nod in confirmation from Shane. He shoots a look over to Yuna that says, *I've got this*, and he's pleased when her face softens into something much more relaxed. They were on the same page. Shane needed to be looked after extra well right now, and as usual, Ilya was very much up to the job.

After dinner, they wind up in the living room while the Hollanders look for something to watch on TV. Ilya's never spent time around the Hollanders doing anything other than eating dinner, so he isn't really sure of the protocol involved with watching a movie, but he's content to follow Shane's lead on this one.

Luckily, there are two couches, and Yuna and David claim the one that's slightly closer to the television. Ilya just sits next to Shane and keeps his hands politely in his lap, but it's only about five minutes into the movie that Shane starts to force his way into Ilya's arms, leaving Ilya no choice but to comply. He was absolutely no match for a sleepy kitty. He risks a glance over at Yuna and David, blue eyes darting to them, but they seem too preoccupied by the movie to notice, so he allows himself to relax and lie back fully against the couch. Shane sighs in appreciation and curls up next to him until he's pressed right against Ilya's chest, Ilya's arm coming to hold him close by the waist.

Shane was needy after their scene from earlier, but the truth was, Ilya really needed this, too. He presses his lips to Shane's forehead and then sinks his fingers through his hair, giving him an appreciative scratch. His lips curl when Shane practically rumbles against him, pressing his nose right to the edge of Ilya's jawline. It instantly helps to soothe Ilya's nerves about Shane's team.

They spend most of the movie like that, although Ilya is pretty sure Shane is asleep against his chest, and Ilya isn't absorbing any of what they're watching; in fact, he's mostly been watching Shane. He glances over to find Yuna watching them at one point, a soft smile on her face that Ilya returns. He pulls Shane even closer to himself. She was trusting Ilya to keep him safe, and Ilya was doing so with all his might.

Eventually, when the movie must be almost done, something black and white catches Ilya's attention from the corner of his eye, and his breathing goes still. It's the Hollanders' new kitten, only it's huge, long arms and legs leading down to massive paws. It's watching Ilya curiously, its head tipped in confusion, like it doesn't understand how two new humans have suddenly appeared in its space. Ilya's heart hammers against his chest as the lanky creature stalks over and then jumps, until it's standing right on Ilya's lap, looking between him and a very sleepy Shane.

Ilya coos softly, can't help himself, and he reaches out to let the kitten sniff his fingers. He's pretty sure he's going to die from cuteness when the cat steps even closer to rub its head against Ilya's hand. And then, when Ilya is sure it can't get any better, the kitten just walks over and plops onto his chest, curling up right next to Shane. Oh my god. Ilya feels like he's going to scream. His heart is going to explode.

He reaches for his phone—which is sitting next to him on the couch—and quickly snaps a few pictures of the sleeping kitties on his chest, trying not to jostle either of the two as he does so. He can't resist holding his phone out even further to ensure he gets one with him smiling in the shot, holding up a peace sign to the camera. When he goes to look at the pictures, he's grinning brightly, and in just two days, the Shane collection in his camera roll is shaping up quite nicely. He vows to take a hundred more pictures before Shane leaves to go back to Montreal tomorrow.

"Oh, I see you've met Moose," Yuna chimes in, noticing the large kitten that has nuzzled its way into Ilya's space.

"*Moose*," Ilya repeats with all the fondness in the world. "Moose is so *big*."

"Yes, we couldn't believe he was a kitten," David laughs, and Ilya's heart soars when Shane nuzzles closer to him.

Moose was a lot like *his* kitten, in fact. Unaware of his own size, limbs clumsily falling off of Ilya's chest as the not-so-tiny creature tries to curl against him further. And as the movie comes to an end, Ilya watches in fascination as Shane starts to rise from his slumber, his sleepy brown eyes blinking open until they settle on the large feline staring back at him.

Moose is blinking back at Shane like he doesn't know what to make of him, and then, slowly but surely, Moose ducks forward to rub his head against Shane's, and Shane automatically nuzzles back, just like a true kitty cat.

Moose is purring loudly as he shuffles closer to Shane, and Shane is only half aware of what's going on, but Ilya can see his kitten instincts kicking in. Moose can sense it, too, if the way he's reacting to Shane is anything to go off of, his big, green eyes going comfortably half-lidded. Ilya fights the urge to squeeze them both close to his chest and attack them with kisses. Instead, he just watches the interaction while trying to fight off the most insistent cuteness aggression demons he's ever had to face in his life.

"Aw, he likes you, Shane. I knew you two would get along," Yuna calls out from across the room.

Shane wrinkles his nose cutely as Moose ducks forward to sniff his face before licking across his cheek. Ilya could just die happy right now. In fact, if he didn't think it would make Shane the most jealous kitty in the entire world, he'd drive to an adoption center on their way back home and adopt the most beautiful, fluffy kitten with the saddest eyes in an instant. Lucky for him, he's already in possession of one.

He and Shane slowly say their goodbyes as Ilya helps Shane to reorient himself back to the land of the living. Yuna and David take turns hugging him, and Ilya is surprised when they each pull him into a hug as well, inviting him back to dinner next week if he has the time. Shane will be back in Montreal by then, but it's clear the invite is meant for him. He has family in Ottawa now, it seems. He tries not to feel too giddy at the thought. And then, just because he can, he kisses Shane right in front of them. Right on the lips. Because it feels good to have someone know. It feels good to kiss Shane openly, in front of someone else, and

not feel like he has to hide it or be ashamed or worry about the consequences. It's a memory that sticks with him for weeks to come.

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Ilya doesn't get the chance to show Shane the new playroom before he leaves. It's only a little heartbreaking, but it does give Ilya more time to make things even better for him ahead of the big reveal. There was still a lot of work to be done, anyway, and Ilya is in over his head trying to get ready for training camp/pre-season.

It's why it makes sense that he's only a little bit losing his mind from not having seen Shane in two whole weeks. They still talk every day, of course. Still communicate on the phone, or through very frequent texts, or lighting up each other's necklace/key chain like crazy. Ilya is pretty keyed up from the lack of physical touch, though, and he quickly realizes why he couldn't go long between casual partners before he locked down Shane. It feels like there's something simmering under his skin, something that he hasn't been able to release since their last scene.

And their last scene is still plaguing his head like crazy. Because of the lack of conversation, the lack of planning, the way Shane had woken up feeling revved and ready to go, and Ilya had just taken control without thought. Had barely checked in on whether Shane wanted something, because it was so obviously clear that he did. But that was a red flag. They hadn't talked about anything like that before. About Ilya just…taking from him. About Shane giving consent ahead of time, because sometimes, he was already too far in to make that conscious choice.

Shane had wanted it. Ilya knows that. Knows it the way he can read Shane's mind like the back of his own hand, but the point is their boundaries were starting to blur, and that…that was going to require a further conversation. It scared Ilya how natural it was for him to make choices on behalf of Shane. Some part of him must recognize that it's necessary, that Shane simply isn't mentally well enough to make his own decisions sometimes—at least in terms of his boundaries when it comes to kink—but it did mean they were going to have to re-think the set-up of their dynamic.

Ilya thinks back to his kink list that is still sitting cowardly on his computer. Truthfully, he was nervous to show his cards to Shane. Shane's list of maybes proved that he was probably willing to try almost anything, especially if Ilya expressed an interest in being into it, and that was great. But it also made Ilya worry that Shane would push himself just for his benefit, that he would rely too heavily on Ilya making decisions for him and agree to something that maybe he, deep down, knew wasn't what he wanted.

On the complete other end, Ilya is also scared that Shane will outright reject him or think differently of him for suggesting something. The one he's most scared of sharing is the one that he wants to explore the most; it's also the thing he thinks Shane will give the most push-back on. So, yeah. He hasn't brought it up. He tells himself he's just waiting for them to see each other in person again, despite not knowing when exactly that will be yet.

He's tense when he gets back to the locker room after a grueling practice. They only had a few more days until training camp started, and Ilya was definitely feeling the pressure. It

must be why he has absolutely no patience when he finds Troy waiting up for him after his shower. The rest of the team has already dispersed.

“Barrett,” Ilya says with little excitement. He was hoping to get out of here and make himself look nice before his and Shane’s FaceTime dinner date later. Ilya was going to surprise him by ordering them each food from a nice restaurant, so it felt like they were almost eating together.

“Hey, Rozy,” Troy greets. Jittery. Nervous. Like he’s about to ask Ilya for a big favor.

Ilya pauses at his locker, looking at Troy unimpressed. He was not in the mood to be asked for favors right now. Especially not from Troy, who already wasn’t his preferred player even on a good day. “Yes, how can I help you?”

“Um, sorry, I just—”

Starting with an apology was not a good sign. Ilya adjusts his towel over his hips and arches an eyebrow when Troy’s eyes dip, tracking the movement. Interesting.

“I had a question to ask you.”

“Sometime today might be nice,” Ilya rumbles in response. He really did not have the patience for this right now. He turns to his locker to start reaching for his change of clothes.

“I know this is probably weird, but I was wondering if I could…” Troy trails, and Ilya shoots him a glare, *begging* him to get on with it. “Possibly get Shane’s number?” He says all at once, and Ilya turns to him sharply, eyes narrowed.

“What could you possibly want with Hollander’s number?” Ilya asks incredulously, like the mere request was inarguably offensive.

“Nothing, nothing! I mean, I just wanted to ask him something…”

But Troy’s eyes are darting around nervously like there’s something he isn’t saying. Something important. And Ilya gets a bad feeling in the center of his gut.

Ilya presses his eyebrows together, leaning a little further into his space. “Ask him what?”

Troy swallows and takes a small step back, scratching at the back of his neck. “It’s sort of… private.”

“Anything you can say to Hollander, you can say to me. Seeing as I am your Captain, no? Unless you are planning to go to Hollander to gossip behind my back—”

“Jesus, *no*,” Troy immediately shuts down, and then he closes his eyes tightly, as if he’s bracing himself for the inevitable. “It’s just…a rumor I heard.”

Ilya feels himself tense all over. “*What* rumor?” He says urgently.

Troy sighs and shakes his head. “Never mind. I don’t want to—”

“Barrett,” Ilya fumes, leaving no room for dispute in his tone. “If there is a rumor going around about Hollander, you better tell me right fucking now.”

“Okay, Jesus.” Troy holds his hands up in defense, blue eyes wide. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard it already. Or…maybe you already know?”

“Spit it the fuck out.”

“That Hollander’s gay,” Troy blurts, his expression panicked like he thinks Ilya is actually going to hit him.

Ilya just feels the air around him go cold. Stiff. Frozen. “Where did you hear that?” He says calmly, trying not to let on that he feels any type of way about it.

“I don’t know,” Troy shakes his head. “A buddy from my old team. He heard it from someone else. Apparently, it’s, um…pretty widespread.”

Fuck. Ilya wondered if Shane knew, if he’s been keeping it to himself, bottling it all inside, or if maybe he was somehow blissfully unaware. The stupid fucking Montreal Voyageurs. Ilya was going to murder each and every one of them, starting with that fucker Hayden Pike. It was Hayden’s fault that the Voyageurs had clued into Shane being gay in the first place. If they were going around spreading that rumor, well, then that was Hayden’s fault, too, in Ilya’s mind.

“You and your homophobic buddies are going around spreading rumors about Hollander, now? Is that what you get up to in your spare time, Barrett?” Ilya seethes. “I thought I warned you this behavior is *not* going to fly on this team. Training camp is right around the corner. Do you really want to risk getting traded this close to the start of the season?”

“*What?* No,” Troy shakes his head, and to his part, he looks horrified by the accusation. “It’s…it’s not, like, a homophobic thing, I swear.”

“Then, what is it like?” Ilya demands to know, crossing his arms over his bare chest. “What could you possibly need Hollander’s number for? Especially if you are going to approach him with some bullshit like this.”

“Fuck, Rozanov. That is *not* what I’m saying at all.”

Ilya watches as Troy scrubs a nervous hand through his damp hair. His eyes are wide, a little scared, like he’s about to tell Ilya something he’s never told anyone before.

“Look, I—” he pauses, hesitates, before apparently deciding to go against his better judgement and power through. “I was only asking because *I’m* gay,” Troy finally gets out, and Ilya was really not anticipating for this conversation to take such a sharp and sudden turn.

“You…what?” Ilya gets out because he’s only slightly taken aback.

“I’m gay,” Troy says again, his eyes dropping to the ground like he’s a disappointment. “That’s the only reason I was asking, okay? I just…thought it might be nice to have someone

to talk to. Someone else in the League. If…if he is, I mean," he rushes to clarify, and then a question overtakes his features once more. "Is he?"

Ilya presses his lips into a thin line. "It is not my business to disclose other players' sexualities, Barrett." He watches as Troy's shoulders fall slightly in disappointment. "But, if you are looking for someone to talk to, you do not have to look far."

Ilya waits for those words to settle into him, observes quietly as Troy slowly starts to process what he's just said, his eyebrows pressed together like maybe he's somehow heard him wrong.

"I—" Troy stutters in disbelief. "Are you saying that…that you're…"

Ilya just licks over his lips. "I am bisexual. If that's what you are asking."

He receives massively wide eyes in return. "What? Holy shit. I mean, really?"

Ilya rolls his eyes and turns to his locker to start putting his clothes back on. They did not need to have this conversation with him being half-naked, even if he understood now that Troy might be appreciating the view. "And, either way, you are wasting your time with Hollander. I have it on good authority that he is a taken man."

"What? No," Troy replies carefully. "I mean, I wasn't—" he laughs awkwardly, until Ilya levels him with a look that says, *you are not subtle in the slightest*. Troy just swallows his words like he's been caught.

"You have people on this team you can count on, alright? You have me, for one. And Harris, our social media manager, is also gay. I'm pretty sure Bood has a sister who is married to a woman," Ilya lists off. "My point is, there are plenty of allies on this team. If you need someone to talk to, there are people all around."

"You're not going to, um, tell anyone, right?" Troy lets spill out of him, and Ilya huffs a laugh in response. "I mean, it's cool. About Harris and everything. And Bood, or whatever. But, um. I'm still not like…ready. To come out or anything."

"Barrett, relax," Ilya tells him seriously. "I am not going to out you to the team, just as I am assuming you're not going to out me."

"No, I would never—" Troy rushes to dispute, but Ilya just deadpans him into silence again.

"Just don't go around telling anyone else what you heard about Hollander, okay? Is not nice to spread rumors. Especially when it is about a huge hockey star," Ilya tells him, his blue eyes assessing the other's intensely.

"So, um." Troy shuffles nervously. "He's taken…then?"

Ilya fights the urge to strangle him once more. Yes, it was nice to know that Barrett was gay, that there was another homo on the team that Ilya could trust, especially if Shane was traded; he just wasn't particularly expecting for said homo to immediately try and make a move on his man two seconds after coming out.

Something must cross Troy's mind all of a sudden, though, because he pinches his eyebrows together once again. "And you, um…you're with someone called Jane?" He asks unsurely.

"Alright, that is enough sharing for today," Ilya says dismissively as he pulls his shirt over his head. He's glad when Troy's shoulders just drop in acceptance, like he's done with the twenty questions, for today at least, and Ilya is thankful.

It's a positive development, for the most part—Troy being gay, that is. What was not a positive development, however, was the fact that Shane's team apparently couldn't keep their big fat fucking mouths shut about their star fucking Captain. Ilya was definitely going to be sharing some choice words with Hayden about that. He would even sic Jackie on him if he needed to.

As soon as Ilya gets home, he goes to the bathroom to do his skin care, because he's taken a page out of Shane's book recently. He wants to look good for his date night. He's not really looking forward to having to bring up this thing with Shane's team, but things have been a little too quiet lately. He should have known something was brewing in the background after nearly two weeks of no drama.

He orders their food and then sends Shane a text to make sure he'll be home in time for the delivery person, all while trying not to let anything on; it was supposed to be a surprise, after all. And then, he does something he really doesn't want to spend his free time doing…and he calls Hayden fucking Pike.

It rings six times before he answers. Six fucking rings, in which Ilya grows more and more angry with each passing one. When he finally does pick up, it's with so much attitude that Ilya wishes teleportation existed so he could punch him right in the face. And see Shane, of course. Priorities.

"What the fuck do you want, Rozanov?"

Ilya scoffs. "I want to know why one of my players just came up to me and asked if Shane is gay," he says, straight to the point and without hesitation.

"Probably because he saw Shane parading around in your stupid fucking necklace. Not really sure why you're asking me."

"Necklace has barely been mentioned in the press. Once they found out it did not involve Rose Landry, no one cared. I am more talking about your Voyageurs who know Shane is gay and don't respect their Captain. I also know at least half of that statement is because of *you*."

"Look, I was just sticking up for him," Hayden argues back, but Ilya is not interested in all this back and forth.

"I do not care. You need to tell your boys to keep their fucking mouths shut. I should not be hearing this in my locker room, especially not when it came from someone from Toronto. You had better hope this rumor is only spreading across Canadian teams, because I swear to god I'll—"

“You’ll what?” Hayden laughs. “Are you serious right now? This entire fucking thing is your fault. If anyone’s the reason Shane is getting outed, it’s you. Forcing him to go along with this stupid charity idea just so you can keep making him parade around in your necklace.”

Ilya chuckles in response. “Wow. You really know nothing.”

Hayden bristles through the phone.

“You think I want him wearing my necklace in public right now? You think I don’t know how terrible this idea was from the very start?” Ilya questions.

“All I *know* is that you’ve clearly got him under some freaky sex spell, okay? I know all about your weird club,” Hayden hisses. “And I know that Shane wearing your necklace is some kinky claim you think you have on him or something. I also know he’s only doing this to keep your attention, and for whatever reason, that’s really important to him. But, if you really cared about him, you’d call off this whole fucking thing before he actually gets hurt.”

Ilya blinks several times and even pulls the phone back from his ear to look at it in disbelief, because Hayden was so off base it wasn’t even funny. “You try telling your friend to take that necklace off. See how it goes over for you. I have told him countless times I did not think it was a good idea, but he doesn’t care. The only reason this charity even *exists* is because Shane concocted an entire foundation in one night as an excuse to keep wearing it.”

“You honestly expect me to believe that Shane came up with the idea for this charity in honor of *your mother* just so he could wear some stupid sex necklace and risk outing himself to the entire world in the process?”

Ilya shakes his head. “Frankly, Pike, I do not care what you choose to believe. I am mostly just upset that someone as wonderful as Jackie is stuck with someone who is so close-minded and vanilla.”

“Are you fucking—” Hayden cuts himself off. “Do not talk about my fucking wife right now. And just because we’re not into whatever *vile* shit you’re into does not mean we’re *vanilla*. Or close-minded,” he adds.

Ilya’s jaw clenches tightly. “Have you said these things to your best friend? Because he is struggling enough as is. He does not need judgment on his lifestyle coming from you, of all people.”

“I’m not judging his *lifestyle*—”

“No, you are actually,” Ilya cuts in. “That is what you do not seem to understand about Shane’s collar and the fact that he is choosing to wear it all the time. It is not because of *sex*,” Ilya mocks. “And it is certainly not something I am forcing him to do. He does it because it is a constant reminder to him that I am his and he is mine. When you insult it, you are not just insulting a piece of him; you are insulting all of him. It is the only way Shane can openly wear his identity, and recently, that is *everything* to him. And I do not blame him after how long he has spent suffering with this secret. Now, that is something that you will *never*

understand. You are lucky, Pike. You have never had to hide parts of yourself the way he has. You have never had to suffer in silence while you cannot openly have the one you love."

Hayden is silent for a few moments on the other end of the line, and Ilya really needs to get going soon, otherwise Shane will be eating a cold dinner by the time Ilya finally calls him. But they've gone on a long tangent now that has deviated so far from Ilya's original point, and he still needs to get that across.

"You are going to have to get used to me, Pike," Ilya exhales heavily. "I am in love with Shane, and he is in love with me. We are living together as much as we can, and one day, I will ask him to marry me, and we will make lots of baby friends for all your little Pikes." Ilya pauses and lets that sink in. "I am coming to you because I *care* about him. *A lot*. He is going through so much that he is not telling you. All I am asking for is a little help making sure he is *okay*. There is only so much I can do from Ottawa, and half of the problem stems from that fucking team."

Hayden huffs imperceptibly from the other end of the phone, and for a second, Ilya considers hanging up. But then, "Alright, fine. I admit that the locker room has gotten…a *bit* out of control recently."

Ilya stiffens. "A bit out of control, how?"

"God," Hayden groans, like he'd rather be doing anything than having this conversation right now. "I don't know. The guys are being weird about changing around him. Whispering to each other when they think he can't hear them. Deliberately not listening to him sometimes. Not passing to him."

"Are you fucking serious?" Ilya's eyebrows press together incredulously. "Don't they know they are only going to screw up their own chances this year?"

"I don't know if they really care," Hayden admits. "This whole thing with you and Shane…it feels like a betrayal to them. They're pissed, dude. Like, if anything, they think Shane's trying to blow the season for them."

Jesus fucking Christ with these Voyageurs. They didn't even know he and Shane were *dating*, and yet, they were so put off by the thought of him. Meanwhile, Ilya hadn't heard a word from his Boston team; nothing except for Marlow, who had immediately texted to congratulate him about the charity. Were the Voyageurs really so fucking awful that they couldn't respect their long-time Captain's involvement with a rival player? A Captain who had led them all to four fucking Stanley Cups? Ilya feels a rage inside of him like no other.

"They will blow the season for themselves once they bully Shane off of that team," Ilya says through gritted teeth.

"What are you talking about?"

Before Ilya can answer, however, his phone is vibrating with a FaceTime request from Shane.

“Nothing. Look, I have to go. If you care about Shane at all, you’ll make sure that rumor doesn’t spread anywhere else. It is already getting around to other teams. It’s only a matter of time before the media gets a hold of it, and if that happens, I don’t know what other assumptions they’ll come to. Fix it, okay?”

“Wait, Rozanov—”

Ilya hangs up and rushes over to the kitchen counter to sit. He briefly checks his hair in the reflection of the microwave and then accepts the FaceTime call, pasting on an easy smile as the call connects.

“Hi, baby,” Ilya greets, pleased when he receives a warm smile from Shane in return.

“Hiya,” Shane’s voice echoes, and Ilya melts at how fucking cute he is. “Did you order delivery to me? Because…” Shane turns the camera to show a fancy-looking bag of food.

Ilya laughs as the doorbell rings, signaling his own food has arrived. “Give me one second, моя любовь.” He goes to retrieve the delivery and sighs happily when he returns to find Shane’s beautiful freckled face back on the screen.

“I ordered you the most expensive kitten salad in all the land,” Ilya tells him lovingly.

Shane giggles in response, and Ilya’s heart flutters at the sound. “What did you order for yourself?”

Ilya holds one finger up as he props the phone on the counter before reaching into his bag to pull out the box. He holds the takeaway box up to the camera and dramatically pops the lid to reveal—

“A hamburger and fries?” Shane deadpans. “I have no idea how your body looks the way it does.”

Ilya just smirks and sets the meal down in front of him. “Is probably because I am a big, strong hockey player who actually eats real food.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but Ilya is so, so fond. Shane is in his Montreal house, wearing a shirt that looks like Ilya’s, probably even wearing Ilya’s cologne, and they’re having dinner together even though they’re hundreds of miles away. He should be happy.

But Ilya’s conversation with Hayden is still fresh on his mind, and he finds himself wondering if Shane has been putting up a front for him these past two weeks. Ilya liked to think he was unfoolable, that he could pick up on every signal, every thought that entered Shane’s head. Truthfully, though, it was more difficult over the phone. Usually, Shane’s nervous energy radiated off of him in anxious airwaves, but maybe they weren’t as transferable through cell phone waves. Maybe Ilya’s Shane senses were stronger when they were together, more powerful, cause with the revelation from Hayden, he can’t help but feel like he’s been flying blind without even knowing.

The last thing he wants to do is ruin his and Shane's date, so instead of letting go of the words on the tip of his tongue, he asks Shane about his day. And, to his surprise, Shane starts going on and on about an event that Ivan has an idea for.

"It's like a pet playground," Shane says excitedly, and Ilya loves how much he's coming out of his shell. Loves that Shane has made such a good friend in Ivan, that he's clearly helping him to be more comfortable with what he wants. "There would be different areas for the doggies and the kitties. Even the bunnies, too! Since I saw some last time."

"Mm, that sounds like a lot of fun, котенок," Ilya hums his agreement, biting into his burger. "You are ready to go back to the club soon, then?"

"I think so," Shane shrugs, chewing around a forkful of his salad. "I mean, especially if you're there with me. I know you're not going to let anything happen to me."

Ilya's stomach swoops at Shane's confidence in his ability to take care of him. He hasn't felt that confident in it lately, and it's then that Ilya realizes he can't put this off anymore.

"Shane, honey," Ilya murmurs softly, taking the phone in his hand this time. "How are things going with your team?"

Shane tenses immediately, ducking his head to avoid having to make eye contact as he goes for another bite of his food. It's a deflection, an obvious one, but Ilya just waits patiently for him to answer.

"I mean, they're fine. The guys are…you know, but," he shrugs, as if it's a real answer. It isn't, not to Ilya.

He hesitates, wonders whether it makes sense to tell Shane about what Troy heard, but Shane catches him before he can decide.

"What is it?" Shane asks, his eyes suddenly alert. Ilya just wishes things could be easy.

"Troy came up to me in the locker room. Said he heard a rumor about you," Ilya gets out lightly.

He watches the way Shane's throat bobs as he swallows. "Oh?" Shane acknowledges, but his face has gone a little blank, his eyes back to a faded dull.

"Shane. You have to tell me if there's something more going on," Ilya begs, because at this point, he still doesn't know if Shane would.

"What are you going to do about it, anyway?" Shane just laughs like he's tired, and Ilya notices as the mask slips. And underneath it all is someone who is, decidedly, not okay.

Ilya has several things he could do about it, actually. If he really wanted to. He could resort to violence, for one. Reach out to his old connections from Russia and have each Voyageur promptly dismembered and killed, probably in a matter of hours. That could get pretty messy, though, and Ilya had enough problems to deal with, so he neatly tucks those thoughts away in favor of seeking out more rational ones.

“You know that I support you always,” Ilya starts, imploring Shane to hear him out.

“Ilya—” Shane is already protesting in disagreement.

“You deserve more than this, Shane. Is all of this really worth it?”

“Worth what?” Shane scoffs. “*Winning?* Yeah, Ilya. All of this is really worth it.”

“Really?” Ilya raises his eyebrows expectantly. “Worth being around assholes all year long? Traveling with them? Putting up with their shit when you know they don’t respect you? When you know it is probably only going to get worse?”

“What the fuck else am I supposed to do, huh?” Shane demands, raising his voice this time. “Settle for some bum ass team that’s never going to win?”

Ilya doesn’t think Shane is talking about him, specifically, but the words still slice through the air with a little too much bite. “Is that what you think I am doing, then?”

Shane presses his forehead into his hands. “Of course not, Ilya. I know you had other reasons for wanting to be in Ottawa.”

Ilya bristles at the way he says it. Like he wasn’t the one and only *true* reason Ilya had done it. Like he doesn’t know. Ilya realizes a beat too late…maybe he doesn’t.

“The reason I wanted to be in Ottawa was because I wanted to be close to you,” Ilya admits openly.

Shane slowly looks up from his hands, face wrinkled in soft confusion. “You were in talks to sign with them before I even started coming to Hush.”

Ilya tips his head in a sort of half-shrug. “It has always been a little bit for you. A lot for you, actually. I will not pretend I haven’t been in love with you for years now. Probably, maybe even since I first saw you.”

Shane’s expression is so open as he soaks in those words, eyes darting around the room as he tries to process a reality in which Ilya has loved him forever. He can’t remember the last time he *didn’t* love Shane. In fact, in several years’ time, he will have spent more of his life being in love with Shane than he has spent not being in love with him.

“Shane,” Ilya tries again, hoping to get through to him this time. “These guys are talking about you behind your back. Outing you to other players on other teams.”

Shane winces and turns to look off to the side, like he can’t take the heat of Ilya’s gaze right now, even through the phone.

“How long will it be before they suspect there is something more going on with us? I feel like you are just a sitting duck surrounded by these wolves and—”

“And what, Ilya?” Shane snaps suddenly. “What the fuck do you want me to do? There’s no good option here. Even if I did leave Montreal, where the hell am I supposed to go? Do you

really want to do long-distance like that? Us being in different time zones when you just said the whole reason you moved here is for me?"

Ilya holds back his words for a second because the answer is so obvious, but he has to be careful with how he approaches this. A large part of him is under the impression that he'll only have one shot to say it the right way before Shane explodes like a volcano, scorching mostly only himself in the process.

"Well," Ilya licks over his lips intentionally. Shane still won't meet his eyeline. Not fully, but Ilya needs this out in the open. "Have you ever considered coming to Ottawa?"

Shane does look at him this time, an unreadable look in those pensive brown eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"We need more depth at center," Ilya starts with the hockey facts, knows that Shane's brilliant mind will cling to those details first. "We haven't finalized the roster yet. I mean, you'd be a shoo-in for first line if you came over. Plus, you saw how good we were together at the All-Star Game. If I played wing with you in center…" Ilya trails, setting the scene. "I mean, think of the power plays. We would be unstoppable, Shane."

Shane furrows his eyebrows, shaking his head. "There's no way in hell Ottawa can afford me, anyhow."

"So, you can take a pay cut," Ilya rolls his eyes. "Luckily, you have a rich boyfriend who is willing and able to pay for everything for you."

Shane is just watching him with the scrunchiest, most thorough thinking expression that Ilya has ever seen.

"Think about how nice it would be," he appeals to a different part of Shane now. The kind that was probably missing Ilya's pets just as much as Ilya was missing his baby kitty. "We could travel together. Live together *all the time*. We wouldn't have to spend a single night apart. Plus, you'd be closer to your parents, and you already know the Centaurs love you," Ilya adds.

"Ilya," Shane sighs. "You know I love you, but…"

Ilya knows what he's going to say. Because, unfortunately, his Shane had a one-track mind that mostly, really, only revolved around one thing: Stanley Cups. And as much as Ilya could try to sell this plan seven ways to Sunday, there was no getting around the fact that the Centaurs hadn't made the playoffs in nearly two decades now.

Still, that was before they had Ilya Rozanov. Now, imagine if they went into the season with Ilya Rozanov *and* Shane Hollander. Maybe they wouldn't win a Cup their first year, but also, with Shane's drive to win, Ilya couldn't put it past him. Hell, maybe they *could* even win a Cup their first year if they really put their minds to it.

"We would be unstoppable together," Ilya tells him pleadingly. "Both on and off the ice." Not to mention how much more at peace they'd be, how much safer both of them would feel if

they could wake up every morning next to each other.

“I’m sorry,” Shane replies, and his words are falling out of him like sludge that will eventually dry into cold, hard cement over Ilya’s bleeding heart. “I just can’t.”

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger!!! You'll be getting Shane's POV first thing next chapter (and yes, he has started going to therapy, more to come on that. pretty sure he hasn't told Ilya)

Also, there were several comments asking whether Ilya will be going to therapy! I think Ilya is so focused on making sure Shane is okay right now that it's hard for him to consider his own mental health. In his mind, if Shane is okay, then all will be right in the world. There will be therapy for both of them in due time!!

I have had such good ideas recently for the future of this story. It really seems to all be coming together. I can't waaaait for you all to see what's in store!! Would love to hear your thoughts/predictions/favorite parts! Thank you for being so lovely and for being willing to take on a WIP. I have seen a lot of discourse recently about WIP, and it breaks my heart how many people won't take it on, so I appreciate you all reading along and being so invested!! It's driving my writing more than you know :)

So so so so so much more to come!!!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> ladies and gentlemen, theys and thems, are you ready to rumbleeeee? 👀
>
> tw for homophobic slursss

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So far, Shane doesn't really get the point of therapy. He's had two sessions now, and both have felt pretty useless. His therapist's name is Ms. Hollis. Her name's Amy, actually—she's asked Shane to call her that—but to Shane she was always Ms. Hollis, because Ms. Hollis was supposed to have some sort of authority, right? Some sort of way to fix whatever fucked up shit was going on inside his head. If she did—fix it, that is—would the cat stuff go away, too? Was that just a symptom of Shane's insanity? Did that mean Ilya suffered from the same?

He's in a bad fucking mood going into his third appointment. On top of the fact that it just doesn't seem to be working, now Ilya has left him with this whole mess to deal with. Throwing Ottawa at him. Like what the *fuck*? Did Ilya honestly expect him to go there? To leave his four-time Stanley Cup-winning team to go to…Ottawa? Did Ilya not know him at all? Did Ilya have no understanding of Shane's goals? Of his strongest desires?

Well, no, that wasn't true. Ilya was *quite* aware of Shane's strongest desires, but for some reason, he just didn't seem to understand when it came to hockey. He didn't care as much; that was obvious. If Ilya cared about winning Cups, he wouldn't have left Boston for Shane, Svetlana, or anyone else. *But if Ilya was still in Boston, you'd never see each other*, Shane's head whispers mockingly. Which meant that Ilya cared more about seeing Shane than he did about winning. Could Shane honestly say the same?

He steps into Ms. Hollis' office in frustration. It's pinched all the way up his spine, which has recently started curling up like a spiral, which was really, really great for him as a professional athlete. Shane is supposed to meet with the team's physiotherapist this week, but he can't stand the thought of being touched right now. Not when he hasn't been touched by Ilya in over two weeks.

"Hi, Shane. Everything okay? You're looking a bit stressed today," she greets him, tucking her short blonde hair behind her ear.

Shane scoffs. "Isn't that the whole reason I'm here?"

"I thought the whole reason you're here is because of your boyfriend." And great, she's caught him one minute into the session this time. A new record.

“It is.” Shane straightens a bit and crosses his arms over his chest, but he knows his face is doing that scrunchy thing it does when he’s ticked off. He knows she can tell.

She just levels him with a look until he huffs and is forced to give in. If he doesn’t, he knows they’ll sit here for the entire hour without speaking. Ms. Hollis was really good at forcing him to participate. But the thing is, once Shane got going, it was usually pretty difficult to stop—his words pouring out of him like an avalanche of whatever leftover pain he’s currently shouldering at the moment. These days, it’s always something.

“My boyfriend wants me to switch teams so I can live with him and not have to do long distance,” Shane gets out with little fanfare.

“And you’re upset by this?” She clarifies, as if it isn’t obvious. She likes to do that, too. Ask him things that they both already know. “Why?”

Shane shakes his head. “It’s just…a lot to ask of me. He knows how important this season is to me. He knows I have to win this Cup.”

Ms. Hollis purses her lips thoughtfully. “So, why do you think he asked you to? If he knows how important it is, he must have a good reason.”

Shane frowns, eyes darting to her. “He’s just worried about my team. He thinks, like, I won’t be able to handle it or something.”

“Handle what?”

“I don’t know,” Shane shifts uncomfortably. “How they treat me, I guess. The things they say. How I have to like…act different around them.”

“Different, how?” She presses.

Shane exhales slowly, steeling himself for the admission. “There’s a weird energy in the locker room. Like everyone’s hyper-aware of me, or something,” he admits lowly, feeling the walls start to cave in around him. “I don’t know if it’s a gay thing or…” he trails, letting his words fade into the distance. “I’ve been waiting till everyone leaves to shower and change,” he breathes out. “Sometimes I hang out on the ice longer, too. Just so no one can accuse me of staring.”

“It sounds like things are getting worse.”

Shane swallows and briefly shuts his eyes. She’s right. He knows she is. He just really doesn’t want to have to come to terms with it.

“Have you thought about what it might be like? To switch teams.”

“God,” Shane mutters, pressing his forehead into the palms of his hands in hopes of finding some kind of solace there. “I definitely wouldn’t be winning a Stanley Cup this year. That’s for sure. I’d be throwing all my hard work down the drain. I might never have another shot at three consecutive Cups.”

“Why is that goal so important to you?” She asks, crossing her legs.

“Because,” Shane replies slowly. “Because it would be historic. It would put me right up there with some of the most legendary players of all time.”

“I think you’re pretty legendary already, Shane. Four Stanley Cups. I’m fairly certain there are more in your future.”

“I’m only getting older,” Shane argues. Ms. Hollis just laughs at him. It doesn’t make him feel any better. “My team’s got the best shot at the Cup this year. I could get those three consecutive Championships. Five total. Halfway to my goal of ten. Why would I give that up?”

“Okay.” Ms. Hollis leans in with interest. “The pros to staying with your current team are that you’d have the best possible chance at winning the Cup. Do I have that right?” Shane nods. “Let’s flip this scenario around now. Tell me the pros of switching teams.”

Shane chews at his lower lip in contemplation, letting the reasons for why going to Ottawa would be better wash over him. “I could live with my boyfriend full-time. I mean, that would be nice. Not having to miss him so much.”

“That’s a good point. What else?”

Shane runs his fingers through his hair. “I’d be closer to my family. The guys on the team are pretty nice, too.”

“Sounds like you’d have a good support system there.”

Shane’s eyes zero in on her. “I have a good support system here,” he maintains.

“Do you feel properly supported?” She challenges, not unkindly, just inquisitive.

Shane opens his mouth to reply before closing it. Rose. Hayden. Even Ivan. But he hadn’t talked to any of them about it. Not about the fact that word was getting around about his sexuality. If someone on Ilya’s team knew about him, then that meant a lot of other players probably did, too. It was only a matter of time before everyone knew.

How would Ilya’s team feel about him being gay, though? Would they care as much as the Voyageurs seemed to? Would his sponsors pull out? Would any team even want him?

“Shane. I’d like to ask you something.”

Shane blinks in awareness, not realizing that he’d zoned out while trying to answer her last question.

“Do you think you would be happier if you were on another team? If you were living with your boyfriend?”

Of course, he would, his mind tells him. There was no world in which he wouldn’t be happier waking up next to Ilya every day. He certainly wouldn’t feel like he does now. Like a wound-

up jack in the box just waiting to explode, only to have to shove it all down again when the bomb inevitably resets.

“I just,” Shane sighs. “I don’t know how I’ll be happy if I don’t at least *try* to win. I’m not going to give it all up over some mild discomfort in the locker room.”

“Why is winning so important to you?”

Shane lets out an awkward laugh like she’s just told a joke. “It’s kind of the whole point of hockey, isn’t it? It’s a game. Everyone wants to win.”

“Sure,” she offers him a soft smile. “But why do *you* want to win? What about winning is so fulfilling to you?”

“Because…” Shane says slowly. “Because hockey is everything. It’s like the one thing I’m good at. It’s all I *am*. If I can’t be the best at hockey, then I don’t know what the point of all this is.”

She pauses, lips pursed as she watches him. “How much of your bandwidth right now is going towards survival instead of playing?”

Shane frowns. “What do you mean?”

“You’re putting a lot of energy into this double life you’re living,” she points out. “Having to hide your identity is creating constant stress for you in the background. Having to always keep your guard up in the locker room. Having to over-analyze your every move to make sure you don’t slip up. Eventually, that starts to take a toll on a person. If you’re not in a good headspace, you can’t be the best version of yourself when you show up, even at hockey.”

Shane presses his eyebrows together in thought.

“Let’s talk about your relationship for a second,” she diverts, once she must realize she’s not going to get a response out of him. “It’s serious, right? If you’re even considering switching teams. If the allure of living with your partner is enough to make you question it even for a second, then you must be pretty serious about him.”

“Of course,” Shane says without hesitation. In fact, it scared him how serious he was about Ilya sometimes. How it happened seemingly overnight.

“Where do you see your relationship in the next two or three years?” She asks. “Let’s say you don’t switch teams. Let’s say you stay with the Voyageurs, maybe even win your 5th Stanley Cup with them, or possibly more. What would staying with them mean for your relationship in two years’ time?”

Shane’s face pinches. He hadn’t really thought about that. Mostly, he’d been so focused on achieving his goal for *this* year, but she was right. If he wanted to make this work with Ilya, he needed to think long-term.

“I don’t know,” Shane admits heavily. “I guess it would probably put a lot of strain on us. Being long-distance for two years. We’d have summers, of course, but I don’t know how

often we'd get to see each other during the season." It would be a lot of late-night FaceTime calls, that's for sure.

It would also mean being in the closet for that long, and Shane already felt like he was losing the reins on that. Even if he was fully out, though, he and Ilya would still have to stay closeted. Scott Hunter aside, the League absolutely wouldn't be down for two star players gay dating each other.

"And do you think that would eventually start to impact how you show up to hockey? Carrying all that stress of having to hide? Of not seeing your partner for most of the year? Especially spending most of your time around a team who, it sounds like, does not support you."

Shane wanted to say *no*; nothing could impact how he showed up to hockey. He was a robot, The Machine. He was genetically wired to excel at hockey; his entire life revolved around making sure he was positioned to be the absolute best at it. But the truth was, missing Ilya was starting to take a toll on him. He could feel the stress building inside of him in ways it must have always used to, but maybe Shane just hadn't realized at the time. Maybe Shane hadn't realized it was even possible to *not* feel that way. With the relief Ilya could give him—the magic of his strong hands, his soft touches, his soothing voice—Shane sometimes felt totally at peace. He hadn't felt that way even once during summer practices so far.

It wasn't just being away from Ilya, though. It was his entire team. The way it felt like they were plotting against him. The way they did not seem to be Stanley Cup-motivated right now. Shane couldn't believe that this was becoming such a distraction for *them*; meanwhile, he was twisting himself into a pretzel trying to keep his head on straight so he could continue to show up and give 100%. As a result, they were not clicking. Not on the ice, not off. And as much as Shane liked to think he could win the Stanley Cup based on sheer force of will alone, a part of him, deep down, knew that this was shaping up to be a bad sign for the rest of the season.

That thought lives with him when he walks into practice the next day, and he doesn't have the energy to put on his Captain hat today. He doesn't have the stamina to even speak to any of them, feeling dejected and so fucking lost with what to do. Could he really go an entire hockey season like this? Sure, he wasn't the best of friends with some of the guys—even last year—but they'd always been civil. He'd always been able to get along with them, didn't feel like he had to try too hard to lead them or get them to listen. They didn't have to be close to win Cups. But this…could they really win like this? Could Shane really suffer in silence for another year? He presses his key chain with a sigh. He was really, really missing Ilya.

He doesn't hang back on the ice today. Doesn't have the patience to keep putting everyone else's comfort level above his own. Not when he feels like he's running on empty. So, he pointedly steps into the showers with everyone else. He ignores Comeau's eyes glaring daggers into him. He tries not to notice when Wilson practically shields his body from view. *Yeah, right*, Shane wants to laugh. As if he would ever be attracted to any of these guys.

He takes his time because the water feels relaxing on his skin, and it feels good to just be, for once. To not have to execute the timing to perfection because he just doesn't have the energy

to care. It's why he's not expecting it when he hears the guys talking about him just before he steps back into the locker room.

"Telling guys on other teams? It's unacceptable. I mean, seriously. It's fucking *Shane* we're talking about. He's given this team everything. We owe it to him to keep this secret." It's unmistakably Hayden talking, and Shane hates that he's putting him in this position as well.

"Secret?" Someone scoffs in response. "He blasted his own secret to the entire world with that stupid fucking charity. Wearing Rozanov's necklace like he's his fucking bitch or something."

A round of laughter follows. Shane can't make out who's who.

"You have to admit that's a faggot ass thing to do," someone cackles, and Shane can't be sure, but he thinks it's JJ.

"Do you guys seriously give that much of a fuck that Shane is gay? Who *cares*?" Hayden again. "All that matters is whether we win. Or do you really not want to show everyone once and for all why we're the best?"

"Yeah, not if we're going to be the fucking laughing stock of the League."

"I don't care about Hollzy being gay, but I draw the line at Rozanov. That shit is just too weird. How are we supposed to trust someone who's shacking up with the enemy?"

God. They didn't even realize how true that statement *was*, and it still bothered them this much.

"Jesus Christ, who gives a *fuck* about Rozanov? He's with Ottawa now. He's barely even a factor anymore."

And that makes Shane bristle a little in annoyance. As if Ilya couldn't whip the Centaurs into shape and give Montreal a run for their money.

"It's just the point of it. Hollander has no loyalty. If he's willing to team up with Rozanov, then who knows what other lines he's willing to cross."

Shane can't take it anymore, so he steps into the locker room with a towel around his waist and his face in a firm line.

"No loyalty?" Shane scoffs, watching as everyone turns to face him in surprise. "Nearly ten fucking years with this team, four Stanley Cups, and you're going to accuse *me* of having no loyalty? Over a fucking charity for suicide prevention and mental health issues. Are you fucking serious with this shit? Are you guys that fucking immature?" He demands, looking at all of them expectantly.

Comeau scoffs, and Shane raises his eyebrows in his direction. "You knew exactly what you were doing with that announcement. It's embarrassing. If you wanna be gay for Rozanov, do that in your own time, but everything you do reflects back on this team."

“You know what? You’re right, Comeau,” Shane laughs bitterly. “Everything I do reflects back on this team. And that is the only reason any one of you has a single Stanley Cup to your name. I’m your Captain, and I’ve led you to victory time and time again, and I think that’s earned me a little respect over the years. Or it should, at least. Every single day, I show up here ready to give 100%, and yet, you guys are out there making stupid choices on the ice. Not passing when you should, missing goals, playing worse than I’ve seen some of you play since your rookie fucking seasons.”

“Yeah,” JJ has the nerve to pipe up. “Maybe that’s because you’re turning this fucking sport into a clown show,” he mutters.

“Excuse me?” Shane turns to face him, his nostrils flared.

“Look at your fucking neck, dude,” JJ gestures wildly to Shane’s necklace. “You’ve been ragging on Rozanov for years, and now you’re suddenly acting all buddy-buddy with him? It doesn’t sit right with me. You’ve been playing double agent this whole time. Have you been throwing games for him, too?”

Shane actually feels the vein on his temple throb with fury this time, his fists clenched at his side. “You think I’m fucking throwing games for him just because we’re teaming up for a good cause? Are you that fucking deluded, JJ? Do you not know me at all?”

“Well, I guess I don’t,” JJ shrugs, spreading his arms wide. “That’s the problem. None of us fucking know you. You’ve been hiding that you’re gay. You’ve been hiding this thing with Rozanov. What else have you been fucking hiding?” JJ points a finger at him.

“Whatever I do in my personal time is my fucking business. You guys aren’t entitled to that,” Shane says seriously. “The only thing that matters is how I fucking show up on the ice, and I’ve done that time and time again. I fucking made this team what it is today.”

And then JJ actually fucking spits at his feet. *Spits*. Like Shane is nothing but a piece of trash. Like the years he’s put into this team doesn’t mean jack shit to any of them, not even someone who Shane, at one point, considered to be one of his closest friends.

“If you wanna prove yourself to this team, then *prove* yourself. Take off that fucking necklace. Act like a fucking man, for once, and leave this Rozanov shit in the past. I don’t give a fuck if you’re a faggot, but I draw the line at that cock-sucking Russian piece of scum. No Captain of mine would ever pull some shit like this. You’re either with us, or you aren’t, and if you aren’t, then you may as well get the hell out of here now before you screw up another season for us. Because, now, I’m starting to wonder the real reason we lost the Cup that year to the Admirals. Maybe you had a little thing for Scott Hunter, too, eh? Did you throw that one as well, Shane? Because, if I recall, you conveniently tripped right before Hunter scored the final goal. Did we lose that final because you couldn’t keep your gay ass thoughts to yourself?”

Shane raises his eyebrows high on his head. That stumble—the one in the Eastern Conference Final the year the Admirals won the Cup—plagued him like no other. Over the years, he’d tried to come to terms with it, tried to push it aside, but deep down, he’d always blamed himself for that loss. Always wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t

tripped. Would they have won their third consecutive Cup that year? Was Shane really the reason they hadn't? Still, to accuse him of throwing the game for *Scott fucking Hunter* of all people? Shane was fucking livid.

"Is that how all of you guys feel, too?" Shane crosses his arms over his chest, looking out to all the other guys who are watching the interaction with pensive expressions on their faces.

He doesn't get an answer right away, save for Hayden, who has such a troubled look on his face, like he's scared of where this is leading. Shane can relate.

Wilson is the first one to add to the conversation by shrugging. "It is pretty weird how you tripped on nothing. I don't know, Hollzy. Maybe you being gay is affecting your performance on the ice more than you think it is. I'm not, like, gay myself, so I can't say for sure, but I assume that's gotta be distracting. Being pressed against the boards by a bunch of sweaty guys all game. I'd be distracted if I had girls all over me like that."

"I've been fucking gay the entire time I've been playing with you guys," Shane shouts now. "You guys wanna isolate my mistakes and try to blame that on my sexuality, be my fucking guest, but don't forget this *faggot* also won you four Stanley Cups."

"And do we really want to risk losing our fifth because you're distracted by this bullshit? Cause I sure as shit don't," JJ shakes his head, turning to slam his locker shut with a finality.

And then, Shane watches in pure and utter defeat as the rest of the guys slowly but surely pack up the rest of their things, all of them passing him glances as JJ's words continue to fester and echo in the silence. It feels like an ending to something monumental, a choice that's been taken from him, either by the guys or the universe or some fucked up higher power from above.

Hayden steps over to him like he wants to say something, but Shane doesn't want to hear it. He leaves all of his gear behind in his locker and then storms out of the rink with a tornado circling dangerously around him, high winds pushing him onward and urging him west.

When he gets back to Ilya's house, there's a package waiting for him that he promptly kicks across the room, feeling everything that's been bottling up inside of him for the past few weeks finally start to burst. He wants to scream, and cry, and punish himself for letting it get to this point. Was this really what everything has been building up to all of these years? Four Stanley Cups only to crash and burn at the height of his career? Over his *sexuality*, for crying out loud.

It's so fucking unfair. Ten years of his fucking life giving this team everything, only for them to kick him to the curb the moment they didn't like something in his personal life. That wasn't a real team at all. A *real* team was supposed to fucking stand by you. Just like Shane had done for all of them. Going to weddings, baby showers, hanging out with the guys' families like they were his fucking own. What had Shane ever asked for in return? Nothing. He'd made years of sacrifices, only for them to throw it back in his fucking face when he asked for one measly one in return.

But, so be it. If the Voyageurs couldn't take him as he was, then Shane would take his talents elsewhere. Shane would show them just how much value he'd added to Montreal's roster over the years, would show them exactly what a season without him looked like, especially if Shane was ready to go up against them with a wrath that not even the devil himself could summon up.

Shane huffs in frustration and goes to pick up the box that's landed somewhere in the living room. His heart aches when he sees Ilya's little chicken scratch writing on the return label.

For my Shane, it says, despite the way Shane had shut him down so quickly over dinner the other evening. Despite the way Shane has been avoiding his FaceTime calls the last few nights, citing that he was simply too tired to talk past answering a few texts throughout the day. It wasn't true. The fact is that Shane just couldn't face him, couldn't take the heat of Ilya's stare, the intensity of his gaze as he practically begged Shane to come to Ottawa. And now? It seemed to be his only option, the choice robbed from him. How could he go to Ilya now that he knew he was just a last resort? That Shane wouldn't have left Montreal for him, but he would if he had nowhere else to go. Shane was selfish. He deserved a lot less than Ilya was willing to give him.

He unwraps the box with a packing knife and feels tears start to pour from his eyes when the first thing he sees is one of Ilya's Centaurs jerseys.

"Jesus, fuck," Shane pinches the bridge of his nose to keep from drowning in a puddle of tears. It doesn't stop him from immediately stripping out of his clothes in order to pull the jersey over his head. It smells like him. Of course it does, because that's what Shane had asked for. That's what Ilya had promised. A box of worn clothes covered in his scent. It only makes him cry harder.

He sniffles and wipes at his cheeks as he steps up to look at himself in the mirror. The jersey is a little big on him; considering he doesn't have on padding, and Ilya was also a size up from him, it falls just past his thighs. Somehow, though, it looks just right, and Shane can't help but try to imagine the same picture, but with his own number printed across the back of the jersey. His own last name in big capital letters. Part of him still prefers the *Rozanov*.

His heart feels like it's cracked and battered down the middle. He can't take any more of this day, so he grabs the box of clothes and retreats to Ilya's bed, dumping the contents of the package all over the comforter, before tossing the box aside and crawling right into it. He doesn't have the mental energy to process anything else as he lets sleep take him away to somewhere safer, somewhere where everything that's happened today is nothing but a distant dream, an unrealized reality that he doesn't have to face just yet.

When he wakes several hours later, it's pitch-black outside. He doesn't know how long he's been out, but he knows he's definitely slept through dinner, which means he must have at least a few worried texts from Ilya by now from not checking in. His body feels lethargic and slow as he forces himself to sit up, groggy and dazed from falling asleep in a strong pile of Ilya's scent. He definitely feels well rested, despite the fact that he also feels like he could use at least another twelve hours of sleep.

Training camp starts in two days, his head reminds him. *None of that matters anymore*, another voice whispers punishingly. Right. His team didn't want him anymore. He was about to be off the roster for the entire season. Everything feels like it's crumbling around him.

He reaches for his phone and is only semi-shocked to find ten missed calls from Ilya as well as a dozen messages. There's a call from Hayden, too. One from Rose. His mom. He feels like he's drowning. He feels like he's going to die. He feels like he's having a panic attack, only it's not one that he can snap out of. It's not just in his head this time. This is real. This is happening. His life is falling apart.

He doesn't get up the courage to respond to anything from his phone. Instead, his brain forces him into an immediate shutdown, and he falls right back asleep. He doesn't set an alarm for practice. He doesn't schedule a session with his trainer at the gym. He doesn't eat dinner or meal-prep or even bother brushing his teeth. He lets himself die a peaceful death buried in a pile of Ilya's clothes.

When he wakes in the morning, the first person he calls is his agent. He's numb. He says it with no emotion. He wants to be traded. He wants to go to Ottawa.

He's grateful when Farah doesn't ask too many questions. She must be able to sense the weight of what he's had to carry in order to come to this decision. It's not her job to argue or make sense of it; it's just her job to make it happen.

He's still wearing Ilya's Centaurs jersey. He doesn't want to take it off for the hope that it might start to feel like a second skin. Like maybe his mind will start to make sense of it if he's able to see the full picture, grasp the entire vision. He has a dozen new texts from Ilya. He still doesn't write back.

He calls his therapist next for an emergency session, like he can sense he needs to be talked off a ledge. He's almost hurt by how unsurprised she seems at the news. Great. He's fucking see-through. He's a cowardly loser, and he's wearing it all over his face. He has four Stanley Cups, and that might be all he ever has. He may never go to the playoffs again.

She walks him through a million different scenarios, because apparently, the only ones in his head are the worst case. But Shane doesn't see a reality in which he ever comes back from this. In his mind, his name is already tarnished. He's one wrong move away from being outed nationally. It's only a matter of time before they link him to Ilya. There weren't exactly rules on other players dating each other, but Shane knew the MLH would never let this fly. He and Ilya would probably be kicked out of the League in no time. He's ruined this for both of them. He thinks maybe JJ isn't so wrong about him, after all.

He ends his therapy session feeling, admittedly, not much better. Ms. Hollis seems to recognize that, and she leaves him with some parting words: This is only the beginning, not the end. *What if the end is so, so much worse*, his mind taunts, but he agrees to call her again in the next few days. He has her number if he needs anything. He still hasn't answered any of Ilya's texts.

Farah lets him know that the Voyageurs' general manager has been contacted about his request for a trade. They're in the process of sorting through the details, but it's official. It's

happening. It feels like the final nail in a coffin. He runs on the treadmill for two hours and then throws up bile into the empty toilet.

He's still sitting there like that an hour later, crumpled in a ball on the bathroom floor, his face pressed to the cool of the open toilet seat. He doesn't have the energy to move a single muscle. It must be why he doesn't hear the front door unlocking, or someone walking all through the house, until they finally find him like that—a pathetic mess.

"Oh, Shane," a voice sighs, and Shane loses it. He's sobbing as he feels gentle arms wrap around him, sweet perfume filling his senses. He's never been so grateful to see Rose in his life.

She doesn't ask him to talk about it. She doesn't press for information or try to get him to stand up and be a real person. She just holds him until he's all cried out, until his shoulders ache from the full-body sobs wracking through him. Until his tear ducts have simply bled themselves dry.

She pets at his hair in a way that reminds him of Ilya, eventually guiding him to lie in her lap as his body positively collapses from exhaustion. He lies on his side so he doesn't have to look at her, instead letting his eyes go hazy as he stares off into the distance. He's comforted by her presence, nonetheless.

Eventually, she's able to coax him into a sitting position, and she carefully helps him clean up his face. She convinces him to stand not long after, hoisting his massive 200 lb body up with more strength than he'd have ever given her credit for. Maybe she just had great maternal instincts. Shane had heard that that could cause a spike in adrenaline.

He follows after her as she leads him into the kitchen, because apparently, he needs to eat. He's still in the Centaurs jersey. It feels like the punchline to a really mean joke.

She makes him a dinner that normally wouldn't fly under his strict diet and regimen, but he doesn't have it in him to protest. He's running on fumes. His diet means nothing if he's not even on a team to implement it for. He's never going to get a fifth Stanley Cup.

After they eat dinner in silence, Rose guides him over to the couch with the promise that she has a surprise for him, and Shane can't help the wet laugh that tumbles past his lips when she produces a pink bottle of nail polish.

"Figured you were due for a fill," she shrugs, offering him a small smile. "It's a little pinker than you usually go, and I'm not a manicurist by any means…" she trails, but Shane doesn't care. He shoves his paw into her lap and offers her a meaningful smile, even if his eyes are still wet from the storm.

He doesn't fault himself for letting Rose dote on him. His mind must recognize he needs it. So, when she's done with his nails, Shane blows on them and then lies against her chest, letting her hold him close as they watch reruns of *The Real Housewives*. Shane doesn't understand any of it. It's a very welcome distraction.

His phone is still upstairs, but he doesn't pay it any mind. If Rose is here, Ilya must have gotten in touch with Svetlana in order to get her the spare key. She's probably texting him updates when Shane isn't looking. He feels looked after. He feels supported.

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Ilya doesn't know exactly what has gone down with Shane and his team, but he knows it's big. Big enough that Shane hasn't answered his texts or phone calls in two days. Big enough that Hayden has had the forethought to give Ilya a heads-up, which Ilya is sure was hard for him to do. Big enough that Shane apparently hasn't shown up for practice today, and Ilya knows well enough that Shane doesn't miss practice for anything. The world could go up in flames around him and he'd still be at the rink, on time, with eager eyes, and his skates in hand.

He feels it's more than rectified when he urgently asks Rose to go get the spare key to his house from Svetlana and make sure that Shane is, at the very least, alive. The relief he feels when he gets the first text of confirmation is enough to have Ilya falling to his knees and thanking a God he's not even sure if he believes in. He hasn't been getting much other context, but he knows that Shane has someone taking care of him. It's all he can really ask for.

He tries not to text Rose or Shane too much as he readies himself for his own practice, their last one before they head into training camp next week. The timing is, admittedly, not ideal, but Ilya supposes you don't exactly get a warning before shit hits the fan. Another one of the beautiful mysteries of life, but honestly, maybe these past few weeks have been a warning in and of themselves. Ilya has felt unsettled since Shane went back to Montreal. He hates that his fears have finally been validated.

When he walks into the Ottawa locker room, Coach Wiebe is already there waiting for him, and he silently gestures Ilya into his office. Ilya freezes slightly, already on edge, but he wordlessly follows him anyway and plops into the chair across from him.

"So, I wanted to give you a heads up that Shane Hollander has asked to be traded. Ottawa is his first choice."

Every hair on Ilya's skin stands up in high alert. Based on his last conversation with Shane, Ilya hadn't even thought that was slightly in the realm of possibility. He wonders what could have possibly happened with Shane's team for things to change so drastically overnight.

"Obviously, we would be stupid not to take him. He's got the best stats in the League, you know that. But, I wanted to run it by you before we get into negotiations, seeing as you're Captain, and currently in place to be our star center."

Ilya swallows and tries to get his mouth to work, tries to get his lips to form words. "Like you said. We'd be stupid not to take him," is all he can manage. He's having trouble processing what's going on. He feels like he's in a dream-state. "Did he give a reason? For…wanting to come here?"

Coach Wiebe sighs. “He did. Or, well, his agent disclosed something, at least. He’s having issues with his team. Related to…a personal matter. I can’t exactly get into the details.”

“Ah,” Ilya says, because that certainly didn’t give him much to go off of.

“Did you know anything about this? Has he talked to you at all? I know you have a friendly relationship with him. The guys haven’t been able to shut up about meeting him at your team dinner. Thanks for the invite, by the way,” he adds good-naturedly, and it pulls a tired smile from Ilya.

“Sorry,” he offers half-heartedly. “Um. I know about the personal matter. Probably. If it is what I’m thinking.” He’s sure it is. Unless Farah somehow told Coach Wiebe that Shane and Ilya are in a passionate love affair that will likely end in the twining of their hands in marriage.

“That’s not going to be a problem here, is it?” Coach double-checks, and Ilya furrows his eyebrows before quickly shaking his head.

“Absolutely not. In fact, this team is shaping up to be like…the waviest team in the entire MLH,” he admits.

Coach Wiebe looks at him in confusion before the realization must hit him. “Oh, I get it. Wait —” he falters, bewilderment taking him over once again.

Ilya huffs a soft laugh. “Let’s just say Shane wouldn’t be the only guy on the team with… a personal matter.”

Coach Wiebe raises his eyebrows and looks Ilya over in question.

“Yeah,” Ilya confirms. “I’m bi, so. We’re not going to have any issues. The other guys won’t either. I haven’t told them yet, but,” he shrugs. Ilya knew they would take it well. He doesn’t mention what he knows about Troy. It’s not his place to say.

“Oh. Well. Thanks for letting me know,” Coach Wiebe nods as he seems to take the information in. Ilya watches as something else crosses his face, another inquiry on the tip of his tongue, but he waves it off before he can let it slip. “You know what? Never mind. That’s not any of my business.”

Ilya appreciates his commitment to discretion. “Did his agent say anything else? I mean, something serious must have gone down for him to leave his team.”

Coach Wiebe just shakes his head. “I wasn’t given too many details. She just wanted to check whether we were open to the trade. I wanted to talk to you before I did anything else, seeing as this will probably affect the lineup.”

Ilya rubs over his weary eyes. “I’m happy to play wing. Move to line two. Take a pay cut. Whatever you need to do to get him to sign with us, please go right ahead. There is absolutely no pushback from me. I want the best for this team, and Shane Hollander is the very best.”

Coach Wiebe nods slowly in understanding. He clearly must recognize there's more to the story, but it means a lot to Ilya that he doesn't ask for any further clarification. He doesn't have the energy to come up with lies right now, especially when the truth is probably pretty glaringly obvious—at least for anyone who knows what they're looking at.

"Great. Then, I'll get back to his agent and let them know." Coach Wiebe looks him over in careful consideration. "Is everything alright with you?"

"I'll be fine," Ilya waves off, not wanting to get into it right now. All he really wants is for Shane to talk to him, to tell him what happened, to tell him he's okay. He should be celebrating the fact that Shane wants to come to Ottawa, but instead, all he can focus on is what it must mean that he does.

As soon as he gets home, he dials Rose's phone number, and he lets out the biggest sigh of relief when she answers.

"How is—"

"He's fine," Rose tells him before he can even get the words out. "He's asleep in my lap."

Ilya's heart pangs with how much he wishes it were him instead. "Did he…did he say anything?"

"Not yet," Rose sighs, pushing her fingers through Shane's hair. Shane responds to the touch even in his sleep, even though his face is pinched up in distress like he's having a nightmare. "I was able to get some food into him. Then, I painted his nails, and we've been watching TV ever since."

Ilya presses his face into the hand that isn't clutching his phone. He should be in his car on the way to Montreal right now, but he has training camp first thing in the morning, and as much as he would like to, he knows he won't be able to leave if he gets to Shane when he's like this.

"I think something really bad happened," Ilya tells her nervously, trying to steady his own shaking voice. "My, um," he closes his eyes for a moment. "My coach said he asked to be traded to Ottawa."

Rose is quiet for a second on the other end of the line, taking in his words, and in this moment, Ilya is glad she knows enough about hockey to understand how much weight this holds. "Wow," she says in response. "That's…big."

"The last time I talked to him about it, he left me with the impression that he would not be considering switching teams any time soon," Ilya continues. "That was just a few days ago."

"I'll try to get something out of him when he wakes up. He was…in a really bad way when I found him. It didn't seem like the time to ask," Rose fills in softly.

Ilya grips the counter tightly and tries to fight off the mental picture of what Shane must have looked like. He badly wants to ask for details, but he knows he's only going to drive himself

insane with them if he does.

“Is he—” Ilya winces before asking. It feels like a selfish thought to have right now. “Does he seem like he’s mad at me? I know you said he hasn’t said anything, but…” he trails, chewing at his thumbnail. “He hasn’t answered any of my texts since yesterday morning.”

“Ilya, I honestly don’t think he’s talked to anyone since he’s been home. I wouldn’t take it personally.”

Except Shane has talked to someone. His agent, at least. He deliberately hadn’t answered Ilya, would’ve had to ignore the glaring thirty-eight missed call notifications from him in order to dial Farah’s number and ask her to get him traded. Ilya wonders if Yuna or David have heard from him. Was he actually ignoring everyone? Or was it just Ilya he didn’t want to speak to?

“Please.” He shuts his eyes tightly. “Please take such good care of him. Make sure he knows how much I love him. That I never intended for things to happen this way.”

“I’ll tell him,” Rose promises, and Ilya can hear her smile through the phone. “Although I’m pretty sure he already knows. He’s wearing your jersey.”

Ilya’s breath catches in his throat. “The Boston one or the Centaurs one?” Ilya asks, cause he had done his due diligence by sending both.

“The Centaurs one,” Rose confirms, and hope fills his gut once more. “He looks really good in it, too. These colors suit him a whole lot better.”

Ilya wants to beg for a picture, but he’s intervened enough for one day, and he doesn’t want Rose to violate Shane’s trust by doing anything he might not want. Plus, Ilya is sure the mere sight of Shane looking all small and defeated in his jersey would positively break him. He has to be strong and get through these next few weeks for both of them to ensure Shane has a Stanley Cup-winning team to come back to.

So, after chatting with Rose for a few more minutes, and making her promise to continue sending regular updates, Ilya reluctantly hangs up and does everything he can to prepare for training camp—the official start of the pre-season.

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When Shane finally rouses from his slumber, there’s a slight crick in his neck.

“Morning, sleepy head,” Rose greets him from the other side of the couch.

“Is it morning already?” Shane frowns, rubbing at his eyes.

“Well, no. It’s actually past midnight. I would’ve tried to get you to bed, but you know,” she shrugs, holding up her arm to show the lack of muscle. “Some of us aren’t blessed in the bicep department.”

Shane huffs a tired laugh at the joke. “Sorry for making you stay.”

Rose shakes her head with a smile. “You know it’s no trouble. Plus, I could use a few days away from set.”

“Please don’t tell me you actually took time off work to come over here,” Shane mumbles, pushing himself into a sitting position. His body aches all over.

Rose merely rolls her eyes. “Jeez. Just say you don’t want to hang out with me.”

Shane levels her with a look. “You know that’s not true.”

“I know,” Rose’s lips pull into a soft smile before her expression drops into something slightly more serious, if not a little sad. “Do you want to talk about?”

Shane shuts his eyes and shakes his head. Fuck. He’d almost forgotten. Almost.

“Okay,” Rose says easily, like she’s not going to make him. “Are you still tired? Do you want to go up to bed?”

Shane pauses for a second to think about it and then hesitantly nods.

“I’m pretty wiped, too. Why don’t you head on up, and I’ll get us each a glass of water?”

Shane turns to her inquisitively. “You’re staying tonight?”

She raises a playful eyebrow at him. “Got a problem with that?”

Shane rolls his eyes and pushes to stand from the couch. Jesus. He’s still in Ilya’s Centaurs jersey. His cheeks flush when he glances up to meet her eye.

“Those colors look good on you,” Rose compliments, playing nonchalant, but Shane can see right through her. She’s talked to Ilya, then. Which meant Ilya already knew about the trade. Fuck.

Shane had meant to say something about it, to give Ilya a heads-up before word from Farah got around to his team, but he’s a coward who can’t face him, apparently. More than that, though, Shane’s main and only priority had been to finalize the trade as soon as possible. He’d wanted *off* that team. As soon as he left the rink, he knew he would never be able to face them again.

Rose must be able to read his thought process across his face, however, because the next thing she says is, “It would mean a lot to him if you shot him a quick text. I know you’re not ready to talk to anyone, but…he’s really worried about you.”

Shane already feels guilty enough as is. “I know,” he acknowledges, the world weighing heavy on his shoulders. He thought leaving this team was supposed to bring him less anxiety, not more. According to his therapist, at least. *This is just the beginning*, her words ring through his head. He tries to picture it as a good thing.

Shane doesn’t have the energy to do his skincare routine tonight, but he does brush his teeth and put on some moisturizer and lip balm, because he’s not a heathen. He runs into Rose as

he's heading back into the bedroom, offering her a grateful look as she hands him a glass of water. He puts it on a coaster on Ilya's nightstand and then turns to find her staring at the bed.

Shane follows her gaze and—oh. He'd forgotten about the massive pile of Ilya's worn clothes that he'd dumped half-hazardly onto the comforter before promptly passing out in the middle of it.

"Do you need me to help you with this laundry?" Rose asks, stepping forward like she's going to reach for some of the clothes.

"No," Shane blurts before he can help himself. "Just, um. Please. Don't."

"Okay." She steps back tentatively, holding her hands up where Shane can see them. He watches as her eyes fall to the bed once again, though, and something like realization crosses her features. "It's Ilya's stuff," she denounces softly, tipping her head in thought. "Is this like a cat thing?"

Shane just groans in response, pressing his face into his hands, because this is what his life has come to. He has four Stanley Cups, no hockey team, and everyone close to him has started to clue into the fact that he's a cat.

"Hey, I'm not judging you!" Rose is quick to placate. "I'm just trying to learn. I mean, my brother's cat really likes me. And that cat doesn't like *anyone*."

Shane can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all, and before he knows it, Rose is laughing with him. And then they're both laughing. Until they're clutching onto each other and falling to the floor with tears in their eyes. And then, when Shane thinks it can't get any funnier—

"Holy shit," Rose says through her tears, her back against the edge of the bed, her head turned just slightly. "His scent *does* smell really good." And they promptly start to lose it again.

Once the laughter eventually dies down, Rose heads off to the guest room to get changed and ready for bed. Meanwhile, Shane crawls onto the comforter to burrow himself in Ilya's pile of clothes once again. And when, midway through the night, Shane sneaks into the guest bed with Rose and pushes his way into her arms, neither one of them says anything about it.

They fall asleep like that, huddled together like they used to do during the brief month and a half they dated. It hadn't made sense to him at the time—why things didn't work out between them, why they got along so well but still crashed and burned—but now it does. Everything has shaped out the way it was meant to. He sleeps that night with a smile on his lips and just a tiny touch of optimism in his brain. *This is only the beginning*, a wise voice reminds him, *not the end.*

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When Ilya wakes in the morning, he has zero messages on his phone. He sniffs and tells himself it's not the end of the world. Shane was probably fine. Rose would make sure Shane was fine. He trusted her with his life—well, with Shane's life, really, but Shane *was* his life.

Shane was wearing his Centaurs jersey, Ilya reminds himself. *Shane was coming to his team,* another thought stabs right through him. Fuck. Ilya needed to get his head on straight. He had probably two weeks to whip this team into shape before Shane's arrival. He had to make sure they were operating at full capacity by the time that happened. The time for fooling around had come to an end.

"Listen up," Ilya says loudly, jumping onto one of the locker room benches as the team surrounds him. There's a buzz of energy in the room, an ongoing chatter that slowly dies down as everyone redirects their attention. "I hate to be the one to break it to you, but summer is over. The season is right around the corner, and frankly, I'm sick of hearing people talk about this team like we're the laughing stock of the NHL. Because the truth is, all of that is about to change."

Ilya looks around the room, his gaze stoic, not a hint of a smile on his face.

"We have a new player coming in soon," he informs the group at large, feeling slightly pleased when he receives a ton of wide eyes in return. "And having him raises the standard of this team. So, understand me when I say that nothing in this room is guaranteed. How you show up over the next two weeks is life and death. If you want your place, you are going to have to work damn hard to earn it because, starting now, this team is a *winning* team. I do not have time for losers or slackers."

A couple of nervous gulps, some eyes suddenly sharp with determination. Ilya takes note of each reaction, cataloguing the strong soldiers from the weak.

"That means that every drill matters. Every rep counts. I want to see you working *with* each other, not against each other. I want to see hard work, sweat, maybe even some tears."

A tentative chuckle wasps through the air, but it dies quickly because Ilya is *not* playing around. The other players must be able to tell.

"I've seen the talent on this team. I know what you're all capable of. Now get out on the ice and fucking show me."

The team breaks apart with a newfound determination. Ilya just hopes it's enough.

The first day of training camp is never really that exciting, and today is no different. They do some drills, some puck touches, some light skating. Today is all about sizing up the talent. Coach Wiebe is keeping a close eye on everyone, but Ilya…Ilya is watching them like a fucking hawk. He's breathing down their necks, popping up at every turn, urging them to do better, be faster, skate stronger. He's trying to be a good Captain, but mostly, he can tell he's making everyone antsy.

When the day finally comes to an end, the guys practically roll themselves off the ice and into the showers. Still, it doesn't stop the onslaught of questions he gets as soon as he strolls into the locker room.

"So, Cap," Troy titters uncertainly. "Just out of curiosity, who's the new player?"

Ilya barely looks at him as he fishes his clothes out of his locker. “You will find out soon enough, Barrett.”

“Okay, but like…why’s he coming in now?”

Ilya turns to glare at him, but when he does, he notices several other players who are also not-so-subtly listening in, trying to collect intel.

“He is ready for a change,” Ilya says simply, addressing all of them. “He is a great player, and we all stand to learn a lot from him, myself included. This team is going to be getting a lot of press in the coming weeks. I expect all of you to be on your best behavior. You do not talk to any reporters without my say-so. You do not speak on behalf of this team or any player on it,” he warns seriously.

He receives a round of nods in return and turns to start getting changed. But he doesn’t miss the whispers behind his back.

“Who could it be?”

“I wonder what position he plays.”

“Someone better than Rozanov? Coming to this team? I doubt it.”

Ilya smirks at that one. They were in for a treat, indeed.

All of a sudden, Ilya’s necklace comes to life on his chest, and he stares down at it in disbelief. It lights up three times in quick succession. *I love you*. Ilya swiftly presses it three times back, and then a buzz for good measure, because lighting up Shane’s keychain doesn’t feel like enough. He wants it to rattle against the palm of his hand; he wants his love for Shane to radiate through his body because it’s the closest he can get to touching him right now. The closest he can get to holding him and telling him that everything would be alright. More than alright, actually. Everything would be fucking amazing.

Stanley Cup or not, Ilya knew for a fact that this hockey season would be the best of Shane’s life. He didn’t need to convince him of that; he just needed to show him. They would look back on this, years from now, and see it as just a tiny blip in their story. The spark that kickstarted the rest of their lives together.

Shane still doesn’t text. He doesn’t call. But he and Ilya do spend most of the night lighting up each other’s long-distance charms, until they’ve said *I love you* so many times that Ilya almost thinks it’s more meaningful than any words they could have possibly exchanged. His Shane was communicating in the best way he knew how—silence—and Ilya couldn’t wait until they were together again to steal the breath from his pouty kitty lips.

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Chapter End Notes

Oh yes, I'm so excited!!! Shane is officially going to be a Centaur :) My boys are going to be so much happier now that they're together. Will it be smooth sailing from here on out? Absolutely not. But they are so much stronger when they're together.

Word about Shane being gay is slowly but surely getting around, but no one has connected him and Ilya yet. The bisexual terminator is not going to fare well with the fact that his kitty is the talk of the town. I fear Shane may be everyone's bisexual awakening! Ilya...look out. Everyone wants your man 👀

ALSO HOLY CRAP WE ARE ALMOST AT 100K HITS!!!

Thank you guys so much for being such fun and interactive readers! Please make sure you've left kudos if you haven't already anddddd consider sending this fic to a friend to make their day? :) it would certainly make mineeee. Can't wait to hear your thoughts, favorite parts, predictions!!! Love you all! Thank you so much for all the fun and insightful comments!!!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another morning. Another day with no texts from Shane. Ilya was starting to get really annoyed. It was one thing if Shane needed space, but at some point, he needed to communicate. Leaving Ilya on radio silence for three straight days was unacceptable. Shane wasn't injured. He wasn't deathly ill. He was capable of sending Ilya a single 👍.

But Ilya gets out of his second day of training camp, and still—nothing. How long did Shane intend to keep this up? How long before Ilya got an explanation? Would Shane even tell him when he was coming? Or would Ilya just show up to practice one day and see him there? No warning. No word.

The only text he has is one from Rose. A simple:

Rose Landry: *Incoming.*

Jesus Christ. Ilya's heart starts palpitating. What the fuck did that mean? Was Shane about to call him? Was he having a mental breakdown? Did Shane being gay finally leak to the wider press? Had his trade been made public? What the hell could she possibly mean by *incoming*?

Ilya pushes inside his house with his thumb hovering over the dial button, but before he can, he stops in his tracks at the sight of several suitcases lined up in the entryway.

What the fuck. What the fuck?

"Hello?" Ilya calls out, not knowing what the hell to expect. His lungs nearly collapse when Shane steps into view.

Shane, who's damp from the shower, and somehow wearing the shirt that Ilya was wearing yesterday. Shane, who looks like he's been to hell and back, but is still smiling at him like Ilya is his favorite person in the world. His eyes are between that of a kicked puppy and a mischievously seductive kitty. He looks like he's *home*.

"Fuck," Ilya gasps out as he surges forward to hug him. His hands are fucking shaking. His heart is definitely skipping important beats. He's not getting enough airflow to his brain.

"I'm sorry," Shane breathes, and he's trying to make himself small in Ilya's grasp.

"Just let me fucking hold you," Ilya demands when Shane won't stop squirming like it's costing him everything to be cared for like this. "God, you had me worried fucking *sick* wondering what happened to you. Wondering whether you were okay."

Shane hiccups against him and hugs back fully this time, digging his sharp nails into Ilya's back.

"How the hell did you get here, anyway? Did you drive here all on your own? You should have fucking called me, Shane. I would have picked you up."

"Rose drove me," Shane mutters softly, and he's rubbing his nose into Ilya's collarbone. "Plus, I knew you were busy with—"

"I do not care. You are the most important thing in this world to me. If you need me, I will come to you without a second thought, but I cannot help you if you do not talk to me," Ilya tells him seriously. "You owe me an explanation. You are not going to get out of it by making eyes at me and going into your kitten space."

"I know," Shane agrees, and Ilya pulls away to grip his jaw, redirecting his gaze until they are eye-to-eye.

"I love you so much. Whatever happened, we're going to get through it, okay? I am always here for you. I just wish you would lean on me when you need it rather than pulling away. Do you understand how worried I was when Coach Wiebe told me you had requested a trade? Do you understand what kind of horrible worst-case scenarios went through my head when Hayden told me to check on you, and you didn't answer for two days?"

"I'm sorry," Shane's lower lip wobbles as his eyes start to get misty.

"I know you are," Ilya sighs, ducking forward to press their heads together. "I just…the thought of anything hurting you makes me want to scream. I wish I could make everything perfect for you. I'd give you anything you want."

Shane sniffles and clutches the back of his neck tightly before pulling him into a kiss, one that Ilya eagerly accepts. Ilya pulls him in tight by the waist until Shane is forced onto his tippy toes, and Ilya has to hunch over him in order to tongue him properly. Claim the taste from his mouth. Shane had tried to restrict Ilya from something that was *his*. And Ilya was not happy with that. Shane would have to be punished, of course, but that would come later. Right now, Shane owed him an explanation.

They migrate to the kitchen, hardly separating an inch, and Ilya is pleased to find Shane has already ordered dinner for them. He's okay. He's functioning very well, at least for the moment. Rose has done a great job at taking care of him.

They eat wrapped up in each other, legs tangled, touching every chance they get. It's been almost three weeks since Shane's last visit. All Ilya wants to do is hold him and fuck him and clean him up until he feels so fucking good, but he's vibrating with the need to know what happened. He needs to know if the Voyageurs have a death wish and if Ilya has to be that harbinger of death.

So, once they finish eating, Ilya leads Shane over to the couch and sits a good distance apart from him. A distance where Ilya can reach for his hand if he needs to, but Shane won't be

able to hide his face in Ilya's chest or wiggle his way into Ilya's lap. He wasn't getting out of this one. Ilya needed to know what the hell was going on.

"Start from the beginning," Ilya tells him, and he watches with calculating eyes as Shane takes a deep breath. For right now, they're not touching. It's killing him not to close the distance.

"Things have been getting worse."

And, right. Ilya already knew that part. He lets Shane continue.

"I used to think the guys were just joking around, you know? Like, maybe they weren't actually homophobic or whatever, but maybe they were just ignorant. Or stupid." Shane scratches the back of his neck.

Ilya steels himself for what's to come.

"I was just trying to keep it out of their faces. Keep the peace. So, I started to hang back on the ice a bit. Make sure I wasn't in the locker room when they were changing or showering. Just so no one would feel uncomfortable."

Ilya doesn't like that thought process, but he understands where Shane is coming from at least. It was a way to protect himself from even more scrutiny in a situation where he was already being made to feel at unease.

"But, it was still getting worse. Practices have not been going well," Shane admits with a heavy sigh. "And that afternoon, I just didn't have the energy to do it anymore. I just…I went in the showers and ignored them, but when I came back, I heard them talking about me. I guess Hayden was telling them off for, like, outing me to guys on other teams and stuff."

Ilya closes his eyes briefly. That had been his influence. He'd been the one to tell Hayden to stick up for Shane. Was he the catalyst behind this whole thing? Was he the reason Shane's team had finally turned on him?

"And they were just…saying these horrible things about me. About me being gay. About me *shacking up with the enemy*. Saying I must have been playing double agent this whole time. *Throwing games for you*," he says it with a scoff. "Saying I had no loyalty to them."

Ilya opens his eyes and shakes his head, but he doesn't interrupt.

"I couldn't take it anymore. I said they were being fucking ridiculous, overreacting, not to mention playing terrible fucking hockey. And then," Shane sucks in a breath, and Ilya can see the anger radiating off of him. "JJ had the nerve to suggest that the only reason I *tripped* the year we lost to the Admirals is because I couldn't keep my *gay ass thoughts to myself* around Scott Hunter."

Ilya raises his eyebrows high on his head. "Are you fucking serious?"

Shane nods tiredly. "I asked the other guys if they thought the same. Apparently, they think that being gay is probably a huge fucking distraction for a hockey player. Seeing as we're

being *pressed against the boards by a bunch of sweaty guys all game*. And apparently, if girls were doing that to them, they wouldn't be able to focus."

"Jesus," Ilya breathes out.

"I didn't have the heart to tell them that they're all so fucking ugly, I would never in a million years be distracted by them. Hiding from me in the showers," Shane puffs an irritated laugh. "Yeah fucking right."

Ilya can't help reaching for him to pull him into a big hug, and he's grateful when Shane sinks into his arms.

"So, yeah," Shane sighs, pressing his face into Ilya's neck. "They basically said they didn't wanna risk losing the Cup this year because I'm a fucking faggot. So, I told them the only reason they have a single Cup is because of this fucking *faggot*."

"God, Shane," Ilya shakes his head, squeezing him tightly. "They're so fucking wrong for that. And that loss against the Admirals was not your fucking fault. I *watched* that game. Your team played like fucking shit. The only reason you guys came even *close* to winning that game was because of you."

"I know," Shane murmurs, and Ilya can feel him smiling against his skin. "Thanks for sending Rose to look after me, by the way. I know I was a dick to you."

"You weren't a dick to me," Ilya sighs, rubbing over his back. "But you could've given me a sign that you were okay. You have no idea how sick I was with worry."

"I know," Shane agrees, rubbing his nose against Ilya's neck.

Ilya pulls away to regard him properly. "I *am* proud of you for recognizing you needed to get out of that toxic environment."

Shane heaves a soft breath. "I didn't have a choice. They practically kicked me off the team."

Ilya brushes some of Shane's fringe out of his eyes. "You always have a choice. And you made the right one. And for that, I am very proud of you."

Shane smiles lightly at him, and Ilya can't resist ducking forward for a sweet kiss.

"And selfishly, I am glad you're with me now. Even if I know Ottawa is not what you had in mind."

Shane frowns and reaches to squeeze his hand. "No, *I'm* sorry. You knew I was in a bad place, and you were trying to give me something to fall back on. I should have never shut you down so quickly. I'm…I'm embarrassed by the way I handled that conversation. And I never meant to say that you can't turn the Centaurs around. I know how good of a Captain you are. I know how hard you work."

Ilya smiles wryly at him. "Well. I am under a lot of pressure now that I know you will be on the team. I have to make sure my perfect kitten gets his fifth Stanley Cup, after all." He

watches as Shane's face crumples slightly, which…was not his intention.

"It's…it's okay, Ilya. I mean," Shane pauses, chewing at his lower lip. "I'm starting to come to terms with the fact that I may never win another Cup. And…maybe that's okay. I mean, four is a lot. It's more than a lot of guys in the League have."

Ilya shakes his head in disagreement, squeezing his hand back tightly. "Are you kidding me? You are *absolutely* going to win another Cup. I am working my guys so hard at training camp. They are very nervous to know who the new star player is. I told them it is life or death. They are busting their *asses*."

Shane puffs a surprised laugh. "Ilya. It's only the second day of camp. You've gotta go easy on them."

Ilya raises his eyebrows. "I do not know how you run your team, Hollander, but on *my* team, we train like the future Stanley Cup winners that I know we *are*. Am I going to have to whip you into shape when you come to practice as well? Because I am not liking this pessimistic talk. You are not sounding like a proper Centaur."

Shane just giggles and drops his head forward onto Ilya's chest. "You're ridiculous."

"Mm, I am being dead serious," Ilya assures him, but he's smiling as well. "I cannot wait to tell the guys about you."

Shane stiffens slightly and pulls back to look at him. "I—we can't come out to them."

Ilya just blinks at him. "I meant about you joining the team."

"Oh," Shane replies, some weight dropping off of his shoulders.

He hadn't actually put much thought into coming out to the guys, but now that Shane mentioned it…it made sense to come out to them eventually. Ilya didn't think the Centaurs would have any problem keeping their mouths shut, and especially with how he and Shane tended to act around one another, Ilya highly doubted they'd be able to keep it under wraps for long. Still, though, he has no intention of trying to force something on Shane before he's ready. If that meant playing platonic a little longer, then Ilya was happy to do that.

"I, um—" Shane starts, and Ilya regards him carefully. "I do think I'm going to have to come out to them, though. I mean, it seems like word is spreading pretty fast, and, like, it's going to get to them at some point or another. I may as well just rip the band-aid off. Address it now."

Ilya is surprised by this, but he has nothing against Shane coming out to the team.

"They are going to take it well," Ilya soothes any lingering worries he may have. "I…sort of came out to Coach Wiebe. And, um. I came out to Troy as well."

Shane presses his eyebrows together in bewilderment. "You did? Uh, wow. What um…what prompted that?"

Ilya sighs. He doesn't really want to get into this right now, but he knows Shane is just asking because he's nervous about people making the connection. "Coach Wiebe was telling me about the trade, asking me if I knew your reasoning behind it since we're friends. I could tell he didn't want to out you, but he was fishing to see if I knew, so I just told him I'm bisexual. I think that…told him what he needed to know. I haven't come out to the rest of the guys yet."

He doesn't mention that Coach Wiebe has maybe clued into the fact that he and Shane are together. Figures it's a conversation for a different day. And Ilya trusted Coach Wiebe not to bring it up, anyway.

"And…Troy?" Shane asks, tipping his head.

Ilya waves it off. "He came to me with a personal matter. I could tell he needed someone to talk to, and he didn't exactly trust me, so I just told him something to ease his worries. He took it well. He's…he's a cool guy." A cool guy who was interested in his boyfriend, but again, not the time or place.

"Oh," Shane just nods in acceptance. "Well…good. I'm glad they took it well. It sounds like…it sounds like a good place to be."

Ilya smiles lightly. He can tell Shane is just trying to make the best out of a bad situation, but in time, Ilya hoped he really came to understand how good this team would be for him. Winning wasn't everything, and while Ilya still fully intended on winning, he prayed that, in time, Shane would start to find value in other things. Like having a team that actually supported him.

"Do you think you'd be up for coming to training camp sometime this week? Not to play or anything. I know you've had a rough go of it," Ilya adds, trying to remove some of the pressure. Coach Wiebe hadn't expected the trade to even officially go through before camp was over. But since Shane was here and all, Ilya wouldn't mind bringing him in to lift the team's morale.

Shane just looks at him like he's offended. "Of course, I'm coming to training camp. I want to get a sense of what we're working with. New team, new lines. I've been playing with the same guys for ten fucking years. It's going to be an adjustment."

Ilya shakes his head fondly and pulls Shane in for a smacking kiss. His hockey star was fucking ridiculous, but Ilya loved him immensely. "Fine, but I do not want you playing with them until they are in better shape. Let me work my magic on them these next two weeks. At least until your trade is officially finalized."

Shane looks like he wants to protest, but Ilya just levels him with a look to show he is very serious. He grins in satisfaction when Shane just sags against him in defeat.

"Fine," Shane mutters, rubbing his cheek against the fabric of Ilya's shirt. "As long as you give me access to the tapes once you have them. I want to start studying the talent pool."

God, he was so fucking sexy when he was talking about Ilya's team. *Their* team, now. Fuck. Ilya couldn't believe how quickly his plan had manifested. He'd anticipated it taking years to convince Shane to become a Centaur, only now, he fucking was one. He could not fucking wait to tell the guys.

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He walks into training camp with an extra pep in his step the next morning. It puts the guys on edge more than usual, which is weird, because the past few days he's been in evil Captain mode. But for some reason, his blinding smile today is the thing that's putting them at unease.

Shane was sleeping in, because Ilya thought he deserved some much-needed beauty rest, but he vowed to make a quick appearance around lunchtime. The guys were in for such a fucking treat. Ilya couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces once they realized who was going to be leading this team to their potential first Stanley Cup victory.

It's also Harris' first day with the team, which Ilya is fucking stoked about, too. For one, the team was shaping up to be pretty fucking gay, and with Harris in the mix now, Ilya was sure the gay vibes were only going to increase. Good. He was going to give Shane a gay-ass, Stanley Cup-winning team the way the world intended.

"Hey, Ilya!" Harris greets him brightly when Ilya steps into the locker room midway through the day. "Mind if I snap a photo? I'd love to make a post about the team's first week of training camp."

"Absolutely," Ilya grins and then strikes a pose for the camera.

Harris is laughing as he takes the shot. "Awesome. Thanks! Hey, I heard about the fact that Shane Hollander is joining the team. Any word on when he'll be here?"

"Sh, sh," Ilya quiets him in a frenzy. "He is going to stop by any minute now to help me deliver the big news. I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"Ah, gotcha," Harris grins, miming zipping his lips. "Your secret is safe with me. Does that mean his trade is official yet?"

"They are still signing contracts, but he is definitely going to be a Centaur," Ilya boasts proudly, because yeah. He had made that happen. "I am sure Hollander is going to want to announce this to the press in his own way, so just make sure you do not put any pictures of him in your post. Not until he is ready."

"No problem," Harris agrees. "I can't wait to meet him! He's like *the* hottest player in the MLH."

Ilya narrows his eyes slightly.

"I meant, like, his skills," Harris laughs at the look Ilya is giving him. "Hottest as in best."

"Oh," Ilya lets his shoulders drop a little at the clarification. "That. Right."

“Don’t get me wrong. He *is* hot,” Harris circles back. “Just maybe not like…*the* hottest.”

Ilya raises a sharp eyebrow. “Oh, really? Then, please, tell. Who is *the* hottest if not for Shane Hollander?”

“Well…” Harris trails, and Ilya follows his gaze as Troy Barrett suddenly steps into the room, sweat dripping down his face.

Ilya smirks and raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Barrett!” He barks, reveling in the way Troy immediately scatters over to him. “I would like for you to meet the team’s social media manager, Harris Drover. Harris, this is Troy Barrett. He is shaping up to be a strong Wing-man for us.”

“I am?” Troy’s face lights up in shock. “Oh, um. Thank you. Uh…” his gaze lands on Harris, eyes dropping momentarily to his prominently displayed LGBTQ+ pins. “It’s nice to meet you. Um. I like your pins.”

Harris brightens at the compliment. “Thank you! I have some extra if anyone on the team is interested.” At the expression that crosses Troy’s face, however, he backtracks slightly. “You don’t have to be gay to wear one. It’s just about ally-ship.”

“I’ll take one,” Ilya pipes up, smiling gratefully when Harris digs one out of his bag and hands it over. Ilya does not hesitate before pinning it onto his jersey, and Troy just blinks at him like he’s unsure.

“Um. I’ll take one, too. But, you know. It’s probably not safe to wear during practice. If someone slams into you, you know…things could go poorly,” Troy explains, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck. “I’ll just put it in my locker for later.”

“Sure,” Harris laughs, handing one to Troy as well. “You don’t have to wear it now.”

Ilya doesn’t miss the way Troy flushes under the attention, but before he can put any more thought into that matter, his phone is lighting up with a text from Shane signaling that he’s arrived.

“Oh, shit! Okay, I’ll be right back,” Ilya tells them both, giving Harris a quick squeeze on the shoulder before darting off to the front of the rink to meet Shane out by his car. Shane doesn’t have any Centaurs merch of his own yet, but Ilya is delighted to see he’s dressed in one of Ilya’s team sweatshirts. Part of him wants to be proud that Shane felt comfortable enough to bear Ilya’s slightly oversized hoodie in front of the team, but honestly, Shane had a habit of parading around in his clothes and not caring who saw. His boy is braver than he gives himself credit for.

“Hi,” Shane greets him with what looks to be a tired smile, but he appears more well-rested than Ilya has seen him in weeks. Sharing a bed with your loving boyfriend could probably do that to a person. Ilya had seen it in himself when he looked in the mirror this morning.

“Hi,” Ilya says back excitedly, and he can’t help bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Are you ready?”

“I’m so fucking nervous,” Shane admits, and Ilya just pulls him into a big bear-hug.

“You’re Shane fucking Hollander. You’ve got this. And you’ve got me. And the rest of the guys are going to lose their shit once they realize we’ve landed you,” Ilya tells him confidently.

“Are they going to lose their shit when they realize I’m a faggot, too?” Shane scoffs weakly, and Ilya pulls away to regard him with concern.

“Hey,” he says seriously. “*None* of that fucking language. Just because a bunch of assholes talked to you that way does *not* mean you get to talk that way about yourself. You being gay is my favorite fucking part about you, okay? It’s the part that lets me be madly in love with you and lets you be madly in love with me back. God did not give men prostates for no reason, yes? He gave you one so I can fuck into you repeatedly until you’re crying and screaming my name and having a religious experience in the best kitten space of your life. You could not have that if you were not gay.”

“Jesus,” Shane laughs, shaking his head. “Please don’t put that in your speech when you intro me.”

Ilya just smirks and kisses him loudly.

“And I thought your favorite thing about me was my freckles,” he pouts cutely. Ilya wants to eat him *up*.

They make their way into the rink, and Ilya fights against all his might not to hold Shane’s hand. If he had it his way, they’d be making their official debut as the power couple of hockey, the official *Mom and Dad* of this team; Shane would be the mom because he has all the power, of course. But alas, Ilya can’t complain when they step into the locker room, and the boys slowly start to notice them in shock.

“Hollander!” Hazy bellows loudly. “Oh my god, what the fuck are you *doing here*, bro?”

“Shane fucking Hollander!” Bood whoops next, until every single one of them has taken notice.

“Hollander! Hollander! Hollander!” They start chanting his name, and Ilya grins over at Shane to find him looking shy and flushed.

“Hey guys,” Shane laughs half-heartedly, and Ilya can’t resist wrapping an arm around him and pulling him close until Shane gives him a look and playfully shoves him off.

“Shouldn’t you be at your own training camp in Montreal?” Troy asks, eyebrows pinched in confusion.

“He’s wearing a Centaurs sweatshirt,” Luca whispers shyly.

“Listen up, Centaurs,” Ilya claps to silence them and get their attention. “I have a big fucking announcement to make. I’m sure many of you remember that I said we have a new player joining us.”

They all just blink at him in confusion, eyes darting between Ilya and Shane like they have no idea what the announcement could be. Surely *Shane Hollander* wasn't the new player he was talking about.

"Shane," Ilya turns to address him. "The floor is all yours." Ilya gestures to him and then steps aside to let Shane deliver the official news.

"Thanks," Shane smiles, his hands in the pockets of Ilya's Cens sweatshirt as he steps into the middle of the room. "Well, it's all being finalized still, but as of the end of this week, I will officially be playing for the Centaurs this season."

Another bout of silence, the boys looking at him in absolute shock and disbelief.

"Is this a joke?" One of the rookies has the nerve to utter.

"Are you guys pranking us?"

"No joke," Shane breathes a laugh.

"But…but—" Luca stammers, shaking his head in bewilderment. "What about Montreal? Why would you leave the Voyageurs? I mean, you guys are the best team in the League."

"It wasn't a good fit anymore," Shane shrugs, offering him a sad smile. "That's actually something I wanted to talk to you guys about. I'm sure some of you have heard some rumors going around. Ones about me."

Ilya sees a few of the guys shuffle uncomfortably.

"Since this is a fresh start, I wanted to be completely honest, and I figured you should hear it from me." He steels himself and then puts on a determined face. "I'm gay. My other team didn't take too kindly to that, so I wanted to get it out in the open before the season kicks off. I hope it's not going to be a problem for anyone in this locker room, and I hope you don't treat me any differently because of it. I'm just here to play hockey, same as all of you."

Ilya doesn't give any of them time to react before he steps up. "If anyone has a problem, please speak up now, because we will not tolerate homophobia on this team. We are damn lucky that Hollander has decided to grace us with his presence, and let me assure you that all of you are a lot more replaceable than he is."

The guys still haven't said anything. They're in a state of shock and fear and disbelief all at once. And then—

"Holy shit. Are you serious? We could actually win a fucking Cup," Wyatt breaks into a huge grin, and all the guys start to titter with excitement.

"Man, fuck the Voyageurs! My sister's gay, too. I fucking love gay people," Bood declares loudly, forcing a surprised laugh out of Shane.

"Welcome to the team, Shane!" Harris calls out. "I have some extra LGBTQ+ ally pins if anyone wants one."

“I’ve already got mine,” Ilya smirks, pointing proudly to the pin on his practice jersey.

“I want one!” Luca raises his hand excitedly. “I think it’s super brave of you to come out, Shane. I’m so, so happy you’re going to be on the team.”

“Yo, me too. I want one!” Holmberg raises his hand, too.

And then, one by one, Ilya watches as all of the guys rush over to get their ally pins from Harris, each of them proudly displaying it by pinning it to their jersey. Out of the corner of his eye, Ilya sees Troy hesitantly pulling his from his locker to pin on as well. He freezes when he catches Ilya watching him and then slowly offers him a tentative smile, which Ilya returns tenfold.

“Here, Shane,” Harris steps forward to pin one on Shane’s Centaurs sweatshirt, grinning when Shane leans in to let him.

Ilya looks on in pure delight as all of the players huddle around Shane excitedly, each one of them wearing their LGBTQ+ pins like it’s cost them absolutely nothing to do so. Ilya even catches Coach Wiebe wearing one on his shirt when he and Shane step inside his office to greet him later. It’s so fucking beautiful that Ilya has to stop himself from crying, because this is everything Shane deserves and more. This was what a real fucking team looked like, and Ilya just can’t believe that this is *his* team, that with all of the horrible shit constantly going on around them, he’s somehow landed the best group of guys in the entire League, and not just that, but he’s got *Shane* with him, too.

Ilya is pleased when Shane hangs around a little longer to chit-chat. He and the boys have to get back to practice, but over the next few hours, the guys find time to go up to him and express their excitement. He catches some of them exchanging numbers with him, a couple of others begging for photos with Shane in their matching Centaurs gear.

Shane politely asks them not to mention the trade yet, or his sexuality, which all of the guys graciously agree to. Shane wasn’t ready to come out to the wider public, yet. He’d told Ilya as much this morning. And while word would continue to spread, Shane was under no obligation to officially announce his identity to anyone until he was ready. Ilya is just glad he felt ready to do so with the guys, and he’s fucking ecstatic that it’s gone so well. Part of him hopes Troy will feel comfortable enough to do the same in due time.

He also, selfishly, is dying to scream he’s bisexual from the fucking rooftops. He desperately wants to be the gay Captain that this very gay team deserves, but he knows it will only draw attention to him and Shane, and for right now, at least, Shane had enough to worry about. Ilya did not want to be another stressor in the midst of his transition.

Shane sits outside the rink and watches the remainder of their practice with one of Ilya’s hoodie strings between his teeth. He’s got his intense hockey face on, the one that makes Ilya want to bite him, and he can’t wait to get him alone later. Shane was in for a rude fucking awakening.

When they finally do step into their house later that evening, Shane heads to the bathroom to have a shower while Ilya gets to work on dinner. He makes something plain, something that

will put Shane's mind at ease, something that he won't have to think twice about eating. Ilya wanted him in a good headspace for what was to come.

"I'm proud of you for coming out to the team," Ilya tells him warmly, sliding his hand across Shane's thigh as they come to the end of their meal. "I know that wasn't easy after the week you've had."

Shane shrugs. "It was a lot easier than anything else I've done this week. Plus, you were right. The guys are awesome," he smiles, and he doesn't seem stressed. He seems so fucking at ease. Ilya knows it's not that simple, but maybe for now, it could be. Maybe, for now, Shane could just enjoy hockey without having to think about Stanley Cups. Ilya hopes it's possible.

"Still. You don't know how happy it made me to see you with them. Having them all accept you like it was nothing. Treat you with the respect you deserve. Treat you like the star you *are*."

Shane flushes under the attention.

"Unfortunately, you and I are going to need to have a serious talk," Ilya breaks the news to him, and he doesn't miss the way Shane's smile drops from his face. "I know this week has been a nightmare for you; I know you are doing your best, but the way that you avoided me for three days is unacceptable."

Shane opens his mouth to argue, but Ilya holds up a finger.

"I am not done," he tells him, and Shane clamps his mouth shut. "I understand you were probably in a very bad headspace, but if you are able to call Farah and initiate a trade, you are capable of sending me a single thumbs-up emoji to let me know you're okay. I should not have to sit by my phone waiting for regular updates from Rose, wondering if you are mad at me, wondering if you are at risk to yourself. I do not need a full conversation or an explanation, but I do need something. You owe me that. As your boyfriend, and especially as your Dom."

Shane swallows thickly and nods. "I'm sorry."

"You are going to be sorry," Ilya corrects him darkly, rubbing at Shane's thigh a little intentionally. "If you are open to it, I would like for us to have a much deeper talk about our dynamic and how it extends to different aspects of life."

Shane's eyebrows pinch together. "I—what do you mean?"

"Well," Ilya licks over his lips, eyes drifting from Shane's hair all the way down his body to where Ilya's hand is still resting possessively over his thigh. "I enjoy taking care of you. It gives me peace of mind to know that you look to me for guidance. Do you enjoy that, too?"

Shane nods emphatically and reaches for Ilya's hand that isn't on his thigh. "Of course, I do."

Ilya smiles warmly, squeezing his fingers. “Well, recently, I have been thinking that I would like to explore that more. And, if you agree, I would like to play a larger role in your decision-making—with clear boundaries so that it feels good for both of us. Is that something you would be interested in?”

Shane sucks his lower lip between his teeth, blinking his big, brown doe eyes up at Ilya. “What, um…what sort of decisions?”

Ilya lets go of his hand in favor of brushing some of his hair out of his eyes, tracing his fingertips across the curve of Shane’s cheek. “We will need to have a long discussion to figure out what we are both comfortable with. But this can extend to many aspects of life. This would mean that you give me consent to take control of things, both in the bedroom and outside of it. Things like your daily routine, when and how often you orgasm, your finances…”

Shane’s eyes go wide, and Ilya looks down to find Shane clutching his knee tightly. “My *finances*? What do you mean by that?”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “It means that if I had my way, I would chop up all your credit cards right now and not let you spend a single cent unless it comes from my bank account. It means that, if you are comfortable, you will have to come to me and get permission to spend *my* money on big purchases. You will tell me what every single cent is going to and I will get off on it because you are *mine* and I want to own and take care of every single part of you.”

Shane sucks in a gasp, but the way his eyes have gone nearly black tells Ilya he is very interested.

“You will not have to waste your time worrying over pointless decisions because I will decide everything for you. When you come, who you’re allowed to hang out with and when, what you spend money on, how hard you work yourself in the gym, how much you eat in a day. I am not looking to restrict you, or mess up your life in any way,” Ilya clarifies before Shane can get the wrong idea. “But if I find you talking to strange Doms in my club without you telling me, you will be punished. If you decide to make a huge life decision like trading to a new hockey team, you will come to *me* and ask my permission first, and I will tell you yes because I want what’s best for you, and then you will feel at *ease* because I have said it is okay. Because you do not have to carry everything alone and because you trust that I have your best interests at heart and I will never, *ever* do anything to go against your mental and physical well-being.”

Ilya lets all of that soak in for him for a second, watching him carefully as each micro-expression drifts across his face.

“All of this would be agreed upon in advance, of course. And we can pause or stop the dynamic at any time if you wish. There will be no consequences if you find it too overwhelming, or if you have a hard limit on something you wish to decide for yourself. I will never decide something for you unless you are fully consenting and present in the moment. I will always pay attention to the *state* you’re in, not just what you say to me. My role would be to look out for you with a gentle guidance because I love you and I care for you and I want things to feel easy.”

Shane still hasn't said anything, so Ilya gives his knee a little squeeze.

"Could you tell me what you are thinking about all of this? There is no pressure if it's not something you're interested in—"

"No, I—" Shane cuts in, huffing to himself in frustration. "I *am* interested. I just…I have a lot of questions, I guess."

Ilya's lips curl at the edges. "We will need to talk about a lot of things. Which part do you find most appealing?"

"Orgasms," Shane says a little shamefully, and Ilya just hums. He had an inkling.

"Mm. Because you are a very good boy for me, aren't you? You want to please your Alpha by letting me decide when you come?"

Shane closes his eyes tightly and nods.

Ilya tips his chin until he's forced to open his eyes again. "What else do you like from what I said?"

Shane licks his lips, gaze darting between Ilya's eyes and his mouth. "I—um. I like the thought of you paying for things. But…but it seems like it would be unfair."

Ilya just shrugs. "You have just taken a massive pay cut, haven't you? You are my kitty who I have adopted. I am aware of the financial implications of owning a perfect kitten. I will need to buy my kitten food, clothes, toys. I have already bought my kitten a house."

Shane shivers and bobs his head up and down. "Fuck. Yeah. Okay."

"You will still be able to use your money if you really wish to. None of this has to be permanent, forever, in every single situation. We will still need to check in with each other very often. We will need to revisit our dynamic and make sure we both are still enjoying it. And there may be times when we decide to pause or turn it off."

He stops to make sure Shane's still listening before he continues.

"What about me using you sexually around the house?" Ilya's fingers slide around to slip through the hair at the nape of Shane's neck.

"Jesus," Shane hiccups another gasp. "Using me like…like how?"

"Well, if I ask you to kneel and warm my cock, you would do so without question. If you are in the kitchen cooking, and I would like to fuck you over the counter, I can just walk up and do it. All this means is that you have given consent ahead of time, so we do not have to talk about it in the moment, but you are always able to tell me no if you are not in the mood. We will still have our colors and our safeword, and this is no different than what we do now in the sense that we can stop at *any* time. And if I see that you are not in the right headspace for it, I will never push that boundary. This means that if you wake up in kitten space, I have your consent to use you how I wish, but it also means that if I decide you are not up enough,

then we will not continue. If you are sick or anxious or in a bad mental state, I will never take control if you are not okay and present."

Shane drops his head forward onto Ilya's shoulder, so Ilya gives him a little head scratch.

"Please, tell me if this is too much. I know this would be a big step up from our current dynamic, and I do not want you to agree just because it's what you think I want from you."

Shane just purrs loudly against his chest. Ilya clutches him closely. "I love you so fucking much," Shane slurs, and…right. This conversation was starting to put him down, which meant that they would have to table it for a later date.

"I love you, too, baby," Ilya assures him. "And I would love to keep talking about this when you are in a slightly better headspace." Because Shane has had a tough week, after all, and if he was anything like Ilya, he was probably jumping out of his skin with the need to scene. "I hope you know I am going to have to punish you for the way you did not text me or call me back for three whole days."

Shane looks up abruptly, a small pout on his face, but his eyes are wide. Eager.

"Mm, don't tell me you thought you were going to get away with that scot-free." Ilya scratches his head mockingly. "I was so worried about my perfect kitty. I need to make sure you will never, ever do that to me again, yes? So, you must be punished. It is one thing if you are not feeling well or if you are unable to communicate, but you called Farah, didn't you? Did you answer anyone else while you were ignoring me?"

Shane gulps and nods, causing Ilya to raise his eyebrows.

"Oh, you did, did you? Who else did you talk to while deliberately avoiding my calls? Was it Hayden? Or your parents?"

"My therapist," Shane says shyly, and *fuck*. Ilya hadn't even realized Shane had started going to therapy yet.

"Baby," Ilya coos. "You called your therapist?"

Shane nods and ducks his head like it's only going to make Ilya more angry, but Ilya just pulls him into a big hug.

"I am so proud of you for doing that. You are such a good cat for knowing what to do when you are feeling upset. Good, good boy."

Shane immediately responds to the praise by nuzzling closer to him.

"Was that your first session?" Ilya pulls back slightly to look at him, but Shane just shakes his head and holds up three fingers. "*Three*?" Ilya clarifies, and he gets a nod in return. "Wow. You are such a good kitty cat. But why are you keeping things from me, sweet boy? You must have known how proud I would be of you. How happy that would make me."

Shane starts fiddling with the string of Ilya's hoodie. "I dunno. I guess I wanted to see if it actually worked before I told you. I didn't want you to get your hopes up if they couldn't fix me."

Ilya furrows his eyebrows and immediately cups Shane's jaw to get him to look up. "Hey, that is *not* the reason I asked you to try therapy. There is *nothing* about you that needs to be fixed. I only asked so that you would have another level of support when you are tackling these difficult thoughts that you get. Was your therapist able to help you when you went to them about your team?"

Shane rubs his lips together and nods.

"Good," Ilya says soothingly, petting over his back once again. "I am glad it is going well. I am glad you listened to me, baby. You are *so* perfect for me. There is *nothing* about you that needs to be changed, okay? You are not broken or damaged or in need of fixing. You are just a tiny kitten who needs to talk about these things sometimes. A lot of people benefit from it, and you are no lesser for needing that. Do you hear me?"

Shane smiles and ducks closer as he nods.

"Good boy. Now, I was going to punish you for every day you did not call me back, which was *several* days before the big blowout with your team, by the way," he tells Shane scoldingly, but he's not really mad. He knows Shane has been going through it. The punishment is mostly supposed to be fun for them, anyway. Well, *Ilya* would be having fun at least, but something told him that Shane would enjoy it as well. "But since you were a very good boy by calling your therapist, I will only count the days in which you did not text me back. How many days was that?"

Shane holds up three fingers.

"Three. Good boy. That's correct. Which means I am going to play with you, and you are not going to come for how many hours?"

Shane pulls away quickly in surprise, his cat eyes big and shocked.

"Shane," Ilya says sternly. "How many hours would that be?"

Shane hesitantly holds up three fingers again.

"That's right." Ilya rewards him with a kiss on the nose. "I am going to deny you for three hours. Can you tell me your color?"

"I—green," Shane says quickly, bobbing his head. "Green. Very green."

Ilya smirks and gives his thigh another squeeze. "Good. I have a surprise for you."

They head into the bedroom, and Ilya orders Shane to strip out of his clothes while he gets the supplies they'll need.

"Do you want to be a kitty cat for me during your punishment?"

As if he has to ask. He isn't surprised when Shane whimpers a, "Please."

"Good boy," Ilya tells him, and grabs his ears and tail. Then, he unwraps the special plug he bought during one of his online shopping sprees for Shane recently. It's compatible with Shane's tail, allows for the beautiful, fluffy piece to be attached to the end, but instead of a normal plug, it's a vibrating one that Ilya can control with his phone.

He turns to find Shane completely naked, standing unsurely next to the bed. He looks a little nervous, and a lot turned on, and Ilya is looking forward to making him fall apart.

"I missed you so much," Ilya tells him earnestly as he stalks over to the bed, watching Shane like he's a delicious slice of prey.

"I missed you, too," Shane says through a hitched breath.

Ilya doesn't think he's ever had to punish him before. Shane was usually such a good kitten, but that's why there was all the more reason to teach him this lesson. Regardless of how good Shane usually was, there were still rules, and he needed to know that there were consequences for not following them.

"Come kneel right here for me, baby. I want to put on your ears, please." Ilya points to the floor right in front of him while moving to sit on the bed.

Shane scrambles to follow the instruction and is kneeling at an instant, blinking up at Ilya with his sad, wet, brown eyes. Ilya's heart clenches in his chest.

"You are not in trouble, baby. Not really. I just want to help you remember for next time, okay? As soon as you are done with your punishment, you can be my good, good boy again. And if you have to use your colors or your safeword for any reason, you will still be my good boy. You are not going to get in trouble if you use those. Okay?" He double-checks, slipping his fingers through Shane's hair.

Shane sniffles and nods, leaning into Ilya's touch.

"Can you look at me, please?" Ilya requests and waits for Shane to comply. "This is not just a punishment. This is a release. For both of us. Once we are done, we are past it. You do not have to hold onto it anymore. Yes? Tell me your color again, please."

"Green," Shane leans forward to lick Ilya's knee through the fabric of his pants.

"Good boy. I am going to give you your ears now. I think you are slipping into a level 2 kitty right now. Is that correct?"

Shane just opens his mouth and bites, digging his canines hard into Ilya's knee.

"Yes, I know. It has been a while since my kitty has marked me. I bet you're feeling very territorial right now. But if you can't be good for me, I cannot give you your ears."

Shane huffs around his knee and then reluctantly sits up, a soft pout on his lips.

“There you are, baby. Look, I got you some new fluffy ears. They are very cute, yes?” He asks, presenting Shane with a slightly larger, slightly fluffier set of black and white ears. Each with their own set of speckles, of course. Shane was a signature type of kitty cat, after all. A *designer* cat.

Shane is looking up at him with want in his eyes, which Ilya takes to mean he likes them. It’s been a long time since Shane has been a kitty. Two and a half weeks. Ilya couldn’t imagine how pent up his kitty tendencies must be feeling. He would have to take very good care of him during this session. Shane deserved some good kitten space, after all that time, even if it was going to be paired with a punishment.

He gently clips each ear into Shane’s fluffy black hair. Shane is still looking a little troubled, like more than anything, he just wants to be good, but Ilya can’t fall for those eyes right now. He can’t give him everything he wants. He needs to be firm sometimes, or Shane will start to run him into the ground with those fucking sad kitten eyes. He did not feel very dominant against them.

“Beautiful,” Ilya traces a thumb over his freckled cheeks. “Now, get on the bed for me if you would like your tail. I got a new plug for you, драгоценный. I think you are going to like it, but I think I am going to like it even more,” he teases.

Shane is mouthing at his knee again, like he thinks it’s somehow going to keep him from the inevitable, but Ilya would quite like to start the clock on this evening. He has a 3-hour movie planned for them, one that Shane probably won’t see a lick of, and Ilya probably won’t either —but it will be something to focus on. Something to keep Shane grounded while Ilya toyed with him.

“Come on, baby. You are stalling. I do not like it. Up for me, please, so I can eat your beautiful ass until you are a crying mess.”

Shane whines, but he must not be able to resist the description Ilya has painted for him, because he almost immediately moves to comply.

“Very good boy. If you are extra good for me, maybe I will reduce your punishment time, but so far, I am not impressed with this behavior,” he warns, giving Shane a small smack on the butt as he crawls onto the bed.

He’s fucking beautiful when he’s naked. He’s beautiful always, but it’s been weeks since Ilya has worshipped his precious skin, fastened his mouth to the most-godly of statues. His Shane could inspire sonnets and sunshine and possibly bring peace to this Earth if enough people paid attention. His Shane was fucking everything, and now, his Shane was going to be with him all the time.

Ilya glides a hand across his right ass cheek as Shane settles on his hands and knees. The ears stick up a little higher, which makes Ilya’s chest warm considerably because he can see them even more clearly from his position at Shane’s rear.

“It’s been so long since you’ve had your tail, baby. Are you going to be extra tight for me?” Ilya questions, licking his thumb before pressing it to rub at Shane’s hole.

Shane gasps and lets his head hang forward, but he doesn't answer, so Ilya pinches the back of his thigh hard.

"Ah," Shane whines.

"You are deliberately not answering my questions. I know you are not that far down yet, моя любовь. Or have you forgotten the point of this punishment already? Remind me why you are being punished." Ilya spreads him apart and licks broadly across his hole.

"Oh, fuck," Shane gets out, dropping his head once more. "It's…it's cause I didn't talk to you."

"That's not the real reason. Tell me the real reason," Ilya demands, licking over him twice more before intentionally pausing to wait for Shane's answer.

"For—" Shane moans. "For not letting you know I was okay. For…for talking to other people, but not you."

"Good boy. You are correct," Ilya praises, giving him a rub over his flank before turning to lie back against the bed, positioning himself directly under Shane's hips.

He immediately gets a look at Shane's cock. His balls hanging dumbly like they serve any purpose. But really, Ilya's cock was the only one that mattered here. Shane was just a mindless kitty cat to fuck into. He would need to do something about that soon.

"Shane, baby," Ilya hums, reaching up to pet over his thighs. "You wanna ride my face for a bit?" Because right now, Ilya just wanted to suffocate under him. He wanted Shane to ride him until his chin was fucking soaked with it. He didn't feel like fingering him tonight, so the only other option was to get him messy until he was all slicked up like a real omega. Ilya wondered if he could find an alpha knot attachment to fuck him with. Shane would probably love that. Ilya fucking would, too.

Shane whimpers at the command, but he immediately shifts to get himself into a better position before slowly lowering himself onto Ilya's face.

Ilya moans, sending vibrations through him as Shane grinds down against his mouth, letting out the most filthy, sinful noises above him. Ilya grips his thighs tightly to pull him closer, to get Shane to put a little more weight on him because it's fucking *hot*. Ilya can already feel saliva starting to gather all over his face, Shane spreading it around with his ass as he grinds his hips in pretty little half-circles against Ilya's tongue.

Shane gasps loudly when Ilya's stubble starts to rub too harshly against his kitten's precious thighs, but Ilya wants it to hurt tomorrow, so he just surges up to meet Shane's movements, trying to lick the taste from inside of him as Shane turns into a sloppy mess above him.

Shane sounds pretty close to tears about fifteen minutes in, and Ilya doesn't want to waste his stamina, so when that happens, he reluctantly pulls away from him. Shane's hole is swollen, and his thighs are fucking *ripped* up, and Ilya wipes his mouth on the back of his arm with a smug look on his face.

If only the fucking Centaurs could see him taking apart Shane Hollander like this. If only the entire fucking League could see. This is what the player with the best stats in the entire NHL got up to in his free time. The man whose face was plastered across billboards sky high, the man who made millions off of companies that were willing to pay to use his name because it was just that powerful. That man, the Golden Boy—well, underneath it all, he was really just Ilya's pet. Ilya's toy to do whatever he pleased with. And it really fucking pleased Ilya to turn Shane into a blubbery, aching pile of tears.

He doesn't make a big fuss of getting the plug in him. Shane is loose enough from grinding against Ilya's tongue for the better part of a half hour, so luckily, Ilya is able to press the plug right into him with minimal pushback. He clips on the tail unceremoniously and then glides his hand across Shane's back in search of the chain to his collar. Once he arrives at his destination, Ilya gives the necklace a little pull.

"Are you ready to come watch a movie with me, baby? We are going to continue to play in the living room. Do you want one of my hoodies so you are not cold?"

Shane is a bit dazed from their activities so far this evening, but he's not completely out of it yet. He nods and then sits up to wrap his arms around Ilya's neck needily.

"Ah, I see. You are being a sweet kitty to me. Giving me lots of sad kitty eyes today. You know I love you lots, don't you?" Ilya double-checks while rubbing his big hands down Shane's bare back.

Shane nods and nuzzles into him desperately.

"I love you more than anything," he repeats, anyway. "I was so happy to see you with my boys today. To see them being so welcoming to you. You are going to be the new kitty cat on the team, aren't you?"

Shane whines and licks over Ilya's neck to show that he really likes that.

"Oh? You were already hoping this, were you? You were hoping to get lots of pets from everyone?"

Shane mewls his agreement and starts to pant against Ilya's skin.

"My goodness. My baby loves the idea of being a kitty cat in front of others. Were you a kitty cat for Rose when she came over? I heard she painted your kitten claws. Can you show me?"

Shane does sniffle this time, signaling tears in his near future, as he pulls one of his paws from Ilya's neck to plop it in his hand.

"Oh, baby. These are so beautiful," Ilya coos, pressing a kiss to his fingers. "These are even pinker than usual. I think it suits you very well. Pink just might be your color."

He's pleased when Shane's cheeks flush a very delicious, similar shade of pink, his freckles peeking through like little stars.

“Okay, off for a second so I can grab you a hoodie, please. I know you do not love ones with zippers, but I would like to be able to touch you, so that is what it will have to be.”

Shane pouts and whimpers in protest, but he doesn’t put up too much of a fight when Ilya stands to find him a hoodie. Once he has, he carefully helps Shane into it and then strips out of his own shirt, leaving himself in nothing but his sweats and boxer briefs.

“Come on, kitty. Let me carry you to the couch. Kitties do not need to walk when they have their owners to carry them, yes?”

He’s grateful when Shane scrambles over him, and doesn’t say anything when, on the ride over, he starts to feel wetness gathering in the crevice of his collarbone.

“You’re okay, baby. You’re doing such a good job for me already,” Ilya presses a kiss behind his ear, rubbing his back slowly as he lowers them both onto the couch. Shane was not taking too well to the word punishment, that much was for sure. Ilya had called him a bad kitty before, but it hadn’t seemed to have had the same effect. Still, he wonders if Shane will feel differently after they finish, or if the perfectionist in him was just really put off by the idea of having done something incorrectly.

Ilya pulls Shane close to him as he reaches for the remote to put on *Titanic*. It was almost exactly three hours, a little mushy, and it didn’t have too much action to the point where it might stress Shane out. If anything, it would maybe make Shane weepy, which Ilya didn’t mind at all. In fact, he secretly wanted his kitten crying and humping desperately against his leg by the time the movie was over.

“Okay, sweet boy. We are going to watch Titanic. And when the movie is over, you can come. But until then, you’re going to be a very good boy and sit with me, right? You wanna cuddle with your Alpha?”

Shane nods and sniffles again, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist as Ilya tucks him further into his side.

He gets a pinch-me moment when he thinks about the fact that not even three months ago, he hadn’t even *kissed* Shane. He was still nearly ten years deep into his desperate plan from hell without any progress to show for it, and now, Shane was cuddled up against him in the house they shared after coming back from training camp of the team that they were both on. He was wearing Ilya’s mother’s necklace around his throat because he wanted to shout their connection for all the world to see. Ilya presses a firm kiss to the top of his head and takes a big inhale, as if it will help him come to terms with the fact that this is real life. He actually gets to have this.

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Shane does *not* want to be a bad kitty. He already feels guilty enough over the whole thing. If Shane was outed, how long would it be before Ilya was, too? Before the two of them were ousted from hockey for good. All because Shane *needed* to come out to his coaches, *needed* Hayden to stick up for him. It all feels so pointless now. He feels like he’s walking across a

very thin tightrope, looking down at the deadly drop that awaits below, except how well he balances determines Ilya's fate as well. It's too much pressure. He's already wobbling.

Shane sucks in a sharp breath, but Ilya tracks it almost immediately and is whispering lovingly into his ear without a second thought. *God, he's **too** fucking good*, Shane thinks to himself. Because Ilya knows everything, sometimes even before Shane knows it himself.

Which must have been terrifying for him these past few days. The not knowing. Shane gets a knot right in the middle of his stomach. His mind takes him back to that night at the cottage, the one where he'd begged Ilya to let him Dom and, Ilya, being the amazingly good sport that he was, had agreed. He pictures Ilya's wide eyes when Shane had started to falter, the scared look on his face once he realized things were going downhill and he couldn't jump in to help, that he wasn't the one in control.

Shane blinks up at him and pictures that same worried look, pictures Ilya going like that for days on end, making himself sick over the fact that there was nothing he could do. Shane swallows and lets tears pour from his eyes onto Ilya's bare chest. He had caused that feeling, the same one that he'd caused that night at the cottage. The one that had caused Ilya to tell Shane about his mom, his guilt over his father and brother and everyone else in his family, because Ilya took that kind of thing personally. He considered himself responsible for *everyone* around him. He needed control because it gave him comfort. Because he had had things taken away from him before and it fucking killed him all the same. Shane had done that to him. Shane had taken away his safety by not checking in. He realizes it now.

"Hey, you're alright, kitty. I promise I'm not mad at you," Ilya leans down to wipe at his eyes, but Shane just surges forward to kiss him. Not like a kitty kiss, but a real, passionate, human kiss because he loves this person more than anything in the world, more than his kitty brain is even capable of processing, sometimes.

He's a little messy with it, a little wet, but Ilya seems to get the sentiment regardless, because he cups Shane's cheek and slows his motion until they're licking gently into each other's mouths, stealing the words not said from the last few days. It's an apology; Ilya knows it. Shane can tell by the way he moans and presses forward, thumb rubbing circles into one of the dimples at the base of Shane's spine.

And then—

All of a sudden, Shane's plug starts to buzz to life inside of him, and Shane jolts in terror, Ilya catching him as he falls forward onto his chest.

"C'mon, baby," Ilya's voice drips condescendingly. "You didn't really think I was just going to have you sit with your kitty tail in for three hours, did you? No, that would be way too easy, sweet boy."

Shane's hands are shaking as he scrambles for purchase on Ilya's chest, letting his face drop to Ilya's shoulder so he can mouth at the skin there.

Ilya is laughing, and it's making Shane feel bad in the good way. The good way that's kind of embarrassing, but he still wants to sink deeper into.

Shane whines and wraps himself around Ilya, rolling his hips forward against him because his dick is red and throbbing against his tummy underneath Ilya's hoodie.

"The movie has barely started, kitten. Are you sure this is how you want to play it? I will pull out a cock ring if I have to."

Shane cries out and stops moving his hips, collapsing his full weight on Ilya this time as he full-body sobs. The vibrations are just a dull thing in the background, just an annoyance really that had caught him off guard, but they buzz to life even harder now, causing Shane to cry harder along with it.

"I know you love to cry for me, don't you, котенок? You are so pretty when you do," Ilya coos, and Shane thinks maybe he really is trying to torture him, because just as quickly as it had started, the vibrations come to a stop.

He heaves a massive exhale, feeling himself start to go down further as Ilya pets soothingly at his back.

"I *love* having my pet back home with me. I need access to my kitten at all times, don't I? You do not try to keep me from something that is mine, yes?"

Shane whimpers and nods guiltily, because Ilya was right. He had been a bad kitty. He'd known it at the time, too. Almost like he had wanted to be punished for it. Almost like a part of him was hoping that Ilya would retaliate. That he cared enough about Shane to do so.

"M'sorry," Shane stutters into his thigh, rubbing his cheek needily against the fabric there.

"I know you are, baby. You are usually such a good boy. You do not like being bad, do you?"

Shane shakes his head frantically.

"No? You don't want to be my bad kitty?" Ilya asks, pressing at the base of Shane's cat tail plug until he yowls in desperation.

"Please, Alpha. Please, please," Shane begs, and Ilya just laughs softly.

"Poor kitten. You do not even know what you are asking for, do you?" Ilya tuts, combing his fingers through Shane's hair. "Come here, baby. Come sit in my lap so I can take care of you."

Ilya was right. Shane *didn't* know what he wanted. He wanted Ilya to take care of everything, to form every thought for him and then lovingly feed it into his head until Shane was nothing but a mindless doll for him.

It's that thought that does it to him. That sends him the rest of the way down into the space where the only words he knows are *meow* and *green*. The plug buzzes to life inside of him, and Shane weeps into Ilya's neck until he's shaking all over. Until he's sucking in panicked breaths, and Ilya is petting him until he feels good again, and then the vibrator goes *off*.

And it happens all over again. Again and again, and Shane gets closer every time, but never close enough. He cries and sobs, and he's so sensitive, he's pretty sure his dick is going to shoot off at any second now. But sometimes Ilya wraps a hand around him and squeezes so tightly that Shane literally *can't* come. No matter how hard he might want to, no matter how much he might *need* it. But he must not, because Ilya hasn't decided he needs it. And Ilya's way was the law.

Shane refuses to come. He refuses to come because he has to be good. He has to show Ilya what an amazingly good kitty cat he can be because, then, Ilya will let him be the team kitty cat. And maybe Ilya will let the boys pet him sometimes. Only if Ilya says it's okay. Or maybe Shane can be a kitty around them, at least. A level 1 kitty cat? Maybe level 2.

Fuck. Shane just…he doesn't mind being Shane Hollander. Not when Shane Hollander gets to love and play hockey with Ilya Rozanov. He just wishes more people knew that Shane Hollander was also a cat. But fuck. People don't even know that Shane Hollander loves Ilya Rozanov. How could Shane possibly be a cat around anyone without Ilya touching him?

He cries harder because everything is so fucking complicated. He wants to love who he loves. He wants to be who he is without having to pick and choose what's appropriate to display. He's never taking off his collar as long as he lives.

"God, you're fucking everything to me, Shane," Ilya is telling him from some far-away place. "I wish I could take it all away. I wish I could fix everything. I'm going to win you so many Stanley Cups, baby."

Shane purrs and nuzzles against him, eyes closed, breathing in his scent like it's more important than oxygen. Right now, it is.

"I love you more than anything, sweet kitten. I'm so, so glad you're with me now. You're never going to have to do any of it alone. I'm always going to be here to support you and take care of you."

Ilya's Russian accent is so pretty. Shane feels fingers scratching through his hair. He's so close to sleep, but the plug starts up again, and he just gets fuzzy again. He's drooling. He thinks he has been for a while now. He licks wetly wherever he can reach, and Ilya rewards him with more pets.

"You're okay, baby. I'm right here. Just stay with me a little longer," Ilya requests, pushing his fingers into Shane's fluff. Shane nuzzles closer.

A beat later, he feels fingers press into his mouth, and he blinks himself back to consciousness, finding Ilya staring back at him. The fingers in his mouth retreat after a moment.

"You are so perfect for me, angel. Would you like to get your treat for being such a good boy for me now?"

Shane's eyes go a little more alert. A treat? For him? Shane smacks his lips and presses his face hotly against Ilya's erection, twisting back and forth to smear his mouth across the

fabric.

“Oh, I see? You are hoping for a different kind of treat, yes?”

Shane nods and even lets out a soft, scratchy little meow, one that makes Ilya moan above him.

“Fuck. You’re such a desperate little thing, aren’t you? You want your Alpha’s cock more than you want to come?”

Shane whimpers and nods again, offering Ilya his best sad kitty eyes.

“So, if I let you suck my dick, you are not going to come. Do you understand, Shane?”

Shane gasps and ruts his hips forward to remind himself of his erection, still pressed against the couch from where it’s hiding in the confines of Ilya’s hoodie. He’s been hard and ignoring it for so long that he had barely noticed. The dull ache is a comfort now. Familiar.

Shane rubs his nose against Ilya’s sweatpants and sniffs once. Twice. Ilya’s fingers slide through his hair and push him down. Shane moans into him.

“Oh, yes. That’s exactly what a good kitty does. You are sucking up to me because you know I will treat you like a fucking king because of it. Because that is how this relationship works when we treat each other with respect.”

Shane drops his head and lets his tongue loll out as Ilya rises to push his sweatpants down, and then, Shane is on him in an instant. He loves rubbing his face against Ilya, loves feeling the pre-cum slide across his lips like a light sheen of lip gloss. He likes feeling Ilya’s pubic hair tickle across his face as the shaft slides against his cheek, likes the scent of him when Shane dips lower to lick at his balls. Or even lower.

“Holy fuck,” Ilya curses when Shane’s tongue dips between his cheeks.

Ilya spreads his legs to give Shane more room, and Shane just…Shane just wants to taste. He licks messily at Ilya’s hole, wiggling his nose up against Ilya’s balls every so often because he likes to nuzzle. He wants to feel Ilya all over him like a reminder. Ilya grips the back of his neck and pulls him closer.

Shane whines because he loves him. He flicks his tongue in circles, and then hearts, because Ilya deserves romance. He kisses. And then tries to bite for good measure, until Ilya is pulling him back by his hair with a shout.

“Ты маленький ублюдок.”

And Shane just smiles dazedly because Ilya is everything to him. He’s missed this so much.

And then Ilya is pulling him into a heated kiss and Shane has no choice but to collapse on top of him with loose limbs. And then Ilya is getting them both off with one hand around his waist, supporting Shane’s entire 200 lbs of weight, while the other is jerking both of their cocks between them. And their heads keep bumping together, and Shane is gasping loudly

into Ilya's mouth in little *ah, ah, ahs*. And Ilya's eyes are so blue that Shane's pretty sure he's died and gone to heaven because there's no way something this beautiful exists on Earth.

And then he's coming with a shout and a sob, and the thing inside of him that always causes panic and alarms is shouting off with pleasure this time. And all of Shane's curvy pieces nestle right there in perfect harmony with Ilya's until they feel like one body. Like maybe they've always been, but somewhere along the way they got separated. Shane clings to him desperately, like he's the last and first thing to ever exist.

Ilya is shushing him, bringing him back down to reality, and clutching him so tightly like maybe he understands the weight in Shane's chest.

"Good boy. Oh, you were so good for me," Ilya says in that soft, almost baby-like voice he does sometimes when he thinks Shane is really fragile and mushy. "God, you are so, so perfect. I've never seen anything like you before."

Shane flushes and preens under the attention, hiding his face. He's embarrassed, and he wants to disappear in Ilya's arms so that none of the other bullshit can ever find him. He deserves this escape. But he also deserves to have it as more than just an escape. He deserves to have it as a reality. To him, it already was, but not to others. Shane wanted to change that.

But there have been enough changes this week. For now, he just needs to get settled. He needs to find his new normal here in Ottawa, with Ilya, and on the Centaurs. He may not have a Stanley Cup anytime in the near future, but with Ilya on his side, Shane was sure the two of them could come up with something equally as thrilling— if not even more so.

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Chapter End Notes

The boys are back together :)

Lots to come! We still have Shane's playroom, which Ilya is hard at work on. In the background, Ilya has also been working on getting his Ottawa club up and running. We still have lots of friends in Montreal, so don't fear!!

Our first away game in Montreal is going to be a doozy. We're not there yet, but when it happens, we have plans with the Pikes as well as a fun event planned at Hush with Ivan. Plus, the game in general is going to be...eventful.

Curious to hear your thoughts on how you think Shane and Ilya's relationship is going to play out with the Centaurs. Are they going to be able to keep it under wraps for long? Will this get them outed to the general public? Thank you **SO** much for all the kudos and comments!!! I am definitely behind on replying, but I read every single one, and you guys are alwaaaays giving me such good inspo/ideas so thank you thank you thank you!! Please keep them coming!!

Also quick question! As this fic gets longer and longer, I'm wondering if it might make sense at some point to split it into two books if there is an obvious stopping point? I worry that fics in the 350-500k range are very off-putting to some people because it's a huge undertaking. Curious to know your opinion as I have a lot of story left to tell with these two!

@rozyhollanov is doing chapter-by-chapter edits and they are so beautiful!!! See her edits for Chapter 1+2 as well as Chapter 3

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of training camp passes by in a blur. Shane still shows up more days than not. He's giving the guys advice, telling them how to line up their shots better, how to anticipate checks before they come, how to know when to pass versus when to shoot. Ilya is having a hard time not hanging all over him, but he supposes it's a good thing he's unable to. He needed to learn how to be a Captain to this team without getting distracted by his favorite toy.

Because Shane isn't just determined when he's in Mr. Hockey Mode; no, he was also seductive. Chewing on the strings of Ilya's hoodie, batting his pretty eyelashes at Harris and Troy and all the other probably closeted, bi-curious-for-Shane truthers.

"You need to knock it off," Ilya tells him one day, pressing him against the lockers of the locker room while everyone else is busy on the ice.

Shane's eyebrows pinch together. "Knock what off?" He voices in confusion.

"You are flirting with all of the guys. Do you really think I don't see you? Using your big, Bambi eyes on them. Laughing *so* hard at something Troy said to you. I know Troy, baby. He is not funny," Ilya hisses, his arm still pressed against Shane's chest, pinning him.

Shane just scoffs and rolls his eyes like a fucking brat. "Would you cut it out? I'm just trying to help. I'm *trying* to be part of this team. Like you wanted."

Ilya grips his chin firmly. "Do not get smart with me. Right now, you are being *extremely* helpful by being eye candy for the entire team. There are eyes on you, котенок. Stop performing for them, or you are going to have to deal with me later."

Shane frowns, and he still looks like he wants to protest, but Ilya just raises his eyebrows, daring him to talk back.

"I know you do not understand the powers of your seduction, but as someone who is *very* affected, I am telling you. These guys know you are gay, and they are all curious to try a piece of this." Ilya can't resist slipping forward to cup Shane's ass, smirking when it elicits a sharp inhale from him. "I do not care if they have wives or girlfriends. I do not care how much they would deny it. All I know is that if I offered you up to them, every single guy on this team would jump at the chance. And you would probably let them, wouldn't you?"

"Ilya," Shane warns, pushing at his shoulder. "Anyone could walk in—"

"Answer my question," Ilya says a little more sharply, using his free hand to tug at Shane's hair this time.

"Yes," Shane hiccups around a gasp. "I'd do anything you asked."

“Mm.” Ilya leans in to kiss him hungrily, sucking Shane’s lower lip into his mouth as he pulls off. “Then, you will listen to what I say, or you will reap the consequences.”

Something dark flickers through Shane’s eyes, something that sends a thrill through Ilya as well. And when they finally separate, something tells Ilya that this won’t be the last of their conversation.

And as the day goes on, Ilya sees a side of Shane he’s *never* seen before. If he thought Shane was being seductive earlier, well, he was in for a rude awakening. Shane doesn’t just laugh at jokes now; no, he actually leans in and slides his hand across people’s biceps, holding onto them by the shoulder as he doubles over in the fakest display of laughter Ilya has ever seen. But it doesn’t even fucking matter because his stupid freckled cheeks are stunningly red, and his hands are probably so fucking soft from the expensive hand cream Ilya had bought him last weekend, and he smells like fucking sunshine because Ilya was testing new colognes on his silly little kitten and so far Shane liked the one that gave off notes of roses and sweet honey lavender. Ilya wants to fucking cry.

By the time they get home—in separate fucking cars because they were still playing best buddies until they either got caught or Shane decided it was time to come out—Ilya is completely livid. Ever since they set some new ground rules, Shane had been acting up like no one’s business. Because Shane didn’t have punishments now, Shane had *training*. Training to become a more well-behaved kitty cat, because he was too sensitive to the word punishment. Because punishment felt a whole lot like failing, and Shane was too perfect to fail. Ilya and him agreed on that front.

But it also meant that Shane thought it was appropriate to act out, to test Ilya’s limits, and with Ilya having no real authority past being his Captain at practices, he was basically helpless while Shane did whatever he pleased.

When they got home, however, that was a different story. They haven’t tackled the entire conversation about their new dynamic, but they have settled on one thing for certain: Shane was free-use now. That meant that, once they stepped past the threshold of their front door, Shane was Ilya’s to do whatever he pleased with. So long as Shane was in a clear state of mind, so long as he didn’t have any objections, Ilya was totally in control. And recently, he reveled in those hours they had to themselves. The ones where Ilya didn’t have to hold back his primal urges, where he didn’t have to worry about someone seeing him salivate over something that was *his*.

The guys have been touching *his* pet all day, and they didn’t even know it. They didn’t even know Shane *was* a pet. The thought makes Ilya angrier. How dare someone touch his kitty cat if they weren’t even going to do it correctly? If they weren’t going to do it in the ways that made Shane feel so good, even when he had been *so* bad.

“Go prep yourself and put in your tail. I don’t feel like dealing with it today,” Ilya tells him coldly, pointing to the bedroom. Lucky for him, Shane doesn’t fight him on it and instantly scampers off. He was probably just as ready for this as Ilya was. He supposed training had become fun for both of them. It was a part of their new routine.

Ilya's been waiting for the perfect moment to unveil Shane's new playroom, and acting like a fucking brat while being seductive towards the team had been the magic key needed to unlock it. Figures Shane would be getting a reward as part of his punishment. *Training*. Whatever. Ilya needed to do a better job of laying down the law because his Shane was starting to enjoy this way too much. Ilya loved making him happy, though, so it was a win-win for both of them, really.

Shane comes out looking flushed and dazed about fifteen minutes later. Ilya would be willing to bet he did a rush job on fingering himself. Shane was a spoiled kitty, after all. He didn't take too kindly to having to do things on his own. He was probably suffering from the stretch of the plug and the weight of his tail, but that would make his training all the more delicious for Ilya to witness.

"Come with me, kitty," Ilya requests, giving Shane's hair a ruffle as he passes by him. He's fully naked save for his collar and tail, and Ilya is pleased to see he's selected a pretty set of ears for himself as well. Their collection was growing quite nicely, and Ilya liked letting Shane pick his ears depending on what type of kitty cat he felt like that day. Today, he's got his big ears on, and Ilya was under the impression that those were secretly his favorite.

Once they get to the door of the playroom, Ilya turns to regard him seriously. "When you are in your playroom, I expect you to be a full-on kitty cat unless I instruct otherwise. That means hands and knees, no using your words unless it is to color or safeword. You may refer to me if you need to get my attention. Otherwise, I want only meows out of you, mister."

Shane lets his tongue loll out of his mouth excitedly, and Ilya can't resist dropping a gentle kiss to his forehead. He unlocks the door using the facial recognition pad and then opens it to reveal Shane's Cat King Paradise.

The whole room is lined with soft, padded flooring to keep his kitty from hurting himself. There are large plush rugs of varying fabrics laid on top, just in case Shane has a different preference depending on the day. Along the walls, Ilya has installed low-level climbing platforms and structures—ones that can support Shane's weight—along with scratching posts scattered throughout.

There's a desk for Ilya just in case he ever wants to get some work done while Shane plays, a big office chair, as well as a plush multi-purpose couch. There are several tether points to hook up Shane's leash should Ilya want to keep him close by. They haven't dabbled with a leash much, but Ilya was looking forward to that one. It would fasten nicely against Shane's collar.

Off to the side was Shane's crate and playpen area, each filled with plenty of toys to keep his kitten occupied. The crate was big enough for him to sprawl out comfortably for a cat of his size, and Ilya had adorned the bottom with only the most comfortable padding and carpet for his sensitive kitty. The playpen was structured similarly, only more open, since sometimes Shane would need to be contained, but not necessarily caged off. It was important to have many options depending on his kitty's needs for that particular day.

All throughout the room, there are ribbons and fish and mice dangling from the ceiling at varying heights so Shane can paw at them to his heart's content. There are buckets of toys

beyond that, drawers packed full of Ilya's hoodies for easy access, as well as a fridge stocked with water bottles and snacks.

There's a large hammock made up of soft green woven blanket fabric, one that Ilya and Shane would comfortably be able to sprawl out on. It hangs in one of the corners of the room, and it's practically the width of a full-size bed, adorned with comfortable pillows and blankets.

There's also a bed, of course, though it acts like more of a nest with the way Ilya has lined it with items for Shane's comfort. Blankets and old Boston Bears gear, anything that will make Shane feel cozy and at home in his little kitten paradise. Ilya is still working on how he wants to structure any rigs, just in case they decide to dabble further into restraints, but for now, that has taken a backseat to other aspects of their dynamic.

He had so much he wanted to explore with Shane, and yet, there were only so many hours in the day. Ilya wondered how they were going to fare once they started traveling for away games. It was going to be tough having to keep up this platonic act because the more time Ilya spent with Shane, the more he became utterly addicted to him. His kitten was the most perfect sub, and their dynamic was turning into more than Ilya could have ever dreamed of. It sent his mind to wondrous places, sparked crazy new ideas out of him, and with Shane, he wanted to try them *all*.

He watches as Shane slowly lowers to his hands and knees and takes in all the wonders that Ilya has set up for him. His eyes are glistening as he stares at the cage, darting to the climbing platforms and scratching posts next. Ilya doesn't know what Shane was expecting out of the playroom, but based on his reaction, Ilya thought it was safe to say he had done well.

"You see now I have been working so hard to make this beautiful playroom for you, and yet, you intentionally disobey me at practice."

Shane whines and wraps himself around Ilya's leg, rubbing his cheek against his knee in something akin to an apology.

"Yes, I know. You are a sweet boy. Deep down, you just want lots of attention and pets, don't you?" Ilya coos, petting soothingly through his hair. "But you are still going to have to learn to obey me. You cannot act out just because you feel out of control, angel. I am your Captain now, and it is going to reflect poorly on me if you are misbehaving. You do not want the team thinking you are a bad kitty, do you?"

Shane whimpers pathetically, and Ilya notices as he swishes his tail back and forth, pressing his nose to the fabric of Ilya's pants to try and catch a scent.

"Or maybe you were acting out *because* you wanted their attention, hm?" Ilya clues in, giving him another scratch behind his ears. "Either way, a kitten who acts out does not get to roam freely. I am going to put you in your cage for a bit until you can learn to calm down and remember who you belong to. Come on. Up. Let's go."

He uses the leg Shane's wrapped around to give him a little nudge towards the cage, and Shane's expression positively crumples despite the fact that he's hard and leaking against

Ilya's pants. Nevertheless, he slowly but surely makes his way over to the crate, pausing every so often to sniff at the beautiful things Ilya has purchased for him.

The room is mostly decked out in lovely pastel colors, because his Shane was a very pretty kitty, so Ilya has selected items in gorgeous pinks, lavenders, yellows, blues, greens. There's even a projector hooked up to the ceiling just in case Ilya ever wants to leave Shane with some swimming fish to chase after or scuttling mice on the floor.

Once Shane finally makes it over to his crate, he pauses and looks up at Ilya with the saddest kitten eyes he's possibly ever seen.

Ilya just scoffs. "Don't act like this isn't exactly what you wanted, котенок. You have been acting up all week trying to get me to bring you in here. I am only granting your wishes. Now, in you go. Do not make me repeat myself again."

Shane lets out a little grumble before hesitantly crawling into the large cage. There's plenty of room to keep his superstar hockey muscles from getting cramped or stiff, so Ilya doesn't expect to hear any complaints out of him. Once he's inside, Ilya kneels down and offers his fingers for Shane to lick and nibble and nuzzle against.

"Yes, baby. You are very, very sweet. But I am going to need you to sit quiet and play with your toys for a little bit while I get some work done. It is very hard work to be Captain of a hockey team, as I'm sure you well know." He means it to be a little biting, and he doesn't miss the way Shane pouts at the dig, but it was the truth. Shane needed to understand that Ilya was running this show now, not the other way around. He latches the door to the cage unceremoniously and then gives one of the ribbons at the top of Shane's crate a little wiggle.

Shane falls onto his back and bats at the string without question, his eyebrows pulling into a determined look once he realizes there's a crinkly fish on his end that keeps rising and falling depending on how the ribbon sits. He tries to pull it to his chest, only for the fish to go flying upwards again, causing Shane to huff in frustration.

Ilya smiles fondly. There, that would keep him occupied for a while. Ilya goes to sit at his desk, which is only a few feet away, and starts to look through some of the practice tapes from training camp so far. Troy was shaping up to be a strong Wingman, much to Ilya's surprise. Luca, too. It would be interesting to see how the lines shaped up once Shane came into the mix.

Ilya turns his attention to Shane once more. Shane, his adorable fucking kitten, who has his tongue stuck between his teeth in focus as he attempts to dislodge the fish from its set of sparkly holographic ocean ribbon streamers. Every time he comes close, however, the fish goes flying from his grasp, sending Shane into a new frenzy of batting at it repeatedly in retaliation. Ilya couldn't believe how precious he was. His baby loved his new kitten space so much.

Time passes by like that, with Ilya fitting in about ten minutes of solid focus at a time before he's forced to drag his gaze over to Shane again. They're in such a good rhythm that Ilya barely notices when an entire hour has passed. The only thing that clues him into this fact is the sight of Shane snoozing away in the pile of blankets in his crate, his paws moving just

slightly like he can't help wanting to knead his claws into the fabric. It was heavily laced with Ilya's scent, after all. Ilya has half a mind to get in there and curl up with him, but that would certainly upset the power dynamics, wouldn't it? Shane's cock is soft and the most delicious shade of pink from where it's resting against his thigh. Ilya wants him clean-shaven.

His attention is drawn back to his desk when his phone starts vibrating wildly against it, a name flashing on his screen that has Ilya rolling his eyes, but he reaches for the device anyway.

"Ah, yes. Montreal's 14th best player. How can I help you?" He greets Hayden with little fanfare.

"What happened to 15th best player?"

Ilya fights very hard not to let his eyes roll right out of his head. "Well, seeing as your stupid team *fumbled* your 1st best player, you moved up a spot. Unless, of course, you think whatever poor rookie is replacing him is somehow better than you. Pretty sad if that's the case, Pike."

"Shut up," Hayden scoffs. "I was just calling to check on Shane, but he's not picking up his phone, so I figured I'd give you a try. I wanted to see how he's adjusting to the new team."

Ilya spares a glance at Shane, who is still sleeping happily in his crate, his tail cutely curled around him. "Yes, he's taking a nap right now, but things are going very well. The Centaurs are treating him like the king he is."

"Good," Hayden breathes a sigh of relief. "And his sexuality? Has he…has he told them yet? Do you think they'll be okay with it?"

"Seeing as they are mature enough not to let something as stupid as someone being gay affect their chances at winning the Stanley Cup, yes, they are perfectly fine. The entire team has been wearing their LGBTQ+ pins all week to show their support. I am pretty sure half of them have a huge crush on him." Ilya was only slightly losing his mind over that fact, but at least Shane was being met with a healthy amount of adoration, which Ilya thought was important for him right now.

"Really?" Hayden asks in surprise. "Wow. I mean, that's great, yeah. I'm…I'm glad he's got a group of guys who are willing to support him."

"Yes," Ilya replies plainly, raising his eyebrows when he's met with silence. "Is there another reason you are calling me, Pike? Or did you want to spend your evening chit-chatting with me? If that is the case, I wish you'd at least include Jackie in our calls. She is so much more fun to talk to."

"Jesus, you're such a fucking dick," Hayden curses. "*Actually*, I was also calling to remind you about our game in two weeks. The Centaurs are playing the Voyageurs here in Montreal."

And, *fuck*. Ilya had nearly forgotten about that. The schedules had been out months in advance, but with Shane changing teams so quickly, Ilya had barely had time to factor that in.

“Look, I just wanted to let you know that the guys are *not* happy about Shane switching teams. There’s definitely going to be some retaliation. Especially now that they think this has been his plan all along—for you guys to team up. I’ll do what I can to keep them in check from my side, but you should probably tell your guys to be on the lookout as well. I know JJ, in particular, is coming for blood.”

Ilya shakes his head and turns to look at his sweet little kitten. Why the *fuck* anyone would want to hurt Shane is beyond him, but he can’t exactly say he’s surprised. The Voyageurs had proven to be a despicable bunch, and not to mention, they had ten years of practice playing together compared to Ilya’s virtually newly formed team. It was going to be a rough game for all of them, especially considering Montreal was currently the best in the League.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Ilya mutters mindlessly while he’s got a million scenarios running through his head—most of which revolve around figuring out how to keep Shane safe in the coming weeks. He was already nervous enough about their first few games without the threat of the terrible, awful, no-good Voyageurs looming over him.

“No problem. It’s Shane, man. He’s still my best friend, you know? I really, really want what’s best for him,” Hayden presses, and Ilya actually believes him, despite all the ignorance Hayden has exhibited over the past few months.

It really did just boil down to ignorance, though, which Ilya couldn’t exactly fault him for. Hayden had clearly never had a queer friend before. Ilya supposed there wasn’t exactly an instruction manual on how to handle some of these things, but he was trying. There were certainly bigger enemies out there, much larger fires to fight. Hayden was a tiny blip in comparison.

“Anyway, Jackie wanted me to invite you guys over for dinner when you’re in town. If you’re feeling up to it. The kids miss their Uncle Shane.”

Ilya’s lips curl slightly. “And their Uncle Ilya?” He questions, mostly to get a rise out of him.

Hayden huffs a heavy sigh. “As much as I hate to admit it, yes. They’re absolutely obsessed with the box of Russian candies you sent over. Thanks for that, by the way. The coma they went into after that sugar crash gave me and Jackie some much-needed alone time.”

Ilya smirks and raises his eyebrows. “If you need me and Shane to watch the kids so you and Jackie can have date night, all you had to do was ask.”

Hayden pauses like he’s waiting for the punchline, but at some point, he must assume that one isn’t coming. “Wait, you’re serious? Don’t joke about that because Jackie would literally jump at the chance to go out.”

“You act like it is such a hardship for me to play with your cute little Pikes. It is good practice for when me and Shane have our own someday. We would be happy to do it. All I ask is that you bring us home some dessert from the restaurant.”

“Dessert, right,” Hayden snorts. “Shane’s not going to eat that,” he says, like Ilya doesn’t know his own kitten’s dietary restrictions.

“Ah, the dessert is mostly for me. Shane will get his special dessert later,” Ilya hums, just to pull a reaction from him.

“Gross,” Hayden gags. Mission accomplished. “Fuck—” he curses. “Yes, swear jar, I *know*,” he says to someone in the distance. “Jesus. Jackie says I’m not allowed to say things like that anymore. Apparently, it’s homophobic. So. Sorry.”

“Put Jackie on the phone,” Ilya requests around a grin, and not even a moment later, there’s some shuffling and then a very distinct female voice filling his ears.

“Hi, Ilya,” Jackie greets cheerily.

“Jackie, my dear. How have you been?” Ilya smiles, tracing his finger over the top of the desk. He’s got a picture of him and Shane with their cat and dog face masks printed out and taped to the corner.

“I’m exhausted. These kids are running me into the ground. Please tell me you’re serious about watching them. I’ll call to make a reservation right now.”

“Mm, make him take you somewhere expensive. You deserve it,” Ilya encourages.

“You are too sweet. How’s our Shane?” Her voice comes warmly through the receiver.

Ilya’s eyes drift to him once again. “He is perfect, as usual. The light of my life. I cannot tell you how happy I am to have him here. The team absolutely adores him.”

“Oh, I am so glad to hear that. He deserves it so much. You two are living together fully now? Is that right?”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees warmly. “We are both so much better for it. I know we were only long-distance for a few weeks at a time, but let me tell you, those weeks were hell on Earth. You will have to come see the new house at some point. It’s beautiful. We’d love to host you guys for dinner.”

“That would be such a treat,” Jackie agrees, and Ilya can hear commotion in the background. “Yes, Uncle Shane and Uncle Ilya are going to visit soon,” Jackie’s voice calls from a distance. Ilya’s heart warms in his chest. “They are so excited to see you. Ruby asked me the other day if she could start learning Russian.”

Ilya laughs loudly. “I will teach her some words when we come by. That way they can talk back to Hayden without him knowing. It will be our little secret.”

“Careful, or I might have you teach me some Russian, as well.”

Ilya cackles and wipes a stray tear from his eye.

“Alright, well, I’ve got to get the kids ready for dinner, but it was so nice catching up with you. We miss Shane loads already. It’s going to be tough not having him around all season.”

“Mm, we will not forget our family in Montreal, don’t worry,” Ilya tells her fondly. “We will see you guys in two weeks, yes?”

“Absolutely! Thanks again for offering to watch the kids. And thank you for taking such good care of Shane. I am so glad he has someone like you in his corner,” Jackie tells him seriously.

“It is an honor and a privilege. There is nothing else I’d rather be doing,” Ilya promises, eyes landing on his sweet, sleeping, baby kitty once again.

As they say their final goodbyes, Shane starts to stir from his slumber, and Ilya immediately stands to unlatch the lock on his crate, just in case Shane wakes up feeling spooked for whatever reason. He was probably deep in his kitten space, anyway, but Ilya wanted to play things safe with all the new boundaries they were setting.

He smiles when Shane blinks himself awake slowly, becoming more and more aware of his surroundings. He doesn’t react much other than to burrow himself further into Ilya’s strongly scented blanket, rubbing the soft fabric against his cheek while trying to bury his nose in it.

“Good morning, kitty,” Ilya greets softly, making a little clicking nose with his tongue to get Shane’s attention. “Did you have a good cat nap, baby? You are looking very relaxed.”

Shane mewls at the sound of his voice, but he makes no move to get up, instead rolling onto his back with his paws up to push further into the cozy space.

“Oh, you are so good. You are enjoying this crate training a bit too much, I think,” Ilya notes, but he doesn’t have it in him to care very much. Every ‘*punishment’* for Shane usually ended up turning into some kind of reward. Which made sense considering he was such a spoiled superstar kitty. Admittedly, Ilya preferred him that way.

Ilya gives him an appreciative little tummy rub, one that has Shane purring and wriggling and nuzzling into anything he can reach, but Ilya is selfish. He wants this pretty kitty in his lap. It’s why he doesn’t shame himself for the way he wraps the edges of the blanket around Shane before unceremoniously tugging him out of the crate and into his arms. Shane is just blinking up at him with wide eyes like he doesn’t know how Ilya managed such a difficult maneuver.

Ilya gives him a smug look as he situates Shane upright in his lap and hugs him close. “My beautiful baby. You look so precious in your special playroom. Do you like it, sweet boy? I had it made just for you.” He laughs when Shane catapults forward, nearly knocking Ilya onto his back as he starts licking wildly all over his throat and chin. “You are so fucking adorable, did you know that?”

Shane just yips like he does, in fact, know it. Good. They were on the same page then.

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When news of Shane Hollander being officially signed to Ottawa breaks, there's a major media storm that follows. They've kept it under wraps for most of training camp, but certain things were obvious. Shane wasn't present for Montreal's pre-season, which was shocking, to say the least. That alone was enough to have rumors stirring.

An Insider gets the scoop first, which is decidedly less shocking, considering the press was full of rats and snakes these days. Shane despised them on the average week, but recently, it was like they were trying to make his life hell. First, by following Ilya and Rose around all summer, and now, by making things even more difficult for him in Ottawa. He just wanted to live with his boyfriend in peace, play some hockey, and be a fucking cat for crying out loud. Was that really too much to ask?

The Centaurs make an official announcement in the days following, and Shane declines to answer any questions. He's not doing a press conference; he's grateful they don't make him. He's here to win some Cups, not be made to perform for some media circus.

Montreal follows with a short statement. Some bullshit about how they wish him the best, how it was mutually agreed upon for personal reasons. Shane doubts anyone is going to buy it. It'll be obvious the second they step onto Montreal's ice. Ice that used to be home. It's going to be a big adjustment.

His first few practices with the team go okay. They've finalized the roster at this point, and he and Ilya are undoubtedly a great match for first line. They've got a whole team jacked full of talent, really, but they're all still getting used to each other's playing styles, and it's frustrating—coming from someone who's been playing on the same line with the same guys for nearly a decade now. But Troy is a strong wingman. And Wyatt is pulling his fucking weight in blocked goals.

Still, there's a nervous energy going into their first away game against Toronto, and Shane is feeling the pressure, too. They had a single game between them and Montreal. One game to get themselves together enough to play the best team in the League. Because they still were the best, despite what Ilya might think about Shane being the only talented player. Shane knew these guys. He'd seen what they were capable of, even when he wasn't on the ice, and if the Centaurs really wanted a chance at beating them this week, they'd have to at least boost their confidence first by beating Toronto. And Shane…Shane wasn't sure he believed in their ability to do that quite yet. At the end of the day, they were a new team, dealing with new lines, a handful of inexperienced players, and a lot of public scrutiny now thanks to Shane and Ilya.

"You're sitting with me," Ilya says, grabbing him by the forearm as they head onto the bus.

Toronto was only about five hours away. They're coming off a morning team meeting, and Shane is tired. He was looking forward to getting some rest on the bus, but sitting next to Ilya isn't a good idea if he wants that to happen.

Shane leans in to whisper to him. "I thought we were going to sit separately."

"It is our first game together. You are the star player, and I'm the Captain, and we are good friends who would like to talk strategy. Why would we not sit together?" Ilya reasons.

And well, on the surface, that story might pass, but Shane knew the reality. The reality was that he was going to fall asleep at some point, and his head would inevitably end up on Ilya's shoulder. And Ilya's hand would slip across his thigh. And then Shane, even in his sleep, somehow—because they were drawn together like magnets—would migrate until he was pressed against Ilya's chest, with Ilya's arm ending up wound around his hip until they were practically one conjoined body. They would be outed as a couple immediately. Not even one game into the season.

"I wanted to get some sleep," Shane mutters lightly, eyes darting around to make sure the other boys aren't watching too closely.

"Great. I brought movies and a blanket."

Shane blinks at him in wide-eyed confusion, because hadn't Ilya *just* said that their cover for sitting together would be under the guise of needing to plan for the game tonight?

Ilya must sense the protest on his lips because he leans in close until his mouth is just against Shane's ear. "I would like for you to sit with me," he expresses clearly, and Shane sucks in a breath. "Is there a reason you need to sit elsewhere?"

There were new rules now. Which meant that, in non-obligation settings, at least—as long as Shane consented—Ilya's preference reigned as the default decision. Shane could override at any time if he had a genuine concern—like maybe if he'd promised Wyatt he was going to sit with him, for whatever reason, but he hadn't. So, Shane just shakes his head. He'd honestly wanted to sit with Ilya, anyway. He just hadn't planned to let himself for obvious reasons. But Ilya was letting him; in fact, Ilya was *telling* him. He feels his skin start to heat up.

"Okay," Ilya pulls away to look him in the eye this time. "Then, you will sit with me?"

He's asking, now. Giving Shane the opportunity to back out if he needs to, since this was all very new to them still. Especially in public. But Shane trusts Ilya implicitly, and he hasn't really asked that much of him yet. Not enough for Shane to prove how good he could be for him. And Shane could. He could be so, *so* good for him.

"Yeah," Shane smiles, clearing his throat. "I'll sit with you." And he's pleased when Ilya smiles at him in return.

"Good," Ilya praises softly, just for Shane, and then he purses his lips in a little kissy face and blows him a discreet kiss.

Shane's tummy flutters with butterflies.

"Rozy!" Luca runs up to them, his eyes wide. He's only slightly out of breath. "Are you sitting with anyone yet? I was hoping we could—"

"Sorry, rook," Ilya shuts him down before he can get too excited. "I've gotta run through some plays with Shane here. He's still getting caught up."

Troy rolls his eyes as he stalks over to them. “Seriously? I wanted to sit with Shane. You guys are *already* friends. The rest of us are still trying to get to know him.”

Ilya huffs in annoyance. “I do not care, Barrett. Do you want to sit with Hollander and become BFFs, or do you want to win your first game of the season? Which do you think is more important?”

Troy mutters something that sounds a lot like backtalk, and Shane can tell Ilya is really struggling with trying to keep himself together.

The truth is that this has been a big adjustment for them coming out of summer. They were used to being around each other all the time, but usually in spaces where they were allowed to express their feelings, as well as feed into their dynamic—places like the privacy of their home, Ilya’s club, or even Shane’s parents’ house. Around the team, though, they couldn’t touch. They couldn’t say certain things or look at each other too obviously. Shane can see the way Ilya is physically fighting to keep from reaching out to him, to keep from staking his claim. They couldn’t comfort each other, and they had grown increasingly dependent on that comfort.

So, Shane does the only thing he can think of. He pretends like he’s scratching his neck and then slyly pulls his collar out over his shirt.

Ilya’s eyes dart to it almost immediately, and Shane can see the way he visibly relaxes at the sight.

Shane smiles and offers him a meaningful look, his eyes glinting.

“How about I sit with you on the next one, Troy?” Shane suggests instead, pulling their attention. “Luca, maybe you could sit with Ilya next time?”

Troy and Luca both seem to brighten at that idea, and it doesn’t take long before they’re eagerly nodding, looking a lot more at ease now that they were promised a seat next to them in the near future.

“See? Everyone’s happy,” Shane turns back to Ilya to find him watching their interaction with a soft expression on his face. Shane wants to hold his hand so badly, but he can’t, so he just presses his keychain in his pocket. It’s worth it for the way Ilya practically beams at him when his necklace lights up against his chest.

Once on the bus, Ilya and Shane claim the seats in front, sitting in the row across from Harris and Coach Wiebe. Shane is secretly glad when Ilya lets him have the window seat, and he’s even more glad when Ilya pulls out a blanket and spreads it across both of them.

“Hey, no fair,” Harris teases when Ilya starts pulling out his iPad, standing it up on the little tray table in front of them. “If I had known you brought a blanket, I would’ve petitioned to sit with you. No offense, Coach.”

Coach Wiebe just shrugs in indifference.

“Mm, you will have to get in line,” Ilya sticks his tongue out at Harris playfully. “Luca already claimed me and my blanket for the next travel day.”

Shane frowns and pinches Ilya’s thigh from where they’re hidden under the fleece. Ilya better not be sharing any blankets with Luca, or anyone else, for that matter.

Once Ilya is finished talking to Harris, he turns to him with a soft smile. “Relax, котенок. It is just you and me,” he murmurs under his breath, sliding his hand across Shane’s leg. “Why do you think I brought the blanket in the first place, hm?”

Shane feels tension leave his body, his eyes going half-lidded at the thought that Ilya had planned this just so they could touch on the bus ride over. “Mm,” he hums happily, and he’s starting to go down.

Ilya must notice because his eyebrows press together as he asks, “Уровень?”

Shane holds up one finger and then waits for Ilya to acknowledge him before hooking two through the chain of his collar.

Ilya chews on his lip for a moment, debating, before nodding jerkily. “Не слишком далеко,” he voices, and that was another phrase that Shane had learned recently, because part of kitty training included learning some key Russian words exactly for scenarios like this.

“Shane, you speak Russian?” A voice interrupts them, and Shane’s cat eyes go wide all of a sudden. It’s Harris. He’s still watching them curiously, eyebrows drawn in disbelief.

“I—um,” he stutters, but he’s already a little out of it. Ilya had given him permission to go down further.

“Just a little,” Ilya rushes to answer. “Working on the charity together, you know? He has picked up a few phrases,” he laughs, like it’s obvious, and Shane is grateful when Harris just smiles in realization.

“Oh, wow. That’s really cool!” He expresses cheerfully, and Shane flushes, nodding.

Ilya grins and then turns back to his laptop to turn on the movie, which is also in Russian. *It’s Ratatouille*, Shane notes with a curl of his lips. He wonders if it was intentional. One look at Ilya tells him it is. Kitties liked mice, after all, and Shane was a kitty.

His tummy flutters when Ilya offers him one earbud of a wired set, which means Shane has to lean extra close to him in order to watch. Ilya had the *best* ideas. The fact that it’s in Russian makes his mind go blank, his thoughts go quiet, and before Shane knows it, he’s fast asleep on Ilya’s shoulder.

“Aww, look at these cuties over here,” he hears someone call out distantly.

“Shut up, Bood,” Ilya mutters, jostling Shane a little in the process.

He grumbles softly, but Ilya just shushes him and wraps his hand more securely around Shane’s inner thigh, pulling him closer. Shane sighs and then goes back to sleep.

When he wakes up several hours later, he's practically in Ilya's lap, with his legs curled up against him and Ilya's arm thrown around Shane. Jesus fucking Christ. This is exactly why they couldn't sit next to each other.

Shane rubs at his eyes and takes a cursory glance around, but luckily, all of the other guys seem to be similarly passed out. All except Coach Wiebe, who's looking through one of his binders with his reading light on, but when Shane sucks in a breath, he turns sharply.

Shane's eyes go wide with panic, and he immediately moves to push himself out of Ilya's arms, except Coach Wiebe holds his hand up, gesturing for him to stop. So, Shane does, his eyebrows pressed together in confusion, and then Coach Wiebe just…goes back to looking at his binder. Like he hasn't seen a thing. Even though he probably has. He's probably seen a lot if this is how he and Ilya have woken up. Shane wonders if anyone else has seen. His heart hammers loudly in his chest at the thought. It should scare him, but instead, he just feels safe, and want burns in the pit of his tummy.

He looks down at Ilya's sleeping face, the dip of his cupid's bow, the curve of his nose, his scattered moles. Shane can't help but smile as he leans forward to press a sly kiss to Ilya's shoulder. He was cuddling with his boyfriend on his first team trip. His Coach had caught him and *encouraged* him to stay. Now he was kissing him and holding his hand, and a thrill runs through him when Ilya stirs and tries to pull him closer.

"Почему ты так далеко, котёнок?"

Shane hardly knows what it means except for the *you* and *kitten*, but it wasn't hard to guess.

"We're going to be there soon," Shane whispers into his skin. "You should probably wake up before the others do."

Ilya reluctantly opens one eye to take note of their surroundings.

Shane chews at his thumbnail and lets his gaze dart in the direction of Coach Wiebe.

Ilya tracks the movement, and then his lips pull into a smirk. "If you are going to wake me up before everyone else, then you at least better give me a proper kiss," he murmurs, leaning further into Shane's space.

"*Ilya*," Shane hisses, gripping his forearm when he gets closer, eyes darting to Coach Wiebe once more.

"Mm, just one," Ilya begs, and by the time he's practically on top of Shane, it seems easier to just grant him the kiss rather than drag it out and risk anyone else noticing.

"Fine," Shane says through gritted teeth, leaning forward for a quick peck.

But Ilya catches him by the jaw before he can pull away, forcing Shane into a kiss that he can't help but melt into, a soft sigh escaping his lips and passing through Ilya's.

It only lasts a few seconds, but there's no way Coach Wiebe hasn't noticed by now, and Shane no longer has the energy to deny himself something that he so desperately needs. So,

when Ilya finally pulls away, Shane bumps their foreheads together to rub his nose against the other's, smiling when Ilya hums and plants one last peck on him.

"You are going to get us caught so fucking fast," Shane sighs as he finally pulls away. He casts a look to Coach Wiebe, who is politely facing the window now, and Shane has to cover his face to hide how hard he must be flushing. "Jesus Christ."

"No, *Ilya Rozanov*," Ilya emphasizes, giving Shane's leg one last squeeze before he sits up and retreats to his own space.

Shane rolls his eyes so hard they nearly fall out of their sockets.

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They arrive at the hotel not long after to get checked in. Shane and Ilya are sleeping in separate hotel rooms to keep up appearances, so they reluctantly disperse to head to their respective rooms and get settled in.

Shane's skin is buzzing with an anxiety he hasn't felt since practically his rookie season. It was his first time playing for a new team in nearly ten years, and he knew that all eyes would be on him tonight. It was a big deal—debuting for a new team so far into his career. There would be pressure to see if he'd made the *right* choice. As if there was any choice at all. As if this had been something Shane consciously decided on.

There was also the fact that this would be his and Ilya's first time playing together since the All-Star game, and people were especially curious since they had announced their charity. That was something the media was talking a lot about, too. *Would Hollander's strong hockey IQ mesh well with Rozanov's affinity towards improvisation, or would they clash? Would two rivals who used to go head-to-head every season be able to share the ice, or would ego get in the way?*

Shane has a million thoughts running through his head as they get to the arena. Ilya keeps looking at him like he knows something is brewing, but there's no time to chat. No time for Ilya to pull him aside and ask the questions that Shane knows he's dying to ask. No time for a hug, or a kiss, or a reassuring touch that Shane could absolutely use right now. Still, it's comforting to know he has someone on the ice that he'll be able to trust. He holds tight to that notion as they make their way out.

The crowd in Toronto is loud, almost like they can sense that this game is important, that this will set the tone for the rest of the season. They're going to see Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov play on the same line for their first official game as Centaurs together. Shane chews nervously at his mouth guard while they warm up.

Ilya skates nearby, giving him a look. They're being watched, probably by everyone in this entire arena, each movement being catalogued, but it doesn't stop Ilya from dropping a quick reassurance.

"Same as always, yeah? You've got this."

Shane closes his eyes and nods, appreciative of the encouragement despite the fact that his stomach is in knots.

Before he knows it, they're lining up for face-off. He's got Ilya and Troy as his wingmen to start, because as they'd determined through practices so far, he and Ilya were practically unstoppable on a line together. Shane keeps that thought in mind as the ref drops the puck and he wins the face-off.

He lets his instincts kick in as he glides seamlessly across the ice, weaving in and out of sticks until he finds the opportunity to pass. And Ilya is waiting right there for him, wide open, so Shane taps it over and then keeps moving towards the goal. Ilya is matching him pace-for-pace, their chemistry coming to life the same way it did when they were at home. The same way it did when Shane was a little kitty cat and Ilya was his dedicated and watchful owner.

Ilya sends it right back to him when the opportunity presents itself, and Shane takes the shot, cheering loudly when it goes right into the goal. Fuck yeah. His first goal with the Centaurs. He looks over to find Ilya pumping his fist in the air, and they bump helmets as they're reunited by the bench.

"Great fucking goal," Ilya shoves at his shoulder, and Shane just grins.

"Great pass."

They're off to a good start. But their other lines are, decidedly, not as strong. Their timing is off. The guys make great passes, but they don't always get finished. Someone is always a step too late or too early. Simple plays turn into turnovers. It's messy, and Shane watches through thinly veiled anxiousness as Toronto quickly catches up. One goal. Then, another.

Coach Wiebe makes the decision to switch up the lines about midway through the game, which means Shane and Ilya are no longer on the ice together, but...almost immediately, something is missing. Instead of spreading their star power to each line, it's taken away their best working duo. Toronto scores again, and by the third period, they're losing 3-1.

Ilya and Shane are thrown back on the ice together for a power play, their final chance to make something of this game, and they've got Luca with them this time. Shane wins the face-off once more and doesn't hesitate. He's got fire in his lungs, determination in his belly. He passes to Ilya. Ilya passes back. The puck is moving quickly between them; the other team's defense is no match for their obvious chemistry. Luca is wide open near the goal, so Shane makes the final pass and…

Luca scores.

He can hear the other boys yelling from the bench. But they're not out of the woods yet. Shane starts pushing more aggressively with the additional time on the ice, but Toronto just has to protect the lead at this point. Ride out the clock. They're blocking shots, slowing things down, forcing resets.

The final horn is deafening.

They lose 3-2. It's not a terrible loss by any means, but to Shane, it still feels like the end of the world. The beginning of a losing season for a losing team. All he can see are the missed moments where they should have played better, should have fought harder.

Shane pours himself into the locker room and tries not to let the weight of the entire world settle on his shoulders. They would play Montreal next, and they would likely lose. Montreal was a whole lot better than Toronto, after all. This should have been an easy win for them. If they had tightened up just a little bit, if they had anticipated each other's movements a hair more, they could have at least tied. Gone into overtime. Ended this game with the ability to hold their heads high. To feel like they'd really given it their all.

Shane still has his gear on when Ilya sidles up next to him.

"It's only the first game," Ilya reminds him softly, but he must know that Shane is going to take this one personally. It doesn't set a good tone for the rest of the week.

"Yeah," Shane forces himself to say, because the rest of the boys seem ecstatic with the outcome. They hadn't won, but they'd put up a really good fight. They had the makings to be a really good team. Eventually. Shane just can't stomach that timeline right now, not when he's spent the last ten years fighting for his rank.

"Oh my god, Shane. I can't believe you passed to me," Luca runs up to him with a giant smile on his face.

Shane finally pulls off his helmet and offers him a slight curl of his lips. "You killed it, Haas. Great job out there."

Ilya smirks and holds up the game puck, offering it to Luca. "That's yours, Rook. You earned it."

Luca's eyes are wide as he looks between Shane and Ilya. Shane just laughs and gives him a sure nod. Luca hesitantly reaches out to take it, like he's sure this is all a dream he's going to wake up from at any moment.

Shane's glad one of them can walk away from this feeling refreshed, renewed, invigorated. All he can think about is the fact that they're going to play the Voyageurs in two days. All he can think about is the empty hotel room that he's going to have to go back to to stew in his own self-hatred. He still has a line of reporters waiting for him to speak. His first interview since the news of the trade has been made public.

Ilya goes with him because he's the Captain, and Shane is grateful for the fact that he'll probably chime in if any of the reporters get too pushy, but Shane is used to being a Captain, too. He's used to dealing with sometimes rude questions, just not usually ones with a cutting layer of truth to them.

"Shane Hollander, tonight was your first game playing with the Centaurs. How did you feel about that start? Scoring a goal off the first face-off must have felt good."

Shane had made sure Ilya's necklace was hidden from view ahead of time. They didn't need extra eyes on them right now.

"It's good to be back on the ice. We're still getting a handle on dynamics and what works best for us, but I'm proud of how this team played," Shane says curtly.

"This isn't the first time we've seen you and your Captain, Ilya Rozanov, on a line together. What was the expectation going into tonight? Can we expect to see you two on the ice together going forward? And how does it feel coming onto a team without the role of Captain sitting on your shoulders?"

"Roz and I have great chemistry on the ice. We've been playing against each other our entire careers. We've both got the skill level. I think right now it just comes down to knowing when to lean on that familiarity versus when to branch out. There's a lot of talent to be explored here. Rozanov's doing an awesome job at trying to balance all of that," Shane nods.

"Shane, is there a reason you decided to leave a four-time Stanley Cup-winning team for a team that hasn't made the playoffs in years now?"

Ilya jumps in before Shane can address it. "The Voyageurs' loss is our gain. Hollander is a star any way you slice it. I have full confidence that he can lead *any* team to a Stanley Cup victory. I'm looking forward to proving that theory with this team right here. We have all the pieces. Now, we just need to put them together until they fit."

Shane relaxes a fraction. Ilya presses their shoes together intentionally.

After they shower and get back to the hotel, Shane gets dressed for the gym without question. It's late, he hasn't eaten, and he's physically exhausted, but he needs to do something right this evening. He only means for it to be a quick cycle to clear his head. A cooldown from the events of this evening.

Except, forty-five minutes later, he's dripping with sweat. His hands are shaking. He's light-headed. He tries to lift weights, but the reps aren't coming out clean. It just feels like pure effort. Pure strain. He needs something else, he realizes. Something the gym isn't going to provide.

It's how he finds himself standing outside of Ilya's hotel room, out of breath and out of options. There was no fixing tonight, but there was still a chance for relief. A chance for correction.

Ilya opens the door with a furrow in his eyebrow, his eyes cataloguing Shane with an intensity that Shane hasn't felt in a while. He looks around, checking to make sure none of their other teammates are meandering around the hallway before pulling the door wider and gesturing for Shane to come in.

Ilya is shirtless and beautiful. His muscles look pumped, like he's worked them extra hard tonight. He looks strong. A lot stronger than Shane feels. Shane is out of breath as he steps inside.

“You should not be working yourself like this after a big game. I need you at your best for the next one,” Ilya says softly, after giving him a quick assessment.

“I can’t stop,” Shane blurts out, but he’s not making sense. He can’t get his thoughts to come out properly. “I need something. Please. I can’t—” he sighs, and shuts his eyes tightly. “I need to do a good job. I need something to help me be good. I didn’t—”

“You *are* good, baby,” Ilya soothes, stepping forward to hold his hands. “You scored the first goal of the season. You won all your face-offs. You did so fucking good.”

Shane just scoffs and refuses to meet his eyeline, gaze darting all around the room. “We fucking lost. Toronto isn’t even that good of a team, and we lost. How the fuck are we going to beat the Voyageurs if we can’t even beat Toronto?”

“It is only the first game, Shane,” Ilya tells him seriously. “We are finding our footing. It takes time to build trust. To learn patterns. To start operating as one system. You know this.”

“We don’t *have time*. The Voyageurs aren’t going to lose these season openers. They’re going to prove that they don’t need me. That they’ve *never* needed me. And, eventually, everyone is just going to forget I exist. I’m going to fade into nothing like those other players who came out and—”

“Hey, listen to me,” Ilya says firmly, giving his hands a pointed squeeze. “Take a breath, okay? In…and out,” he guides, and Shane huffs, but forces himself to follow along. “You do not have to prove yourself in one game. You played some great fucking hockey out there. Anyone with eyes will be able to see that. You are no less of a star for losing *one* game with a new team that is still getting oriented.”

Shane swallows and shakes his head.

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Ilya presses his lips together as he looks him over. Shane was not going to let this one go. He takes in his twitchy appearance, the way his body looks overworked, but Ilya is far more concerned with his weaponized mind right now.

“I need you to punish me,” Shane says all of a sudden, and Ilya’s eyebrows raise high on his head. “I should have played better. I should have anticipated that pass. Troy was wide open, but I knew he wasn’t—”

“Shane,” Ilya sighs.

“*Please*,” he begs. “Make me work for it. Make me earn it.”

But Ilya is not going to do that, because Shane was already too familiar with punishing himself in order to fuel his emotional regulation. Ilya refused to feed into it. It was an unhealthy cycle that would end here.

“Why don’t you go have a shower?” Ilya suggests instead, because Shane is still sweaty from his late-night gym session. “Clean yourself up. And when you come back, I’m going to take

care of you, okay?" He offers instead.

Shane shuts his eyes tightly and nods, so Ilya steps forward to kiss him, and Shane leans into it without question.

"Go on, then," Ilya urges, giving him a little nudge towards the bathroom until he starts heading in that direction.

When Shane returns, he's damp and naked, save for a towel around his waist. Ilya already has a warm pair of sweatpants and socks waiting for him.

"Put these on for me, baby," Ilya says slow. Controlled. "I am going to fix you right up."

Shane blinks at him before hesitantly getting dressed, his lower lip pulled between his teeth once he's completed the task. "I was bad," he admits shamefully, and Ilya's heart breaks a little more.

"You are overwhelmed, angel. Not bad. You are never bad for something like this, okay? Especially not when you tried your best. Especially not when you scored a goal in the first minute," Ilya reassures, stepping over to run his hands over Shane's bare shoulders. "You are pure tension. Come here," Ilya sighs, taking his hand to pull him onto the bed.

Shane goes easily, like he doesn't have it in him to argue right now, and for that, Ilya is thankful.

He knows that part of this extra pressure has to do with the fact that Shane is on a new team —a team that loses—but he can't help but picture a parallel scenario in which Shane has just come off a win with the Voyageurs, only he's still punishing himself, and in that scenario, Ilya isn't there to help bring him back to baseline. To him, this is still better than the alternative. He hopes that, in time, Shane starts to feel the same way.

Ilya settles on the bed with his back against the pillows as he maneuvers Shane to sit in his lap, his fingers carding through Shane's hair in the way that always gets him to calm down when he's holding onto stress. He sees the magic start to work almost instantly, with Shane closing his eyes at the comforting touch.

"You don't need to worry about anything right now," Ilya reminds him, feeling Shane start to relax in his arms. "You are with me. It's my job to take care of you. All you need to do is rest. Let your body reset," he voices lowly, watching as the words sink into Shane's skin, breaking up the tension that always seems to nestle and burrow within him. "Why don't you focus on being a kitten for me, sweetheart?" Because Shane was always the best at that. There was no competition, actually.

Shane hums and nuzzles a little into Ilya's neck.

Ilya smiles at the scent of his body wash radiating off of him. "Good boy. You are so good for me. No matter what happens out there, you are always going to be my good boy, hm? Nothing will ever change that."

Shane purrs softly, and Ilya runs a hand down his back as Shane arches into the touch.

“Just focus on my breathing, sweet kitten. That’s very good.”

Shane is getting lost in it, Ilya can tell. He needed this after today, and Ilya will never complain about getting to hold him. He had expected a lonely, miserable night in his hotel room, aware that Shane probably wouldn’t want to risk getting caught on their first away game together. He’s not exactly pleased with the demons that have brought Shane here tonight, but as much as he wishes those demons didn’t exist, he’s very aware that they do, and he can’t say he isn’t grateful for how it’s impacted his evening.

Shane starts clutching onto him a little more tightly, and Ilya can feel the way he’s shifting in his lap, the restless energy that’s buzzing to life from deep within his veins. He needs more, Ilya would be willing to bet, which is why he’s unsurprised when he feels Shane’s erection start to press into him.

“Easy, baby. We’re in reset mode right now. Just come back to me a minute,” Ilya requests, keeping his touch intentionally soothing.

Shane whines and rubs his face into Ilya’s neck, licking lightly behind his ear.

“How are you feeling, gorgeous? You are feeling playful right now?” Ilya checks.

Shane nods and licks broadly over his skin, Ilya tipping his head back to give him more room. He closes his eyes momentarily at the sensation. He’s half-hard in his own pants, partially from having a warm lap of kitten, partially because he’s revved up from their game. Playing on the ice with Shane had worked up something inside of him, something desperate and prideful. There was something about seeing him out there, the big, bad Golden Boy of hockey dominating as usual, but this time, it was *Ilya’s* passes that he was shooting into the goal; It was *Ilya’s* team that he was scoring for.

Ilya moans softly and gives his hips a little squeeze. “You want something from me, baby?”

Shane gasps and nods jerkily, pressing his ass against Ilya’s fattening cock.

“Why don’t you go get the lube from my bag, hm? We can have some light playtime.”

He smiles when Shane scrambles off of his lap to complete the request, his kitten clumsily tripping over himself in an effort to retrieve the aforementioned item. He’s back, not even a moment later, and he’s licking over Ilya’s cheeks this time, licking at Ilya’s lips until he parts them to tongue him back. “Mm, you are very delicious, котёнок.” And Shane preens. “Take off your sweatpants for me, baby. Leave your socks on. I do not want you to get cold.”

Shane follows the instruction beautifully, practically twisting himself in a pretzel to shed himself of Ilya’s sweats while Ilya does the same. And once they’re both naked, Ilya gets on his knees and positions Shane so he’s on all fours in front of him. Ilya slides a warm hand down the expanse of his back.

Shane is panting in anticipation, but he must not be expecting it, however, when Ilya skims right past his hole in favor of slicking up his inner thighs.

“If you were a real omega, we would not need lube,” Ilya tells him hotly, smirking at the way it makes Shane moan and collapse into his forearms. “Wouldn’t that be convenient? My baby getting wet all on his own. Desperate for his Alpha’s cock, hm? But you are always desperate for me, aren’t you?”

Shane whimpers and nods from where his face is pressed into the bed.

“Be good for me,” Ilya reminds him, giving his own cock a stroke to make the glide a little easier. “I am going to fuck your thighs, okay? I want you to sit in my lap. I am going to do all the work,” he informs, because Shane’s muscles had been through enough for one day. Ilya just wants him to give in now.

Shane moans his agreement as Ilya helps him into position, sitting back against the pillows once more before he carefully pulls Shane into his lap, wedging his dick between the other’s thighs as he settles on top of him.

“Fuck, that’s good, baby,” Ilya breathes out when Shane’s ass comes in contact with the golden hair filling the space between Ilya’s upper thigh and his groin. Ilya grips his hips tightly, content to take full control of Shane’s movements right now. “Keep squeezing your thighs together. Just like that. Oh, fuck.” Ilya drops his head to rest on Shane’s back as he uses all of his arm strength to lift him up and down.

Shane cries out at the way Ilya’s dick must be rubbing him in all the right places, brushing against his balls every time he thrusts up into him.

They find a comfortable rhythm like that, with Shane a moaning mess on his lap, while Ilya strains to continue fucking him at a steady pace. They’re both gasping at every upstroke, lost in the way their bodies are sliding together so effortlessly, like they could master any position, at any time, in any facet of life, just by choosing to execute it, together. Their chemistry was strong on and off the ice, indeed. If only those filthy reporters could see them now, then they wouldn’t have to ask his perfect kitten stupid fucking questions.

Ilya is really starting to find his stride. He’s pushing little *uh*s out of Shane every time their hips smack together. It’s dirty, and a bit obscene, and Ilya is in the process of trying to figure out how he’s going to keep guiding them while simultaneously freeing one hand to tug Shane off, but before he can get that far, there’s a loud knock at the door. Ilya freezes instantly, and Shane huffs like it’s the loss of his life.

“Hey, Rozy?” Calls a voice from outside his hotel room. “Sorry to bother you. I was just hoping we could talk about the game tonight. Like, you know. Areas for improvement before the next one.”

It’s Barrett, because, of course, it is. Ilya rolls his eyes in frustration. He does not have time for this right now.

“It’s not a good time, Barrett,” Ilya fires back through gritted teeth. “Let’s talk tomorrow.” He expects that to be the end of it, for Troy to say okay and retreat to his room, but alas, luck is not on his side this evening.

“I just…I wanted to go over it while it’s still fresh in my head, you know?”

Shane lets out a dejected whine, and Ilya immediately lets go of one of his hips in favor of clamping a hand over his mouth. Shane squeezes his thighs in retaliation, and Ilya groans softly at the way his hard cock twitches in response.

“I understand, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. I am in the middle of something,” Ilya says, his voice only slightly strained.

And Shane is getting impatient now, wiggling in his lap and biting harshly at his fingers until Ilya is forced to pull his hand away with a hiss. Ilya responds by wrapping a firm hand around Shane’s cock and squeezing, which inadvertently forces a loud moan out of him.

“Jesus,” Ilya mutters, shushing him instantly. He presses a soothing kiss to the back of Shane’s neck.

“Is someone in there with you?” Troy’s voice rings out once again.

“Fucking hell, Barrett. I told you I am busy right now,” Ilya shouts at the door because he needs him to go away before he hears something that Ilya won’t be able to explain tomorrow.

More silence. And then…nothing.

Ilya holds his breath, and he’s thankful that Shane seems to understand the need for being quiet as well.

He waits. And waits. Until a minute passes. Two.

And then Shane is squirming against him in impatience, and Ilya has no choice but to continue fucking into him because he’s just as desperate. Just as close.

It only takes a few more pumps to pull Ilya’s orgasm from him, his cum spilling all over Shane’s deliciously muscular thighs, and Ilya doesn’t hesitate before coating his hand with his release and then jerking Shane quickly to completion.

Shane keens high in his throat, twisting restlessly in Ilya’s arms as Ilya attempts to hold him steady, pressing a series of kisses to the back of his neck as he works him through it.

“Mm, that’s it, baby. Come for me. Fuck. You are so good.”

Shane is panting breathlessly, his limbs loose, while Ilya worships his skin, dragging his lips and stubble across every inch of precious muscle. His star athlete. His Golden Boy.

He’s combing his hands over him, whispering lovingly into Shane’s ear. He digs his fingers into Shane’s shoulders in an attempt to relinquish some of the tension there, and Shane gasps out in pleasure, his head dropping forward while he sags against Ilya’s grip.

“Good. Good, good boy,” Ilya says into the crook of his neck.

They stay wrapped up in each other like that for a little longer, with Shane eventually turning in his arms so Ilya can hold him properly. His kisses into his hairline, murmurs sweet nothings against his forehead, until Shane is nothing but a warm pile of sleepy kitty in his lap.

Ilya reaches for a tissue from the bedside table and works on cleaning them up, repositioning Shane so he can wipe the lube off his thighs, the release from his tummy. And then Ilya slowly brings him back up again. He gets some water in him. He orders room service since Shane hasn’t eaten anything since before the game. He pets him while Shane eats his grilled chicken and veggies.

As much as he’d love to keep him here tonight—as much as they could both use a good night’s rest—Ilya knows that they have an early call time for their bus tomorrow morning and, unfortunately, sneaking Shane out in the morning would be way too risky. Still, it doesn’t stop him from dressing Shane in his clothes and walking him back to his hotel room.

He goes in with him because he can’t resist the temptation of getting to tuck him into bed, and that was the whole point of all this, anyway, right? To be able to see Shane. To be able to take care of him even when they were on the road. Even when they had to pretend like they weren’t together.

But the rest of the team is probably fast asleep by now, so Ilya doesn’t blame himself for the way that he hovers. He doesn’t blame himself for the way he offers to help Shane with his skin care routine just to hang around a little longer. He doesn’t blame himself for the way he steals minty kisses from his lips right after Shane is finished brushing his teeth. And he certainly doesn’t blame himself for the way he watches him from the doorway as Shane gives him a sleepy smile and a little wave of his fingers.

“I love you,” Ilya says into the distance between them.

Shane nuzzles further into his pillow, almost like he’s pretending it's Ilya’s chest instead as he watches him with stars in his eyes. “I love you more.”

“Mm,” Ilya hums fondly. “Not possible.” But he doesn’t argue anymore. Instead, he blows him one last kiss before retreating back to his own room, feeling satisfaction glide through every inch of his body. They may have lost tonight, yes, but how can Ilya possibly see it that way with the way the night has shaped up to be? With Shane around, no matter the score, it was impossible not to feel like a winner.

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When Shane wakes up the next day, he’s surprisingly at ease. He’s sore, his body screaming out at him from his additional workout last night, but his mind doesn’t assault him the way he’s expecting it to, coming out of a major loss.

Well, not a *major* loss, technically. But a big one considering they were going up against Montreal tomorrow with no wins to show for. The pit returns to the heat of his stomach like a

swallowed watermelon seed that will surely grow. Shane just hopes he has a little longer before it starts to distend inside of him.

He's wearing Ilya's clothes still. They're a little big, but it's just a basic black Nike hoodie and sweatpants. He doesn't think anyone will notice. Plus, it's early enough in the morning that they won't be at risk of running into any press. Shane had to keep up appearances for his Reebok deal, after all.

He meets the team downstairs for a quick breakfast, which, for Shane, just means a bowl of granola and oats with a few blueberries sprinkled on top. Ilya still finds a way to press a bottle of orange juice into his hand, however, his eyes leaving no room for argument, so Shane just rolls his eyes and downs it in one go.

The boys are in a good mood. Most of them, at least. Everyone keeps going up to Luca to congratulate him on his first goal. They're clapping Shane on the shoulder, too, and Shane looks over to find Ilya watching with a proud smile on his face. It makes Shane smile as well. In fact, everyone seems to be smiling except for Troy, who just looks pensive. Contemplative.

Shane catches Ilya's gaze, nodding in Troy's direction, and Ilya immediately takes notice.

"Barrett," Ilya says upon approaching him, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "You wanted to talk about play strategy with me, yes?"

Troy shrinks a little under Ilya's touch and doesn't meet his eye line. "Uh. It's fine. I think I figured it out, actually."

Ilya raises a disbelieving eyebrow at him. "You are sure?"

Troy nods jerkily, and Ilya shrugs, shooting Shane a look that says, *Kids…what can you do?*

Shane smiles and shakes his head, but he straightens a bit when Troy approaches him this time. The rest of the team has already started making their way to the bus.

"Hey," Troy greets easily. "We're still sitting together, right?"

"Oh," Shane blinks in realization. Right. He'd promised that. "Um, yeah. Sure. Why not?" He agrees, not missing the way Ilya's expression drops into a pouty frown over Troy's shoulder.

"Cool," Troy smiles, but he looks on edge. Anxious. Worried.

Shane doesn't ask questions when Troy promptly leads him to the back of the bus, his eyes catching Ilya's as the other is pulled into a seat closer to the front with Luca and the rest of the guys. Admittedly, there's a lot of privacy back here, and Shane wonders if that was intentional on Troy's part.

Troy takes the window seat, which Shane doesn't mind because he spots Ilya sitting in the aisle up front, and it's nice to be able to keep an eye on him, even if it's just the back of his head. Plus, if Shane wanted to get up and stretch his legs for whatever reason, he'd have an

easy getaway plan. …Not that he was going to try to get away. He could certainly survive a six-hour bus ride without Ilya, after all. Really. It wouldn't be a problem.

They chit-chat about the game last night, how the air unit in the hotel room was so sensitive that it only seemed to have two real settings: freezing cold or sweltering hot. They talk about how Troy's excited to play against Montreal, even though he thinks they'll probably lose. Shane doesn't offer his two cents on that one, mostly because he isn't sure he can stomach the conversation right now. And then, when they're about an hour into the bus ride, Troy takes a cursory glance around before leaning in a little closer.

"Um," he says tentatively, and Shane can't help the way he tenses in anticipation of whatever he's about to say. "I wanted to talk to you about something. It's sort of…awkward."

"Okay," Shane replies carefully, his eyebrows furrowing together as he leans in as well. "What's up?"

"Well," Troy sighs. "It's about Rozanov, actually." He's intentionally keeping his voice down to keep the sound from carrying. "It's just…I went to his room last night to, like, talk to him about the game. And…I'm pretty sure I heard someone with him."

Shane sucks in a breath. "Oh?" He asks, trying to play nonchalant. "What, um, what do you mean?"

Troy licks over his lips before continuing. "Like. I'm pretty sure he brought someone with him back to his hotel room."

Troy raises his eyebrows like he's waiting for Shane to clue in to what he's saying, but Shane is just trying not to freak out over the fact that they've been discovered this quickly. He must realize that Shane isn't getting it, however, because he continues to explain.

"I'm saying I'm pretty sure Rozanov brought someone back to his room last night. For sex."

Shane swallows thickly, blinking a few times while he tries to get his mouth to form a coherent thought. "Oh," is all he comes up with, once again.

"I just, um," Troy huffs, ducking his head slightly. "I know he has a girlfriend, you know? And it's probably none of my business what other players do on the road, but," he pauses before continuing. "I was in a long-distance relationship not that long ago, and I got cheated on, and it fucking sucked. I just…I don't want to see anyone get hurt like that."

Shane is at a loss for words.

"I know he's my Captain, and I probably shouldn't say anything, but I just figured, like. You guys are friends, right?" Troy lifts his head to look at him this time. "And you…you've met her? Jane. Right?"

"Um, right—" Shane stutters.

"I'm sure she's a sweet girl. And maybe they have some agreement I don't know about, or something." Troy pushes his hand through his hair like this has been causing him a lot of

stress. “I just…figured I should tell someone. You know? Because I don’t think it’s right.”

“No, um,” Shane clears his throat, his eyes darting to the front of the bus where Ilya is laughing loudly at something Bood’s said. “You did the right thing by coming to me,” he offers Troy a small smile. “I’ll…I’ll look into it, yeah?” Shane nods in assurance.

“You will?” Troy double-checks, his eyes grazing over Shane’s features.

“Of course, yeah,” Shane agrees, his expression warm. “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding,” he waves off. “Ilya’s a good guy. Maybe they were just having phone sex or something.”

Troy worries his lower lip between his teeth. “I dunno. It really sounded like someone was in the room with him.”

Shane’s expression falls slightly.

“Not that…not that I was listening or anything!” Troy jumps in to defend himself, his eyes wide. “I mean, not for long. Only a minute or two. Just…just to make sure I wasn’t imagining things.”

Shane’s heart picks up in his chest, but he forces a laugh. “I’ll talk to him about it, okay? Let’s just not jump to any conclusions, yeah?”

He’s thankful when Troy relaxes at that, giving him a jerky nod, but unfortunately, all Shane can think about for the rest of the bus ride over is how quickly this thing is starting to spiral out of control.

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Chapter End Notes

my pinterest board for shane's kitty playroom if anyone is interested.

Oh god I'm doing my best with the hockey, but I truly don't know anything, so feel free to correct me if I get something terribly wrong.

This chapter was so fun to write!!!! I love the Centaurs so much, and having Ilya/Shane together all the time now. We're heading back to Montreal :////: but also :))))) !!

Thank you for all your thoughts on the one book/two book dilemma. I think I do have a point coming up in the next several chapters that might be a nice way to end it, but I'm just going to play it by ear. I'll only do it if it feels like a satisfying place to split. Either way, there will be much more of this story.

I'm getting caught up on comments. Thank you to all of your beautiful minds for sharing! You guys pick up on so many things, it's crazy. Let me know what you think of this one ♡ thank you again for reading as fast as I am writing!!!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they finally get to Montreal, Ilya sends Shane straight off to physio for recovery in response to his late-night workout from the night before. They plan to stay the evening in the hotel with the rest of the guys to avoid suspicion, but Shane secretly hoped they could petition to stay in Ilya's Montreal house after the game. They had a long weekend before their next home game against Buffalo, and both Ilya and Shane had already cleared excuses for staying behind while the rest of the team traveled back to Ottawa. Shane was staying under the guise of catching up with family and friends, while Ilya had big plans with his long-distance girlfriend, 'Jane'.

"Cap, you've gotta bring Jane around to meet the boys. Maybe drinks tomorrow night?" Dykstra suggests as they sit down for their team dinner at the hotel.

"Yeah, we're dying to know who locked our resident playboy down," Bood grins, claiming a seat on the other side of the table.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "My precious Jane is busy. If she is going to make time for anyone, it is me. I will not have her waste her hours on meeting you fuckers."

"Hey," Wyatt calls out hurtfully. "Why are you keeping her from us, Rozy? Are you afraid we're gonna embarrass you or something? Hollzy's met her. Right, Shane?"

Shane looks up from where he's been pushing his food around his plate for the past ten minutes. "What? Oh, um. Yeah. Few times."

"So, what? Is she hideous or something? Why's our boy Roz keeping this so lock and key?" Wyatt wrinkles his nose.

Shane just shrugs. "Some people are private about that sort of thing."

"Like you?" Troy questions, shoving a bite of food into his mouth.

"Me?" Shane frowns, tipping his head.

"Yeah," Troy shrugs. "Didn't Roz say you were taken or something?"

"No way." Wyatt's eyes go wide as he turns to Shane. "Hollander's a taken man? Since *when*?"

"Uh," Shane says helplessly, his gaze darting to Ilya, who just shrugs like he has no idea how Troy's come to that realization. "I dunno. It's kind of complicated."

Ilya scoffs slightly, which in turn pulls the attention of half the table. Once he notices, he lets his expression go blank while blinking innocently up at them. "What?"

“You did,” Troy acknowledges Ilya. “You said you had it on good authority that he was seeing someone.”

“I—” Ilya stutters, shaking his head. “I do not recall saying this. You probably misheard me.”

Troy narrows his eyes slightly at him. “So, Shane *is* available? Or he’s not? Because you told me that—”

“Everyone on this team is so goddamn nosy.” Ilya raises his hands up in annoyance. “Who cares if Hollander is seeing someone? Who cares if I am seeing someone? What? You fuckers can’t get off unless you are living vicariously through us?”

“Some people take their relationships seriously, I guess,” Troy replies pointedly. “Does Jane know you’re so secretive about her? Is there maybe a reason for that?”

“Yes, the reason is *mind your own damn business*, Barrett,” Ilya bites back. “What I share of my relationship is between me and my Jane. If I do not want to answer your stupid questions, then I will not. Some boundaries should be respected. Simple as that.”

“Right,” Troy laughs bitterly, and Ilya looks like he’s about to jump up and fight him, so Shane quickly steps in to play mediator, aware that Ilya is missing out on some important context.

“Jane is super private,” Shane informs the group at large. “She’s got her own high-profile career. She doesn’t want to be linked to anyone publicly. Let’s all just stop making assumptions about things we know nothing about. Okay?”

Troy quiets at that, and Ilya is shooting Shane an inquisitive look like he knows something is up, but Shane just shakes his head imperceptibly. It’s not the time to get into it.

“Wow. Rozy’s Jane is high-profile, huh? Could it possibly be…someone like Rose Landry?” Holmberg suggests, and it’s Shane’s turn to stiffen this time.

Luca’s mouth twists into a frown. “I thought Shane dated Rose. Rozy wouldn’t do that. Right?” He turns to look at Ilya in question.

“Luca,” Bood replies patiently. “Shane is fucking gay. Besides, I’m pretty sure Roz’s girlfriend is named *Jane*. Not Rose.”

“Oh, that’s not a bad point, though. If she’s as private and high-profile as you say, maybe Roz is using a fake name so we don’t know who she is,” Wyatt hums, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Plus…Rose is the same number of letters as Jane.”

“Maybe it’s more like…a rhyming thing, rather than the number of letters,” LaPointe joins in on the guessing. “Quick, which names rhyme with Jane?”

“Are you guys serious? Or did I not *just* say to mind your fucking business?” Ilya scoffs, standing from the table with a loud scrape of his chair before he stalks off to get more food.

“Damn,” Dykstra mutters after he’s departed. “Roz does not play about his Jane. He’s even more on edge about playing the Voyageurs than Shane is.”

“Hey!” Luca grins happily. “*Shane* rhymes with Jane.”

Shane splutters around the sip of water he was taking, pulling the attention of the entire table.

Troy gives him a gentle pat on the back. “You alright, Hollzy?”

“I’m fine,” Shane waves him off quickly as he reaches for a napkin to wipe his face.

“He’s just appalled that you idiots think Roz could land him. Trust me, Shane is *way* too good for Rozanov,” Bood snorts, and Shane’s stomach churns at the way this conversation has taken a turn.

“So, how bout it, Hollander? You got a man here in Montreal or what?” Wyatt wonders aloud. “Hot piece of ass like yourself. You must.”

Shane’s eyebrows press together slightly as he flushes at all the eyes suddenly on him.

“Please,” Holmberg laughs. “He’s probably got a man in every city. When you look like Hollander does, life is probably just a buffet of hot men.”

“Um,” Shane gets out, eyes darting in the direction of wherever Ilya’s just gone.

Wyatt whistles in response. “For real. If I was gay, I’d be all over that. Imagine being ranked the hottest player in the MLH *and* the best. Someone needs to lock you down quick if they haven’t already.”

Ilya sets his plate down loudly as he returns to the table, his gaze locked harshly on Wyatt. “Is there a reason you all are thirsting so heavily over our star center right now? Because usually that is the type of thing that makes people uncomfortable.”

Troy just blinks at Ilya and then turns to look at Shane, who is still blushing shyly as he pushes his food around his plate. “They’re just saying he’s hot. It’s not exactly a secret. I mean, Shane doesn’t seem to mind. Do you, Shane?”

“Um, I—” Shane stutters, shaking his head awkwardly.

“There’s a difference between calling someone hot and saying you would be *all over that* if you were gay,” Ilya gets out sharply. “Unless there is something you’re not telling us, Hazy?”

Wyatt just shrugs and holds his hands up in defense. “Hey. I mean no disrespect. If Hollander ever wants to give me a chance, well…I’m sure he could rock my world.”

“You have a girlfriend,” Ilya says stoically.

“Yeah, and I’m sure I’m not the only one here with a fucking *hall pass*, okay? If Hollzy ever wants me, then Lisa would have no objections. *Trust*,” Wyatt confirms, before offering Shane a wink.

Shane laughs because he's pretty sure they're joking. He's pretty sure all of them are, but Ilya does *not* seem to be joking right now. In fact, he looks like he's damn near close to exploding and leaving several casualties in his wake.

"Fuck it," Bood shrugs. "My wife has a huge crush on Hollander. Pretty sure he's *both* of our hall passes."

"I had a dream about him one time," Luca nearly whispers, and Shane is stunned by all of the admissions, but he's also terrified with how Ilya still hasn't sat down. How he's clutching the table like he's going to flip it.

Shane presses his key chain in his pocket as way of distracting him, but Ilya's nostrils flare like it's just an annoyance. A reminder of the fact that they can't be public about their relationship. For some reason, it makes guilt trickle across Shane's insides. Like he's the one forcing them to stay closeted. Forcing *Ilya* to stay closeted, more like.

"I am calling it a night," Ilya says decisively, like he can't take any more of it. "Hollander, you should head up, too. I need you well-rested for tomorrow. The rest of you horndogs, wrap it up. Tomorrow's morning skate is mandatory, and then we have an important team meeting after. If I catch anyone consuming alcohol this evening, I am going to bench you for the rest of the season, do you hear me?" Ilya narrows his eyes at all of them.

The team murmurs out their agreements, and Shane freezes when Ilya turns more directly to him.

"Finish the rest of your meal, please. Big fucking game tomorrow. I need everyone in peak condition."

Shane swallows and nods jerkily, recognizing the command for what it is. He takes a big bite out of what's left of his chicken.

They don't get time to talk that evening, which puts Shane massively on edge. Ilya claims he wants to look over the tapes from Toronto ahead of their game, but all Shane can think is that he must be mad at him. When he suggests stopping by Ilya's room to watch the tapes with him, Ilya shuts him down, and Shane tries not to act like a kicked puppy over it.

But he can't help the way he bursts into tears when he gets back to his hotel room. He draws himself a bath and sobs into his knees until the water has gone cold around him. And when he's done with that, he slowly dresses himself in a pair of Ilya's clothes and retreats to his cold, lonely bed.

The stress is up to his ears now. He's drowning in it. He gets a text from Hayden and Jackie that the kids can't wait to see him and Ilya. There's a picture attached of Ruby and Jade wearing matching Centaurs jerseys with Ilya's number on the back, and it only makes him cry harder.

He texts his therapist, even though he knows she probably won't respond at this hour, but it still feels like some form of release in a way. He goes to bed with all the lights on and one of Ilya's shirts pressed to his face.

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Ilya is not messing around today. He's running their morning practice like the fucking navy, keeping all of the guys in check because their game against the Montreal Voyageurs is something so serious, and it really has nothing to do with whether they win or lose. No, in fact, he's far more concerned with the Voyageurs and their ridiculous vendetta against Shane, which literally made no sense, considering they were the ones who forced *him* out due to concerns over…gayness, of all things. Meanwhile, most of Ilya's team was fucking *foaming at the mouth* to take a crack at Hollander, which…yeah. Was not putting him at ease either.

When they finish practice, he promptly sends Shane off to get some more rest, citing that he's not needed for the team meeting. He tries to ignore the hurt look Shane has been flashing him all morning, even though it feels like a kick in the stomach. *It's for his own good*, Ilya tells himself, and tries to believe it. Because he has a one-track mind right now, and that one-track mind revolves solely around *keeping Shane safe*. He can make amends with him later once he's accomplished that goal.

"Alright, boys, listen up," Ilya tells everyone seriously, once Shane is on his way back to the hotel. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that this game is going to be a rough one. But I'm not just talking in terms of hockey."

There's a murmur that rattles across the group.

"I've got it on good authority that the Voyageurs are coming into tonight with a fury, which means one of us will have a huge target on their back. I'm sure I don't have to tell you who."

He lets his statement simmer with them for a second.

"I'm expecting some foul play. They're going to be breathing down his neck all night, checking harder than they should, not letting up after the whistle. These Voyageurs don't care about penalties. They know they've got this one in the bag. Tonight, I care more about protecting Hollander than I do about winning. I want you guys on him at *all* times. If they hit hard, you hit back harder. Every touch he gets is going to be heavy, and we cannot afford an injury this early on in the season. Are we clear on that?" Ilya double-checks, and he's pleased when he sees a lot of determined nods.

Zane smirks and cracks his knuckles. "I've been waiting to take a stab at those Voyageurs for weeks now. Hollander is ours. They didn't want him, anyway; we won him fair and square."

"If they're targeting him, that's just straight up homophobic," Wyatt shakes his head. "That shit doesn't fly on this team. Right, boys?"

"Right," everyone agrees, and Ilya sees a particular fire flare in Troy's eyes.

"We've got him, Cap," Troy vows, nodding seriously. Ilya offers him a grateful look in return.

As much as he hates the fact that his entire team is apparently lusting after his boyfriend—something he sort of already suspected because who the fuck *wouldn't* want to fuck Shane—

he can't say he isn't comforted by the level of devotion that they have towards their star center. His boys were ready to lay their lives on the line if it meant protecting him, and Ilya is endlessly grateful that they seem as passionate about the cause as he is. It only lessens his nerves going into tonight a tiny bit.

By the time he gets back to the hotel, Shane is waiting outside of his room, pacing rapidly. Ilya approaches him with concerned eyebrows, his bag slung over his shoulder as he pulls his room key out of his pocket.

"Are you mad at me?" Shane says in a hurry once he catches sight of him, and Ilya frowns in confusion.

"What? Of course not. Why would I be mad at you?"

"You've been ignoring me ever since we got in last night," Shane expresses, his own face pinched in discomfort. "Did I do something wrong? Is it because of what the guys said?"

Ilya lets his shoulders sag as he lets out a sigh. "No. You didn't do anything wrong, and I could not care less what the guys say as long as *you* are not bothered."

Shane frowns and shakes his head. "Then, what? Is it because I didn't sit with you on the bus? Because I had already promised Troy—"

"Shane, you did not do anything wrong," Ilya tells him clearly. He's not touching him, just in case anyone else should decide to make a surprise appearance, but it doesn't mean he doesn't want to. "Honestly, I have been preoccupied with this game more than anything." He takes a small breath before continuing. "Hayden let me know that the guys are planning on playing dirty tonight. I know you're capable of handling yourself out there, but I would not put it past them to cross some lines. I think they are feeling pretty confident about this one, especially after seeing us lose to Toronto, which means they are going to push the refs to their absolute limits."

Shane swallows, his gaze dropping to the floor as he takes in the new information. "Jesus. I was expecting some rough play, but this?" He scoffs dejectedly. "Isn't it bad enough I ended up on the losing team? Do they really have to rub my nose in it?"

Ilya presses his lips into a firm line. He wants to argue, but he knows it's not what Shane needs to hear right now. His frustrations are 100% valid, and Ilya feels for him. Truly. "I gave everyone a heads up. Just to be on the lookout. I do not know how far they're willing to push, and you're still our best player right now. We cannot afford any injuries just because the Voyageurs want to make this personal."

Shane chews on his lower lip in contemplation before nodding jerkily, like he understands where Ilya is coming from, at least. "Yeah. You're right."

"You don't need to do anything differently," Ilya reminds him calmly. "Just show up. Play the game. The boys and I have your back out there, okay?"

Shane gives him another nod, this one more sure than the last.

His Shane was precious, precious cargo, after all, and Ilya was going to be damned if he let some stupid, half-wit Voyageurs do anything to fuck with his kitten. Toronto had been child's play in comparison, and while he's not expecting a win tonight, he has full confidence in the Centaurs' ability to protect Shane at all costs. The rest of their season depended on it.

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Shane is trying not to spiral out of control when they get to the arena. It's Bell Centre—a place that used to feel more like home than his actual house did—but today, it feels like he's just stepped into a snake-den. He's met with boos almost immediately. He tries to let it roll off his shoulders. It's just hockey. He's played this game a million times, and tonight would be no different. It's just another day on the ice.

He's not immune to the glares he receives the moment he skates out. The Voyageurs are huddled together tightly, clearly putting up a united front, and Shane almost wants to laugh. Where was that energy a couple months ago? Or could they only come together for a cause that they cared passionately enough about? Like their shared hatred of gay people, apparently.

He's grateful when he sees Hayden meander over for a quick greeting, and he can't help but smile in appreciation despite the way the guys are glowering daggers into them.

"You square for tonight?"

Shane nods and sucks his upper lip between his teeth, bracing himself for what's to come. He doesn't miss the way Hayden glances over his shoulder to offer someone else a quick nod. Shane doesn't need to look to know that it's Ilya.

"Just watch yourself out there, got it?"

"Thanks," Shane nods his understanding, and Hayden's eyes drift past him once more. Shane actually does turn this time to catch Ilya staring intensely back at them, his eyes laser-focused. Something passes between him and Hayden, but Shane doesn't get to dwell on it for long before the Voyageurs start calling him back over.

"See you on the other side," Hayden says in dismissal, tapping his stick against Shane's before skating off in the other direction.

Shane is still starting because he's their best chance at making any headway in this game, so he lines up for the first face-off of the evening, only to be met with Comeau's smug smile.

"Try not to get too distracted," Comeau chirps tauntingly. It's a dig at him being gay. A callout to their final conversation before Shane had himself traded.

Shane doesn't react except to swipe his stick forward as soon as the puck hits the ice. Once again, he wins the opening face-off.

The Voyageurs are on him in an instant. JJ gets him with a hard, clean hit against the boards—a shoulder to the chest—but Shane doesn't let it get to him. He's playing the game as usual, not one to be deterred by childish antics. Ilya is always close by; he's taking control of

the puck more than he typically would, and Shane doesn't fight him on it, but it seems like there's always an opportunity for someone to crowd his space. The game feels like it's closing in around him.

JJ keeps coming after him like he has a personal vendetta, the boards rattling as he drives Shane into them, and after the ref blows the whistle, he gives Shane an extra shove for good measure. It's small. It's cheap. It doesn't stop Ilya from grabbing him and shoving him back. The refs break it up before it can escalate.

Montreal is the first to score a goal, which Shane tries not to take personally. They're more practiced with working as a unit. They've had a decade to get used to each other, after all, whereas the Centaurs were working with mere weeks of playtime. Still, it only adds to the quickly rising tension that feels palpable in the air.

But Shane has the benefit of knowing how these guys operate. He's aware of every trick in their book, has spent just as long learning their mannerisms and playing style as they have, and it pays off in the form of being able to read their moves a step before they execute them. He knows he has all of the Voyageurs chasing after him as he races towards the other end of the ice, which in turn allows him to slip a perfect pass to Ilya, who promptly scores. Fuck yes.

They're tied 1-1.

The game continues on like that, with Shane and the rest of the Centaurs on high alert as they go through the motions. It isn't until second period that JJ actually gets a serious hit in. Shane turns a corner for the puck, going low, and JJ pins him roughly against the boards, trapping his stick a little awkwardly—and with it, his wrist. A second body rams into him half a beat later, which drives the hit further home. Shane is eventually able to pull free and shake it off, but he flexes his hand on instinct, and Ilya notices.

The next time they're on the ice, Ilya goes after JJ and gets him back with a hard check. It's not illegal, but it does send a clear message, and Montreal sharpens up their defense in response. They start hitting harder and for longer, putting even more pressure on Shane. They're lingering after whistles, but only barely. Not enough for the refs to take notice, even though the audience clearly has. It's almost masterful, the execution of it all.

Shane spots Hayden voicing his frustrations to JJ from the bench, but none of the other Voyageurs are listening to him. They're on a mission, and right now, they're tied, which only seems to make them angrier.

They're still chasing Shane rather than the puck, but it doesn't matter considering the skill level they're operating within, and Montreal scores once more when Troy makes a bad pass. The game immediately starts to shift after that. The tensions are rising, both amongst the Voyageurs and the Centaurs, and the ice is quickly turning into a war zone.

Shane watches from the bench, rolling his wrist slightly to take away some of the strain, and Ilya whispers something to Coach Wiebe, who nods his agreement. Ilya doesn't sit down once, watching the game with a locked jaw and tightly held shoulders, his blue eyes

following the Voyageurs' every move like he'll be able to see the future, predict the hits before they come.

The next time Shane is on the ice, JJ gets him again, trapping his arm similarly to last time. And then another Voyageur unnecessarily piles on top of him, and the pain in Shane's wrist radiates a little higher, a little stronger. It's Troy who jumps to his defense this time, a few other Centaurs shoving and yelling, but it's Troy's gloves that drop when the Voyageurs don't let up still, and the crowd is a roaring sea of noise in Shane's ears. It winds up earning Montreal a power play, and Shane curses, unsurprised, when they score without hesitation.

3-1

They start targeting him more intentionally after that, driving more hits into his side, putting more contact towards his arms and hands like they've zeroed in on a direct target. And with the Centaurs' star player essentially boxed out, Montreal is able to pull for a 4th goal.

4-1

As they head into the grueling 3rd period, Shane notices Coach Wiebe is keeping him off the ice more than usual. Ilya starts taking on double-shifts, much to Shane's dismay, and the team is tightening around him as the game continues to get messier. There are fights after every whistle. The refs are calling for more penalties, but it doesn't deter the tone by any means. It's scrappy, physical, and it's fucking beyond frustrating to have to watch it go down from the sidelines.

"Stop fucking pulling me," Shane tells Ilya as he finally makes his way over to the bench.

"Your wrist is injured," Ilya says without sparing him a glance.

"It's fucking fine. They're destroying us out there. At least let me get one goal in."

"Jesus Christ, Shane," Ilya shakes his head, but Shane isn't having it. He's not leaving this arena until he's left everything on the ice, injury or no injury.

"Coach Wiebe, please," Shane begs, sidling up to him. "One shift. We're nearly done."

Coach Wiebe contemplates him for a minute, risking a glance at Ilya before he gives a quick nod. "Alright. The two of you together. Make it happen." He gestures them onto the ice.

Shane breathes a sigh of relief and doesn't give Ilya a chance to argue before he starts making his way across the ice. There are 35 seconds on the clock.

He notices almost immediately that Montreal is overcommitted to blocking lanes, which means they're not tracking bodies the way they should be. A loose puck and a soft lane through the middle gives him all the opportunity he needs. 2-3 seconds of space that most players would miss, but Shane is not most players.

There are sticks everywhere as it happens, bodies all around him, and the puck is bouncing slightly, but he drifts into the soft lane as the play breaks down, and possibly by chance—or

maybe just years of chasing it and knowing how to be in the right place at the right time—the puck slides right into Shane's path.

Shane takes the shot without question. He doesn't even line it up. He can't see the goal through all the chaos and the bodies, anyway, but it works in his favor because the goalie can't see him either. The puck goes cleanly into the net.

4-2

It's a loss, but it's a loss that Shane can live with because, this time, they've really given it their all. The arena is up in arms, and the Centaurs go wild cheering from the bench.

None of the Voyageurs look him in the eye as they go for the final handshake. JJ gazes over his head as if he doesn't exist. Comeau mutters something under his breath and gets a face full of Ilya in return.

"Good game," Hayden offers genuinely, and Shane's lips curl in lieu of a response. They'd see each other tomorrow when Shane and Ilya went over to watch the kids. Right now, he just wants to get out of there as soon as possible.

As soon as he gets to the locker room, Ilya spins him right back around and sends him to the medical staff area instead to get his wrist checked out. Shane rolls his eyes, but he doesn't argue, especially when Ilya tells him he's going to handle the after-game interviews tonight. The reporters were probably desperate to talk to him, but Shane's grateful he doesn't have to deal with it. He's mentally spent, and the physical effects of the game are starting to catch up with him.

Their athletic trainer checks him over thoroughly and then sends him off with some ice packs, a compression wrap, and a handful of anti-inflammatories. They give him some recovery tips to follow for the next few days, encouraging him to take it easy, but luckily, their game against Buffalo wasn't until next week. He'd have plenty of time to rest up before then.

He showers quickly and then meets up with the rest of the team for the bus back to the hotel. Ilya sits with him, but they don't talk, and Shane realizes pretty quickly that he's just acting as a buffer so the other guys won't yap his ear off. Shane appreciates the gesture, leaning his head against the window while he smiles and pretends to nod along to whatever they're saying.

When they get to the hotel, everyone heads to their rooms to drop their stuff off before they reconvene for dinner, but Ilya and Shane intentionally hang back a bit to talk to Coach Wiebe.

"Great game tonight, boys. Your wrist alright, Hollander?" He double-checks.

"A little sore, but I'll be fine for the game against Buffalo." Shane shrugs, holding up his hand to show the ice pack he's got wrapped around it.

“Good. You take it easy, too, Rozanov. You took a lot of hits, especially with how often you were on the ice tonight. I want you in recovery mode this weekend. Both of you,” he tells them seriously, and Ilya nods.

“Listen, Coach,” Ilya petitions. “I was wondering if it would be okay if I stay at my Montreal house tonight now that the game’s done. It’d be nice to sleep in my own bed and get a head start on the weekend. Plus, you know. Spend time with my partner.”

Coach Wiebe’s eyes slide from Ilya over to Shane.

“I—um. Me too,” Shane adds jerkily. “I’d also like to stay at the house tonight if I can. My house, I mean,” he rushes to clarify, and Coach Wiebe just stares at them for a second before shaking his head.

“Look, guys. I have no problem with whatever this is,” he gestures between them. “I just need to know the plan. Because if you’re going to continue on the way you have been, I give it about a week—*maybe* two—before the rest of the guys figure it out. I’m surprised most of them haven’t already.”

Shane’s eyes go wide. He wasn’t expecting him to just…address it so directly. “Er—sorry, Coach.”

“It’s fine,” he waves off. “But you’re lucky it’s just me who saw you on the bus. If you had woken up even five minutes later, the entire team would have seen you. Like I said, it doesn’t matter to me. Come out, don’t come out. Just make a plan before the choice is made for you. Alright?” He looks between them once more.

“Got it,” Ilya agrees. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Yeah, seriously. It means a lot,” Shane nods quickly.

“Good. You guys are free to go whenever. Enjoy your weekend. And *please* don’t do anything to injure yourselves more,” he warns. “I meant what I said about taking it easy. I can’t have my two star players out because they can’t keep their hands off each other.”

Shane flushes, and Ilya bites back a grin.

“Yes, Coach,” they both say in unison.

That seems to satisfy Wiebe enough because he starts heading into the hotel soon after.

Ilya is giggling wildly beside him.

“Shut up,” Shane rolls his eyes, but he can’t resist smiling a little. “He’s right, you know? What happened on the bus cannot happen again.”

Ilya huffs dramatically. “*Or*,” he offers instead. “We could just *tell* them. They already know you’re gay. It’s not like they are going to have a problem with me being gay, too.”

“I know, but like,” Shane sighs. “It’s one thing to have a gay guy on the team. It’s another to have two guys on the team who are literally *dating* each other. Especially us, you know. I don’t want it to create an uncomfortable dynamic.”

Ilya deadpans. “Shane. Half of those guys just admitted they wanted to fuck you last night. I do not think we are at risk of making anyone uncomfortable.”

Shane scoffs. “They did not.”

“Uh, are you kidding me? Do you even know what a hall pass *is*?” Ilya raises his eyebrows.

Shane frowns and averts his gaze. “No,” he mutters softly.

“A hall pass is when you give your partner permission to have sex with someone outside of the relationship.”

“What?” Shane wrinkles his nose. “Why would anyone do that?”

“It is like a one-time pass for certain people, such as celebrities. Basically, Bood and his wife have an agreement that they would both fuck you if given the chance. And so would most of the guys on the team.” Ilya crosses his arms over his chest.

“What are you trying to say?” Shane presses his eyebrows together.

“I’m *saying* it is very frustrating that every single guy on this team is allowed to express their desire to fuck you except for the guy on the team who is *actually* fucking you.” Ilya throws his arms up in exasperation. “They are thirsting after you all day long, and I just have to sit and watch while doing nothing about it. It is fucking torture.”

Shane just watches him for a moment before exhaling heavily. “I get it, okay? I’m sorry it’s hard on you, and I do understand where you’re coming from. I just—” Shane chews at his lower lip nervously. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but it makes me really nervous. Like I know they’ll take it well, but—”

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Actually, it made perfect sense to Ilya. The last team Shane had inadvertently come out to didn’t take the news so well, which meant that Shane had every reason to be anxious about revealing his relationship to this one. It didn’t matter that the team already knew he was gay. It was still scary for him, and Ilya understood that.

“I just,” Shane pauses, closing his eyes tightly. “I just want to keep it under wraps for a little longer. Just until I find my footing here. Is that okay?” He asks, looking up at Ilya this time.

And all Ilya sees is a tiny baby kitten who, despite being a massive hockey star, is still just scared of his own shadow at the end of the day. Ilya would never force him into something he wasn’t ready for.

“Of course, that’s okay,” Ilya smiles softly, reaching to tangle his fingers with Shane’s good hand. “I just wish they did not feel so comfortable expressing their desire to *fuck* you,” Ilya

groans, throwing an arm over his face.

“Oh, please,” Shane rolls his eyes, like he doesn’t believe that for a second.

“Excuse me?” Ilya turns to him again, his eyebrows arched.

Shane just levels him with a look. “As if you don’t fantasize about it all the time.”

Ilya’s eyes go wide as he lets out a surprised laugh. “*Me*? You think I am the one fantasizing about it? You are the one who is so desperate to be the team cat.”

“Oh my god,” Shane splutters a laugh of his own. “You’re ridiculous.” He shakes his head.

“Oh, I am ridiculous?”

“Yup,” Shane replies, popping the ‘p’.

“Ah, that is very funny. We will see who is ridiculous when we get home.”

It’s Shane’s turn to raise his eyebrows this time. “Oh, really?” He asks in interest.

“Yes, really,” Ilya insists, chasing after him as Shane suddenly speeds off towards the hotel. “You may be fast, kitty, but I am faster!” He calls.

They zoom right past Troy and Luca in the hotel lobby.

“Hey, Rozy! Hotel bar for dinner and drinks?” Luca yells out.

“Sorry, rook,” Ilya turns over his shoulder to offer Luca a grin. “I’ve got a hot date tonight.”

“Shane?” Troy questions hopefully.

“Sorry, guys,” Shane offers a sympathetic look as he presses the button to the elevator. “I’m grabbing my stuff and heading home. I’ve gotta get some more ice on my wrist.” He holds his hand up as an excuse.

“You’re not traveling back with us tomorrow?” Troy furrows his eyebrows.

Shane shakes his head. “I’ve got some people to see while I’m in town.”

“I’m staying the weekend, too. My Jane is absolutely ravenous for me. She keeps lighting up my necklace like crazy,” Ilya exaggerates.

“She has not,” Shane rolls his eyes.

“Has too!” Ilya argues. “I do not blame her, you know? She is like a lost little kitty when I am not around. She is always desperate for me.”

Troy frowns, and Shane shoves at his shoulder hard.

“Ow! Do not be so rough with me. You heard Coach, Hollander. I am fragile.”

“Not so fragile you can’t fuck your Jane—”

Ilya tackles him in a playful headlock as Troy and Luca look on with wide eyes.

“We will see you back home for Buffalo, yes?” Ilya offers them each a grin, while Shane is still struggling to get out of his grasp. “Great game tonight, boys. Those Voyageurs can suck a big one.”

Shane bites at Ilya’s wrist all of a sudden, which causes Ilya to yelp in pain and drop his arms just as the elevator opens, and Shane immediately darts inside.

“Have a safe ride back,” Shane gets out breathlessly, his cheeks flushed with exertion as he smiles.

“Yeah. You too,” Troy mutters, looking between them for a second before he and Luca round the corner to head to the restaurant.

As soon as the elevator door closes, Ilya crowds all up in Shane’s space. “That was very naughty, kitty.”

Shane smirks as Ilya towers over him. “You are making such an ass out of yourself, and you don’t even realize it.”

“Me? Make an ass of myself? Never.”

“I’m serious,” Shane laughs, pushing lightly at Ilya’s chest. “Troy totally heard us the other night. He thinks you’re cheating on your Jane.”

Ilya’s eyebrows raise high on his head. “Cheating on my Jane?” He scoffs like the idea is ridiculous. “Why would he think this?”

“Hm, probably because he heard you having *sex* in your hotel room and you’re supposed to be in a long-distance relationship?” Shane suggests. “Just. Off the top of my head.”

Ilya groans and ducks forward to bury his face in Shane’s shoulder. “Jesus Christ, Hollander. First, you give me constant blue balls, and now you are making my team think their Captain is a cheater? I am starting to think you are more trouble than you are worth.”

Shane’s jaw drops. “Giving you *constant blue balls*? You’re the one who didn’t want me to come to your room last night so you could watch *hockey tapes*.”

“Yes, because I will not fall prey to your sneaky seduction techniques. If you want to win some games, then you must let me do my job and stop distracting me,” Ilya says seriously. “And I am not surprised Troy came to you with something like this. It is all part of his master plan to win you away from me.”

“What are you talking about?” Shane laughs as Ilya wraps his large hands around his hips.

“Oh, you are not the only one who Troy is coming to with private matters.”

“Like what?” Shane challenges, like he’s sure that Ilya is just trying to get a rise out of him.

“Mm, like before you got traded and he heard you might be gay, so he approached me for your number,” Ilya murmurs, ducking even closer to press their foreheads together.

“He did not,” Shane replies disbelievingly.

“He sure did,” Ilya validates, claiming his lips in a bruising kiss. “The entire team is gay for you. Just accept it.”

Shane gasps and shoves Ilya off of him as the elevator dings to signal they’ve arrived at their floor. They separate just in time for the doors to open, revealing Wyatt and Bood.

“Oh, hey, guys. We were just heading down for dinner,” Wyatt greets.

“You alright, Shane? Those Voyageurs are fucking brutal,” Bood scoffs. “They might be good at hockey, but at what cost, you know? Just tons of foul play. The ref should have called them on it.”

Shane just shrugs. “We’ll get ‘em next time.”

And Ilya is surprised he’s taking the loss so well, especially considering how he’d reacted after they lost to Toronto.

“You guys coming, or what?” Wyatt holds the elevator doors as Ilya and Shane step out.

“Negative,” Ilya replies, and he can’t tamp down on his smile. Not when he has a whole weekend planned for him and Shane that’s just waiting to begin. “I’m packing up my stuff and getting the hell out of here. My Jane is waiting for me.”

“You dawg. One of these days, we’re gonna find out who this special lady is,” Bood warns, pointing a finger at him. “You can’t keep us from her forever.”

“Go get laid, Roz. Hollander, we’ll see you down there?” Wyatt double-checks.

“Nope, sorry,” Shane shakes his head, lips curled around his own smile. “I’m staying the weekend in Montreal. Got a few people to see.”

“A *few* people! I fucking told you. Hollander’s got guys on tap in every zip code. My man,” Wyatt whistles.

“Okay, go on now. I think you have flirted with Hollander enough for one week, hm?” Ilya raises his eyebrows, wrapping a possessive arm around Shane’s shoulders. “Leave my star alone.”

“*Your* star?” Bood cackles. “You may be Captain of this team, Rozy, but you don’t have a claim over Hollander any more than the rest of us do. He’s just as much *ours* as he is yours.”

Ilya feels fire flare in his belly. He was getting really sick of them talking about Shane like he wasn’t *his*.

“Well, technically, Ilya is the one who suggested I join the team, so,” Shane chimes in helpfully. “I am maybe a *tiny* bit more his.”

“A tiny bit?” Ilya turns to look at him. “A *tiny bit* more? You cannot be serious. Who has known you since before rookie season? Who has played with you for the past decade?”

Shane rolls his eyes and shoves Ilya off of him, pushing him in the direction of his hotel room. “Don’t you have a Jane to get to?”

“Careful, Shane,” Bood teases. “Seems like Rozy is *this* close to asking you to sub in for Jane when she’s not around. All that work on the charity, seeing his necklace on your neck…I dunno. Seems to be doing something to him.”

Shane flushes at the insinuation, but Ilya just grins and wiggles his eyebrows, making like he’s going in for a big kiss before Shane shoves at him again.

“Hilarious,” Shane mutters, but Ilya can see the way it’s affecting him—the fact that the boys have noticed Ilya’s advances towards him. Fucking finally. Ilya was losing his mind. “See you guys.”

“See ya!” Wyatt calls out, both of them waving as the elevator doors finally shut.

“Don’t,” Shane warns once they’re alone.

“I didn’t say anything.” Ilya holds his hands up in defense, but he’s smirking as Shane walks ahead of him.

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When they get back to the house, Ilya sends Shane off to boil some of his weird veggie pasta while he starts on collecting ice to run them an ice bath. After a few trips to and from the ice maker, he’s filled up the tub nearly halfway—just enough for him and Shane to be able to sit comfortably without any water spilling over.

Ilya pulls his shirt off and then stalks back into the kitchen to check on Shane’s progress.

“You finished, baby?” He double-checks, leaning against the back of one of the barstools.

“Almost,” Shane replies as he finishes serving the pasta into two plates.

“Put it in the fridge and come to the bathroom with me, please,” Ilya requests, and Shane follows the command without question, quickly storing the plates of pasta for later before reaching for Ilya’s hand.

“Ready,” Shane declares.

He’s so fucking cute. Ilya wants to keep him forever.

“Clothes off for me, angel,” Ilya tells him when they reach their destination, and he goes to take the rest of his off as well. “We’re going to have an ice bath together, and then I am going

to shave you, okay?"

Shane frowns, one hand lifting to rub at his face.

"Not there." Ilya holds a finger up at him and then points lower.

Shane's eyebrows pinch together in confusion, and it takes him a second, but once he gets it, his cheeks go deliciously pink.

Ilya hasn't talked to Shane about wanting to shave him, because that was another thing they discussed during the reassessment of their dynamic. Shane's kink list of maybes—while adorable—was mostly useless, but it did drive home an important point. Shane didn't know what he wanted; that much was obvious. He was, however, open-minded. And that beautiful, open mind of his *loved* to be surprised.

Which is why Shane didn't want to see Ilya's kink list. When Ilya went to him about it, Shane had simply said he'd been to all the sites already, researched everything that was out there. He reiterates his hard nos and then asks Ilya to only run something by him if he considers it to be extreme. Anything else, Shane thought was fine to bring up in the moment, and if Shane had an issue, he'd simply use his colors or say no. Everything else was entirely up to Ilya's discretion.

Ilya did not consider shaving to be extreme, but he does recognize it's a choice that will bleed into Shane's life past the confines of just this scene. It's only natural to want to check in with him before doing anything drastic.

"How do you feel about that?" Ilya asks him plainly.

"Fuck." Shane's knees nearly buckle. "Good. Really good."

Ilya's lips curl in satisfaction. He wonders if that came up in Shane's research.

"C'mon, baby. Ice bath first. Do not make me wait for you," Ilya warns, pushing his hand into the tub to check the water level before slowly climbing in.

Shane is not far behind him, his clothes off in a flash, and then he carefully joins Ilya, hissing as the ice works its magic on his likely aching muscles.

"Easy. There you are. Just ten minutes and then I will warm you up."

Ilya pulls Shane close to his chest, wrapping an arm across him to ensure he stays fully submerged. Ilya was concerned about his wrist, especially with Ivan's event at the club this weekend. He'd have to keep a close eye on Shane. His kitty could not be on his hands and knees for too long with their first home game rapidly approaching.

"How are you feeling after that game, принцесса?"

"What's that one mean?" Shane asks, because he was slowly but surely trying to learn more Russian words.

Ilya presses his face into Shane's neck, dropping a sly kiss there. "Princess."

Shane shivers and sinks closer into his grasp.

Ilya rubs his hand over Shane's pec. "The game, angel?"

"I'm glad I got that last goal in," Shane responds, and Ilya smiles into his skin.

"Mm, you are a superstar. I would have had Coach put you in more if those Voyageurs weren't playing so dirty. We are lucky you did not end up worse off. I do not enjoy the thought of them targeting you like this," Ilya informs him, scratching the stubble of his chin across Shane's shoulder.

Shane tries to shift a little, but Ilya just holds him in place. Eight more minutes.

"I just hope we can win one at some point," Shane sighs softly, and Ilya hopes so, too. He knew that even just one win would help so much with Shane's confidence, but unfortunately, building a new team takes time.

"Do you regret it?" He forces himself to ask, because he needs to know what Shane's thinking. Needs to know whether he's secretly cursing Ilya for getting him into this mess in the first place. If Ilya hadn't invited him back to Hush, maybe they wouldn't be here right now. Maybe Ilya would be coming off a loss *against* Shane and his Voyageurs, probably sitting in his Montreal house all alone. It's a very hard reality to stomach, and he can't resist pulling him a little more securely to his chest.

Shane just sighs and tips his head back against Ilya's shoulder until brown eyes are boring into him, his fluffy black hair splayed all over Ilya's shoulder. "I love you so fucking much," comes his response, and Ilya's heart thumps loudly in his chest.

It's not an answer to his initial question, but it does tell him enough to have heat swirling in his belly. Shane was upset about hockey, upset about leaving his winning team, and heartbroken over the loss—but he wouldn't trade any of it, despite how much it must be killing him that his dream of a 5th Stanley Cup was looking less and less like a reality this season. To Ilya, it's sentiment enough.

Ilya presses a featherlight kiss to his forehead, watching in fascination as Shane's pretty eyelashes flutter shut. He still can't believe he gets to have this. It's everything he's been dreaming of for the last decade, all of his prayers finally answered. Maybe there was a God, after all.

They sit quietly like that for the remainder of the ten minutes, until Ilya feels numb all over in a good way. His body would thank him later for the recovery, and his mind was already at ease with how Shane was taking this loss compared to the one against Toronto. Baby kitten steps, but progress was progress.

After they reach the end of their ten minutes, Ilya drains the tub and then reaches for a towel, helping Shane to stand before wrapping the fabric securely around him. He completely

bypasses his own needs, still dripping wet and freezing as he reaches to turn on the heated floors so Shane's precious feet don't get frostbite.

Once Shane is situated and warm, Ilya dries himself off and then starts looking for everything they'll need. He thinks it will be easiest to shave him standing up. That way, he'll be able to hold Shane close while he does it. Shaving could be intimate. Ilya has done it with other scene partners before, but never with someone he loved. Never with someone he intended to marry and spend the rest of his life with.

With the electric clippers in hand, he silently beckons Shane over, the other watching him with wide, wanting eyes. Ilya can't help but smile at how tiny he looks wrapped in his towel. It's so nice to have some alone time after a busy week with the boys. He needed a reminder that Shane was his, and his only. Despite the fact that he *loved* how the boys constantly showered Shane with praise and affection, deep down, he didn't want anyone to take his job away from him. Selfishly, Ilya wants to be the one to put that gorgeous smile on his face; Ilya wants to be the one to bring a sunset of pink to Shane's pretty, flushed cheeks.

Once Shane has stepped into his space, Ilya carefully takes the towel from around his shoulders and places it down on the ground beneath them to make for an easier clean-up.

"Come here, моя любовь," he prompts, and Shane practically falls into his arms, granting him a sweet hug. "Oh, hi, baby," Ilya hums, happily returning the hug and rocking him slightly. "I have missed sleeping with you very much this week. My kitten gives the best cuddles in the world. I was practically dying without you in my arms."

God, Ilya couldn't wait until they could come out to the team. Having Shane in his hotel room every night would be such a comfort. Especially with the way the season was going so far, Ilya needed to keep a close eye on his mental health. He would not let the team's losses contribute to any additional mental decline on Shane's part. His kitty was the most important thing in the world to him, and having to separate every evening left Ilya with a hole in his chest that was almost impossible to fill.

"Are you ready for your grooming, sweet kitty?" Ilya asks, smiling when Shane licks gently at his neck in response. He rubs a comforting hand down his back, giving him one more squeeze before he pulls away to position Shane in front of him.

They can both see each other in the mirror like this, which was good because Ilya wanted to look at his face as he shaved him. Even more so, he wanted Shane to watch what he was doing to him.

He takes the clippers in one hand and slides the other over Shane's abdomen, letting his touch drift down until he reaches the soft hair below Shane's belly button, his fingers gliding through with an appreciative scratch. Shane relaxes instantly into his arms, leaning against him as Ilya hooks his chin over Shane's shoulder.

He reaches for Shane's cock next, placing his hand over top of it to keep it out of the way as he turns the clippers on and starts to trim some of the hair down first. Shane's mouth drops often in a soft gasp once the clippers buzz to life and the first few strands of hair fall to the floor on the towel below them.

Ilya smiles and rubs his scruff against Shane's shoulder to keep him grounded, holding him securely as he continues to trim away all the excess. Shane's head falls back against him, and Ilya can feel the way his body goes pliant like a soft cloud of cotton candy. Ilya presses his lips to Shane's collarbone, then his neck as he multi-tasks, maneuvering Shane's cock left and right to reach the hair that trickled across the edges of his inner thighs.

Shane moans like he's enjoying this way too much, and Ilya gives his lower tummy an appreciative rub before reaching for his balls to trim further down the side of his legs.

"You are so beautiful, котенок," Ilya murmurs against his skin, and Shane's eyes have slipped closed, so Ilya presses his teeth down intentionally. "Keep your eyes on me, sweet boy. I want you to watch what I am doing to you."

Shane whines and starts to squirm in his grasp, but Ilya just shushes him and holds him steady.

"Come on, angel. Be good for me, or you will not get to come after," Ilya warns.

Shane is panting like he's got fire ants underneath his skin. He wraps his paws around one of Ilya's biceps to have something to hold onto, and Ilya rewards his efforts to stay still with a nip to his jawline.

"Good boy. Mm, you are so, so good for me always. Even when you are bad, you are so sweet. So cute. You can never do anything wrong in my eyes," he tells him indulgently, because Ilya loved moments like this where he got the opportunity to just be saccharine with him. No prying eyes to worry about, no pressure to guide the scene forward in any way. Just touching, appreciating, loving on him. Ilya's arms were made to hold Shane; he knows this for a fact. He's been working himself in the gym ten times over, trying to put on the muscle required to lift Shane to his heart's content. He'd do it in every lifetime. He'd find him in any parallel universe. He's confident that Shane is meant to be his in any world or life that exists. Knowing what he knows now, he can't believe he ever had to question it.

Once Ilya is finished with the clippers, he carefully walks them forward so he can discard the tool on the counter before filling the sink with warm water. He takes some of that water in his hands, letting go of Shane for a minute while he reaches over him to grab the shave cream he'd purchased for sensitive skin. He distributes some of the foam into his hand and then wraps an arm around Shane's chest, pulling him close once more.

He lathers up the shave cream in one hand and carefully glides it across Shane's pubic area, massaging his fingers into Shane's skin to help soften the hair and keep him as relaxed as possible.

Shane sniffles like he's on the verge of tears, and Ilya can feel his heart pounding against his chest from where Ilya's forearm is splayed across him.

"You okay, baby?" He double-checks, even though he's sure this reaction is a positive one. Sometimes, his Shane needed to find a way to release all the intense emotions he had ricocheting around inside of him, and they very rarely came out in the form of words.

Instead, his feelings usually spilled out of him in the form of diamond-colored water droplets that Ilya would spend hours licking away if given enough time.

Shane shuts his eyes tightly and nods, causing Ilya to smile and drop another round of kisses to his shoulder.

Once Ilya is sure Shane's hair is as soft as it's going to get, he rinses his hand in the sink and then reaches for the freshly purchased razor. He snicks the safety guard off and then slides his hand down Shane's abdomen to cup his cock once more before dragging the razor intentionally against his skin in a downward motion.

Shane sobs and turns to bury his face in Ilya's neck, his arms still wrapped securely around Ilya's bicep as he does his best not to fidget too much.

Ilya shushes him and keeps going, gliding the razor through the remainder of his hair in confident, sure strokes. Once he's finished at the top, he guides one of Shane's feet up onto the bathroom counter so Ilya can lean over him and get at those hard-to-reach places. He repeats on the other side and then smacks a kiss against Shane's cheek before dropping to his knees to shave the rest of him.

He has Shane hold onto his shoulders while he maneuvers his cock to carefully shave his balls and then his shaft. After a good ten minutes of working to get him completely hair-free, Ilya pulls back for a moment to admire his handiwork.

"Beautiful," he comments, reaching for a towel on the counter behind him to wet it in the sink before cautiously cleaning him off and wiping him down. He pats Shane's hip and then stands to grab some aloe vera lotion, which he promptly lathers all over him to reduce the risk of any ingrown hairs or infection.

Shane is crying, sniffling cutely while he watches him with big, wet eyes, and Ilya shakes his head at how precious he is. He looks fucking stunning bare, and Ilya has half a mind to shave the rest of his body, too. His legs. His arms. Ilya even wants to be in charge of shaving his face going forward as well, but this is more than enough for one evening, and he can tell by Shane's body movements that he's starting to get tired. So, Ilya presses a quick round of kisses to his thighs before lifting one of Shane's legs over his shoulder and going to town on his hole.

Shane grips onto his hair tightly, grinding against him until he's practically riding Ilya's face like it's all he was made to do. Ilya just moans and doesn't shame himself for the way he jerks himself off to the sound of Shane's open sobs, to the feeling of Shane's delicious thighs pressed all around him. He's exactly where he wants to be.

Shane comes first, but Ilya isn't done with him, so he keeps licking until Shane is an overstimulated, whimpering mess above him. He sucks at his rim hungrily until his face is a war zone of saliva, and he's suffocating under the weight of Shane's quivering, buckling legs. And then, Ilya moans against him as he comes and spills his release all over the towel, leaving a sticky mess right in the middle of Shane's scattered pile of discarded pubic hair.

Shane practically collapses by the time Ilya is done with him, but Ilya catches him before he can fall into the aftermath of what they've done, carefully folding the towel and pushing it aside with his foot before wrapping his arms around Shane fully.

Shane is sucking in big gulps of air like he can't get a handle on his breathing, so Ilya just rubs his back soothingly to help him time it out.

"My best boy," he praises gently. "You take everything so well. Always so good for me," Ilya presses into Shane's skin as his teary eyes pool an ocean into the dip of Ilya's collarbones. He cups Shane's sensitive cock just to feel how smooth he is now, how bare, and Shane just continues to sob openly until he's all cried out. Until he starts to quiet in Ilya's grip, practically asleep from how spent he is in Ilya's arms.

They still have to eat dinner and get ready for bed, but Ilya doesn't mind holding him a little longer while Shane gets some much-needed shut-eye. He slides his back against the bathroom counter until they're sitting comfortably on the floor, Shane curled up and spent in his lap as Ilya pets him through it. In thirty minutes, his legs will probably be asleep, and they'll be no closer to finishing off the rest of the evening, but Ilya doesn't care. Shane needs this right now. They both do.

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The next evening, after a day spent mostly relaxing and wrapped up in each other, Shane and Ilya head over for their big date with the Pike kids.

Jackie and Hayden barely have time to say hello to them as they rush out the door, since Hayden has apparently gotten the reservation time wrong and they were already running late. Figures. Ilya shares a look with Jackie that he takes to mean as a mutual agreement that her husband is fucking awful. It's only mostly a joke, but Ilya takes pleasure from it nonetheless.

The kids have already eaten an early dinner, and luckily, the toddler, Amber, is passed out cold in her room with a baby monitor on. Which just leaves the little boy, Arthur, and the two twin girls, Jade and Ruby.

They're playing pretty princesses, wearing the cutest dresses and crowns that make Ilya's chest just ache with want. Arthur is on theme, too, but he's a knight with a sword that has to fight the tough dragon. Only, Ilya realizes thirty minutes in that Arthur would much rather be a pretty princess with them, so he goes digging around in their dress-up box for something that will make him feel included.

"There are no more crowns," Shane tells him softly while the two of them sift through the options as Arthur pouts from his spot on the floor.

"Ah, what about nail polish?" Ilya suggests, fingers coming in contact with two sparkly bottles. One blue and one pink.

"Boys can't wear nail polish!" Ruby declares loudly, and Ilya turns to look at her.

“Why not?” Ilya questions, tipping his head. “Uncle Shane wears nail polish. Don’t you, Shane?”

“He does not,” Jade giggles, but Ilya just reaches for Shane’s hand to show them.

“Does too,” Ilya sticks his tongue out childishly.

Shane flushes as the girls rush over to look at his nails, eyes wide when they realize that he is, in fact, wearing nail polish.

Arthur peeks over shyly.

“It’s pink!” Jade declares.

“But you can barely see it. There’s no sparkles.” Ruby frowns.

“Hm, you are right about that,” Ilya realizes, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Why don’t you girls help him out? He could use some pink sparkles, no?”

“Is Uncle Shane a pretty princess?” Arthur voices quietly.

Ilya just gasps as if it’s obvious. “Of course, he is. He is the prettiest princess in all the land.” Ilya gestures to him. “Would you like some nail polish, too, Arthur?”

Arthur seems to contemplate this for a second before bobbing his head up and down in a nod.

Shane is watching the two of them with a fond expression as the girls get to work on adding more sparkles to his kitty claws.

Ilya grins and reaches for the blue bottle to start on Arthur’s nails as well.

“You need more than nail polish to be a pretty princess,” Ruby declares, her hands on her hips, while Jade takes over the nail situation. She’s clearly the more talented manicurist, wiping at the edges of Shane’s nails to keep them neat, her tongue stuck between her teeth in determination.

“Oh, yeah?” Ilya asks in interest, trying to keep an eye on all of them at once as Shane gets pampered. “What else do we need, then?”

Ruby looks down at the box thoughtfully, her eyes going bright before she ducks down to retrieve something, and Ilya watches in utter adoration when she comes up with a sparkly pink cat ear headband. “Here! Uncle Shane can be a princess kitty cat!”

Ilya’s heart threatens to burst out of his chest. “That is the most perfect idea I have ever heard in my life.” He meets Shane’s gaze to find the other staring back at him with red flushed cheeks. Ilya just grins while he finishes up Arthur’s paint job.

Ruby approaches Shane with the headband and then promptly bestows the ears upon his fluffy head as Jade smiles down at her handiwork.

“Beautiful job, ladies.” Shane holds his hands up to admire his new glittery manicure.

“Hey, cats don’t talk!” Jade scolds, placing her small hand over Shane’s mouth.

“Meow,” Arthur offers his two cents.

Shane just blinks until Ruby pulls Jade’s hand away. And then, a soft, “Meow.”

All of the kids start giggling at that, and they rush over to pet him.

And Shane…Shane is just eating it right up. He’s smiling at all the attention, leaning into the pets and giving affectionate nuzzles, which the girls are loving. Arthur even crawls over at one point to join in, mindful of his nails as he rubs his hand over the fabric of Shane’s jeans.

Ilya just sits and watches with the dopiest grin on his face. He pictures Ruby and Jade with their own set of cat ears, pictures Arthur with a face full of freckles and jet black hair. He pictures Shane, in the middle of it all, being the absolute best cat dad to a litter of kittens.

They play kitty cat for a little while longer, which mostly just consists of the kids doting on Shane. They brush his fur for him with a toy brush, and Ilya even gives them permission to draw on whiskers and a kitten nose with a non-permanent marker. They still won’t let him talk, but one look at Shane tells Ilya that he doesn’t mind one bit.

“Are you and Uncle Shane married?” Arthur asks him suddenly, placing his tiny hand on Ilya’s knee.

“Mm, not yet,” Ilya tells him secretly, but the girls overhear and immediately want in on the conversation.

“Why not!” Ruby demands to know.

“Do you love each other?” Jade questions seriously.

“We love each other very much,” Ilya confirms with a smile.

“Then, you should be married!” Ruby shouts. “A wedding! We can have a wedding right here.”

“Then, you can be our Uncle Ilya for *real*,” Jade leans in to whisper to him.

“I would like that very much,” Ilya whispers back.

So, they have a wedding. Jade and Ruby are able to find them matching heart rings, one pink and one purple, and since Shane is already dressed so pretty, they find Ilya a flower crown to ensure he’s properly matched for the occasion.

Arthur plays them a tune on his toy xylophone to set the mood, and then Jade and Ruby tag-team the role of the officiator, reading a few lines from one of their princess books in place of the typical opening remarks.

“Does the Prince vow to always save the Princess Kitty Cat from the mean, evil, bad guys and to love him forever and ever?” Ruby recites, turning to Ilya.

“I do,” Ilya says dutifully. They’re both on their knees, staring into each other’s eyes while holding hands at this ridiculous wedding that is somehow going to end up being one of the best days of Ilya’s entire life.

“And does the Princess vow to always be the best and prettiest Kitty Cat for the Prince in the entire land, and to love him forever and ever and ever?”

Shane leans forward to press his forehead against Ilya’s. “I do.”

Ruby and Jade giggle wildly.

“Arthur. The rings, please,” Ruby requests, and Arthur holds out the two heart rings.

Ilya reaches for the pink one because that one is obviously for Shane, and he carefully slides it onto his kitten’s pretty little finger before offering his hand up for Shane to do the same.

“I now pronounce you Husband and Kitty Cat!” Jade declares.

“You may kiss the Kitty Cat,” Ruby allows.

So, Ilya wraps an arm around Shane and pulls him into a searing kiss, his sweet котенок going lax as he sinks into it. And the kids cheer like it’s the most beautiful thing in the world. To Ilya, it is, and he vows to marry Shane just like this at their actual wedding. Kitten ears and all. In sickness and in health. Till death do they part.

By the time Hayden and Jackie get home, the kids are already off in their beds, fast asleep. Ilya had put on a movie for him and Shane to watch in the meantime, but Shane was all kitty-ed out and fast asleep on his chest. Ilya is only half paying attention to the movie himself, much more focused on raking his fingers through Shane’s hair and wiping at the edges of his whiskers where they’ve started to smear. He still has his sparkly kitty headband on, and they’re both still wearing their rings. Ilya fully intends on keeping them forever, little Pikes be damned. (*Ruby has already given him permission*.)

He’s so caught up in the way Shane’s back is rising and falling with the cadence of his breathing that he doesn’t notice the sound of the door opening. Not until Hayden rounds the corner of the couch and stumbles upon them.

“Where are the kids?” He asks, looking around wildly as if Ilya has somehow hidden them somewhere in this room.

“They’re in bed,” Ilya murmurs softly, Shane nuzzling closer to him at the quiet commotion.

Hayden’s eyes drop to Shane then, like he’s just noticing him for the first time, and his expression morphs into one of mild confusion.

“What’s with the ears and whiskers?” Hayden says under his breath, eyebrows pressed together.

Ilya looks down at Shane and smiles at the sight, giving his scalp another heavy scritch. Even in his sleep, Shane still reacts with a purr, his lips curled in sated slumber. “The girls wanted to play kitty cat.”

Hayden just blinks, taking in the full picture. “And the rings?” He asks next.

“Mm. We also had a wedding.” He’s a fool in love. He knows Hayden can see it on his face, but he doesn’t care. He’s not hiding. He’s in the process of getting everything he’s ever wanted.

“Oh,” is all Hayden says in response, but he doesn’t look away. He’s trying to make sense of it. Trying to rationalize the versions of Shane and Ilya that he once knew against the version that exists now. Ilya is sure it’s a stark contrast. “Um,” he shakes himself out of his stupor. “We brought back dessert. Do you want to eat it here or should I pack it up?”

Ilya hums his appreciation. “I would like to eat it here if it’s no trouble. I barely got to see Jackie.”

Hayden nods. “Yeah. Course. Um, are you gonna…” he trails, eyes grazing over Shane once more.

Ilya turns to his boyfriend and presses a quick kiss to his forehead. “Baby,” he says softly, gliding his hand up the back of Shane’s shirt to slowly start bringing him back to life. “Sweetheart. The Pikes are back from dinner. Do you wanna wake up and say hello to them?”

Shane just mewls and burrows even closer, burying his face into Ilya’s warm chest.

“I know, kitty. We are going to have to wake up to go home either way. We should try to spend some time with our friends, though first because we may not get to see them again for a little while, hm?” Ilya gives his shoulder a rub.

Hayden shuffles awkwardly in place like he doesn’t know what to do with himself, so Ilya gives him an out and promises they’ll meet him and Jackie in the kitchen in a few minutes. When they finally do, Shane is still pretty sleepy and out of it, clutching onto Ilya’s hand like a lifeline.

“Hey, guys,” Jackie greets with a big smile. “How were the kids?”

“They are perfect,” Ilya replies, wrapping an arm around Shane as the other clings desperately to him. “Amber slept through the evening, while Arthur and the girls played pretty princesses.”

“I see they got Shane as well,” Jackie laughs, noticing his whiskers and cat ears.

Ilya looks down at him fondly. “I think they just know a kitty cat when they see one.”

Shane flushes under the attention while he hugs Ilya’s waist.

“Thank you *so* much for watching the kids. God, I needed tonight,” Jackie sighs.

“It is not trouble at all. The kids are wonderful. We are happy to watch them anytime.”

“I hope chocolate cake is alright.” Hayden walks over with a takeaway box and a fork.

“That is perfect,” Ilya assures, reaching to take the items with his free hand.

Jackie and Hayden also have a box filled with the same, so Ilya follows them over to the kitchen table with Shane in tow so they can all eat together. Ilya attempts to deposit Shane into his own chair, but his kitten just isn’t having it, so Ilya indulges him by letting Shane sit on his lap.

“You’re okay, precious. You are safe here,” Ilya reminds him softly, wrapping his arm around Shane’s waist to keep him steady while Shane rests his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

“Is he alright?” Jackie asks lightly, her gaze drifting between the two of them. “The guys should not have been as rough with him as they were. I’m still furious over how they handled that.”

“He is okay,” Ilya confirms, giving Shane another rub as he picks up his fork to take a bite of the chocolate cake. “His wrist is a little banged up, but he will survive.”

Hayden still looks like there’s something he’s not saying, so Ilya fixes him with a look. “What is it, Pike?”

Hayden’s face pinches up at having been caught staring. “Nothing, just.” He gestures to Shane vaguely. “Why is he so out of it?”

Shane turns to press his nose into Ilya’s neck, and Ilya is very aware of the fact that he’s hardly paying attention to their conversation, lost in kitten world.

“He is fine. He is just very relaxed. He feels safe here.” Ilya reaches for Shane’s ears to pull them off his head because those definitely weren’t helping him to stay present and human right now.

Shane whines in protest, and for a second, Ilya is concerned he’s going to start crying, so he runs a hand down his back in an attempt to soothe him.

Hayden’s eyes dart between them before narrowing slightly. “Is this like a sex thing?”

“Hayden,” Jackie sighs, shaking her head.

“Not everything is about sex, Pike,” Ilya replies calmly.

“You own a fucking sex club,” Hayden snorts.

“Yes, and yet, you are the one who is always bringing it up,” Ilya deadpans.

“I’m just saying. This doesn’t seem normal,” Hayden looks Shane over worriedly.

“Is normal for us, Pike. I am keeping a close eye on him. But he has had a stressful week, as I’m sure you can imagine.” Ilya keeps his tone neutral, not wanting to spook Shane. “Sometimes, it can be nice for him to shut his brain off for a bit. He knows when he is with me, he can relax fully, and he also knows he is around friends right now. It is a good thing to feel this way. So, yes, he can be extra cuddly. Or he doesn’t feel like talking. He trusts me to take care of him. It is an outlet for both of us. And it is working very well.”

“I just don’t see—”

“Yes, you don’t see,” Ilya cuts in. “There are many things that you don’t see.”

Hayden didn’t see Shane when he was at his worst, when he was outside Ilya’s door begging for a punishment because he thought he hadn’t done well enough during the game. He clearly didn’t see the way anxiety built up within his friend like a scary monster threatening to strike, maim, and destroy. And he certainly didn’t see Shane when he was soft and sweet and pliant, crying in Ilya’s arms because of how great the relief could be for that monster to take a backseat and let Ilya take over.

“I understand you have been good friends with Shane for a long time, and you want what’s best for him, but as his boyfriend, I get to see sides of him that you do not. And that is because I am in love with him, and he is in love with me. He is no different than the Shane you know. He just has a better support system now and better coping mechanisms. That is all that this should tell you right here.”

“But the…the kitten stuff…” Hayden winces like he doesn’t even want to say the words.

“Oh my god, Pike.” Ilya rolls his eyes. Now he was starting to grow frustrated. “Is it really so crazy? To want someone to play with your hair? Or call you pet names? To want to give up control and relax for a little bit? Have someone take care of you?”

He feels Shane’s fingers start to slip through the curls at the nape of his neck, almost like he’s seeking out comfort. He realizes then that this conversation is probably not great for Shane’s headspace. Shane had slipped lower than either of them had meant for him to, which meant that it was probably best for them to start saying their goodbyes.

“Yes, baby,” Ilya turns to address him, offering Shane a reassuring smile while running a hand down his back. “Everything is okay. I think it is probably time for us to head home now, yes?”

Shane nods his reply into his shoulder.

“Thank you very much for the chocolate cake, Pikes. I think it is best to take the rest with me,” he informs them gratefully as he closes the to-go box.

“Are you sure?” Jackie frowns.

“Yes,” Ilya offers her a curl of his lips. “It was really good to see you both, though. I meant what I said about having you over for dinner at the new house. You are welcome any time.

We even have extra bedrooms for you and the kids if you do not wish to make the drive back."

"Look, man," Hayden groans, after what Ilya assumes must have been Jackie kicking him under the table. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm really not trying to come off as a judgmental asshole. It's just confusing for me."

"You do not have to understand our dynamic," Ilya replies, shrugging indifferently. "I just really wish you could recognize that I only want what's best for him and that he is always safe when he is with me. I am not the enemy here, Pike."

"He *does* recognize that," Jackie insists, shooting Hayden a harsh glare. "He knows how good you've been for Shane. I mean, you can obviously see how much he adores you." Jackie gestures to Shane, who is still clinging to him like a needy kitten.

"Thank you, Jackie," Ilya says softly. He purses his lips for a moment before puffing out a sigh. "I did not mean to bring this into your home," he feels the need to address. "I was not expecting it when the girls brought out the ears, and by that point, everyone was just having so much fun. He got a little too relaxed, and that is my fault."

"Ilya, it's fine. Really. He's harmless," Jackie voices, a kind smile on her lips. "The kids love him, and we love him, too. If he wants to wear cat ears, it makes no difference to me. I'll get him a damn litter box if he wants one."

Ilya lets out a surprised laugh at that. God, he loved Jackie.

"As long as he feels comfortable here. We just want him to be able to be himself. Right, Hayden?" She says pointedly.

"I mean, right," Hayden agrees without question, though his eyebrows press together a few seconds later. "He doesn't actually use the litter box, does he?"

Ilya grins widely and shakes his head, but it does give him some new ideas. He doesn't get the chance to dwell on them for long, though, before Shane is pressing his teeth gently into his neck. "Fuck, alright. We really do have to get going, actually."

"Did he just bite you?"

"Yes, he bites." Ilya squeezes Shane's hip affectionately. "He is a bit of a menace, actually," he accuses, which pulls a giggle from Shane. "Alright, come on, Принцесса котёнок. It is time to go."

They say their final goodbyes, and the Pikes promise to drive out to Ottawa for a visit soon. Ilya is pleased when Hayden and Jackie each pull Shane into a big hug that his cuddly kitten happily returns, but he isn't expecting it when Hayden pulls him into a hug as well.

"Seriously, dude," Hayden exhales before pulling away. "Thank you for being so good to him. On and off the ice. I can, um. I can see why you guys fit well together. And, uh. I'm glad he has you."

“I appreciate that, Hayden. And if you are ever looking to impress Jackie, well, you know where to find me,” Ilya can’t resist adding with a wink, just to pull a rise out of him.

“Alright, Rozanov.” Hayden rolls his eyes.

When he and Shane get back in the car, Ilya surveys him lovingly. “That was a big day for you, hm?” He runs his knuckles over Shane’s freckled cheek. “We are married now, you know? No take-backs,” he warns, but Shane just catapults towards him and starts attacking him with sweet kitten licks all over his face. His tummy warms with the knowledge that he’ll likely be receiving those kitten licks for the rest of his life.

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Chapter End Notes

Once again, thank you for all your comments! I am incredibly behind on replying to them, but I appreciate them, nonetheless!!!

Let me know your thoughts on this one. Thanks for continuing to be such lovely, lovely readers! x

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they wake the next morning, Shane's embarrassed. Embarrassed of the way he acted around the Pikes. Embarrassed that Ilya had told him he'd gone basically non-verbal by the end of the evening. Embarrassed that Ilya has essentially taken it upon himself to share details of their private life with someone who Shane did not consider to be the most open-minded person in the world.

"I had to say something, Shane. They were very confused," Ilya is telling him softly while Shane tries not to do anything rash. Like totally freak the fuck out.

"I should have never been like that around them," Shane shakes his head. "It's like…totally fucking inappropriate."

"Shane, you were not doing anything inappropriate. You were being quiet and sweet, and I do not think it is the end of the world, but if you think we need to establish more boundaries around where and when this can happen, then I think we should do that. It's just that you go down very easy, котёнок. When you woke up from your nap, you were a lot deeper than you were when you fell asleep. Maybe it is because you woke up with your ears on. I do not know," Ilya admits.

"Then, we should have left. It's not something we should bring around other people."

"Shane, I understand," Ilya sighs. "But these people are your friends, and I don't think it's such a bad thing to feel comfortable around them."

"We were babysitting their *kids*," Shane emphasizes.

"We did not do anything wrong," Ilya whispers, reaching for his hand. "I will make sure it does not happen again, okay? They caught me off guard with the cat ears, but you're right. I should have steered it in a different direction. Suggested another game, I don't know. Please, do not be mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you," Shane gets out, digging his sparkly nails into the back of Ilya's hand. "I'm just fucking embarrassed. God, they must think I'm like a freak or something."

"You should not feel shame about our dynamic," Ilya frowns, reaching out to pull Shane into his arms. "I thought…I thought this is what you wanted. For some people to know. It is becoming a big part of who you are."

Yeah, Shane thinks. It was becoming a big part of who he was. A big rooted tree that was growing quite large inside of him, each branch more embarrassing and more taboo than the last. There was a being gay branch. A playing for a losing team branch. Wearing a collar

branch. Identifying as a kitten branch. There was even a branch for dating Ilya. Submitting to him. Having a playroom designed for a human cat. Shane feels like he's going to puke.

"Baby, you are scaring me," Ilya says cautiously, like he can see the way the war has started up inside of him again all over Shane's face.

"I—" Shane sucks in a big breath. "I need to talk to my therapist. Fuck. I need to call her. I'm sorry."

Ilya's eyes graze over him in quick succession, almost like he wants to argue, but he isn't fully sure where Shane's head is at. "Okay. That is okay. You should call her," he nods, petting a soothing hand over Shane's stomach, but Shane can't do this right now. He pushes out of Ilya's arms and locks himself in the bathroom with shaking hands, trying to ignore the hurt on the other's face.

So, he calls Ms. Hollis, and he tells her everything. He tells her about being a little kitten for Ilya. He tells her about Ilya's sex club and his new kitty playroom. He tells her about dropping sometimes in public. How it makes him feel like he's an anomaly, how he already feels like one just by being a gay hockey player. A gay Asian hockey player. A gay Asian hockey player who's a kitten and dating his ex-rival. Well— he doesn't tell her about the rival part.

And then he tells her about the Pikes. How he acted. How Ilya revealed details of their dynamic, even though he's pretty sure Hayden already had an inkling from previous comments that have come up. He even lets himself admit that it was likely to come up sooner or later. That Shane was slipping in public more and more. That, shamefully, he wanted to. He wishes it was more allowed, but he also knows that it's not.

She listens with open ears. She doesn't judge him. She doesn't interrupt. She just lets him vent, and she keeps her tone neutral the entire time, even while jumping in occasionally to ask clarifying questions.

"It sounds like this incident tapped into an existing fear you have about how you are perceived," she says when he finally stops word-vomiting to take a breath. "You are taking a few things here—such as your sexuality, your sport, your relationship dynamic, and sexual interests—and turning that into a broader conclusion about yourself as a person. These may be aspects of your life, but they are not definitions of your worth. And there may be situations where you feel different or less safe, but that is not the same as being inherently wrong or defective."

Shane swallows and tries to take in what she's saying. She validates his feelings about the incident with the Pikes without making him feel guilty.

"That does not sound like a major violation, and I don't think you should be beating yourself up about it, but what it does highlight is that you and your partner need to have clearer communication around disclosure and when certain headspaces are appropriate."

"I didn't mean for it to happen," Shane still feels the need to tell her.

“It sounds like your friends took it well. Have you two discussed what is okay to share with others?”

“Not really,” Shane admits, though the topic had come up a few times. “I think they sort of already knew about my collar. I just…I don’t want them to think it’s like—” he pauses. Can’t get the words out. He still feels like the only person on this earth who’s just…wrong. Out of step. Maybe not deserving of being here. “I don’t want them to think I shouldn’t be around the kids.”

“I think it’s important to stay grounded when you’re taking on the role of a caregiver, but it also sounds to me like nothing was intended to be sexual or harmful. This is the first time something like this has come up in this context, right? So, I don’t think the takeaway should be that you did something bad, but rather, maybe you and your partner have a lack of explicit planning for certain scenarios like this—and you can stand to be better prepared in the future.”

Shane tosses her words around in his head, trying to let them soak in, trying not to let the bad thoughts consume him.

“As for your friends, were you embarrassed by the content itself or just that it was shared without your input? Is it the actual role that brings you shame, or is that coming more from outside reactions?”

“No, I mean,” Shane frowns, chewing at his lower lip. “I guess I’m just embarrassed that I can’t keep it to myself.”

“Well, it sounds like this dynamic gives you comfort and regulation, which I think is valuable. It just seems like you need to figure out a way for you and your partner to protect that while also ensuring you’re not put in situations where you feel too exposed. But, you did mention that you would feel comfortable letting certain people in on non-sexual parts of your dynamic, yes?”

Shane flushes and fiddles with the string of his hoodie. “I just…I’m around my team so much. Traveling with them. Being on the bus. In hotel rooms. On top of nonstop games and practices; it’s endless. I—it would be nice to be able to relax sometimes. I feel like I always have my guard up, and when I’m with my boyfriend, sometimes…I don’t know. Hockey is fucking stressful. It can be nice to just…let go. Even just mentally. For a little while. I want to be able to do that sometimes without people thinking I’m…you know.” He doesn’t say the word freak again, but he thinks she hears it anyway.

“I think you’re touching on something important here, and you don’t exactly need people to fully understand your dynamic to be able to express parts of your personality without shame. It sounds like you’re putting a lot of effort into managing how you’re seen, and sometimes, when people feel this way, they have a strong desire to be accurately understood, rather than having to constantly translate themselves. Times where you can drop that effort might feel very regulating to you. I think that’s what you’re looking for with your team, yes? And maybe there are areas where that intersects with feeling like a cat.”

Shane lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

They talk for a while longer, until they've taken up the entire hour, and Shane is sure that Ilya is only growing more and more concerned, so he wraps up the phone call with a promise to call her next week, and then gets in the shower to rid himself of the stress of this weekend.

When he finally emerges, cheeks pink from the steam and a towel around his waist, Ilya is waiting for him with breakfast and a pack of ice for his wrist.

"I'm sorry," Ilya tells him guiltily. "I really fucked up the way I handled yesterday. I shouldn't have told the Pikes anything without your permission. I should have stopped the kids when they brought out the ears."

"Ilya, it's okay. It was a weird situation. One we hadn't talked about and didn't know to plan for. It makes sense that you had to think on your feet, and I'm not angry with you," Shane assures with a small smile as he cups the back of Ilya's neck. "I don't expect you to have everything figured out for the two of us all the time, okay?"

Ilya still looks like he's blaming himself, though, so Shane pulls him into a warm kiss.

"You don't have to feel guilty about this. If anything, we probably just need to set some clearer boundaries for what to do if that ever happens again. And I'm going to call Hayden just to make sure everything's good."

Ilya nods and swallows thickly, but he's still not touching him. Shane sinks closer to try to convince him to.

"You are feeling better after talking to your therapist, yes?" Ilya confirms, his blue eyes intense as they catalogue him.

"She's really great," Shane agrees, threading his fingers through the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck. "Have you ever thought about seeing one? It's actually really nice to be able to talk to her about this stuff. Especially when I'm feeling unsure."

Ilya smiles lightly and finally anchors his hands around Shane's hips. "Mm, I am glad you have another outlet, Мой маленький ангел."

"Maybe you could talk to her, too, sometimes. If you wanted. I mean, it might be nice. To talk to someone occasionally," Shane offers gently.

"I do not think I should intrude on your safe space," Ilya replies, reaching up to brush some of Shane's hair out of his eyes. "But I can look for one of my own if you like. It seems only fair since I have asked this of you."

"Only if you want to," Shane reiterates, because he would never force Ilya to do something he didn't want to do.

"If it is helping you as much as you say, then maybe it is worth a shot." He pauses for a moment, hesitating, and Shane furrows his eyebrows. "Are you…are you still feeling comfortable to go to the event tonight? I know Ivan is excited to see you, but there is no obligation if you are feeling weird after yesterday."

Shane relaxes instantly. “Of course, I still want to go to the event tonight. I’m really looking forward to seeing Ivan as well.” He smiles brightly, stepping forward to pull Ilya into a big hug. “I’m okay, really. Please don’t feel like anything that happened yesterday is your fault. We’re still figuring it out. We’re still growing and learning, right? We’re not going to get it perfect every time, but everything’s okay. No one got hurt. Nothing bad happened,” Shane reiterates.

Ilya sinks into his grasp, clutching onto Shane like the physical touch will make the words more real. More true.

Shane just holds him close. “I love you so much, okay? Promise me you won’t let this eat away at you.”

Ilya exhales heavily, tucking his face into the crook of Shane’s shoulder. “I love you, too. I am just so worried about getting it wrong and ruining everything.”

“Baby,” Shane frowns, pulling away to cup Ilya’s jaw again. “You are going to get it wrong sometimes. There’s no shame in that. You’re going to mess up, and so am I, because we’re human beings and that’s what we do. But there’s no such thing as *ruining everything*. We’re married now, remember?” He reminds him lightly, lips curling at the ends. “You’re not going to scare me off.”

Ilya laughs wetly, but if Shane had to guess, the reminder of forever has worked because he ducks closer to press their foreheads together almost immediately after. “Go give Hayden a call, and then I want to feed you your breakfast. You deserve to be a kitten all day today. I want you to get your fill before we have to go back to Ottawa and have to play best buddies for the foreseeable future.”

Shane smirks and nuzzles against him, loving the sound of that idea, but…

“I was thinking,” Shane approaches lightly, pressing a series of kisses across Ilya’s cheek and down his jawline. “Maybe we don’t have to play best buddies anymore?”

Ilya’s hands freeze on his skin, and he pulls back to regard him. “Are you serious? Do not joke with me about that, котенок.”

Shane presses a laugh into his skin, nuzzling even closer. “I’m sick of hiding so much. The whole reason I switched teams is so that I could be myself without having to apologize for it. The guys are great, yeah? I think they’ll take it well.”

“The guys will take it so well,” Ilya agrees without hesitation. “Coach Wiebe is fine with it. They might be upset to know you’re *taken*, but it will soothe me very much to stake my claim over you.”

“Yeah,” Shane harmonizes. “And maybe, um. We don’t have to hide the other stuff so much either, I mean. I talked to my therapist, and she said she doesn’t think it’s an issue for me to like…be relaxed around them. Quiet, sometimes. It’s not, like, a cat thing. Sometimes, it’s just a Shane thing, you know?”

The smile Ilya gives him in return is blinding as he surges forward to steal Shane's lips in a kiss. "I think that is perfectly okay, too, baby. The boys will not mind if you want to be a perfect angel for me. They are used to seeing you in superstar hockey mode, but you don't have to be performing for them all the time. Sometimes, it is okay to turn yourself off if you feel safe enough to do so. We just need to make sure we're clear on what that looks like and how we can continue to do things safely when we're around others."

Shane feels a lot more comfortable after being able to discuss this with him and Ms. Hollis. And while the thing with the Pikes still sits like an unfortunate mistake on his chest, he recognizes that it's allowed them to have this conversation to make sure they're putting their best foot in front of them going forward.

His phone call with Hayden is brief and to the point. He explains the stress of the game, how it's been taking a lot out of him to keep his relationship with Ilya private, especially when he's constantly in such a high-stakes environment. He had felt safe enough to let his guard down, and sometimes that manifested into being really quiet. Letting Ilya speak for him. He wants Hayden to know that that part is nothing to be worried about on Shane's end, but he does check in to make sure the kids hadn't felt weird about anything.

"Oh, man. The kids are fine. Honestly, don't even worry about it," Hayden assures him. "They had a blast with you guys."

"Good," Shane breathes a sigh of relief. "I'm not sure exactly what Ilya said to try to explain it, but I just wanted to make sure it didn't come across as anything concerning."

"Dude, not at all. Trust me, it's okay. I know you've probably had a week from hell, and the game didn't make things any easier on you. I'm just glad you're okay and that it seems like you've got a good support system. To be completely honest, it was kind of nice to see you relaxed like that for once. I don't think I've seen you as anything other than stressed in the entire ten years I've known you. In fact, I didn't even *realize* that until I saw you last night. If wearing a pair of cat ears is all it takes to get you to chill the fuck out, then by all means, be my guest."

Shane splutters a laugh. "Jesus. Well, it's not just about being a cat. I mean, sometimes. But. I dunno. I've been seeing a therapist. I'm learning a lot about myself, and I guess I have a tendency to like…put on a mask, sometimes? I don't know. She explained it much better, but apparently, it can be exhausting. Keeping up appearances like that. I'm still trying to figure out where I can unclench a little bit." Because sometimes that could manifest as being a cat, but Shane also recognized that, at other times, it should not.

"Jackie and I want you to know that you're always welcome to unclench when you're here. We love you no matter what, dude. We're always going to be your family."

Shane hates how much it makes his heart swell, but Ilya is still waiting for him with breakfast, and he'd promised to be quick, so he says his goodbyes with Hayden before making plans to see them in Ottawa soon. Either way, it feels like a monumental step forward, and Shane is excited about what it might mean for opening up other areas of his life to those that he's closest with. It doesn't necessarily feel like it has to be such a bad thing, and there's still a much larger conversation to be had, but for now, he feels lighter.

When he returns to the kitchen, he practically dips Ilya in his arms with how he tackles him to press a smacking kiss on his lips, but Ilya just throws him over his shoulder in response and tosses him onto the couch before crawling over him to initiate a 20-minute makeout session. Shane's not surprised when Ilya eventually ends up having to heat their breakfast for a third time, but all in all, it's a really good morning.

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Shane is *so* fucking excited about the event tonight. He hasn't really let himself think about it much because their week had been jam-packed with other stressors, but now that those are out of the way, Shane just wants to let loose.

It's his first time being back at the club since his assault, and he feels good. He's got Ilya with him this time. Svetlana will be there. Ivan is helping to host with Cedric, and Rose might even stop by if she's able to get out of her shoot in time.

Mostly, Shane's just excited to be a kitten. He gets to have his ears tonight, *and* his tail, which Ilya had fought him on, but Shane had begged and pleaded. A lot of the pets went in various states of undress, and while Shane wasn't comfortable doing that personally, he knew Ilya had hidden away special clothing items to account for his tail, and Shane *badly* wanted to go full-out.

"Ilya, моя любовь," Shane had tried his sorry excuse for Russian as he sidled up to him. "Please, can I wear my pretty tail tonight? Ivan is going to be wearing one."

"Ivan does not spook like my kitty does," Ilya had replied, firm but unable to resist touching him still. "And it is *moya lyubov'*," he corrects Shane's pronunciation softly.

"*Moya lyubov'*," Shane repeats intentionally, eyes dropping to Ilya's lips, which briefly pull into a small smile. "I just want to feel like a proper kitty tonight. Like all of the other pets."

"You are always a proper kitty, my sweet boy. I do not want you to feel too out of control in public. Remember that these people still know who you are," Ilya reminds him.

Shane frowns and shakes his head. "All of the people who said something to you about me have been banned. I'm going to wear my lace kitten mask you gave me for *Unleashed*. Everyone else can just mind their damn business. I'm a member here, and I deserve to be able to enjoy this space just as much as they do. If anyone acts out of turn, then you're going to handle it. I know you will."

"I will ban them immediately," Ilya reiterates, because there was now a zero-tolerance policy. If anyone even seemed like they might become a problem, they were removed from the system and asked to leave effective immediately.

"Let's just…let's have a plan, okay? Cause we're planners now," Shane reminds him gently. "If I start to feel uncomfortable, we come back to your playroom immediately to reassess. Even if it's just a tiny bit uncomfortable. We'll come back and talk about it and then determine whether I should keep wearing it."

“Shane, that is easier said than done once you go down, baby,” Ilya sighs, carding his fingers through Shane’s hair. “You would basically just have to default to my judgment, and I am definitely going to err on the side of caution, considering what happened the last few times you were here.”

“That’s okay,” Shane nods emphatically. “We can give it a shot, and if you think it’s a bad idea still, we’ll come back in here, and you can take it out. I’m feeling…I’m feeling good about this. I’m feeling confident.”

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Ilya recalls the last several times Shane had felt confident. Going to the club on his own. Not wanting to wear his mask during the *Fire and Ice* event. Trying to *Dom* Ilya. All of those instances had quite literally ended in disaster, and he does not have high hopes for this one either. He wants to tell Shane no out of caution, but he also knows that Shane and Ivan have been talking about this event for a while now. He knows how excited Shane is to get to be a kitten tonight, and he has no idea when they’ll be able to make it out here again for another event. So, against his better judgment, Ilya agrees. They’ll try it out to start, but if he gets even a semblance of panic stirring from Shane, he’s not going to hesitate before pulling the plug. *Literally.*

“I am going to be keeping a very close eye on you tonight,” Ilya tells him as they’re in his playroom getting ready. “I know you are excited. I know Ivan is going to be here, and you want to impress him with how good of a kitty you can be, but I will not do it at the risk of your safety, okay? I meant what I said before. You are defaulting to my decision on this one. If I say the tail goes, then the tail goes. No arguments. That is for your protection. Tell me your color, please.”

“Green,” Shane nods. “I want you to decide. You were right. I didn’t know my own limits last time, and I don’t want to get caught in a scenario like that again. It wasn’t fair to you or Ivan, and…if I’m not doing a good job at knowing my own needs, then I would like for you to decide for me.”

“Good,” Ilya praises. “Thank you for being so agreeable on that. I am going to feel a lot more comfortable knowing that you trust me to make that call and de-escalate if things get to be too much.”

Shane smiles lightly and slides a little closer into Ilya’s space. “Can I know what I’m going to be wearing tonight, please?” He hums, rubbing his cheek against Ilya’s shoulder.

And my, my—his Shane was such a seductress tonight, using his sneaky kitty techniques to try and trick Ilya into giving him what he wanted. Ilya smirks at the valiant effort.

“You are being very extra sweet to me today, aren’t you, котенок? Do not think I don’t notice what you’re doing.”

Shane just blinks innocently up at him, batting his eyelashes and flashing his big, brown, Bambi eyes.

“You think I am going to give you everything you want just because you are cute, huh?” Ilya couldn’t fault him for that train of thought.

“I just wanted to take a peek before you prep me,” Shane pouts. “Before I’m too down to appreciate it.”

Ilya watches him for a second before, ultimately, caving. He can’t deny Shane of anything at all these days. Part of him wonders whether he needs to go into Dom-specific therapy or something. For Doms who just can’t stand the fuck up to their subs because they’re too fucking in love with them. It made him stupid, and it made him blind, which was beyond dangerous. He had let it affect his judgment with the Pikes, and that was a terrible and unfortunate mistake—one that Ilya would carry guilt over for a while, despite Shane’s attempts to console him—but it was an important lesson. He makes a mental note to look for therapists who may specialize in knowledge about kink later. Admittedly, it wasn’t the worst idea.

Ilya hands Shane his lace mask from their first pet event together and then stands to get the rest of his outfit. He was well-prepared for Shane wanting to wear his tail at an event. In fact, he’d bought special pants for it ages ago, but he hadn’t anticipated Shane’s identity being outed to the club and the turmoil it would stir up. Still, they’re here, hidden away in Ilya’s dresser with a ton of other clothes that pretty much exist only for Shane at this point.

He reaches for his hoodie with the thumb holes in the sleeves, but this time, he’s had adorable little kitten paws painted over the fabric with pink and black toe beans for his precious baby. His kitty was going to be a full-out kind of kitty today. Ilya thought he deserved as much.

He goes for the pants next. Ilya’s seen a lot of pants that would allow for a tail, but most of them utilized a zipper compartment in the back, and Ilya knew that texture was not going to fly for his sensitive boy. So, instead, he has soft pants with a hole that will close around Shane’s tail with ties. He would be a lot more secure that way, rather than risking the zipper accidentally slipping open in the middle of playtime. Ilya expected Shane to be a very playful kitty today, considering the theme and the way the event would be structured.

He hands Shane the pants for him to look them over, watching as his sweet boy runs his hand over the soft texture of the fabric. The pants were flowy and comfortable, silky in a way that would feel like heaven against Shane’s precious fur.

“Do you like them, baby? Feels nice, yes?” Ilya double-checks, since Shane has already started to go quiet. “I also had some pretty kitty paws painted on the inside of these sweater paws for you. So, you can feel like a true kitty cat.”

Shane pouts, and for a second, Ilya thinks maybe he’s gotten this all wrong, but then Shane is climbing into his lap and hugging him close. “I love you,” he tells Ilya, not for the first time today. “I love you so much.”

“I love *you* so much.” And, in fact, Ilya loved Shane so much that even the words *I love you* were starting to not feel like enough. Ilya needed more words in the English language to be able to properly express the intensity of his feelings for Shane.

“No, I love you more, though,” Shane is trying to tell him, like he really thinks it’s true.

“Mm, but I have loved you for much longer.” Ten years’ worth, to be exact. “Surely, that must mean I love *you* more.”

Shane just smiles lightly and presses their foreheads together. “I can’t believe this sometimes, you know?”

Ilya swallows. Yeah. He knew better than anyone. His biggest nightmare could have him waking up screaming in the middle of the night. Those early days in Ottawa, where Shane was hundreds of miles away from him, and sometimes Ilya’s body and mind couldn’t make sense of the fact that their relationship was real. All those years of yearning, of wanting. It was like he could trick himself into thinking it was all a dream, especially after so long of trying to manifest that dream into existence. His imposter syndrome with Shane could be deadly, and sometimes, Ilya could convince himself that he didn’t deserve him at all.

“This is…this is real, right?” Shane has the audacity to ask him, and Ilya’s brows furrow as he pulls him impossibly close.

“This is more real than anything in the fucking world, Shane. More real than hockey, more real than this club, more real than anything I have ever known in my life. My feelings for you are absolutely limitless. I do not want you to ever have to doubt that. If you have to doubt it for even a second, then I have not done my job right by loving you to the absolute fullest.”

Shane just laughs wetly and wraps his arms around him. “Really?”

Ilya blinks up at him seriously. “I would do anything to prove my love for you. Anything you wanted.”

Shane has a playful look in his eyes, and Ilya can’t resist tickling his sides to pull a laugh out of him. “Would you…get a tattoo?” He taps his chin thoughtfully.

“Without question. What tattoo would you like for me to get?” Ilya hums because it’s the easiest request of his whole year. Maybe his whole life.

“I dunno. We could get matching ones,” Shane suggests, and Ilya’s heart is going to explode. Matching tattoos. Permanent. Forever and ever.

“You would get a matching tattoo with me?” Ilya double-checks, because Shane is saying very serious things. Soulmate, lifetime, forever-level things.

“Maybe. I mean, it doesn’t have to be *matching*, I guess. But coordinated.”

Ilya tips his head because his Shane was a planner, and it was sounding to Ilya like he already had something in mind. “Okay…” he trails, waiting for Shane to elaborate, but Shane is just shyly playing with the curls at the nape of his neck. “Like what, моя любовь?”

Shane blushes and ducks forward to bury his face in Ilya’s shoulder, but Ilya isn’t having it.

“You cannot bring up this idea of tattoos and give me no details, sweet angel. I know you have something cooking up in this beautiful mind of yours,” Ilya hums, carding his fingers through Shane’s hair.

Shane just giggles like he’s feeling silly, and it pulls a smile out of Ilya. His favorite part about being with Shane was when the seriousness of Mr. Hockey and being the Golden Boy dropped, and Shane was just…relaxed. Happy. Playful. He could even be fucking hilarious when he wanted to be. Ilya was endlessly enamored with him, and getting to see him when he let his guard down was the most beautiful thing in the world. To Ilya, at least. Probably to everyone if they ever had the chance, but Shane was all his.

“*Shane*,” Ilya warns when the other still hasn’t given up his idea. “Tell me right now, or I’m going to have to give you some kitty spanks until I get it out of you.”

Shane flushes all the way up to his ears at that, and Ilya just smirks in amusement. Yeah. Spanking was *definitely* on the table. Not tonight, of course. Their schedule was already jam-packed, but maybe when they returned to Ottawa, Ilya could make use of the big, cozy couch in Shane’s kitty playroom.

“Well, I was thinking,” Shane says tentatively, like he isn’t sure how Ilya will react. As if Ilya has ever reacted poorly to anything he’s brought to him. “Maybe like. I could get some cat ears. Just, so um. It’s like…obvious. I dunno. To me, I guess. Or to you. Like, that I’m your котенок.”

Ilya’s big blue eyes graze over him in appreciation. “Oh, so my collar is not enough for you? You want to tell the whole entire world you are my baby kitten by tattooing it on your skin forever, yes?”

Shane just blushes harder and goes to bury his face in Ilya’s shoulder once again, but Ilya stops him with a firm hand on his chin.

“Do not hide from me when you are bringing up very serious things, sweet boy. You have told me your tattoo, but you have not told me mine, yet.”

“I didn’t get that far,” Shane admits shamefully.

“Ah, I see. You just want me to have another claim on you. You are hoping to flex your kitty-ness for the entire world to see,” Ilya replies knowingly.

“No, I mean. I *want* you to get something, too. I’m just…I’m not sure what,” Shane relays, rubbing his nose across Ilya’s jawline before he sucks a soft mark into Ilya’s neck.

Ilya moans out before he can help himself, digging his fingers into Shane’s hips. “Fuck, baby. I’ll come up with something, then. We can figure it out together. How does that sound?”

Ilya can tell that idea sounds very good to him by the way Shane starts licking all over his neck. God, Ilya was so fucking turned on by Shane’s complete and utter devotion to him. Most Doms would never get to experience this level of commitment, not by their sub, not by a life partner, and certainly not by someone who was one-in-the-same. Ilya was lucky that

way. Blessed. He wraps his fist around the pendant of Shane's collar and kisses his knuckles indulgently. When he'd first given Shane his mother's necklace as a collar, he could have never anticipated that he'd still be wearing it to this day. Moreover, he could have never anticipated that he'd want to wear it for the rest of his life.

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Once Shane is prepped and ready with his tail, Ilya helps him into his outfit for the evening. Shane can't stop rubbing his paws over the fabric of his pants, and Ilya smiles, glad to know he's done right by his kitten yet again. He gets him into his mask next and lifts the mesh lace covering just enough to display the lower half of his face before drawing some pretty kitty whiskers onto his cheeks and a heart onto his nose.

Shane's already down a bit from his tail, but Ilya is pleased to see that he's in more of a playful mood than a sexual one. He's nervous about the tail for many reasons, but mainly, he knows Shane hasn't worn a plug in public before, and he thinks the weight of the tail might cause Shane to get a little more fuzzy than he's expecting it to. It doesn't matter, though, because Ilya is fully prepared to take it out at the first sign of discomfort.

It's still early, but Ilya knows that Ivan is here already, and he knows that Shane is jumping out of his skin with the desire to see him. He loves the fact that Shane has made a friend here, despite everything that's happened, and Ilya intends to keep them together all night because he's well aware that Ivan has been a calming presence for him in past scenes. Ilya even spoke to Cedric ahead of time to ensure the two of them were aligned on that front. Lucky for him, both Cedric and Ivan seemed very excited to spend time with him and Shane at this event. Plus, he knows Svetlana has extended an invite to Rose if she has time, and as far as Ilya was concerned, any friendly and trustworthy faces would be extremely important to keep Shane in a good headspace.

"You ready to see Ivan, baby?" Ilya double-checks as Shane nuzzles into him. They're on the couch, taking a breather after getting his tail in, the strings of his pants tied seamlessly around it. He wants his kitten as calm as possible before they head out into the main area.

"Mm," Shane hums his response, and Ilya can tell he's getting into that headspace where he'd rather not talk anymore.

"Good boy. Remember what we said about your tail, okay? If I notice you are getting overwhelmed, we're coming right back in here, and I'm going to take it out. No arguments, okay? And this does not mean you were bad or did anything wrong. This is just to keep you safe and comfortable, yes?" Ilya gives his hair an intentional ruffle.

Shane smiles dazedly and nods.

"I know you are probably going to go down pretty far tonight, angel, but I still need us to keep up with our check-ins, okay? I expect you to give me some paw squeezes if you're unable to use your words. What do we do if we are green?" Ilya holds out his hand for Shane to demonstrate, and Shane responds by digging his nails into Ilya's hand once. "Good boy. We do once for green. And, if you are red?"

Shane digs his claws into Ilya's hand this time and holds it.

"Good boy. We hold for red. I do not want to bother with yellow tonight. If you are slightly unsure, we are going to stop and check-in in the playroom. For tonight, yellow is the same as red." Ilya was not going to leave any room for error tonight, not after how serious their last few mistakes have played out.

Shane just mewls and rubs his head against Ilya's, wiggling his tail happily, and Ilya can't resist offering him a pet.

"I love you, okay? We are going to be as safe as we possibly can tonight. No more screw-ups." He's trying to reassure himself more than anything, but it works just as well to assure Shane, who is just eating his words up right now.

If Shane's wrist were in better working condition, Ilya might have him on a leash crawling tonight, but he was already worried enough about his star player, even with Shane's wrist wrapped tightly under his hoodie.

Shane has a yellow band wrapped around the sleeve of his other wrist, one that stands for *Do not pet without permission.* And while Ilya did not anticipate granting *anyone* permission to pet his precious котенок, he recognized that there may be some exceptions if Shane is feeling very down and comfortable. Mainly, the only exceptions would come in the form of Svetlana, Cedric, or Rose.

As they head out into the main room, Ilya is pleased to see that not many people have arrived yet. Good. That would give him time to get Shane situated. But first, a trip to the bar to see Angel.

"Oh my god," Angel practically squeals as they approach, and she instantly sets aside the drink she was working on to greet them. "I'm sorry. I have to come around."

Ilya laughs as she steps out from behind the bar in order to give them both a big hug. She starts with Shane, and Shane just sinks happily into the embrace, a sated smile on his kitty lips. She comes to Ilya next, and Ilya keeps one arm around Shane's waist while he wraps the other around her in a half-hug. His kitty had a tendency to get possessive, and Ilya did not want to take any risks tonight.

"It's so good to see you guys! Wow, it's been forever. Shane, you look absolutely beautiful as always." She glances down at his wristband and then over to Ilya. "May I?" She asks, gesturing to Shane.

"What do you say, baby? Can Angel pet you?" Ilya ducks close to Shane's ear to ask him, and his sweetheart just blushes shyly. "It is up to you, котенок. You can say no if you are not feeling like a social kitty right now."

Shane presses his cheek to Ilya's chest and then tips his head slightly in a nod, his arms wrapped around Ilya's waist.

“Good boy. Go on and let her pet you, then. It’s just Angel, yes?” Ilya turns to Angel and gives her a nod, because although his Shane was acting a little timid, Ilya knew he was just getting warmed up. Besides, if anyone was going to pet him at all tonight, Angel was probably the best possible person to test it with, especially before more people started to arrive.

“Oh, thank you,” Angel says graciously as Shane tips his head forward slightly for her to ruffle his hair. “Wow, you are so, so soft, kitty. You’ll have to spill on your grooming routine later.” Angel grins playfully.

Shane blushes some more, but Ilya doesn’t miss the way he nuzzles a little closer after the interaction, like his kitten was more than pleased with the attention despite still feeling a little bashful.

“That was so sweet, baby. You did so good for me. As soon as they come around with the treats, I will get you one,” Ilya promises, giving Shane’s back a rub, and Shane rumbles in response.

“Everyone at the club has missed you guys so much,” Angel relays once she’s back behind the bar again. “I wasn’t sure when we were going to see you again after last time.”

Right. Last time. When Shane had gone alone and been assaulted. Ilya feels fire in his lungs.

“Yes, well. We have made some changes. No one comes to events unless they have been in good standing with us for a while now. I will not risk the safety of any of my guests.” He presses a pointed kiss into Shane’s hair because, *especially* not his Shane.

“People have been looking out for each other a lot more, too. I haven’t seen any questionable behavior since the changes. It seems like everyone feels really comfortable, considering,” Angel reports, and Ilya nods.

“Let’s keep that up, then.” He wraps his knuckles against the bar. “A milk and honey shot, please, Angel?” Ilya requests with a soft smile.

“Coming right up,” she agrees, turning over her shoulder to get started on the order.

“By the way, have you seen Cedric or Ivan yet? Cedric texted to tell me they are here, but I don’t see them.” Ilya takes another cursory glance around the room.

“They went into one of the playrooms to get ready,” Angel fills in, pointing towards the hallway at the back of the club.

Shane scrapes his nails down the fabric of Ilya’s soft, fitted tank and lets out a needy whine.

“Yes, baby. Ivan is here, but we must wait for him to be ready. They are warming up the same as we did. He is going to be a puppy, hm?”

Shane perks up excitedly, rubbing his face all over Ilya’s shoulder as he starts pawing at his chest.

“I know, sweet boy.” Ilya looks down at him fondly. “You are very excited. It is very cute, but I do not want you too hyper just yet, okay? We do not want to spook Ivan off.”

Shane’s expression drops into a pout, and Ilya wishes more than anything he could see more of his beautiful kitty eyes behind the mask.

“You are so freaking cute, I cannot stand it.” Ilya suddenly pulls him into a big hug. He was excited to be back at Hush, admittedly. Running the club had taken a backseat to other things, as it usually did during the hockey season, but Ilya had so much he wanted to explore with Shane still. And club events were a really unique and fun way to do that.

“Here we are. One milk and honey shot,” Angel offers, sliding the glass over.

Ilya reaches over to take it graciously and then holds it up to Shane’s lips. His kitty doesn’t hesitate before lapping the liquid right up, his cute, little kitten tongue flicking through the milky liquid, and Ilya is feeling dark, dark thoughts. Thoughts of Shane lapping up a shot of his cum like that. He’d probably have to get off a few times to fill the shot glass all the way. Maybe they’d keep it in the fridge, and Shane would have to look at it, wanting and waiting until it was all full up for him. He’d have to watch as Ilya got off into the glass day-by-day, desperate for a taste, but Ilya would deny him until it was time.

And then, after several days went by, he’d finally present the milk to his kitten and watch as Shane greedily lapped it up. Shane would probably lick the glass clean, desperate to swallow every single drop. And Ilya would probably get off on it while filling a new one. On and on, again and again, until his kitten was on a healthy, dependable diet that consisted of regularly drinking his Alpha’s milk. Yeah. Ilya would like that a lot. Shane probably would, too.

“Good boy,” Ilya tells him lowly, and he doesn’t miss the way Shane shivers in response. He wants to see his eyes so badly. He can see them a little, if he gets really close, but the point of the mask was to keep him hidden, of course. Even if people knew who he was, it was still best for Shane to have some semblance of privacy. Ilya recognized that, but selfishly, he was sick of the hiding. Everywhere he went, it was like he could have Shane, but not fully. Not openly. And all Ilya wanted to do was scream it from the fucking rooftops. He and Shane were together. They had gotten *married*. Pretty soon, they’d have matching tattoos, and then a wedding for real, probably followed by several kids. Which Ilya hadn’t actually spoken to Shane about yet, but… well, a guy could dream.

When Shane is done with his shot, Ilya feels a presence next to him, and he’s delighted when he turns to find Svetlana, all done up with beautiful cat eye liner and a shimmery navy dress.

“Sveta, fuck. It is so good to see you.” He can’t resist letting go of Shane fully to wrap her in a big hug, which she happily returns, but it isn’t long before Shane starts whimpering frantically at the flagrant lack of attention. “I am here, котенок. I am here. You know Sveta is family, baby,” Ilya sighs as Shane tugs him back over and wraps around him immediately, a definite frown on his pouty kitty lips. He’s all over him, aggressively nuzzling, and getting little nips in that Ilya keeps trying to bat away.

“Wow, I see how it is. You are not even excited to see me, котенок?” Sveta huffs, her hands on her hips as Shane turns slightly at the question. “And here I thought you were going to be

on your best behavior tonight."

"She is right, baby. You did not greet Sveta at all. You are being a greedy kitten right now. Jealous and possessive. It is not a good look," Ilya tuts, and Shane immediately crumples into him. "You are not in trouble, angel. But you should be nice to Sveta. She is your family, too, yes?" Ilya reminds him, giving Shane a little tug at his hair to get him to show his face.

Shane sniffles and rises a tiny bit from Ilya's chest in order to give Sveta a small greeting in the form of a soft, "Meow."

"There's my sweet boy," Ilya smiles, running his fingers appreciatively through Shane's fluffy black fur. "He is very impatient to see Ivan," he tells Svetlana in explanation.

"Ah. I saw Cedric and Ivan come in earlier. They are very excited as well. I think Cedric is secretly hoping you and him will become closer. He has had a tough time finding Dom friends recently. Everyone is on edge after what happened with you-know-who. They are hesitant to befriend him because he is so new." And Ilya is grateful she's avoiding saying Nikolai's name. He does not need any triggers tonight.

He wrinkles his nose at the idea of anyone shutting Cedric out, though. He was newer to the club and the scene, in general, but he was a quick study, and Ivan had taken to him almost immediately. Ilya saw no issues with getting closer to Cedric, especially if Ivan and Shane were going to remain close. It would be nice to be friends with another pairing.

"I am excited to spend time with Cedric as well. I know Ivan has felt very comfortable with him recently. I think they are shaping up to be a good duo, hm?"

Svetlana nods in agreement. "I am just glad we have not had any problems with the other one." She's referring to Sasha this time, and Ilya was glad about that, too. Still, though…

"Never speak too soon," Ilya warns, because Sasha was known to be quite hard to get rid of. Sometimes, it took a few iterations of telling him to fuck off before the message finally stuck.

"Ivey," Shane rasps half-heartedly into his chest, and Ilya turns to offer him a sweet smile.

"I am going to need you to be patient for me, kitty. Ivan is coming, but we will not rush him. He will be out very soon." Ilya taps Shane's nose playfully. "Please, can I have a kitten lick now?" He asks, pivoting to give Shane access to his cheek.

Shane easily grants his request and cups Ilya's face with his paw in order to deliver a round of soft kitten licks.

"You two are very cute," Svetlana comments quietly, and Ilya looks over to find her watching them with a warm look in her eyes.

He can't control the way his lips curl in response. "Thank you, Sveta. We are very perfect for each other, no?" He faces Shane once again to bump their foreheads together. Shane just tips forward to try and bite at Ilya's neck. "Okay, *enough* of that, kitty," Ilya laughs. "You are on thin ice with me. Behave yourself, or I am going to pull your tail for the rest of the evening."

Shane whines dejectedly, and Ilya would be willing to bet he's using his sad kitten eyes under that unfortunate mask of his.

"Oh my," Sveta says in amazement. "I didn't even see your tail, котенок. Ilyusha, that is absolutely beautiful. And it fits him so well. I'm impressed," she voices, eyes bright this time as she surveys Shane.

Shane rubs the tip of his nose against Ilya's neck, going shy again at the attention, and Ilya recognizes he's probably not going to open up much more until he gets to see Ivan. They don't have to wait too long, though, because all of a sudden, Shane starts mewling excitedly and pressing his paws all over Ilya's chest. It's undoubtedly Ivan and Cedric coming from one of the playrooms, so Ilya places a firm hand on the back of Shane's neck to keep him in place.

"Calm, котенок. Wait for them to come to us," Ilya warns, because it was important to respect boundaries when it came to other pairings. Especially with Cedric and Ivan, Ilya wasn't entirely sure of their dynamic or the rules they abided by.

Shane starts to lick sloppily at his neck, and Ilya has to steel himself with a steadying hand around Shane's waist because kitten Shane was *really* doing something to him tonight—and that was saying a lot because kitten Shane did something to him pretty much *every* night.

Luckily, Cedric chooses that exact moment to walk up, placing a hand on Ilya's shoulder in acknowledgment. "Hey, Rozy. Good to see you back here," he greets good-naturedly.

"Cedric, hey. It's good to see you, too. My котенок has been going out of his mind wanting to see Ivan." Ilya rolls his eyes, trying to keep a handle on Shane as he twists enthusiastically in his arms. "Baby, *please*. He is right here. Please, be calm for me."

Ivan laughs as he walks up, and Ilya takes in his doggy attire. He's got a pair of soft brown puppy dog ears on that blend into his hair quite nicely, and only a little bit of makeup on his face, similar to Shane's kitty whiskers.

"Hey, Ilya. And hi, my wonderful kitty cat. There you are," Ivan addresses Shane warmly, his eyes darting to Ilya for a second. "Is it okay to hug him?"

Ilya smiles at the extreme display of manners, and he instantly lets Shane catapult out of his arms and into Ivan's grasp.

"Oh my goodness," Ivan grins happily when Shane practically tackles him. "I've been missing you so much. How are you, kitty?"

Shane is just hugging him so tightly, nuzzling against him like he's trying to embed Ivan's scent into his nose, and Ilya can't help how fucking fuzzy it makes him feel inside that Shane has someone like this that he can be himself around.

"I know, I know. I never get to see you now that Rozy stole you away from me," Ivan teases, and Ilya shrugs.

“You will have to visit once we get the Ottawa club up and running.”

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Shane’s eyes go wide. Ottawa club? What Ottawa club? There was going to be a club in Ottawa?

“I didn’t realize you were opening a club in Ottawa, Rozy. That’s amazing,” Cedric comments.

Ilya’s eyes drift to him, and Shane blinks at having been caught staring.

“Yes, it is early stages still, but it will be nice to have something closer to home. I am already missing the club too much,” Ilya admits.

Holy shit. Ilya was making an Ottawa club. Shane swallows thickly as he tries to picture what that might entail. A new playroom for Ilya. A new club to run around in. One they’d have access to throughout the whole year. New people to meet? Probably. But would they be nice? Would they like him? Would he still get to see Ivan?

“I’m excited for you to see all the different areas,” Ivan redirects his attention, and Shane could get lost in his pretty brown eyes. “I think you’re really going to like the kitty one. I even asked Ilya to make sure we got the fabric on the blankets right.”

Shane just purrs and collapses into him again, hugging him close. He *really* liked Ivan. Ivan was such a comfort and a safe space, and Shane knew nothing bad could ever happen if he was around. Well, especially if Ivan *and* Ilya were around. He still doesn’t know how he feels about Cedric yet. Shane eyes him warily before hiding in Ivan’s neck, sniffing him lightly.

“Oh, Cedric is nice, kitty. You’ll like him,” Ivan assures, and Shane is still nervous, but he trusts his friend more than anything. He trusts Ilya more than anything, too.

“He is already down,” Ilya explains to Cedric, and Shane pouts at the fact that they’re talking about him. “He has been looking forward to the event for a while now. Plus, it has been a pretty stressful week.”

“I can imagine,” Cedric expresses sympathetically. “But you said he goes down easily, no?”

“Yes, very easily.” Ilya is smiling at him, and Shane juts his lower lip out even more, leaning against Ivan for comfort. “Even more when he is stressed.”

Ivan rubs his side and blinks up at Ilya. “It takes me a little longer to get down. We’re still trying to figure out our dynamic.” His lips curl when Cedric reaches out to ruffle his hair.

“Mm, you are not normally a puppy, are you?” Ilya wonders aloud.

“A few times,” Ivan shrugs, while still paying attention to Shane, which Shane greatly appreciates. “I’ve been to all the pet play events before, but I don’t think I identify as that the way your sweet котенок does.” Ivan nuzzles into Shane affectionately, and Shane can’t help

the soft meow he lets out. “I haven’t been to one with Cedric, though, so we’re excited to explore.”

“I will get you down,” Cedric vows, giving Ivan’s collar a little adjustment. “We are still getting warmed up. Ivan does better with eyes on him, don’t you, pup?”

Ivan grins and shrugs. “I like an audience. What can I say?”

“Mm, my kitty is the opposite. It is best if I start to bring him down on my own. It helps him relax to be in public more.”

“Well, I don’t blame him,” Ivan reasons, stroking his fingers through Shane’s fluffy hair. “He feels very safe with you. And he has had some unfortunate experiences here.”

The distraction of fingers in his hair works because Shane can barely pay attention to what Ivan is saying. All he wants is to stop pretending to be human and go play. Standing up, talking with the owners. Pets were supposed to roam, and scamper, and cause trouble. Shane has a lot of trouble inside of him that he would very much like to unleash. He reaches up to paw at the bell on Ivan’s collar.

“Alright, baby. Why don’t we let Ivan and Cedric get a drink, and we will meet them over in the kitty area, yes? Unless Ivan would prefer to go to the puppy area first to continue getting warmed up?” Ilya suggests, looking between Ivan and Cedric for confirmation.

Shane whines and just wraps himself further around Ivan, pulling a laugh from the group.

“I think we’ll go to the kitten area first. I doubt your котенок will take well to the grass we have in the puppy area—since I know his skin can be sensitive—and I would love to spend some time with him,” Ivan hums, giving Shane another intentional pet down his back.

“I am sure Angel can bring us some drinks if you want to head over now?” Cedric offers instead. “Take advantage of the space before too many others arrive? He will probably do better if he can familiarize himself with everything before additional pets crowd the area, no?”

“If that is okay with you both,” Ilya nods in agreement. “I think that would be a great idea.”

“He does not normally crawl, does he?” Cedric tips his head in consideration. “I am still learning what is best for Ivan. Maybe you have some tips for me, specifically with the pet/owner dynamic.”

“Mm, I am mostly worried about him getting sore. Tonight, we will try to limit putting too much pressure on his wrist since he got a little banged up the other day. He has it wrapped under his sweater paw. But he does like to kneel as long as we are touching. I anticipate him getting playful with Ivan tonight, too.”

“Ah, I see,” Cedric nods in understanding. “Well, we will follow your lead this evening. For Ivan and I, we are just looking to have fun and explore. We have lots to discover about our dynamic still.”

Shane just meows and blinks his big eyes up at Ilya, reaching desperately for him.

“Aw, come here, kitty. You are missing me already,” Ilya coos, wrapping him in a hug as Shane graciously transfers himself from Ivan’s arms into his owner’s. “Yes, baby, we are going to go explore now. You were a very good, patient boy for me. I told you I will get you a treat as soon as they are served.”

Shane yips and licks across Ilya’s lips. He really wanted a treat. His tail is making him feel fuzzy, and Ivan is making him feel playful, and his kitty fur is standing up on the back of his neck in anticipation. He doesn’t know what to do with himself, digging his claws into the fabric of Ilya’s shirt as he waits for guidance.

“I’ve got you, angel. C’mon. Let’s head over. Everyone is ready, yes?”

Shane purrs when Ilya hugs him close and starts leading him further into the club. They haven’t had a chance to explore yet, but he starts to shift excitedly once the different areas come into view.

Each area is set up in its own designated play pen, with a gate for owners to open to ensure the pets stay contained. He spots one for doggies, and one for bunnies, but the one Shane can’t stop staring at is the one they’re heading over to right now: the one for kitties. And the one for kitties is filled with the *softest*-looking blankets Shane has ever seen. There are benches for the owners and hooks to tether leashes to. Even more so, though, are the buckets filled with toys and goodies that Shane can’t wait to get his paws on.

“You two have done an excellent job with the space,” Ilya compliments, as he opens the gate to let them into the kitty area.

Shane is bouncing in place impatiently, grabbing onto Ilya wherever he can reach. He feels hyper. He wants to run around and play with Ivan.

“Well, you were a big help with that,” Cedric laughs, his hands intentional on Ivan’s shoulders as the gate closes and re-latches behind them. “Ivan was telling me all about your custom kitty playroom.”

Ilya smirks as Shane head-butts him, trying to rub his face all over to absorb Ilya’s scent into his skin. “Yes, the playroom turned out excellent. My kitty is obsessed. It is probably the prettiest playroom I have ever seen. Right, котенок?”

Shane whines frantically as he waits for permission, sniffling and pouting while looking at all the blankets and then back to Ilya hopefully.

“I want you to kneel with me for a second, baby. Ivan and Cedric want to have a drink. Remember, it takes them longer to warm up, hm?” Ilya tells him as they walk over to the sitting area, a few tables scattered around to hold drinks.

Shane sulks because he’s starting to feel a little overwhelmed. He has so much energy inside of him. He doesn’t want to sit still right now; he wants to *run*.

“Hey, look at me, sweet boy,” Ilya re-directs his attention, sitting down before squeezing the back of Shane’s neck to get him to kneel.

But it doesn’t matter. Shane’s eyes have started to well up with big, fat kitty tears that start to slip down his cheeks. He reaches up to wipe at them under his mask with one of his sweater paws, feeling embarrassed and needy and restless.

“C’mere, baby. You are getting yourself overwhelmed. I want you in a good, playful headspace, but you are too hyper for our company right now. Please, allow them to get adjusted, and then I promise, I am going to give you what you need. Lay your head on my lap for a moment and let’s get you re-grounded, yes?” Ilya hums, scratching behind Shane’s ears intentionally as he settles on his knees and presses his cheek to Ilya’s thigh, wrapping his arms securely around Ilya’s waist. “Good boy. Deep breaths for me. You are okay. Just be calm for me. Sh, that’s it,” Ilya soothes, and Shane sucks in a shaky breath while trying to regulate his breathing.

“Wow, he is really something, Rozy,” Cedric shakes his head in amazement. “You can tell he is a kitten through and through. Is his tail a plug?”

“Hi, kitty,” Ivan whispers as he sinks down to his hands and knees next to Shane. He leans over to give Shane a sniff, and Shane perks up a little at the attention.

“Be good, kitty,” Ilya reminds him, and Shane grumbles, pressing his teeth into the fabric of Ilya’s jeans.

Ilya pulls him off with a small tug of his hair, which causes Shane to huff and press his cheek into Ilya’s knee once more.

“Yes, it is a plug,” Ilya responds to Cedric, combing his fingers through Shane’s hair, which works to soothe him only slightly. “I think it is making him a bit restless. He has not worn a plug in public before, and certainly not to an event. I am keeping a close eye on him just in case he gets too worked up.”

Shane wiggles his tail on instinct, desire burning in his belly when he feels it shift inside of him, and he closes his eyes tightly to focus on the feeling. Ivan is still sniffing him, so Shane sticks his tongue out playfully, licking across Ilya’s jeans.

When he opens his eyes, Ivan is grinning at him, and Shane grins back, letting his tongue hang out again. He’s thrilled when Ivan mimics him and sticks his tongue out back, and Shane can’t resist diving forward to tackle him into the pile of blankets.

“Котёнок,” Ilya says sternly, but Ivan is just laughing and pawing at Shane’s chest as he starts licking at his cheeks.

“He’s alright,” Cedric assures Ilya, smiling down at the two of them. “I think it is helping my pup to get in the right headspace.”

Ilya still looks like he’s ready to jump in at any moment, but Shane is grateful for the opportunity to finally rub himself all over the blankets. He rolls off of Ivan and onto his back

to wriggle around with his paws pulled close to his chest, panting at the way it nudges his tail this way and that. Mm. He liked that very much. He can feel himself starting to get hard in his pants.

Ivan is watching him with wide, wanting eyes, and Shane meows enthusiastically, pawing at him to get him to join in. Shane barely notices as Angel brings by a round of drinks for Cedric and Ivan, only whining when Cedric gets Ivan's attention to help feed him a shot. He growls and bats his paw at Ivan's legs when he starts to crawl away.

"Kitty, be *nice*," Ilya scolds, and Shane huffs in frustration, his eyes getting watery again. He doesn't understand why he isn't allowed to *play*. "I told you, baby. You are at a different level than Ivan is right now. You need to respect that Cedric is in charge of him. If you cannot control yourself, I am going to take you to remove your tail."

Shane's face crumples, and he instantly curls into one of the blankets to hide the fact that he's crying, but he feels Ilya's hand on his back not even a second later. The smell of his cologne so close by tells him that Ilya has knelt down next to him.

"Deep breaths, baby. You are not in trouble, but you need to listen and do what you're told. You are not in control here, hm? That means you need to listen to me and you need to let Ivan listen to Cedric."

Ilya sits down next to him and coaxes Shane into his lap, so Shane immediately climbs into his arms and tucks his face into Ilya's neck, taking a deep inhale of his scent.

"Good boy. Just focus on me, okay?" Ilya prompts, speaking to him in that low, calming way that always helps him to re-center.

Shane responds with a soft purr, nuzzling a little closer at the attention.

"There you are." He can hear the smile in Ilya's voice, and it makes Shane smile as well. "You know what I think will help you to calm down?" He hums, causing Shane to mewl inquisitively.

Before he can question it further, though, he feels a brush running through the back of his hair, and Shane moans at how good it feels.

"Oh, you like that, yes?" Ilya laughs knowingly.

"I want to get brushed," Shane hears Ivan mutter quietly, and then a few short moments later, he can feel Ivan's presence next to him again. Shane raises his head at the commotion and is pleased when he sees Ivan's puppy face appear in view.

Ivan lets his tongue loll out once more, and Shane ducks forward to rub against him, giggling when Ilya pets under his hoodie over his tummy. He's having such a good time. His brain feels fuzzy, his thoughts distant. The only thing that matters right now is playing with Ivan and being good for Ilya. He wiggles to get his tail to move inside of him again, feeling his dick start to get wet with pre-cum against the fabric of his pants.

Ilya is still brushing him and petting him while talking to Cedric, but Shane is fully focused on Ivan right now, and that only intensifies when Ilya brings a mouse into the mix.

Shane yelps and immediately darts after the tiny toy that is somehow getting away from him each time he paws at it. Ivan laughs happily and tries to bat at it as well, but Shane deserves this. He's the one putting in the work. Ivan growls suddenly when Shane steals it away from him, and Shane hisses before scurrying back over to Ilya.

"Hey, hey, play nice, please. There are plenty of toys to go around."

Shane huffs in frustration, but his bad mood doesn't last long when Ilya pulls out the laser pointer next. Shane practically jumps ten feet in the air chasing after it, dashing all around the play pen in an attempt to nail it down.

"Careful with your paw, baby," Ilya reminds him, gently coaxing Shane to lay back in his lap as he dangles a new toy directly over him. "I don't want you hurting yourself more." Shane just pants and rubs his face all over the fabric of Ilya's groin, rutting back against his plug as Ilya pets over him soothingly. "Mm, you are very excited, kitty. Feeling good still? Can you give me your color?" And then Ilya reaches for his paw, and Shane digs his claws in once to signal that he's green before licking at Ilya's wrist.

There are more people coming into the club now, but Shane pays them no mind. Not until people start coming up to greet him and Ilya. He doesn't appreciate other owners stealing *his* owner's attention, so he hisses softly and then goes back to playing with Ivan. He's grateful when Ilya doesn't scold him for it.

Ivan is feeling more loose and puppy-like, Shane can tell. He's somehow got a doggy bone in his mouth, and Shane sniffs curiously at it before wrinkling his nose. He doesn't like doggy toys. He *does* like when Ivan tips his head at him and starts to circle him, sniffing all around. Shane's breath hitches in his throat when Ivan gets to his tail and starts to sniff there, too. Shane cranes his head to see, but his mask is blocking his view, so he pushes at it with his paw until the covering comes up.

He can see Ivan fully now, and the experience is much better. Shane's tongue lolls out in response, and Ivan seems to yip and brighten at being able to see his full face.

Shane giggles wildly when Ivan rolls on top of him until he's practically sitting in Shane's lap. Shane just blinks at him, his breath hitching at the feeling of Ivan's erection pressed against his, and he grinds his hips up experimentally, gasping at how good it feels.

Ivan reacts, too, tipping his head and rutting back against Shane for a minute until they're both panting, staring at each other.

"Hey, no, puppy," Cedric's voice interrupts them. "We do not hump. Especially not without permission, okay?"

Shane just lies there, tilting his head back to look at Cedric in confusion. Ivan seems confused as well, and neither of them make any effort to get off each other. They're just being pets, sniffing and humping. Shane doesn't think they've done anything wrong.

“Jesus, baby, your mask,” Ilya curses, rushing over to pull Shane’s face covering down, and Shane starts to suck in panicked breaths, feeling claustrophobic all of a sudden. He doesn’t *want* his mask down. He wants to watch Ivan. He wants to see his eyes while they play. He likes how Ivan has reacted to seeing him. “Kitten, listen to my voice, okay? You’re with me. You’re okay. But you need to keep your face covered.”

Shane shoves at the covering with his paw defiantly, so Ilya can see his teary kitty eyes and how badly he *doesn’t* want to wear it.

Ilya just cups his jaw and searches his eyes carefully. “You do not want your mask anymore, angel? There are lots of people coming in right now. I do not want you to get spooked.”

Shane just whimpers and rubs his cheek against Ilya’s hand, using his long eyelashes to his advantage.

Ilya’s gaze slides from him over to Ivan, who is still perched in his lap and watching them curiously. Ilya smiles and glides his thumb over Shane’s freckles where they intersect with his whiskers. “You are having lots of fun with Ivan, baby? He is making you feel very comfortable, yes?”

Shane nods emphatically and continues to pout until he gets his way.

Ilya sighs and shakes his head. “Fine. I will let you keep your covering up for now, but we will leave it on just in case you change your mind. If you are starting to feel overwhelmed, I need you to let me know, котенок, okay?” He checks seriously, and Shane pulls him close by the neck to start licking at his face. Ilya laughs and turns at the attack. “Okay, okay. You are very sweet, gorgeous.”

Ivan looks on, his puppy eyes darting between the two of them for a moment before he leans down to lick Shane’s cheek, and Shane purrs in response.

“Is he okay with that?” Cedric’s voice rings out from somewhere nearby, and Shane lets his eyes slip shut at all the good feelings when Ilya’s fingers slip through his hair.

“Mm, yes. He is feeling very good right now.”

Shane wriggles underneath Ivan to get their erections to brush each other’s once more, and Ivan practically collapses on top of him to hump him a little more.

“Ah, no. That I am not okay with,” Ilya tells Shane sternly before turning to Cedric. “Can you help with Ivan, please? We have not discussed this.”

Shane whines pathetically when Ivan is gently pulled off of him, and he quickly sits up to start panting desperately at his owner.

“I know, baby. You are getting very excited because of your tail, but we do not play sexually with others without getting consent ahead of time,” Ilya tuts, petting over his hair to try and calm him down. “We need to respect boundaries, okay? It is not appropriate.”

Shane digs his claws into his Alpha's knee, his eyebrows furrowed as he pouts and starts to keen in the back of his throat.

"I told you no, sweetheart. Look, they are coming around with the treats now. I promised you one earlier. I am going to have to get you a leash for next time if you cannot keep to your personal space."

Shane tips his head towards Ilya for a pet and rumbles loudly when he gets one in response.

"That's a good boy. You are so good when you listen to me, sweet котенок. You are doing so, so well this evening. Wearing your tail and playing so nicely with Ivan. Do you think you would let Cedric pet you, baby? Cedric and Ivan are good friends of ours, yes? I think we would like to hang out with them more often. It would be nice if you could feel comfortable with Cedric, too, hm?"

Shane just blinks, turning to survey Cedric, and he cowers a little at the attention, pressing his face into Ilya's shoulder.

"You do not need to be shy, sweet boy. He is Ivan's owner, remember? That means if we want to play with Ivan, we have to be nice to Cedric."

Shane doesn't like that logic, but his brain is in the fuzzy place where he can't tell up from down, so Ilya must be making an important point because Ilya *never* asks him to do anything unless it's important. Shane sniffles, wrinkling his nose a little before leaning his head towards Cedric in offering.

He hums appreciatively when Cedric first holds out his hand for Shane to sniff, and he does so without question before licking his fingers once.

"Oh, that's very good, baby," Ilya praises, giving Cedric a nod to continue.

Then, Cedric is petting him, and Shane lets his eyes slip closed at the comforting touch, tilting his head a little so Cedric can scratch behind his ears. Shane wiggles his tail to signal that he likes it. It feels so good, in fact, that he can't resist crawling closer to Cedric to sniff the rest of him in interest.

Cedric's blue eyes are on him, watching him, and Shane blinks his own huge brown eyes up at him. He places his paw on Cedric's knee, observing as the Dom's lips pull into a smile, which in turn makes Shane flush.

Cedric is nice, Shane decides. Good for Ivan. And he smells good, too. Not as good as Ilya, of course, but Shane likes him.

"Now I am getting jealous over here," Ilya calls out to him, and Shane turns to practically tackle his owner to the floor, laving his tongue all over Ilya's face with sweet kitty kisses. "There's my very good boy. Oh, you are just the cutest ever. God."

And Shane just loves him so much. He's in Ilya's lap as the servers come around with treats, mewling happily when Ilya feeds him some ahi tuna bites. Kitties loved fish, and so did

Shane. Fish was so, so good for his diet. He watches on curiously as Cedric feeds Ivan a little cookie.

“Mm, those are for the doggies, baby. You would not like that,” Ilya informs him, and Shane just grinds his tail against Ilya’s lap because he’s pretty sure *that* is something he’s allowed to do. His tummy warms when Ilya smirks at him in response.

The rest of the night goes by like that. Shane splits his time between loving on Ilya and playing with Cedric and Ivan. They start up a friendly game of fetch, where he and Ivan take turns retrieving the toy before kindly passing it off to one another. Ivan is acting like *such* a puppy, and it’s making Shane feel super fuzzy and sated.

But everything shifts when Rose arrives, and Shane is *so* happy to see her. She’s not a pet—she’s just in regular attire—but Shane doesn’t hesitate to cuddle up to her for head scratches as soon as she enters the kitty playpen.

“Oh my god,” Rose laughs joyfully once she realizes the state that he’s in.

“He is very down right now,” Ilya warns, like he isn’t sure how Rose will react, but Shane knows he’s slipped around her before. Maybe not *this* much, but Rose was very aware by now that Shane identified as a kitty cat.

“That’s okay,” Rose shakes off. “Oops, sorry. I know Svetlana told me there are rules. Am I…am I allowed to pet him?”

Ilya smiles at the request and grants it with a sure nod.

Shane is positively delighted when Rose kneels right down into the blanket pile to give him an affectionate rub, and he can’t believe he gets to have this. His best friend and his boyfriend and his puppy friend all in one place. And Shane gets to be a fucking cat for all of it. Not just a level 1 or a level 2 kitty cat, but a full-on *playful* level 3. He’s in kitty cat heaven right now. He rolls over onto his back for tummy pets.

Rose just laughs like she finds the whole thing adorable. “Oh my god, Ilya, he’s *precious*.”

Ilya smirks like it’s an attestation to his incredible ownership. “I think he is asking you for tummy rubs right now.”

Rose glances over at Ilya, hovering her hand until he gives her a nod of reassurance before rubbing her hand over Shane’s clothed abdomen.

And Shane purrs loudly, rubbing his cheek against the fabric of the blankets beneath him. He’s *so* glad Rose could make it. He feels like everything is perfect.

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Ilya is watching Shane with nothing but pure adoration in his eyes. His beautiful little kitten was forging a whole life for himself in the kink world, and Ilya couldn’t be more proud. God, Shane was *everything*. Everything and more. Ilya couldn’t have cooked Shane up better himself even if he’d custom-made him in a lab. Shane was surpassing Ilya’s wildest *dreams*

of what they could be. *He's going to marry him*, he reminds himself warmly. He's going to marry him for real and love him for the rest of forever.

Rose looks up at him again, her expression open while she takes it all in. "This event is *so* cool."

Ivan and Cedric have retreated to the puppy area for a while, and Ilya is secretly glad to have some one-on-one time with Rose. She was becoming a great ally to them amidst some difficult transitions, and Ilya couldn't be more grateful that Shane had so many lovely people in his corner.

"I am so glad you could make it. I wasn't sure how you would feel about diving into this headfirst. It is pretty intense for a first event," he admits, looking around at all the chaos in the room. The other puppies, bunnies, and kittens were in various states of undress, with most wearing some form of head covering or attachment to bring them closer to their desired animal of choice. To Ilya, it was nothing new, but he recognized it was probably a lot for someone who hadn't been exposed to it before.

Rose just waves her hand like she couldn't care less. "He's been a little cat-like around me before. Plus, I sort of knew what I was walking into."

Ilya can't believe how fucking cool she is. He can't rationalize that this is the same person who had him cursing the sky at their most recent All-Star game. His perception of her has come so far in just a matter of months, and now, there wasn't anyone he trusted his Shane with more.

"Do not address him by name, please," he tells her softly, just in case Svetlana hadn't briefed her on that part, but Rose is handling Shane like a pro right now.

"Oh, who's the sweetest guy? Oh my goodness. You are just the cutest little thing," Rose is cooing at him, and Shane is eating it right up, head butting her incessantly for pets and nuzzles.

Ilya's heart warms at the sight. "There are toys, too, if you want to play with him. Just be careful because he was getting a little frisky earlier."

Rose just gives him a look and *right*. He'd almost forgotten about the physical part of her and Shane's past. Mostly, Ilya just found the thought of Shane having sex with a girl to be utterly laughable. Well—okay, maybe he would find it more believable if Rose were into pegging, at least. But as far as Ilya knew, she wasn't. Svetlana had invited her, though, which begs the question…

"Are you here *with* Svetlana?" Ilya tries to broach the topic, and he hopes she knows what he's getting at.

Rose smiles bashfully and shrugs. "I don't think it was like a *serious* invite, if that's what you mean. I wasn't even sure I was going to make it with how late my shoot ended." She busies herself with dangling a string toy over Shane as the other bats determinedly at it.

“Have you…thought about girls before?”

Rose splutters a laugh and raises her shoulders in indifference. “I haven’t really thought about *any* of this before, quite honestly. I guess I’m just taking it all in.”

Ilya nods in understanding. He had figured out his sexuality pretty early on in life, but he knew that some people barely thought to question it until they were exposed to the right environments. “Well, I hope you feel safe to explore here, at least. No one will pressure you or be offended if you are not interested.”

“I appreciate that,” she tells him wholeheartedly. “I don’t know that I see it for myself in the way that you guys participate, but it’s really nice to be able to freely explore something I don’t have a good understanding of.”

“Mm, it is becoming lifestyle for us, which I did not expect,” Ilya reveals, reaching over to adjust Shane’s mask when it starts to fall further over his face. Shane licks his wrist in appreciation before he returns to his enthusiastic mouse hunt.

“Lifestyle?” Rose remarks, tilting her head.

“Where we partake regularly, even outside of scenes. We are still trying to navigate when and where it is okay for him to drop.” Ilya presses his lips together, contemplating whether he wants to divulge this next bit, before ultimately puffing out a sigh. “We had an incident yesterday at the Pike house that I am…not proud of.”

“What happened?” Rose’s eyebrows pinch together in concern.

“We were babysitting the kids, and the girls decided they wanted him to be a kitty cat.” Ilya swallows and shakes his head. “I did not think it was a big deal at the time, but he has been very stressed this week, and he tends to drop very easily. Nothing happened really—not anything that they would notice—but I should have stopped it as soon as I saw where it was going. He was super out of it by the time Jackie and Hayden came home. I mean, he wasn’t like that around the kids—he fell asleep and woke up much deeper than he was when we were watching them—but still.”

Rose’s lips twist in understanding. “Kids are tricky,” she replies lightly, still paying attention to Shane. “I think it’s really easy to screw up around them. Especially if you’re not around them very often, you know? It seems obvious, what’s appropriate and what isn’t, but I think it’s much tougher to discern those things in the moment.”

“I should have known better,” Ilya reiterates. “I want to be a good parent more than anything and, after what happened yesterday…” He trails before huffing a nervous laugh. “I am terrified of screwing up now. Especially with how our dynamic is shaping out to be. I do not know how you manage something like this with kids around all the time. It makes me wonder if we will ever be able to have both things coexist, or if we will have to choose one in the end. I know we have time to figure things out, but still. I refuse to mess things up the way my father did,” Ilya admits heavily. “I will not do that to my child.”

“Ilya,” Rose smiles. “I think you guys are going to be *great* parents. Part of being a parent *means* messing up sometimes, unfortunately. You just kind of have to learn those lessons as you go along. I’m sure you didn’t mean anything by it. How did Jackie and Hayden feel?”

Ilya exhales heavily. “They were very gracious to us for watching the kids. I do not know how much they understand of our dynamic, but I think they are starting to grasp some of it on a basic level, at least. I just…I don’t know. They should have been more upset. Furious, maybe. I probably deserve that.”

“You know better for next time,” Rose offers, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, which Ilya appreciates. “And I’m sure you guys will come up with a plan for whenever you’re ready to settle down with your own. I can’t speak for him, but knowing Mr. Hockey —” Rose nods to Shane pointedly. “I’d be willing to guess that it’s probably still a way’s away.”

Ilya laughs and looks down at Shane, giving his tummy an intentional rub as Shane licks happily at his mouse, the toy trapped between his two pretty kitten paws.

He feels better after his talk with Rose, and he’s more than pleased with how this evening has gone with Shane. It was a much-needed reprieve after the many stressors of this weekend.

“I know you guys have been losing,” Rose broaches quietly so Shane won’t hear. “But I have to say, you two look *great* on the ice together. There’s a lot of potential there. Dare I say… enough to make playoffs at the very least.”

Ilya’s heart picks up in his chest as he lets his gaze fall to Shane once more. “Our team is bonding more than I could have ever expected. The guys are fucking amazing. I mean, they literally *worship* him. Like…to the point where it almost makes me uncomfortable with how much they are thirsting after my kitty.”

Rose barks a surprised laugh. “Around you? Please. I’m sure they’re terrified.”

Ilya just raises his eyebrows and shakes his head. “They do not know.”

He watches as Rose’s jaw drops in shock. “They don’t *know*? I’m sorry, but *how* is that even possible? Have they spent a single second around you guys?”

It’s Ilya’s turn to snicker this time. “Mm, we have come very close to getting caught. Several times, actually. But I wanted to let him get settled before we did anything rash. I trust them to keep our secret, but I think it will be a big adjustment for all of us. Especially with how we can be sometimes.”

Rose makes a face like she can testify to that, and Ilya sticks his tongue out at her playfully.

Then, all of a sudden, Shane starts crawling into his lap like he needs more attention, so Ilya smiles and makes room for him, ruffling his hair fondly as Shane wraps around him like a kitty octopus. “Hi, baby,” he greets, and Shane licks slowly over his face in response. “I know, it has been a long evening. You are so, so perfect for me, моя любовь. You have been on your best behavior all day, haven’t you?”

Shane just keeps licking him, almost like he's grooming him, and Ilya wrinkles his nose as Shane tries to wet every inch of his face.

"I think it is probably time for us to head out soon. He has had his tail in for a while," Ilya informs Rose, who is still watching them with a mix of curiosity and appreciation.

"Oh my god, I didn't even notice that," she laughs, her eyes falling to Shane's tail for the first time that evening. "Is it a—"

"A plug," Ilya nods his agreement. "I used the smallest one, but he has not worn it in public before. I imagine he's starting to feel pretty sensitive."

And, like clockwork, Ilya can feel Shane's erection pressing against him, his kitten breathing hotly into his neck.

"Well, I think that is our cue to leave," Ilya notes, squeezing Shane's thigh before leaning in to kiss his kitten nose. "I'm very glad you could make it out this evening. I know he is very happy to see you. And I cannot thank you enough for taking care of him a few weeks ago when I could not." He's, of course, referring to Shane's very nasty departure from the terrible, awful Voyageurs and how Rose had graciously dropped everything to step in and take care of him.

"It's never any trouble," Rose ensures. "If he needs me, I'm there. Same with you, yeah? You have my number if you ever need it."

And Ilya's heart swells with emotion. He was very blessed with the people in his life already, but with Shane in the mix now, it felt like that group of people had expanded tenfold. Ilya was extremely comforted by the fact that his boyfriend had so many people who cared about him, especially with how many of them seemed willing to extend that care to Ilya as well.

"Promise me you'll come see the new house at some point?"

"Are you kidding? How *else* am I going to get to see the Cat Paradise you built? He's been talking my ear off about it," Rose laughs good-naturedly.

Ilya raises his eyebrows in surprise. God. It was good to know that Shane had people he could be so open with. Enough to share about their *playroom,* for crying out loud. He couldn't believe it.

He and Shane close out the evening by saying their final goodbyes to Rose, Cedric, and Ivan, before ultimately making their way back to Ilya's playroom. Once they get there, Ilya immediately dims the lights and walks Shane over to the bed with his hands firm on his hips.

"My sweet baby did *so* fucking good for me today," Ilya tells him genuinely, because the night really could not have gone better. No panic attacks. They didn't need to take his tail out, and Shane had even gone half the night with the mesh layer of his mask all the way up. No one had bothered them. No one made Shane uncomfortable. It was the perfect night Ilya needed after what felt like weeks of straight chaos.

Shane grins like Ilya's just told him he's about to win his next Stanley Cup, and Ilya can't resist pulling him into a tongue-heavy kiss, sighing in satisfaction when Shane just licks into his mouth like he doesn't know what to do with himself.

"You are so fucking sexy, you have no idea," Ilya mutters against his skin, trailing his lips across Shane's jaw and down his neck. He holds Shane tight by the waist, sucking a flurry of marks all across his sensitive skin, until Shane is gasping and mewling deliciously in his grasp. He tugs at the back of Shane's hair, forcing him to look up so Ilya can take in his flushed cheeks, his wet lips. His dazed, dazed brown eyes. "Everyone wants you, baby. But you're mine, aren't you?" Ilya coos softly, watching as the words settle over him. "And no one could take care of you the way I can. No one makes you feel the way I do. Right, angel?" Ilya hums, cupping Shane's cock in his pants.

Shane whines like he's going to start sobbing from overstimulation any minute now, but Ilya doesn't care. He wants to watch him fall apart. He wants Shane to cry and scream until it's too much. He wants to ruin him until he's nothing but a puddle of come, and sweat, and tears. He wants Shane to beg for mercy, for forgiveness, for anything that might save him from Ilya's relentless desire to consume him whole.

"The things I want to do to you. Jesus," Ilya huffs a sinister laugh. "If you could only *see* the shit that lives in my mind." But his Shane was a pervert. And for every dirty, dark thought Ilya had, he was absolutely sure that Shane's beautiful mind could cook up something twice as twisted. Ilya almost wanted to test him to see if there was anything Shane *wouldn't* say yes to.

What if Ilya wanted to pass him around the team? Have him suck all of their cocks. Have them cum on his face one by one until Shane was nothing but a sloppy, filthy mess. And then maybe Ilya would take pictures—on a Polaroid camera, to be extra safe—and he'd hand them out to each of the boys as souvenirs. A little keepsake. A reminder of just how desperate the team kitty cat was to *please*.

Ilya would fuck him after and make them all watch, just in case any of them forgot who Shane really belonged to. They'd beg for a taste, but Ilya would take pleasure in watching them yearn from afar. It wouldn't stop him from teasing at team events, though, touching Shane inappropriately in front of all of them so they knew what they were missing out on. Maybe they'd approach him for birthdays or special occasions, wanting Shane as their gift, positioning him to let them take a crack. As their prize. As their reward. Maybe if Ilya promised the boys Shane in return, they could actually walk away from this season with a Stanley Cup. Surely that would be motivation enough. And it would certainly make his Принцесса котёнок happy. Ilya smiles at the thought.

But, for now, he just fucks Shane good and hard. He lets the fantasies swirl through his head as he sucks on Shane's pretty hairless cock. As he lets his tongue drift lower until he's licking around Shane's tail. Watching his hole gape when he removes the plug and then licking inside there, too. He rims Shane with a hand wrapped tightly around the base of his cock until his kitten is begging and screaming and wrecking his precious baby voice.

Ilya thrums with the knowledge that Shane's voice will be noticeably hoarse the next time he sees the guys. Maybe they'd come out to them then. Maybe the team would be forced to

instantly come to terms with the fact that *Ilya* had spent all weekend doing that to him. That Ilya's high-profile *Jane* was really just their very own Shane Hollander. Shane Hollander, who spent most of his time as a needy kitten begging at Ilya's feet. Shane, who often fantasized about being the team cat, even though he'd only taken one cock in his entire life.

Ilya is sliding that cock into him right now. The only cock Shane would *ever* take, probably. Unless Ilya suddenly got a whole lot less possessive, which he did not foresee happening any time soon. The pendant of Shane's collar is bouncing across the backs of his shoulders as Ilya fucks into him from behind, and Ilya reaches forward to hold it in his hand until the chain goes taut around his neck.

Shane is letting out cute little gasping sobs that Ilya wishes he could film and broadcast for the entire world to see. He wants everyone to know what he can do to Hockey's Golden Boy. To the hottest player in the MLH. He wants it playing on billboards all across the nation, streaming live on every channel, filtering through the airwaves of every radio station. He wants Shane's tattoo on him like a brand, because he was just as much Shane's as Shane was his, and he's sick of fucking hiding it.

He comes to that thought, to the thought of telling the team, watching their faces as the realization washes over them. As they start to put the pieces together. Add up the clues. He comes to the thought of being able to touch Shane openly, to lay his claim anytime he wants, to have the boys look to *him* for permission before they approach Shane with anything, because Shane was his fucking *property*. Ilya owned him, and it was about time people knew that.

After teasing him all night and then denying him for the better part of an hour, Ilya finally, finally gets Shane off, biting harshly at his neck until he's sure he's drawn blood. Until he's sure the marks will last on him for weeks to come. Ilya was sending a message: Shane Hollander was fucking his, and going forward, he planned on making that abundantly fucking clear to as many people as he could. To as many people as Shane would allow for him to.

He collects Shane in his arms afterwards, pressing scripture into his skin that not even the heavens above could inspire, because his Shane was other-worldly—something beyond this realm, Ilya was sure. His Shane was fragile, and sweet, and kind. His Shane was complicated, and made up of a million different parts that all moved out of tandem with one another, but it only drew Ilya in more, only made him want to try harder.

Everything in his life up until this point had been pure effort without payoff. But with Shane, he was endlessly reaping the benefits. Every day, he watched as Shane blossomed before his very eyes. He would tend to him with water and soil and look on in admiration as Shane bloomed, and bloomed, until he was running kitten laps in the clouds. Until he was rising every morning like the fucking sun and painting Ilya's skin with warm, golden rays. Until Ilya couldn't even remember the days he spent stumbling around in the dark anymore because their future together was just so fucking bright.

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Chapter End Notes

Writing a chapter without the Centaurs is not as fun for me. I can't wait till we're back in Ottawa for our first home game of the season!! The boys are playing Buffalo, and as much as the technicalities of hockey have been killing me, I really, really enjoy writing how the dynamics tend to shake things up for Ilya and Shane.

I hope everyone's concerns with the last chapter were addressed here, but I do want to reiterate that this is fiction. I am not advocating for anything my characters do in this book, and I, myself, am also not perfect. I'm writing this book for fun, and as much as I want their actions/feelings to be realistic, I also recognize that this is an indulgent and silly exploration of creativity. I wanted to write the Pike wedding in a way that made sense for my world, and that happened to include Shane being a kitty cat. It really wasn't meant to be much more. I am also trying to slowly introduce Shane being a kitten around more of their friends and family, which does include the Pikes (although I am not intending to have it show up around their kids again!), but if any of that is going to make you uncomfortable in any way, please decide for yourself if you would like to continue reading this story.

All that to say, I am writing this purely for entertainment purposes. I write my characters in the way I picture them reacting to things in the moment. They might get things wrong, but I think they've shown that they are also capable of a healthy amount of course correction. Thank you to those of you who have continued to trust me with this story!! I appreciate your support, and I do appreciate your criticisms at times, too, but if it ever gets to the point where you feel the need to leave a nasty or mean-spirited comment, please just stop reading lol. No one is forcing you to be here. (this is not at all directed at anyone in particular; no one said anything mean, just a general statement!!!)

Anyway, enough with the drama. Thanks for all the comments!!!! You're so appreciated!!! There's a canon event coming up that I'm so excited for, and I don't think I've seen anyone write it the way I intend to, soooo buckle up <3 Thank you!!!!!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Jesus, you did a fucking number on me," Shane hisses, looking at himself in the mirror to poke at the bruise Ilya left on his neck. It's purple and pretty fucking noticeable to the point where the guys will definitely see it.

They're back in their Ottawa house, and Shane has actually missed it after an entire week of traveling. Traveling and losing hockey games. But their first home game is this evening, and Shane is feeling pretty hopeful. It would be his and Ilya's first time playing on home turf, which meant that they would probably draw a huge crowd. Everyone was eager to see them play on the ice together, and they were only getting better.

Ilya just smirks and snakes his arms around Shane's waist, kissing behind the back of his ear as he watches him in the mirror. "You want my mark on you forever, котенок. Let us see how you do with this for a week."

Shane rolls his eyes and elbows out of Ilya's grip. "Come on, we're going to be late to practice."

"We can take my Porsche, yes?" Ilya asks hopefully, cause they'd finally had a chance to bring it over from Montreal.

"You can take whatever you want. I'm taking my car." Shane shrugs.

"You what?" Ilya's expression falls, his eyebrows pressed together in confusion. "Why are we taking separate cars? I thought we were going to come out to them?"

"Not right before the fucking game," Shane laughs incredulously. "I meant like at some point soon. It's our first home game. I don't want to distract them with any big news."

"Jesus fucking christ," Ilya groans. "Shane, you are killing me with this. Look, we don't have to tell them right this second, but I am sick of taking separate cars. We live together. This is ridiculous. It is a waste of gas, and it is a waste of my energy to be away from you."

Shane just looks at him as if he's the dumbest person in the world. "Ilya…if we show up together, obviously they're going to know."

"Shane, we could fuck right in front of them and they would still think it was a prank. I will just make something up," Ilya huffs in frustration. "We are going in one car, and that is final. Go wait for me in the Porsche. I'll be out in a few minutes."

Shane scoffs at how dismissive it is, but Ilya just looks at him and raises a sharp eyebrow like, *do you really want to challenge me right now? Go right ahead.* And something about it is scary enough that Shane doesn't want to. Challenge him, that is. So, Shane just swallows

and nods imperceptibly, ducking his head a little to avoid the heat of his gaze. And then he turns to grab his bag and goes to wait in the car—the Porsche, just like Ilya said.

They arrive to practice a little early, and Shane is relieved to see that none of the other guys are moseying around in the parking lot. Ilya shoots him a look that says, *see? Told you so*, and Shane just rolls his eyes as they walk in.

As soon as they get to the locker room, however, Shane is startled by the sight of a jet-black puppy running around—with half the boys crowded on the floor to play with it. Wyatt is holding a rope toy while the puppy chews at it and tries to pull it away with its teeth, and Shane is instantly at unease.

"Oh my goodness," Ilya exclaims delightedly, dropping his bag nearby as he rushes over to greet the dog.

"There you guys are!" Harris laughs, smiling over at him and Shane. "You missed the news on the bus ride home. We have a team puppy now!"

"Are you serious?" Ilya's eyes go wide while he pets the puppy enthusiastically.

Shane's stomach churns with discomfort at the sight.

"Yup! His name is Chiron. Isn't he cute?" Harris coos, snapping pictures as the rest of the team fawns over the small animal.

"He is *so* cute. I can't believe this. This is the best day of my life," Ilya declares, holding the puppy's face in his hands as he ruffles his fur.

Shane just walks around everyone to put his bag in his stall, trying not to bristle with how jealous he is. *Team puppy*. The words ricochet around his head violently. Great. Now everyone was going to be obsessed with this stupid dog, Ilya included, but Shane wanted no part in it. The only dogs he wanted to be around came in the form of Ivan or other members of the club, but even they weren't impeding on his team space like this.

"Shane, can I get a picture of you with the puppy for social media?" Harris asks from over his shoulder, and Shane tenses immediately.

"Um," Shane swallows, turning slightly to address him. "Maybe later, yeah? Right now, I just really want to focus on the game tonight."

"Oh, yeah. No worries. I totally don't want to mess with your process," Harris relents. "We can do it another time!"

"Yeah, thanks," Shane offers him a slight smile, but it drops straight away when Harris goes back to the dog with the rest of the team.

"Hey, Hollzy," Troy sidles up to him, clapping him on the shoulder.

Shane only flinches slightly. "Hey, Barrett. You ready for tonight?"

“Yeah, totally. We missed you on the ride back. Did you see everyone you wanted to see in Montreal?”

“I did, thanks. It was nice,” Shane nods, the corners of his lips curling upward.

“I’ll say,” Wyatt snickers as he pokes at the large hickey on Shane’s neck. “You dating a vampire or something, Hollzy?”

Shane flushes and instantly puts his hand over his neck.

Bood whistles once he notices all the commotion. “Hot *damn*, Hollander. I see you made the most of your time off this weekend, didn’t you?”

Ilya suddenly becomes a large presence behind them, shoving Wyatt and Bood out of the way in an attempt to get to his stall next to Shane’s. “Would you guys stop fucking crowding around him? Christ. What is the obsession with Hollander’s sex life?”

“Uh, he’s the only gay guy on the team, dude. Excuse me if I find it fucking interesting, okay?” Wyatt rolls his eyes.

“What the fuck is so interesting about it?” Ilya challenges, getting in his face.

“I don’t know! I’ve only fucked women. It’s interesting to me,” Wyatt argues.

“Then, go watch some fucking porn,” Ilya bites back.

“Look, Shane is *hot*. I’m just curious to know who landed our boy here. We’re gonna have to vet this guy. Make sure he’s good enough for our star.” Bood grins, giving Shane’s shoulder a shake. “Besides, we’re just ribbing him. Same as we do to everyone else on this team.”

“Yeah, Rozy,” Wyatt smirks. “And how *was* your special Jane?”

Shane watches as Ilya’s eyes fall to him all of a sudden, and Shane quickly averts his gaze, redirecting his attention to something inside his locker.

“Like I said last time. None of your business,” Ilya grumbles. “Maybe I could tell you soon. If my Jane would allow me to share things—”

“Don’t you have a dog to play with?” Shane says harshly, slamming his locker before turning around with his arms crossed.

Ilya’s expression falls slightly, his eyes softening, but Shane doesn’t care. If Ilya wants to obsess over some stupid team dog, then so be it. He certainly wasn’t going to sit around letting Ilya make him feel guilty over not being ready to divulge their relationship yet.

“Yikes. Did you two get into a lovers' quarrel?” Dykstra asks as he strolls up to his stall.

“I’m just sick of all this talk about Jane. If she doesn’t want people to know, then she doesn’t want people to know,” Shane says plainly, and Troy is looking at him intentionally.

“I agree,” Troy feels the need to pipe in. “If it’s private, it’s private. If she doesn’t want people to know, then you should respect that. Right, Rozy?”

Shane notices Ilya gritting his teeth before he slams his own locker shut.

“Let’s just focus on the game tonight, alright, Barrett? It’s our first home game. I need everyone in check,” Ilya barks out harshly.

“Jeez. Something tells me this weekend did not go as planned,” Holmberg mutters under his breath, but thankfully, Ilya doesn’t seem to hear him.

“I have a feeling Jane is going to play a big part in how our skate goes this morning,” LaPointe agrees.

Shane just rolls his eyes and heads out to the ice. He’s in a bad fucking mood over this dog, and he’s making no effort to hide that fact.

The morning practice goes okay. Ilya does push them a little harder than usual, but Shane’s grateful for the workout. His body could use the extra conditioning. His wrist is still a bit sore, but he’s got ice on it as soon as he’s back in the locker room. He tries not to react too much when Ilya appears at his side.

“Wrist feeling okay?” He asks gruffly.

Shane scoffs.

“Your nails are pink!” Luca cries out all of a sudden, pointing to Shane’s fingers.

“What?” Shane frowns in confusion before the realization dawns on him. His nails were usually pink—not noticeably so—but right now they’re especially pink and sparkly from when the kids had painted them. “Oh yeah.”

“I didn’t know you paint your nails, Shane,” Troy blinks up at him in awe. “That’s um…I mean. They’re really pretty.”

Shane just laughs and shakes his head. “Thanks, guys, but I just helped babysit this weekend. The girls wanted to do a makeover on me.”

“Oh,” Luca frowns. “So, you don’t paint your nails?”

“No, I mean. I do,” Shane backtracks slightly, his eyebrows furrowed together as he tries to figure out what’s normal to divulge. “I mean, I get manicures. Just so everything looks clean. I think they usually do like a light pink. Nothing sparkly like this. I don’t hate it, though,” he admits, holding out his fingers for them to admire.

“I think it looks great,” Troy compliments, and he hasn’t lifted his gaze from Shane’s hands once. “Maybe we could go together sometime. I’ve never gotten mine done, but…I don’t know. It seems relaxing.”

Shane lets out a surprised sound. “Really? Yeah. I’d love that, actually.” He usually went with Rose, but it would be nice to have someone to go with in Ottawa.

Ilya slams his locker shut. “Shane. It’s time to go. Get your stuff.”

Shane frowns at the interruption. “I’m not done talking to Troy.”

“I do not care. I am driving, and I would like to leave. Now, please.”

Troy tips his head in confusion. “You guys drove together?”

“His car broke down. He asked me to pick him up. Let’s go,” Ilya says by way of explanation.

Shane wants to argue, but he knows he’s not in a position to right now, so he just grabs his bag and offers Troy and Luca a smile. “I’ll see you guys later for the game, okay? You ready?”

“So ready,” Luca nods eagerly. “I’m gonna help you score tonight.”

“You’re going to score all on your own,” Shane promises with a wink before pulling his bag over his shoulder. “You, too, Barrett. You looked great in practice today.”

“Thanks,” Troy flushes.

“Shane. *Now*,” Ilya reiterates impatiently, glaring daggers between Troy and Luca, who cower a little under his stare.

Shane huffs, offering them each a look that pulls a small giggle out of the two, but it dies on their lips the second Ilya turns to face them again.

“You’re being a fucking asshole,” Shane mutters as soon as they get in the car.

“And you’re being a fucking brat,” Ilya fires back at him, revving the engine loudly. “Flirting with Troy and Luca while I’m right fucking there.”

“I *wasn’t* flirting—”

“You’re gonna go get your nails done with Barrett? Really, Shane? Does that sound fucking appropriate to you?” Ilya turns sharply to him.

“What is your problem?” Shane narrows his eyes.

“*My* problem? My problem is that everyone in that locker room has a fucking crush on you and you refuse to let me tell them you’re *mine*.”

“I told you I don’t want to distract anyone before the game,” Shane mutters, resting his chin in his hand as he stares out the window.

“Yes, well. They are all distracted enough by you and your fucking pink sparkly nails and your massive hickey—”

“Well, whose fault is that?” Shane demands.

“You *said* we could tell them. That is what you told me, and that is what I believed.” Ilya points a finger at him before looking over his shoulder to start backing out of the parking lot. “So, yes. I left a hickey, and I expected you to tell them it was *me* who fucking left it there, but you refuse to do that.”

“Well, you seemed pretty fucking preoccupied with the dog, so,” Shane scoffs, shaking his head. “I figured you didn’t give a fuck what me and the guys were talking about.”

“Shane,” Ilya sighs as he pulls onto the main road.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I’m tired, and I need to rest my wrist before the game, so. Let’s just…not.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything after that, and Shane is grateful for the peace and quiet. He needs to focus right now, but all he can think about is Ilya and that stupid dog. How Ilya loved all animals, but Shane knew he loved dogs *especially*. Probably more than cats. And now there was going to be one around them all the time. He presses his forehead against the window and doesn’t look at Ilya for the remainder of the car ride. And when they arrive home fifteen minutes later, Shane gets out of the car and heads inside without another word.

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The energy inside the arena is unlike any other as they step out onto the ice for their first home game. Each of them gets their own dramatic introduction with the lights dimmed, and considering half the crowd is in Shane Hollander jerseys, the cheers he receives when he skates up to meet the rest of the team are deafening.

Shane taps his stick against Troy’s as he sidles up next to him and offers the crowd a big wave. They’re on their feet, kids and adults alike, and Shane can feel the excitement feeding the adrenaline in his belly. This is their moment. Their chance to prove to the fans that they’re more than just a losing team.

Ilya skates out last, and they cheer for him just as loudly. The boos from Buffalo’s side are slightly more intense than they had been for Shane, but Ilya doesn’t seem to mind much. His jaw is locked. He’s in focus mode. They still haven’t talked since their dispute this morning. Ilya won’t even look at him. Shane tries to shake off the tension that’s settled itself into his shoulders.

He’s first up for the face-off, and he wins it without fail, taking off in the direction of the goal. Ilya is right there like usual, so Shane cuts him a clean pass and then keeps driving to the net. He’s wide open, defenders shifting towards Ilya this time, and Shane fully expects him to pass back for their first home goal of the season, but—

Ilya isn't even looking at him. He goes for the shot, but he's too late. The defender is already in front of him, and the shot gets blocked before it reaches the net.

"Fuck," Shane curses in frustration. "I was wide open," he relays as soon as he and Ilya skate up to the bench.

"I saw you. It wasn't a clean pass," Ilya grits out, and Shane scoffs.

"It's alright, boys. Just clean it up for next time," Coach Wiebe cuts in.

Shane shakes his head as he sits down, his mouth guard between his teeth, while he watches second line take their shift. Troy is determined. He gets trapped up against the boards, but he's able to pass to Luca, who carries it into the zone with a great show of control. He takes the shot, but the goalie clears it before it can go in. No goal, but they've done their job correctly. The score sits at 0 – 0.

The next time Shane's on the ice, he loses the face-off, but he's able to knock the puck loose and steal it back almost immediately. He tries to hold it even though he knows he should pass; he's got two players who are on him in an instant, and one of them pins him to the boards, trapping his wrist slightly. Shane winces as he tries to protect the puck, but there's no room to move. He can hear Ilya calling to him from the other side of the ice, but it's too late. Buffalo steals it back and takes the shot. Wyatt blocks it easily.

"That was fucking stupid," Ilya tells him when they approach the bench once more. "Just move it next time."

"Funny, because last shift I *did* move it," Shane reminds him coldly. "You're the one who didn't pass."

"I'm not the one with an injured wrist," Ilya hisses in return.

"Come on, guys. Just play the game. I need you working together, not against each other." Coach Wiebe says as he ushers them in.

Shane doesn't spare Ilya a glance as he settles into the bench once more, and by the end of the first period, they still haven't made any headway. Buffalo is playing pretty terribly, but Shane can tell they're gaining confidence as the game goes on. They've definitely noticed the disconnect between Shane and Ilya, and they use that to their advantage as they head into the second period. And after a bad pass forces a turnover, which results in a goal for Buffalo, Coach pulls them both aside.

"I don't know what's going on between you two, but you need to figure it out right now. We don't let personal issues affect how we play on the ice. Go to the tunnel, fix it, and come back ready."

Shane swallows and nods as he and Ilya head out to the tunnel for a second. It's not fully private, but it's private enough to have some semblance of a real conversation. He crosses his arms and waits for Ilya to speak first.

“Look, I’m sorry I got mad earlier, okay? It just kills me to hear the guys talk about you like you’re with someone else.”

“But I’m *not* with someone else,” Shane argues back. “And you know that.”

“Well, it still bothers me.” Ilya shrugs.

“Whatever, Ilya. I’m so sick of talking about this,” Shane sighs, pinching at the bridge of his nose. He’s still beyond irritated from earlier, and it really has nothing to do with Ilya’s reaction. Not to the guys, at least.

“This is not about that,” Ilya realizes almost immediately, his eyebrows pressed together. And then, “Tell me.”

Shane just laughs bitterly and shakes his head, but Ilya can see right through him.

“This is because of the dog?” Ilya raises his eyebrows in surprise this time. “Shane.”

“I just—” Shane huffs.

“It is a dog. It is cute. Of course, I’m going to think the dog is cute, but that means nothing —”

“You *know* it means something. To me, it does.” Shane narrows his eyes, and Ilya’s expression softens slightly.

“I am sorry, okay? I wasn’t thinking about how it would make you feel. I was caught off guard.”

Shane ducks his head to avoid his gaze.

“I’ll make it up to you later,” Ilya attempts to make amends. “But, right now, we’ve got to get back out there and score some goals. Yes? We all need this win.”

Shane is still upset, but he knows he’s right. He’s going to feel like shit if he lets this affect the game to the point of loss. Buffalo is playing too terribly for them to not take this one.

“Okay?” Ilya prompts when Shane still hasn’t said anything, and he forces himself to nod jerkily.

“Yeah. Okay,” Shane agrees, making eye contact this time so Ilya knows they’re on the same page. “Let’s lock in.”

Ilya's lips curl slightly, and they bump shoulders on their way out with a new sense of determination set across each of their faces.

“We good?” Coach Wiebe looks to both of them expectantly as they step back onto the ice.

“Good,” Ilya nods.

“We’ve got it,” Shane confirms, and they tap their sticks together before heading out for the next shift.

Now that they’re on the same page again, they’re able to switch up the tone almost immediately. There’s less hesitation this time. Faster puck movement. Shane wins the face-off and gets a clean pass to Ilya, mimicking their play from earlier, but this time, Ilya passes right back to him. They’re working in tandem now, and Buffalo isn’t expecting the hand-off as Shane makes a clean shot into the goal.

“Fuck yeah,” Ilya breathes, knocking their helmets together when they meet up back at the bench. Shane grins. 1-1.

There are fewer turnovers after that. Buffalo’s defense is confused by the switch-up, which allows Troy to make his first goal of the season, bringing the score to 2-1. The arena is on their side again, and Shane can see the effect it has on the other boys. He feels it, too. The energy is electric. It’s driving them through the third period, and from there, they just need to hold the lead.

They’re playing smart, avoiding risky plays, not forcing anything. They’re keeping it simple, letting their skill and the ice do the work. And it fucking pays off. When the final horn sounds, the boys practically tackle each other in excitement. Their first win, and on home ice, no less. Shane feels like he could run a marathon. It feels like the sign he’s been searching for. He’s on the right team. He made the right choice. They have a chance to really build something here. Something they can grow into. Something long-lasting.

They’re all buzzing with exhilaration as they take in the noise from the crowd, and Shane can tell that they’re going to celebrate hard this evening. He fucking wants to, is the thing. He’s so fucking proud of this team. He knows how hard they’ve worked for this, and he knows that it’s only the beginning.

He can’t hide his grin when he and Ilya are pulled for after-game interviews. They ask about the issues earlier on in the game, but Ilya just waves it off as home-ice nerves. They didn’t want to disappoint the fans, and luckily, they haven’t. It’s early in the season, and they’re still getting used to playing on a line together. There’s bound to be some missteps. All that matters is getting it right in the end.

Once the reporters leave, Coach Wiebe gives everyone a big congratulations on their first win. The boys are still whooping loudly, especially some of the rookies who are high off their first official win as part of the NHL, but Shane doesn’t blame them. He feels similarly on top of the world. It must be why he doesn’t think twice before grabbing Ilya behind the neck, raking his fingers through the back of his sweaty curls, and pulling him in for a big kiss.

Ilya just stands there for a few seconds like he doesn’t know what to do with himself, but it isn’t long before he moans softly and leans into it, grabbing onto Shane’s waist as Shane stands on his tiptoes to meet him at his full height. They’re both dripping with sweat, which makes their lips slide against each other a little messily, but Shane doesn’t care. They fucking made that happen out there, and with the lightning-like chemistry between them, he knows they’re only going to keep getting better.

When Shane finally pulls away, Ilya is staring at him with a dazed expression, his icy blue eyes clouded from the surprise, and it's then that Shane notices the locker room has gone quiet around them. He's still holding onto Ilya's dripping face as he takes a cursory glance around the room, and when he does, he's met with a dozen pairs of wide eyes.

"Uh, Rozy?" Bood laughs awkwardly to break up the tension, and it must work because Ilya shakes himself out of his stupor slightly to turn to him.

"Yeah?" He rasps, like he'd nearly forgotten where they were for a second.

Shane flushes and tucks his face against Ilya's chest to hide from the attention. He hadn't actually meant to come out to the team in such a public and obnoxious way, but he supposed there was no going back now.

"Did something happen in the tunnel that we should be aware of?" Wyatt asks next, because it appears that all of them have no idea what the hell they're looking at.

Ilya just blinks and looks back down at Shane, a question in his eyes, and Shane merely nods, a little smile on his lips. Ilya smirks and pulls him closer.

"Boys," he announces to the group at large. "I'd like for you to officially meet my Jane."

Jaws fucking drop.

"What?" Dykstra laughs wildly. "You're kidding."

"Nope," Ilya shakes his head.

"Since when?" Wyatt demands to know.

"For a while now," Ilya shrugs.

"But…but—" Bood looks between them, aghast. "What about the long-distance necklace?"

Shane bites back a smile as he holds up his key chain, pressing it intentionally. All of the guys watch in astonishment as Ilya's necklace lights up proudly against his chest in response.

"Oh my fucking god." Wyatt rushes over to grab both of their shoulders, looking between them. "You're telling me *Rozanov* left that fucking monster on your neck?"

Shane lets out a surprised laugh while Ilya just puffs his chest.

"You're gay?" Luca blurts, and everyone on the team turns to look at him.

"Mm, I am bisexual, actually. But seeing as I plan to be with Shane for the foreseeable future, you could say that I am very gay, yes."

"That's why you wouldn't give me Shane's number." Troy crosses his arms over his chest.

“Wait,” Holmberg frowns, shaking his head like he’s trying to figure out what the hell is going on. “Why would you need Hollander’s number?”

It’s Troy’s turn to flush this time, and Ilya just raises his eyebrows as if to say *your call.*
“Um,” Troy replies carefully. “Cause…cause I’m gay, too?”

“*What*?” LaPointe clutches onto Holmberg like he’s about to faint. “How many gay people are *on* this team?”

“Um,” Luca titters nervously, scratching at the back of his neck. And then, “Maybe? I mean, I’m not sure yet. I might like both, you know. But, um. With Shane, I mean—” he cuts himself off when Ilya gives a sharp shake of his head.

“Okay, no one else is allowed to come out if they plan on using the word *Shane* to do it. Point is, this is a very gay team, and we will support everyone on it,” Ilya clears the air, giving Shane another squeeze. “But you guys also need to back the fuck off my boyfriend.”

“Wait.” Bood holds his hands up for everyone to pause. “Is that the reason you switched teams? Because of him?” He asks Shane directly this time.

“Uh,” Shane replies tentatively. “Kind of, yeah. I mean, my team was awful. They said some really nasty shit to me, but like. The idea of not having to do long-distance anymore definitely helped. Plus, you guys seemed really cool when you came over to the house for dinner.”

“The house,” Wyatt repeats carefully. “Are you guys like…living together now?”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “You guys really think I bought that big of a house for just me?”

“Wait, you *bought* the house together?” Bood clarifies.

“Well, Ilya bought it,” Shane adds shyly.

“*Right*,” Ilya snickers. “But Shane’s the one who picked it out.”

“Wow,” Troy comments lightly, still staring at them. “So, that night in the hotel room…”

Shane swallows and shakes his head quickly.

“Wait,” Wyatt cackles loudly. “Don’t tell me Barrett heard you guys having sex.”

“Shut up,” Shane groans, burying himself in Ilya’s chest once more. He can’t complain when Ilya wraps his arms fully around him this time, feeling Ilya’s smile pressed against his flushed skin.

“Ah, yes. And then Barrett accused me of cheating on my precious Jane. Little did he know that he was actually making the accusation *to* my precious Jane.”

“Well, you could’ve told me,” Troy scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Could have saved me a lot of embarrassment, actually. So, thanks for that.”

“If it were up to me, I would have told all of you fuckers ages ago. Instead of having to listen to everyone fantasize about getting with my—”

“Okay, okay. *I’m* the one who wanted to keep it private,” Shane chimes in, lifting his head from Ilya’s chest to address the group. “I just wasn’t sure how everyone would take it. But I’m sorry we lied.”

“I have *so* many questions still.” Wyatt grins like he’s having a fucking field day with this.

“Alright, alright. You can ask all the questions you want at drinks later. But for now, I need to get in the shower because it fucking stinks in here,” Ilya declares, giving Shane’s hip a squeeze.

“Hey,” Shane pouts.

“Not you, precious. You smell like sunflowers and daffodils like always,” Ilya assures him, and Shane smiles in response.

“Holy shit. Are we about to witness Roz in an actual honest-to-god relationship?” Holmberg whispers, though it’s not quiet by any means.

“With *the* Shane Hollander. This shit is nuts,” LaPointe agrees in bewilderment.

“I assume this goes without saying, but this doesn’t leave this fucking room. If a single word of this gets out to the press, I will personally hunt you down and feed you to your families,” Ilya warns, pointing at all of them menacingly.

“Jesus. Alright,” Shane snorts, pulling at his hand to tug him in the direction of the showers. “He’s just kidding.”

“I am not!”

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They’re a little late making it to drinks after taking advantage of the empty shower room, but luckily, none of the boys call them on it when they finally stroll in. Ilya has arranged for them to go to a nice bar with an event room for extra privacy, which Shane greatly appreciates because, now that he’s allowed, he can’t keep his hands to himself. He’s in one of Ilya’s hoodies and a pair of jeans that are way too big for him, but Ilya had lovingly rolled the ends into cuffs while pressing kisses across each of his ankles.

“There you guys are,” Wyatt grins brightly as they step into the room, and Shane can tell they’ve all had at least one round already.

Shane smiles as Ilya pours himself into a chair and pulls one up close for Shane to sit next to him.

“Perfect timing. We were just about to get into a game of Never Have I Ever.”

Shane furrows his eyebrows slightly. “Never Have I Ever?” He turns to Ilya in confusion, looking for clarity, but Ilya just smirks.

“Excellent choice, Hazy,” Ilya comments, thanking the waiter as they come by with a round of beers.

Shane wrinkles his nose slightly at the beer, and Ilya instantly notices, catching the waiter before they leave to order some of their top-shelf premium vodka as well. Shane tries to tamp down on his smile when Ilya shoots him a quick wink.

“So, if anyone else on the team feels like coming out before we start, now’s your last chance. Because I like to play dirty,” Wyatt warns the group at large.

“Wait, what’s Never Have I Ever?” Shane feels the need to ask because no one’s answered his question.

Ilya’s lips curl into a lazy smile as he slides a hand across Shane’s knee. It’s under the table, so no one should be able to notice, but it still puts Shane on high alert nonetheless. They haven’t had any time at all to discuss how they feel about PDA around the team.

“Basically, we go around the table, and everyone says something they haven’t done. If you have done it, you drink. If you haven’t, you don’t drink.”

“Oh.” Shane frowns, shrugging as he looks over at Ilya. That didn’t sound so crazy. But Ilya is still looking at him like there’s more to the game than everyone is letting on.

Troy sighs and downs the rest of his beer before reaching for another one. “This is going to be interesting.”

“I fucking love this game,” Holmberg declares.

“I fucking hate this game,” Dykstra opposes.

“Too fucking bad. It’s called team bonding,” Bood cackles, high-fiving Wyatt when prompted.

“I don’t get it,” Luca murmurs, but everyone just waves him off.

“Alright, who’s going first?” LaPointe claps his hands together.

“I vote Hazy. Since it was his idea, after all.” Troy crosses his arms over his chest.

“Fine, fine! I’ll start with something easy. Never have I ever kicked a teammate out of my hotel room in order to have sex.”

Shane wrinkles his eyebrows as he looks around the room. A few of the guys drink, including Ilya. He reaches for his glass of vodka to drink as well, but Ilya squeezes his knee and shakes his head. Shane frowns and puts his cup back down. He doesn’t understand this game at all.

“Boring. Never have I ever used a sex toy to get off.”

“With a partner, or alone?” Ilya chimes in to clarify.

“Alone.”

Ilya doesn’t drink, so Shane doesn’t either, but Ilya is looking at him expectantly. “What?” Shane mutters in confusion.

“You should definitely drink to that one,” Ilya huffs a laugh.

Shane frowns some more, but he drinks. Troy does, too, and they each make eye contact before putting their drinks down.

“Oh shit.” Bood looks between the two of them knowingly. “I want to ask something *so* bad, but—”

“I’ll go next,” Ilya interrupts. “Never have I ever been arrested.”

Surprisingly, no one drinks.

“Seriously? None of you fuckers?” Ilya sighs. “Just when I thought this was shaping up to be an interesting season.”

“Never have I ever had my body count hit triple digits,” Wyatt fires pointedly.

Ilya rolls his eyes before drinking.

Shane’s body count definitely isn’t in the triple digits either, so he quickly takes a sip of his drink.

“Hollander!” LaPointe laughs maniacally. “*You*?”

“No, Shane,” Ilya breathes a laugh at him. “You drink if you *have* done the thing.”

Shane’s eyes just go comically wide as the realization hits him. “Your body count is in the triple digits?” He whispers in shock.

Ilya rolls his eyes and pulls Shane’s chair closer to him. “You know I have a past, моя любовь. This should not surprise you.”

“No, I know, but…” Shane shakes his head. “*Triple* digits?”

“I like can’t believe what I’m witnessing now,” Holmberg shakes his head.

“I know, right? It’s fucking nuts,” LaPointe murmurs his agreement.

“Hm.” Bood taps his chin thoughtfully. “Never have I ever had my partner call me daddy.”

Luca coughs loudly when Ilya drinks, his wide eyes darting between him and Shane.

“Oh my god.” Shane rolls his eyes. “I do not—”

“Never have I ever *called* my partner daddy,” Wyatt offers, squinting slightly at them.

Shane crosses his arms over his chest.

“Guys,” Troy chimes in. “This is getting a bit targeted…”

“Yeah, not cool,” Dykstra agrees.

“Oh, come on. Last one,” Wyatt begs. “No one’s *judging* here. It’s all in good fun.”

“I’ve never fucking called him daddy. Ilya, tell them,” Shane demands, nudging him to get the other to chime in, but Ilya is way too quiet for his liking. “Ilya.”

Ilya just stares at him, his head tilted slightly as if to say *come on.*

“*Ilya*,” Shane says again, kicking his chair this time.

“Боже мой. He doesn’t call me that,” Ilya relents.

“I’ve *never* called you that,” Shane reiterates, because he hasn’t clarified that part.

But Ilya is quiet again. “Shane,” he says lightly.

“Oh my god,” Holmberg grins. “You have. See? I knew these two couldn’t be *entirely* vanilla.”

“Excuse me?” Ilya turns sharply, like he’s offended. “*Vanilla*?”

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Ilya wants to laugh. Vanilla? Jesus fucking Christ. These guys didn’t even realize what they were fishing for. Here they were wasting their time trying to see if Shane liked to call him *Daddy*. Of all things. Pretty much the most basic thing a couple could try during sex, especially if it’s just the word. He had tested Daddy out on Shane the first time they scened after Shane brought out his list of maybes. Level 1 of trying to figure out what Shane might be into. But *no*, his Shane was filthy. He wanted to be *owned*. He wanted an *Alpha*.

“I mean, no offense,” Holmberg is quick to add.

“I dunno. I’ve heard some *shit* about Rozanov back in the day. Some wild stories from a friend in Montreal,” Wyatt grins around his beer.

“Stories like what?” Troy wrinkles his nose, looking between him and Wyatt.

Ilya shrugs. “They were probably referring to my club.”

“Your club?” Troy frowns. “You have a club?”

“I am part owner with a good friend of mine from Russia. She runs the place when I am in hockey season.”

Shane shifts a little at his side, so Ilya turns to look at him, a question in his gaze.

Shane just shakes his head and takes a sip of his vodka, so Ilya gives his thigh a comforting rub in response.

“Cool! Maybe next time we’re in Montreal, we can all go see it?” Luca suggests hopefully.

Ilya’s lips pull into half a smirk. “We will see, Haasy.”

“Is that how you and Shane got together? In Montreal?” Troy questions, taking a swig of his beer.

“Yeah, how long has this been going on that you guys have a fucking house together?”

“A few months,” Ilya replies, looking to Shane for confirmation.

“Only a few months?” Bood asks in clarification. “You guys announced the charity a few months ago.”

Ilya shrugs. “It was around then.”

“I’m so confused,” Wyatt laughs, resting his head on the table for a minute.

“They’ve obviously been friends for years,” Troy points out.

“No,” Shane shakes his head. “I mean, not really. Not at all, actually.”

“I tried to shoot my shot with Shane the summer before our rookie season, but it sort of blew up in my face,” Ilya discloses to the group.

“Well, I really wish you had tried *again*.”

Ilya’s jaw drops slightly. “Are you serious? I thought you rejected me after I arranged a whole photoshoot for you. That hurt, you know? But I must have called you pretty at like a *hundred* different face-offs over the years.”

“Oh my god.” Shane flushes. “I thought you were chirping. I didn’t know you were being serious.”

“Of course, I was being serious,” Ilya scoffs. “These freckles. Come *on*.”

“Wow,” Luca just blinks, looking between them. “So, you guys are like…in love?”

“In *love*?” LaPointe rolls his eyes. He’s a little more drunk than the rest of them. “C’mon. *Rozy*? This dude is like *the* man.”

“And Hollander is like *the* man, too,” Holmberg argues. “So, what are you trying to say?”

“What? Nothing,” LaPointe laughs. “I’m just saying I don’t think Rozanov *does* love. Some people just aren’t built for it, you know?”

“I mean, they literally live together. Plus, the necklace thing makes a whole lot more sense now,” Bood nods to Shane’s neck, and Shane goes pink in response.

Ilya grins and orders Shane another vodka when the waiter comes around because his boy has already polished off his first glass.

“We are very much in love,” Ilya tells the group, since apparently that’s not been made clear yet. Which means Ilya really needs to step it up.

“Really?” Troy asks, looking between them.

“Really,” Ilya confirms, taking Shane’s drink from the waiter when they come by with another round. “Here, котенок.”

“Another?” Shane asks.

“Yes, моё солнышко,” Ilya nods.

“What’s he saying?” Troy leans in to question Shane. “Do you know Russian?”

“Um,” Shane stutters. “A little bit. It’s just pet names, mostly.”

Ilya licks over his lips in contemplation. “Come to the bathroom with me for a second?” He murmurs lowly in Shane’s ear. “Wait, a few minutes before you come.”

Shane turns to him inquisitively, eyebrows furrowed, but Ilya just stands from the table and stretches his arms over his head.

“I’m going out for a smoke. Be right back,” he calls over his shoulder before stalking off. He gives Shane an intentional look and then heads for the restroom. As soon as he gets there, he pulls out his phone and looks at the time. One minute. Two minutes. Three. Shane slips through the door exactly three minutes and twenty seconds later.

“What’s going on?” Shane frowns in confusion. “Is something wrong?”

“We didn’t talk about being around the boys,” Ilya explains, reaching for Shane’s hand to pull him close. “If I am allowed to touch you. Or talk to you the way I do.”

“Talk to me like…like how?”

Ilya smiles and presses their foreheads together until Shane is forced to breathe in his scent. “Like this, baby. Like when I call you my sweet precious angel, hm?” Ilya noses across his jaw and down his neck, licking a circle around the prominent hickey. “Or if I want to caress your pretty freckled cheeks like I have been withholding myself from doing.”

Shane sucks in a breath and clutches onto him tightly.

“I do not want to cross any boundaries you are not comfortable with. But they are going to find out more about my club, eventually. They are going to keep prying. I just want to make sure we are on the same page about what you want to say to them.” Ilya tips Shane’s chin up

to him until he's met with hazy brown eyes. "We do not have to tell them anything if you don't want to. I am very comfortable telling the boys to fuck off."

"No, I mean—" Shane shakes his head. "I dunno. I don't want them like…specifically prying, per se? But it's going to come up eventually, like you said. I don't think we need to like…go into detail or anything. Just because they ask. But um. If something comes up…we don't like…need to lie either."

His response is pretty confusing, but Ilya practically speaks fluent Shaneglish by now, so he has a decent idea of what he's trying to say. Stop the guys if they're crossing boundaries. Keep details to a minimum. If they find out more with time, then that's okay. Ilya knew Shane probably wanted them to know at some point, but he wasn't in any rush. Slow and steady. Ilya agrees. If it comes up, it comes up. He'll handle it in the moment.

"That sounds okay to me," Ilya confirms, cupping Shane's jaw. "And the other stuff I said? About touching you?" He hums, letting his thumb graze across Shane's lower lip. "Kissing you?" Ilya leans in to claim his mouth in a sensual kiss that has Shane moaning and leaning into his touch.

"I—" Shane gasps. "As long…as long as it's not inappropriate. I don't wanna, uh," he sighs softly as Ilya scrapes his scruff across Shane's neck. "Make anyone uncomfortable."

Ilya just breathes a laugh against his skin. "I think they would all be very comfortable to watch me make you squirm."

"Just—" Shane grips his forearm tightly, eyes slipping shut. "Don't let me go down, please."

"You are not going anywhere, baby," Ilya promises, pulling Shane close to him to give him a hug. "I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable with the Pikes. I promise it's not going to happen again, okay?"

"No, I know," Shane acknowledges, drawing away to cup Ilya's cheeks in his hands while still staying well within his grasp. "I appreciate you asking me in here to talk. And, like. I know we've talked about wanting them to know at some point. The team, I mean."

"I think it is inevitable that they are going to find out," Ilya admits what's been on his mind for a while now. "We are around them so much. It is not my intention to slip up, but I have seen how easily it can happen."

"I know," Shane agrees, taking a deep breath. "I think it's better to tell them before that happens, but um. I just. One thing at a time, okay? I think them finding out about us being together is enough for one day."

"Of course, angel. There is no rush. I just want to make sure we're on the same page about what to do if anything does happen. And I mostly just wanted to ask if I can be sweet with you." Ilya smiles lightly, pressing a series of kisses down Shane's neck as the other tips his head in want. "I am going to take that to mean yes."

"Please," Shane whimpers, clutching onto him tightly all of a sudden.

“We are going to behave ourselves and go have one more drink, okay? Then, we are going to go home, and I want to have a talk about something Cedric asked me.”

“Something Cedric asked you?” Shane’s eyes widen a little bit. “What do you mean?”

“Calm, котенок. It is nothing bad. You are not in trouble,” Ilya soothes, giving his hip a comforting rub. “But we are not going to talk about it here. So, let’s get back before they start to wonder what we’re doing.”

“You said you were going for a smoke,” Shane reminds him.

“They are not going to believe that for a second.”

So, they walk back into the room with their hands linked, but all of the attention seems to already be on Luca.

“Rozy, Rozy. You gotta see this. Look at what Haasy drew of you.”

Ilya keeps his hand in Shane’s as he steps over to peer into Luca’s sketchbook. “Holy shit. That is amazing, Haasy.”

Luca flushes at the attention, but then he flips the page to show an equally beautiful drawing of Shane—if not even more so, for obvious reasons.

“Wow, Luca. You’re so good at that.”

“Thank you,” Luca responds shyly.

And there’s only one extra seat near him, so Ilya plops into it and pulls Shane on his lap so they can look at more of Luca’s drawings. No one even pays them any mind. No one except Troy who Ilya catches eyes with across the table. They’ve gotten off to a bit of a rocky start so far, but Ilya could tell they had a lot in common. He really hoped they could learn to get along with time.

Troy’s eyes drift to Shane for a second before ultimately falling back to Ilya. And then he offers him a soft smile. A *congratulations* of sorts. Like he gets how incredible Shane is, and he knows how lucky Ilya must feel to have him. Even more than that, though, it’s like he can tell that Ilya’s really good for him. That he intends to take care of Shane and worship him with all his might.

Ilya mirrors his expression and hugs Shane’s waist a little more tightly. He deserves him. He really does. He lets himself believe it this time. Even if it’s just this once. Even if he doesn’t believe it tomorrow. Right now, he deserves him, and Troy is his witness.

-

When they get home later, Shane is a little tipsy, so Ilya gets him a tall glass of water. Shane is giggling and won’t stop hanging off of him, and Ilya can’t resist tickling him so he falls into his chest fully.

“God, you are so *cute*. What the hell am I supposed to do with you?” Ilya groans, and Shane laughs loudly as Ilya picks him up and puts him on the counter, stepping between his legs to kiss him. “I can’t believe you kissed me in the locker room, kitty,” he teases, rubbing his hands over Shane’s thighs.

“We *won*,” Shane reminds him, as if Ilya has forgotten.

“Mm, I told you I would lead this team to victory. Did I not?”

“Yeah, cause you finally passed to me—”

Ilya leans forward to bite his shoulder, and Shane giggles wildly, cowering away.

“Stop, stop. Please.” Shane cups his cheeks to try and keep him from coming any closer.

Ilya just turns to kiss his fingertips. “I am very glad the boys know about us now. Thank you for that.”

“I’m also happy,” Shane replies, his cheeks pink from the mix of alcohol and frequent giggling.

“You are just happy that we *won*,” Ilya replies knowingly, digging his fingers into his sides.

“I mean, that *too*. But also.” Shane pulls him close, wrapping his legs around Ilya’s waist. “I got to kiss you in front of *so* many people.”

“You just want to kiss me in front of the entire *world*, don’t you, precious?” Ilya teases, leaning against him. “Remember how you said you were gonna pull me onto the ice and kiss me after winning the Stanley Cup like Scott Hunter?”

“Wouldn’t have to pull you on the ice now,” Shane hums affectionately. “Since you’d already be there.”

“Ah, that is true. In the first scenario, I am just watching you from the stands?”

“Stop being mean to me,” Shane pouts.

Ilya kisses him until he’s breathless. Then, he forces Shane to drink the rest of his water and scarf down half of a panini. Ilya gets him some pain medicine, because Shane could sometimes get a headache if he drank without eating right before, and Ilya wants him feeling nice and comfortable for their conversation. Once all that is done, Ilya picks him up and carries him to the couch because it’s a more neutral area.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Ilya boops his nose as he sidles up next to Shane, reaching out to hold his hand.

“Hiya,” Shane grins, still feeling a little loose from the alcohol, no doubt, but clear-headed nonetheless.

“I love you very much. Did you know that?”

“I did,” Shane replies, but his eyes are sparkling ten times more after hearing Ilya say it.

“Cedric called me yesterday,” he broaches lightly, running his thumb over the back of Shane’s hand from where their fingers are linked. “He and Ivan had a lot of fun the other night.”

“Really?” Shane wonders aloud, his lips twitching up slightly. “Good. I mean, me too. Lots of fun.”

“It was a great event, wasn’t it? They did a really good job,” Ilya muses, stroking Shane’s tummy over his shirt with his other hand.

“I really like the pet events,” Shane admits softly, leaning into the touch. “I like when everyone acts like me.”

Ilya just smiles at him. He could understand why Shane preferred pet-specific events. It made him feel like he wasn’t alone in wanting to feel that way.

“Ivan really enjoyed being a puppy with you. Cedric said they’re interested in exploring more pet play.”

“You think Ivan’s a puppy?” Shane sucks in a breath.

Ilya’s heart picks up at how hopeful he sounds. “I’m not sure, baby. I think probably not as much as you are a kitty, but he liked playing with you. Apparently, he went down really far, and they had a wonderful time.”

Shane just squeezes his hand in response.

“In fact, they had so much fun that they were wondering if we might like to play—the four of us—again sometime.”

Ilya watches Shane’s throat as he swallows.

“What do you mean…the four of us,” Shane voices hesitantly.

Ilya brings their joined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to Shane’s knuckles. “I mean that I have no interest in touching Ivan. And Cedric has no interest in touching you. It just means that, if you would like, then we could maybe have a playdate with him and Ivan.”

Shane squeezes his hand tightly again. “What does a playdate mean?” He whispers.

Ilya kisses his hand once more. “I think for now, it just means that the four of us would hang out similarly to how we did at *Pet Playground*. We will have playtime. Cedric and I will have a chance to talk more, get to know each other better. And you and Ivan can have fun being a silly kitty and puppy together. Yes?”

Shane smiles when Ilya makes like he’s going to start tickling him, catching his hands before he can get too close.

“It is up to you, baby. Do you want to see Cedric and Ivan again?” Ilya double-checks. They would need to have an extended conversation about what that would mean, but for now, he’s just gauging interest.

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Shane’s tummy flutters at the thought of getting to see Cedric and Ivan again. It was nice playing with a puppy, for one. Shane’s first potential pet friend. Well, Ivan wasn’t a pet fully, but he liked it, at least. So much that he wanted to play again. Shane flushes at the insinuation.

“I wanna play again,” he says softly while nodding, because even the thought of that was making him want to go quiet right now.

“You warmed up a lot to Cedric by the end, didn’t you, angel? He is not bad for Ivan, I think.”

Shane sinks a little closer to Ilya, wanting to crawl in his lap.

“Oh, I see.” Ilya catches him right in the act. “You are trying to go down already, but we have not even finished our evening plans.”

Shane frowns, tipping his head. What plans?

Ilya just smiles and tugs him forward to give him a kiss. “Can I show you something outside?”

“Outside?” Shane questions warily, because he was feeling a lot like an indoor kitty cat right now.

“Out back. Come on. You’re gonna love it,” Ilya assures him, standing from the couch and pulling Shane up with him.

Shane has no idea where he’s going with this as Ilya maneuvers him through the gym and out to the pool, until he sees the fresh finishing. Brand new, updated tile. The bottom of the pool was now a dark royal blue that reminded Shane of his gym’s pool back in Montreal. It made the pool look bigger, more rich, more luxurious, but it wasn’t just the finishes. There were new lights in the pool, and ones around it, too. Ones that made the atmosphere scenic. And best of all, off to the side, where the gym and pool area intersected, was a beautifully added sauna and cold plunge station.

“Fuck,” Shane whines, and he instantly turns to collapse into Ilya’s chest. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he murmurs against him as Ilya’s big arms wrap around his shoulders.

“Of course, Милый ангел.” He feels Ilya’s lips in his hair. “Your boyfriend can afford to buy you many beautiful, nice things, hm?”

“Please,” Shane begs, but he doesn’t know what he’s asking for. Ilya just makes him want, and want, and want. He’s never wanted more in his life, but Ilya just lets him have it all. Anything his heart desires.

“Would you like to go for a night swim, baby?” Ilya asks, stroking his fingers through Shane’s hair. “You haven’t had a chance to use the pool yet. I know you were looking forward to it.”

The pool does sound *so* nice right now, but more than anything, he wants Ilya’s hands all over him. As usual, it’s like Ilya can read his mind.

“I hired someone to come clean the pool tomorrow,” he mentions casually, and Shane pulls back to regard him.

“Clean it?” He questions lightly.

“Mm,” Ilya hums, rubbing his thumb over Shane’s jawline. “Clean it. Just in case it is dirty.”

Shane’s eyes go dark, and Ilya smirks knowingly.

“You look so cute in my clothes, baby. You know, next time we travel for away games, we could probably stay in the same hotel room. If you wanted to.”

Shane nods emphatically. He really wants to. “You don’t think Coach will mind?”

Ilya just shrugs. “I think he must realize by now that we play much better when we are in sync. Nothing gets me in sync more than holding you every night.”

“Same,” Shane breathes out, mesmerized by Ilya and how he practically radiates love sometimes. Like it’s the easiest thing in the world for him to love Shane. And Shane has never felt particularly lovable. Not until recently, anyway. “You’re like…the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Ilya’s got this devastating look in his eyes like he can’t believe Shane’s even real, and Shane flushes under the intensity. He swallows thickly and averts his eyes to keep from crying.

“Do not get all weepy on me now. I’m trying to do something sexy by fucking you in the pool.”

Shane lets out a wet laugh. “I’m sorry, I just. I can’t believe this sometimes.”

Ilya’s eyes soften, and he leans in close, squeezing Shane’s hips in his hands. “I know. Sometimes I think my Mama is watching over me,” Ilya admits quietly. “Sometimes…I think she sent me a real-life Earth angel to make sure I am okay.”

Shane’s face crumples as he pulls Ilya against him to tuck his face into the other’s neck. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why not, my sweet baby? Is the truth,” Ilya relays openly, like he’s not afraid of the strength of his feelings.

“Because I wish I could meet her,” Shane sobs lightly, clutching onto him so tight. “It kills me that I’m never going to. She’s the most important person to you, and I’ll never know her.”

Ilya hugs him like a lifeline. “She knows you, little kitty. This I know for a fact. She lives in the necklace that you wear so proudly against your chest. She is keeping you safe because she knows that you are everything to me. She knows that it is the best way to keep me safe as well.”

That only makes Shane cry harder, but Ilya holds him through it, rocking him as they continue to cling to one another. And as much as Shane wishes more people could know about him being a kitten, more than anything, he wishes that people could know about this. About Ilya being the love of his life. His protector. He wishes that people wouldn’t look at them and see them as hockey rivals; they were *soulmates*. Shane is 100% sure of that. He grows more sure with each passing day.

We’re going to get married, Shane tells himself, and despite only being together for a few months now, it doesn’t feel like such a far-off thing. Shane knows if he asked that Ilya would marry him tomorrow. Tonight, even. According to Ilya, they already *were* married from the silly little wedding the Pikes hosted for them.

They hardly separate as they slip out of their clothes, and Shane practically screams as Ilya picks him up to jump into the pool with him. But the water is warm, and Ilya is still holding him koala-style as they come up for air. And Shane just can’t believe that this is their house. That they’re on the same team. That they get to do this every day for the rest of forever. He finds he doesn’t even mind *what* they do, as long as they get to do it together.

Ilya presses Shane against the wall of the deep end and kisses him passionately. Shane’s toes can barely reach the ground, so Ilya holds him up, and Shane clings on as they make out lazily. Shane is feeling like a mermaid kitty, though, so eventually, they make their way closer to the shallow end to show off doing handstands and front flips. Ilya has Shane score him as he dashes out of the pool to pull a cannonball. Shane gives him full marks even though he gets water everywhere and it looks like it’s going to be a pain to deal with tomorrow.

His cheeks go deliciously pink when Ilya crowds him against the wall again, his hand coming down to cup Shane’s hairless cock.

“I did not like fighting with you this morning,” Ilya expresses lightly. Shane can barely think with the way Ilya is all up in his space and touching him, but he thinks maybe that’s kind of the point. Like Ilya is trying to ensure he doesn’t get too stressed with whatever he’s about to bring up. “You were very jealous of Chiron, weren’t you, baby?”

Shane’s expression drops into a frown, but Ilya just smiles at him, caressing his jaw with his other hand.

“All the boys petting him. You wished that was you, didn’t you?”

Shane swallows and tries to duck his head, but Ilya forces him to keep his gaze. “You said it was the best day of your life.”

“Aw,” Ilya coos like he’s the most precious thing in the world. “It’s because I am Russian and we are very dramatic, baby. But maybe it was the best day of my life, after all. Not because of

Chiron, but because I got to kiss you in front of all the boys."

Shane's tummy flutters slightly, but he's still upset. "Harris posted the pictures on Instagram."

Ilya's eyes graze over him appreciatively. He's still cupping Shane's cock like he wants to feel how Shane reacts to each thing he says. "You wish that was you all over Instagram instead, yes? With your cute little ears. Having all the guys pet you. You think it is such a waste to have a team puppy when there has been a team kitty all along, hm?"

Shane pouts and drops his head in a nod.

"We will open up to them with time, baby," Ilya assures him, because they had decided they didn't think it was a big deal for Shane to be cuddly. To get pets.

Shane knew he wanted more than that, though. Really, he wanted the guys to know what Ilya did to him. That Ilya was in total control. That if Ilya told him to drop to his knees in the middle of the locker room, he would. If he told Shane to get himself off with his fingers while all the boys watched, he'd do it without question. Shane thinks the boys would even like that, too, probably. Luca would probably be scared, but he wouldn't be able to look away. Troy would pretend he wasn't affected, but Ilya would call him out on it. Force him to stop trying to hide it.

Shane moans at the thought, and Ilya smirks like he can see his fantasies all over his face.

"You know," Ilya mentions casually. "The new club should be ready in just a few weeks."

Shane's eyes widen slightly.

"I was thinking. It should not be such a big secret. That I own these clubs." Ilya shrugs. "I am not ashamed of the BDSM world. I do not think it is so crazy to invite them to the big opening."

Shane just sucks in a breath because he has no idea what the *big opening* would entail. Would it be an official event? Would Shane be in full kitty cat mode? Was that…was that okay?

"Not an event," Ilya clarifies, reading his mind like always. Was Shane that obvious, or was Ilya just that good at interpreting his body language? "We will have an event at some point, yes. Maybe we could invite some of them if anyone is actually interested in being a member. In learning more. But I do not think it is a big deal to show them the club. Let them come to their own conclusions about us. They can ask questions if they wish. Maybe some will be more into it than others, hm?"

Shane swallows and nods. He's getting hard thinking about it, and he can tell that this is kind of the point of this conversation. Ilya is still holding his cock, seeing what he reacts to. So far, *everything*. Shane is reacting to everything.

"I think it is important for them to understand our dynamic to some degree if you want to be…more kitten-like sometimes. It is good to see who is comfortable with that and who is

not. That way, we are not forcing it on anyone. We want to be courteous. Even though I think many of them will not mind since they are all so openly attracted to you."

Shane gasps as Ilya squeezes his length. He's talking about it like it's the most casual thing in the world. Like the Centaurs accepting him as the team kitty cat is more than just some wild fucking fantasy that the two of them have concocted to get off on. Like it's actually a reality that may exist somewhere in the near future. Shane doesn't know if any of this is actually happening or if he's just losing his mind in some weird kitty cat daze he can't escape from. Maybe he's still in Montreal going through some type of critical psychosis. Maybe he'll wake up tomorrow and it will have all been a dream to distract from the anxiety-induced nightmare that used to plague his real life.

"Cedric and Ivan would probably make the drive to come see the new club, too, if you wanted. Ivan is a very good friend to you, isn't he, kitty?"

Shane whines and feels himself start to slip a little more. His breathing is going a little more ragged. He wants to nuzzle into Ilya and grind against his leg until he's desperate and leaking.

"You two were being very naughty together. Humping at the event like a bad, bad kitty."

Shane chokes on a gasp. He's hard as a fucking rock.

"My kitty likes to be filthy sometimes, hm?" Ilya tips his head mockingly. "Getting off on another pet. It is not enough to hump your owner. Now you have to hump random puppies at the park."

Shane cries out and goes to bury his face in Ilya's chest because Ivan was not just any *random* puppy. Ivan was his best friend, maybe. The only other sub Shane knew and felt close with.

"I know, baby. You love Ivan very much. I am not angry with you for getting all desperate. You're just a silly little kitten sometimes. Your mind goes blank, and you give in to your primal instincts, yes? Like a kitten in heat."

Shane moans uncontrollably and tries to rut into Ilya's fist.

"But you should be desperate for your *Alpha*, yes? We cannot hump whoever we please. You are lucky Cedric thinks you are such a perfectly cute and well-behaved kitty. You were so cute and perfect, in fact, that you sent Ivan very deep into puppy-space. Imagine that. My sub sending another sub down because you are just *so* much like a kitten that you are turning others into pets, too. Almost like you should be giving kitty demos for people at the new club. Like we should be showing everyone just how a prize-winning kitty behaves for his owner."

Shane is clawing at Ilya now with an attempt to get closer to him. He feels fire in his lungs from how badly he needs him. "Alpha. Please. Please, please, please, please—"

"Be good for me," Ilya says simply, and Shane bows his head in submission.

He wants to wait on his knees for Ilya all day, a vessel to take his cock. To please him. To make him feel good. His devotion to Ilya could rival that of any devout follower of any type of religion. Shane has never, ever worshipped before, but Ilya made him want to. Ilya made him understand the feeling of safety one could experience being divinely protected by a higher power.

“I love you,” Shane sniffles, leaning forward to bite gently at Ilya’s chest because the words don’t feel like enough. He wants to sear them into his skin. Wishes Ilya could walk around with Shane’s love branded all over him for the entire world to see. Maybe that’s where his desire to be a kitten around people comes from. Maybe he mostly just wants everyone to know that Ilya *owns* him. That Shane would dedicate his life to making Ilya happy because Ilya takes care of him so, so well. He’s better than he’s been in months. Years. Maybe his entire life.

“I love you so much, sweet angel,” Ilya smiles, and then he’s stroking Shane’s cock agonizingly slow, and Shane whines at the feeling of wetness and his owner all over him. “You get very overwhelmed by your feelings sometimes, hm?”

Understatement of the year. Sometimes, Shane’s feelings for Ilya felt like they could consume him whole. Eat him alive. Burst him into flames. He feels that way now, with his heart hammering against his chest like a fucking kick drum. It makes words harder to access because none exist to describe the expanse of his love for Ilya.

Shane shuts his eyes tightly and lets the tears slip. He wishes he could communicate all of it the way Ilya does so easily. The way Ilya’s words spill out of him without thought, painting Shane with an unlimited supply of praise and affection. He wishes he could offer him the same, but he can’t make sense of it in his mind, can’t get his lips to form properly around the intense thoughts that torpedo into him like missiles, too fast and too sharp to understand what they mean. He hopes his submission is enough, that he can portray his obscene level of obsession in other facets of their dynamic. He digs his nails into Ilya’s skin, begging him to understand, to feel how much Shane positively *aches* for him. He’d destroy himself if Ilya asked because he trusts wholeheartedly that Ilya will always be there to put him back together. Shane can’t believe he went his whole life up until this point without this. It feels like a critical part of him. A missing piece he hadn’t even known to search for.

“Please,” Shane sobs, imploring him to read between the lines.

“I’ve got you, baby. You are right where you’re meant to be,” Ilya soothes, like he does, in fact, get where Shane is coming from. He glides his thumb over the sensitive tip of Shane’s cock, and Shane cries out.

“Oh, fuck. Oh my god. Please. Please. Fuck, please,” he begs, unashamed.

“You are so desperate all the time. I think we are going to need to introduce something new to your kitty training to ensure you are a good boy for me.”

Shane sucks in a gasp, his eyes going half-lidded, his brain going fuzzy like it always does when Ilya wants to bring something new into the mix. Shane wants to suck on his brilliant

brain. He wants to coat every inch of Ilya's DNA with saliva until no part of either of them exists that hasn't been touched and blended with some part of the other.

"Maybe when Ivan comes over, I will have to put you in a cock cage to ensure you do as you're told."

Shane comes. Barely a touch. Barely a stroke. He just…he comes. Collapsing into Ilya's arms with a series of gasped whimpers crying out of him as he goes fucking bone-dead, his limbs giving up on any hope of life.

"Jesus fucking christ," Ilya groans, lifting his hand out of the pool like he'll somehow be able to show off Shane's release.

But Shane is horrified to note that there is actually something of substance in his hand. His cum mixed with the chlorine of the pool water. He doesn't hesitate before licking all over Ilya's palm to clean it off.

Shane sucks in a panicked breath. He feels like he's fucking hyperventilating. A *cock cage*. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Ilya was going to control every part of him. Mind, body, and soul. Shane wanted him to. He had never wanted anything so badly in his life. Not even his dream of winning ten fucking Stanley Cups could compare to the thought of Ilya owning him completely. He has half a mind to give up hockey entirely and become Ilya's full-time sex slave. He doesn't care if he's good. He doesn't care if Ilya punishes him, beats him into oblivion, nurses him back to health. He would let Ilya drive a stake through his heart if it would give him enough pleasure. Shane would sacrifice himself for the cause.

"Oh my god, baby," Ilya laughs in amazement. "You are so fucking *sexy*. You could probably get off just to my words alone, couldn't you, sweet boy? I wouldn't have to lay a finger on you. I could just tie you to the bed and talk you through your orgasm. I bet it wouldn't even take long."

Shane rubs his face desperately over Ilya's neck, eyes closed as he embraces the feeling of his lips and teeth and skin grazing over Ilya's body. He's nothing but a stupid fucking mutt for him. A useless, brainless, little kitty. He wants to get off again. He wants to get off ten times in a row just by humping his leg, rutting against him. Wants Ilya to make fun of him and call him names while he does it. Shane feels like the dumbest, smallest, most cock-drunk baby kitten alive right now. He pants ridiculously while trying to get a hold on the insane feelings spiraling through every inch of his body.

Ilya cups his ass and lets his blunt fingernail graze over Shane's hole.

"Ngh," Shane makes an inhuman sound. He can't open his eyes because he can't make sense of the world right now. He wants Ilya to see and process things for him like he did at their first event together.

"So sensitive, my baby boy. Oh god. You do *filthy* fucking things to me. You are the most seductive creature alive. I want to record you and show you off for the entire world to see. I think you are every man and woman's darkest fantasy. You should be made famous for how

good of a kitten you are. Magazine spreads. Talk shows. The source material for college lectures on the inner workings of *desire*."

Shane is hard again, and Ilya is barely touching him. Just holding his ass, one fingertip hardly pressed to his hole. Shane wiggles to try and get any type of sensation out of it, but Ilya has a firm grip on him.

"I want you to come again from me talking to you. I want you to get off on my thoughts alone."

Shane wants to scream. He feels like he's going insane. He doesn't open his eyes. He keeps rubbing his face all over the stubble on Ilya's jawline. He wants beard burn all over his face. The backs of his thighs. Every inch of his flushed skin.

"You are so pathetic you don't even know what to do with yourself. My whiny, needy baby."

Shane lets another sob wrack through him, his back rising and falling with the intensity as he just cries, and cries, and cries.

"You are so *desperate*. You could get off five times in a row before I get myself off even once. Which is funny because your stupid, useless cock doesn't even matter. That is why I want to lock it away. Plant you on my Alpha cock until you are pregnant with my babies. Growing them in your sweet, little omega tummy."

Ilya presses a hand to his stomach, and Shane thrashes wildly against him.

"You should be focused on *my* pleasure only, sweet boy. But you are so needy and sensitive. You can't even help yourself. A strong wind could probably do it for you, hm? Perhaps if I tied you up outside, left you to sunbathe and catnap on the lawn all day, you would be covered in come by the time I got back. A filthy mess. Getting off to the feeling of the sun on your skin and my words running around your brain. I should force you to listen to hours of pre-recorded filth that I have prepared for you. I should make you listen to it every night while you sleep, so you are nothing but a mindless puppet for my enjoyment. Hypnotize you until my voice is the default for any thought that pops into your head. You will think only in my words. Act only from my commands."

He's fucking right, is the thing. Shane *could* get off on only his words. Ilya could be a thousand miles away and Shane would still hear his voice like a narrator telling him exactly how the story is going to end. Exactly how and when he's going to finish. Shane would have no choice but to enact it, to follow through until it became a reality. Ilya had so much control over him that he was rewriting history, changing the past and future with every word that he spoke.

"I should just keep you home and pump you full of babies. You'd look so beautiful pregnant, моя любовь. Oh, and I would take such good care of you. I bet you would be a horny little omega still. Demanding, too. Barking out requests and ordering me around as if you are the one in charge here. I would go along with it for a while because you are so cute, but I am an Alpha, baby. It's just in my nature to want my hot, pregnant omega husband waiting naked

for me when I get home. Kneeling at my feet. God, your skin would be all flushed. Your belly all round," Ilya groans like the words are doing something to him, too.

Shane doesn't understand how any of this is real life. He's panting wildly, like Ilya's voice is actually sinking into his skin and heating his blood. Stimulating his cock. Shane can picture it behind closed eyelids. Ilya would be so territorial if Shane had his baby inside him. He'd growl at anyone who even *looked* at Shane wrong. He wouldn't let Shane lift a finger. He'd probably put on another twenty pounds of muscle just to be able to keep lifting him.

And, *oh*, the things Ilya would scent for Shane's nest. He'd buy him the softest blankets in the world, give Shane all his best hoodies and practice gear. Gear that was covered in sweat, still dripping with his musk. Shane wants to drown in a hamper of his dirty clothes. Wants to fall asleep with Ilya's boxers pressed to his face. Wants to lick the moisture from his socks.

Holy fuck. He can hardly feel his body right now.

Ilya's finger circles lightly over his hole, and Shane shudders in his arms, clutching onto him weakly.

"I—"

"No, don't talk, baby. I am the one talking right now."

Shane clamps his mouth shut. If Ilya weren't holding him up, he'd be drowning in this pool.

"The boys would be so protective if we had a pregnant omega on the team."

Shane sniffles and tries to embed his body into Ilya's skin, the water sloshing around them as he tries to get closer, tries to climb him. Rut against him. Anything to relieve some of the pressure that builds menacingly in his tummy.

"Ilya—"

"Do I need to gag you, baby? I thought I told you not to speak."

Shane lets more tears fall from his eyes as he clutches desperately to him, wrapping his arms tightly around Ilya's neck while he nuzzles into him.

"That's a good boy. Just cry for me. Trying to tell the boys you've never called me Daddy," Ilya scoffs like the idea is ridiculous. "They can see right through you, you know? They know you're a slut for me. They may not realize how much yet, how deeply I own you, but they can see how affected you are."

Shane whines, wiping the snot from his nose across Ilya's wet skin. Tears and snot and pool water and Shane's cum that he just licked off of Ilya's hand.

"I should want to deny you. I used to like this the most of anything, but now I just want to see you ruined. Maybe I will invite the boys over for dinner and say you are with your family, but really, you're tied up in your kitty playroom coming over and over again. A knotted dildo fucking in and out of you. Pre-filled with your Alpha's seed. A cat toy hanging above you so

the only things you can do are come and play like a silly little kitten. And then maybe after you are screaming, after you've come until you've passed out, I will lock you up and not let you come for a month straight. Make you wear a cock cage at every game, every practice. Every team night until you are so desperate that you are begging for release every time I touch you. You will wake me in the morning with tears in your eyes because you can't imagine going one more day without an orgasm, but you will, baby. You will because you know how happy it makes me to see you whine and cry."

Shane bites Ilya hard enough to draw blood as a second orgasm wracks through him, Ilya squeezing his sensitive cock through it as Shane shudders and gasps and cries some more. He can't get air into his lungs. Can't get oxygen into his brain. Can't hear himself over his heavy breathing.

"Good boy. You're okay," Ilya is soothing him, petting over his hair, keeping him from sinking into the black hole of his mind.

Shane can't stop crying despite the hand rubbing his back, the voice whispering in his ear telling him that he's alright, that everything's going to be fine. He can't stop rubbing his cheek against the scruff of Ilya's chin, grabbing his body, trying to climb into him. He wants to be closer. He wants to share the same air, he wants Ilya to lay on top of him until Shane can feel him everywhere.

"Sh, sh, you're okay," Ilya promises, holding him equally as tight. He's pressing kisses into Shane's hair, but Shane just can't calm down. He's so overwhelmed. His cock is sensitive and he feels like Ilya has just fucked his *mind*. "Getting off on just me talking to you. *Baby*. I have never seen anything like you before in my life."

Shane hiccups another sob and licks wetly over Ilya's bleeding neck. He's an omega who's just marked his Alpha for life. This man is *his*. He's never fucking letting go of him. He's never fucking getting over this. He's never, ever, ever going to be alone ever again.

Eventually, Ilya is able to maneuver them over to the steps of the pool, where he pulls Shane into his lap and lets him cry a little longer. A lot longer. Shane isn't sure he's ever going to stop. But Ilya indulges him like always.

And when Shane is shivering so much that he's sure his pruny fingers have started to go blue, Ilya picks him up—despite the fact that he's soaking wet and complete dead weight in his arms—and carries him into the brand-new sauna.

Ilya sprawls out naked across the spacious steps and has Shane lie back against his chest. His fingers never leave Shane's hair. He's hard against Shane's back, but Shane doesn't even know where he is right now. He's warm. He's home. Wherever Ilya goes, he's going to follow.

As his body returns to a normal temperature, Shane hums happily and twists until he can nuzzle into Ilya's muscular torso. He sucks on a spot near Ilya's ribs as a way to self-soothe, rubbing his face anywhere he can reach, mapping Ilya's moles with his tongue, laving over his chest. He's grooming him, taking care of him the best way he knows how. And then Ilya carefully guides him lower, until Shane is licking across his length, nursing on his cock.

Ilya doesn’t take control of the situation, just lets Shane lick and suck to his heart’s desire. He lifts one leg when Shane drifts lower, pressing kisses to his balls, and then his hole. He smells like chlorine, tastes like it too, but Shane is so fuzzy. Ilya keeps one hand in his hair and just scratches lightly at his scalp, letting Shane rub his messy face all over, lapping at him and nipping at his inner thighs. Until Ilya is coming with a gasp all over his face and his hair and across his eyelashes, and Shane just blinks up at him in confusion cause he hadn’t expected that. He’s just grooming the love of his life like a good, good kitty.

Ilya kisses him and steals the cum from his lips, licking into Shane’s mouth as Shane just collapses on top of him like a weighted blanket that Ilya hugs close. His muscles are sore. His brain is spent. He’s filthy, but he doesn’t care because he knows Ilya is going to figure it out. He hums contentedly and shuts his eyes, dozing off to the mindless sound of sweet Russian in his ears and gentle fingers in his hair. His dreams aren’t even nearly as good as his real life.

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Chapter End Notes

The boys are out!!! And obsessed with each other. They've come such a long way!

Thank you for reading, and thank you for leaving incredible comments as always.

Looking forward to so many things with this story.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for traumatic event/mention of death (nothing graphic)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It starts when Shane gets home from his doctor's appointment.

"What's in the bag?" Ilya asks curiously, strolling into the kitchen.

Shane rolls his eyes. "My doctor thinks I need new reading glasses."

"Reading glasses?" Ilya repeats. "Do you even read?"

"I mean, sometimes," Shane frowns. "But apparently your eyes can get worse if you strain them."

Ilya glances down at the bag again. "Well, let's see them then."

Shane furrows his eyebrows. "What? The glasses? Why?"

"I am not in the mood for your questions, baby. I am wondering why you're asking them instead of showing me your new glasses that you purchased with money from my bank account."

Shane swallows and fumbles to get them out of the bag with shaking hands, holding them up for Ilya to see.

"Put them on for me," Ilya commands, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans against the counter to watch him.

Shane hesitates for a second before opening them up and sliding them on his face. He lets his hands drop back to his sides and looks at Ilya expectantly.

Ilya feels like a lion right now. A lion who's just come across the most delectable doe-eyed deer. A doe-eyed deer with glasses that simultaneously make him look like the most innocent and sinful thing alive.

"I want you in my office, naked, on your knees, and kneeling on a pillow by my desk. Now, please."

Shane blinks at him a few times, his mouth opening slightly, but he slowly stalks off in that direction while still glancing back at him.

“Glasses on,” Ilya calls out to him, and Shane scurries down the hall.

God. Shane was a fucking vision. And Ilya had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to get him dressed all pretty. He calmly walks in the direction of Shane’s playroom to retrieve some stuff he has stashed away in the dresser. Some beautiful baby pink stockings. A matching pair of silky thong panties. An adorable little plaid schoolgirl micro mini skirt. Some blush. Strawberry lip balm.

His mind is spinning as he steps into his office to find Shane waiting there for him, naked and kneeling, just as Ilya has asked. His back is to the door, and Ilya’s mouth waters at the thought of Shane’s pretty ass in the outfit in Ilya’s hands.

“You better be wearing your glasses, baby,” Ilya warns as he rounds his desk, but he’s pleased to find that he is. “Good boy,” he praises, and he can see the way it sinks into Shane’s entire being.

Ilya lays the outfit out over his desk and then walks around the front, leaning against it as he looks down at Shane.

“Come up here with me, sweetness,” Ilya requests, patting his knee to tell Shane to rise.

Shane scrambles to follow the instruction, and he immediately steps forward into Ilya’s space.

“Hands on my shoulders, please,” Ilya snaps, pointing to his shoulder as he reaches to grab one of the stockings. “Lift your right foot up. Good,” he hums, rolling the stocking onto Shane’s foot and up his thigh before looking up at him.

Shane’s eyes are black, his mouth open in shock like he hadn’t expected this. Ilya hadn’t really expected him to come home in a pair of glasses looking like a little schoolgirl either, so safe to say they were both feeling pretty surprised.

Ilya helps him into the other stocking next, kissing his left foot before he lets it drop to the ground and reaches behind him for the thong.

Shane gasps fully when the panties come into sight, and Ilya tips his head, surveying his reaction. But he just looks curious. Excited.

Ilya gets him into the panties, his hands gliding over Shane’s hips as he takes in the sight of him. The glasses are fucking doing things to him, the lights glinting off the front so it looks like there are stars in Shane’s eyes.

“Getting glasses is a big decision, baby. I mean, you had to consult a doctor. You picked out a style. You spent my money. And all that time, you didn’t think to ask my opinion. Wonder what your loving Dom might think about this important life change. I am in charge of your appearance, no? Do glasses not fit into that category?”

Shane opens his mouth to speak, but Ilya’s questions are rhetorical. He interrupts him before he can chime in.

“Because of this, I think it’s only fitting that you be my naughty schoolgirl.”

Shane moans in want when Ilya pulls out the tiny mini skirt next. It’s much too small for him, barely covers anything as Ilya helps him into it. Shane’s perky, athletic ass is completely on show in his ridiculously vulgar panties. Ilya pulls him close and squeezes each ass cheek in both hands.

“Such a shame how pretty you are,” Ilya tuts, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “It only makes me want to ruin you that much more.” He smiles at the way Shane’s Adam’s Apple bobs in his throat.

As much as Ilya loved women, none of them could ever have this effect on him the way Shane did. His stunning flushed cheeks. Those innocent freckles. Miles of tan, muscled skin. God, Shane’s *eyes*. Like little round pieces of boba hidden behind the sultry frame of his new glasses. Ilya wants his come streaked across them, wants the lenses fogged up with steam. But first, he wants Shane’s ass bright red.

Ilya reaches for the tinted strawberry lip balm on his desk and cups Shane’s face to pull him in until they’re up close and personal. He uncaps the balm and then paints the sticky pink across Shane’s lips, breathing in the smell of strawberry before claiming him in a kiss. He moans and licks across his lips, tasting the sweet strawberry on his tongue.

“That’s my sweet girl,” Ilya says softly, surveying as Shane’s breathing gets a little ragged. “You are so naughty, baby.” He glides his thumb across Shane’s lower lip lovingly. “I bet you were such a handful in school, hm?”

He doubts that, actually. Shane was probably the perfect student, if not a little annoyingly so. He probably raised his hand a lot, asked a million questions, stayed after class to argue against something that didn’t align with his own personal research on the subject. Ilya probably would have been crushing on him *hard*. Shane would wrinkle his nose as he passed by Ilya smoking a cigarette in the parking lot, and Ilya would just smirk and call out to him, asking if he wanted one, knowing he would never take him up on it, but Ilya would enjoy getting a rise out of him, nonetheless. He’d love to see Shane’s shoulders tense in irritation, would love to see him get all flustered, his cheeks all pink. Speaking of…

Ilya pinches one of Shane’s freckled cheeks and then reaches for the palette of blush, taking out the little brush that comes with it. Shane holds his breath this time as Ilya swipes the pinky rouge across the high points of his cheekbones. Shane’s hands are still on his shoulders, just like Ilya had asked, and he can’t help pulling him closer until Shane stumbles and practically falls into his lap. Ilya hovers his lips against Shane’s ear.

“You gonna be a good little girl for me, princess?” Ilya hums huskily.

“Yes,” Shane hiccups in surprise, his pink nails digging into Ilya’s skin.

“Your professor called me today,” Ilya continues, his voice a little taunting. “Told me you’ve been sitting in the front row. Chewing on your pen. Distracting everyone with your slutty little glasses and your pink, wet lips.”

“Oh,” Shane sucks in a breath, letting his forehead fall forward onto Ilya’s shoulder.

“You don’t have anything to say for yourself?” Ilya double-checks. “You whoring yourself out to all the boys at school, baby? Is that what I taught you?”

Shane sucks his glossy lip between his teeth as he shakes his head. “No,” he whispers.

“Mm, I didn’t think so,” Ilya agrees, gliding his hands across the fabric of Shane’s pretty stockings. There are sweet ribbon-y bows at the tops where they meet his thighs. “I’m not surprised they all want you when you look like this, angel. But I should not have to remind you who you belong to. Do I?”

“No, sir,” Shane replies, pressing his nose needily into Ilya’s neck.

And *oh*, Ilya likes that very much.

“Well, apparently I do,” Ilya sighs, as if he’s disappointed. He pinches Shane’s ass between his fingers again, kneading the skin there. “I’m afraid I’m gonna have to punish you, baby. Just so you don’t forget.”

Shane lets out a noise of protest, but Ilya just shushes him.

“It’s only going to be worse if you fight me on it, kitten. The best thing you can do for me is take your punishment like a good girl, and then maybe I will reward you when you’re done.”

Shane whines and breathes heavily into Ilya’s neck like he’s actually scared, but he has no reason to be. It’s in both of their hard limits that neither of them are interested in excessive pain. Still, Ilya thinks Shane might like impact play for a variety of reasons—number one being that the marks would last on him for days, and his kitten hasn’t been able to stop staring at the hickey Ilya left on his neck. Ilya catches him looking at it in the mirror sometimes, tipping his chin left and right to see it better while he does his pretty kitty skincare. He’s caught Shane staring at *his* neck the past day or so, too. The massive bite mark Shane has left on him that broke skin and nearly got infected. It’s healing quite nicely, though. Shane had practically come in his pants when Ilya whispered it must mean that the bite took, that they’re bonded forever now.

“Why don’t you go sit on the couch for me, baby?” Ilya tells him, rubbing his hand soothingly over Shane’s lower back.

It’s clear Shane doesn’t wanna pull away from him. He’s being clingy and soft, and he’s probably already down a bit from the way Ilya has been talking to him, but all Ilya can think about is bruising up his thighs, having Shane walk around naked in the locker room with his ass covered in purple marks. The boys would have to pretend not to notice, otherwise they’d be caught staring, but Ilya is sure he’ll be able to tell by the looks on their faces. His innocent Shane probably wouldn’t even realize, especially if he was in full-on hockey mode. Ilya hoped they kept winning. He’d very much like to get attacked with a surprise makeout in the locker room again.

Ilya opens the bottom drawer of his desk to retrieve a pink riding crop with a little heart on it. He'd seen it online and immediately thought of Shane. Thought of this exact scene, actually. He just hadn't anticipated the glasses, but they were only making the experience that much sweeter.

The riding crop is small, short, and rigid. When Shane sees it, however, Ilya instantly spots the fear in his eyes. The way he shifts nervously as Ilya steps over to the couch.

"Come here, princess. You're okay," Ilya says comfortingly, gesturing Shane into his lap. Shane scrambles to comply and cozy up to him, like he thinks being extra good right now is going to get him out of this punishment. Only, it's not meant to be a punishment. He hasn't done anything wrong. Nothing at all. Ilya just wants an excuse to play with him, and he thinks this is something Shane is going to wind up enjoying.

Ilya smiles down at him, holding the crop in one hand while he uses the other to caress Shane's pretty blushed cheek with his thumb.

"I know this looks very scary, but it does not hurt as much as it seems like it does," Ilya tells him gently, thumbing at Shane's smattered freckles. "Can I see one of your hands so I can show you?" Ilya requests, holding his own hand out for Shane's.

Shane is looking at him like he doesn't believe him, like he thinks Ilya is going to betray his trust by trying to trick him into something he isn't going to like. It would hurt Ilya's feelings, but he knows they haven't used impact tools before. It makes sense that Shane would be nervous.

"Just your hand, baby. I promise you it is not so bad," Ilya tries again when Shane still hasn't moved.

Shane searches his eyes one more time, like he's looking for something to stand on, before hesitantly placing one of his hands in Ilya's palm.

"Thank you, angel. You're so good for me," Ilya praises, bringing Shane's hand up to his lips for a kiss. He brings the riding crop into view, shows Shane the little heart, and carefully rubs it over the palm of his hand and across the inner part of his wrist.

Shane flinches slightly, tugging his hand back a bit, but Ilya holds his grip firm to keep Shane from going anywhere.

"Easy, baby," Ilya continues to try and calm him down. "I need you to trust me, please. Can you give me your color?"

Shane hesitates, and Ilya instantly pauses for a second, pulling the riding crop away from his skin.

"Shane," he says again, squeezing Shane's fingers in his own when he still hasn't gotten a response. "You are not going to get in trouble, sweet boy. I just want to make sure you're okay."

Shane takes a deep breath and shuts his eyes tightly. “Yellow,” he whispers.

Ilya sets the riding crop aside and immediately pulls him close, hugging Shane tightly against his chest. “Good boy,” he murmurs, running a big hand over Shane’s back as the other exhales heavily. “Thank you for using your color. You did exactly the right thing, sweetheart.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane mumbles into his neck.

“Nothing to be sorry for, baby. We are going to pause for a second and have a little chat. As long as you are safe, that’s all that matters to me, hm?” Ilya continues to pet over his back, holding him incredibly close. “Can you tell me what made you yellow? Is it the riding crop?”

Shane nods like he’s embarrassed.

“That’s okay. It is okay to be nervous. We have not used anything like this before. I know you do not want me to cause you lots of pain, and I do not want to do this either. That’s why I was going to show you on your hand so you can get used to the sensation first.” Ilya pulls back a little to cup Shane’s face, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of his lips. “Do you think it would be okay if I show you that? See, the thing about certain crops is they do not actually hurt that much,” Ilya explains, holding Shane’s jaw to make sure he is listening. “It is mostly in your head; it is the anticipation of the pain that is actually scary. But when I show you on your hand, it does not hurt nearly as much because you can see the crop coming. It is actually a very similar sensation to what you would feel on your backside, just without the surprise.”

Shane is staring at him intently, eyes searching Ilya’s like he wants to trust him so fucking badly, until he finally offers a small nod and holds out his hand.

“My sweet angel. Oh, you are so good for me,” Ilya smiles at him as he reaches for the riding crop once more. “See, I got one with a heart on it because I could never punish my best kitty cat. I only want to make my kitty feel good things, yes? But sometimes pain can feel very good. That is why I wanted to try this with you, but if you do not like it and we don’t want to do it again, then we will not. I know you put maybe next to lots of things, but you can change your list at any time, Shane, okay? You are always allowed to come to me with new limits. I’m never going to be upset with you for that.”

Shane swallows and nods heavily like he really does understand, so Ilya brings the riding crop in between them again and lets Shane touch the leather of the heart first.

“There you go. Nice and simple,” he hums, gliding the pink crop over the tips of his fingers. “I am going to give you a tiny little slap on your hand, okay? Can I do that?” Ilya asks, watching Shane’s reaction carefully.

Shane looks more curious than put off at this point, so Ilya feels confident proceeding as he pulls the crop back slightly and brings it down on the palm of Shane’s hand.

Shane winces and tugs his hand away for a second, but it must not hurt as much as he’s expecting it to because the fear in his eyes softens considerably.

“See? It is not so bad, right?” And Shane shakes his head, so Ilya gives him another little slap. This time, Shane doesn’t pull away at all. He’s just looking at his hand, looking at the way his skin is forming in the shape of a heart before it quickly dissipates.

“Oh,” Shane says softly, and Ilya rubs his hip with his free hand.

“How about if I do a baby one on your thigh while I have you sitting here? That way you will be able to see it coming,” Ilya offers, since Shane seemed to be warming up to the idea, even though he still looked a little unsure.

Shane rubs his strawberry pink lips together and tips his head in consideration before nodding jerkily.

“Yeah?” Ilya double-checks, rubbing the heart lightly over Shane’s upper thigh before bringing it down in a soft smack on top of his skin.

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Shane gasps at the sensation, but it doesn’t hurt like he’s expecting it to. It’s just a little sting. Like the feeling of a rubber band snapping back against his skin, only maybe even less so. He feels silly for coloring. Embarrassed.

“How does that feel, my little prince?” Ilya rubs over his thigh with his hand this time, soothing the slight mark the crop has left on his skin.

“It’s…it’s okay. It doesn’t hurt that much,” Shane admits softly, and his heart flutters at the way Ilya is smiling at him.

“Do you want to keep going with the scene, or would you prefer if we stopped?” Ilya asks him clearly, and Shane knows Ilya’s not going to be upset if he wants to stop, but he can’t stop looking at the tiny red mark on his upper thigh. The way Ilya is massaging the area so carefully.

Ilya would probably take *such* good care of him after. Especially since Shane colored. He’d be so gentle. He’d probably dote on him for the rest of the day. Let Shane sit in his lap for dinner if he milked it extra hard. He could probably convince Ilya to kiss his bruises better, rub cream on him every day until they healed, carry Shane all around the house if he asked. Shane’s getting hard in his lap, and Ilya’s smirk tells him he’s noticed.

He flushes at the fact that it’s not the idea of the crop that’s turning him on. Wonders what Ilya would say if Shane told him it’s the thought of the aftercare that’s doing it to him. Shane leans forward to press a shy kiss to his cheek, his heart pounding when the lip balm leaves a tiny little pink kiss mark on Ilya’s fair skin.

“Can I have your color, baby?” Ilya questions, and Shane feels himself slip back down again, almost as if he’d never called yellow in the first place.

“Green,” Shane hums, threading his fingers through the curls at the nape of Ilya’s neck.

“Good boy,” Ilya rewards, grazing his hand in big circles across the span of Shane’s leg. “Are you okay with how I was talking to you before? Being my pretty princess. My naughty little girl?”

Shane moans and falls forward to mouth at Ilya’s neck, licking around the dark purple and red mark he’d left on him in the pool.

“Good girl,” Ilya voices this time, and Shane sucks in a gasp. “You are not bad, sweetie. You just need to be reminded that there are rules sometimes, yes? You cannot go around being a slutty girl, blinking your big kitten eyes at everyone to get your way. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” Shane whispers, and he lets Ilya pull him back by the scruff of his neck.

“I am going to need you over my lap now, please,” Ilya requests, scratching his fingers through Shane’s hair, and Shane scrambles to follow the instruction.

He’s never been over Ilya’s lap like this. He feels exposed. Can feel the cool air on the backs of his thighs as Ilya lifts his tiny skirt up and exposes his pink panties. God, Shane feels *so* seductive right now. Like he actually had gone to school like this in order to get a rise out of Ilya. *Fuck*. Shane could definitely play up flirting with the guys more if Ilya wanted to punish him. Shane could give him a reason to be jealous, possessive.

Not that Ilya usually *needed* a reason. He tended to get pretty possessive on his own, but imagine they were sharing a room on the road and Shane needed to *borrow* something from Troy. Only, maybe he got distracted talking to him in his room and lost track of time. Ilya would probably come to hunt him down, would knock on Troy’s door furiously until he answered, and then Ilya would see Shane in there. Hanging out. Lounging on Troy’s bed like it was no big deal. Maybe he’d have Troy paint his nails. That would surely piss Ilya off. Despite the fact that Shane just liked having his nails painted, it was definitely something that fell within their dynamic. Ilya would not take too kindly to Troy playing a hand in pampering Shane’s kitty claws.

Shane moans when Ilya rubs a firm hand over his ass, pinching the skin roughly between his fingers.

“I am going to give you just six strikes, baby. I want you to count them for me. I am going to be very, very gentle with you since it’s our first time, okay? How many strikes are you going to get?”

“Six,” Shane repeats obediently.

“And you’re going to tell me immediately if you need to use your colors, yes? What color are you right now, princess?”

“Green,” Shane whispers, gasping as Ilya adjusts him so his toes are no longer touching the ground.

“Good.”

Shane jolts when he feels the crop against the back of his thighs, but Ilya steadies him with a firm hand on his lower back. He's just letting Shane get used to the sensation, the same way he did when he showed him earlier on his hand.

"Take a deep breath for me, sweetheart," Ilya commands, and Shane follows the instruction. Inhaling, then exhaling. "Good girl."

Shane jumps when the first strike comes down against the back of his right thigh. It stings, but Ilya was right. It's the anticipation that hurts more than anything. The actual bite of the crop isn't so terrible.

"One," Shane gets out quietly, and Ilya rewards him with another rub across his back.

The second strike comes on his other thigh this time, which causes Shane to drop his head down against the side of Ilya's thigh. Ilya is pulling at his thong now, wedging the fabric further into Shane's ass, and Shane feels like his entire being is on fire.

"Two," he breathes.

"Doing so well for me, baby," Ilya tells him before smacking him again on his ass cheek this time.

Shane moans and grips onto him tightly. "T-three."

"Oh, these hearts on your skin are so precious. You are quite sweet for someone so naughty, baby girl."

The fourth one comes suddenly, and Shane actually yelps at the sting right where his ass meets his thigh. His skin is a little more sensitive there. Ilya notices and rubs over it with his fingers. "Count for me, baby," he reminds him.

"Four," Shane remembers, letting his eyes slip shut.

"Two more," Ilya says into the quiet air, and Shane holds his breath as Ilya carefully pulls his panties down past his thighs.

Ilya spreads his legs a little wider, and Shane has no idea what to expect, but based on everything that's happened so far, he trusts Ilya implicitly to know his limits. To know what's best for him right now.

He yelps loudly when the crop comes down on the back of his balls this time, shocking him enough that his eyes snap open and he holds his breath, clutching onto Ilya's leg tightly like he's afraid he's going to lose his balance and fall off his lap.

But Ilya's got him. He's shushing him, rubbing a soothing hand all over Shane's back to distract him from the sting. He hadn't hit him hard. Just enough to surprise him with the placement of the slap.

"F-f-five," Shane gets out shakily.

He has no idea where the sixth one is going to go. Not until he feels Ilya spreading his thighs even further apart, pulling at one of his ass cheeks until—

“Ah,” Shane whines, biting at the inside of his wrist to keep the noise from echoing as Ilya delivers the last one right against his hole. It doesn’t hurt, not really, but it scares him enough to shock tears into his eyes, his heart beating rapidly against his chest. “Six,” he cries, letting his body sag in relief as Ilya lifts him to collect him in his arms.

“Good boy. Oh, you did so fucking good for me, baby,” Ilya sighs, hugging him close to his chest as Shane sniffles into his neck.

Shane’s panties are still around his legs, so Ilya quickly untangles him from them and pulls the silk fabric off before stroking his fingers gently over Shane’s red hole. Shane jerks at the sensation, but Ilya just rubs over his back with his other hand until Shane settles back down onto his lap.

“Easy, baby. There you go.” Ilya presses a series of kisses into his hair, and Shane can hear the smile in his voice. “I’m so proud of you. Oh my goodness. You did such a good job. Such a good boy for me. You’re so fucking pretty in your glasses and your makeup and your sweet, little stockings. God. You take everything so well.”

Shane is still trying to get control over his breathing as he lets Ilya’s words wash over him. He hadn’t been a kitty for that scene; he’d been a princess and a schoolgirl and whatever else Ilya had wanted, but now that he’s down, all he wants to do is lick and nuzzle. So, he grazes his teeth over Ilya’s jawline. He nudges his nose against Ilya’s neck until he can smell his scent where it’s at its strongest.

“Mm, there’s my sweet kitty,” Ilya recognizes the switch in headspace almost immediately, and Shane purrs at the extreme attention to detail. How could he *ever* not trust Ilya when Ilya always knows where his head’s at? “I know, I know, котенок. You do not like to be in trouble. You just want to be good for me always, don’t you?”

And Shane nods, nuzzling even closer as Ilya continues to rub over his thighs and ass, kneading at the skin intentionally to help soothe him. Ilya glides his fingers through Shane’s hair next, causing Shane to moan and tip his chin forward so he can rub the scruff of his cheek against Ilya’s shoulder.

“My messy boy loves to rub himself all over me, doesn’t he?” Ilya comments fondly, and Shane’s tummy flutters when he remembers the pink lip balm that’s leaving cute kiss marks all over Ilya’s skin. “How about you suck my cock and I’ll let you rut against my leg to get yourself off, hm? I want to come all over these pretty glasses.”

Shane doesn’t have to be told twice before he’s pushing out of Ilya’s lap to get down on his knees and pressing his nose to Ilya’s crotch against the fabric of his sweatpants.

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“God, you’re so hot the way you’re a real-life kitten,” Ilya moans, pulling at Shane’s hair a bit to be able to see his slutty glasses as Shane inhales his scent where it’s strongest. Part of

him wants to sit just like this. Pull his sweatpants down and just have Shane rub his face all over his cock. Ilya could probably come like that. He liked to make fun of Shane for being desperate, but the truth is, he was *just* as fucking weak for him sometimes. He couldn't let Shane know that, of course. Shane already liked to test him too much, and Ilya had a habit of not being able to resist giving him whatever he wanted.

Shane just slow blinks at him, batting his eyelashes and his big eyes seductively up at Ilya as he sniffs intentionally. Then, Shane holds his gaze as he licks broadly over the fabric, lapping his tongue over the outline of Ilya's length.

"Fuck," Ilya curses at the sight of him, scratching his fingers through Shane's hair while simultaneously pulling him closer to grind against his face. The face of a fucking angel. His cheeks are so pretty with the added blush, and his freckles look like sprinkles on a very pink cupcake. Those glasses, though. Those fucking glasses, Ilya couldn't get enough of. He watches in fascination when his hard dick nudges them slightly off Shane's nose for a second as he rubs himself all over Shane's precious cherub face.

Shane makes a desperate whimpering noise high in the back of his throat like a kicked puppy, and Ilya watches in fascination as Shane attempts to pull his sweatpants down with his teeth.

"Jesus Christ, you are going to be the death of me," Ilya mutters under his breath as he lifts his hips to shove his sweatpants down past his knees.

Shane is on him in an instant, breathing hotly against his dick, sniffing at him, pressing his nose to his balls.

Ilya shuts his eyes tightly to focus on the scruff of Shane's jaw scraping over his inner thighs, the edges of his glasses lifting every time he ducks his head too close to Ilya's groin.

Shane mewls against him, and Ilya groans as saliva starts to pool in the pillows of Shane's lips, gliding over his erection, wetting his cock.

Ilya stretches his leg forward until he can press his foot against Shane's bare cock underneath his little mini skirt, and he breathes heavily at the sight of Shane rutting suddenly against him.

Shane moans and drops his cheek down against Ilya's thigh for a second, forgetting his mission of sucking Ilya's dick in favor of focusing on his own pleasure. It doesn't take long for Shane to figure out that he much prefers to grind his cock against the fabric of Ilya's sweatpants instead, but everything changes when he discovers he can also press his ass back against Ilya's socked toe.

"Holy shit," Ilya sucks in a gasp, watching with a dazed expression as Shane completely wraps himself around Ilya's leg in order to hump him. He's using his big toe like a fucking butt plug, rubbing his greedy little hole all over it, and Ilya has never seen anything hotter in his life. He wishes he had a leash to pull Shane up by his collar so he could see his face.

But Shane must sense eyes on him, because all of a sudden he turns to look up at Ilya and—

Fuck.

Ilya spits into his hand and starts jerking off to the sight of him. Shane's mouth is wide open, his eyes all foggy behind his glasses as he continues to rock himself back and forth. Alternating between getting off against Ilya's shin and his foot. He's got his arms locked fully around Ilya's leg, drool spilling from his lips onto Ilya's knee.

Ilya tries to time his strokes with Shane's rhythm while the two of them hold eye contact. They're getting each other off just as much as they're getting themselves off. And when they both come at the same time, it feels like the most intimate thing in the world.

Ilya leans forward to paint his release across Shane's slutty kitten glasses, and Shane cries out as his hips stutter sporadically against Ilya's leg.

"Fuck, Shane." Ilya collapses back against the couch, as he takes in the sight in front of him.

Shane is completely spent. His glasses are ruined, he's still in his naughty schoolgirl outfit with the baby pink stockings and his smeared strawberry lip balm. His eyes are shut, and he's collapsed in a pile of cum and exhaustion on Ilya's leg, his hips still moving in little circles like he can't get enough of the sensation despite how overstimulated he must be right now.

He can't fucking believe his life. Ilya was pretty sure he was going to think about this every time he got himself off for at least the next year. Or at least until Shane inevitably did something hotter and freakier than even Ilya's wildest fucking dreams could conjure up.

He watches him for a little while longer, letting Shane self-soothe by cuddling up to the fabric of his sweatpants, rubbing his sweet little kitten face all over it while still wearing his cum-stained glasses. Ilya smiles at the thought of cleaning them for him later.

Eventually, he's able to coax Shane up enough to pick him up and carry him into the bathroom. He gets him all clean and then gets to work on taking care of his slowly bruising ass. Shane whimpers pathetically as Ilya rubs a soothing layer of cream into each of his cheeks, paying special attention to the backs of his thighs as well. He kisses his sensitive skin over and over again while Shane leans over the bathroom counter, making soft little sniffling sounds that Ilya wishes he could commit to memory and play on a loop in his brain forever. He can't resist ducking down to lick warmly at Shane's hole in an attempt to mollify some of the pain with a quick tongue massage. He extends the same treatment to Shane's clean-shaven balls, taking pleasure in the way his baby immediately starts to cry.

Ilya stands slowly, kissing a path all the way up Shane's back until he gets to his shoulder, and then his neck. And then his jawline, his soft cheek that's still pretty and pink. His lips, which are now covered in streaks of stray tears. Ilya kisses his nose. And his eyelids. And his forehead, and his hair. And then he collects him against his chest and holds him until Shane's legs get wobbly and they're forced to retreat to the bedroom and sleep away the rest of the afternoon. Ilya watches Shane for a whole hour before he finally lets himself drift as well.

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Their next home game is against Detroit, and they come out of that one with mixed emotions. On one hand, they scored a lot. Ilya, Shane, Luca, and Troy all made goals. Four total, but not enough to beat Detroit's five. They weren't super rough or physical players, but they had a way of executing critical sequences that made goals creep up fast.

A 5 – 4 loss to follow up their first win, and at home, no less. Shane takes that one hard.

They have a day off before their next game, but Shane still shows up to the optional team skate, and then lies to Ilya about running an errand while he secretly sneaks off, buys a day pass, and goes to the gym.

It only takes Ilya thirty minutes to figure it out.

"Hello?" Shane answers the call a little breathlessly, his treadmill paused as he tries to keep his breathing under control.

"I am outside. Get in the car."

"Excuse me?" Shane laughs awkwardly. "Outside, where? What are you talking about?"

"I am outside the gym. I am not stupid, Shane. You walk out of the house in gym clothes and claim you're going to the grocery store, and then I get a charge on my card for a day pass at a fucking health club. You cannot be serious."

"I just—"

"Нет, do not argue with me. Get your ass out here right now, or I am taking the sauna away for a week."

Shane's jaw drops. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Oh, I am so fucking serious. You are going to see just how fucking serious I am if you are not out here in the next two minutes."

So, Shane goes. He turns off the treadmill, gets his bag from the locker room, and then he enters the car willingly and silently. He doesn't say anything as Ilya revs the engine and speeds the entire way home.

And when he gets home, Ilya makes him kneel on a pillow on the kitchen floor with a plug up his ass and a blindfold on while Ilya cooks lunch.

Shane breathes out slowly as the sounds ring out around him. The clang of a pan. The sizzle of meat. Ilya's footsteps against the kitchen floor. He's freaking out, but he knows it's what he deserves for disobeying. For lying. He's naked and still covered in dried sweat. Ilya hadn't let him shower.

Shane whimpers softly in relief when Ilya passes by him and slips his fingers through Shane's hair. It instantly puts him more at ease. Ilya's there. He sees him. He's not ignoring him.

After Ilya is done making lunch, he sits down at the bar stool and eats, passing Shane little bites of sandwich that he feeds him by hand. Shane leans against his leg and sucks happily at Ilya's fingers whenever food is presented to him. The plug is nothing but a comfort inside of him. He's serving his owner, he's making it up to him. He's so, so good.

Ilya tells him as much when he takes his blindfold off and removes his plug. When he presses a million kisses to Shane's face and then carries him to the shower to rinse him clean.

He even holds him when Shane admits the true reason he had felt the need to go to the gym. The upset over their first loss on home ice. The fact that they have another game at home tomorrow. What if their win against Buffalo had been a fluke? What if they just continued to lose after that?

Ilya holds him on the floor of the shower as he cries. He puts him back together and then dries him off, wraps him up in blankets, and cuddles up to him for a catnap.

When Shane wakes up, he feels better. He feels relief. But it lasts only for a little while.

Their game against Philly is a rough one. It's like they're on edge from the first puck drop. The whistle blows, and immediately, there's pushing, gloves nearly coming off, Shane somehow caught up in the middle of it. They're targeting him, but the Centaurs realize fast and sync up to block and defend.

The whole game is messy. Pucks bouncing, missed passes, broken plays. The goals that do come are chaotic, mostly off of rebounds. The entire game feels rushed, like they're predominantly just running and chasing instead of executing clean passes and shots.

There's so much fucking chirping. Shane is tuning most of it out, but there's one that cuts through clear as day. He's leaning over the puck for face-off when he hears it:

"Hollander." A toothy, menacing grin. "I heard about you switching teams. Figured you'd have run off to try figure skating by now."

Shane's blood runs cold. It's an obvious dig at him being gay, but it's done subtly enough that the ref won't be able to call him on it. He tries not to let it affect him, but it does. His jaw clenches. His hands tighten around his stick. He chokes.

He loses the face-off, but it doesn't matter because Ilya skates after the guy and checks him *hard*. After the whistle blows, Ilya shoves him—instigating to get him to fight back—and then his gloves come off within seconds. They both receive time in the penalty box, but not before Ilya gets a punch in. And Shane can't help the way it makes his heart thrum a little in excitement as he skates back over to the bench.

There's a point where they're ahead. There's a point where they're tied, and Shane still thinks they might be able to take it to overtime. Ultimately, though, Philly pulls through with a win.

The score is 4 – 3 for their second loss at home. They've only won one game overall.

Shane is devastated, but he still pulls Ilya into a warm kiss the second they get into the locker room. Ilya happily accepts the kiss by pressing Shane up against his stall as Shane cups his cheeks to hold him close.

“Thank you,” Shane murmurs softly.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Ilya vows, pressing a kiss to his mother’s necklace on Shane’s chest before he starts to strip out of his gear.

Shane just watches him with flushed cheeks and dazed eyes while his heart pounds rapidly against the skin where Ilya’s lips have just brushed.

“Hey, fuck that guy,” Troy tells him as he rolls up to his stall. “I’m glad Rozy got a punch in. He deserves to get his shit rocked.”

Shane’s eyes go wide.

“I meant—” Troy stutters, like he must realize the double meaning behind what he’s said. “I meant the guy from Philly. Um…not Rozy. Er, I mean. I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant,” Shane laughs to break up the tension. “I appreciate it, man. And I agree that guy’s a dick.”

Troy just smiles and opens up his locker. “We’ve got your back, yeah? I mean, I know *he’s* got your back, obviously.” Troy nods to Ilya. “But like. None of us are okay with that. We won’t let that shit fly. Not now. Not for the rest of the season.”

Shane swallows and nods. And then he ducks forward to pull Troy into a hug before he can stop himself.

“Oh,” Troy voices softly, and it takes him a second, but he eventually does sink into the embrace.

“Thanks,” Shane murmurs, tipping his head down against Troy’s shoulder, letting his hair brush across Troy’s neck as he takes in his scent.

“Yeah,” Troy clears his throat. “Yeah, I mean. You— you’re welcome.”

“Shane,” Ilya’s voice comes from behind him, a gentle hand on his back. Shane leans into the touch on instinct, letting Ilya pull him slightly out of the embrace. “You okay?” He asks, blue eyes squinting down at him.

“Yeah,” Shane replies, licking over his lips. “Troy just…” he starts, but the words die on his tongue. He doesn’t know what he’s trying to say. He just feels really safe right now. Ilya protected him. And Troy seemed like he was willing to go to war for him. The whole team would, probably. Shane looks around the room and sees a whole lot of good people on his side.

“Mm. You are feeling very safe right now, yes, моя любовь?” Ilya brushes his knuckles over Shane’s cheek.

Shane nods and drifts closer to him, until Ilya is cupping the back of his neck and pulling him into his chest.

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Troy is shooting Ilya a look over Shane's shoulder, a question in his eyes that Ilya can't answer right now. Instead, he just gives Troy a thumbs up and wraps his arms around Shane, pressing a kiss behind his ear.

"Game's over," Ilya tells him lightly. "You're with me now, okay? Just keep breathing." He rubs circles into his spine as Shane follows the instructions, his back rising and falling as he takes deep breaths.

Troy is still watching them as he strips out of his gear, half curious, half concerned, but mostly he just looks like he wants Shane to be okay, which Ilya appreciates.

After a minute longer of holding him, Ilya helps him to sit down and then presses a water bottle into his hand. Troy is still hovering, so Ilya offers a quick smile that he hopes comes off as reassuring. He mostly just doesn't want to draw any more attention to Shane. Other than Troy, none of the guys had seemed to take notice so far, and Ilya preferred to keep it that way.

Troy finally heads off to the showers, and Ilya keeps a grounding hand on his shoulder while Shane continues to drink. He's just praying Shane is able to process this loss in a way that doesn't bleed into their upcoming away trip.

Shane has had a tough week so far. One home loss had been bad enough to send him spiraling, but another? Ilya was really worried. Plus, the home games had proven to be better for them. It was clear the team felt more motivated, more spurred on by their growing fan base—though they wouldn't hold onto them for long if they kept losing like this.

They had two away games in Florida coming up: one in Fort Lauderdale and the other in Tampa. Fort Lauderdale is up first, and their travel day is right after the Philly game.

When they get to the airport, Shane is quiet to say the least. Ilya keeps trying to talk to him, trying to cheer him up, but Shane doesn't respond much. Instead, he looks out the window as they wait for their plane to board.

Ilya heads off with Troy to pick up some coffee and a tea for Shane, but he's surprised when Troy grabs an extra coffee for himself as well. Ilya raises an eyebrow, but he doesn't comment on it. He just watches in fascination as Troy brings the coffee right over to Harris. Harris, who brightens and thanks him profusely, while Troy just flushes and collapses into the seat next to him. Interesting.

Ilya hands Shane his tea and then rushes off to try and buy a new charger before the plane boards—since his old one barely works. While he's in the store, however, he looks around at all the other items, and he's stunned when he comes across a thick black hoodie with solid black cat ears that stand up on the hood. The sweatshirt is soft, soft enough to pass even Shane's high standards, and Ilya is pleased to find that the fabric is thick, too. His Shane

could get cold on planes, and he hadn't brought a jacket, so Ilya grabs the charger and, without a second thought, buys the sweatshirt as well. He shoves it into his backpack just in case Shane wants it later. If not, then no harm done. It was always better to be prepared.

He makes it back over just in time for the plane to start boarding. Shane is shooting him an inquisitive look, but Ilya just waves him off. He's glad they don't have to worry about keeping up appearances this trip. Now that everyone knows they're together, no one even attempts to ask to sit with him. They know that he and Shane are a package deal. It must be why Ilya feels so giddy when he and Shane slide into their own row. Their first flight as boyfriends together. Their first trip out of the country together. Their first time sharing hotel rooms for real.

Well, he hadn't actually run that by Coach Wiebe yet, but Ilya wasn't worried. Coach Wiebe was cool. There was a concern over whether they needed to keep up appearances just in case, though. While the team knew about them now, Ilya was still hyper aware of the fact that they weren't out to the public yet. All it would take was one wrong move, one fatal slip-up, and all of the pieces could come crashing down around them. Ilya wasn't going to let something as silly as a hotel room screw that up for them, so maybe it was better to have two just to play it safe. Just in case they needed it.

Shane has his face pressed against the window of the plane, and Ilya doesn't want to bother him, so he just takes it upon himself to pull out his blanket and drape it across them. Shane barely reacts except to sink a little further under the warmth, readjusting like he's trying to get more comfortable to go to sleep. Ilya smiles and puts his earbuds in.

He must doze off as well, though, because by the time he wakes up, they're in the middle of the clouds. Ilya tries to memorize the sight of Shane sleeping, his face pressed against the sky through the window, his pretty self glimmering like the sun.

A flight attendant comes around with drinks, and Ilya requests a Coke for himself as well as a ginger ale for Shane. He also asks for a granola bar since Ilya hadn't seen him eat anything since early in the morning at breakfast. Then, he reaches over to rub Shane's shoulder and gently tries to coax him back to life.

"Shane, babe," Ilya whispers. "The flight attendant came around with snacks. Are you hungry?"

Shane scrunches his face up cutely as he wakes, his hazy brown eyes slowly coming into focus as he takes in his surroundings. He stretches his arms high up over his head and does an absolute sleepy kitten cat stretch that makes Ilya want to bite him.

"Are we almost there yet?"

"About an hour out," Ilya hums, opening Shane's tray table to put the ginger ale on it. He presses the granola bar right into Shane's hand. "Eat that, please."

Shane wrinkles his nose as he looks at the ingredients. "It has chocolate in it."

Ilya sighs. "It has protein. It is good for you. Please eat it."

Shane had been in a bad mood from their loss. Or maybe bad mood wasn't the right way to describe it. It was more like he had taken the loss really hard. Ilya couldn't blame him for it. His Shane was used to winning nearly every game. He'd done so for practically his entire career. Even when the Voyageurs didn't win the Stanley Cup, they were almost always one of the final contenders. Losing the Cup came down to circumstances and pure chance sometimes, but losing in general—losing for no good reason—that wasn't Shane's forte.

He's sluggish. Unmotivated. Being extremely hard on himself in ways that Ilya wishes he wouldn't.

"I'm not hungry," Shane shakes his head, but he does reach for the ginger ale.

Ilya sucks in a breath and tries to take the small win. He takes the granola bar back from Shane and tucks it into his bag for later. They'd land soon, and he would make sure Shane ate a big lunch as soon as they got to the hotel. Everything was going to be fine.

"Do you want to practice some Russian on my iPad?" Ilya offers next, when Shane just continues to stare out the window without a word.

Shane blinks as if he's contemplating the offer. "I thought you need internet to do that."

"I downloaded some of the lessons before we left."

Ilya watches as Shane chews on his lower lip, still contemplating, before he finally ducks his head in a nod. Ilya smiles and pulls his iPad from his bag, loading up the app before handing it over.

Shane silently accepts the device and sets it in his lap, turning the volume down before pressing play on one of the lessons.

"Я устал," the app sounds out in the white noise of the airplane. "I am tired."

"Ya ustal," Shane repeats.

"Ya oos-*tahl*," Ilya sounds out intentionally for him.

"Ya oos-tahl," Shane whispers the correction, before pressing a button to go to the next one.

"Good," Ilya nods in approval, letting his hand slip across Shane's knee, but Shane subtly shifts away, angling himself up against the window so Ilya can't reach him anymore.

Ilya presses his lips together in frustration and redirects his attention to the other side of the plane.

Harris is showing Troy something on his phone, and Troy is laughing, his eyes sparkling like Ilya has seen them do sometimes when Shane is around. It makes his heart flutter hopefully. Maybe he wouldn't be the only one lucky enough to get to experience love with someone on this team.

The other boys are starting to get a little restless after three hours cooped up on the plane. Bood is dancing wildly in the aisle, and everyone is laughing at him. It makes Ilya smile. But the plane dips suddenly, causing Bood to fall, and Ilya frowns when his Coke spills slightly on his shirt. He looks over at Shane, who is now glancing out the window instead of down at the iPad, his eyebrows furrowed.

The team is all laughing at Bood on the floor, with Bood begrudgingly getting up and flopping into his seat as the pilot turns on the fasten seatbelt sign. An announcement comes through that they might be experiencing some turbulence. Ilya glances down at his seatbelt, then Shane's, just to be sure.

All of a sudden, though, the plane shakes violently. Ilya barely has any time to react as his Coke knocks onto the floor, and a loud bang sounds out through the cabin. And then—

The plane fucking drops. Ilya feels his stomach drop with it, a terrible feeling working its way through his body as his entire life flashes before his eyes. And all he can think about is *Shane*.

Shane, who wouldn't even be on this flight right now if it weren't for him. He'd be somewhere in Montreal, probably, on his way to his 5th Stanley Cup. Shane was supposed to win *many* more Stanley Cups, in fact. He was supposed to have his whole life ahead of him. God, Shane's parents were never going to get over this. Rose. The Pikes. The entire hockey community and the *world*. Everyone would be devastated by the loss of Hockey's Golden Boy, the best player in the League, the best person to exist, possibly ever, in all of human existence.

Holy fuck. Ilya is supposed to have so much more time with him. They're supposed to get married. Have kids. Tell the entire world about their love. None of that seemed to matter anymore, though.

Shane is screaming. The entire plane is screaming, actually, except Ilya. All Ilya can focus on is reaching for Shane's hand and gripping it as tightly as possible. When Shane turns to him, his eyes are wide and more fearful than Ilya has ever seen them in his life. He doesn't want to go like this. Shane deserved to die peacefully. An old man in his bed, with Ilya wrinkled and gray-haired by his side.

He brings Shane's hand up to his lips and kisses it over and over. And then Shane is scrambling over to hug him tightly, and Ilya can feel tears against his neck as he holds him as close as possible.

"I love you. I love you so much. Everything's going to be okay. I'm here. I've got you."

Please don't let him feel any pain. Please let us go to heaven together. Please let my Mama be waiting for us.

Ilya presses his face into Shane's hair as his own eyes blur. His mom would finally get to meet Shane. She'd watch over them. She'd make sure everything was okay. He wraps his fingers through the chain on Shane's neck and prays. Prays for forgiveness. Prays for a miracle. Prays for Shane.

The pilot says something about the engine. An emergency landing, but Ilya can't focus on anything except for the way Shane is sobbing into his arms, clutching onto him like a lifeline. Ilya is holding him so firmly that he's sure Shane's body will be covered in bruises when they find them. *Shane's body*. Holy shit. He feels like he's going to puke.

Someone yells something about the plane being on fire, and Ilya does let himself cry fully at that. His hands are shaking from where he's trying to keep Shane as close to him as possible. Combing over his arms, raking his fingers through Shane's hair. Trying to provide him with some form of comfort, some form of peace as they transition to the other side. He hopes Shane's parents are soothed by the fact that Ilya was with him when it happened. That Ilya was there to ensure he felt love even in his final moments.

He thinks back to the first time he saw Shane. When Shane had introduced himself in that parking lot back in Saskatchewan. Ilya remembers his freckles the most. Remembers falling in love with him, even then. The warmth of Shane's hand and his shy, pretty smile. The way he had shaken Ilya's hand twice, and Ilya hadn't wanted to let go. He's not letting go. Not ever. Even if this is the end for them. At least he was able to have Shane for a short time. The ten years spent trying to get to him were all worth it. And they had gotten married, as far as Ilya was concerned. The law might not agree, but for all intents and purposes, Ilya was Shane's husband. He hopes Shane's parents get them grave plots next to each other. Matching headstones. He hopes they'll tell the world of their love.

Shane is having a panic attack in his arms, and Ilya shuts his eyes tightly as he braces for impact. He prays it happens quickly. He prays he can take the brunt of the crash. Maybe Shane would even survive if Ilya shielded him enough.

The plane tips one way, then the other, and then there's a loud thud as the wheels come in contact with the ground. Ilya sobs because he's sure this is it, that the plane is going to burst into flames, that they're seconds away from going up with it. But the threat never comes. Everyone seems to be holding their breath. And then—

Loud cheering. Ilya lets one eye slip open, and he sees emergency vehicles out the window, but they're on the ground. They're in one piece. The fire is still burning somewhere in the distance, but Ilya feels a wild sense of relief flood through him.

We're going to be okay. We have more time. I'm not going to waste it.

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Shane is still a sobbing mess by the time they get inside. Ilya is trying to get a hold on him, but Shane keeps stopping like he wants to collapse to the ground. They can't do that, however. They need to get to the team bus that's going to take them to the hotel because Shane can't be seen clinging to him in public like this.

"Come on, baby. Just a little further. We're almost there. I've got you," Ilya keeps telling him, trying to hold Shane's entire dead weight by anchoring Shane's arm around his shoulder.

Troy shows up worried at his side and silently takes Shane's other arm to help distribute some of his weight. Ilya offers him a desperate and thankful look as they both rush to get him into

the safe confines of the bus.

Ilya throws himself into the first row of open seats he sees and immediately pulls Shane to sit on his lap, the other collapsing heavily on top of him as Troy sits in the row across, still watching on helplessly.

“Deep breaths, Shane. Fuck. You’re okay. You’re alright, angel. I’m right here with you,” Ilya keeps murmuring to him, trying to clutch his face to meet his eyeline while Shane completely loses it. He’s letting out deep, gasping sobs that wrack through his entire body, so Ilya just pulls him close. Tries to hold him through it.

Shane’s clutching onto his chest tightly, his nails digging into Ilya’s skin like he’s terrified that Ilya is going to disappear right from under him. He’s shaking uncontrollably, and Ilya’s heart throbs at the sight of him. As much as he hates to see him like this, more than anything, he’s just so, *so* glad he’s okay.

“Barrett,” Ilya says to get Troy’s attention. “Get the hoodie out of my bag, please,” he requests, and Troy scrambles to oblige.

“Are you cold, Драгоценный котенок?” Ilya double-checks, rubbing his hands over the goosebumps littering Shane’s arms, but Shane is non-responsive right now. Ilya needs to focus on getting his breathing under control.

“Here,” Troy says as he offers Ilya the black sweatshirt he’d purchased earlier. The one with the kitten ears on the hood.

Ilya takes it thankfully and then works to help Shane into it, maneuvering his head into the hole first, then his arms. Shane is limp like a little doll. He’s crying so hard that Ilya is pretty sure he has no idea where he is, his vision blurry from the tears. Ilya pulls the hood over his head to offer him some semblance of privacy, and then he reaches for Shane’s hand, and he pulls Shane close until one of his human ears is pressed right up against Ilya’s pounding heartbeat.

“Just listen to me. Focus on my breathing,” Ilya tells him softly, rubbing his hand in soothing circles over Shane’s back. “You’re okay, baby. Everything’s okay. I’m here. You’re safe.”

The entire bus is quiet, and it’s then that Ilya realizes how many eyes are on them.

“Is he okay?” Wyatt whispers, turning to face them from where he and Bood are sitting one row up. Bood looks equally concerned, and when Ilya turns his head, he sees similar looks on Luca, Harris, Troy, even Coach Wiebe.

“I’ve got him,” Ilya tells them all as he lets go of Shane’s hand in favor of petting at his hair underneath his hood.

Shane whimpers at the touch and sinks closer, shutting his eyes tightly as he listens to the sound of Ilya’s voice. The thrum of his heartbeat.

The boys remain silent for the rest of the ride over. The only noise that can be heard on the bus is the sound of Shane crying, sniffling, taking in large gulps of air. And Ilya pressing words of assurance against his flushed skin.

It's only about thirty minutes into their ride that Ilya lets himself close his eyes and take a deep breath. *Fuck*. They had survived, but Ilya knew this was something that was going to stick with them forever. He reaches into his pocket to turn on his phone and swallows at the nearly thirty missed calls from Shane's parents. He doesn't even think before dialing them.

"Hi Yuna," he says softly, scratching his fingers through Shane's hair as the call connects.

Troy and Harris are still watching him from across the aisle, like they're worried Ilya might need them to jump in and help at any moment. He's too tired to think about his surroundings and who could be listening in, though. Right now, he just needs to let Shane's parents know that their son is safe.

"Yes, we are both okay," Ilya informs her. "It was…very scary. He is extremely shaken up, but we are both in one piece. Everyone on the team is fine, too. No injuries. Just…" he trails off because he doesn't know how to put into words the thoughts that he's had to process over the past hour.

"Oh my god, we've been sick with worry. When you didn't answer your phones, we thought —"

"I'm sorry," Ilya feels the need to say. "I was so focused on getting to the bus. Helping him calm down. I completely forgot you were tracking the flight. I should have called you sooner —"

"Ilya, it's okay. I'm just so glad you boys are alright. Yes, David, they're both fine," he hears her mention to Shane's father, and Ilya smiles lightly. "Can we talk to him? Are you guys back at the hotel yet?"

"He is not in a good place to talk to anyone right now, but I will call you as soon as I can, okay? I'm going to take care of him, I promise you. I wish I could have done more. Made sure he was less afraid. I don't know," Ilya sighs, looking down at the perfect angel in his arms.

"You're doing plenty, sweetheart. I'm so glad he has you with him. Just give him a hug and a kiss for us, please. Let him know we love him more than anything. And, you too, alright? We're so glad you're safe."

Ilya swallows, and he feels tears prick at his eyes. "I will tell him. I—I am very grateful to have you both in my life. I have probably not said it enough, but—"

"You don't have to say anything," Yuna promises warmly. "You show us with everything you do. We love you, Ilya, okay? Give us a call when you're both feeling up to it."

Ilya closes his eyes as a few tears slip out. "I love you, too," he whispers, nodding. "I will, thank you."

When he hangs up the phone, he rubs at his eyes with his fist and then presses his lips to the top of Shane's head. Shane is calmer now. He's only half awake, but he's still shaking. Still letting out little sniffles like the fear hasn't worked its way out of his skin yet. Ilya can relate to that.

When he looks over at Troy, he's glad to see that he and Harris are leaned in close to each other. Maybe one good thing has come from this plane crash, after all. Maybe this would bring them all closer together, make them recognize that life is short. It was important to take risks. To go after what you wanted. To not get distracted by the little, insignificant things.

Ilya definitely has a new sense of clarity, a new outlook on life. One thing that he knows for absolute certain is that he wants to marry Shane as soon as possible. For real. So that if Shane ever *is* in trouble, Ilya is the first person they call. Not that he's letting Shane out of his sight ever again.

He sends a silent prayer out to his Mama for keeping them safe. He would see her again, eventually. Shane would, too. But it wasn't their time, and for that, Ilya is grateful. He has so much more life he wants to live with Shane. He's got ten years' worth of missed memories to catch up on. He isn't going to waste a single second of it.

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Chapter End Notes

Soooo the plane crash happens a little earlier in my book than it does in The Long Game. All for good reason, of course. We're in Florida for the rest of the week with Away games! I do hope the weather holds up :/

I was so shocked at how many of you said last chapter was your favorite so far, thanks for your kind words as always!!

Let me know your thoughts on smut, angst, what's to come, etc! Thank you thank you thank you for reading!

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for aftermath of traumatic event and brief mentions of death/suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time they get to the hotel, the rain is coming down hard. Shane jerks himself awake at the sound of thunder, a flash of lightning sparking up just before his eyes outside the window of the bus.

“You’re okay, baby. You’re alright,” Ilya is telling him in an instant, but the fear doesn’t leave Shane’s skin.

He feels all wound up, crumpled together like a broken slinky whose ridges have started to bend and no longer fit together properly.

“We are at the hotel,” Ilya murmurs, and Shane notices the boys shifting around them to grab their things.

All of Shane’s limbs are asleep, though. He’s been perched in Ilya’s lap for who knows how long. His eyes are heavy, and they hurt from crying. His chest feels tight, like he could go for another round. He can barely keep his head up from how it’s pounding against his skull.

“Let me give you a piggyback ride. Just keep your hood up for me, okay, sweetheart?”

Shane feels like Ilya is talking to him in Russian right now. He doesn’t understand any of it, but he doesn’t argue when Ilya helps him onto his back.

“Troy. Harris. Would you mind grabbing our bags, please?” He hears distantly, but he’s already buried his face in the back of Ilya’s neck, arms wrapped tightly around his chest.

“Of course.”

“Yeah, we’ve got it. No problem.”

Shane’s entire world shifts as Ilya stands to his full height and starts carrying him off the bus. He stays hidden in his hood like Ilya requested. He doesn’t think he could lift his head even if he tried. He can’t get his brain to form a single thought.

Ilya holds him the entire time they wait in the hotel lobby for their rooms. The building is shaking with how intense the storm is getting, and Shane’s pretty sure he hears the word *hurricane* leave someone’s lips. He sniffles, rubs his nose against Ilya’s hair, and tries not to cry some more.

He feels like the world is out to get him. Like someone's trying to strike him down for tempting fate. For trying to get by with having hockey, a solid support system, and the love of his life. There were too many good things at once. It shouldn't be allowed. Things were too perfect. It only made sense that the universe needed to take something away.

Right now, though, it seemed like the universe was trying to take all of those things away. His team. His boyfriend. His sanity.

Ilya starts over toward the elevator as he gets their room keys, and, in this moment, Shane is grateful he doesn't have to do anything. He needs to be alone. He needs to take shelter and hide in the bathtub, needs to keep Ilya far away from any sharp objects or windows. He knew this was too good to be true. He knew that he could never have this. Not fully. Not the way others get to. No, Shane's one thing in this life was hockey. He couldn't skate by with more than that. It wasn't fair to everyone else. He could only have so much.

He's vaguely aware of the fact that Troy and Harris are still with them. They're talking quietly to Ilya in the elevator. Something about getting settled and then meeting in the hotel bar for some much-needed drinks.

"I am not sure we will be making it down for that," Ilya voices softly.

"He's gonna be okay, right?" Troy whispers, but Shane never hears Ilya respond.

"Thank you for helping with our bags," Ilya murmurs, slipping the hotel room key into the door before he steps both of them inside.

"It's no trouble at all."

"Yeah, don't even worry about it. We just hope he feels better."

"I've got him," Ilya replies confidently, and then Shane hears the door to the hotel room snick closed once more.

Ilya deposits him onto the hotel bed before crawling over him, resting his entire weight on top of Shane. And Shane just wraps all of his limbs around him, holding onto him tightly. Desperately. And Ilya's face is in his neck, sniffing like he's trying to commit his scent to memory.

"You were gone," Shane's voice trembles as he holds him, his fingers tangled tightly in Ilya's curls.

"I am right here. I am not going anywhere. I would never, ever leave you."

"You were. You were gone," Shane insists, and the mere effort of trying to speak has him crying again. "You were dead and I couldn't—"

"Hey," Ilya pulls back to cup his face, their noses still pressed together. "I am right here in your arms, like always. I will *always* be here. I'm never going to leave your side."

“I can’t do it without you.” Shane’s face crumples as he scrunches his eyes up tightly. “I don’t know how I used to, but I can’t anymore. I need you too much. I’m never going to survive—”

“You do not have to survive anything without me ever again. I’m always going to be here for you, baby,” Ilya vows, rubbing his thumb over Shane’s cheek as he kisses his newly fallen tear tracks.

“I *saw* you die. I could feel it. Ilya—”

Ilya just drops his head against Shane’s chest again and takes another big inhale, like he’s trying to convince himself that Shane is also still alive and well. That the loss they’re both feeling inside of their bodies is a false one. A leftover instinct from a prophecy that was never fulfilled.

“It wasn’t real,” Ilya promises him, pressing the words into his skin. “We are both okay. I’m not going anywhere, and that is never, ever going to happen again. You don’t have to be afraid of anything. I’m going to keep you safe like always.”

Who was going to keep *Ilya* safe, though? Shane doesn’t care about himself, not the way he cares about Ilya. All he knows is that if anything ever happens to him, Shane is never going to be okay again.

He pictures Ilya’s body in the rubble. How he has no living family. Maybe he had Svetlana listed somewhere as his emergency contact, but that should be *Shane*. Shane was his family now more than anyone. Ilya could list Shane’s parents, too. They’d take care of him, right? If anything ever happened to Shane, he knows his parents would take Ilya in. They’d have to. He was their son now, too. Shane makes a mental note to check in with them about it. They need to know that Ilya is in his life forever. That this isn’t some whirlwind relationship. No, this is soulmate-level shit. He has half a mind to go and get Ilya’s bite mark tattooed on him right now, just so no one can ever question it.

What if Shane hadn’t been on that plane with him? What if it was just Ilya alone up there with the rest of the Centaurs? And what if fate had played out a little differently in that universe? What if there was a version of Ilya that *did* die in the crash? Shane would have been in Montreal doing…what? Winning hockey games? Was that really so important? It didn’t feel like it anymore. Not in the face of death. Not in the face of Ilya’s death.

He tortures his mind with all the details. How would he have found out? Would anyone have told him? Or would he just be sitting down for dinner and see it on the news? Would he hear it in passing in the locker room? A nasty comment from one of his teammates.

Good riddance, they’d say, and Shane would have punched whoever it was straight in the face. Hayden would have probably had to pull him off of them, as Shane just cried and punched into oblivion. He would have been a mess. A fucking disaster. He probably would have taken off the rest of the year. The rest of the season. The rest of his life.

He’d have probably killed himself.

The thought scares him half to death, and Shane swallows thickly as he pulls Ilya impossibly close. He's at the point where Ilya is essential to his physical and mental well-being. Like Ilya could actually legally classify as his emotional support person who needed to be around him at all times.

"I can't live without you," he whispers, and Ilya hugs him like he's trying to collapse Shane's lungs and steal all the air from his body.

"You never have to," Ilya promises.

It's the way he sounds so sure of himself that finally gets Shane's head to shut up. He doesn't have to think right now. Like always, Ilya is going to handle it. Ilya's going to take care of him and make sure nothing bad ever happens again.

They take a lazy bath after that. Shane lies back against Ilya's chest while Ilya strokes his fingers through Shane's hair. It's a comfort that he will never take for granted again. He keeps his ear pressed to Ilya's heartbeat to remind himself that Ilya is, in fact, still alive, despite what his brain keeps trying to trick him into believing. Something tells him that Ilya must be feeling pretty similarly, though, by the way his hand hasn't left Shane's chest either.

They stay there until the water turns cold. Until Shane's fingers are prunes and Ilya's legs are starting to fall asleep from being crammed in the tiny hotel bath.

And then, Ilya helps Shane back into his new cat hoodie. Shane hadn't even realized about the ears.

"Where did this come from?" He voices quietly when Ilya bestows it upon him.

"Saw it at the airport today. Figured you might get cold," Ilya shrugs, like it's the most normal thing in the world to have seen something and thought of Shane. To have bought it just because he thought Shane might want it. Or need it.

Shane collapses into his chest and hugs him tightly again. He glides his hands all over Ilya's arms, and his shoulders, his chest, trying to make sure he's in one piece. Hoping to reassure himself that he's not going to wake up and enter a very different reality. One where Ilya hadn't survived somehow. Even if Shane had been with him. He can't picture a world without Ilya Rozanov. He can't imagine how bleak one must be.

They take a nap after that, because it's still only the afternoon. Their game tomorrow has already been cancelled due to the impending hurricane, which means they have a whole day off to recover from the trauma of today's flight. To sort through the aftermath that follows.

Because when Shane wakes up, he's gasping in panicked breaths. He's back on that flight again, only this time, Ilya's been sucked out the back of the plane. Ilya is right outside the window, falling to his death, and Shane is watching it happen. He's screaming. He's crying. He sees as Ilya's lifeless body hits the ground and breaks off into a million pieces. His arm is separated from its socket, lying on the tarmac. The wheels of the plane drive over it as they land, and Shane doesn't know how they're going to have a proper burial. They'll have to

lower an empty coffin. None of the other boys seem to care; their loved ones are safe. But Shane…Shane's just lost everything. Shane's never going to be okay again.

Ilya's arms are around him in an instant.

"It's not real. Baby, it's not real. I'm right here. I'm with you," Ilya reminds him, holding desperately to Shane's face to try and get him to open his eyes. To see what's right in front of him.

Shane throws up all over the bed. He's sobbing uncontrollably, Ilya's gripping onto him tightly in an attempt to keep him in place.

"Shane, please. You're okay. Please, look at me."

But Shane can't. It feels like a trick. It feels like his dream is real life, and this is the sleep he can't wake up from. He's seeing Ilya in his consciousness as a way to cope with the loss.

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Ilya feels helpless as Shane thrashes wildly in his arms. He's fucking scared. Shane isn't just crying, no; he's screaming out gasping sobs like the memory of the crash is causing him physical pain. He's fighting against Ilya's grip like he's trying to get away from him, but Ilya is terrified he's going to hurt himself, so he keeps holding onto him.

It feels like Shane has super strength right now, though. Like the adrenaline is what's allowing him to nearly break through Ilya's vice-like grip. He's got thirty pounds of muscle over him, and still, Ilya can barely keep him in place. His biceps are straining with the way Shane is struggling against him, trying to run away. From what? Ilya isn't sure.

He isn't sure what comes over him, what triggers the idea in his brain, but the only thing Ilya can even think to do is to bite Shane's shoulder hard through the fabric of his hoodie. It works, however, because Shane gasps in surprise and practically collapses into him.

"Good," Ilya says firmly, and now that he's seen what works, he changes tactics. Shane doesn't need to be comforted right now; he needs to be *told*. "Relax into my arms, котенок. There you go. Listen to the sound of my voice."

Shane's entire body sags as he goes limp in Ilya's arms, finally relinquishing himself over to the higher power that his mind knows very well: Ilya as his Dominant.

"I am going to need you to calm down for me," Ilya says huskily, and he watches as the effects wash over him.

Shane's eyes have gone half-lidded, like he doesn't even know where he's at right now. If Ilya had to guess, he's somewhere between subspace and kitten space, reverting to a comfort that his body and mind have become accustomed to. It's a coping mechanism, and in this case, Ilya considers it to be a really good one. His Shane was *not okay*.

They need to get out of the room. Although Shane hasn't thrown up that much, considering how little was in his stomach to begin with, the bed sheets clearly need to be changed, and

Ilya desperately needs to get some food in him.

He glances over at the clock. It's 8pm. The boys were probably still down at the bar drinking after everything that had happened. Ilya isn't sure how he feels bringing Shane around them when he's like this, but he's out of options, and Shane's safety is a top priority. Besides, he thinks being around the boys might be a good distraction from whatever new demons have spawned and planted themselves in Shane's head after this traumatic experience.

So, once he's sure Shane is capable of standing up on his own without collapsing into a puddle of tears, Ilya helps him get dressed and then carefully starts to lead him downstairs. Shane is swaying a bit, like his brain has shut down, but Ilya walks behind him with two hands planted firmly on his shoulders to keep him upright. He's not crying anymore, which Ilya is grateful for, even if he still looks like he's been to hell and back. There are purple indents stamped under both of his eyes, his face a mixture of pale and splotchy flush from losing whatever had remained of his breakfast.

"Oh my god. There you guys are! We were so worried," Wyatt gasps the moment Shane and Ilya step into view.

"Shane, holy fuck. Are you okay? That was intense back there, right?" Bood rushes over to him, but Shane just turns to hide in his chest, so Ilya pulls him close, shielding him from their view.

He's grateful that the hotel has granted them a private room within the restaurant/bar to keep them hidden from any prying eyes. Ilya doesn't have the energy to worry about that right now.

"Just…give him some space," Ilya warns them as they all try to crowd around Shane.

"Is he…is he okay?" Troy asks carefully, a beer in hand.

"He is not okay right now, no. He is very shaken up. I did not even want to bring him down here, but he threw up in our room, and I need to get some food in him while we wait for housekeeping."

Shane whines softly into his chest like he's hyper aware of the fact that they've entered into a much more populated space.

Ilya pulls his hood over his head and rubs his hand over the fabric. "You are okay, angel. It's just me and the boys. We need to eat something now."

"I'll get the waiter," Harris pipes in quickly. "Just tell me what you want."

"A sandwich, please. Anything plain is fine as long as there is meat on it. No sauces. Two of those," Ilya requests as Harris rushes off. He guides Shane over to one of the empty chairs, but he makes no move to sit next to him. Instead, he hovers behind him and keeps his arms wrapped around him so Shane can continue to hide in his chest.

Shane is clutching onto the fabric of his shirt, and Ilya is grateful for the sign of life. He's grounding himself, seeking comfort. He's present, which was all Ilya could really ask for right now. Ilya takes a deep breath and rests his chin on the top of Shane's hooded head. He looks over to find Troy watching them intently.

"Thank you for all your help today," Ilya tells him quietly. "This week has been…a lot."

"Is something else going on?" Troy asks, his eyebrows furrowed.

Ilya doesn't know where to begin. He rubs over Shane's shoulder where he bit him, and Shane rumbles a little against his chest in response, like the physical pain is a reminder that Ilya is still there with him. That he's alive.

"He is like this, sometimes. It's how his brain processes stress. He just kind of…shuts down. Seeks comfort. We have gotten pretty good at managing it, but," Ilya sighs, hugging Shane closer to him. "Losing so many games has not been helping. He is very hard on himself about hockey. And now this…" he trails, obviously referring to the plane crash. "I am very scared for how this will affect him going forward," Ilya nearly whispers because he hasn't let himself admit it yet, but he's fucking terrified.

Shane's head could be a scary place even on the best of days, but *this*? This was going to stick with him for a while; Ilya could tell.

"What can we do?" Troy whispers back, and Ilya is silently thankful that Troy's following his lead. Matching his tone of voice so Shane doesn't spook. "To help, I mean."

"There are little things," Ilya admits, reaching under Shane's hood to pet at his hair. He smiles lightly when Shane starts to nuzzle into his hand. "He's usually fine if I am around him. I know what to do to bring him back. But…I can tell he feels very safe around you."

"Really?" Troy's eyes go wide at the revelation. "What…what makes you say that?"

"When he hugged you in the locker room yesterday," Ilya fills in. "It was more than just a hug, though, wasn't it? He was leaning on you. Going quiet. Being affectionate. He is not like that with everyone. Only around people he trusts."

"Oh," Troy replies, his expression contemplative as he tries to make sense of it. He's still watching Shane like he desperately wants to understand.

"I think it would be…good for him. To have someone else he can be himself around," Ilya mentions lightly, even though he knows it goes much deeper than that. He knows how much he'd be asking for Troy to understand. To dive into. It's a conversation for a different day, but Ilya thinks that if Shane is going to be a kitten around anyone on this team, so far, at least, it's going to be Troy. "I am opening a new club in Ottawa in a few weeks," he forces himself to say.

Troy tips his head slightly, like he hadn't been expecting the change in topic. "Oh?"

“I have one in Montreal. It is a special kind of club. And it is very important to me and Shane. To our relationship,” Ilya continues to try to explain. “I would love to tell you more about it sometime. And, if you are comfortable, I would like for you to consider coming to the opening to learn more.”

“Uh, you’re not actually part of the Russian mob, are you? Because Bood was telling me some stories, and like, if this is you trying to get me to join—”

Ilya laughs genuinely at that. “You are funny, Barrett. I think I am actually starting to like you.”

Troy’s face pinches in offense. “Wait, are you saying you didn’t like me before?”

Ilya just smirks and rolls his eyes. “You have been trying to make a move on my boyfriend ever since I met you. I am sure I don’t have to tell you that you’re very attractive.”

Troy flushes profusely at that and ducks his head, which only causes Ilya to raise an eyebrow.

“Unless you did not know? I am sure Harris can vouch for it.”

Troy looks up suddenly, his mouth wide open like he’s been caught. “I—what are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing,” Ilya shrugs casually. “Just that he told me you are the hottest player in the MLH. He even thinks you are prettier than my Shane.”

Troy scoffs and shakes his head. “Well, now I know you’re lying.”

Ilya just smiles and rubs his chin across the top of Shane’s head. “I am not. He thinks you are very cute. I would be willing to bet that you think the same about him.”

Troy huffs like he’s annoyed, but his cheeks are still flaming red. “Whatever. And the only reason I wanted to talk to Shane is because I thought he was available. Obviously, if I had known, I wouldn’t have said any of that.”

“I know,” Ilya relents easily. “You two would not have been a good fit for each other, anyway. Something tells me you are looking for a partner who is a bit more…” he tips his head in consideration before settling on, “Decisive.”

“Decisive?” Troy wrinkles his nose.

But before they can say anything else on the matter, Harris appears with two boxes in hand.

“Here we are! Two roast chicken sandwiches. I told them to take the sauce off just like you asked, and I wasn’t sure about cheese or pickles, so I just asked them to put it on the side. I figured it would be easier than trying to pick them off,” he explains, placing the boxes on the table in front of them. “Also, I thought you guys could probably use this.” He deposits a glass of clear liquor in front of them. “Russian vodka, right?”

Ilya smiles happily. “Wow, Harris. Thank you so much. You are very decisive, indeed! A man with a plan.”

Harris laughs like he has no idea what that means, but he’s pleased to have done right by them. “I don’t know about that, but I’m glad you think so. How’s our Shane doing?”

Ilya pulls Shane’s hood back slightly to get a look at his face. His eyes are closed, and he seems pretty calm from having been wrapped up, hidden away in Ilya’s chest for the past ten minutes.

“Shane, sweetheart. Your food is here. Is it okay if I feed you something now? Harris also brought some of my special vodka.”

Shane just hums, his lips pulling into a little smile, and Ilya can tell he’s a bit down. A bit fuzzy. But that’s okay. Right now, Ilya just needs him safe.

“Oh, I love the little cat ears on his hoodie!” Harris exclaims, and Shane practically purrs, turning to hide in Ilya’s chest once more. “That is so cute!”

“Yes, he is the cutest kitty in all the land. Don’t tell him, though. He gets away with enough as it is. Hey, *no*,” Ilya warns when Shane goes to bite him, and Shane just giggles like it’s the funniest thing in the world. “You think you are so funny, don’t you, котенок?” Ilya ruffles his hair fondly as he pushes his hood off his head. “Come on, baby. It is time to eat something.”

Ilya shoves Shane’s chair a little closer to Troy whilst pulling one up for himself, and he can’t exactly say he’s surprised when Shane immediately tries to crawl into his lap.

“No, you cannot sit in my lap right now,” Ilya sighs when Shane refuses to let go of him. As much as Ilya wanted to indulge him, Shane needed to be a human as much as possible, and sitting in Ilya’s lap was decidedly *not* going to help him achieve that.

Shane pouts like he’s devastated, but Ilya is surprised when he turns to press his cheek into Troy’s shoulder instead.

“Wow,” Troy laughs in amazement. “You weren’t kidding about him being affectionate.”

“Shane,” Ilya scolds lightly. “You cannot just invade people’s personal space without permission, okay? I know you like Troy very much, but we need to have boundaries. Please, come over here so I can get some food into you.”

“I—it’s not a big deal. I mean,” Troy pipes up. “He…he can lay on me if he wants to.”

“I appreciate that, Barrett, but he knows he needs to eat right now. He is just trying to make me jealous so I will let him sit in my lap. Which is not going to happen, by the way, котенок,” Ilya tells him pointedly.

Shane huffs, but he reluctantly lifts his head.

“Good,” Ilya praises as he pulls Shane’s chair closer to him before reaching for one of the boxes of food.

“He’s so quiet and sweet,” Harris coos softly, settling into the seat next to Troy. “Is he always like this with you?”

“It is definitely a stress response,” Ilya mentions lightly, trying not to say anything that might trigger Shane’s awareness to the conversation too much. “When he is overloaded, it can help for him to just…step away from his head for a bit. Especially when he is around people he feels comfortable with. He might be a little quieter, a little more cuddly, but usually he is okay. He trusts me to take care of him. And he clearly feels like he can trust you guys to see him like this.”

Troy swallows, his eyes trained on the two of them. “Sounds nice,” he comments longingly. “The stepping out of your head bit,” he sighs, running his fingers through his hair. “I wish I could do that, sometimes.”

Ilya just smiles at him, his gaze falling to Harris, who is looking at Troy intentionally. “I think you probably just need to find someone you feel safe around.”

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Shane is having a grand ‘ole time. He’s a little fuzzy. Ilya keeps feeding him bites of a chicken sandwich. Actually, Shane had wanted Ilya to feed him fully, but apparently, that’s not allowed right now, so they’re switching off. Shane eats one bite, and then he’s allowed to have Ilya feed him one, so naturally, he’s very eager to get through his own bites in order to get to Ilya’s. He thinks it’s just a trick to get him to keep eating, but he doesn’t even care.

The boys are in a good mood. They’re all drinking, having a great time, but Troy keeps watching him with this extra set of care in his eyes that is making Shane feel warm all over. He keeps reaching for him, but every time he does, Ilya just pulls him back to get him to focus on his meal.

Can I cuddle with Troy when I’m done? Shane wants to ask, but he’s enjoying not having to talk right now. He almost, *almost* feels like a kitten.

But his hood is down, so he doesn’t have any cat ears on. He knows he isn’t allowed to bite or lick. He’s not even allowed to *meow*. Ugh. Being a kitten who’s not allowed to be a kitten is so, so hard sometimes. Shane wishes it were easier.

“Are you okay, Shane?” Luca approaches him shyly, and Troy touches Luca’s shoulder when he threatens to get too close.

Shane wants to bite Troy. He thinks Troy might be one of his humans. He needs to claim him fast before another kitty can.

“He’s alright,” Troy tells Luca. “He just doesn’t feel like talking, and he needs some space, but you can still sit with us if you want.”

Shane looks over at Ilya to find him smiling, his face open and relaxed. Ilya definitely approves of Troy being one of Shane’s humans. Heat warms his belly. Maybe Ilya will let him have Luca or Harris, too.

“You want some vodka, baby?” Ilya leans closer to him, a hand on his shoulder as he offers the glass to Shane’s lips.

Shane allows Ilya to tip some of the liquid into his mouth as he places a hand on Ilya’s thigh, digging his kitty claws into the fabric of his pants.

“Good,” Ilya says softly. He’s been avoiding the ‘boy’, but Shane hears it anyway. He knows they’re in public. He knows he can’t be a good boy right now. He just has to be good. But it doesn’t mean he’s not a good boy for Ilya still. Since Ilya told him that Shane was pretty much *always* his good boy.

“Fuck, I am so glad the game’s cancelled tomorrow,” Bood heaves a sigh as he collapses into a chair at their table.

Everyone seems to be coming over to sit with them now, but Shane doesn’t mind. He likes the company from this particular group of people.

“I just wish we could actually go to the beach or something. Sucks to be stuck in Florida with shitty weather. I thought the whole point is we were going to get some *sun*,” Wyatt emphasizes.

“I think the whole point is that we were going to play some hockey and *win*,” Ilya stresses, and Shane perks up a little at the idea of winning.

“Hell yeah. Look at Shane,” Wyatt laughs, pointing to him. “Shane’s ready to win. How you doing over there, buddy? You good?”

Shane just nods, flushes, and shyly tucks himself back against Ilya’s side.

“You two are so fucking cute it makes me sick,” Wyatt shakes his head.

“I still can’t believe it,” Bood agrees, taking a swig of his drink. “Hollander and Rozanov, huh? I’d kill to see that tape.”

“Jesus,” Troy scoffs. “You guys are crude.”

“*What?* I can’t be the only one thinking it.” Bood looks around the group incredulously. “What about Luca? Luca’s definitely thought about it!”

“What?” Luca’s eyes go wide. “No. I—”

“Oh, relax, Haasy,” Wyatt laughs. “He’s just teasing. We all know Rozanov and Hollander look hot together. It’s just human nature. Right? Two good-looking guys. Is it so crazy to assume they’d look good together? I mean, look at them. Look at the way Shane’s clinging to him.”

“Probably because we all just went through something *extremely* traumatic, you ass,” Troy bites back. “God forbid he needs some comfort from his boyfriend.”

“Oh, please,” Wyatt rolls his eyes. “I think we *all* know they get into some freaky shit. Don’t you guys remember that crazy room Roz had in his house? You know, the one with the fucking *facial recognition* pad. Or don’t tell me you think that room was *actually* for his cat.”

Shane can’t help the smile he hides into Ilya’s neck. The playroom actually *was* for Ilya’s cat. Maybe just not in the traditional sense.

Ilya rubs soothingly at his lower back and then tugs at the back of his sweatshirt intentionally.

Shane sighs. *Don’t get too excited,* котенок, he can practically hear him saying. Shane *isn’t*.

But Troy is watching him now, tipping his head curiously like something has just dawned on him. And when Shane looks around the table, he sees a *lot* of eyes on him. Shane widens his own kitty eyes at the attention.

“So, Roz,” Wyatt leans in when no one else says anything. “You gonna tell us about your Montreal club now or what?”

“Jesus, Hazy.” Ilya rolls his eyes as he takes a sip of his and Shane’s shared cup of vodka. “You are *really* interested in my sex life, huh?”

Wyatt wiggles his eyebrows wildly in response.

“Uh, just out of curiosity,” Harris laughs while scratching at the back of his neck. “What exactly does your club have to do with your sex life?”

Bood snorts, and Ilya raises an eyebrow at him.

“I mean, we’ve all heard the rumors,” Bood says like it’s obvious.

“What rumors?” Troy’s eyebrows pinch together.

“That Roz owns a sex club.” Bood shrugs, raising his beer at Ilya.

Troy’s head spins as he turns to look at him. “You do?”

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Ilya presses his lips together. Jesus. This was all happening right now, huh? The timing could not have been worse, but then again, considering the way Shane was slipping in his arms, perhaps the timing could not have been better.

“It is a private BDSM club, yes,” Ilya relents, shrugging slightly. “So, what?”

“So, now that you’re locked down by Hollander, is he gonna, like, make you sell it or something?” Holmberg snickers, while LaPointe cracks up next to him.

Troy bristles. “Doubt it. Roz said he’s opening up another one in Ottawa soon. Didn’t you?”

Ilya blinks and takes a deep breath. “Uh, yes. Ottawa club opens very soon.”

“Well, *shit*. What the hell, Rozy? Weren’t you gonna tell us?” Bood demands. “I thought we were tight, man.”

“I was debating it,” Ilya admits, downing the rest of his vodka.

“*I* got invited,” Troy feels the need to proclaim for some reason, and Ilya fights extremely hard not to roll his eyes.

“Dude.” Wyatt hits his arm. “You invited Barrett, but not me? Is it just cause he’s gay? Cause you know I get these urges….”

“Jesus Christ,” Ilya splutters a laugh. “Listen, I was going to invite you all eventually. I just wasn’t sure if you would be interested,” he admits honestly. “The club is not just fun and games. Some serious shit goes on there. It is not for everyone.”

The boys go quiet at that, and Ilya doesn’t really understand why until he realizes. They’re all staring at Shane. Like maybe the implication has dawned on them that he and Shane *likely* partake if Ilya’s gone to all this trouble to open another club in Ottawa. Ilya slides his hand further around Shane’s waist.

“So, uh,” Bood coughs to break up the tension. “What goes on there?”

They’re all watching him with curious eyes. Everyone’s a little drunk. They’ve just survived a fucking plane crash together. And they had the entire next day off to spend inside while they were forced to ride out this hurricane. Ilya looks down at Shane to find him slow blinking up at him, fighting against every fiber of his being to keep from being a cat because he knew Ilya wanted him to stay up right now. Because he was *so* good for Ilya, always, and that meant that Ilya thought he deserved the world.

“We have events sometimes. Demonstrations. Other nights, it can be just like a normal club. There is drinking, dancing. There are playrooms available, or sometimes people rent them out for private parties.”

“What is BDSM?” Luca whispers to Troy, but Troy blinks wide-eyed back at Ilya, like even *he* doesn’t fully know.

Ilya just raises his eyebrows and clears his throat. “Wow, okay. Uh, it is just a term for different relationship styles or activities—”

“It’s *really* kinky sex,” Wyatt tells Luca with a wink.

Ilya rolls his eyes. “It is more about *trust* and structure.”

“What kind of events do you do?” Harris leans forward in interest, and he seems genuinely curious.

“All different kinds,” Ilya smiles at him. “We do an annual *In the Dark* night. It is a partnered event where one partner spends the evening blindfolded.”

“Blindfolded, doing what?” Bood tips his head, eyebrows drawn together.

“All night, the seeing partner leads, the blindfolded partner follows. One person is giving up control, the other is taking it. It is an exercise of trust, like I told you.”

“Our first event,” Shane whispers so quietly that Ilya almost doesn’t hear him, but the light poking at his ribs clues him in.

“Well, hello. Someone is feeling talkative,” Ilya teases, giving Shane’s hip a little squeeze. “Yes, you are right, котенок. Our first event together,” he agrees, looking down at him fondly.

“Okay,” Wyatt nods, looking satisfied, like he’s gotten the confirmation he’s been looking for. “So, you guys *do* go to the club together.”

Ilya glances over at him and rolls his eyes yet again. “Yes, Hazy. I do bring my boyfriend to the club that I *own*. Very good. Would you like a medal?”

“I’m sorry, I just still don’t get the point of the blindfold event,” Bood chimes in.

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“It can, um, be nice,” Shane swallows as he sits up a little to clear his throat. “To not have to think for a bit. To let someone make decisions for you. It’s, like, relaxing,” he says softly.

“Holy shit,” Holmberg mutters. “That’s kind of hot.”

“Wow, Hollander. Who knew you were such a freak?” LaPointe laughs.

And Shane flinches. His heart pounds. Fuck. They should not be bringing this up. They should not be telling the guys about this.

“What the fuck did you just say?” Troy stands up all of a sudden, slamming his beer down on the table. “LaPointe, I swear to god—”

“*Relax*, Barrett. Fuck. I meant like a freak in the bedroom. What are you, his keeper or something?”

“I think you need to watch your mouth. All of you. You’re asking them super personal questions, and then you’re laughing and making jokes at everything they say.” Troy scoffs, glaring at the entire group of them. “If you want to ask questions, then stop being fucking assholes. Didn’t Roz *just* say this is serious shit?”

“Woah, Barrett, calm down—”

“He’s right,” Ilya shrugs, like he’s content to let Troy play guard dog a little longer. “I do not mind talking about my club or our relationship, but it is not something to joke around about. I get that we are your teammates and we are used to chirping at each other, but Shane is also my partner. And I expect you to treat him with the same respect that I would show to any one of your wives or girlfriends.”

“Shit,” LaPointe frowns. “Sorry, Hollander. I wasn’t trying to be mean.”

“Yeah, me either,” Holmberg says sheepishly.

“It’s okay,” Shane murmurs, shaking his head.

“Fuck. I’m sorry I was laughing,” Wyatt laughs and then covers his mouth. “Sorry. I just—had a lot of alcohol tonight. Rough day,” he jokes, pulling laughs from the rest of the group.

“For what it’s worth, I wasn’t asking just to ask. I was *genuinely* curious,” Bood admits, and his cheeks go a little red. “Cassie is maybe, sorta into that stuff. Or…she wants to be. I, um—” he pauses, chuckling. “I have no idea what I’m doing, though. That shit is harder than it looks.”

Ilya smirks. “It is a skill learned over many, many years. It requires a lot of time and practice to get it right, and even still, it is different with every person.”

“So, um,” Harris clears his throat. “Forgive me if this is, like, way too personal a question, but…do you guys like….partake? In the scene?”

Ilya’s eyebrows raise high on his head. “You are familiar with the scene?”

Harris flushes slightly, and Troy’s eyes are wide as saucers.

“Well, I mean. Not too much on my own, but an old boyfriend of mine was really involved.”

“Are you a Dom or a sub?” Ilya scrunches his eyebrows up. “Ah, only if you are comfortable sharing.”

“I’ve tried both, but probably more of a Dom,” Harris shrugs. “And, you?”

“Dom,” Ilya laughs as if the question is ridiculous.

“Which means Shane is your…”

“Sub,” Shane whispers, clutching onto Ilya’s shirt as everyone’s eyes land on him again.

“What’s, um,” Luca starts nervously. “What’s that mean?”

“Dominant and submissive. Is the two main roles within BDSM,” Ilya fills in, and Shane is grateful when he pulls him closer to his chest.

“Damn,” Wyatt whistles. “Guys, can I tell you all something? I really think the gay guys on this team are having *much* better sex than the straight guys on this team.”

The entire table is in stitches, and Shane looks up to meet Ilya’s gaze with a smile. Ilya just gives him another squeeze and presses a kiss to his forehead.

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Shane wakes the next morning to the shrill ring of his cell phone. He scrunches his face up as the morning light streaks in through the windows, blinding him while he reaches over to the

nightstand in search of his phone.

"Shane, babe. Are you coming soon? I miss you so much."

Shane frowns and looks over at the clock, but the numbers are glitching out. Flickering and changing before his eyes. "Ilya? Where are you?"

"What do you mean? I'm at the airport, remember?"

"The airport?" Shane sits up a little in concern. "Why are you at the airport? We're supposed to have more time."

"You left me here. Remember?"

And Ilya's voice sounds distant all of a sudden. Cold.

"You left me in pieces, Shane. My body's in a million different pieces all over the tarmac, remember?"

"Ilya," Shane chokes out.

"Shane."

"Ilya, fuck, please don't leave me."

"Shane."

"Please—"

"Shane," Ilya is yelling, shaking him heavily. "It is just a nightmare, baby. I need you to wake up for me. Come on, sweetheart."

Shane gasps himself awake and screams out a sob at the sight of Ilya in front of him.

"You are okay. You are okay. It was just a bad dream. I'm right here—"

Shane grabs onto him desperately, collapsing face-first into Ilya's lap as he cries and attempts to suck in big, heaving breaths of air.

"You're okay, you're okay, you're okay," Ilya is whispering over and over again, but it feels too much like the dream. It feels like he's going to disappear any second now.

"Don't leave me, please," Shane begs into his stomach as Ilya tries to anchor him down against the bed while he shifts restlessly.

"I'm right here, baby. *Please*, listen to my voice. Feel my hands. I am real. I am here," Ilya vows. "I need you to breathe for me, angel. I really, really need you to breathe."

Shane sucks in short, shallow breaths, but then, there's a heartbeat under his hand, and it's like everything comes back to him.

The plane crash. The fire. The plane *landing*.

Ilya.

Shane lets himself go limp as he breaks down fully in Ilya's arms this time, clutching onto him with shaking, fumbling hands.

"There you are, princess. You're okay. You're right with me. I promise you I am not going anywhere," Ilya shushes him, pushing his fingers through Shane's hair. "It was just a bad dream, that's all."

"Y-you were gone," Shane whimpers, his lower lip and chin trembling. "In pieces."

"Except that I am not gone. I am right here," Ilya tells him for probably the hundredth time since the crash, but each time makes him understand it a tiny bit more. Believe the nightmare a tiny bit less.

Until eventually, Ilya is able to coax Shane into a sitting position and pull him into a tight hug.

"I'm sorry I keep freaking out," Shane whispers, but his voice is still wobbly.

"Shane, something very scary happened to us," Ilya tells him seriously. "I think your reaction is completely normal. And, even if your reaction wasn't normal, I would not care. I'm still going to love you. I'm still going to take care of you and fix you up like always, yes?" Ilya tips Shane's chin to get him to look up at him. "Even if you go mentally insane," he attempts a joke.

"Do you…think I'm going mentally insane?" Shane asks carefully, because he feels that way sometimes. He wonders if Ilya has been thinking that, too.

"Ah, no," Ilya laughs a little, brushing the front pieces of Shane's hair out of his eyes. "I think you were in a plane crash not even twenty-four hours ago, and you are very rightfully shaken up about it."

Shane swallows. He doesn't deserve him, he realizes. Ilya gave so much of himself all the time, and Shane felt like he had absolutely nothing to give in return. Relationships were supposed to be give-and-take, but Shane just felt himself taking constantly. He didn't have anything to offer Ilya back; he didn't even have much for himself to stand on.

"Hey," Ilya catches him going down the bad thought path. "I want you to listen to me right now. Not whatever your brain is telling you. I am in charge, okay? That means I know what is best for you and I know which thoughts are worth your time and which ones are not."

Shane blinks up at him, feeling his heart start to slow in his chest.

"We are going to go down and get some breakfast. And then we are going to go to the beach with the boys. We are going to relax and get some sun."

"Isn't there a hurricane?" Shane voices unsurely.

“There was supposed to be, but it turned into a beautiful day, so we are going to take advantage of the nice weather,” Ilya smiles at him.

“But what about the game?” Shane presses as his heart skyrockets all of a sudden.

“Sweetheart,” Ilya leans in, his eyebrows creased with concern. “The game is already cancelled. And, personally, I think that is a very good thing right now. You do not need to worry about hockey or the weather or anything at all today. You just have to listen and be good for me. I am going to tell you everything you need to know, okay? I want you to shut your brain off, please. Can you do that for me?”

Shane sucks in a deep breath. “Yeah. I mean, yes, but—”

Ilya sighs and tips his head in question.

“I just. I don’t really like the beach. Like, the sand, and the saltwater…” Shane wrinkles his nose, but Ilya just laughs.

“Oh, baby. Do you really think I don’t know you at all?” His lips curl, and he presses forward to kiss him gently. “I already rented you one of the beach cabanas. You are just going to lie out in the sun and tan nice and pretty for me, okay?” Ilya hums, looking him over, and Shane’s heart flutters.

Yeah. He didn’t deserve him at all.

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When they get down to the beach, Shane is already a little uncomfortable. Ilya had forced him to put sunblock all over despite Shane’s arguments that he *doesn’t* burn, and even though Ilya had bought a special sunscreen that was supposed to dry into the skin faster, it was still bothering him.

“It’s just so sticky,” Shane sighs, shifting uncomfortably. The sun is streaming into his eyes. There’s sand all over his shoes and ankles from having to walk all the way across the beach to get to the luxury cabana. And, worst of all, all the guys want to go into the ocean. Not one of them wants to stay and lie out with him.

“I am sorry, моя любовь. It is sticky, yes, but you need protection from the sun. Even if I do secretly hope you get more of these cute little speckles,” he leans in close, but Shane pushes him back by the chest.

“You can’t do that out here,” Shane reminds him, eyes wide as he looks around to check their surroundings.

“No one is even looking.” Ilya rolls his eyes.

“I’m looking,” Bood pokes his head in all of a sudden, and Ilya just shoves at him.

“God, I can’t wait till you bring Cassie around the club so I can tell her about all the gay shit you say.”

“Hey,” Bood makes an affronted sound, but he’s laughing not even a second later. “I told you Cassie’s got a wild side. She’d probably be into it. Could I really bring her to the club?”

“Of course,” Ilya shrugs. “Opening night is for family, friends, whoever. If you guys want to come back after that for the events and stuff, you’ll have to be approved for a membership. Background check, sign nondisclosures. It is for safety and privacy reasons. We take this very seriously.”

“Sounds fucking legit.” Bood nods, clapping his hands together. “You gettin’ in on this?” He asks, jutting his chin in the direction of the water.

“I’m going to hang out here for a bit,” Ilya waves off with a smile.

“No, you should go,” Shane huffs. “I know you love to swim. I don’t want you to feel like you have to hang out with me.”

“Well, what if I just *want* to hang out with you?”

Shane looks at him deadpan. “You only wanna hang out with me because I have no one else to hang out with.”

“Hey guys,” Troy gets out breathlessly as he strolls up to the cabana. “What’s up?”

“Barrett,” Ilya claps him on the shoulder. “Are you going in the water or are you laying out?”

“Uh,” Troy laughs at the question. “I think I’m gonna lay out. I could use a little color. I’m starting to look like a ghost,” he frowns, looking down at his pale arms.

“Well, I think you look great,” Harris comments, appearing not even a half-second later.

“Oh,” Troy jumps in surprise. “I—thank you.”

“No problem,” Harris smiles warmly. “Hey, Ilya. Hey, Shane.”

“Harris, my man.” Ilya sidles up to Harris this time. “Won’t you join me for a glorious splash in the ocean?”

“Absolutely,” Harris agrees around a laugh. “It’s a beautiful day. I’ve got a new lease on life. Not to mention, the water looks fucking beautiful.”

“Perfect. Then, Harris, you’ll come with me. Troy, you stay and hang out with Shane.”

“I—really?” Shane questions, raising his eyebrows, cause usually Ilya would never leave him alone with any of the guys, but especially not Troy. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure, котенок. Is there a problem?” Ilya raises his eyebrows expectantly.

“No problem,” Shane mutters.

“What’s that word mean? The one you just said in Russian,” Troy cuts in, squinting up at Ilya. “You use it a lot.”

“That? Oh, nothing. Is just pet name.” Ilya waves off. “Come on, Harris. I’ll race you in.” And then Ilya takes off running in the direction of the water.

“Hey, no fair,” Harris shouts, throwing his bag down and quickly stripping out of his clothes, into his bathing suit, before rushing to follow after.

When Shane looks over at Troy, he finds him just blinking in shock, his cheeks a little flushed.

“You alright?” Shane asks carefully, leaning in to catch his gaze.

Troy shakes himself out of his stupor. “Yeah, um. Of course. No, I’m totally fine,” he chuckles awkwardly, and Shane smiles. “So, uh. Are you feeling a bit better today? I know, um, yesterday was a lot.”

Shane’s smile drops instantly.

“Sorry,” Troy backtracks. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“No, I mean.” Shane ducks his head before letting out a heavy sigh. “I just—fuck. I can’t lose him, you know?” Shane admits, eyes drifting to where Ilya has started splashing Harris to try and get him to come further into the water. “You don’t even think about something like that. And then, when it happens, it’s like, fuck. I didn’t even know to have that fear until yesterday, but now, I can’t stop picturing it.”

Troy swallows and nods, offering Shane a wry smile in return. “I know what you mean. It really puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?” And he’s watching Ilya, too. Or maybe Harris. “Ilya’s a good Captain,” Troy thinks aloud. “I never expected to come out, like, ever,” he laughs. “Let alone to my entire team.”

Shane lets his lips curl also as he lounges back against the pillows on the sun sleeper. “Jesus. I didn’t either. I mean,” he laughs in amazement. “I barely even let myself admit I was gay until my girlfriend had to flat-out *tell* me.”

Troy looks over at him, his eyes brightening slightly at the revelation. “Wait, seriously? You didn’t know you were gay until what? Rose Landry?”

Shane laughs again at how stupid it sounds. “I was in *extreme* denial, let’s just put it that way.”

“Wait,” Troy’s eyebrows press together. “So, did you…” he pauses for a second, almost like he’s not sure whether he should ask his next question. “Had you ever been with a guy?”

Shane licks his lips and flushes slightly. “I—not before Ilya, no.”

Troy’s eyebrows shoot up this time. “Holy shit. Rozy was your first?”

Shane turns to hide his face in one of the pillows.

“Sorry,” Troy laughs. “I’m not judging, it’s just…wow. That’s kind of fucking nuts.”

“God, I know.” Shane presses his hands over his eyes. “The thing is…I don’t think I’ve been attracted to *anyone* the way I’m attracted to Ilya. I mean, even when we first met all those years ago, he gave me these fucking…butterflies,” Shane admits, peeking slightly at Troy through his fingers. “Is that just like so fucking pathetic and lame?”

Troy just watches him for a minute before shaking his head. “No, I think that’s really sweet and rare.” Troy’s eyes drift back to Ilya and Harris. “You’re really lucky you found someone like that. It sounds like you guys have something really special.”

Shane puffs a small breath and follows Troy’s gaze. “Yeah.” It’s why he’s so terrified of losing him. “What about you? Have you…been with guys before?”

Troy exhales heavily. “Yeah.” He lies back against the pillows as well, stretching out. “My last boyfriend fucking cheated on me. He told me it didn’t matter since we were just casual, anyway, because we were long distance,” Troy barks a sarcastic laugh. “I was completely in love with him. He broke my fucking heart.”

“Jesus,” Shane swallows, turning slightly on his side to regard Troy properly, his arm propped up behind his head. “I’m so sorry.” And then, “Is…is that why you were so worried when you thought Ilya might be cheating?”

Troy breaks into a grin at that, his twinkling eyes meeting Shane’s gaze. “Yeah. Fuck. Sorry about that, by the way. That must have been really weird for you.”

“No, not at all,” Shane shakes his head, eyebrows pressed together gently. “I thought it was sweet you were so concerned. I’m sorry I didn’t just tell you then and there,” Shane sighs. “I guess I was just scared about how everyone would take it. Like, it’s one thing to have a gay guy on the team, but it’s another to have to see it in the locker room, on the buses, at team events…”

“Well, I don’t know about the other guys, but *I* for one find it really refreshing,” Troy offers. “Plus, I mean, the way he is with you,” he smiles lightly, shaking his head.

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

“I don’t know,” Troy shrugs. “Just, like, the way he talks to you. The way he looks at you. It’s really intense.”

Shane chews at the inside of his lower lip. “Intense?” He questions warily.

“It’s a good thing, trust me. I’d kill to have a boyfriend like that,” Troy assures him, sighing wistfully. “I mean, I’d kill to have a decent boyfriend in general, but…no one’s ever taken care of me the way he seems like he takes care of you. Feeding you. Looking after you. Worrying over you.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane breathes out. “He’s really protective. I think it’s just how he was raised, you know? He’s always, sort of, had to be…like, the caregiver. For his family and stuff.” Shane’s heart clenches at the thought that he’ll never meet them. He finds himself reaching for his necklace, wrapping his fist around the pendant. “I think it’s why he’s so good at leading.”

“Leading?” Troy presses his lips together.

Shane blushes slightly. “Yeah, like. Being a good Captain. Being a good boyfriend.”

“Being a good Dom?” Troy guesses, and Shane huffs a laugh into the pillow as he hides his face again. “Sorry, I just. You brought it up last night, so…”

“No, I mean. It’s fine,” Shane waves off. “I guess I’m just not used to talking about it that much. Not with people outside of the club, at least.”

“Ilya invited me,” Troy relays. “Er, I know he sort of invited everyone, but um. He invited me before that. He said, um. It might be nice. For you to have more people you could be yourself around. And, that if I felt comfortable, maybe I could learn more?”

“Fuck,” Shane curses, glancing over at Ilya in the ocean once more. “He did?”

“Sorry,” Troy feels the need to apologize. “Is that—”

“No, it’s okay,” Shane says quickly. “I just,” he huffs and then drops his head, picking at his fingernails.

“Hey.” Troy reaches out to stop him with a slight frown. “You’re going to mess up your nails.”

Shane feels warm all over, and he stops picking immediately. “Thanks,” he murmurs, sitting up a little despite the way his cheeks are flaming red. “Sorry. I just. Don’t know how to talk about this to people.”

“Well,” Troy starts. “Maybe you could tell me what it’s like?”

“The club?”

“Yeah, or like. How did you get into it?” Troy muses.

“Well,” Shane hums thoughtfully. “Rose actually told me about it because she thought I needed to get laid. With a guy, I mean,” he adds as an afterthought, but it pulls a laugh from Troy. “And, um, I didn’t know Ilya owned the place. I just sort of…saw him there. I guess I’ve always been a little…mesmerized by him, but this time was different. I mean, he was really in his element. And I hadn’t seen him outside of hockey probably ever, you know? He just looked…really, really good.”

Shane coughs, feeling a little embarrassed by the way he’s talking about Ilya, but Troy just nods for him to keep going.

“And then he invited me to *In the Dark*, which is like the blindfold event we were talking about. I had no idea what to expect when I got there, but *god*,” Shane breathes, shaking his head. “I can’t tell you how good it felt to just…let go. Give up control. Not have to worry about things for a bit.”

Troy swallows.

“I didn’t have to talk. I didn’t have to think. I didn’t have to decide anything because everything was decided for me. He told me where to go, what to do. He was…feeding me. With his fingers,” Shane adds, because that part was important. “He just kept touching me like I was *his*. And, I dunno. It felt really nice to have someone’s full attention like that. I mean, he made me feel so…cared for. And, like. Looked after. And I think, especially with dating girls before, I had never really taken on that role before. You know? I mean, fuck, the way he was talking to me.”

“Like…like how?” Troy asks tentatively. “How he was talking to you last night?”

Shane feels his breathing pick up because Ilya *always* talked to him so nicely, but his Dom voice was something else entirely. “He just has this way of making you sink into your head. Like his voice is so calm and soothing. He talks really slow and deep sometimes. Like he’s trying to hypnotize you,” Shane admits quietly, and it’s turning him on a bit. The way Troy is looking at him. The flashbacks Shane’s getting of their first event together.

He rubs his hands over his eyes to try and snap himself out of it.

“So, um. Then, what happened?” Troy presses. He’s leaning in with interest, almost like he’s hanging on to every word.

Shane curls his legs closer to him, hugging the cabana pillow against his chest. “I freaked out,” Shane splutters a laugh. “I was having a gay crisis still. And a Rozanov crisis. And a kink crisis. But, um. I still went back.”

“You did?”

“Yeah,” Shane nods emphatically. “Because I’d never felt anything like that before. Um, like. The ability to just turn my brain off. To not have to worry about anything. Plus, Ilya *really* wanted me to come back. He put together this event in, like, a matter of days just to convince me,” Shane smiles fondly at the memory.

“What, um. What other events do you do?” Troy asks, subtly moving a little bit closer.

“Well,” Shane bites his lower lip hard. His heart is pounding. He has no idea if he’s making a huge mistake by telling Troy all of this. He surveys the other carefully in front of him, but it’s like Troy can read his mind.

“Hey, I’m not judging, I swear.” Troy raises his hands. “I just, you know. It sounds like… really interesting. I’ve, um. I’ve never felt like that either. Like,” he pauses, as if he’s trying to come up with the right words to describe it. “God, I don’t know. I’d love to be able to get out of my head like that. To not have to think for a while, like you said. I can’t even *imagine*

how nice that must feel. To have someone take care of you. To the point where, like, they handle *everything*."

"Yeah," Shane breathes, wetting his lips with his tongue. He thinks Ilya probably was hoping he would tell Troy about this. If Ilya trusted Shane alone with him right now. If Ilya invited Troy to the club. Clearly, he thinks Troy is a safe bet to share something like this with. And Shane trusts Ilya implicitly. "Have you heard of like…pet play?" He broaches carefully. He tries not to hyperventilate when Troy scrunches his eyebrows up.

"What, like…with actual pets?"

"No. Shit," Shane laughs as he shakes his head quickly. "Never mind." Yeah, no. This was not a normal topic to bring up at all. Shane's sure that Troy means well, but there's no way he actually wants to know about this stuff.

"No, wait." Troy clutches onto his arm. "Tell me. I'm not trying to be mean or anything. I just genuinely don't know." His eyebrows furrow.

Shane feels his throat go dry as he continues to shake his head. "Sorry, no. It's probably weird. I mean, I definitely shouldn't be talking about this with you. You're going to think I'm such a freak—"

"Woah," Troy cuts in, and suddenly he's sitting up fully, taking Shane's hand in his. "You are *so* far from a freak. Like, if anything, you're *way* cooler than I thought you'd be."

Shane's own eyebrows crease together. "Really?" He asks.

Troy just laughs like it's obvious. "Yeah, I mean. The way you're so, like, confident. So yourself."

"*Me*?" Shane asks incredulously, because he's never felt that way. He's never been known for his confidence. If anything, he feels like he's been hiding for the better part of ten years. Maybe even longer.

"Yeah, *you*," Troy agrees. "I mean, you came out to us that very first day in the locker room. You're like the first hockey player I've ever heard say he was gay—let alone the *biggest* hockey player in the entire NHL. And you didn't apologize for it. You just…told us. Like it was no big deal."

"Well," Shane relents. "That's only cause I was already kind of outed."

"Still," Troy shakes his head, lifting Shane's hand a little higher to prove his point. "You openly wear nail polish. You kiss Ilya in the locker room like you don't care who sees. You fucking…walk around with his necklace in front of the entire world. You posted it on your Instagram." Troy is grinning now. "I mean, that's fucking badass."

Shane's heart flutters wildly in his chest at the way Troy is speaking about him. It did sound brave when he put it like that. Confident. Proud. Like Shane wasn't afraid of how people would react to his love, even though, truthfully, he was terrified.

But after the plane crash, he was feeling less so. What was the point of hiding when it felt so good to love Ilya openly? Frankly, Shane was sick of hiding so much. Maybe he wasn't ready to announce their relationship publicly yet, but he could certainly stand to hide less. Especially around his team. Especially around Troy, who was practically begging for him to open up.

"Um, pet play," Shane says shyly, as Troy lets their hands drop, but Shane keeps their fingers tangled together for moral support. He needs to touch someone right now. He needs comfort if he's going to get this out. "It's sort of like a headspace. You can kind of just shut your brain off and let someone else be in charge."

"What, like, the headspace of…of a pet? Like a dog or something?"

"Um, or a cat." Shane scratches the back of his neck. "It's not even really about being an animal that much. It's more just like…being led. Looking to someone for guidance. Giving up control and letting someone else decide for you."

Troy blinks a few times, and Shane risks a glance at him.

"Wow. So, do you like wear ears and stuff?" Troy asks, tipping his head, and Shane feels like he's losing his mind.

His hands are shaking, he realizes. Troy just links their fingers together a little more securely.

"Yeah," Shane whispers like it's something to be ashamed of. "Sometimes."

Troy's quiet for a moment, and Shane is fairly certain he's about to make up some excuse to leave. To go run in the water and play with the rest of the team because Shane was obviously saying fucking insane things that should not be shared with any other normal person.

"That's kind of cute," he says instead. "You'd look good with them."

Shane wants to cry.

Troy is smiling at him like he knows how fragile Shane is right now, but he's not running. He's not freaked out. He's just there. Holding Shane's hand, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the back of Shane's.

"So, what? That's why you get all cuddly and soft, then? Is that what Rozy was talking about?"

Shane presses his face into the pillow and covers himself with his free hand to avoid the heat of Troy's gaze.

"Hey, it's not a big deal," Troy laughs, reaching to tug Shane's hand away. "I mean, I'm sure there are crazier things to be into. He doesn't like…keep you tied up in a cage with an electric shock collar on you, does he?"

Shane groans. "I mean, no. Well…it's not a shock collar."

“Shit.” Troy raises his eyebrows. “Do you actually have a collar, then?”

Shane just blushes and nods. “I mean, it’s just—”

“The necklace,” Troy realizes, and Shane can’t believe he’s put that together so quickly.

“Do you…you know about BDSM?” Shane tips his head in confusion because there’s no way Troy is just being so normal about this.

Troy huffs and rolls his eyes. “My ex told me part of the reason he cheated was because our sex life was too vanilla.”

“Jesus,” Shane comments. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well. I kind of, like, took that personally. So, I went into this huge deep dive—or at least I *thought* it was a huge deep dive—and I basically looked up all this stuff, but it was just about like. I don’t know. Pain. Punishments. Getting tied up. I mean, a ton of crap I’d never be interested in.”

Shane shakes his head. “No. I mean, that’s some of it—if you’re into that—but with me and Ilya, it’s more about our dynamic. Giving up control. Letting him lead me or…decide things for me. It can sort of just be whatever you want, you know? There’s a lot of different things I’d never heard of, or I never thought in a million years I’d be into.” He flushes again. “Like…like the kitten stuff.”

“But, it’s like a sex thing, right?” Troy clarifies.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, before stopping himself. “Well, I mean. No, not always. For me, sometimes, it’s just about letting go. Getting out of my head. It can be…really relaxing to just…not have to worry about anything. I get to be soft and cuddly, and I get to turn my brain off. It’s kind of, like, primal sometimes, too.”

“Primal like how?” Troy prods curiously.

“I dunno,” Shane shrugs shyly. “Like biting, sometimes. Licking. Nuzzling.”

“Yeah,” Troy laughs. “I noticed the biting thing. Trust me. A *lot* of the guys did. Rozy’s neck has literal teeth marks.”

Shane’s cheeks are dark red.

“So, um. In the locker room the other day,” Troy raises lightly. “Ilya mentioned that was you sort of…feeling safe around me? Like, um. Safe to be yourself more? Is that…” He trails, but Shane knows what he’s asking.

“Well.” Shane bites his lip and lets out a huff. “I dunno. I guess I’m still kind of trying to figure out what’s a kitten thing versus what’s just a Shane thing. Like...my therapist says I tend to…put on this mask, I guess. Where I feel like I need to have everything together all the time instead of just…relaxing. So, sometimes, when I’m around people I can trust, I just, um…sort of drop into this headspace.”

“Like a kitten headspace?” Troy tips his head.

Shane pinches his lower lip between his fingers in thought. “I don’t think it’s always that. But, I guess they do sort of intersect, sometimes. I think being quiet and cuddly, that can be a Shane thing. But, definitely the nuzzling, like. That’s a kitten thing,” he admits bashfully.

“And the kitten things are, like, more sexual?”

“No!” Shane is quick to clarify. “I mean, not always. There’s like…there’s levels to it. God, I don’t know. Ilya could probably explain this much better than I could. He has this whole system,” Shane laughs, but he feels lighter for being able to talk about this.

Troy is still holding his hand; it’s like they both barely notice, but it’s a much-needed comfort nonetheless.

“Level 1 isn’t really sexual at all. It’s probably mostly just the unmasking thing. It just means I feel safe, and sometimes, that means I get into this sort of kitten headspace. It makes my brain sort of slow down a bit. It can be, like, harder to express myself. Or make decisions. That’s why it’s really important that Ilya is there to guide me when I get like that. I still know what’s going on and stuff, I just…kind of look to him more to take control. And he helps to make sure I don’t go too far down.”

“What would, um,” Troy asks carefully. “What would going too far down look like?”

Shane blinks a few times. “Well, um. I guess if I went really far, I could not know where I am. I might start like…getting way more kitten-y.”

“Like the licking and biting?” Troy guesses.

“Yeah, or. Sometimes I…meow?” Shane laughs, ducking his head again. “Words can be hard. When I’m like that. Or sometimes, I start pawing at him. Wanting him to pet me. Sniffing him—since he smells so fucking good. *Humping* him. If I get really turned on,” Shane lets himself admit. “I dunno. Our dynamic is pretty widespread. We do a lot of things. But like. Obviously not around other people. Except at club events.”

“Fuck,” Troy breathes out in surprise, his eyes cataloguing Shane carefully. “You hump him at club events?” His eyes are wide, but Shane doesn’t see any judgment in them. Just curiosity.

“Yeah,” Shane whispers. “We do pet events, sometimes, and like. Everyone’s a pet. Everyone wears their ears, and some people have like…tails or leashes. One of my friends, Ivan,” Shane holds his breath. “He’s a puppy. Well, not all the time. He’s just a sub, I guess, but he’s a puppy *sometimes*. And, like. We had so much fun at the event last weekend in Montreal. His Dom, Cedric, is really nice. And Ilya said we could maybe even have a playdate soon.”

“What, like, actually play? Like together?” Troy furrows his eyebrows.

“With toys and stuff,” Shane nods jerkily. “Sorry. I know this probably all sounds super weird. I probably shouldn’t be sharing so much.”

“No, I mean. Shit. I never knew there were so many different parts of BDSM. I sort of just thought it was for people with pain kinks.” Troy offers a toothy grin, and Shane giggles, lying back against the pillow once more.

“Not at all. Ilya and I *hate* pain play. Or, I mean. I haven’t really tried it that much, but… yeah. I don’t think I’d like it if he wanted to hurt me. Most of our punishments are more, like, mental, I guess.”

“Wait, so he actually punishes you?” Troy’s eyes dart to Ilya in the ocean.

Shane smiles lightly. “Just if I break the rules. But, I mean, there’s always aftercare. I think that’s usually my favorite part. When I just get to relax while he dotes on me. I mean, I can’t imagine finding a better Dom than Ilya. He’s so, *so* perfect. I think, at the end of the day, we just want the same things out of it. It’s why our dynamic works so well.”

“God. I wish I had something like that,” Troy admits, puffing a sigh.

Shane perks up a little. “Well, you could! If you come to the club. Ilya could probably help you find a Dom, no problem. He’s the one who matched up Cedric and Ivan, and they’re doing amazing so far.”

“Really?” Troy blinks, though his gaze shifts to Harris.

“Unless…you already had someone in mind?” Shane offers knowingly, and it’s Troy’s turn to flush this time, but then, Troy’s staring at him, and Shane stares back in confusion.

“Sorry, it’s just. You, um,” Troy gestures to him. “You have a bit of sunscreen. In your hair.”

“I do?” Shane frowns, reaching to touch at his hair, but Troy just laughs.

“Here, hold on.” And then he’s leaning into Shane’s space, running his fingers through the front of Shane’s hair. “Sorry, it’s just. Now, it’s spreading.” Troy sticks his tongue out slightly in concentration as he tries to rub the sunscreen out, and Shane—

Shane can’t help tipping his head forward and closing his eyes, letting himself savor the sensation for a moment, his fingers twitching slightly in Troy’s grasp because *right*. They were still holding hands.

“Oh,” Troy comments, as if the realization has dawned on him. “Sorry, is that—um. Did I trigger the cat thing?”

Shane laughs wetly and lets his forehead fall to Troy’s shoulder while he sucks in a breath. “No, you’re fine. It just…felt nice. That’s all,” he comments softly, before forcing himself to lift his head and meet Troy’s eyeline again.

But Troy must be able to see something in his gaze because he pauses, and then, all of a sudden, he’s raking his fingers through Shane’s hair intentionally. And Shane’s lips part in a small gasp, his eyes slipping closed once more as he leans into the touch without question.

“Is that okay?” Troy asks, and all Shane can do is nod while his entire body goes lax. “Here, lie back if you want—”

“You don’t have to—” Shane forces the words to come out of his mouth.

“Dude, I can literally *see* the stress melting out of you. You’ve had a rough week. Just let me, yeah?” Troy offers around a sweet laugh, and Shane feels himself sink.

He puffs a soft sigh and lets his body melt into the cabana sleeper. He lets his eyes fall shut again and focuses on the way Troy’s petting his hair, tips his head a little closer to give him more room.

He practically rumbles when Troy scratches over the crown of his scalp.

“Wow, you really like that, hm?” Troy murmurs softly, but Shane is done talking. He’s done answering questions. Right now, he just wants to let Troy pet him like he’s a cat. He feels on top of the world.

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“So, Harris,” Ilya says intentionally once they’ve paddled out and found the perfect spot to jump over waves without getting completely thrown underwater. “I am going to need you to tell me more about you being a Dom.”

Harris just cackles in surprise. “God. I am *not* a Dom, trust me. I’ve only done it once or twice. I really don’t have any experience whatsoever.”

“Once or twice is more than most people. Are you interested in learning more?” Ilya questions lightly, only because Harris had seemed curious during their conversation last night at dinner.

“I mean, *maybe*,” Harris admits, and his cheeks are flushing slightly. “I figure I should probably worry about finding a partner before I worry about anything related to BDSM,” he laughs.

“Well, the finding a partner part should be pretty easy, don’t you think?” Ilya asks, tipping his head in the direction of where they’ve just left Troy and Shane on the private cabana bed.

“What, *Troy*?” Harris’ eyes go wide. “Yeah,” he scoffs. “Right.”

Ilya just raises his eyebrows. “What? You are not interested?”

Harris still looks shocked as he glances between Ilya and the beach where they’ve just come from. “You can’t be serious, I mean. He’s not—”

“Not what? Super into you? That’s not what he told me.”

“*What*?” Harris’ jaw drops. “No, I…I thought he had a crush on Shane.”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “Everyone has a crush on Shane, Harris. Keep up. Troy is obviously a sub. And two subs together, that does not work.”

“I—” Harris’ eyebrows pinch together. “You think Troy is a sub?”

Ilya just smirks and lets himself dip completely underwater before bursting back up and splashing Harris all over.

“Hey!” Harris laughs, pushing water at Ilya this time.

“Well.” Ilya pushes his wet hair out of his face. “He has not told me in so many words, but I have a pretty good radar when it comes to these things. I mean, you should have seen Hollander when I first met him. I probably should have known immediately, with the way he is such a rule follower, but *instructions*—” Ilya sighs, letting his eyes slip shut for a second before blinking them back open. “He follows instructions like a dream. He is easily the most submissive person I have ever met. He can drop into subspace just from me talking to him.”

“Seriously?” Harris’ eyebrows pinch together in surprise. “Shit. I don’t really know anything about subspace, but it’s supposed to be pretty hard to get someone there, right? I don’t think I’ve ever put someone in subspace before.”

Ilya just grins. “I can teach you how. It is very different person-to-person, but yes. My котенок goes down very easily. We are constantly fighting to keep him from going down when he is in public. Is becoming a big problem, actually.”

Well, no. Not a problem. A problem was a bad thing, and Ilya didn’t find Shane’s ease at which he could go into subspace to be a bad thing whatsoever. In fact, it was probably one of the best things in the world. The fact that Shane was so damn easy for him. He liked being told what to do. And Ilya *really*, really liked telling him.

“Um. Wow. Your котенок?” Harris tips his head in question. “Is that Russian for sub?”

“Mm, is Russian for kitten,” Ilya relays, but he doesn’t go into further detail. “Anyway, Troy has a big fat crush on you, and he was very interested when I brought up the club. He has mentioned how nice it would be to shut his head off, and I think you could offer him that. You know. If you wanted.”

Harris swallows and then turns to look at Troy and Shane again. Troy and Shane, who are suddenly leaned in close and talking to each other animatedly. Ilya’s heart picks up in his chest.

He really hopes his instincts about Troy are correct. That he’s not just imagining things. How *great* would it be for Shane to have another sub on the team that he could talk to? Someone safe. Maybe even someone as safe as Ivan was for him.

Ilya was probably getting ahead of himself, but whatever. The sun is shining. He’s alive and well, and his brain is full of optimism. For the first time in a long time, he trusts that the universe has a plan, and he actually thinks the plan might be a good one.

His mom’s necklace isn’t on his chest, but he still feels her beaming down at him. He feels her light glinting from Shane’s neck across the beach. And he knows she’s the reason that he and Shane get to live another day. That this whole team can. He doesn’t really believe in miracles, but he does believe in saviors. People who are meant to protect you from the evils of this world, even if those evils live within yourself. His mom is his, and he’s Shane’s, and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, Harris can be Troy’s.

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Chapter End Notes

Troy Barrett, you are so special to me! Shane has a new humannnn, the kitty is so happy

Some healing/bonding time for the boys. They deserve the night off! We still have one more away game on this trip and then back home to Ottawa.

Thank you for all the lovely comments, as always. It's amazing to see so many new people who are getting caught up to the recent chapters. Just know, you're all so appreciated and I love hearing your ideas/what you're looking forward to most with the story!! Even if I don't respond, I am definitely reading all of them, thank you!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

> trigger warning for continued trauma from the plane crash and non-consensual drugging (not as extreme as it sounds, but wanted to tag just in case!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they finally get back to the hotel after a long day spent in the sun, Ilya is exhausted. It's not just from today, though, or even the past two days. It's been building up probably for a while now. All week, maybe. Perhaps even longer.

They order room service for dinner before Ilya even gets a chance to shower because, again, Shane hasn't eaten since breakfast. And when they sit down to eat at the little table in their hotel room, Ilya turns on the TV and hands Shane the remote so he can look for something to watch. He doesn't think anything of it as he goes to the restroom to relieve himself.

But when he comes back, Shane is frozen in place, his eyes wide. He's got the remote in his hand, half-raised to the television, and when Ilya turns to look at the screen—

It's *Cast Away*. Tom Hanks is screaming as the plane starts to dip. Oxygen masks, and life jackets, and the whirring sound of the plane's engines failing as the big, metal death-machine gives up and nose-dives, spiraling closer and closer to the inevitable crash that is so familiar Ilya can practically feel it reverberating in his bones.

He finds himself watching it, too, unable to look away. Something is vibrating through his body. Something that feels a lot like panic. And for a second, he can't move. He can't breathe. He's just standing there watching it happen, his own memories flooding back to him. The fear in Shane's eyes. The deafening sound of everyone screaming at once. The mental images that flashed through his mind when he was sure they only had minutes left to live. Shane's charred, burnt body in the rubble. No amount of time in the gym or number of Stanley Cups could have saved him in that moment. It didn't matter if Ilya loved him with all his might. He couldn't protect him. He had felt so fucking helpless. He feels that way now.

When the pilot gets knocked unconscious by a particularly brutal blow to the head, Ilya jolts forward and reaches for the remote to turn it off. The silence that follows is so palpable that even the sound of the air conditioner coming to life next to them is enough to make him jump. And then, he looks at Shane. Shane, who's still staring blankly at the lifeless TV. Shane, whose hand is still poised to change the channel even though he's no longer holding the remote.

Ilya can see the way he's swaying, like a red wave of terror is starting to wash over him, infiltrating his bloodstream one vessel at a time. His breathing picks up, and Ilya is on him in

an instant, gripping onto his shoulder, trying to get Shane to look in his eyes.

“Shane, it’s just a movie. It’s not real,” Ilya tells him calmly.

Except that it *is* real. It happened just yesterday. Ilya feels it in his own body like a physical weight that has latched onto him, dragging him down, holding him under. They didn’t die in that plane, but they didn’t walk out fully unscathed either. They’re both carrying around the wreckage inside of them. For every piece of metal that didn’t hit the ground, there’s a similar shard digging into Ilya’s gut, cutting deeper with each passing second and ripping him to shreds from the inside out.

He scratches his fingers through Shane’s hair and then slides his hands down both of Shane’s biceps, trying to be a grounding presence even though he himself doesn’t feel like he exited that plane alive. There are pieces of him still missing, still up there. Pieces that he wonders if he’ll ever get back. Pieces that look a whole lot like safety, reassurance, hope. He’s void of those things now. Where optimism lived yesterday, a hole exists today. A false sense of security ripped right out from under him with a menacing laugh like he was stupid to have ever believed it. When has anything good ever come without the bad? He should know better by now. He’s lived through enough tragedy to know how these things go.

He’s doing a half-assed job at taking care of Shane right now; he knows that. He’s barely aware of his surroundings as he goes through the motions. Physical touch. Grounding words. Keeping Shane’s breathing under control. He gets him to the bed. He pets his hair. He’s trying every trick in the book.

And, eventually, Shane is calm for the most part. He’s so lost in his own head that he barely notices how distant Ilya is. How emotionless his words are coming out. Maybe it’s because Ilya doesn’t believe them himself.

Everything’s gonna be okay. You’re safe. Everything’s going to be fine.

Would everything be okay, though? Would everything be fine? It doesn’t feel like things are going to be fine. It feels like he’s fucking spiraling, spinning, getting closer and closer to the edge of a cliff. He’s not in any position to be taking care of Shane right now, but he has to. If he doesn’t, then who will?

He’s on the brink of explosion when someone knocks at the door, and for a second, he barely moves. He isn’t even sure he’s capable. He’s absentmindedly petting Shane’s back while staring blankly at the nature channel on TV. Shane, for the most part, seems pretty enthralled by the choice of programming. He’s sprawled across the bed on his stomach, his cheek pressed to the comforter as he watches with wide, captivated eyes while birds flit and flutter across the screen. He’s definitely a kitten right now, but Ilya is just glad he has some way of escaping it. Maybe a little jealous, too.

The knock sounds out again, and a sigh rushes out of him. He moves on autopilot to go answer the door, petting Shane’s hair as he passes him, before opening it to reveal none other than Troy Barrett.

Ilya blinks at him.

“Hey, uh. Sorry to bother you.” Troy wrings his hands together. “I was, um. I was wondering if you guys wanted to watch a movie? Shane mentioned he’s never seen *Men in Black*, so. I have it downloaded on my computer and I just figured, you know.”

“I’m sorry, he is really down right now,” Ilya heaves a breath. “Something came on the TV that was just…yeah.” He shakes his head. He can’t admit how much it affected him, too, but with the way Troy is assessing him, Ilya wonders if it’s written all over his face, pinched into the lines of his body.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Troy frowns, like it’s somehow his responsibility that Shane isn’t feeling 100%. “When you say down, you mean…”

“Yes. Like a kitten,” he says before he can think any better of it. He opens his mouth to backtrack once he realizes.

“It’s fine, he told me," Troy interrupts before Ilya can do anything to rectify the situation. “Is he okay? Does he need anything?”

Ilya furrows his eyebrows because he hadn’t realized Shane had opened up to Troy. He had hoped, of course, but he hadn’t expected it. Not to this degree. Not to the point where Troy knew what Shane being ‘like a kitten’ meant with no additional explanation.

“He, um,” Ilya stutters, while trying to come to terms with this new reality. A reality where someone else around them actually understands what’s going on. A reality where Ilya can talk about this openly without having to hold onto key parts to ensure their secret doesn’t get found out by an unsuspecting bystander. Someone who can’t consent to seeing it or being part of it because they don’t fully *know*.

But Troy knows. Ilya doesn’t know how much Troy knows exactly, but clearly enough, if his very open and understanding expression is anything to go off of.

“He’s um,” Ilya clears his throat, trying to regain control of the situation. “He’s just watching the nature channel right now.”

Troy nods like he understands. And then, “Are *you* okay?”

Ilya just stares at him. Almost like he can’t comprehend the question, and maybe it’s because no one’s asked him that in a very long time. In fact, he hasn’t even stopped to ask *himself* in as long as he can remember.

Ilya decidedly *isn’t* okay, he realizes. And now that someone’s pointed it out, it washes over him like a tidal wave. His hand falters on the door, and he finds himself having to lean against it, like he can’t even hold himself up anymore. The exhaustion is quite literally weighing him down, and he feels his eyelids dip.

“Hey,” Troy says suddenly. “If you need help, just tell me.”

Ilya clutches onto Troy’s arm for a second, like his body is physically seeking out someone to help ground him. He wonders if this is how Shane feels most days. Like a very weak person

trapped inside of a body that's deceptively strong on the outside. A very small presence within a vast and newly empty amount of open space.

"I need to shower," Ilya lets himself admit quietly because he could use a few minutes to himself. A few minutes to decompress without having to worry about the impact of Shane seeing him lose his cool. Shane needed him to remain stable right now. If Ilya let Shane see how scared he was, then Shane would be scared in return, and while Ilya could manage a little bit of fear, his Shane was already operating under large, copious amounts of stress, to the point where any extra could have a serious negative, and potentially detrimental, impact on his overall health.

"Okay," Troy nods in determination. "What do you need from me?"

"I—" Ilya falters again. He feels like he's asking for too much. No one has ever watched Shane alone while he's like this. Not without Ilya in the room to supervise. Could he really trust Troy? Did he even have a choice?

"Ilya," Troy says again. "Just tell me what you need."

"I just need you to keep an eye on him," Ilya relents, feeling his shoulders sag in defeat. He's a failure of a Dom, and right now, he's not doing his job properly. He's passing Shane off to someone else while knowing that they're not going to be able to provide the level of care that Shane deserves. "Just for a few minutes. I don't feel comfortable leaving him alone like this."

Troy is touching his side gently, almost like he's trying to offer some form of comfort. Ilya hates how much it's working. He feels so out of place.

"I can do that. Is there anything I need to know?"

"You know what you're agreeing to, right?" Ilya double-checks, because he has to be sure. He has to know he's not just springing this on him. "He feels like a cat right now. Like, *actually* a cat. Not just quiet and cuddly."

"That's okay," Troy agrees. "He explained it to me. My ex had a cat. I've watched cats before."

"He should be fine to keep watching TV. He might get a little riled up at the birds, but he's okay. Just…don't overthink it. If he wants attention, he'll let you know. Let him sniff your hand first if you go to pet him. He might be playful or silly. He might try to bite you or cuddle up with you," Ilya starts rattling off anything he can think of. "Don't call him by his name, it could pull him out of it, and he might start to overthink once he realizes you're there. He doesn't fully understand what's happening, okay? So, just. Be careful what you say. Nothing about hockey. Nothing about real life. Just keep it light. Treat him like he's really a cat. If he starts to wonder where I am, just tell him I'm going to be right back, but you can knock on the door if anything happens or if he needs me."

"Okay," Troy nods quickly, like Ilya is rambling too much at this point. "I've got it. Really. You don't have to worry. I'm gonna take care of him."

Something about the way he's phrasing it instantly puts Ilya at ease. Like he understands that this isn't just a game they're playing. That Shane is actually re-regulating himself and requires a very specific and structured environment to be able to do that.

So, Ilya steps aside to allow Troy to walk further into the room and meet, for the first time, kitten Shane.

"Sweetheart?" Ilya says softly as he shuts the door and starts in the direction of the bed.

He's thankful that Troy is following his lead, hovering behind him, being mindful not to get too close while Ilya handles the introductions.

"Look who came to see you," Ilya pulls Shane's attention away from the TV, and he's delighted when Shane seems to perk up a little in response. "Is it okay if Troy comes to hang out with you for a little bit, baby? I think he really wants to watch the birds with you."

-

Shane's cat eyes go wide at the realization that a new human has stepped into his space. At first, he's on high alert. Usually, Ilya would never bring someone around him when he's like this. Unless it was someone they both trusted, like Rose or Ivan, but as far as Shane knows, neither of them are in Florida right now. But, upon further inspection, Shane can see that it's just Troy who's walked into the room. A new human that Ilya is thinking about letting him claim. He feels his cat ears twitch from where they're perched on top of his head.

"Do you think he could sit and watch with you, sweet boy? Troy is a good friend of ours, right? He is very nice and safe."

Shane wishes he had his tail right now so he could swish it curiously. His nose wrinkles. He knows this human, of course, but he's never met him quite like this. He has no idea how Troy is going to react. His cat senses remind him to stay on guard. To scope it out before giving him the okay.

"You can go over to him. Just go slow. Follow his lead," Ilya is telling Troy quietly, and Shane's eyebrows raise when he realizes that Troy is going to approach him now.

He makes himself small and cowers a little in anticipation.

"Hi, Sha—"

"Kitty. Just call him kitty."

"Hi, kitty," Troy corrects, and Shane narrows his eyes into slits.

Can this person be trusted? He hasn't decided yet.

Troy is so close to him now. Right at the edge of the bed. He's blocking Shane's view of the birds, but he's holding his hand out expectantly. Shane has half a mind to bite him just so he realizes who's in charge here. This is *Shane's* territory. He already claimed it. And now Troy is trying to come near the bed where he and Ilya sleep together. How rude.

“Baby, be nice to him,” Ilya warns, like he can see where Shane’s head is at.

Shane just huffs and collapses into the bed like a grumpy kitty, but Troy is laughing like it’s funny, and it makes Shane’s belly swirl a little in response. Hmm. Maybe this human has come to play with him. Maybe Shane can even convince him to get the cat toy that he knows is hidden away somewhere in Ilya’s bag.

“You’re doing fine,” Ilya says to Troy, but Shane is so focused on tracking Troy’s every movement that he barely hears him. “He just hasn’t been introduced to anyone when he’s like this before.”

“I like your ears, kitty,” Troy says to him directly this time, and Shane’s eyes widen a bit at the compliment. “Do you mind if I pet you? Remember how I did that earlier? It seemed like you liked that, so. I was hoping to do it again.”

Shane *does* remember that. It’s somewhere stashed away in his human mind, a place he can’t really access right now, but he remembers the feeling of Troy’s fingers in his hair. How relaxed he had been with the sound of the ocean waves in the background, Ilya’s happy Russian accent ringing out from somewhere in the distance. God, he misses Ilya. He wants to wrestle and play and jump all over him, but for right now, he’s focused on assessing the strange new human standing in front of him.

Troy wanted to pet him? Shane tips his head curiously, and after another second of just staring at Troy’s outstretched hand, he leans in a little to sniff at his fingers. Interesting. Troy smells like soap! The hotel soap that Ilya had used to wash him clean last night, even though Shane would have much preferred Ilya’s regular body wash. But Ilya had forgotten it at home like a bad, evil owner. Shane could never hold it against him, though. He loves Ilya way too much.

Shane’s tongue darts out to lick at Troy’s fingers, and he frowns when Troy pulls them back slightly in surprise. When they return, not even a half second later, Shane bites him in retaliation.

“*Hey*. Absolutely not, котенок. Troy is a friend. And we do not bite our friends.”

But Shane is smiling. He totally showed Troy who’s boss around here. He slinks back into his spot on the comforter and rubs his cheek against the soft fabric, twisting slightly to feel the warmth all over his skin.

“Sorry about that—”

“It’s fine,” Troy laughs again. “I don’t have to touch him if he doesn’t want me to. I’ll just give him his space. You should go shower.”

Ilya looks extremely hesitant, like he’s not sure he’s making the right choice by bringing Troy around Shane. Shane’s eyebrows just twitch up in loose awareness. He has no idea what’s going on, but he recognizes that Ilya is clearly struggling with a decision.

Eventually, he relents. “I’ll be super quick. Just five minutes.”

“Take as long as you need,” Troy waves off. “Ten minutes. Twenty. We’ll be totally fine out here.”

Ilya licks over his lips as if contemplating something before he ultimately points to his backpack. “There’s um, a string toy. In my bag. If he starts getting aggressive or trying to come at you, he probably wants to play. He just might get a little—”

“*Ilya*,” Troy stresses. “I’ve got it. Seriously. Just go. We’re gonna be okay.”

Shane watches as Ilya swallows and then nods surely, his eyes drifting to Shane.

Shane perks up a little in awareness.

“I’m going to be in the bathroom just for a few minutes, baby. I’m just going to shower, but Troy’s going to stay with you, okay? I’m right here if you need anything. I’m right behind this door.” Ilya points to the bathroom door intentionally.

Shane just tips his head in confusion before sparing Troy a glance. Once again, he has no idea what’s going on, but Ilya is clearly trying to tell him something. The really great part about it, though, is that Shane couldn’t care less right now. If Troy wants to hang out in here, he’s just going to have to accept the risks of intruding on Shane’s territory. As far as Shane is concerned, he’s the cat king of this hotel room, and if he chooses to retaliate against him, then Troy will simply have to suffer the consequences.

He turns back to the TV just in time to see a massive crow land on top of the bird feeder, which causes all the other little mini birds to scatter and fly off. Shane jolts, his eyes darting in a million different directions as they each fly away to separate corners of the sky. Shane reaches his paw out like he might be able to grab onto one of them, but the TV is too far away, and they’re gone before he can process what that even means. He huffs and sinks down in frustration.

A door closes somewhere in the distance, and he can hear the sound of running water. Shane’s cat ear twitches when he hears someone moving closer to him, however, the bed dipping as Troy dares to sit on the far end. Shane turns just in time to see him taking his shoes off, Troy’s eyes going wide at having been caught.

“Sorry, kitty. I didn’t mean to interrupt your program. It looks like a really good one. I think I’ve seen this one before,” he hums before squinting at the TV in interest, which Shane finds really silly because there’s no way Troy can possibly recognize this random compilation of birds eating out of a feeder.

His lips curl on their own accord, and when Troy looks back over, he catches him smiling.

“Hi there. You’re really not gonna let me pet you?” Troy asks, patting the bed next to him. “That’s too bad. I was ready to dole out some *really* good head scratches,” he links his hands and flips them outward, stretching his arms out in front of him and flexing his fingers. “But you know. I suppose I can just save those for someone else.” He shrugs as if it makes no difference to him one way or the other.

Shane scrambles over and practically collapses on top of him, laying his head directly in Troy's lap before looking up at him expectantly.

"Oh, I see. *Now* you want me to pet you," Troy muses, but he's shaking his head fondly. He raises his hand above Shane's head and then hesitates. "You're not going to bite me again, are you, kitty?"

Shane just nuzzles his cheek against the fabric of Troy's sweatpants until Troy lets out a laugh.

"Okay, okay, *fine*. But only since you asked so nicely."

Shane purrs at the feeling of warm fingers gliding through his hair. And, that's *right.* It all comes flashing back to him. Troy is a *very* safe human. Ilya has clearly left Shane alone with him for a reason.

Shane feels a sharp realization in the middle of his tummy. Maybe this is a test. Maybe Ilya's seeing how Shane reacts to Troy before he decides if he's going to let Shane be the team kitty.

Holy shit. He has to be on his best behavior. If Ilya is testing him, then perhaps Shane has already failed by biting Troy. Shane is *not* a bad cat. In fact, he's an extremely polite type of kitty. He has to make sure Troy knows this before he reports back to Ilya.

So, he pushes himself into a sitting position and then headbutts Troy's shoulder, rubbing his cheek across him in a way that, Shane at least, considers to be very welcoming.

"Aw, look at you. You're such a nice cat, aren't you? You just need some time to warm up, hm? That's okay. I'm the same way sometimes, too," Troy tells him. And Shane just thinks it's so curious the way he's talking to him. So conversational. Like Shane has any earthly idea of what he's saying.

"Meow," Shane offers in response.

"Exactly. See? You get it."

Shane giggles. Troy's just being silly. They're *totally* vibing right now.

"Do you want me to get the cat toy out of Ilya's bag? He told me I'm allowed to play with you if you want."

Shane's eyes go wide, and he instantly places his paw on Troy's knee to dig his claws into the fabric of his sweatpants.

"I know, right? We should have lots of fun to make him super jealous."

Shane feels a thrum of excitement in his belly at the thought of that. Making Ilya jealous would probably mean Ilya was going to be *all* over him later. Mm, Shane loved it when Ilya got possessive. Maybe he should make sure to get Troy's scent on him just in case.

He mewls softly and starts to knead his claws into Troy's knee, blinking up at him just in case Troy needs any additional proof that Shane is a very sweet kitty who deserves his fish toy so badly right now. Ilya had brought it for him after all, and yet, Shane has been *deprived*. He just wants to play. There's something roaring inside of him, demanding to be addressed. It makes Shane want to pounce and *zoom*.

"You're super cute," Troy smiles at him, reaching up to poke at one of his kitten ears, and Shane feels his heart flutter.

He likes Troy a lot. A lot, a lot. He likes Troy even more when he stands and starts off in search of Ilya's bag.

Shane just circles around the bed excitedly, pausing every few seconds to check if Troy is done and if he's on his way back yet. Once he does start walking over, Shane throws himself onto the bed in anticipation, spotting the crinkly holographic orange sparkle fish on the end of his ocean ribbon toy.

"God, I bet Ilya spoils the hell out of you with these toys. This looks like a good one, by the way. Is this your favorite toy? I feel like this would be my favorite. Definitely digging the fish," Troy babbles, and Shane sticks his tongue out happily.

He's having so much fun. This human talks so funny. Like, what is he even saying? Shane reaches his paws out to try to get Troy to *play* with him. Enough talky talky from this pretty boy. Shane wants his damn fish.

"Alright, here you go." Troy crawls back onto the bed to sit with him. "Am I supposed to just dangle this above you? Like this, right?" He asks, letting the fish hang over Shane while Shane lies on his back and paws furiously at it. *Hell yeah*. Now this is what Shane was talking about. Some real, serious cat playtime.

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Ilya grips onto the bathroom counter tightly as he tries to catch his breath. Holy shit. His hands are shaking. He feels dizzy, like the room is spinning around him, trying to swallow him whole. The lights are too bright, causing his vision to go in and out. He really needs to breathe.

"Come on, get it the fuck together," he commands his body. He can feel himself losing control, and that is something he absolutely cannot afford to do right now. He needs to snap out of it and get back to taking care of Shane. Shane needed him way more than Ilya needed to be doing whatever the hell this is. Trying to breathe and failing. Always failing the people around him.

"Ебать," Ilya curses as he slowly lowers himself to the ground, sucking in deep breaths. He places one hand over his chest, the same way he makes Shane do when he's having a panic attack. He closes his eyes and tries to talk himself through it. In and out. Deep breaths. Everything's alright. He wonders if it usually feels as artificial to Shane as it feels to him now.

Shane, who he'd almost lost in the span of a few minutes. Powerless to do anything to help him. His entire life, his entire future disappearing before his very eyes. He'd do anything to push the images out of his head. The ones that keep playing over and over again of the news reports that would come out the next day.

Shane Hollander, four-time Stanley Cup-winning hockey star, dead in plane crash.

For some reason, the 'four-time Stanley Cup winner' hurts the most. The idea of Shane not getting to achieve every single thing he wants in this life. Ilya wipes at the tears on his face.

Shane Hollander, not survived by any spouse or children, just his parents, David and Yuna Hollander.

No one would have had any idea that he and Shane were actually married. Husbands to be, in fact. Would anyone tell them? Would Hayden? Would Rose?

Ilya forces himself to stand and strip out of his clothing.

Shane Hollander, found dead after embarrassing start to the hockey season on new losing team, Captained by failure, Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya turns on the shower and steps under the punishingly cold spray. He doesn't have time to wait for the water to heat up. Shane is down and vulnerable right now, and Ilya is probably fucking stupid for leaving him with Troy. It's like he never learns from his mistakes. He was destined to hurt anyone who got near enough. He was like the sun, burning people with the intensity of his love. A little from far away might be nice, but too much, too close, could be deadly.

It's why he originally buried himself in the club when Svetlana first bought it. *The Cave*, as they'd affectionately called it, because it resembled one, and Ilya supposed he bought into it because he really just wanted to disappear. Keep himself far from others for his own protection and theirs. And the club really was a safe haven because there, he was entirely in control. He couldn't hurt anyone. Not really. Not with all the systems in place to *prevent* hurting people.

BDSM was safe. People colored before anything bad could happen. Ilya never *tried* to hurt anyone, but sometimes he still did. Sometimes they'd call yellow or even red, and he'd stop, and just like that, everything would be okay again. They'd pause, discuss, and they'd move forward. The world would keep spinning.

Ilya's not in the club right now, though. He can't call red at the top of his lungs like he wants to and expect whatever hotshot is in charge to just agree. Life was not a very forgiving Dominant.

Ilya tips his head back under the stream and runs his fingers through his hair, rinsing the shampoo and seawater out of his curls. He tries to wash the events of the last two days down the drain with it, but to no avail, he still feels like a sharp, jagged pile of rocks. Weighed down. Useless. A hazard to those around him.

A pile of rocks should not be trusted to keep a beautiful flower like Shane safe. He was endangering him by even trying. And now Shane was too co-dependent. Ilya had made a fucking mess of him, quite frankly. Forcing him into the BDSM world before he knew any better, deciding that all of Shane's problems could be fixed just by him being a cat. He'd implemented a fucking execution strategy, had taught Shane to rely on it so heavily that it was actually starting to cause problems in his everyday life. It must be why he has Troy fucking Barrett cat-sitting in the other room right now. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He deserves to burn in hell for what he's done. Probably deserved to go down in that plane just as whatever higher power had intended. He'd probably only been spared because *Shane* didn't deserve it. No, Shane was too good for this world. He was most certainly too good for Ilya. Ilya rubs at his eyes some more and tries not to let the thoughts consume him, tries to get a handle on his rapidly beating heart that's threatening to burst out of his chest—and not in a good way.

Fuck. What would happen when Ilya inevitably ran Shane into the ground like he had done with everyone else in his life? The only one who has stuck around him long enough and *survived* is Svetlana. But she was tough. She could handle anything. Shane, on the other hand…Shane was fragile. He was so fucking strong, but he was also paper-thin. The force of Ilya, when the time came, would rip right through him; however, he can't cut him loose either. They're too tangled, at this point. He's sculpted Shane to be exactly what he needs with no fucking thought to how it might affect Shane in the long run. No plan for when this starts to unravel and blow up in his face. Shane would take the brunt of it, just like his mother had. His father. His brother's entire family.

Ilya bangs his fist against the shower wall and revels in the way pain blooms across the side of his hand. He's in too deep. There's no plan of action, no chance to course correct. All he can do is try to put as much distance between Shane and whatever destruction might follow. It would be Ilya's doing, of course. Whatever happens now is solely Ilya's fault, and as always, he won't be the one to shoulder the consequences. He's knowingly put that on Shane, and for that, he'll forever be sorry, but it's too late now. He's fucking selfish. He knew what would happen in the end, and still, he did it anyway. Sucked Shane into his orbit, trapped him in his sticky, vice-like grip. *Run*, Ilya wants to scream at him, but he knows Shane won't. He's under his spell. He can't recognize a bad thing because Ilya's still wearing the face of the good guy. He was an apex predator in that way, luring people in with the illusion before swallowing them whole and spitting their bones back out in a cataclysmic display of greed and destruction.

He shuts the shower off and reaches for his towel, drying off quickly. It's been much longer than five minutes. Ten, maybe. Fifteen, if he had to guess. As horrible as he is, Shane still needs him. Ilya had made damn sure of that, hadn't he? Taking a complex creature and making him even more complex, his life even more structured and shameful than it had already been when Ilya found him.

He reaches for the robe provided by the hotel and swiftly wraps it around him, bending down to shake the remaining water droplets out of his curls. He assesses himself in the mirror and practices a soothing smile, the one he's going to have to paste on before facing Shane. Before going out and pretending everything's just fine and dandy. That this is all a good thing.

They're making progress. Progress towards what exactly? Imminent danger. But he still has to keep the roads clear. He still has to make sure the ride is smooth. He doesn't want to trigger any alarms in Shane's brain, even though Ilya is intensely aware of where they're headed. Even though every thought in his head is screaming at him to *Abort Mission! Abandon Ship! Take Cover!*

Ilya takes a deep breath and opens the door, praying to find Shane in one piece.

He blinks at the sight in front of him.

Shane is lying on Troy's stomach. Troy's lying down with his head propped against one of the pillows, his leg outstretched as Shane lies perpendicular, his face pressed into Troy's abdomen. Troy is dangling a fish string toy over him with one hand, the other resting in Shane's hair as he idly scratches at him. And Shane…Shane is going wild with the attention.

"Oh my god, I know you can do better than that," Troy laughs as he raises the fish a little higher.

Shane just huffs and reaches his paw out extra far to hit it ferociously.

"Woah, that was a good one. Good job, kitty. You totally got him," Troy amends, allowing the fish to fall a little further into Shane's space this time so he can bite at it fully.

Ilya watches with soft eyes as Shane chews at the edge of the crinkle toy, looking so at peace with himself around his new friend. And Troy isn't judging. He doesn't think it's weird, as far as Ilya can tell. He's just…going with it. Accepting Shane—and Ilya—as they are. Ilya swallows thickly as he steps further into the room.

"Hey," Troy says when he notices him, a warm smile on his face. "Good shower?"

It hadn't been, actually, but Ilya nods anyway. He'd really needed those fifteen minutes to just…be. To not have to worry about Shane, even though he was *always* worrying about Shane. But all of that falls away when Shane spots him and immediately rushes over to greet him.

Ilya has no choice but to laugh and sit down on the bed as Shane positively attacks him with kitten licks. "Oh my goodness. Hi, sweet boy. Did you miss me? I missed you, too."

Shane is pawing at him, crawling in his lap to lick at his neck, his jaw, across his face.

Ilya just holds him around the hips and twists his head once or twice to avoid getting licked in the eye. "Wow, someone is in a very good mood. Did you have fun with Troy, baby?" Ilya comments knowingly, rubbing his hand over Shane's back in an attempt to get him to settle down.

"We had tons of fun," Troy confirms, sitting up a bit. "We agreed fish are better than mice."

Ilya lets out a surprised laugh. "Oh, really?"

"Absolutely. He was going to town on that thing."

Shane nips at his neck gently before letting his tongue dart out to soothe the spot. When Shane pulls away, he's flushing shyly, and all at once, Ilya feels his own stress start to melt out of him. He feels his demons start to take a backseat, slipping away into the unlit corners of his mind. He reaches up to pet at Shane's hair, smiling when Shane leans into his touch and starts purring happily.

"Thank you for being so good, sweet kitty," Ilya tells him softly. Slowly. Just for Shane. It's time to start winding down, getting ready for bed, and with the way Shane is blinking sluggishly at him, Ilya would be willing to bet he's already halfway there. "Such a good boy for me. Maybe we can play with Troy again some other time, hm?" Ilya offers, brushing his knuckles over Shane's pretty, freckled cheek.

Shane keeps trying to push closer, so Ilya indulges him by pulling him into a hug, and he lets his eyes slip shut as he buries his nose in Shane's hair, inhaling deeply so the scent of home fills his senses. Shane is such a warm, welcome weight in his lap. Ilya almost wants to fall asleep just like this. There's a second where he thinks he's going to.

"I'm…uh, just gonna let myself out," comes a timid voice, and Ilya's eyes snap open.

Right. He'd nearly forgotten about Barrett.

"You guys are good, right?" Troy asks, concern slipping across his features like he can see right through whatever brave face Ilya is trying, and apparently failing, to put on. "I mean, you're…okay?"

Ilya's lips curl slightly at the edges, but he lets his pain pool into his eyes, lets himself be seen for just a second so Troy will know how grateful he is. How much this has meant to him.

"We are going to be alright," Ilya vows, wrapping his arms a little more tightly around Shane as he hooks his chin over his shoulder. "Thank you for being so good to him. I do not take it lightly."

"I really like him," Troy offers softly, and Ilya can see, truly, just how much. "I really like both of you."

"He really likes you, too," Ilya whispers, squeezing Shane's hip as his sleepy kitty nuzzles further into his neck. "We both do."

Troy smiles and ducks his head, cheeks pinkening slightly in a way that makes Ilya want to hug him. But he's got a lap full of warm kitten right now, and his eyes feel like they're being weighed down by a ton of bricks, so he just smiles in return and vows to make it up to Troy some other time. He could think of a few ways to make it up to him, actually—most of them coming in the form of Harris. Ilya was going to work his magic and ensure those two got together. Troy deserved it. They both did.

-

By some miracle, Ilya convinces Coach to let them take a bus to Tampa. They were supposed to have another flight today, and while they would still need to fly back to Ottawa eventually, Ilya was hoping to give himself a little more time to prepare Shane for the inevitable.

Shane has been in a fantastic mood today. Now that he knows Troy is one of his safety people, the two of them are attached at the hip. Every time Ilya turns his back, they're giggling about something, showing each other things on their phones, whispering in each other's ears. It might tick him off if he didn't find it so god damn endearing, but mostly, Ilya was just glad that Shane had another person he could be himself around. Lately, it felt like they needed as much of that as they could get.

"Hiya," Shane says giddily as he sidles up to him on their way to the bus.

"Oh, hello," Ilya greets. "I wasn't sure if you noticed me. You seemed distracted by your new best friend, Troy Barrett."

But Shane just giggles, and Ilya has no choice but to smile back at him.

"I was not expecting you to tell him so much."

Shane's expression falters slightly. "Was I not supposed to?"

Ilya just leans down to bump their foreheads together and steal a quick kiss. "I am so proud that you felt comfortable enough to share that with him. Did you tell him everything?"

Shane nods. "Well, I mean," he pauses. "Not *everything*. I didn't tell him about our…full dynamic."

"Mm," Ilya hums knowingly. "You did not tell him that I am in charge of your entire life?"

"I figured that might not go over as well as the kitten stuff," Shane breathes a laugh, and he wraps his arms around Ilya, grinning like they're sharing an inside joke.

Ilya kisses him once more before giving him a nudge in the direction of the bus. "You are still planning on sitting with me, right? Or did Troy come up with some reason to steal you away?"

"As if," Shane rolls his eyes, pulling Ilya along by his hand as they pile onto the bus with the rest of the team.

Ilya raises an eyebrow when Shane starts tugging him to the very back, but Shane just smirks and presses him down against the seats before crawling into his lap.

"Oh, I think I like where this is going," Ilya says appreciatively, placing his hands behind his head to lean back while he enjoys the view. "Are you gonna give me a lap dance?"

"What?" Shane laughs, pushing at Ilya's chest. "You're so fucking stupid."

"I think you mean so fucking *sexy*." Ilya reaches to grab Shane's hands and traps them in his.

Shane leans in close until they're nose to nose. "Yeah, that, too," he says softly, and Ilya holds him like he's made of glass as they kiss once more.

They spend the entire bus ride wrapped up in each other. Healing from the past few days. Ilya is grateful that the guys don't bug them, like even they understand just how much he and Shane need the quality time. Processing the crash at the hotel, while they were technically still on a work trip, wasn't doing either of them any favors. Ilya secretly couldn't wait until they were home. Until he could snuggle up with Shane in their own bed, wash up together in their own bathtub, and spend some much-needed time in Shane's pretty kitty playroom.

Ilya was craving release. Shane had gotten to be a kitty since the crash, but Ilya hadn't gotten to be his *owner*. Not really. Not in the way he needed. He'd been keeping a sharp eye on Shane, watching over him, keeping him level, but what Ilya really wanted to do was take him apart.

He wanted to rim Shane for hours. He wanted to coax at least two orgasms out of him before he even *thought* about fucking him. He wanted to talk Shane down nice and slow, until he was so loopy he could barely even remember his own name. He wanted Shane so far down that he was drooling and crying and rutting himself against anything he came in contact with. Drunk off of Ilya's words. Desperate for more like a greedy little kitten.

And then once Ilya had effectively ruined him, he'd carefully bring him back up again. He'd spend all night pressing words and kisses into his skin. Washing his hair. Holding him close. Trying to convince himself that everything is going to be okay, and maybe, this time, it would be. He hopes they win their hockey game. He hopes their plane ride home doesn't go as terribly as he's expecting it to. He hopes they're through the hardest part.

Still, when he looks at Shane, he can get so fucking lost in him. Like he can forget everything bad that's ever happened and just focus on this. Just focus on keeping him happy.

Ilya's okay. Really, he is. He has to be.

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"Hey," Troy sidles up to Shane with a grin as they're getting ready to hit the ice for their game against Tampa. "You've fucking got this, remember?"

Shane's tummy feels warm as he smiles back at him. He and Troy had *really* started to hit it off these past few days. So much so that he was sure it was going to show up on the ice today. With Shane, Ilya, and Troy all on a line together, Shane had high hopes for this game.

The Tampa guys were skilled, and they were fast, too. They always executed cleanly, and they punished any sign of hesitation, but Shane wasn't feeling hesitant. He was feeling sure. Troy had his fucking back in more ways than one, and their new chemistry was sure to lead to more completed sequences.

"Hey, it's me. Your boyfriend, remember?" Ilya calls out from behind him, and Shane rolls his eyes, turning to face him with a laugh.

“Yeah, thank you, Ilya. I *know*.” Shane was surprised the whole fucking world didn’t know by now. He felt like it was radiating off of him in large, swooping letters: *Ilya’s*. “And thanks, Troy.”

“Yes, thank you, Troy,” Ilya smiles fakely in Troy’s direction.

“Be nice,” Shane scolds.

He’s having such a good day so far. He hadn’t screamed himself awake with a nightmare, for one, and their morning skate had gone really smoothly. Shane was feeling strong—physically, at least—and the mental stuff…he was working on. But they had another flight tomorrow, and Shane wasn’t sure how he was going to react. He was just glad he had Ilya through it all. He can’t imagine how he would have coped if this had happened with his Montreal team, but then again, Shane wasn’t so much concerned with losing his own life. He was concerned with losing *Ilya*.

Ilya, who seems a little wound up. He’s re-taped his stick twice already now, and Shane watches as he grows frustrated with the third taping, ripping it off in annoyance.

“Hey,” Shane offers, placing a gentle hand on Ilya’s arm as he walks up to him. “Let me?” He holds a hand out for the stick.

Ilya’s eyes soften slightly when they look over to him, and Shane watches in satisfaction as his shoulders drop and he hands over the stick.

“Thanks,” Shane says around a smile, and he gives Ilya’s hip a squeeze before sitting down and taking over. He makes quick work of the tape, ensuring it covers the stick neatly and cleanly, with no bunching or tearing like the rush jobs Ilya was doing before. Once he’s finished, he presents the taped stick back to Ilya. “Okay?” He asks.

Ilya takes the stick and carefully looks it over, his expression grateful as he surveys Shane. “You’re so good to me.”

“It’s just some tape,” Shane laughs, but he gets the sentiment when Ilya leans down to kiss him warmly.

“I love you. We’re gonna kick ass out there,” Ilya vows, cupping Shane’s jaw to look him over.

“Well, I already knew *I* was going to kick ass, but I’m glad you’re committed to kicking ass as well—”

Shane giggles wildly as Ilya practically tackles him against the locker room bench.

The energy when they finally make it out to the ice is to be expected. There’s booing, especially for Shane and Ilya, but the crowd knows Tampa is a better team. They think they have this one in the bag. Shane is determined to prove them wrong.

He wins the first face-off, but Tampa is fucking fast. They’re on him in a minute, and when he gets sandwiched between two defenders against the boards, the puck slides right out from

under him. It doesn't take long for them to rush back to the other side and score their first goal.

1 – 0

By the end of the first period, Tampa has scored another goal off the rebound, and Shane is really trying not to let it get to him. It doesn't matter how many goals Tampa has scored. It matters how many goals *they* score, and right now, Shane is hungry.

He and Troy share a look as they head into the second period, and Shane is glad to see he's not the only one gunning for this. They could all use a win after the week they've had, so when they're back on the ice again, Shane leans in with a fire in his belly. He loses the face-off, but it isn't long before the puck comes loose and Troy chases it down *hard*. He wins a battle along the boards and passes right to Shane, who shoots down the ice and then passes to Ilya.

There's a second where Shane thinks Ilya is going to shoot. He'd have a good chance at a goal, but instead, he takes a narrow path and passes to Troy. And Troy is right there, almost hidden out of view, but exactly where Ilya is expecting him to be. He scores, and the Centaurs go wild from the bench.

2 – 1

Shane bumps helmets with Troy as they skate over. "Fuck yeah. That was amazing."

"Thank Rozanov," Troy shrugs happily, and when Shane looks over, he finds Ilya smiling, too.

From then on, their chemistry is off the charts. It's like he, Ilya, and Troy know where each other are going to be at all times. Their spacing is near perfection, and Tampa is having trouble anticipating it. They probably went in today thinking this was going to be an easy win, but the Centaurs were starting to give them a run for their money. They were catching up fast.

Ilya's breaking up plays with hard checks, Troy is like a fucking monster every time a puck goes loose, and Shane has the ability to predict Tampa's every move from watching hundreds, if not thousands, of hockey tapes over the years. Eventually, those pieces start to add up.

Troy gets Shane the puck, and Shane passes to Ilya. Goal. 2 – 2. And on their next play, Troy fights for a puck in the corner and manages to slip it behind the net, with Ilya right there to pick it up and send it flying back to Shane. They're moving like one machine as Shane cuts into open ice. Tampa thinks they've got a hold on their chemistry now, and Shane knows they think he's going to pass, so he makes to do just that. Troy is open, and Shane can see Tampa's defenders closing in on him, so he angles his body in Troy's direction, looks to him, and he can see the way Troy reads it. The smirk on his face once he realizes what Shane is doing.

Troy plays along and taps his stick, gets ready like he thinks Shane is really going to pass to him, and then, at the last second, Shane pulls the puck close to him and takes advantage of

the clear lane to score the winning goal.

3 – fucking 2. Ottawa wins.

The crowd boos, but his boys are losing their minds. Troy practically tackles him in a hug, and Ilya is looking at him with so much warmth in his eyes that it makes Shane dizzy. Their second win of the season. Their first away game win. It feels like the beginning of something really fucking special.

“Oh my god, that fake out at the end. Fucking beautiful, Hollander,” Bood is telling him when they get back into the locker room. “And Barrett, you were the fucking GOAT tonight. Those steals?”

“Great fucking game, boys,” Ilya hollers. “I want to see teamwork like that every single time.”

“All it took was a fucking plane crash,” Wyatt snorts, and the rest of the guys break into laughter.

Shane can’t stop smiling. They’ve been to hell and back together, but it seems like something good has actually come out of it this time. They’re operating as one unit now, reacting to one another as if they’ve been playing on the same team for years instead of just a month or two.

Ilya’s teeth are glinting brightly as he stalks up to him. “You scored the game-winning goal,” Ilya practically purrs, sizing Shane up as he invades his space.

“I did.” Shane’s lips curl as he raises his eyebrows. “Can I help you?”

“Mm, no,” Ilya says lowly. “But I can help you later.”

Shane gasps as Ilya slyly leans in to lick across his cheek and up his jaw, stopping when he gets to his ear to swirl his tongue along the outer ridges. Shane lets his eyes slip shut as he waits for more, but nothing ever comes, and when he opens his eyes again, Ilya is halfway across the room talking to Luca. He turns when he notices Shane looking at him and offers him a wink.

Shane just stands there a little dazed for a second before he shakes himself out of it. Fuck. Now, he was going to have to take a shower around the guys with a huge fucking boner.

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When they get back to the hotel, Ilya is all over him. He’s kissing him and biting him, and he’s everywhere all at once, so much so that Shane can’t keep up. He’s trying to kiss back, he’s trying to meet Ilya with every motion, but Ilya is moving at a million miles an hour.

“Slow down,” Shane laughs when Ilya starts frantically stripping him out of his clothes, but Ilya is relentless. Once Shane is naked, he picks him up and then shoves him against the wall. “Jesus,” Shane moans, as Ilya assaults his neck some more.

“When we get home, I am going to fucking wreck you,” Ilya growls, and Shane feels his heart pick up as he desperately clings to Ilya’s shoulders. “God, you have no idea how much I’ve been dying to just take you apart.”

Shane gasps and slips his fingers through Ilya’s curls. “Take me apart right now. I wanna feel you tomorrow.”

Ilya surges forward to claim his lips in another biting kiss, his teeth latching onto Shane’s lower lip as his fingers start pulling Shane’s ass cheeks apart.

“Holy shit,” Shane whines when one of Ilya’s fingers grazes over his hole. He squirms, but there’s nowhere for him to go. Ilya’s got him pinned up against the wall, Shane’s legs around his waist, and he’s attacking him from every angle. It’s too much, and it’s not enough. Shane just digs his nails into Ilya’s neck and hopes he gets his message across. He needs *more*.

“You’re so desperate for me, baby. What would the other team think if they knew you were such a slut for your Captain?” Ilya purrs into one of his ears before sucking it into his mouth.

Oh, *fuck*. Shane’s eyes slip shut as he tips his head back against the wall. He doesn’t want to be a cat right now. No, right now, he just wants Ilya to fucking wreck him. He wants Ilya to be a little rough, a little mean, a little punishing. He wants to fuck like two massive, muscled athletes would. Like a grizzly bear and a leopard.

Ilya pulls him away from the wall and practically throws him onto the bed, gripping his hips tightly to move him into position before he reaches for the lube on the bedside table. Shane tugs him into a tongue-heavy kiss, moaning when Ilya takes control of it by sucking Shane’s tongue right into his mouth. Ilya is *such* a good kisser. Probably because he’s kissed about a hundred million people by now, if his triple-digit hitlist is anything to go off of, but Shane is turned on by the fact that he’s the only one who’ll get this type of treatment going forward.

Oh, god, Shane wants to marry him. As soon as fucking possible. He should not be thinking such romantic thoughts as Ilya shoves his thighs up so his knees are next to his ears, but he can’t help himself. He’s picturing the flowers. Ilya standing there in his perfectly tailored suit. He’d probably cry as Shane’s mom and dad walked him down the aisle. Shane would probably be crying, too.

The boys would all be there. Coach Wiebe. Hayden. Rose. Svetlana. Even Ivan and Cedric. All their closest friends. A large, wonderful group of people who accepted them and loved them without question. Without limits. Shane is giddy at the thought of just how many they have in their corner. He and Ilya had already built such a wonderful life for themselves, and it had only taken a matter of months to do so. Well, on top of the ten years Ilya spent plotting and pining, that is. Shane feels like a pile of mush.

They’re gasping into each other’s mouths as Ilya fingers him, and Shane wonders if Ilya feels as see-through as he does in these moments. There’s nothing more intimate than having someone *inside* of you. Touching parts of Shane that have quite literally *never* been touched by anyone else. He wants Ilya’s come to paint each one of his organs until traces of him remain for years to come. He wishes Ilya could get him fucking pregnant.

Ilya moans loudly when Shane tells him as much.

“I would give you the best babies, моя любовь. I would never stop taking care of you and our beautiful family. I hope they get your freckles and throw little cat tantrums every time they don’t get their way.”

Shane laughs wetly and holds Ilya so close to him, nudging their noses together. “Our children are going to be cats?”

“Of course, they are going to be cats. You are a cat, no? Any baby that comes from you is going to be a cat,” Ilya tells him as if he’s being ridiculous, but Shane just surges up to kiss him.

This is the love of his fucking life, no question about it. He’s always wondered how people determine that, especially since he’d never felt anything close, but with Ilya right now, he feels it in every fiber of his being. If there is a higher power out there, if there is some master plan, he’s sure that he and Ilya are written in the fabric of the stars. They’re perfectly made for one another. Every problem Shane’s ever had, Ilya is perfectly equipped to deal with, and for every doubt that enters Ilya's head, Shane wants to chase it away with sunshine and kitten licks.

“You’re so fucking good to me,” Shane tells him. “We’re gonna have this for the rest of our lives.”

Shane can see the effect it has on Ilya as he fucks him good and deep, Ilya’s balls slamming into him with loud smacks that he’s sure are somehow making the entire hotel shake—or at least the room next to them. Poor Wyatt.

Shane doesn’t care, though. He wants the boys to know just how gone he is for Ilya, just how much Ilya *owns* him. He thinks it’s about time that more people know. Because Ilya isn’t just his boyfriend, or his top, or even his Dom—Ilya is his fucking soulmate. Shane’s pretty sure that if you cut him open and looked inside, Ilya’s name would be written somewhere along the inner workings of his DNA. Scrawled in perfect Cyrillic script. *If found, please return to Ilya Rozanov.* Shane wants to sign over all of his rights, make Ilya his legal guardian, have Ilya be in charge of all major life decisions going forward. If Ilya says it’s okay, then it must be. If Ilya thinks he should do something, then Shane will. He doesn’t care if it’s healthy, or normal, or sane. He can do whatever the fuck he wants, and what he *wants* is to give up all his control.

His words are spilling out of him while Ilya fucks him, and Ilya hasn’t said a word. He’s just listening, crying maybe, getting off to everything Shane says. Shane can’t even see his face because Ilya is fucking him so hard. It doesn’t matter, though, because Ilya is nailing into his prostate with every single stroke, and Shane is gripping onto the headboard to keep from slamming into it and getting a concussion.

“Gonna marry you and have so many of your babies and tattoo your name across my fucking soul. I want this so fucking badly,” Shane babbles delusionally, and he hardly has time to think when Ilya pulls out and flips him over to his stomach, pushing his head down against the pillows before driving into him once more. “Want everyone to know I’m yours. You can

do whatever you want to me. Please. I trust you. I trust you. Whatever you want, it's fucking yours."

-

Ilya can't look at Shane's face right now, can't let Shane see how much of a mess he is. He just tries to channel that energy into fucking him harder, into making it hurt so Shane will feel it tomorrow, just like he'd asked, because Shane deserved whatever he wanted.

What he wants, however, is Ilya. Ilya, who has no family, no close friends other than Svetlana, no real support system except for the one he's happened to stumble into. He's a stray dog, one who's been fighting for scraps and has felt unworthy of love his entire life, but Shane gives it away like it's so easy. Like Ilya deserves any of this, let alone *all* of it.

Shane's submission is fucking beautiful on the average day, but his *devotion*? That was new. His desire to give over every single part of himself, like Ilya is worthy of being in possession of something so rare and devastating and tragic. Shane, with all of his complexities and special preferences that Ilya has spent years learning and navigating, even when Shane wasn't physically close. The Golden Boy who spun pure magic when he was out on the ice and shone like a rare diamond when he was off it. Ilya wasn't the first one to fall prey to his glinting constellation freckles or the way he smiled bright like a moon that was always full, even when it wasn't. He'd seen the effect Shane had on others, the way they gravitated towards him when he spoke, or especially when he laughed and butterflies and rainbows spilled from his pink, precious lips.

But Shane was blind to everyone's affections towards him. He'd been that way his whole life, unable to see his own beauty, unaware of the way he lit up each room he walked into, capturing the attention of anyone who was in it. Ilya had watched his blissful ignorance for years, wondering what it would take to get the Golden Boy to finally see just how golden he actually was. And not just in terms of hockey, not just in terms of Stanley Cups, but in life. In every aspect and scenario that could ever exist. Shane was the best of the best, and Ilya had wanted to show him that. To prove it to him.

Right now, in Ilya's arms, Shane is fucking *gleaming*. His skin is pretty and flushed from spending an entire day in the sun. The line of his back is glinting with sweat, and Ilya presses a track of kisses down it as he continues to fuck into him. There are still faint bruises littered across Shane's ass from his heart-shaped spanking a few days prior. And the words that are spilling from his lips are more confident and sure than Ilya has ever heard Shane say in his life.

He's saying it like they're facts. Like it's no question that Ilya will be his husband someday. That they'll have a large family and Ilya will actually get to keep him forever. That somehow he's done enough to actually deserve this. It's healing something inside of him. His tears are leaking onto Shane's back.

"Love you so much. Gonna love you forever. I can't wait till everyone knows. Till we can walk down the street together holding hands and kiss each other on the ice—"

Ilya sobs and holds Shane's neck down as he comes with a few final hard thrusts that knock the air out of Shane's throat. Shane hasn't finished yet, so Ilya doesn't give himself any time to recover before he's pulling out and licking the come from Shane's ass, holding his hips tightly as he rims him. He reaches around to tug Shane off with his other hand while trying to suffocate in the glorious wonderland that is Shane's hole. His fucking home away from home. His safe place. Whenever the world gets to be too much, you can find him right here, burying all his problems into making Shane a sobbing, leaking mess.

Shane reaches back to grip his hair and pull him closer, while Ilya just opens his mouth so wide he's pretty sure he's going to get lockjaw. He's eating him messily, his own come smearing across his face in his relentless pursuit to give Shane everything, every piece of himself, every bit of his energy and motivation.

When Shane finally does come, Ilya doesn't stop. He keeps eating, in fact. The only thing he does pause to do is bring his hand up to his face and lick Shane's release up too before diving back in for more, until there's a mix of him and Shane all over Shane's cheeks and the backs of his thighs.

Ilya rims him until he's crying out from overstimulation, until he's shaking and squirming against the bed and taking everything Ilya gives him so, *so* well. He's fucking perfect in every way a person can be. Polite, generous, kind, *docile*. But also a fucking brat when he wants to be. Someone who is constantly giving Ilya a run for his money, whether it's on the ice or just in the comfort of their own home. The one they bought and share together. The one that's going to be filled with a million cat kids one day.

It's then that Ilya realizes he doesn't need to deserve him. That wasn't Ilya's choice to make. All he needed to do was love him unconditionally and let Shane decide the rest. His Shane was perfectly capable of saying no. Ilya had seen him turn his nose up at a dozen houses before he settled on the right one. Ilya had watched as he practiced the same shot over and over until he was finally satisfied with the angle at which it entered the goal. Shane was picky, and he wasn't shy about expressing his preferences if something didn't look or go the way he wanted it to. He was a perfectionist, through and through. A fucking menace, sometimes, but a cute one.

And for some reason, he had decided that he wanted Ilya exactly the way he was. Imperfections and all. Despite the fact that Ilya could get a little too possessive sometimes. Despite the fact that Ilya overlooked key elements of the world around him in his effort to give Shane absolutely everything. Despite the fact that Ilya could get lost in his head sometimes, insecure and hard on himself for no reason, but Shane was always there to pull him back from the ledge. To remind him that things would never be as bad as they seemed. Even when Shane was fighting some pretty nasty battles of his own...with Ilya, he was always the most encouraging person in the world. Talking him down from destruction. Keeping him present when Ilya's thoughts threatened to take him far away. Back to Russia. Back to the coldest and darkest moments of his life.

He coaxes another orgasm out of Shane because he deserves it and so much more. He's ready to get matching tattoos. He's ready to buy a wedding ring and whatever else Shane wants in order to let him know that they're on the same page. That he's ready to tell the entire world

whenever Shane is. Fuck hockey. Fuck anyone else who has anything to say about it. They've proven time and time again that the best way for them to navigate this life is by doing it together. And now Ilya is sure that the only way they survived that stupid plane crash was because they had each other. They make each other stronger. They make each other better. *Both* of them. And Ilya isn't going to let himself doubt that anymore.

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"Do you trust me?" Ilya asks as they're in line to board the plane back to Ottawa.

Shane just smiles at him and nods without question.

"Take these," Ilya says, before handing Shane a few gummies. It's melatonin with a bit of ashwaganda to help Shane calm down and hopefully sleep through the entire flight. There was no need to try and make it through this one without a little extra help.

He's pleased when Shane takes the gummies and chews them without question. No comments about the sugar intake. No suspicious or inquisitive looks. Just pure fucking faith that Ilya would never give him something he doesn't normally like if he didn't have a damn good reason.

"Do you trust *me*?" Shane quips back at him, and Ilya tips his head. He figures Shane is just asking to ask, just being cute to be cute, so he leans forward to boop his nose, trying to be mindful of the fact that they're still in the airport. Still in public.

"You know I do," Ilya hums down at him, giving the string of Shane's (his) hoodie a little tug.

Shane's lips curl even further as he hands over a water bottle.

"For me?" Ilya smiles in surprise.

Shane just shrugs and flushes slightly. "They threw yours away at security. Figured you needed another one."

Ilya finds him incredibly sweet. It's a gesture, a small one, but he appreciates it nonetheless. Ilya liked to be in control, to take care of everything, but he couldn't lie that it was nice to have someone take care of him back sometimes.

"Thank you, моя любовь," he murmurs softly, and Shane bites back a smile.

He doesn't think anything of it until he wakes when the plane is on the ground. Ilya frowns and rubs at his groggy eyes, wondering how the fuck he fell asleep when his plan had been to stay on guard and alert the entire time just in case Shane needed him. But when he looks over at Shane, he finds the other smiling knowingly.

"Sleep okay?" Shane questions, tipping his head, but there's something mischievous in his eyes. A little sparkle that lets Ilya know he's up to something. That he's played a part in this.

Ilya looks down at his water bottle and then back at Shane.

“Did you drug me?” Ilya asks incredulously.

Shane just shrugs. “You seemed like you needed some rest. It’s no different than what you gave me, right?”

Ilya wants to eat him alive.

“Oh, you are so going to get it later,” Ilya warns, but mostly he’s just glad they made it back in one piece. No panic attacks over turbulence. No jumpiness over the seatbelt sign going on. Just smooth sailing. Two minds that are so insanely alike, given how drastically different they could be at times.

Shane grins like it was his plan all along to get punished, but Ilya can see the offering for what it is. For all the insane levels at which Ilya cared for Shane, all the instances in which he planned for every minute detail, Shane was reading him and playing him right back. Plotting in the background, executing quietly so Ilya wouldn’t notice how much Shane was giving him in return. His best and fiercest opponent turned into his most absolute safe place. His number one priority, and now, his number one supporter.

Ilya reaches out to link his fingers with Shane’s and then presses his lips to the back of Shane’s hand in a kiss. Shane just stares back at him and rubs over his ring finger intentionally. It feels like a promise.

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Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be the last of this book, but don't worry!! more coming i promise <3 the next book will pick up where this one leaves off

i'm very excited for the next chapter.....!!!!! and no, it's not the ottawa club :) that will be introduced next book along with some other new plot points that i'm super super excited about

as always, thank you for all your kind comments on this chapter and any other! you are very much appreciated!!!

GUYS DONT BE SAD I SWEAR THIS FIC IS CONTINUING RIGHT INTO THE NEXT BOOK!! IT'S JUST A WAY FOR ME TO RECENTER MYSELF AS WE HEAD INTO SOME NEW THEMES AND PLOTS!!!!

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

I love you all so much! There will be another book in this series and it will start very soon :) read the end notes for details!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya is sitting in a tattoo shop cursing whoever the fuck came up with the idea to press a needle into your skin repeatedly until it scars fucking black.

“Holy shit,” he breathes out, shutting his eyes tightly.

“You picked a pretty gnarly spot,” the tattoo artist tells him gruffly.

“Just tell me it’s almost done,” Ilya begs.

“Should’ve brought someone to hold your hand.” He shrugs.

Ilya just glares at him. He would’ve loved to have brought Shane with him to do exactly that, but the tattoo was supposed to be a surprise, and it’s not like they could have come to do this together. Still, despite the pain, Ilya is fucking buzzing to show Shane the tattoo he got for him.

It’s all he can think about as the artist wraps up his new ink and leads him over to the register to pay.

“It’s an interesting one. Does it have any meaning?” The guy asks him as Ilya swipes his credit card.

“Yeah,” Ilya responds, but he doesn’t elaborate.

His tattoo wouldn’t make sense to a lot of people—or maybe to some people it would—but it would make sense to Shane, and that was the important part. While Ilya planned to give him the best proposal of all time eventually, he wanted to prove his never-ending love in other ways until he could find the perfect moment to make that happen. And this tattoo…well, Ilya knew it would mean a lot to Shane. He can’t wait to see his reaction.

He pulls his hoodie back on to ensure Shane won’t see it until he’s ready, and then starts the trek back home. Shane had been acting weird this morning. Something about needing time alone to do an everything shower. Whatever that means. It didn’t matter, though, because Ilya had already booked his tattoo appointment before they left for Florida, sending inspo pictures back and forth with the artist on Instagram to ensure it came out exactly the way he wanted.

A tattoo was permanent, and so was Shane in his life. They'd established that after this most recent Away trip, and Ilya wasn't a violent person, but after everything that's happened this week, he felt the need to carve his name into Shane's skin. Until Shane's precious arms were bleeding and scarred. Until his entire body screamed that he was Ilya's. No matter what happened from here on out, there would be proof of that. Ilya would make sure there was.

But he's not actually going to slice up Shane's skin. No, instead, he's sliced up his own because Ilya was nothing if not dramatic with his gestures. The idea of surprising his Shane with something as cliché as candles and flowers, at this point, seemed like child's play.

He stops dead in his tracks at the sight of Shane in the living room. *Surrounded* by candles and flowers. Fuck. His throat is tight. It doesn't feel like child's play anymore.

"Shane?" He says unsurely.

Shane is wearing Ilya's fucking Centaurs jersey and seemingly nothing else. He's standing in the middle of the room, flushed and so fucking perfect. He's smiling, and nervous, and shy, and Ilya has no idea what the fuck is going on.

"Ever since we met, I knew there was something between us," Shane starts, and Ilya is frozen in place. "From the moment I introduced myself to you in Saskatchewan, even before then, when I saw you on the ice, I was fucking mesmerized."

Ilya drops his keys on the counter and makes his way further into the room, drawn to Shane like a magnet because this feels important. This feels like something life-changing.

"I was stuck on every word you said, even then. The blue in your eyes. The little cupid's bow above your lips. Your big dick in those shorts when you Dommed me into drinking water at the gym all those years ago."

Ilya lets out a wet laugh as he steps up to Shane and reaches for his hand. Shane squeezes his fingers tightly.

"Even when I assumed I had been stood up, I couldn't help but obsess over you. Before I even *thought* that I might be gay, I would still spend hours watching your interviews. Watching your highlight reels. Telling myself it was just because you were my competition, even though I went down so many rabbit holes that had *nothing* to do with hockey."

Ilya can't believe how endearing he is. He's the sweetest thing alive.

"I think some part of me must have known you were mine. That we were put on this Earth to find each other. There's no chance I could ever do this alone. I mean, it's no wonder I struggled through all those years that I tried. Lost and confused and out of place." Shane's lips twist in discomfort, but they turn upwards half a moment later. "When all along I was just missing my other half."

Ilya's heart throbs.

“Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov,” Shane says, and Ilya’s eyes go wide as he starts sinking down to the floor. And then Shane Hollander is in front of Ilya on one knee, pulling out a fucking ring before holding it between them, presenting it to Ilya with a smile and tears in his eyes. “Will you—”

Ilya collapses onto his knees just in time to place a firm hand over Shane’s mouth.

Shane just looks at him with wide eyes, like he has no idea why Ilya has stopped him. As if Ilya hasn’t spent the last ten fucking years dreaming about this moment.

“Baby, I love you *so* much, and please don’t take this as me rejecting you, but you are out of your fucking mind if you think I’m going to let you take this away from me when I have spent the last ten years of my life fantasizing about proposing to you.”

Shane laughs in surprise against his hand, and Ilya’s wet eyes soften at how fucking perfect he is.

Ilya removes his hand and pulls Shane into a kiss before he can say anything else, like ask Ilya to *fucking marry him*. Holy shit. He was going to jerk his dick to the thought of Shane on one knee for him for the rest of forever.

“You got me flowers, baby?” Ilya breathes into his mouth, cupping his jaw as he holds him so, so close.

“And candles,” Shane adds, and Ilya wants to laugh at how stupid he fucking is. Crying over flowers and candles when just five minutes prior, he had bristled at how that wouldn’t be enough to put forth a meaningful proposal. Shane, however, lived to prove him wrong.

“I love it,” Ilya tells him earnestly, cupping Shane’s cheeks with the sleeves of his hoodie. “You proposing to me wearing my *jersey*,” Ilya groans, shaking Shane in his arms. “You’re the cutest thing in the entire world.”

“Not cute enough for you to say *yes*,” Shane grins back at him, but Ilya just grants him another kiss.

“Mm, proposing to someone seems like a big life choice, no? This is definitely something you should have run by your Dom,” Ilya scolds lightly, his expression dropping into a warm smile when Shane shoves at him. “And what are you wearing underneath, hm?” He lifts at the edge of his jersey, eyebrows raising when he gets miles and miles of thigh before stopping on a pair of tiny pink boxer briefs. “Oh, *принцесса*.”

Shane flushes and clutches onto Ilya’s shoulders as Ilya continues to survey him. “I can’t believe you said no.”

“Shane.” Ilya pulls back immediately. “I am *not* saying no.”

“You didn’t even let me *ask* it fully,” Shane huffs, rolling his eyes. “I practiced what I was going to say and everything. I asked my mom to help me pick out the ring.”

Ilya rolls his eyes right back at him. “Okay, fine. Ask me, котенок. But I am still going to do my *own* proposal, and you are going to cry your little kitten eyes out at how beautiful it is.”

Shane’s lips finally pull into a smile as he holds the ring out between them again. “Ilya Rozanov,” he says quietly, looking deep into Ilya’s eyes, and Ilya’s heart picks up in his chest once more. “Will you marry me?”

Ilya just smiles at him with the warmth of a thousand suns. “Of course, I will marry you, моя любовь.”

Shane grins and dives forward to kiss him as Ilya holds him securely with arms wrapped around his waist. And then Shane is pulling back and presenting the most beautiful gold ring to him. One that matches the gold of Shane’s kitty collar and his mother’s necklace. And—

“Oh,” Shane frowns lightly. “It doesn’t fit.”

“Hm,” Ilya hums regretfully. “Must not be meant to be.” He laughs wildly as Shane practically tackles him to the floor, pinning his wrists while settling on top of his lap.

Shane pauses, however, at the sight of plastic hidden underneath the sleeve of Ilya’s hoodie. “What’s that?” He frowns, pushing at the fabric to try and uncover whatever Ilya is hiding.

“Ah, well, while you were setting up your proposal, I was out working on a grand gesture of my own,” Ilya smirks, and he lets Shane shove at his sleeve until the freshly inked tattoo is revealed in all its glory. Ilya sits up a little, pulling Shane fully into his lap so he can hold his wrist between the two of them. He places his palm down on Shane’s thigh to show him the top of his hand first.

Shane’s eyes are wide, looking back and forth between Ilya’s eyes and his hand in front of them. “Is that…”

“Yes, a tattoo,” Ilya confirms, reveling in the way Shane has frozen up in his arms. He shows the intricacies of the chain that links around his wrist before turning over his palm to reveal the full tattoo of his mother’s necklace, the pendant sitting right in the middle of the palm of his hand. If he closed his fist, it was almost like he was pulling on Shane’s collar, with the chain displayed proudly wrapped around his wrist.

“It’s…” Shane swallows like his mouth has gone dry. “It’s my collar.”

Ilya reaches to cup Shane’s jaw with his free hand, tracing his thumb across Shane’s cheek. “You said you were going to get kitten ears, and you already wear my collar, so I thought it was only fitting that I get something to represent you, hm? Something that says you are mine even when I am not allowed to scream it from the rooftops.”

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Shane can’t believe this. Ilya is wearing their dynamic, wearing Shane’s collar, right on his wrist for all the world to see. Not hidden away shamefully. Not somewhere that would mostly be covered by his clothes. Not something that was only for Shane and Shane alone. No, Ilya’s

tattoo was sending a message. A loud one. And if anyone looked at Shane's neck, if anyone had any suspicion at all, maybe they would be able to put two and two together. Maybe they wouldn't fully understand what it meant, but they would see that Shane and Ilya wore matching pendants. Not to mention the fact that this was also a beautiful way for Ilya to honor his mother, to carry her still on his body now that Shane bore the original piece.

"Ilya," he says emotionally as he looks down at the tattoo. It feels like an even bigger gesture than his proposal. A commitment that Ilya is pledging to forever.

"I love you so much," Ilya tells him, looking into his eyes intentionally. "Whether we are married or not, you are with me forever. I am carrying you with me wherever I go."

Shane shuts his eyes tightly to let the tears fall as he collapses into Ilya's chest, desperately wrapping his arms around him. "Fuck. I love you. I love you. I love you. Thank you so much."

"You are very welcome, sweet boy," Ilya murmurs into his ear, rubbing at his back. "I would do anything for you. You know this."

Shane did know, but it still meant so much to him. Ilya was one to shower him with affection and reassurances, to promise him the world and forever over and over again, but it was another thing to see proof of that with his own eyes. It was another thing to see the chain he wore around his neck every single day printed across the sensitive skin of Ilya's hand—the same hand that had pulled on his collar a million times as a way of reminding Shane who he belonged to. Now, Shane would never ever forget. And when they came out one day, he was sure the entire world would understand, too.

Ilya's tattoo was so *intimate*. So loud in his love for Shane. Shane almost felt bad about the way he wanted his kitten ears printed right behind his regular ears. His hair would hide them mostly, but there was something about the idea of Ilya grabbing the back of his neck, the idea that Ilya's tattoo of Shane's collar would align right with Shane's kitten ears, and the way that particular connection represented their dynamic more than anything.

"It's right on your wrist. Everyone's going to see it," Shane sniffles, rubbing his nose against Ilya's jawline.

"They will see it, and they will know that you are mine. That I am your owner and you belong to me," Ilya tells him indulgently.

Shane knew that not everyone would understand the deeper meaning, but he liked how Ilya leaned into the fantasy. The *boys* would definitely understand it. To some degree. Maybe more with time.

"Are there any other special plans you have for us tonight that I should know about?" Ilya asks conversationally, and Shane furrows his eyebrows slightly.

"No," he replies carefully, because was he supposed to make other plans? Was his proposal not enough? Did Ilya expect more?

“Well, you come to me in this jersey and your cute little panties, so how am I to know what your beautiful mind has come up with?”

Shane swallows and pulls back a little to regard him. Fuck. Maybe Ilya wanted him to plan something sexual for them. Maybe he thought Shane had ideas for them this evening. But, as Ilya’s expression slowly morphs, Shane starts to understand that’s not what’s happening here.

“So, you will not mind if we go with my plans for the evening, then?” Ilya double-checks, combing his fingers through the side of Shane’s hair, which has gotten a little longer recently, but Ilya was in charge of telling him when he was allowed to cut it.

Shane’s tummy swirls in anticipation at the idea of Ilya making plans for them. To be fair, Ilya *always* had a plan, but when it tied into a special occasion—like getting a tattoo certainly warranted—he usually had something a little extra up his sleeve.

“I want to surprise you,” Ilya says cautiously. “But it is different than what we have done before. I know you are going to like it, but—”

“Yes,” Shane says immediately. “Whatever it is, yes. I trust you. I’ll use my safeword if I need to. I’ll color out,” he vows, because there was nothing he loved more than Ilya giving him something unexpected in the moment.

“I know you will,” Ilya nods, but he’s still touching Shane like he’s fragile. Like he’s worried. “But I have a feeling this is going to put you really down. So, I want to make sure we are on the same page.”

Shane sucks his lower lip into his mouth and tries not to jump out of his skin. He was getting a little better at controlling himself during scenes, at being able to stay present during some of them, or at least the ones where he wasn’t fully a cat. But Ilya mentioning he’s at risk of slipping really far tonight tells him this is going to hit on something *big*. One of the things Shane wants most. Still, though, he has no idea what it could be.

“I am going to stretch you more than usual,” Ilya offers, and Shane clutches onto his neck tightly, digging his nails in as he tries to keep himself from doing anything drastic. Like running wildly around the room with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. “And you are free to be a kitty, of course, but tonight…” Ilya leans in close until his lips are hovering against Shane’s ear. “I want you to be my omega.”

Shane whimpers and presses his face needily into Ilya’s shoulder. Holy fuck. He has no idea what that means, but he wants it so badly. Oh god. It’s something that has come up in their scenes before, but always in the moment. Always off-handedly. But Ilya has *planned* something, and Shane’s mind is spinning as a million different scenarios run through his head. None of them really make sense, though. Obviously, he and Ilya were not *really* an Alpha and omega, but maybe the plan was just to lean into the roleplay tonight. Commit to it fully in ways they hadn’t.

Stretching him more than usual. Fuck. Maybe Ilya was going to plug him up with something nice and big to simulate how it might feel to take his knot. Shane moans at the thought. He’s getting off to it already, feeling restless in Ilya’s lap.

“I can see that you like this quite a lot, котенок,” Ilya notes, taking in Shane’s reaction. “I will keep the rest a surprise for you, but I want to make sure we check in very often with each other, okay? I need you to be on your best behavior for me.”

Shane nods emphatically against him. He would. He would be so fucking good for him. The best omega in the world. Ilya was going to get him pregnant. Ilya was going to claim him so they could start their lives together as a mated pairing.

“But, first. I am going to need this.”

Shane is confused when Ilya shifts him a bit to reach for something, and oh. Shane still has Ilya’s engagement ring wrapped tightly in the palm of his hand. He lets his fingers uncurl when Ilya reaches for it, and then watches as Ilya places the ring between his lips for a moment before lifting his arms to unclasp the long-distance necklace from around his neck.

Shane still doesn’t understand. Not until Ilya brings the necklace in front of him and slips the ring onto the chain before handing the entire piece of jewelry back to Shane.

“Will you do the honors?” Ilya asks, holding up the necklace to him.

And Shane’s face crumples as he takes the chain with shaking hands and leans in close to fasten it back around his neck, feeling Ilya’s warm breath on his skin. Once the necklace is latched securely, he traces his fingers over where the ring meets the charm and then leans down to press a kiss to the new piece of jewelry, finishing with a final kiss on Ilya’s lips.

But Ilya doesn’t let him pull away after that. Instead, he sucks Shane’s tongue into his mouth and falls back against the floor so Shane is sitting on top of him once again while they make out. Shane can’t help sucking in a gasp of air when Ilya grips his hips and presses his erection up against him, letting Shane feel just how hard he is in his gray-washed jeans. Holy fuck. Shane is engaged to the hottest person *alive*.

Eyes bluer than the sea, golden blonde curls that positively soak up sunlight and project it back onto anyone who is lucky enough to exist in Ilya’s presence. A body sculpted by the fucking Greek gods. Muscles that were getting bigger and stronger every day, like it was Ilya’s sole purpose in life to make Shane lose his fucking mind.

Ilya has always been bigger than him, but lately, he was fucking massive. Shane didn’t even understand it, considering Ilya’s diet and lifestyle choices. They worked out practically the same amount, and Shane ate a *thousand* times cleaner than Ilya, but it’s like Ilya was just destined to grow to ten times his size. It made Shane fucking weak. It made him look at Ilya at least twenty times a day wondering what it might be like to get pushed over the counter by him. Fucked against the wall. Ilya could probably do push-ups with Shane latched onto his back. He could probably do pull-ups with Shane sitting right on his cock, fucking into him with each rep.

He was so fucking hot, physically, but it was Ilya’s mind that could send Shane into a fucking spiral. Into a coma, probably. The things that came out of his mouth. The plans he conjured up that surpassed even Shane’s wildest fantasies. *How* was he so brilliant? How did he get it right every single time? How did he get better with each passing day? Would it ever fucking

stop? There are times when Shane isn't sure he can possibly love Ilya any more than he already does, and then *BAM*—it hits him like a fucking freight train. Like a fucking charter jet. Like a god damn nuclear reaction that obliterates his insides into a million fucking loved-up pieces. It's bursting out of him, demanding to be felt, demanding to be heard.

"I'm gonna be your partner for life, baby. Don't you want to make it official?" Ilya asks, pulling Shane close to him by the back of his neck to kiss behind his ear. To suck on the sensitive skin there.

Shane is melting on top of him, trying to get closer, trying to sink deeper into Ilya's never-ending abyss. He doesn't know what *making it official* means, but he wants to find out. "Yes," he whispers, just in case Ilya is looking for an answer.

Ilya simply wraps one strong arm around his waist and takes Shane's entire weight as he pushes himself off the ground with his free hand and stands to his full height.

Shane gasps and holds onto him tightly as he goes from being on the ground to suddenly way up in the air. But Ilya's arms are *so* strong around him. Shane can feel the way they strain as he himself scrambles to stay upright, but Ilya just readjusts his hold until Shane is comfortable, and then keeps walking.

He kisses him as he walks, and Shane has no idea how Ilya can kiss him like this and still know where they're going. It doesn't matter, though, because Shane never had to worry when he was with Ilya. Ilya was all-knowing. Ilya handled everything. Shane loved him more than anything in the world.

Shane whines softly when Ilya pulls away from him, but when he turns his head to follow Ilya's gaze, he realizes they're standing outside of his playroom. Ilya is just using the facial recognition pad, since it was only for his owner to access. Shane wasn't allowed to play without Ilya's permission. Shane licks his neck in gentle excitement. He couldn't get too hyper. He needed to be good.

"My kitten is being so perfect for me," Ilya acknowledges, and Shane purrs, tucking his head into Ilya's neck at the praise. "Keep up this behavior and I am going to spoil you rotten tonight."

Shane's heart picks up a little in his chest. Ilya was planning on being sweet to him tonight. Granted, Ilya was sweet to him most nights, but sometimes his surprises called for acts that were a little more punishing. Words that were a little more biting. Words like *slut*, or *naughty*, or *bad*.

It was usually temporary, but Shane *hated* being a bad kitty, and while he would never oppose to being *Ilya's* slut, he didn't like the implication that he was looking for attention from anyone but his owner. Well…he liked it *sometimes*. When the timing was right, and with Ilya, it always was. But most times, he just wanted to be loved and adored. He wanted to serve and worship. He wanted to be Ilya's good, good boy, and he wanted Ilya to be his loving and possessive owner.

He thinks the scene is going to go a bit more like that tonight. There was a reason Shane liked the idea of Ilya being his Alpha so much. Of the thought that they were genetically wired towards one another, like they couldn't even control themselves. He felt that way a lot. He felt addicted to and obsessed with Ilya's scent. He felt like just a whiff of Ilya could set him off, make his blood rush like crazy all the way down to his cock. It could make his brain short-circuit, could make him want to do stupid, stupid things like drop to his knees in the middle of practice because Ilya was so hot when he yelled commands to the team using his Alpha voice.

And *fuck* did Ilya have an Alpha voice. Sometimes it could go all low, vibrating from somewhere deep within his chest like a rumble that could more often than not turn into a roar. Rookies had been known to cower under the pressure of Captain Rozanov's wrath, especially during the pre-season, until Ilya would inevitably have no choice but to reveal that he was really nothing more than a big teddy bear. A teddy bear, however, who could turn very grizzly if properly motivated.

Shane is getting so stuck in his head already that he doesn't notice Ilya has placed him on the bed until Ilya is leaning down in front of him, staring into his eyes.

"Are you with me, baby?"

Shane feels a little lost, to be perfectly frank, but he's here. He reaches for Ilya's hand and gives it a tiny squeeze.

"I see, you are feeling quiet. Well, I am going to need your input for this next part."

Next part? Shane tips his head. What was the next part?

Ilya is just smiling at him like he's being silly. "We are going to build your nest, sweet boy."

Shane feels heat bloom from deep within his chest, ricocheting through him until it spreads to every part of his body. Until his cheeks are red and his breathing picks up.

Ilya notices, just like he notices everything. He places his hand on top of Shane's knee and gives it a gentle shake. "I have lots of clothes and blankets for you to choose from. How about I hold one up, and you can tell me if you like it or not, hm?" Ilya offers. "And then we can decide where everything goes. You know what a nest is, don't you, baby?"

Shane nods quickly. Fuck yeah, he knows what a nest is. He'd made one once back in Ilya's bed at their Montreal house, when Shane was feeling *so* alone, and Ilya had felt like a million trillion miles away. He'd cried the entire time while searching for items that reminded him of Ilya, looking for anything that might still hold traces of his scent. Unfortunately, he had come up pretty short.

In fact, one of the only things that *had* even remotely still reminded him of Ilya was a shameful secret he'd tucked away for later for that exact reason. A sweaty gym tank that Shane had nicked from the bedroom floor while Ilya was still in the shower. He'd stashed it somewhere safe, somewhere Ilya would never find it, just in case Shane needed something, *anything,* that smelled like him, even if that smell was pretty rank.

And Shane did need it. He'd needed it so badly. He'd let out a sob of relief once he remembered, once he realized he finally had an item for his nest that would bring him real physical comfort. He'd slept like a baby with his face pressed into Ilya's sweaty shirt. He was even blessed with dreams that night of Ilya shirtless in the gym, teasing Shane as he towered over him, told him he shouldn't be lifting so much without a very dedicated and hands-on spotter. Ilya, of course, was up for the job.

So, yeah, Shane supposed you could say his nest had actually been so good that it quite literally got him laid, at least in the imaginary sense. He had a feeling tonight would be more of an actuality, but still. The sentiment remained. Shane could make a damn good nest. Probably even better if Ilya was prepared to scent the items fresh.

"It is a safe space," Ilya tells him anyway. "A place where you can let your guard down. A place where you are completely protected and secure to do whatever you want and be whoever you want."

Shane swallows.

"And what you want is to be my good, little omega, right? Surrounded by things that smell like your Alpha. That bring you comfort?" Ilya hums knowingly.

He's doing that thing with his voice. That thing where he talks slow and gentle and ends each line with a question. Like Shane is just a small child who needs extra help to understand. Shane grabs onto his arm desperately to let him know that he's resonating with everything Ilya is saying. It's putting him into the most beautiful headspace, and it's not a kitty exactly. It's slightly different, but it still makes him shy and quiet and needy and handsy. Luckily, Ilya seems prepared as he leans in to kiss Shane's cheek and ruffle his hair.

"Let me see what I have in my drawer for you."

And Shane watches with wide, wanting eyes as Ilya starts by taking out a bottle of his cologne.

His *pheromones*, Shane thinks to himself. His brain is ooey and gooey. He's so, so spacey.

"How about this, котенок?" Ilya questions, holding up the first option for Shane to review. It's a Boston Bears t-shirt, one that Shane has seen stretched across Ilya's broad chest a million times over the years.

Shane instantly bobs his head up and down and makes grabby hands for the shirt.

"Who knew you were such a Bears fan?" Ilya teases, and Shane frowns, but the expression slips away when Ilya finally hands him the tee.

Shane doesn't hesitate before bringing the shirt up to his nose, and he's pleasantly surprised to find that this one already has a scent. Like maybe Ilya had the forethought to store some of these items away before washing them.

Ilya shows him a few more items. Some hoodies, some sweatpants, a button-up shirt, a hat that Shane's seen Ilya wear to the gym once or twice. There's also larger items like soft blankets, little pillows that are covered in a butter-like fabric that Shane can't resist rubbing against his cheek. Ilya's spritzing his cologne onto them every so often, sometimes holding the item up to his own nose to check the scent before he decides. Ilya even gives him a little stuffed Centaur that makes Shane's heart throb as he hugs it close to his chest. He feels like he's on cloud nine.

But as much as he loves everything that Ilya is handing him, it still feels like something is missing. Some visceral need coming from deep within him that Shane is eager to satiate. Ilya is watching him curiously as Shane chews on his lower lip in thought.

"You are wanting something else, котенок. What is it?" Ilya asks him, but Shane doesn't know how to say it. He can't find the words right now.

So, instead, he places the stuffed Centaur mascot back on the bed and then carefully crawls his way over to Ilya, pausing on his knees right in front of him. Shane hesitantly reaches out to grip at the waistband of Ilya's pants, looking up at him with big, pleading eyes.

"No, we are not doing that now, sweet boy. Right now, we are making your nest, remember?"

But Shane shakes his head. He's not trying to do anything naughty. He just really wants Ilya's clothes fresh from the source. Mostly, he wants Ilya's boxers. He wants Ilya's socks. He wants anything that's going to carry his heady scent more potently. Shane wants to bathe in that smell; he wants to get off on it.

He tries to convey as much, dipping his hand a little lower until he can tug at the black fabric sitting low on Ilya's hips. His mouth is watering at the thought of getting this for his nest, and he whimpers loudly to let Ilya know.

"Oh, I see," Ilya realizes. "You are very obsessed with your Alpha's scent, hm? It is not enough to have the clothes from my drawer. You need them right off my back, don't you, sweetheart?"

Shane nods pitifully, but Ilya is just smiling at him as he reaches down to caress his cheek.

"You can have anything you want, angel. You only need to ask. Can you use your words for me?" Ilya requests, grazing his thumb over Shane's lower lip before pressing the digit into his mouth.

Shane moans and lets his eyes slip shut as he fastens his lips around Ilya's thumb, sucking slowly like it's more for his comfort than it is for Ilya's gaze. He gasps when Ilya removes the digit and then smears the line of spit all over Shane's mouth and chin.

"What was that, baby? I couldn't hear you?"

Shane keeps his eyes shut because he feels like he's in omega heaven right now. He can't even believe this. That he has an Alpha who's helping him make a nest. That his Alpha is about to strip out of his clothes and hand them over for Shane to roll around in, sniff, rut into.

He feels feral. He feels drunk off the way particles from Ilya's cologne are still spiraling through the air, working their way into his bones.

"Please," Shane forces himself to whisper, and all at once, Ilya isn't touching him anymore. There's a shuffling sound right in front of him, and when Shane lets his eyes snap open, he sees Ilya stripping out of his clothes. Shane's throat feels tight as the shirt comes off first, revealing miles and miles of Ilya's hard, chiseled body. Shane is breathing heavily. He wants to lick him all over. He wants to commit each curve of Ilya's chest and abdomen to memory with his tongue. He feels like an actual wild animal right now. Like he can't control himself. Like he's in fucking heat.

Ilya smirks at his reaction, handing over his shirt before he gets to work on his jeans, and Shane wastes no time burying his face in it. He feels relief rush through his entire body as Ilya's ripe, fresh scent makes its way through his veins, soothes him to his core.

"Oh, you're such a good omega, aren't you? So desperate for your Alpha. Does my scent calm you, sweet boy?"

Shane just falls to his stomach and twists around helplessly, trying to get the scent from the large pile of clothes all over him. Embedded into his nose. Seared into his skin. He goes crazy when Ilya hands over his jeans next. But it isn't until Shane is finally handed Ilya's boxers that he feels like he might actually come. Just from the *thought* of how filthy it is. How good it feels to act fucking insane for his owner. *Rabid*, in fact.

He feels like he's in heat, genuinely. Like Ilya was pumping something extra into his pheromones. Something addictive that was making Shane physically react.

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Ilya watches on in thinly-veiled hunger as Shane starts to fucking lose himself. He's getting really into the headspace, Ilya can tell, and it's different than when he's a kitten. He's more scent-focused now, more reactive to the space around him, like he's soaking up comfort from the nest that they still hadn't really put together yet.

Shane is sniffing and licking at Ilya's discarded boxers like he's fucking possessed, even though Ilya knows how much he was probably sweating in that tattoo chair, losing his mind at how god damn painful it had been. He has to be mindful of the wrappings tonight, since Shane was surely going to be in quite a state by the time Ilya was done with him.

Ilya takes off his socks next, but when he goes to toss them on the floor, Shane makes a particularly wounded sound that has Ilya turning sharply in question. But it's just Shane giving him his desperate, pleading kitty eyes. The kind that clue Ilya in to the fact that he wants something. Ilya's *socks*, to be exact. Ilya is so fucking hard already.

He crawls onto the bed as Shane sucks the fabric into his mouth, trying not to lose it right then and there at the sight of his kitten fucking worshipping him. Instead, he helps Shane start to organize the items into a structure around the border of the bed. It takes a little convincing to get Shane involved, but once Shane starts to see the nest forming, he focuses right up.

His omega is picky, like always. Ilya places his old Boston Bears jersey in five different spots before Shane finally agrees to one he likes. Everything had to be perfect for his baby's first knotting, after all. Ilya was going to ruin him for anyone else.

He'd gone to the darkest depths of the internet to find the toy that they were going to use tonight, had done hours of research to ensure he'd have the perfect way to create a special experience for his absolute best boy. Ilya had heard of knotting dildos, sure. Even knotted plugs. But there was nothing that would compare to the wearable cock knot that Ilya had purchased.

It had a hole in it so Ilya would be able to slip his dick right through, a loop that he could secure around his balls to make sure it stayed in place as Ilya fucked Shane. And when it was time, Ilya would push forward and sink the large silicone knot attachment into Shane's stretched and greedy hole, and even better, there was a little indent further down the sheath that would allow them to lock into place when they were finished. No synthetic sperm like some of the knotting dildos came with either. Ilya was going to give him the real thing. A nest. His knot. Even a fucking baby to grow inside of him. Anything to sell the fantasy that Shane was craving. And Ilya couldn't lie to say that he wasn't craving it just as badly.

Ilya fucking wishes he had a knot that would lock him and Shane together for twenty minutes to an hour every time he came inside of him. There was something so intimate about staying attached even after both of them had finished, of keeping Shane full while he rode out the after waves of his orgasm. Shane was going to go deep into some form of kitten or omega space tonight—that much Ilya was sure of—but he was prepared to keep an extra close eye on him. As usual, Shane's comfort and safety would be a top priority.

Once the border of the nest is starting to look up to Shane's standards, Ilya spreads the soft pink and teal blankets across the inside to create a nice little cozy nook for him, and then just to ensure he's covered all his bases, he spritzes the entire thing with a few pumps of his cologne.

And Shane is going fucking wild when he collapses inside. He's on his back with his paws up in the air, rutting and twisting around the space like he's the happiest kitty in the world. He keeps turning his head to pick up different scents depending on which item his nose is closest to. Ilya can see now how Shane's strategy has come into play, the freshest items with the headiest scent closest to the inside where Shane will be able to access them most.

Ilya smiles and pets at his tummy, admiring the Captain's *C* from his own jersey printed across Shane's chest. It was symbolic, since Shane was always in charge, wasn't he? As much as Ilya liked to pretend he had control, they both knew, deep down, that Shane was the one who held all the cards close to his fluffy kitten chest.

Ilya is naked, and horny, and his dick's hard against his stomach, so he pushes Shane's jersey up a bit to get a better look at his omega's little dick in his tiny, pink boxer brief panties. There's a sweet bow just at the top, and Ilya thumbs over it in want. Shane still has his eyes closed like he's died and gone to omega heaven, but if they want this knotting to happen anytime tonight, Ilya needs to start getting him prepped. Omegas required a lot of slick in order to take their Alpha's knot and, since Shane wasn't equipped with some of the biological

necessities to make that happen, Ilya was going to have to substitute with a healthy dose of spit and a whole fuck-load of lube.

He leans forward to press his lips to the fabric of Shane's pretty boy panties, feeling a little thrum of approval run through him when Shane immediately arches into the touch. He's gasping, but his eyes are still closed, almost like the anticipation is what's turning him on.

So, Ilya takes his time. He presses slow, gentle kisses all over Shane's thickening cock, until Shane is pressing his hips up desperately, going crazy from the need to be touched fully. Ilya rubs the palm of his hand over him and hums in satisfaction when Shane whines.

"That's a good boy. Whine for me. Show me how desperate you are for your Alpha to wreck you," Ilya encourages as he continues to rub over him enticingly slow, using his thumb to press little circles across the head of Shane's cock through his panties. "Bathing in my scent, look at you. You're so, so precious."

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Shane feels precious, content to lose himself in the feeling as his big, strong Alpha takes care of him. Ilya's massive hand spread across his cock is delicious, and Shane wants more. He presses his hips up to try and get it, but Ilya seems content to tease him a little longer. To let Shane rut up against the ridges of his fingers on his non-tattooed hand.

"That's it. Just take what I give you. You are not in charge here, hm? Listen to your Alpha's voice."

Shane lets his mouth drop open as he pants, still twisting his body this way and that in an attempt to find more pleasure. To seek better feelings. His arousal is trickling into his gut and spreading all across his body. He thinks his skin is getting warmer, like Ilya's scent is triggering an actual heat, or maybe Shane's imagination was just that good. Maybe his brain was just that powerful that he could put himself into heat just by thinking about it, just by being a desperate little animal for Ilya's amusement.

Please, he thinks, and when he opens his eyes, Ilya is watching him with an easy, half-lidded expression. Like this is just an average day for him. Like playing with Shane until he's whining and pleading is just a walk in the park. A regular afternoon. For Ilya, Shane supposes it is, but it doesn't make the yearning consume him any less. It doesn't make the needy feeling go away.

He almost cries in relief when Ilya finally starts stripping him out of his underwear, a little tantalizing smile on Ilya's lips as he pets over the fabric and then holds it up for Shane to see. There's a tiny wet spot that has bled into the baby pink of his boxer briefs, a strong indicator that Shane was already leaking pre-cum and making a mess of himself, but he knows what Ilya is going to say before the words even leave his mouth.

"My omega is slicking up for me already, hm? I think your heat is starting, angel."

And Shane moans fully at that, his face pinching up because he can't take how good it feels to have Ilya talk to him like this. He's not even saying anything crazy; it's just a different type

of language, but to Shane, it feels fucking filthy. Indulgent. *Wrong*, in a way that is so, so right.

Ilya's hands are gentle as he settles into the space between Shane's thighs, spreading his legs slightly to make room for himself before nuzzling into Shane's skin. Grazing the scruff of his cheek across the inside of Shane's legs, taking his time to make sure Shane feels everything.

"Alpha," Shane gets out pleadingly, and Ilya just hums and continues to rub his face against him. *Scenting him*, Shane realizes. His body goes lax.

"Such a good boy for your Alpha, yes? Oh, you smell so delicious down here, baby. I think your scent is made perfect just for me."

Shane gasps and reaches out desperately, thankful when Ilya relinquishes one of his hands in order for Shane to cling and grab onto it. He can see Ilya's large shoulder muscles flexing with the stretch, and he watches Ilya's blue eyes on him as he ducks down to press a barely-there kiss to Shane's taint. Just a ghost of a touch, so tiny that Shane hardly even feels it, but it's driving him wild, nonetheless.

"Mm, what do you smell like down here?" Ilya asks rhetorically before pressing his nose right to Shane's rim and inhaling deeply. Shane thinks he's going to die when Ilya lets out a moan. "My baby is so *sweet*. Honey and cinnamon, and…oh, what else is that? Is that caramel? I think I'm going to have to get a taste."

Shane jolts when the tip of Ilya's tongue circles his rim feather-light. Like he really is tentatively diving into a dessert and trying to get a sense of the flavor. Ilya hums curiously and then presses his tongue flat against Shane this time, licking broadly across him in a way that forces Shane to turn his head and bury his nose right in Ilya's boxers from where they're positioned next to him in his cozy nest.

He feels so *safe*. So loved by his Alpha, but he just *needs*. He's so fucking needy. He's the neediest omega alive, probably. Wants to lap at his Alpha's cock, suck on Ilya's knot until he's forced to lock himself in Shane's throat. *Oh* god.

Shane is squeezing Ilya's fingers in a death-like grip as Ilya really gets into it now. Licking him fully. Spreading his cheeks apart with the hand that Shane hasn't taken captive. Shane can feel Ilya's scruff against the backs of his thighs every time Ilya rubs his chin against him, which is frequent enough that Shane has to assume it's intentional. He's going to have beard burn all over him tomorrow. The thought makes him whine and struggle some more, but Ilya just holds him through it. Licks him slow and steady like he isn't in any rush. Like his goal isn't to get Shane off, but rather to get Shane *wet*. Which Shane realizes, after a while, *is* the point.

His slick is dripping onto his thighs, coating Ilya's face and clinging to the stubble on his chin so that when Ilya pauses to look up at him, Shane can see the way his lips are fucking *glistening* with moisture.

Shane cries out and grabs Ilya by his hair, trying to pull him closer, but Ilya just removes his hand with a sharp squeeze around his wrist.

“Be good for me, omega,” he says intentionally low, his voice vibrating out of him in a way Shane has *never* heard it before.

His Alpha voice, his Alpha voice, Shane’s kitty brain reminds him excitedly, which means he has no choice but to obey. To relax instantly. To sink into submission.

“Good boy,” Ilya says in that same tone, that same cadence that’s driving Shane fucking wild.

And then he goes back to licking. He’s so strong that he can hold Shane’s quivering legs down with just one arm thrown across Shane’s waist to keep him in position while he forces his tongue deeper. Shane feels Ilya’s nose nudge up against his balls and it’s wet, too. He’s swirling his tongue crazy-style now, making shapes Shane can’t even picture behind his closed eyes, and then he’s lapping again. Loudly. *Wetly*. Slurping, at points, like Shane is leaking fucking slick

“Please, Alpha. Please,” Shane begs, scrappling to grab at Ilya’s arm, to find anything to ground him to this reality.

“You wanna come, baby?” Ilya questions, licking across Shane’s legs this time, planting sloppy, wet kisses all over his skin. “You’re so *wet* for your Alpha, aren’t you? You gonna take my knot tonight?” Ilya squeezes one of his ankles and then shoves it up next to his head.

Holy fuck, Shane is crying. He can’t believe he gets to have this. A partner who indulges all of his wildest fantasies, a partner who researches and plans and figures out how to make it happen. How to make it *perfect*. 10/10. No fucking notes. If Shane were to die like this, Ilya’s omega in his Alpha’s arms, he would die happy.

But not before getting his knot.

“Yes,” Shane chokes out, and his heart picks up when Ilya laughs.

“Needy, little omega. You want your Alpha’s knot so badly,” Ilya taunts, gliding a hand across Shane’s stomach under his jersey. “Need me to pump you full of babies, don’t you? Fill you up until you are all full of my kittens?”

Shane throws an arm over his face because he can’t take this. The thought of having Ilya’s children is too much right now. He shudders when Ilya presses a finger to his hole and the tip of it slips in without restraint. Shane tries to curl up and hide, but Ilya’s too fucking strong. He’s *so* much bigger.

Shane feels like if Ilya wanted to, he could *really* pin him down, to the point where Shane couldn’t get out from under him no matter how hard he tried. He almost wants to see how it would feel to be entirely trapped by him, *entirely* under his control. He could decide Shane’s fate. Could decide if he ever wanted to let Shane go free or if he wanted to stay there on top of him and keep him hostage forever. Just because he was bigger. Just because Shane wasn’t strong enough to get away.

“Look at me, котенок. I want you to watch what your Alpha is doing to you. I know your little omega brain cannot work properly until you have my knot, but I still expect you to obey

me."

Shane sniffles and throws his arm away from his face, reaching for his Centaurs plushie for comfort instead as he keeps his eyes locked to Ilya.

Ilya, who Shane hasn't seen grab any lube, but suddenly it feels like there's something gushing out of him, or maybe gushing *into* him, and Shane gasps loudly.

Holy fucking shit. What the fuck. What the fuck is happening?

"How you doing, baby?" Ilya's voice brings him back to the present, and he's rubbing at Shane's hole again, only this time it's with two fingers that dip into him every so often. "Can you give my hand a squeeze if you're green? Just my fingers, please. Careful of the tattoo."

Shane doesn't know up from down from sideways right now. There's something in him. Something cold. He feels fucking *weird*. Like he's a different kind of animal. A different kind of creature. Shane moans when Ilya's digits finally do enter him, and that's when he feels just how fucking *wet* he is. Like Ilya has somehow shot lube up inside of him. He turns his face to desperately rub it against something from his nest, taking in deep inhales as he tries to reorient himself.

"Baby?" Ilya double-checks, and Shane's head is warm, sticky caramel right now. He wonders if it's bleeding into his scent. Bleeding into the taste of his slick. He wants to ask Ilya to check. Maybe the lower down Shane went, the more he'd turn into a real omega, and then Ilya could bond him in yet another way. Because marriage and a tattoo simply weren't enough. He needs to be bound to Ilya in every possible means a person can be bound to someone. In *every* type of universe; real, fictional, or otherwise. He and Ilya were already there in the *Game Changers* universe, and they were well on their way in akatomlinson's *is just ten year plan to fuck*, but what about all the one-shots that akatomlinson still had yet to write?

Shane blinks when he sees Ilya's hazy face above him, his lips moving around words that Shane should probably be listening to, but everything is too good where he's at. Shane's head lolls as Ilya cups his chin and tries to focus him. The lube inside him is starting to slip out. Shane sucks in a gasp.

"*Shane*," Ilya says while giving each of his cheeks a light tap with his hand.

Shane startles and lets his eyelashes flutter quickly in awareness.

"I need you to come up a little for me, sweetheart. You are getting very far away. Everything is okay, yes? You're right with me."

Shane smacks his lips as they pull into a smile, his gaze starry-eyed as he looks at Ilya's handsome face. *Wow*. Did anyone even understand how big a catch Ilya was? He was so *safe*. He protected Shane from fucking everything, even himself. And his stupid team, who had shit-talked Ilya as if he wasn't the fire inside Shane, warming his entire being and doing everything in his power to keep the lights on after a particularly cold and tumultuously long winter.

“There you are, baby. Come back to me a bit. I still have my fingers inside of you, okay? I am going to pull them out now.”

Shane’s eyes go wide as he instantly jerks up to grab at Ilya’s arm. The *last* thing he wants right now is for Ilya to be further away.

Ilya looks him over carefully, his blue eyes assessing, and Shane is getting so fucking lost in his beauty. Wow, he’s pretty. Ilya was going to give him the prettiest babies. *God*. Shane feels another flurry of tears wash over him, and he grips Ilya’s arm tightly. He’s okay; he’s just so emotional. He cries a little harder when he sees the new ring hanging from Ilya’s necklace.

“I know, sweetheart,” Ilya says softly. “I know it’s a lot. You’re doing so well for me. I know it’s making you emotional, but that’s okay. You’re completely safe here. You’re with me, and I’m always going to take care of you. I’m never gonna let you go too far, okay?”

Shane hiccups and rubs at one of his teary eyes with his fist.

“Let’s just sit here for a minute and take some deep breaths, okay? I’ll leave my fingers inside of you, and we can just pause for a second, hm?” Ilya prompts. “Can you breathe in for me?”

Shane swallows and forces himself to inhale, even though it’s done a little shakily.

“And out.”

Shane pushes the exhale out of him, his eyes roaming over Ilya’s bare chest, taking in his many, many moles. Between that and Shane’s freckles, they were going to make some of the most speckled cat kids of all time. He breathes in again. And out.

“Good boy. You’re doing so well for me, like always. I’m a very, very lucky man, aren’t I?”

Shane jerks slightly in awareness as he takes Ilya in with fresh eyes. That’s right. Ilya was a man. He didn’t actually have a knot. Couldn’t *actually* get Shane pregnant. Well, fuck. That was disappointing. He hates how Ilya smiles when he pouts. Like he’s achieved his goal of ruining all of Shane’s deepest, darkest fantasies.

“I know. I’m sorry, baby, but I need you to come up a bit if you still want my knot.”

Shane’s eyes zero in again. So, he was still going to get a knot. Somehow, at least. Ilya would find a way. Maybe he would find a way to get him pregnant, too.

“That’s right. You are going to get my big, fat Alpha knot. Which is why I need to stretch you nice and open for me.”

Ilya flexes his fingers inside of Shane, and Shane’s whole body twitches, but Ilya just presses his left elbow down on Shane’s thigh to keep it in place as he sinks deeper into the mess of lube that’s somehow *within* him. Ilya Rozanov*,* Sex God, and now Fucking Magician.

He scissors his fingers, and it pulls something animalistic out of Shane. A wounded howl, perhaps. Ilya bites his thigh, and Shane pants into Ilya’s boxers again. Deep breaths. He

needs Ilya's knot *badly*, but fingers are the first step to getting there. Shane needs to keep himself together. His dick is leaking wildly against his tummy. Ilya hasn't even looked at it once.

"That's a good boy. Sweet, little omega. You are just a perfect angel for me. Taking my fingers so well. Ready to please your Alpha."

Shane nods frantically into Ilya's boxers, and he yelps when Ilya goes to press in a third finger, lube squelching out of him as Ilya fills him up. "Ah," Shane groans while twisting frantically.

"Sh, sh. You're okay, baby. I know it is very overwhelming, but you are doing so, so well for me. You're stretching so beautifully."

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Shane *is* stretching beautifully. Ilya can't stop staring at where his fingers are disappearing inside of him. His fingers that are fucking *glistening* with slick. They're soaking wet from the syringe of lube that Ilya pressed up inside of him to get him nice and loose. Nice and ready. He knows Shane is sensitive. He knows Shane needs to come, but Ilya needs him prepped and ready before his own dick explodes.

Shane is the hottest little omega he's ever seen in his life. Pink, flushed skin and those teary, devastating eyes that Ilya could never get enough of. His tiny, wet hole that kept sucking on Ilya's fingers every time he tried to pump them in, and then out. Forcing his inner walls to stretch wider. Further. Because the knot was fucking big. Girthy. Shane was probably going to *gape* after. Ilya feels like a fucking rabid wolf about to tear into a delicious meal.

The wearable knot isn't just for show on Ilya's end either. It's ribbed on the inside, so that Ilya will be affected by it just as much as Shane is, and he can't say he's not vibrating with the urge to try it. To physically tie him and Shane together. To overwhelm him so much that he turns into a brainless, drooly mess. Ilya's baby omega to take care of for the rest of the evening.

Once he had fucked Shane through the first wave of his heat, then Ilya would hunt and scavenge for sustenance. He had an overwhelming urge to *provide* for Shane. He was already paying for everything, making all the choices, taking care of the future mother of his children, but Ilya still wanted more. He wanted to be responsible for pumping air through Shane's lungs. He wanted to physically monitor his heart beating, wanted to direct blood to each and every one of his veins. His obsession knew *no* bounds. He'd direct Shane's thoughts like a conductor of an orchestra if he could; in fact, there were some days in which he did exactly that.

Marriage, though, that was different. That was one step closer to actually being a father. To being responsible for Shane's safety, and health, and entire body and soul. That was worthy of transferring all their money into a joint bank account. Citing Shane as his next of kin. Taking out a life insurance policy to ensure that Shane had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life, just in case anything ever happened to Ilya. Just in case he was no longer around to take care of him.

Ilya shuts his eyes tightly and takes a deep breath of his own. Tries not to get too emotional, but Alphas and omegas were special. They mated for life. They bit into each other until they broke skin, until they became one, and then wore each other's mark proudly for all the world to see. Alphas and omegas could feel things through their bond. They could pick up on each other's emotions, could practically read one another's minds through changes in their scents. They acted on instinct, out of pure desire and want for one another. Alphas took control while omegas submitted, and no one questioned that; no one thought it was weird because, in an Alpha and omega world, it wasn't.

Ilya thinks he must have been an Alpha in another life. Blinded by his powerful emotions, sometimes, but also ferociously protective of those he held near to him. Willing to die for the ones he loved.

And Shane, the *sweetest* smelling omega in all the land. The one that all the Alphas, and even some omegas, were chasing after. Dying for a whiff of him, or better yet, a taste. But Shane was blind to all of them. In fact, Shane hadn't ever been drawn to an Alpha's scent before Ilya. He'd barely known he was an omega, still trying to perform and suppress, until Ilya woke up something powerful inside of him. A *need* to be who he *was*—who he, deep down, had *always* been. See, Shane had been scared that being an omega would reduce him to less, would limit him in ways that were not compatible with the life he craved. But Ilya had proven him wrong. Ilya had given him a pack that wanted to protect him just as much as they wanted to lift him up. A pack that was comfortable with an omega being Top Dog, no matter who he submitted to in his free time. No matter whose mark he wore. And Ilya believed the same. If anything, Shane held even *more* power as an omega. He had all the control. Ilya was a slave to his every wish.

Ilya presses a round of distracting kisses across Shane's thighs as he edges his pinky in alongside his other three fingers. He nips at his skin to pull Shane's attention away from the never-ending stretch. They were close, but Ilya wanted Shane to be as comfortable as possible, which meant that more prep was always the better option. Better to be safe than sorry.

Ilya swirls his tongue through the mess that is Shane's hole, hoping to provide some form of relief as he pushes him to his absolute limits. Stretches him wider than he's ever been stretched before. Ilya's knot would be the biggest thing Shane's *ever* taken; he was expecting lots and lots of tears.

Shane is crying now. He has been for a while, but he goes in and out of it. Sometimes, it's like he completely forgets he was ever overwhelmed and he just looks sniffly. A little fuzzy. But other times, he's sobbing and twisting and buzzing like he's got ice running through his veins. Right now, he's more like that. The sensitive baby that Ilya knows very well.

He shushes him and lets Shane squeeze his fingers until they start to lose circulation. He keeps pressing wet, slick kisses anywhere he can reach, wiggling his fingers minutely to keep inching them further inside. Until Shane is practically wailing and Ilya's entire hand has disappeared within him, save for his thumb. He brushes said thumb across Shane's perineum, watching in cautious admiration as Shane quivers and shakes.

Shane's dick is so, so hard, but Ilya doesn't care. Tonight, he's just a hole to take Ilya's fat knot. Maybe Ilya will touch him when he's screaming so loud that he's defying the laws of gravity and sound, levitating past all barriers known to man, but for now, Ilya is content to let his dick continue leaking pitifully against his tummy.

He's been mostly focused on stretching Shane so far, but Shane has been *so* good for him, so Ilya rewards him with a little nudge to his prostate that he's sure will have Shane seeing stars. Shane's eyes roll back into his head, and Ilya watches in amazement as he comes untouched all over Ilya's jersey.

"Fuck," Ilya curses, diving forward to lick up the release with his tongue.

Shane is shaking violently from all the stimulation, so Ilya just places a grounding hand on Shane's abdomen and lets him ride through it.

"Good boy," he soothes. "So, so good. You are absolutely perfect. Just breathe, that's it. Doing so well for me, baby."

His Shane was so *sensitive*, god. Ilya loved to ignore his pretty cock and watch him come anyway. Just from Ilya playing with his ass. A true omega, indeed.

He waits until Shane is a tiny bit more coherent and then gives a warning before slowly starting to pull his fingers out of him.

"Alpha," Shane sobs, and Ilya pets over his hip.

"Easy, baby. Stay calm for me, please," Ilya requests, but he knows Shane can feel each ridge of his finger as they pass by his rim. He knows that lube is leaking out of Shane's hole like nobody's business, knows that it's probably a sensation nightmare for Shane right now, even though Ilya had searched for the absolute best lube for his boy. It would all be worth it to be able to give Shane his knot, though. He knew his kitten fantasized about it more than anything.

Eventually, he's able to pull his hand entirely free, and he immediately reaches for a towel to wipe his fingers off before crawling over to wrap himself around Shane. His arms that were getting bigger and bigger by the day cause Ilya had doubled his supplements and started going up in weights twice as fast. He was fucking killing himself in the gym, but it paid off to be able to hold Shane for as long as he wanted. It paid off when Shane was bone-dead from a particularly intense scene and Ilya needed to carry him halfway across the house to get from Shane's playroom to their bedroom. Any sacrifice was worth it if it improved Shane's life in some way.

Shane clutches onto him tightly like he's scared Ilya is going to drift away, so Ilya just presses reassuring kisses and nips to his neck. "My sweet angel. You are just the most perfect thing alive, aren't you? Take everything I give you like you're fucking made for it. Like you're made for *me*."

"Yours," Shane gets out desperately, and Ilya just smiles at how precious he is.

“You are mine forever,” Ilya agrees, holding up his necklace to show Shane the ring that hangs from it now because he knows the effect it will have on him.

Shane just lets his teary eyes leak some more as he wraps his own fingers through Ilya’s necklace before pulling him forward into a kiss. It’s probably the softest, most intimate kiss known to man, and if you had asked Ilya a few months ago what his preferred type of kiss was, he wouldn’t have said this one. Now, though, he wants to kiss Shane like he’s made of porcelain for the rest of his life.

He indulges Shane a little longer, barely lets their lips separate as they just kiss over and over and over again. They’re hardly using tongue, just aligning their mouths to test how perfectly they fit together—*like puzzle pieces*, Ilya thinks, as sparks shoot through his veins. He’s cupping Shane’s chin with gentle fingers, nudging their noses together and inhaling his scent. And then, after a while, he lets his hand drift lower and cups Shane’s spent cock until he whines dejectedly.

“Do you still want my knot, sweet boy?” Ilya checks, because they had come all this way. It would be a waste not to knot him after stretching him so much, after he was perfectly and deliciously open for Ilya. But, as always, Shane’s comfort came first. Plus, they had the rest of their lives to experiment. To keep playing and discovering new things.

But Shane is nodding emphatically and pulling Ilya impossibly close, so Ilya rewards him with a deeper kiss this time. One that makes Shane go lax in his arms as Ilya takes control once more. Ilya feels Shane’s cock start to come to life again in his hand, Shane whimpering into his mouth while Ilya nibbles at his lower lip before kissing across his face. His nose. His freckles. His gorgeous brown eyes.

“Gonna knot you and get you pregnant, baby. You’d make the most beautiful kittens, wouldn’t you?” Ilya coos, rubbing over Shane’s tummy this time. “Would be the best mother. Taking care of my babies.”

Shane moans and tries to bury his face in Ilya’s hair.

“You’d smell like me all the time if you were pregnant. All the other Alphas would know you’re mine. Wearing my mark proudly on your neck,” Ilya hums, licking over Shane’s neck where he’d bit him harshly not too long ago. They were *already* mated, as far as Ilya was concerned, but he knew Shane taking his knot would *fully* solidify the bond. It was symbolic of the life they were starting together. The beautiful life that Ilya has dreamed of for so, so long.

Shane is starting to go down again, and Ilya is going to go out of his mind if he doesn’t slide into Shane’s dripping wet fucking hole soon, so he reluctantly pulls away in order to retrieve the wearable knot from a set of drawers next to the bed.

It’s red, like Ilya imagines his actual knot would be if he had a seductive creature like Shane hanging around him all the time, making him crazy, driving him wild. It’s a little sparkly, too, since Ilya thought Shane might like that. His Shane liked pretty things, after all.

Shane gasps when Ilya holds it out in front of him.

“I am going to put this on,” Ilya explains, letting Shane see the width of the knot as he turns it in his hands. “I am going to fuck you like normal, and when it is time, I am going to knot you and then we are going to be locked together until I say we are done. Okay? It is a lot to take, so I need you to let me know if you need help. I am going to keep a very careful eye on you.”

Shane looks fucking dazed, his eyes going gooey as he processes the sheer girth of the attachment that’s going to go inside of him soon enough. Ilya is also feeling a little lightheaded at the thought of seeing Shane stretch. Shane’s hole, that had only taken one cock in his *life*. Ilya wants to cry at the fact that that would remain true for the rest of forever. Shane was *his*. He had only ever *been* his, like it was fucking fate. A prophecy fulfilled.

Hollander and Rozanov—their names had been used together in the same sentence since the start of their careers, but for reasons unbeknownst to the wider public. Reasons unbeknownst to Shane, probably, at the time, too, but Shane’s proposal had told him everything he needed to know. Because even when Shane couldn’t put a name to his feelings, he had still known something was there. He hadn’t known he was gay, hadn’t even known how to identify in a world where his skin, the way he processed things, the way he experienced attraction, were all considered outside of the norm. But Ilya had had all the time in the world to chase Shane, to learn him from the outside in, and he never should have doubted that they would find each other in due time. That fate would play out in the way it was always meant to. Hollander and Rozanov—the two most talked about hockey prospects in the world, and now, the soon-to-be First Husbands of Hockey. It was a fitting twist to their story, a fitting end to the narrative that had been shoved on them from the moment they debuted into the NHL. They were rewriting history, reclaiming everything that had been taken from them.

Ilya stays close to Shane as he sits up to work the wearable knot onto his dick. It slides on easily, and Ilya almost has to shut his eyes for a moment when he feels the inside ridges start to grip him, but he can’t look away from Shane’s face. He can’t tear his eyes away from Shane’s gaze, even as he carefully maneuvers his balls into the open hole to secure the knot against the base of his cock. Ilya moans softly, and he can’t help reaching out to graze his knuckles across Shane’s pink, wet lips.

“Why don’t you suck on me for a second?” Ilya offers, because he thinks it’ll get Shane further into the headspace. He thinks it’ll get Shane used to the idea of seeing Ilya’s new knot as part of him, rather than just a toy he’s attached to himself.

Shane doesn’t need to be told twice as Ilya presses the tip of his cock to Shane’s mouth, Shane’s wide eyes looking up at him as he envelops the head of Ilya’s cock, lips catching on his pre-cum.

“Oh, that’s nice, baby. Getting your Alpha nice and wet, aren’t you?” Ilya gasps, holding himself by the base of his knot as he sinks a little further into the tight heat of Shane’s mouth. He doesn’t want to stay here for too long because he’s pretty sure he’s going to wind up coming all over Shane’s face if he does, and unlike Shane, Ilya was not known for his ability to get himself off multiple times in a row with little to no recovery time. So, after a minute or two, he reluctantly pulls away and then ducks down to kiss Shane on his pouty lips. “You ready for me?” Ilya double-checks as he moves across Shane’s body, swirling his fingers in the filthy, slick mess that is Shane’s stretched-out hole.

Shane nods as his mouth hangs open, like he's half shocked and half scared for what's to come.

"It is just going to be like normal at first, okay? Just me fucking you," Ilya tells him soothingly as he gets into position, rubbing the head of his cock against Shane's open hole. *Fuck*, he was fucking beautiful. One of the seven wonders of the world. The best bottom, sub, and omega of all time. The absolute *best* kitten in all the land. This was Ilya's reward for all the horrible shit he had been through in his life. All the terrible lows and the artificial highs that were never really that fulfilling either, but *this*? This was everything to him. *Shane* was everything to him. "I'm gonna take such good care of you," he whispers, maybe more to himself than to Shane. "A husband, a father, an Alpha. Whatever you need."

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Shane cries as he reaches for Ilya's hand again—his one without the tattoo this time, now that it was freed up. He doesn't know what to expect, doesn't know what it feels like to be knotted. All he knows is that Ilya is going to take care of him. Ilya is going to make him feel good and chase all the bad things away for the rest of forever. Shane never has to worry about anything again. He's chosen correctly. A year ago, he could have never predicted this. That he'd be engaged to the love of his life, and that person would be Ilya Rozanov, of all people.

He never could have predicted he'd be playing for the fucking *Centaurs*, and that it would be the most fulfilling hockey experience of his life so far. That he'd be a regular at a sex club—soon to be *two* sex clubs—and that he'd be a cat in the majority of his free time. A cat who lived to be pampered and doted on by his loving owner. Which…again, was Ilya Rozanov. Life was full of surprises.

He sucks in a sharp breath when Ilya glides into him easily. There's absolutely no pushback. Shane is leaking slick like a fucking waterfall. Likely thing for him to do considering his choice in Alpha. The hottest man alive, and with so many fucking talents and good qualities, too. Every time Shane thought that Ilya could not possibly get any better, Ilya proved him wrong by being even more thoughtful. Even more understanding. Even more intuitive. He was a never-ending mystery, full of surprises that Shane wanted to spend the rest of his life uncovering. He felt like he had only grazed the tip of the iceberg.

"Oh," Shane moans when he feels the edge of the knot brush up against his rim. It doesn't go inside of him yet, but just the knowledge that it's there—that it's touching him, that it's going to be nestled within him at some point soon—is enough to have him squirming wildly.

"There you go, baby. You're okay. You feel how big your Alpha is for you? Feel how fucking feral you make me?" Ilya punctuates that sentence by thrusting up inside of him, and Shane cries out desperately when the edge of the knot stretches him a little more. "God, you're so fucking wet. Smell so fucking *good*. This is all for me, isn't it? All for your Alpha?" Ilya asks as he swirls his fingers through the mess coating Shane's inner thighs.

Shane whimpers and nods pitifully. *All* for Ilya. He was living and breathing for Ilya at this point. Maybe they were co-dependent beyond belief, but after years of suffering alone, Shane *deserved* this. Ilya was teaching him how to heal, how to go after what he wanted, no matter how far-off or ridiculous it seemed. Ilya was the one who made him understand that all of this

was *okay*. That he wasn't weird or wrong or bad for wanting this. For *needing* it, sometimes. For needing Ilya. He wasn't weak for being submissive, and he wasn't an anomaly for being gay. He'd come out to his team and seen the impact. Saw how it made Troy and Luca feel confident enough to do the same. How it made the other guys step back, reassess, and re-evaluate any preconceived notions they might have previously held. He saw how Ivan had let himself go down after seeing Shane be so completely himself, so completely a kitten because Ilya had taught him that there was no fucking *shame* in it. In being happy. In living his life the way *Shane* wanted to live it, not the way others expected him to. Shane has been quiet for *so* long, but now, all he wanted to do was be *loud*.

He lets out a flurry of animalistic sounds as Ilya gets into a rhythm of fucking him. Ilya, who is grunting like he's started to sink into a headspace of his own, the headspace of an Alpha who was absolutely scent-drunk on his omega in heat. Shane could feel their brains starting to melt together, their thoughts starting to sync up.

I want this forever. I'm never letting you go. You were put on this Earth to be mine.

Shane can hear Ilya's inner consciousness while the other drives into him roughly because the glide is so fucking smooth. Shane is barely aware of what's happening over the filthy sounds of the lube squelching inside of him, probably coating the base of Ilya's knot and getting it all ready for him. Shane wants it. He's never wanted anything so badly in his life. He clenches around Ilya to try and pull him closer, to try and feel more of his knot, and it works when Ilya practically collapses on top of him, holding himself up by one arm as he grinds deeper into Shane's entrance.

Shane gasps and grabs onto his hair, pulling him close so they can kiss messily, slobbering into each other's mouths from how hard they're panting. Oh *fuck*. He's going to have this dick for the rest of his *life*. No one else is going to get to experience this ever again. He can't wait until they can have a ceremony. Until he can profess his love in front of all of their friends and family. Until he can take Ilya's *name*. Holy shit. Shane tries to hump against Ilya desperately, dragging his claws down the expanse of his back until Ilya hisses in pain.

"My needy little kitten," Ilya says through gritted teeth, and Shane cries harder. It's too much. It's so intense. It's so fulfilling. "One day, everyone will know you are mine. No one will ever question it again. You are the thoughts inside my head, the blood inside my veins, my motivation to keep going," he tells him, holding onto Shane's hip as he continues to fuck him as deep as the knot will allow him to go. "I was not even alive before I met you. My life did not start until I saw those beautiful freckles. My heart did not beat until you sank to your knees in front of me in submission. The whole reason I am a Dom is so I can serve you. The whole reason I am a man is so I can walk with you through all paths of life. And the whole reason I am your owner, the whole reason I am your Alpha, is so I can protect you with every fiber of my being. Fuck, Shane. Fuck."

Ilya is crying now, too, which was rare, but becoming more common as they fell deeper and deeper in love with one another. They had gone through so many challenges, had surpassed so many milestones in such a short amount of time. Their relationship journey had been intense, to say the least, but Shane wouldn't change any part of it. He and Ilya were perfect for one another, alike in all the ways they needed to be, and different in all the ways required

to make them fit properly. Ilya was the sun to Shane's moon, the lyrics to Shane's melody, the fucking gravity holding him to this Earth, keeping him from floating away.

"I'm close," Ilya gets out, and Shane can hear just how much he's struggling to keep his composure.

Shane feels similarly, his dick slapping against his tummy every time Ilya hammers into him, his thighs wetting Ilya's heavy balls that were poised to pump a million tiny kitten babies into his waiting and fertile stomach.

Ilya's eyes go heavy like he can see exactly where Shane's thoughts are. "You ready to take my knot, baby? You ready to bear your Alpha's children? A mix of you and me walking around in this world. Genetic proof that you and I are forever bound."

Shane shakes with the intensity of his sobs, shivers with how bad he wants it, even if he knows deep down that it can never be true. But, they could still have kids somehow. Through surrogate or adoption, or maybe some miracle genie that can grant Shane's wish of combining his and Ilya's DNA into the perfect specimen. Whether it's a child or a cat or some hybrid mix of something in between.

Shane fucking screams out as he feels Ilya start to sink the knot into him, the base stretching his hole so wide that he feels like he's going to fucking burst. He feels like he's dying and living all at once, red alarm bells going off in his head because it feels like it should be wrong, but he's lost in how right it feels. A metaphor for him and Ilya, probably. A fitting beginning to the rest of their lives.

Ilya is pushing the knot in slowly, but it still hurts like all hell, and Ilya's eyes keep shutting tightly like he can feel it, too. Like Shane isn't the only one experiencing the pressure. Like it's really his actual knot that Shane's tight heat is squeezing around.

Shane's sucking in large gulps of air, trying to keep from disappearing into the void as Ilya's knot just keeps coming and coming and coming. He practically loses it when he feels more wetness coating his rim, like his slick is just bursting out of him.

"Fuck, you're doing so good. Just keep breathing for me. Tell me if it's too painful," Ilya's words guide him off the brink of insanity, even though he still feels pretty close.

Shane's grateful when Ilya finds his hand once more and squeezes it tightly, giving Shane something to hold onto, something to focus on. Shane has no idea how far in it is, has no clue how much more could possibly be coming. All he knows is it feels like it goes on forever. He's trapped in a fog that's so hazy he can barely see what's right in front of him. All he knows is Ilya is the only thing he eats, sleeps, and breathes. All he knows is Ilya is *his*, and he never lets Shane fucking forget it. The tattoo, the bonding mark, the proposal that Ilya said he had been fantasizing about for *ten years*. The implication behind that, that Ilya knew Shane was his from the moment they met. He was that confident. He was that sure. He was *that* in love.

All of a sudden, Ilya jolts forward, and Shane feels something pop into place, and then Ilya is shouting and shooting off inside of him. And there's a hand on Shane's dick, but Shane can't

tell which sensation is coming from where because he feels so full and his brain is *mush*. He's nothing but a pile of pleasure. The walls are closing in around him. And then he's coming harder than he's ever come in his life. His vision is whiting out, his ears go fuzzy, his body goes lax. He's fucking convulsing on the bed, and Ilya is touching him, talking to him, but Shane doesn't understand English. He's nothing but a hole to host Ilya's knot, a womb to take Ilya's sperm. They're locked together, and he's pregnant, and he's *Ilya's*.

"Holy fuck. Holy fuck," Ilya is muttering repeatedly, combing over Shane's hair. "Took my knot so well, baby. Best omega in the world. You did so good for your Alpha."

There's praise spilling out of Ilya's mouth, and Shane clings onto it like a lifeline, even if he has no idea what any of it means. Ilya is just babbling nonsense, and Shane is eating it up like a cock-drunk kitty. His mouth is open. His eyes are, too, but there's nothing in front of him. He can't see. He can't think. He doesn't exist as anything except an orifice for Ilya's pleasure. He feels fucking *good*.

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Shane is fucking gone. He's a million layers deep in subspace or kitten space or omega space, or wherever the hell he goes when he ascends to omega kitty sub heaven. The knot is gripping Ilya so tightly from where he's buried inside of Shane, the ridges pressing into the base of his cock and making him see fireworks behind his eyes, but his job isn't done. They're locked together, and while Shane probably wouldn't come up fully until Ilya pulled out of him—or maybe long after that—Ilya still needed to get him back to a place of at least somewhat existing in this plane of reality.

"Good boy," Ilya murmurs to him, petting over Shane's hair. They're, admittedly, not in a great position to be locked together. Ilya supposed that's why Alphas and omegas usually fucked doggystyle, but he needed to see Shane's face. Needed to watch him fall apart almost as much as he needed to make sure he was okay. That he wasn't suffering through any pain. Ilya collapses on top of him to hold him, while simultaneously trying to shoulder some of his weight to keep from crushing Shane, but Shane seems to welcome the fact that Ilya is all around him. Trapping him and invading his senses.

Shane is mewling like a tiny baby kitty, and Ilya recognizes he's going more into that kitten headspace now—the kind that required a bit more comfort, a bit more reassurance in the form of physical touch and grounding words.

"Oh, you are the best kitty cat for me. So fucking sweet for your Alpha, aren't you? There's my good boy," Ilya coos, pressing a round of soothing kisses down his neck. He licks over the bite mark that has healed nicely over the past week or so, and he takes pleasure in the way Shane shudders at the gesture. "That's right, baby. We are bonded for life now," Ilya says slow and syrupy and deep. "You're carrying my children." He presses a hand to Shane's stomach under the fabric of his *Rozanov* jersey. "A nice litter of healthy baby kittens. I hope to god they get your eyes. And your sweet freckles. And your fluffy black and white fur. Oh, you're going to make the most beautiful kitties for me, angel. You made your Alpha so proud."

Shane sniffles and whimpers and clings to him desperately like he needs all the attention in the world, and Ilya is so, so happy to provide it. He'd sit around whispering words of praise into Shane's ear for hours, days, even weeks on end if he could. It's his sole purpose in life, the thing he's probably best at in this world.

They stay like that for a while, Ilya whispering a mix of Russian and English against Shane's pink, flushed skin. They're so sweaty that they're starting to stick together, and Ilya knows he's going to have the time of his life cleaning him up later. Shane's kitty playroom did have a bathroom of its own, but it was nothing compared to the long tub in their master bedroom. The way Ilya could stretch all the way out and hold Shane fully. Two massive athletes who were supposed to be sworn rivals, but somehow ended up being absolutely perfect for one another instead.

Shane was a never-ending puzzle that Ilya was constantly trying to figure out, but he never got bored of it. In fact, he found Shane to be *endlessly* fascinating. The way he was sometimes a playful kitty before turning into the most devastating teary-eyed baby in a matter of minutes, or even seconds. The way he loved for Ilya to show him off almost as much as he wanted to remain private, staying hidden from prying eyes. He craved affection and love more than anyone Ilya had ever met before, but he was also terrified of it—at least he was before he met Ilya. Before Ilya had taught him that love was unconditional, that it didn't come with labels or warnings. It was meant to be given away freely, through all the different phases of life, through every overwhelmingly high high and each crushingly low low. He had experienced a lot of both with Shane so far, but he wasn't afraid. He was running forward full-speed ahead. And even though Ilya burned through people like fire, there was something so special about the way Shane made him want to freeze like ice. Stop time and embrace the chills that Shane could make run down his spine for just a little longer. The way Shane soothed each burn that had etched itself into Ilya's skin over the years, melted through the remnants of charred ash and dust like ocean waves carrying his pain far out to sea.

They stay like that for about twenty-five minutes before Ilya starts to lose feeling in his arms. Shane is sleepy and sated in Ilya's grasp, and the last thing he wants to do is disturb him—he wishes they could stay like this forever—but he knows Shane is going to be sore enough tomorrow as is. So, with some light coaxing, he carefully starts to sit up and pull himself out of Shane. He can't say he's surprised when Shane immediately starts crying again.

"I know, baby. I know," Ilya tells him with a sympathetic look. He's trying not to get hard again at the sight of Shane's hole stretching around the knot as it exits him, but Shane is just so fucking beautiful. So fucking good. Too good for this world, probably, but absolutely perfect for Ilya.

Shane grabs onto him desperately, like he doesn't want to lose Ilya's cum, doesn't want to risk not getting a baby out of it, but Ilya just shushes him and holds onto his belly intentionally.

"You are already pregnant, Милый ангел. Can't you feel our babies growing inside of you? There's a whole litter in there." Ilya pauses for a moment and then leans down to make a big show of pressing his ear against Shane's abdomen. "Oh, yes. I can feel them through our

bond already. A litter of healthy baby kittens from my best omega kitty cat. You did so well for me, sweetheart. Now, I just need to take care of you, okay?"

Shane sniffles, but he seems soothed by the sentiment, at least enough to let Ilya keep pulling out of him. And when the knot finally pops loose, Ilya doesn't hesitate to pull Shane fully into his arms, the other a dead weight in his hands as Ilya gets him situated in his lap. They urgently need a bath, but not as badly as Ilya needs to kiss reassurances into his skin, not as badly as he needs to remind Shane that everything's going to be okay. As long as they were together, nothing bad could ever happen to them.

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Shane feels like he's died and gone to heaven. He must have because he doesn't know where he is. All he knows is that Ilya's face is upside down above him, and he feels warm all over. Blue eyes and strong hands holding him. A Russian accent that he never expected to become the most soothing sound alive.

Shane reaches out to touch him, just in case he's not real, and he smiles when Ilya lets out a delighted laugh.

Ilya takes Shane's hand and holds it against his cheek, rubbing it against the scruff there, and Shane purrs at how grounding it feels, nuzzling further into Ilya's arms. He's caught by surprise when water swishes around him, and *oh*, they're in the bathtub. How fun. Ilya always has the best ideas. Like getting Shane pregnant. That was awesome. Ilya was going to be such a good dad.

"There's my happy baby kitty," Ilya says to him directly this time, like Shane has finally risen to the surface of whatever deep body of water his mind had sunken him into. "Light of my life. Father of my future kids. My kitty cat husband-to-be."

Shane giggles softly because it's so funny, but it's also so true. Shane does want to be Ilya's kitty cat husband, mostly just because he knows that he *can*. He knows that, with Ilya, he can have whatever he wants—it doesn't matter how ridiculous. For every insane thought that entered Shane's mind, Ilya had already thought of something more unhinged; in fact, they usually matched each other's energy freak-for-freak.

And, yeah, Shane was a fucking *freak*. A freak who liked to fall asleep in a human-sized crate sometimes and get knotted up pregnant by his Alpha when they weren't busy being two of the biggest hockey stars in the world. What *about* it? Who fucking *cares*?

Shane was ready to start living for *himself*. He's dedicated so much of his time and energy into being a perfect little pet for the NHL, of all people, but that ended today. From here on out, he was nobody's pet except *Ilya's*. He would no longer suffer in silence. He would no longer beat himself into submission until there was nothing left. No, instead, he would give himself over willingly into Ilya's loving and capable hands. He would bow down to the person who was always working to lift him up, who always wanted him to soar higher, no matter the request, no matter the aspiration. With Ilya, nothing was out of reach. Five Stanley Cups. Ten. Ilya would lasso Shane the moon if Shane wanted. He would serve it to Shane on a pretty little kitty platter while Shane knelt at his feet to lick it up, and then Ilya would call

him a *good boy* because all Ilya really wanted out of his submission was Shane's *happiness*. It's a great fucking feeling, the idea that the only measure of being successful is how good Shane feels in his own skin.

He's come a long way from the scared nineteen-year-old that cried himself to sleep, not because he thought he had been stood up, but because he'd wanted to kiss a boy so fucking badly. He imagines that Shane seeing him now. Cuddled up to Ilya in the bathtub of their shared home, a playroom fit for a Cat King just down the hall, Ilya's tattooed hand that proudly displayed Shane's collar resting possessively over his neck.

Everything's going to be okay, he wishes he could tell him. *You're going to get everything you never knew you needed.*

Ilya ruffles his hair, and Shane sinks impossibly closer, shutting his eyes while trying to imagine what the next few years might look like. There were so many wonderful things to come. Ilya's new club, more wins and memories with the Centaurs, their *wedding*. He wonders what advice future Shane might have for him, wonders what that Shane would tell him now if given the chance, but there's something so beautiful about the not knowing. The endless possibilities. His kitten brain is soothed by the fact that Ilya is going to be there with him every step of the way, and that thought is more calming than all of the Stanley Cups in the entire world. Shane still wants to win more than anything, but luckily, with Ilya by his side, he already feels like he's won it all.

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Chapter End Notes

[the wearable cock knot for anyone who's interested in seeing]

THANK YOU SO MUCHHHH!! whether you have been with this fic since the beginning or you just got caught up recently, whether you have left one comment or many, I am so so thankful to you all for being such incredible readers. I truly got the nicest and most encouraging comments, which I know is not the case for every author, so thank you thank you thank you from the bottom of my heart.

THERE WILL BE A BOOK TWO AND IT WILL START ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, JUST DEPENDS ON HOW LONG IT TAKES ME TO WRITE. If you are subscribed to this fic, please stay subscribed and I will update you when the new book goes live. You can also bookmark the kitten shane series, which is what the second book will appear under, or subscribe to my Ao3 in general to get updated for any new works I post!!!

themes to come still in book 2:
-Ottawa club!!!
-Troy/Harris

-Team Kitty Shane
-more pets!!!
-W E D D I N G P L A N N I N G W I T H M R . R E A L E S T A T E
-more canon events from the long game
-annnnnd all the regular schenanegans that we know and love

for anyone who would like to follow me on twitter it's @sluthollanov :) feel free to invade my inbox if you're nice! i will follow back if you post **only** hudcon/hollanov (#strict)

and to everyone else, i'll see you for the next one!!!! <3 thank you!!!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!