found connection (baby i can't stop calling you)

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found connection (baby i can't stop calling you)

by aquilanovae

Summary

Shane calls a phone sex hotline and gets Ilya crooning unspeakable filth in his ear. It kind of devolves from there.

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Ilya is a college student in Boston working on the side as a phone sex operator, Shane is still a hockey player. They have toe-curling, back-cracking dirty phone sex and end up catching feelings along the way.

Notes

I posted a smut one-shot yesterday and got like 450 kudos in less than 24 hours. I see you freaks. I'll throw you another bone, i'm right there with you.

This does in fact have a plot, I've had this drafted for ages. I fear I am back on my bullshit.

They're also like 22 in this, fyi. Shane just made captain.

Tags will be added.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: pick up (the phone)

He's only doing this because he wants to say he tried it. Tried it, hated it, done with it, and never has to think about it again.

It started, as most of Shane's nightmares do, with a chirp from JJ.

They had been on the tail end of a road trip, exhausted in the way that comes with the dual-challenge of playing a physically brutal sport nonstop all while missing the comfort of home. It was a hard win against the Bears, but a win regardless, and the locker room was exuberant.

"Hollander," JJ called out with a Cheshire-like grin while Shane was trapped changing at his stall. Shane had to hide a wince as JJ leaned against the stall next to his. "How are we celebrating?"

"Oh," Shane blinked. That was actually a reasonable question. "We could go to a bar?"

"Non, Captaine," he laughed, and Shane had let his guard down too fast. "I mean how are we *celebrating?* Which pretty girl is getting lucky tonight in Boston, Hollander?"

"Oh," Shane repeated, then cleared his throat. "I'm not really looking for anything tonight." In his head, he silently thanked one of the Bears defenseman being an absolute menace tonight. "Marleau checked me like three times against the boards, man. I don't think trying to have sex with these," Shane briefly lifted up his shirt and flashed his ribs, black and bruised, "is going to be fun at all."

Drapeau and JJ both winced. "Ah, that's fair Captaine," JJ commiserated.

Maybe he should get checked more often, if his teammates would let him go like that so easily whenever they asked about sex.

"You could use one of those hotlines instead." Never mind. JJ apparently didn't know how to drop a bone.

"Sorry?" Shane furrowed his eyebrows, turning to face his stall and continuing changing.

"You know," he dragged out. "The phone sex hotlines."

Shane fumbled and dropped his shoulder pads like he wasn't a professional athlete.

"Um," he started, not quite sure how this was his life. "What the fuck?"

"What, you haven't used them before?" JJ asked, "Captaine, you are missing out!"

"That's…" and to his horror, he knew he was going red. "I mean isn't that like… hiring a prostitute?"

JJ and Drapeau both snorted out loud. Even Hayden, usually his only ally in the locker room, had to cover his mouth.

“Fuck you guys,” Shane muttered, flushed.

JJ tutted, slinging an arm around his shoulders. “It’s not actually having sex,” JJ reassured. “Not really. You’re just talking. And getting off. Easy.”

“I think a lot of the guys have tried it, if I’m being honest,” Drapeau shrugged. “I mean, sometimes I’ve got too many bruised ribs to try and pick up a girl at a club on the road, but I still have needs. Having a pretty-sounding woman moaning in my ear while I’m jacking off is not a bad alternative.”

Shane sometimes wished he hadn’t actually been born a man. This would not be normal locker room conversation in the PWHL, he was sure of it.

“It’s not even expensive, especially not for you, Mr. Highest-Paid-NHL-Player-In-The-League,” JJ ribbed, hitting his chest. “What’s the issue with giving it a shot?”

Shane squinted, unsure. He’d been burned before. Several times. He knew he had a tendency to be what others called gullible and make the mistake of believing people at their word. “I feel as if though you are all fucking with me. If this is hazing, reminder I’m your fucking captain and can make you bag skate for an entire practice tomorrow.”

JJ shuddered. “Oh, non, none of that. Please. Here,” JJ pulled out his phone, scrolling to his contacts and pulling out one for a fucking saved phone sex hotline. He hadn’t been kidding. Shane suddenly wished he hadn’t said anything at all.

Could have just nodded and shrugged, said sure, whatever, and moved on. But no. Now JJ had his hand out expectantly for Shane’s phone.

Shane realized suddenly that they had an audience, both Hayden and Drapeau waiting to see what he would do, and he groaned, pinching the space between his eyebrows. “Jesus fuck. Okay. Fine. Maybe I’ll try it. No promises though.” He gave JJ his phone.

“Yes! Maybe if you have a pretty girl talk you through an orgasm tonight, you’ll relax and go easy on us in practice, eh?” JJ smirked, typing in the number.

He let JJ slap it back in his hand, the new contact glaring accusatory. “Just for that Boiziau, you can do bag skates on your own in the morning.”

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Which is what lands him here, three nights later in his own apartment after getting back from the road, staring at an unwanted phone number on his extremely sparse contact list. He has to be better at not letting JJ get to him like this every time.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters to himself, glancing down at his crotch where he was half-hard and the reason why he’s even *considering* pressing the call button. “Fuck it.”

When the woman with a distinctly Eastern European accent starts speaking, Shane nearly immediately hangs up the phone.

“Hello, this is Aural Desires, a discreet, personalized adult pleasure phone line. Who are you looking to enjoy your night with?”

Shane just barely stops himself, pulling the phone away for a second to take in a deep breath.

“Hi, um,” Shane winces. “I’m… not really sure. Sorry. I’ve never done this before.”

“That is alright,” the woman replies easily, and he’s relieved. If she’s laughing at him, she was really good at hiding it. “What do you usually enjoy with a partner in person?”

Shane is rapidly regretting every life choice that had landed him here, starting with picking up a hockey stick at age four. “I uh… that’s the other thing. I haven’t, you know– okay, maybe this was a bad idea, shit I’m so sorry–”

“Sir, it really is okay,” the woman interrupts, and god, he hears amusement there. “If I’m being honest with you, this is pretty refreshing for me tonight.”

That shocks a laugh out of Shane. “What?”

“Yes,” she continues, and Shane thinks he can hear her smile. “Usually I pick up the phone and I get a caller telling me he wants “a slutty bitch who’ll suck his dick until she chokes and gags on it.” Is an unfortunate hazard to the job.”

“Oh Jesus,” Shane snorts, and just like that, he relaxes. “Wow. Okay. Fuck. Um, I’m sorry? For whoever you usually deal with it.”

“Thank you, you are very sweet,” and the woman is definitely grinning now. “Let’s try something else. What kind of porn do you like?”

Shane coughs. She’s… direct. “Um.”

“I’m being very serious when I tell you nothing you say is going to be the weirdest thing I’ve heard tonight,” she adds dryly. “I am just trying to find someone within our portfolio who would be a good match.”

Oh god, he had nearly forgotten that is what he was calling for. Again, he considers hanging up but exhales, closing his eyes as he knocks his head back on his headboard. This is as low risk as it got. If he can’t do this, he’s going to be stuck like this and every one of his teammates are going to think of him as their virgin Captain for the rest of his hockey career. This isn’t even real sex. It’s basically a soft launch.

“I uh, think I would like someone experienced. Probably patient,” he forces out. He didn’t want to think about his porn, but after being asked so directly it’s really fucking hard to think about anything else. “But I don’t mind if they’re a little mean.”

“A little mean?”

“Like, y’know. Bossy.”

“Okay,” and Shane hears her typing. Do they have some kind of database, sorted by kinks? “Do you have a preference for gender?”

Shane freezes. He knows what he’s supposed to say. He knows what’s expected of him, from every girlfriend he hadn’t been able to get it up for as a teenager to his teammates telling him about conquests as if they were appealing to Shane. He should say he wants a woman moaning in his ear, because that’s what he’s supposed to want.

“I think,” he keeps his eyes closed. “I think, um. Men. Shit. Yeah, sorry. A man.”

The woman is quiet for a moment without typing. “I think I know who would be a good fit. Before I connect you with him, I will need your credit card information.”

Dread shoots down his spine. Credit card info. That meant–

“You… need my name for that, don’t you?” Shane asks weakly. “Um. Okay. This actually wasn’t a good idea. I’m sorry. Sorry for wasting your time–”

“You’re not,” the woman interrupts, voice soft. “If you are worried about people finding out, I am the only person who will record this information and I guarantee my discretion. That is what we are respected for. I’m making an assumption right now but” she pauses, “we’ve had high-profile callers before.”

“Fuck,” Shane rubs his face and picks up his wallet. “Yeah. Okay. Okay, fuck it. We can do this. Are you ready for the info now?”

The woman handles his information briskly and without a reaction to him saying “Shane Hollander” out loud, so maybe she’s not a hockey fan. It’s a relief because listing his credit card number over the phone makes this feel incredibly real. Fuck, he’s seriously paying for sex. Even if it is over the phone.

“I’ll connect you now with Roz,” she finally says. “Enjoy your time with him and,” she stops. “Just relax. He’ll take care of you.”

Shane flushes bright red. Thank god she can’t see him. “Right. Cool. Thanks, uh.”

“Have a good night sir,” she laughs, and he hears a click.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Hello,” a cool, deep accented voice greets him, and it’s such a jarring difference from the woman’s soft lilted laugh, Shane nearly feels whiplash. He’s really doing this.

“Oh,” Shane breathes. “Um. Hi.”

He hears the man exhale something like a laugh. “Hi,” he echoes back. “My name is Roz. What can I call you?”

“Shane,” he automatically answers and then winces, silently hitting his forehead. He’s supposed to give an alias, even his dumb ass knew that.

“Shane,” Roz drawls. “It is good to meet you. What would you like me to do for you tonight?”

His name in Roz’s mouth makes him stir in his briefs, and he shifts. He doesn’t know if it's how deep his voice is, so undoubtedly a man, or the accent, might even maybe be both, but Roz is already doing it for him.

Well, Shane thinks to himself sardonically, there goes the straight allegations.

“Um. I’m not really sure.”

“Mmm, okay,” the way his accent curls around the word ‘okay’ is unexpectedly endearing. “What do you normally like when you fuck?”

Maybe this phone sex line has a job requirement of being startling direct. “I’ve never… I’ve never done this before,” Shane admits, with a waver just under his voice. The man hums with an answering undertone of amusement. “Yes, I gathered that.”

Shane frowns, unconsciously straightening. “Fuck off I mean I haven’t done *this* before. Sex. Even if it’s just talking to someone over the phone. This is all new to me.”

The man is completely silent over the line, and Shane’s vague irritation vanishes to only be replaced with total mortification. “I mean… shit, that’s weird isn’t it, I shouldn’t have said that, sorry, um, maybe this was a bad idea, I should–”

“Shane,” Roz cuts in, and it’s like he slapped a hand over his mouth. “Breathe.”

Shane obeys without thinking, feeling as if air had been punched into his lungs. “Um, right. Sorry.”

Roz hums like he has something he’s working through in his mind.

“You’ve never had sex,” Roz repeats slowly, and Shane cringes. “With man or woman.”

“No. Well, I mean, I’m– I-I’ve been with women. Just. Not like that.”

“So yes, no sex. You couldn’t get hard?”

Shane flushes bright red and he covers his face with a hand, even though Roz can’t see him.

“Fuck you, don’t make fun of me.”

“I am not,” Roz immediately denies. “I am glad you told me. Will help me set the scene.”

“Set the scene?”

“Mmm. Tell me what you look like.”

Shane is caught off guard enough that it forces him out of an impending spiral to focus on the request. “Oh. Um. I’m half-Japanese, I guess. Decently tall I think. I, uh, I play sports a lot.”

“Okay,” Roz replies, and he sounds almost amused again. Shane doesn’t let himself get stuck on that. “Short hair?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Then he asks, “What are you wearing?” and oh shit. Roz pitches his voice lower like gravel. He switches from conversational to sultry before Shane can even blink and it sends heat straight down to his gut.

“Uh, a t-shirt,” Shane stammers, heart racing. He’s already half aroused. “Briefs. I’m getting ready for bed.”

“And you are? In bed?”

Shane sinks deeper into his pillow like it can hide him. “Yes.”

“Good. I want you to take off your shirt.”

Shane flushes with the command. It’s the first that is even vaguely sexual, and makes his skin prickle with heat.

“Shane? Shirt.”

He lets out a shaky breath before reaching down and pulling it off over his head.

“Okay,” he breathes. “I did it.”

“Mmm. Now do exactly as I say.” Shane bites his bottom lip. “I want you to take one of your hands and hold your neck. Drag it down, slowly, let my hands touch your skin until you get to your chest.”

Shane obeys, and a flush follows his hand down as he stops with holding his left pec in his hand.

“I am sure you have big, pretty tits, Shane,” Roz drawls and Shane inhales sharply. “Athlete, you said? Yes, definitely. Squeeze for me, and rub your nipple with your fingers.”

Shane moans under his breath, shocked at how sensitive his chest is. “Oh, shit Roz…”

“These women.” Shane pauses, eyebrows furrowed because he isn’t sure if he misheard. “They couldn’t make you hard.”

Shane bristles with annoyance, horniness briefly forgotten. “Listen, man fuck off—“

“Are you hard right now?”

Shane immediately chokes on his words. His hand that had unconsciously slipped to rest on his crotch twitches over the growing bulge there.

“Do I make you hard, Shane?” Roz murmurs, voice low and heady like bourbon on his tongue. “Do I make you curious?”

Shane can’t breathe.

“You make me curious.”

There’s no reason for him to be so wound up. It has never been like this with a woman. But Roz manages to do it over the fucking phone within a few minutes.

“Shane. I asked you a question.” And the warning in his words is like a jolt of electricity down his spine.

“Yes,” Shane gasps, eyes squeezed shut. “Yes, you do. I’m— holding it. I’m so hard.” He uses his other hand holding the phone to put Roz on speaker.

“Take your hand off your cock. I did not say you could touch yourself.”

And Roz can’t see him. It’s not like he would know if Shane listened. He could keep his hand on himself, rubbing the almost painful ache between his legs, and the other man would never know.

With an involuntary noise, he forces himself to remove his hand and shoves it under his thigh. Even without Shane saying anything, Roz hums satisfied, like he actually can see Shane following his instructions.

“Mmm. Good. You’re doing good for me, sweetheart.”

Shane doesn’t think he has ever been this aroused in his life.

“*Fuck,”* he breathes.

“Yes,” Roz huffs a laugh. “Take off your briefs. I want you naked.”

Shane finishes undressing, and lays nude on his sheets. He picked these sheets specifically because it’s the only texture he can stand against his skin, but they’re driving him out of his mind now with how sensitive he’s become.

“I bet you look gorgeous.” Roz muses, “pretty and pink, cock hard. Are you wet for me yet?”

Shane bites his lip again, turning his face into the pillow, towards the phone, and arching his back involuntarily. “…yes. I’m, um, I’m leaking.”

Roz makes a low noise of approval that Shane feels straight in his cock. “Fuck. Haven’t even touched you yet and you want it so bad already. You’re being a very good little virgin slut for me, Shane.”

“Oh fuck,” Shane gasps, flushing red. For a crazy, inane moment he wonders deliriously if he can come untouched with just Roz talking to him like this.

“Come on, want you to stroke yourself. Slow. Feel every bump. You have foreskin?”

Shane whimpers, eyes closed as he strokes his cock, using his precum to help him glide up and down slowly. “Yeah, yeah I’m not circumcised.”

“Play with the skin under your head. Mmm, good like that,” he praises when Shane’s breath comes back short. “Does that feel good, sweetheart?”

“Yeah,” Shane answers breathlessly. His cock is fucking throbbing in his hand. “Yes, so good, Roz, please, I need more.”

He hears Roz properly groan, making Shane want to preen. “If we had time I would make you beg for me like that until you cried. Shit, I’m so hard for you.”

And it’s probably a line, definitely a line, because a little voice in the back of his head keeps reminding him that this was all fake. Roz is being paid for this, paid to tell horny men what they want to hear until they cum. It’s enough for him to hesitate, suddenly unsure. He’s clearly too quiet for too long though, and Roz makes an inquisitive noise over the speaker.

“Shane?” Roz asks. “You are okay?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah, sorry,” Shane stumbles. He’s flagging. Fuck, first time he’s been hard with another person and he fucking it up because he’s too in his head. So what if Roz is pretending? Shane knew what he was signing up for when he called. “I’m here, you can keep going, sorry.”

Roz doesn’t take the offer. “What happened?”

Shane winces. “Nothing! Nothing, seriously, I’m fine.”

“Hmm,” Roz hums over the speaker, deep and short. “Shane, I’m going to tell you something, and you’re going to listen, understand?”

Something’s seriously fucked with him, because hearing the other man smoothly command him without hesitation has him nearly panting like a bitch in heat.

“Okay,” he manages to eke out, knowing that Roz was waiting for a response.

“You do not lie to me,” Roz states, voice firm. It made Shane’s breath catch in his throat. “Not about this, about how you’re feeling. Who you are, yes, fine, that is whatever, expected. But this? When I ask you if you’re okay, you will be honest. If I ask you how you are feeling, you will tell me the truth. That is my hard rule.”

“Oh,” Shane breathes. “Uh–”

“You do not lie to me,” Roz continues as if Shane hadn't interrupted him, “and I do not lie to you, about how I feel. That is concern, yes? That I am pretending. If you swear to me you

will not lie as we play, I swear I will not lie to you."

Shane manages, throat a little dry, "are you a mindreader? Why are you here doing phone sex? You could be in Vegas."

"Shane. I am waiting."

"Okay, okay," Shane agrees, eyes closed. "I won't lie." This is a lot for an orgasm over the phone. Maybe he really should have just tried to jack off on his own.

"So you believe me, when I tell you that I am not pretending?"

"I guess."

"Good. Then you believe me when I tell you I'm thinking about what it would be like to feed my cock down your throat and listen to you choke on it."

Shane lets out an embarrassingly broken moan, with blood rushing straight down to his dick so fast it makes his head almost spin. "*Holy fuck.*

"You haven't done this before," Roz continues conversationally, even as Shane tries to find his composure again. "So you would lick it, yes? Soft little kitten licks as you get used to the taste. Get used to the feeling of hard cock on your tongue. Until you need more."

Shane closes his eyes, mouth dropping open. He's fucking salivating.

"Yes," Shane breathes, "yeah, I haven't, um, done that before. But it looks… I would want to, I think." He swallows, "I think I would want you in my mouth. To taste you."

"Mm," and Roz's voice is suddenly another step lower. "Good. In that case, fingers in your mouth, Shane."

He raises his hand to his lips automatically but waits.

"Um," he hesitates. "How– how many should I put in?"

For a second, Roz doesn't say anything and hears something like a quiet groan, like it's done muffled and far away from the speaker.

"He asks how many?" He thinks he hears Roz breathe with disbelief over the line, but before Shane could be sure, he replies, voice closer. "Start with two. I'm bigger though."

It's such an offhanded frat-bro statement, something he'd think someone in the locker rooms would brag about, that Shane huffs a laugh.

"You are laughing? You don't believe me?" Roz demands, but it's not mean. He sounds like he's laughing with Shane. "For that, you take your hand off your dick while you suck me."

Okay, *that's* mean. Shane stills his hand without realizing and he's immediately aching.

“Shit,” he hisses, squeezing himself.

Roz makes a disapproving noise. “Shane. I said hands off.”

“How do you know that?” Shane asks, exasperated, but lets go. He instantly itches with the need to touch and seek relief.

“You should not be talking. You have my cock in your mouth. Two fingers, Shane.”

Shane sits up and shifts slowly to sink onto his knees, on his haunches. Then he puts two fingers into his mouth and sucks.

His eyes flutter shut involuntarily and he chokes out a small whimpering noise.

“Fuck,” Roz drags out. Shane wishes he knew if Roz was jerking off to him too, listening to his fucked out noises over the phone. “That’s it. Suck on them and use your tongue.”

Shane feels spit pool at the corners of his mouth as he sucks on his fingers, the taste of his own clean skin on his tongue. He lets his tongue lave in between his fingers and writhe around them like a snake. He closes his eyes, and sinks into the fantasy that Roz painted for them.

Shane on his knees, mouth stuffed full with cock. Roz would taste salty, musky not like the faint aftertaste of Shane’s handsoap. He would hold his face probably, hand in his hair as a guide because Shane wouldn’t know what he was doing. He wouldn’t be nice about it. Shane has just met him, but he knows without a doubt that Roz would not be kind. Because he would know that Shane wouldn’t want him to be kind.

With his free hand and his closed eyes, Shane reaches up and tugs on his own hair hard as he takes the fingers deeper. He moans out loud, louder than he had before.

“You like that?” Roz whispers, “Fuck, I knew you would. I could tell. You are born cockslut, Shane. You’d beg me to fuck your mouth, and thank me while I did.”

Jesus *Christ.* Shane needs to touch himself so bad. He’s making more and more involuntarily muffled noises without realizing because Roz shushes him over the speaker.

“Shh, you’re alright,” he soothes. “You’re doing so well for me Shane. Such a good boy. Do you think you can take three?” He doesn’t reply, simply moving to do as told. He tries taking three and immediately gags.

“Shit, you’re gagging on me,” Roz breathes. “Am I too big for you, sweetheart? Or do you like it, when I hold you still and fuck your throat? I’d have my hand gripping your head, fucking your mouth onto my cock, make you take it. I think you are a pretty crier, Shane. I can see it, you tearing up as I shove myself down your throat.”

Shane can’t take it, slipping his fingers out with a desperate whine. “Roz,” he pants and he actually is so close to tears. “Roz, I can’t– Please. Please, I need to come.”

“Why can’t you?”

Shane pauses, unsure if it was a trick question. “You– you haven’t let me yet. Please, can I come?”

He hears a punched out noise over the line and the unmistakable sound of skin on skin. “Блядь, oh my fucking god,” Roz curses, and Shane doesn’t have to make up how affected Roz sounds as he groans deep in his chest. “Fucking hell Shane, where did you come from? You can touch yourself, малыш. Fuck, I want to finish listening to you come.”

Shane lets out half a sob in a relief, wet hand finally falling to stroke around his cock. He’s so hard it hurts.

“Thank you, fuck,” he whimpers, “oh my god, thank you for letting me, oh fuck– Roz, I’m coming.”

The noises he makes as he moans would have humiliated him had he been mentally aware of them, but he’s too busy coming harder than he ever has before to even think.

“Ебать,” he hears Roz groan a little far from the speaker, a breathy and dragged out thing, and Shane knows he’s coming too. Shane’s still not quite back on Earth enough to appreciate it as much as he wants to.

“Oh my god,” he’s chanting under his breath. He flops back onto his bed, head swimming, “oh my god, oh my god.”

“No, afraid not god, just me,” Roz says. Shane can hear he’s nearly as out of breath as Shane is.

“Fuck you,” Shane curses automatically and Roz laughs.

“Yes, I did,” he grins and Shane flushes red.

A very dangerous thought pops into his head. God, if Roz can make him come like that over the phone… what would he be like in person, actually touching his skin, holding him down? Making him take it like he said? Shane shuts the idea back down immediately.

“You are okay?” Roz asks, tone much gentler and it sinks around Shane like a warm blanket. “Feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane mumbled, sprawled out on his sheets, limbs lethargic. He’s not sure he could move even if he wanted to. “Feel really good.” Roz hums, pleased.

And Shane can’t help himself. “Um, was I good?” he asks, timid, and he wants to smack himself, mortified. What the fuck? Why would he ask him that? He should have taken the high of making the other man come and leave while he was ahead. He just had to remind Roz exactly how pathetic and new he was to all of this.

Roz doesn’t laugh though, like Shane had expected him too. Instead he hears another shaky exhale over the phone, and another word that sounds like a curse in another language. Actually, something Slavic probably, he thinks.

“Yes, Shane,” Roz finally replies, and he says it so softly Shane has no choice but to melt. “Yes. You were good. You were so fucking good for me, sweetheart. Do you have something to clean yourself up with?”

“Um,” Shane glances to his nightstand, finding his tissues. “Yeah, yeah I do.”

“Good,” Roz says, quietly. Shane realizes that he’s winding down the call because somehow, fucking somehow, Shane forgot he’s paying for this. The euphoria from such a good orgasm sours a little. He’s really fucking tired now. “Drink some water, and if you have time, take a warm shower, it’ll help you relax.”

“I feel plenty relaxed,” Shane mumbles drowsily. He’s actually feeling pretty exhausted. He knows that tomorrow he’ll have a reckoning to deal with as he inevitably remembers everything he said and did with this stranger he was paying for sex with over the phone. But right now, he’s ready to fall asleep with the echo of Roz’s voice.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Roz muses wryly. “In that case, go to sleep Shane. You did so well for me. You deserve it.”

“Okay,” Shane agrees sleepily. “Okay. Good night, Roz. Thank you.”

“Беспредел,” Roz whispers, before telling Shane, “Good night, Shane.”

Chapter 2: call back again

Chapter Summary

Shane calls back. Ilya doesn't even know how to begin to handle this.

Chapter Notes

ilya perspective babes ;)

my niche HR headcannon is that Ilya is actually borderline genius at math, like lowkey human calculator vibes, and i will be taking it to my fucking grave. I will not be taking constructive criticism at this time. You can pry it from my cold dead hands.

a little more ilya lore and plot-building. then more porn for you filthy animals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya thinks he's going to kill Svetlana. He can't prove it, but he knows she did this on purpose.

He had thanked him. *Thanked him* for *letting* him come. Ilya is pretty sure he's losing his goddamn mind.

It's been three days since Shane called him through Aural Desires and went on to be the most natural submissive Ilya had ever witnessed in his life, entirely over the phone. It's also been three days since Ilya's been able to think about absolutely anything else besides the man's pretty, breathless moans in his ear, choking on his own fingers because Ilya told him to.

Usually when he slips into a dom role over the phone, his clients only go so far; they have to do it to themselves after all. He knows that a majority of them don't do it all, but are content to get off on his voice and imagine it in their minds. Ilya doesn't care either way. He'll get paid regardless.

But Shane. He had taken the scene and followed it to the letter, until he was making himself sob and choking on himself, pretending it was Ilya's cock down his throat. He had wanted to know how many fingers to use. At the time, Ilya had thought he was having a stroke. Hell, he might still be having one.

He muffles a tired groan in his palm, rubbing his face and trying to focus on board at the front of the lecture hall. It's one of his upper-division classes, Fluid Dynamics II, and he

really can't afford to not pay attention. But still, a boy who had no idea what he even looked like is consuming his thoughts.

The class starts shuffling, already packing up backpacks before he realizes the lecture is over. MIT students seem to always have something to do or somewhere to go.

He gets a text on his personal phone as he's getting ready to leave, resigning himself to ask someone for their notes. When he goes to check it, he curses under his breath.

Sveta (12:23 pm): lunch, on you? I will meet you at Katya's

Ilya (12:26 pm): I am upset with you. you can buy your own damn lunch. I'll be there in ten.

Sveta (12:26 pm): will it help if I suck your dick?

Ilya (12:26 pm): no. that will do the opposite of help.

Sveta (12:27 pm): 🤭 oh so you are UPSET with me

Ilya (12:27pm): 🖕

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Katya's is a small, family-owned Russian cafe in Cambridge that he and Svetlana had stumbled upon early in their first year in Boston. They had been soaking wet, caught off guard in the rain and not accustomed yet to Boston's fickle temperament, and had been promptly adopted by the grandma who ran it.

The bell above the door jingles as Ilya opens it, and enters the kitschy cafe only to see a streak of black bolting at him.

"Привет, как дела, София?" *Hello, how are you Sofiya?* Ilya greets, making kissy noises as he crouches down to pet the long-haired black cat. Sofiya purrs happily under his hands, preening and rubbing her head against his fingers.

"Ilyushechka! это ты?" *Is that you?*

His heart stings like it always does when he hears that particular diminutive. Still, he manages a smile for Katya, the owner of the store.

"Katya, you grow more beautiful every day," Ilya flirts, speaking in Russian.

Katya was a first generation immigrant, having fled from St. Petersburg after the fall of the USSR as a young adult with her then husband. She rarely smiles, but there is still a warmth to her that had drawn Svetlana and Ilya to her when they first met.

She smacks him with a towel, barely reaching his shoulder as he towers over her, but her scowl is soft.

“Ah, stop that, flattering will not help you,” she sniffs, before grabbing his arm in a grip so tight he nearly winces. She clicks against her teeth with her tongue. “You are too skinny. You school boys do not eat. Go sit with Svetochka and I will bring the borscht.”

“Thank you, babushka,” he grins, watching her wave her hand as she goes back to her kitchen. Katya’s Cafe was small, only holding about three tables with chairs and two booths. It’s homey, all light wood floors, dark green walls, and warm, dim lighting. Surfaces and furniture have traditional Russian textiles and patterned decorations. Framed portraits and landscapes from the motherland completely cover the walls and there’s a cat tree for Sofiya near the front.

Svetlana is already in their booth, in the back corner of the restaurant. She’s sipping on a glass of what looks like kompot, scrolling through her phone, only looking up when Ilya drops himself in the booth seat in front of her.

“Ilyusha,” she greets, smiling wryly. Ilya frowns at her. “How was class?”

“Terrible.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“And are you going to ask me about my classes?” She prompts. Svetlana was at Harvard, across the street from Ilya, studying finance. Before he died, one of the few things his father remembered well enough to rant about was the fact that Svetlana had chosen to study smart money while Ilya would be stuck overworked and underpaid, working for someone else in aerospace engineering. Yet another failure.

“No, I don’t think so,” he crosses his arms, leaning back in the booth.

Svetlana sighs, and gives up on small talk. “Fine. You are upset with me,” Svetlana says, waving her hand. “Why?”

Ilya grits his teeth, because he knows if he says it out loud it’ll sound ridiculous. Svetlana notices and rolls her eyes. “I do not want to do this guessing game with you Ilyusha but I will if I have to. Is it drugs?”

“No, I haven’t used in weeks.” Benefit of not answering Sasha’s texts. Svetlana raised a single eyebrow but said nothing else on it.

“Money then.”

“Нет.”

“Work?”

Ilya shuts up, lining his lips together. Svetlana smiles to herself, self-satisfied. “Work. Okay. What have I done on a phone sex line that has upset you like this?”

“You know what you did,” Ilya mutters under his breath. He still has his arms crossed like a toddler.

“It has to do with a caller, doesn’t it?” Svetlana muses, and Ilya itches under his collar uncomfortably. She sits up a little, her expression cooling suddenly. “You didn’t have a bad session did you? Someone hurt you?”

Sometimes callers go too far, ones who have dangerous kinks and say dangerous words. To them, whoever they were calling was nameless, faceless, and thus not really a person so they took it as an opportunity to say whatever they wanted. Even if it would have probably sent them to prison in real life. Ilya is usually good at shutting them down, or at least hanging up sooner rather than later. But early on, when he first started doing this years ago, sometimes they would set off triggers that sent Ilya down a dark path.

“No,” Ilya denys, because god, it was so, so far from a bad session and it’s still pissing Ilya off. “It was not bad.”

A smirk flickers on Svetlana’s face. “Oh, I see. This is about a session that was too good.” She’s clearly thinking back before a lightbulb flicks on. “Aha, this is the sweet boy, isn’t it? The virgin?”

Ilya exhales, slumping in his chair. Svetlana grins in victory. “Oh I knew it. He made me laugh. I knew you’d like him when he called. Was he good?”

“Svetlana,” Ilya grumbles. “What do you fucking think?”

“Yes, he was very good,” Svetlana taps her bottom lip, “he has to have been, to keep you still thinking about him days later.”

“Fuck off,” Ilya swears. “You knew what you were doing.”

“I knew that you would like him, that’s all. You like the sweet ones more than you let on.”

He unwittingly remembers a shaky breath crackling through his speaker, asking so, so shyly, if he had been good. Ilya groans, resting his elbows on the tabletop and dropping his head in his hands. “Fuck, I am losing my mind. I won’t even ever talk to him again. He was just a caller.”

“Mmm,” Svetlana ponders, “I don’t know. You’re an asshole but very good at sex. Maybe he will call back for more.”

“You are not a romantic Sveta, don’t start pretending to be one now.”

“It is not romantic,” Svetlana grins with all her teeth. “I’m calling you a whore.”

Before he can tell her off, Katya joins them, two steaming bowls in hand. “Ah, Katya, you save me. My heroine.”

“What fool thing have you done now, Ilyushechka?” she tuts disapprovingly. Ilya squawks as Svetalana cackles in victory.

“Me?! Why does it have to be me?”

“It is a boy, babushka,” Svetlana answers, smug as she brings her spoon to her mouth. “Poor Ilyusha is in love.”

“I am not!” Ilya protests but it’s too late, because Katya has that look in her eye. He glares at Svetlana.

“Is this true? How old is he? What does he do? Does he have money?”

Ilya groans.

“Oh, he definitely has money,” Svetlana mutters into her soup. Ilya kicks her under the table.

“Katya,” Ilya sighs, rubbing his forehead. “There is no boy. Sveta just likes to annoy me for entertainment.”

“Well,” Svetlana tilts her head back and forth, so-so, “there isn’t a boy *yet.* I am working hard though Katya, do not worry.”

“I will kill you, Sveta.”

“Hmm,” Katya humphs, eyes narrowing in maternal disapproval. “When there is a boy, Ilyusha, you bring him here, understand? I wish to see a wedding before I die and there will be no wedding if I do not like him.”

Ilya looks up at her and can’t help but soften. He had been worried at first, scared even, of the old traditional Russian woman learning about his bisexuality. Russia is not known to be kind about these things and he likes Katya. He hadn’t wanted to lose another good thing that reminded him of his home.

When she had found out, it was in the stupidest way possible. With Ilya’s tongue down a boy’s throat outside of a bar on a night out, while she was on her way home with her grocery cart.

She had narrowed her eyes, pinning Ilya in place. “You are gay, Ilya?”

The other boy had fled, blurted something about needing to go and left Ilya with her alone. It had been almost impossible to meet her eye. “No. No, Katya, I am bisexual. I like both.”

“You like both,” Katya had repeated slowly, and Ilya braced himself, “but still you do not have girlfriend? No boyfriend? What are you doing out here kissing strange boy on the street? Wasting my time– Ilyushechka, I am growing old. There is boy who lives on floor below. Polite, pretty, works in hospital. How he dresses, homosexual. I will find his cell number, yes?”

Ilya had blinked at her, stupified. When it had been clear she was being serious, he had been unable to hold back his tears.

It's hard not to remember that now, especially since Katya has never gone back on her unconditional support. Ilya can't remember any other older adult who, having known him, decided to care and simply wanted the best for him. Not since his mother passed.

"Yes, babushka," he agrees, voice quiet, "I will bring him here."

Katya pats his cheek. "Good boy. Now both of you eat. I will bring bread."

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Ilya makes Sveta pay for her own lunch after she had thrown him under the bus in front of Katya. He still drops her off at her apartment before he leaves for his next class though.

He slogs through the rest of his afternoon, a three hour physics lab and another evening lecture in equation modeling. By the time he leaves campus and takes the bus to his studio apartment, he has a headache and is starving again, despite how much Katya had force fed him. His place is tiny, barely livable for a man of Ilya's size but it's his and most importantly, his *alone*. Trying to find a place to be taking dirty phone sex calls for money while living with a roommate would have been a nightmare, but he's got all the privacy in the world as he reheats pizza bites and sets up his workspace with homework and his work phone. He's slated to be on call from eight tonight.

It is, technically, illegal for Ilya to be working for the hotline. Svetlana was one of the very few Russian nationals who had dual US citizenship with her American-born mother who, at the time of Sveta's birth, had not renounced her citizenship yet. But Ilya, on a student visa without a social security number, isn't allowed to work in an area outside of his field of study, and most definitely not in what would peripherally be seen as "adult entertainment."

Sveta's friends with the founder though, a graduate from Harvard's business school, and they had made it work under the table passing it off as the money his father was supposed to be sending him. Now Ilya got paid generously enough to afford his rent and the part of his tuition at MIT not covered by scholarships with just one job, instead of the three campus ones he had been at risk of juggling his freshman year. And it's a job he was *good* at.

For about three to four hours a night, all Ilya has to do is keep his ringer on while he works on his assignments and pause a few times to answer the call and make someone come with his voice. He's good at sex in real life. At least, he hasn't had complaints from Svetlana since they were teens and she wouldn't hesitate to tell him if he wasn't good enough. But that translates well over the phone because he knows exactly what he was doing, knew what felt good. He's good at picking up what a caller was into and molding himself into that persona for about ten to fifteen minutes before hanging up and returning to differential equations. He has quite a few regulars so he was never short on customers and would get about five to six of them on average for any given night. The amount he was paid for each one was well worth any boredom in feet kinks.

It's Wednesday night, which historically is a slower night of the week. He has had three callers, two shyer women and a very audacious young man with a cum kink, and is approaching the end of his shift. With just twenty minutes left until midnight, his work phone rings and Ilya has to cover a yawn. He finished his homework an hour ago and is more than ready to go to bed.

"Hello," Ilya murmurs into the phone, knowing his accent pitched low did things to people. Americans seemed to have strange kinks.

"Ah, hi," a shaky voice replies and Ilya shoots straight up. "Um, hey Roz. It's Shane. You might not remember me–"

"Sweetheart, believe me," Ilya interrupts, trying to hide a giddy grin. "I remember you, Shane. Is very hard to forget a moan as pretty as yours."

"Oh," Shane breathes, and what Ilya would give to see the blush he knows Shane is painted with. Does it start at his ears? His cheeks? Does it travel down to his chest, a path to follow with love bites and kisses? "Oh that's– good. I'm glad. Um. How have you been?"

Ilya wants to *eat* him.

"Good. Better, now," he answers, "so polite, sweetheart. Makes me wonder about all the ways I can make you *not* polite."

Shane makes a surprised noise that sounds a lot like a strangled cough. Ilya smirks. "And you? Have you been okay? You felt okay after our last call, yes? Didn't drop?"

"Drop?" Shane asks, confused. Ilya closes his eyes and prays to a God his mother believed in. Fuck, how did he forget this was his pretty little *virgin*. Ilya must have done something truly evil in a past life to deserve having his sanity tested like this.

"A drop, yes," Ilya repeats. "It is after very… intense sessions. A very hard orgasm. Sometimes when the hormones– endorphins, yes? – when the endorphins run out, after being so high, someone might drop very quickly."

"What does a drop look like?"

"Different, for different people. Some people get very low and sad, very lonely. They may feel scared or ashamed. Other people will just feel very… removed. Tired, more exhausted than is normal."

Shane is too quiet for too long. Ilya bites his lip, his previous giddiness dampened by a trickle of unease. Fuck, this is something he should have talked Shane through earlier.

"Sweetheart, did that happen to you?" Ilya asks, and he doesn't even try to hide his worry. Shane still doesn't answer him. "Shane."

"N-no. No. At least I don't think so," he stumbles over. "It was… really intense, like you said. And I did feel really tired really fast all of a sudden. Like I couldn't move even if I

wanted to. But I fell asleep like, right away."

Ilya lets out a shaky breath. "Okay. Okay thank you for telling me. We will be more careful tonight, yes? It is not good for you to feel like that all by yourself." *Especially since I can't be there to take care of you.*

"Yes, okay," Shane agrees, almost shyly. "So you still want…?"

It strikes Ilya in that moment, that he's never had a caller ask him if he wants it, a client who asks for consent like Shane does. It is pretty implied, Ilya getting paid for it and all, but it still knocks Ilya off his feet, when this sweet boy asks just because he really wants Ilya to want it too.

Oh, Ilya thinks to himself in dismay, *I am seriously fucked.*

"Yes, малыш, *baby,* I very much still want," Ilya says out loud. "What are you thinking?"

For a minute, Ilya doesn't think Shane is going to answer and is already thinking of things they could start exploring with. Then he hears him inhale, and Ilya perks up. "Um. I've been remembering that night a lot."

"Have you?" Ilya asks, closing his eyes because if he did, it almost felt like a normal conversation. "What have you been remembering about it?"

Shane let go of his breath in a whoosh that Ilya heard over the speaker, followed by rustling of some sheets. He's on his bed again. Ilya feels heat stirring in his gut in anticipation.

"Um," Shane whispers. "I've been remembering how you told me what to do. What you'd do to me if you were really here." He swallows audibly and Ilya wants to nip at the ridge of his throat as it moves. "I remember when you said I did good for you."

"Yes," Ilya drawled. "You were very good for me that night. Will you be good for me tonight too?"

And yes, there it was. The softest whimper Ilya had heard over the phone like this, telling Ilya that the sweet boy on the other line wanted him.

"Yes, please," Shane breathes. "Let me be good for you?"

God. "Undress, sweetheart."

He hears Shane follow his directions, and after a second, Ilya does the same, stripping off his shirt and sweatpants to leave himself in just his briefs. Shane had made him come unbelievably hard last time, when he rarely ever even touches himself while working with a client. Usually it was pretending, making demands, occasionally groaning when necessary. On the off-chance a session or a client's kinks get him aroused, he waits until after the call to get himself off.

When Ilya had promised Shane honesty in return for his own, he had meant it. He didn't even need to try.

“Okay,” Shane says after. “I’m done.”

“All of it?”

“Yes, Roz.”

Ilya wonders briefly what his name, actual name, would sound like in Shane’s voice. He had thought he was American at first, but he said a handful of words, like *sorry*, just a little bit different from the people around Ilya in Boston.

“Good,” he acknowledges. “Here are our rules tonight. One, you do not touch yourself anywhere unless I say so. Good?”

Ilya waited for him to respond, until Shane made a surprised noise. “Oh. Oh, I can decide too?”

“Yes. Yes, of course Shane. They are *our* rules. I will not do something or ask something of you that you do not want. The rules only count if we both agree.”

“Oh, okay,” Shane mumbles, “um, *wow*, yeah that’s good. I’m good with rule one.”

“Good,” Ilya parrots. “Rule two, we are honest with each other about what we feel or what we’re doing. Like last time, yes?”

“Yes, okay. So,” Shane hesitates. “If you say you’re hard, or that you’re touching yourself, then–”

“Then I am hard,” Ilya confirms slowly, voice pitching low, “and I am touching myself. I do not pretend with you, Shane.” Shane lets out a pretty little moan. Ilya really is getting hard now.

“Last rule,” Ilya tells him, remembering the thing that had set Ilya on fire last time they did this. “You cannot come until I tell you. No matter how badly you want to.”

“Yes,” Shane agrees to this rule quickly, quicker than the others. Ilya has to bite down a smile. That is certainly interesting.

“Good. Are you hard?”

Shane makes a sound that’s something like a punched out laugh. “Fuck Roz, you know I am.”

Ilya really has no reason to feel so smug. “You’re right, I do. Stroke yourself. Slow.”

He hears the slight hitch in Shane’s breathing as he does as asked. Last time, Shane had asked, bewildered, how Ilya had known if he had obeyed his directions or not. As if he didn’t know how fucking loud he was, how reactive even over the phone. Pretty whimpers, shaky

breathing, desperate little filthy noises like choking on his own fucking fingers. It had been enough to drive Ilya crazy then, and he's well on his way to insane now too.

Shane must have him on speaker too because he can hear the slide of skin on skin as Shane touches himself and the way it pairs with his soft exhales.

"That's good, sweetheart," Ilya praises, "a little tighter, faster, yes, there you go." Shane responds with a whimper and starts chasing his orgasm. "You sound so pretty, Shane. I could listen to you moan all night."

"Fuck," Shane gasped, and Ilya could hear how fast he was stripping himself. "Fuck, fuck, fuck I'm close, I'm so close, Roz–"

"Good. Stop touching yourself."

Ilya hears his hand falter but not stop. He frowned. "I said stop, Shane."

Shane makes a pained, confused noise, but he knows from his ragged, desperate breathing, he had done as asked.

"What–" he pants, "what, why–"

"I don't think you've earned your orgasm yet, sweetheart," Ilya murmurs, "you'll need to try harder than that."

Shane makes a pained moaning noise, desperate already. "Oh fuck, please, Roz—"

Ilya wants Shane to be sobbing when he begs for him. He's on a mission.

"Mmm, I know, I know," Ilya says, and he lets it be a little condescending."Can you do better for me?"

"Yes, you fucker," Shane curses, annoyed, and Ilya makes himself hide his grin, even with no one watching. He had liked it last time when Shane talked back. Made it so much more satisfying to make him fall apart into pieces.

"Good boy. Do you have lube?"

Shane's breath catches, the way Ilya expects it to. He waits, imagining the flush on him.

"Yes," Shane whispers, the bratty version of him not even a minute ago vanished.

"Have you ever fingered yourself, Shane?" Shane lets out a shaky breath, and Ilya gives him a little push. "Have you ever had anything in that sweet, tight hole?"

Shane moans, strangled and Ilya feels a wicked curve on his lips.

"Yes, I've tried it," Shane answers, and Ilya imagines he's shaking.

"Did you enjoy it?"

“Um,” he hears Shane hesitate, “I didn’t mind it. To be honest I don’t know if I was doing it right.”

“Okay, that’s okay,” Ilya replies. “Because I know how to do it right.”

“That’s going to be kind of hard to do over the phone Roz,” Shane says wryly. “I’m still the one who’s going to have to fuck myself.”

Ilya likes it when Shane swears and says filthy things— Ilya gets the impression he’s too well-behaved in real life to let himself be crass. If Ilya is blessed with more time with him, he is going to make this boy a dirty talk champion.

“Mmm, no,” Ilya tells him, “no it’s my fingers. Because you’ll do as I say, won’t you Shane? Do *exactly* as I say. You’re my good boy, aren’t you?”

The possessive was a risk, but well worth it when Shane whines over the speaker.

“Yes, okay,” Shane agrees, “fuck, yes, tell me what to do.”

“We’ll start with one finger, yes? You have the lube?”

It’s surprisingly annoying to have no visual cues as he waits for Shane. He had never really cared as much for his other calls, but he finds himself wanting to *see* with Shane. Dangerous thoughts.

“Yeah, yeah, got it,” Shane pants, “so do I just—“

“Circle the rim with it, get used to it,” Ilya settles back, planning to take his time. Shane inhales sharply and Ilya knows that he’s the sensitive type. “Okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, just more than I expected.”

“Mmm. Now press in. Slowly. Want to watch and feel your pretty hole suck me in.”

That surprises a gasp out of Shane, or maybe it’s the feeling of penetrating himself.

“How far are you?” Ilya asks, and he’s rubbing himself over his briefs. As a treat. He’s expecting to hear Shane say halfway, or even just the tip to his first knuckle.

“All of it,” Shane keens, voice thready, “it’s— I’m all the way inside.”

Ilya closes his eyes. He imagines replacing Shane’s finger with his own and feeling the wet, hot, *tight* feel of him. Imagines it around his cock. Ilya squeezes his bulge.

“Shit, sweetheart,” Ilya huffs a laugh. “You’re the overachiever type, hmm?”

That surprises a laugh out of Shane too, and Ilya delights in it. “Fuck. You have no idea.”

“Mmm, I think I do. Push in and out of yourself. When you’re ready, add a second.”

He listens for a short while to Shane's quick, brief breathing, and knows when he's stretching himself with two when he hears a small whine escape him.

"Good," Ilya says when he thinks he's ready. "Add more lube. And then you're going to do exactly as I say, understood?"

"Yes, Roz," Shane sighs, without hesitation. Roz wants to see so badly his cock is aching with it. "I'm done."

"Okay. Two fingers in now. Only to the second knuckle. Have you done it?"

Shane makes a discomforted sound. "Yeah. Yes. Feels a little weird. But still good–"

"Now curl your fingers and press up."

He knows exactly when Shane's found it.

"Oh f-*uck*," he cries, "fuck, fuck, how did you–"

"Rub in circles, gentle," Ilya continues, smug. Shane gasps, and Ilya can hear how he's moving on his sheets, body unconsciously chasing pleasure.

"Roz," he's panting, a whine trapped in his throat. "Roz, fuck, fuck, so good, you're making me feel so good."

Ilya was pretty sure he was dying. He curses under his breath, pulling himself out just to squeeze his fingers in a tight ring around the base of his throbbing cock. Insane. This boy was going to drive him insane, crying out to Ilya as if he wasn't the one making himself cum. As if it's Ilya's fingers inside of him.

"Yeah, sweetheart?" he rasps. "You like my fingers in you, fucking you open? You're so hot and tight, sucking me in. Your pretty little hole would feel so good stretched around my cock. *Fuck*, your perfect ass would be so tight on me. I might not fit."

He would. He would make sure of it. If he had to fucking *train* Shane to take it, he would.

Shane moans wantonly. "Yeah. Yes, Roz. Want you to fuck me like this. Please, please fuck me. Need you. It'll fit, Roz, please I'll be so good."

"*Fuck,* Котёнок," Ilya grunts, "are you close, sweetheart?"

"Mmhmm," Shane confirms, soft whimpers escaping him. God, he'd sound like that while Ilya was fucking him, wouldn't he? Little punched out noises each time Ilya fucked his cock in him.

"Good," Ilya breathes, eyes closed. "Take your fingers out Shane."

The cry that Shane makes is nothing short of devastated. But Ilya has no doubt he's done as asked immediately. Born fucking submissive, fucking Christ.

“Fuck, why,” he begs. “Please, please, Roz, I was so close, I want to be so good for you, please let me–”

“Not yet, малыш,” Ilya murmurs, stroking his own cock slowly now. “You still have to blow me. You did such a good job last time, sweetheart. I want your mouth on me again.”

“Okay,” Shane inhales slowly and exhales, trying to calm himself down. “Okay. I can— two fingers?”

“Mm, yes. But on your front this time. Do you have a pillow, something to put between your legs?”

Shane catches on quicker than Ilya had expected. “Shit, you can’t be serious.”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Ilya grins, “I very much am. Pillow between your legs, малыш. Because you’re going to hump my leg as you suck me like a good fucking slut.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane moans, and Ilya can hear him move to obey. “That’s mean. This is mean, Roz.” His breath hitches, meaning he’s got friction.

“Mmm, maybe,” Ilya concedes, “but I think we both know you like it when I’m mean.” A soft whimper leaks through. “Yeah. You really, really, like it. Fingers in your mouth Shane. Don’t make me tell you again.”

The same sloppy, wet sounds of Shane fucking his own mouth come through the speaker just as prettily as last time, and it’s easy to pace his own hand with the noises. Ilya wishes he had thought to bring lube before he settled at his desk.

“Three again,” he tells him, knocking his head back as he lazily strokes himself. “We have to teach you to take me, sweetheart. Get you used to having your throat fucked full.”

He’s getting better at being able to tell when Shane’s close, a rush of high pitch whimpers that escapes him involuntarily. Too lost in the pleasure to be self-conscious. Ilya is doing his best to picture it, Shane desperately humping his own pillow with three fingers in his mouth. Imagines him tearing up seeking his own release and too desperate to be embarrassed about it.

“*Roz–”*

“Stop.”

Shane *sobs.*

“Please,” Shane pleads without his fingers in his mouth, and yes, this is what Ilya wanted, wanted him crying, “please, Roz, I need to— I can’t—“

“On your back.” He hears Shane obey immediately and Ilya really isn’t going to last long. He speeds up his hand, feeling his breath punch out of him. He must be on speaker, because Shane makes a soft, curious noise.

“Are you— is that—“ he stumbles, and it’s almost adorable, the way he can’t say it out loud.

“Jerking off?” Ilya exhales with a laugh, “yes, sweetheart. You have me so fucking hard. All I can think about it fucking you, pounding you into the bed. Shit, you’d be so tight, I know it. A perfect fucking hole.”

Shane’s whimper is obscene. “Oh fuck, yes, yeah, want— want that, want to be—“ he cuts himself off, clearly embarrassed, and oh, that just won’t do.

“Want to be what, Shane?” Ilya’s nearly panting, his hand working himself hard, “Tell me, baby, what do you want to be for me?”

“Roz. I’m— I can’t—“

“Say it,” Ilya demands, voice dropping low and mean.

Shane gasps over the phone and it rushes out. “Want to be a perfect hole. Perfect hole for you. Want you to fuck me full— fuck, please, Roz, please let me—can I come, please—“

“Okay, Shane,” Ilya breathes, head spinning with how close he was, with listening to Shane talk dirty and beg so prettily. “You can come, sweetheart.”

He can hear Shane react instantaneously.

“Fuck,” Ilya grunted, listening to him cry out, staccato whines escaping him as he rides it out, “that’s it. There you go. Shit, you take it so well, sweetheart.”

“Roz,” Ilya can hear the way he’s gasping for air, shuddering through sobs. Ilya sent him into the atmosphere with that orgasm. “Oh fuck, fuck that was so— I didn’t know I could do that.”

“Couldn’t do what?” Ilya asks, hand slowing on himself as he listens to Shane try to catch his breath.

“Come like— I’ve never done it without touching myself, like you know, my dick,” Shane is shy again, even as he’s buzzing from the hard finish. Ilya imagines him curled up in his sheets, skin glowing from the orgasm, face in his pillow as he comes down.

“Did you fuck yourself with just your fingers then?” Ilya is trying to imagine the finish to complete the picture. Shane with his back arched, shoving his fingers into himself as he tells Ilya how badly he wants Ilya to fuck him. Finding that new spot that Ilya had been the one to show him. Prostate orgasms could be intense like that, Ilya knows.

“No, no I— didn’t use my fingers.”

He didn’t… he was on his back so then what…Ilya freezes.

“Shane.” And it would be insane. Absolutely fucking batshit. Ilya has never seen anyone actually manage it. But. “малыш. Did you come untouched? *Completely* untouched?”

“Ah,” Shane breathes, and he hears the uncertainty there. “I— you didn’t say I could touch myself but that I could come and I was already so close. I was just… waiting for you to let me.”

Ilya has to put himself on mute.

“Holy fuck,” he swears to his empty studio. “Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy *fuck.”*

This sweet, absolute slut of a boy just came on Ilya’s fucking command. It has to be the hottest thing Ilya has ever heard anyone do and Ilya hasn’t even *touched* him. Fuck, *no one* has ever even touched him.

“Um,” Shane hesitates, cautious. “Was that— was that wrong? Should I have done something different?”

Ilya makes himself unmute, even as his head and cock are both throbbing in a way that’s excruciating.

“No,” Ilya rasps, clears his throat. “No, Shane, *sweetheart*, you were perfect. Absolutely perfect. Such a good boy.”

Shane makes a soft cooing sound, content, and Ilya has to close his eyes. He thinks he’s going to scream.

“You didn’t,” Shane starts, “um. I don’t think I heard you come.”

Ilya exhales, glancing down at his dick still in his grip that’s almost purple with how hard he is.

“No,” Ilya replies, “no not yet. I am so hard though. You made me so fucking hard, being such a perfect boy for me. Fuck.”

Shane sighs. “Will you? I didn’t get to hear you last time because I was— mine was so intense. Can I listen this time?”

He has never done this before, with a caller. Purposefully making himself come for them to hear. He’s faked orgasms of course, moaning and swearing as he swung his protractor tool around his finger, bored.

He exhales, before moving his hand again, inhaling sharply at how sensitive he was. “Ah, shit. I will not last long.”

“That’s okay,” Shane reassures sleepily. “Oh, I came a lot this time.”

“*Fuck*,” Ilya groans, “where, Shane, over your stomach? Athlete. You have abs?”

This was solely for Ilya’s imaginative pleasure now. Desperately needing some kind of picture to help him over. He’s always been a visual learner and he’s never regretted it like he is now, so close to the edge but not quite enough.

“Oh,” Shane hesitates, “um. Yeah, sort of. It’s the start of the season, so I still have some of my summer weight but yeah. There’s usually always some definition, even during the off-season. Does that help?”

That helps. That helps *a lot*.

“You sound so hot,” Shane mumbles, as if to himself. Ilya still hears him. “I wish I could see you. It would be so hot to watch you make yourself come like that.”

And it’s with that image, Shane curled up next to him, kissing his neck and chest tiredly, and spent cock between his legs. Watching obediently, enraptured as Ilya sprawls out next to him sitting against the headboard, working his cock in his fist until he orgasms. It’s with that fantasy Ilya tips over, grunting out Russian swear as he comes so hard his head spins.

Ilya slumps back into his chair, exhausted as he tries to catch his breath.

“Oh,” Shane whispers, “oh, wow.”

Ilya lets out a weak laugh. “That was good for you sweetheart?” He pitches his voice lower, echoing Shane, “was I good, Shane?”

Shane snorts out a laugh knowing he’s being teased a little and that makes Ilya smile. “Fuck off. You know you were. You were so good.” He pauses before continuing. “Thank you. You make me feel so good.”

This boy *has* to stop thanking him for sex. Ilya isn’t nearly strong enough to handle it.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya deflects, well aware of their earlier conversation. He reaches forward for his phone, takes it off speaker. “Any bad feelings? Exhaustion?”

“I am tired,” Shane admits. “But I think it's because of… you know.” Like this, it sounded like Shane was talking to him next to his ear.

“Mm, I do. You did so well for me. Listened to me every time. Fuck. I’ve never done that with someone either.”

“You’ve never,” Shane repeats, surprised. “Done what? Jerked off over the phone?”

Successfully edged someone with just his voice. Made someone *come* with just his voice. Untouched, un-*fucking*-believable.

“Yes, sure,” Ilya settles on, clearing his throat, “Congratulations, малыш, you’re the first to ever hear me actually come like this.”

“Huh,” Shane laughs, and he sounds a little out of breath. If Ilya listens closely, he thinks he even sounds pleased. “That’s— uh, what does that mean, by the way? What you called me, *may-lesh*?”

“Малыш,” Ilya corrects, biting a grin at the broken Russian. “Baby, in Russian. Baby boy, more specifically.”

"*Oh–"* Shane clears his throat, and he can *hear* the flush down his neck. "Russian, right, that makes sense. I thought you sounded Slavic."

He had never spoken in Russian to a caller before either, Ilya realizes. Hadn't felt the urge, the way he did during good sex in real life. Yet another first Shane stole. Ilya finds he would be okay with Shane taking more.

"You sure you're okay?" Ilya checks. Shane hums. "In that case, good night Shane. Get some rest. You earned it, hmm?"

"Okay," Shane agrees, softly, "good night Roz."

Ilya hangs up, tossing his phone back on the desk. He punches out a short breath, finally glancing down at the mess he's made of himself. He hadn't bothered trying to catch his release, and had spurted cum all over his abs, dripping down from all the way up to his chest. Somehow his cock is still twitching with aftershocks.

Ilya inhales, covering his face with his clean hand. He's putting Svetlana in an early grave, he's sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Pretend with me that MIT has a merit scholarship program. They do not, but we live in fiction.

Also i know too much about US immigration law now because I'm living through the end of an empire and do local rapid response to *** raids. apparently that helps with gay smut too.

how we doing y'all

Chapter 3: dial tone

Chapter Summary

Shane considers his team, his friends, and Roz. It's not all nice.

Chapter Notes

plot? in MY porn? it's more likely than you think

listen i love the shayden bromance so fucking much okay, those are my stupid wholesome jock boys

CW: some canon (and reality, apparently, thanks Team USA) typical misogyny in the manosphere hockey world

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hayden clocks him almost immediately.

“Shane,” he starts, staring at him before he starts grinning. “Oh shit, did you get laid?”

Trevors, in the stall between theirs, whips his head around to join in on the staring.

“What the fuck?” Shane manages, burning red. “No! No I didn’t.”

“Dude, I know a morning afterglow,” Hayden points at his face. “And that’s the face of a man who had a very good orgasm last night.”

All Shane wants is one normal fucking practice. One practice where all they—professional hockey players—do is play professional hockey. Why is that too much to ask?

“Do you guys talk about literally anything else?” Shane groans. “Literally. Anything. I’ll talk about Jackie’s pregnancy cravings with you if you drop this right now Pike.”

Hayden shudders. “No, no. If I think about what she’s been making in the kitchen at 2 in the morning right now, I might throw up before practice today.”

“So who was the lucky lady, Hollander?” JJ smirks, slinging an arm around him. Shane hates how tall the enforcer was, even if it did save his ass out on the ice.

“There was no lucky lady, Jesus, leave it,” Shane exasperates. “You guys want my jerk-off schedule that bad?”

JJ grins, delighted, and Shane immediately flushes. He doesn’t normally get into it like this with his teammates, thinks as captain he should lead by example and avoid the more crude comments. Even though JJ does his damn best to pry it out of him.

“Non, not right now, but if it makes me play like *that* and get a Hart, then maybe later,” JJ cackles.

“Shut up, go be a problem somewhere else,” Shane grumbles, shoving JJ off of him. “Practice starts in ten.”

“Don’t worry Shane,” Hayden laughs. “Just say the word, and Jackie will hook you up with one of her yoga friends. Or art friends. Or honestly any of her friends, she hypes you up a lot at girls' nights. Apparently they rate your pictures.”

“Why— how would you know that, they’re girls’ nights,” Shane settles on, because he didn’t want to touch the rest of it with a ten foot pole.

Hayden shrugs. “Don’t like being too far away when Jackie’s this far along. So I just stay upstairs with the twins. She and her friends don’t mind. Sometimes she makes me go out to the store if they forgot to bring something, so they like having a delivery service I guess.”

“Jesus, Pike, she’s got you whipped,” Koch snorts from his stall a few benches down.“How’d she manage that, she have a magic pussy or something?”

“Hey,” both Shane and Hayden snap sharply.

“Shut the fuck up Koch,” Shane scowls. “You know WAGs are off limits.”

Koch rolls his eyes. “Whatever, I get it. Was just a joke, fuck.”

“Joke about my wife again and see what happens Koch,” Hayden warns, tone serious. Hayden is one of the most easy-going players on the team, but when he fights, he fights.

But Shane can see the others shrugging it off, jibing about him and Hayden being too sensitive. Hayden, Shane, and occasionally Miitka who also adores his wife and kids are the “weird ones” in the locker room. Easy pickings for the butt of jokes because of their supposed softness. It isn’t new but it still sours Shane’s stomach now. If they’re like this with Hayden for loving his very female wife while she was pregnant. What the fuck are they going to do to Shane if they find out how much he likes it when a man talks him through an orgasm in his ear like Roz had last night? If they find out how badly Shane wants someone who is a man?

Practice runs smoothly because Shane is running it– there isn’t any other option and Shane knows how to play hockey with a machine-like efficiency. But he’s hesitant to try 1-1s with the vets after the locker room, sticking to his rookies and working on their passes. They, for the most part, still look up to Shane enough to listen.

He gets off the ice exhausted, sore, and unsatisfied with himself. He's still silently spiraling through the locker room conversation walking back through the tunnel. It isn't the first time Shane thinks about how much easier it would be if he just liked girls. If he could just want a girl like that, like the way he wants—

"Hey," Hayden stops him before they enter the locker room, tone solemn, "thanks for that, sticking up for me in there earlier with Koch."

Shane shakes his head vehemently, protesting. "No, fuck, Hayds, you don't have to thank me for that, shit. Jackie's my friend. And I'm your fucking captain it would be fucked if I let that slide. WAGs off limits is a hard rule and Koch knew that."

"Still," Hayden shrugs, a small smile on his face. "I know you would have done it even if you weren't my captain. And we can't exactly say the same for everyone else in there, can we?"

No, Shane thinks to himself, we can't.

Because the team doesn't respect him. He doesn't have the presence for it. He's 21, youngest Captain for the Montreal Voyagers in franchise history, and there's still vets who are bitter about taking orders from a guy they still consider wet behind the ears. It doesn't matter if he's the best scorer on the team, or how many wins he single-handedly gets them. It won't be enough to be seen as a man worth listening to, especially when it comes to locker room rules.

While they're undressing he thinks again, looking at the vinyl C on the practice jersey he had just taken off, what the fuck he's doing here trying to play Captain.

"Are we still on for dinner tonight?" Hayden asks, when they're out of the rink, walking over to their cars. Montreal has settled deep into winter, even just in November, and Shane can feel it in the way his nose and bare fingers turn numb, cold, and raw within minutes. Shane offers him a tight smile. "Yeah, sure, of course."

"Great," Hayden grins back, "I'll let Jackie know before we head out. You sure I can't convince you to try her black cherry cheesecake? It literally sends me into a coma, dude."

"It's regular season Hayds, you know that," Shane turns him down wryly even though the thought of cheesecake makes him long for one of Jackie's treats. He hasn't had a dessert since the summer ended.

"Yeah," Hayden sighs, "thought I'd at least give it a try. The twins have been asking about you."

Ruby and Jade Pike were two years old and, if you ask Shane, chaos incarnate. Shane never knows what to do with them, having bypassed most of that part of childhood according to his mom, but he doesn't mind it when they drag him into their play. Making kids happy is easy in a way that making literally everyone else happy isn't.

"Really?" Shane smiles, and he means it, "that's sweet. I'll have to hang out with them tonight."

“You say that now,” Hayden groans, but Shane knows better. Hayden loves his kids more than anything on this Earth, besides maybe Jackie. It’s refreshing to be around, after spending the majority of his life surrounded by hypermasculinity.

It doesn’t take long to drive out to the Pike residence, Shane following Hayden’s minivan just outside of the city. Ever since the older player had essentially imprinted on him during Shane’s rookie year, Shane’s gotten almost as comfortable in Hayden’s home as he is in his own.

Jackie kisses his cheeks as a hello, waving Hayden off to get the twins. Even just between the four Pikes, there’s a blanket of chatter: the twins yelling from deeper inside the house, Hayden and Jackie joking about something.

As much as Shane likes his peace and quiet, there’s something nice about being around this kind of domesticity, loud and busy as the Pikes bustle around him. His home in Ottawa growing up was warm and loving but he was an only child and according to his parents, *sensitive*. He grew used to the serenity of their house and finding comfort in it, but there’s something to be said about love that’s joyful too.

Jackie asks about their practice as Shane helps set the table. Hayden catches Shane’s eye and silently both agree to keep what happened quiet.

“Same as always,” Shane smiles thinly. He’s usually shit at lying but he covers it up well when he protests immediately as he sees her try to lift a basket of toys off one of the dining chairs. “Jesus Christ, Jackie, you’re growing a whole human in there, let me do it.” Jackie rolls her eyes, but doesn’t protest, and Shane knows he was right to jump in when she presses a hand against her lower back.

“Unk’e Shane!” One of the twins who Shane is 90% sure is Ruby comes running up from where Hayden had been washing and getting them ready for dinner. She has arms up and it's instinct now to let her jump and catch her.

“Hey kiddo,” Shane greets, setting the girl on his hip. “What have you guys been up to?”

Shane gets an earful of Ruby’s toddler babble, shortly joined by Jade’s toddler babble, until they all settle at the table, the babies in their high chairs. Dinner is loud and messy in a way that Shane still hasn’t gotten used to, but it’s not terrible.

Jackie’s always mindful of Shane’s performance diet without ever having to be asked so Shane trusts what’s on his plate like he would in his own apartment. He knows if he wants, there’ll be a ginger ale in the fridge that Hayden never forgets to pick up from the store when he goes for groceries. The guest bathroom has the same lotion that Shane uses at home because he hates how dry his hands get after washing them. They’ve both made it clear that they want him here and silently make sure their home shows that too. Shane has always been grateful to them for it.

“You’re so good with them Shane,” Jackie says later in the living room, nursing a glass of fruit juice. Hayden had gone up twenty minutes ago to put the kids to bed, so Shane’s waiting with Jackie, listening to her talk about her last prenatal visit. “You ever think about it?”

“What, kids?” Shane laughs leaning back into the armchair he usually claims when he’s over. He’s not quite relaxed, he never really feels like he can be anywhere that wasn’t his family home in Ottawa or his own apartment, but it’s far as he’ll let his guard down.

“Yeah,” she smiles, “you would be a great dad, Shane.”

“Jackie, I’m 21.”

Hayden snorts from behind him, having returned from upstairs without Shane noticing. “Yeah, buddy, we’re not the right couple to be talking to about being too young for a family.”

He settles into the couch next to Jackie with an arm stretched out across the back, and she unfolds to nestle against his side in the space he makes for her. She’s almost eight months pregnant now, and Hayden has a hand absently massaging the back of her neck to get the tension out. Habitual.

Jackie and Hayden got married a year after they met during Shane’s rookie year when they were both 21 years old. Shane’s been by Hayden’s side the whole time to see them meet at a bar and fall in love and get the full white-picket fence experience. And Shane’s happy for them. He is. They’re both good people. He’s glad they found each other and get to have this contentment. This kind of normal.

Shane looks down at his ginger ale, thinking about how it’s never going to be normal for him. Not like what they have.

Like clockwork, Hayden brings up matchmaking again. “You know you can, if you want. Wife, kids. You deserve it, man.”

“Plus you’re a good guy,” Jackie pipes up, “which makes a huge difference, you don’t even know. There’s plenty of women who would fall in love with you like *that,* I know it. We just have to get you out there.”

Shane forces a chuckle out. “Let me get us the Cup first and then we’ll see.”

Shane wonders sometimes, what would happen if he just told Hayden and by extension, Jackie. About being not straight. Maybe not everything, definitely not Roz, but just enough to make it clear that women don’t really do it for him, can they stop bringing them up? Out of everyone on his team, he trusts Hayden the most, considers him his best friend, and Hayden’s never been one of the guys chirping egregiously homophobic shit.

But he never says anything about it either, Shane thinks to himself, frown tugging on his face that he hides with a sip of his drink. Not like the way Shane defends Jackie.

Maybe that’s not fair to Hayden. It’s not like he knows Shane might like men or that the jokes bother him. Shane is always careful to shut himself down when the joke starts hitting too personally. But it means Shane isn’t really sure what Hayden thinks when it comes to homosexuality, doesn’t know why he’s okay with listening to their teammates say bigoted things. And as he watches his closest friends, straight friends, having exactly what Shane can’t imagine for himself— not knowing makes telling them too much of a risk.

“We just want to see you happy too Shane,” Jackie tells him.

Shane smiles, lies, because what else is he supposed to do? “I know Jackie. It’s okay, I am happy with what I’ve got, really.”

+++

The next two games are away but relatively nearby so the rest of the week goes by fast. It’s one win against Ottawa and another loss against New York, which makes Shane throw himself into video review the moment he gets home everyday. Shane’s expecting the same for himself Wednesday night, maybe just for a shorter time, when he notices the unassuming package at his doorstep. He’s a little confused, not remembering if he ordered something until he opens it up inside on his kitchen counter and immediately flushes. Video review will have to wait.

He forces himself to eat dinner and shower before getting to the main event, preparing to go to bed. Finally, he sets himself up on his mattress with his purchase and a bottle of lube, nervous even with the heat pooling in his gut. Shane pauses, but then goes on to strip out of his clothes as well, exhaling as he leans back on his pillows nude and picks up his phone.

He had gotten over the mortifying ordeal of asking the phone sex line switchboard operator he had met the first night when Roz’s hours usually were the second time he had called and Roz wasn’t there. She had been more than willing to share, and he knew from just the way she was talking that she was feeling very smug. It ended up worth it, because now he knew he could call at 10 pm on Mondays or Wednesdays and not look like an idiot when he asked for Roz. At least, not more so than usual.

He’s starting to build something like a routine after these past two months. About once a week, he calls a phone sex hotline and asks for one specific man. And once a week, he gets to cum so hard he sees stars, all while that man tells him filthy fantasies over the speaker and calls him a good boy.

Lana, when he remembered his manners and asked for her name after his third call, has been discreet from the start. If she had looked up his name after her shift that first night and figured out who he was, she didn’t give it away and maintained that line of professionalism. That’s why when he calls tonight, a little anxious but mostly feeling anticipatory butterflies with the request he has for Roz, he relaxes a little when he recognizes her voice and greeting.

“Hi Lana,” he says, and because his mother had raised a polite son he adds, “how has your night been?”

“Hello Shane,” she replies warmly, “it has been slow, but good.”

“So no weird men with fetishes yelling at you about their feet kink?”

“Not yet, unless you are thinking of changing that?”

Shane snorts, grinning. Lana is funny and quick-witted but still patient with Shane as he struggles through his hang ups with everything about this. He thinks that if he was interested

in women, she would be someone he would want to take out to dinner and get to know. It's not the first time he thinks she reminds him a little of Roz, right down to the accent. Speaking of.

"Is, ah, Roz available?" it's still embarrassing to ask, even if this is the seventh time now. Lana knew what he was calling for, after all, and with who. Shane knows that she knows that he's planning on having an orgasm tonight.

"He is, as a matter of fact. Would you like me to connect you?"

"Please," he agrees, already flushed red. She hums. "Okay, I'll do that now. Enjoy your night Shane."

The click over the phone is getting depressingly familiar. However, the low, accented, "hello," still makes his skin heat and spark. What's changed is that now it also makes Shane feel some tension loosen in his back, letting the mask he's only recently realized he's always wearing slip a little.

"Hi Roz," Shane says, voice a little shy. He's a lot more confident that Roz really does remember him like he says and he's rewarded: Roz goes from deep and sultry to warm and casual. Inexplicably, it makes the butterflies worse. "Shane. Hello. It is good to hear from you."

As if Shane hasn't called almost every Wednesday the past nine weeks for this like a needy slut. Roz's generous like that.

"Yeah," Shane replies, biting down a grin as he settles back on his pillows. "Same. Uh, how are classes?"

He had managed to pry out from Roz that he was a college student a couple of calls ago, but he had stayed tight-lipped about almost everything about it. Still, it builds on the picture in Shane's head he's been painting for a while, one that haunts his day-to-day life more and more everyday. He had caught himself thinking about what Roz might be studying during warmups once. He was considering something like literature or language when his skate caught an edge and he went down like an amateur. He had refused to tell JJ what he was thinking about when the rest of the team ribbed him about it.

"They are okay," Roz answers, and Shane can almost hear the shrug. The way he says 'okay' still floods Shane with a touch of fondness like it had the first time. "Exams soon, and I have much to still learn."

"You're smart," Shane tells him without thinking, knowing this like an axiom even if he's never been provided concrete proof. "I know you'll do great."

Roz is quiet for a second, and Shane almost cringes. That was too much. Even he knows that telling the guy he's paying to talk him into an orgasm that he'll do well on his exams is a little weird.

“Yes,” Roz clears his throat before Shane can backtrack. “Thank you. Can I get you naked now?”

Shane snorts out a laugh at the unsubtle change in conversation, used to Roz’s abruptness by now. “No need. I’m already uh— I stripped before I called.”

“Ah, that’s my good slutty boy,” Roz purrs, slipping into his role like silk. Shane has to hold back a whimper at the possession, the idea of being Roz’s. Dangerous line of thinking.

“Our rules?”

“Do only as I’m told, be honest, and I’m not allowed to cum until you let me,” Shane recites dutifully, flushing like he does every time he says the last one.

“Very good,” Roz praises. “I think tonight I want you on your knees for me. You have your lube?”

“Um. Actually,” Shane interrupts. “I, uh, wanted to try something different, if that’s okay?”

“Of course is okay,” he replies immediately. “What do you want, малыш?”

“Um,” Shane stumbles, burning red. It’s not even that bad but saying it out loud, especially to Roz is… a lot. “I, uh, bought something recently. It came in the mail today.”

If Shane isn’t hallucinating, Roz sounds a little delighted. “Oh? A toy, sweetheart? Tell me.”

“It’s ah,” Shane looks at it now, staring at him, accusatory. “It’s a dildo. I just— you keep telling me about how you would fuck me and I um. I wanted to try something like that. With you.”

Roz breathes out in that shaky way that Shane has started recognizing as Roz’s shocked-into-horny- silence exhale. It does make Shane preen a little every time, sue him.

“How big?”

He blushes at how urgently Roz asks him. The teasing from his tone has dropped off, leaving Shane unmoored. “Um, the website said six inches.”

“Hmm,” Roz grunts. “Will be good start. I am bigger than six inches. Will get you ready for me when I finally fuck into that tight virgin ass.”

It’s Shane’s turn to let out a weak exhale, because every time Roz says something like that, it really sounds like he means it— like they really would, eventually, fuck for real. It’s too risky to consider, way too risky with Shane’s career but it was a nice fantasy that always got him hot and bothered. He eyes his toy, holding it up. Roz could just be talking shit, but if was telling the truth about being more than six inches…

Shane bites his lip. “I don’t know how you would fit, if you’re bigger than this.”

“Oh, малыш,” Roz coos, and Shane flashes hot at a familiar subtle condescension. “We will make it fit. I will make you take it.”

Shane can’t help but imagine it. A large bulking body holding him down into the mattress, pressing into him from behind. Listening to him choke and whine but making him take every inch anyway. Shane exhales, letting out a soft moan.

Roz grabs his attention again. “Lube, sweetheart. Start with one finger.”

Shane obeys, already prepared with his lube next to him. They’ve done this a handful of times now, and it’s gotten easier after each session. Now Shane knows he likes teasing himself a little around the rim before sinking a finger in, a pleased gasp escaping him as his body is forced to stretch for the intrusion.

“Just like that,” Roz murmurs, “very good. Open yourself up for me, малыш. Keep those fingers away from your prostate, hmm?”

He flushes but still listens, avoiding the spot inside of him that makes him shiver. “Can I add a second finger, Roz?”

“Mmm, yes. Thank you very much, sweetheart, for asking. Makes me so hard when you do.”

“Are you?” Shane whispers, “hard?” He has to bite his lip when he pushes in his pointer finger, the stretch slight but satisfying.

“I’ve been hard since you told me about this toy, Shane,” Roz laughs breathily, “fuck, I wish I could see it. Scissor out your fingers, you’ll need to make a decent amount of room for me.”

Shane loses himself in the easy fingering. With two fingers, occasionally brushing against his prostate is almost unavoidable and it doesn’t take long for Shane to aching for relief, panting.

“Roz…” Shane breathes, “fuck, feels good, what do I…”

“Now three.”

Shane gasps. They hadn’t done more than two in the weeks they’ve been doing this. Three is — “I’ve never… Roz, I’ve never taken three.”

“I know,” Roz reassured, “but if you want me to fuck you the way you’re hoping, sweetheart, you’ll need to be able to take three. It’s how we make it fit, yes?”

Shane closes his eyes and inhales. He circles his lube-slicked fingers around his rim. Okay. Three.

Shane whimpers as he pushes in stretches out his rim farther than he has before, forcing his ring finger inside with the first two. Roz shushes him. “Shh, you’re doing good. You’re doing so good, малыш, just a little bit more and we can get that cock you want so badly inside you, hmm?”

“Oh fuck,” Shane moans, and it doesn’t take time at all for him to adjust to the change, fingers pressed all the way in. He had been needing more, and Roz had made him take it.

“Fuck yourself with your fingers,” Roz instructs, “and use more lube. I want to hear that sloppy hole.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane groans, because *fuck*, Roz could be filthy and it made Shane’s head spin. He hears Roz’s answering groan though when Shane does exactly as asked, Shane blushing at hearing the obscene, wet sounds of his fingers thrusting in and out of himself.

“Боже мой,” he mutters to himself in Russian, before telling Shane, “I think that’s enough. I think you’re ready for my cock.”

“Yes,” Shane breathes, eyes closed as he pulls out of himself and leaves his hole gaping. “Yes, Roz, want you to fuck me, please–”

“Lube and dildo, sweetheart,” Roz teases, “you know what to do.”

His hands are shaking a little as he preps until he’s spread his legs out wide and his hips up.

Shane’s breathing fast, heart racing as he feels the blunt, slick head bump against his entrance.

“Okay,” Shane whispers, “okay. Can I?”

“Mmm. Yes. Let me see your pretty little hole stretch on me. Go on Shane, be good.”

Teeth in his bottom lip Shane forces it forward and pushes in, letting out a whimper.

“Oh fuck. Fuck, Roz, that’s, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Shane whines, the pinch almost too painful. “Roz, it hurts—“

“Shhh, hey, it’s okay,” he soothes, voice gentle without a drop of condescension. “You are doing so good for me. Just relax. Relax for me sweetheart, you can do it. I know you can take it.”

Shane bites his bottom lip, forcing his hip flexors to go loose. It makes the tip slip in unexpectedly and before Shane realizes it, he’s popped the head of the dildo all the way in. A ragged, desperate noise drags out of his throat.

“Oh,” he gasps. “*Oh.”*

“Shane? малыш, you are okay? Talk to me.”

“I’m— y-yeah. Yeah. I think,” he swallows, closing his eyes and focusing all his mental energy to the sharp and dull ache between his ass cheeks. “I think the tip is all the way in. The head, I mean.”

Roz groans. “Good boy. Fuck. Can you keep going for me?”

It feels like a burn but Shane does as told, breath hitching the farther in he goes. He has to stop when more of the toy is inside him than out. His pulse is throbbing through his cock. It's the most he's ever had up his ass and it's almost too much.

"Roz," he pants, "I don't know… I don't think I can…"

His internal muscles flutter around the intrusion and he whines at the feeling of something so hard inside of him.

"If it is too much, we stop," Roz reassures him, and he feels his shoulders drop in relief when he doesn't hear any disappointment in the man's voice. "You've already done so good, sweetheart. But I think you can do it, hmm? Do you want to try?"

Shane breathes, slow in and out. Thinks about the shocked groan he gets out of Roz when he does something particularly slutty, the way he sounds when he praises Shane for something he didn't expect him to do. Shane calls every week because he's getting addicted to the way Roz moans his name out when he's coming to him.

"Yeah," Shane whispers. "Yeah, I want to try."

"Perfect," Roz tells him, "you're perfect. Take it out of you, sweetheart, careful."

Shane winces at the feeling of the toy leaving him as he pulls it out.

"Use more lube, yes? On the toy but in your hole, too," Roz sounds a little teasing, "you can't actually get wet like a girl after all. Even if you leak for me with just a few words."

"Shut up," Shane huffs, voice catching as he does as told and the cold feeling of lube in the warm sensitive inside startles him.

"Done? Good, let's try again," Roz coaches, "this time, it'll be in and out but only a little bit, okay Shane? Not too much at once."

And it's so much smoother like this, the burn eased away by the lube and the small pushes and pulls helping him take more without feeling too overwhelmed. Before he realizes it, he reaches the base of the dildo, pressed almost flush with his ass.

"Holy shit," Shane gasps, "holy *shit*, that's–"

"All the way in then, малыш?" Roz checks, "does it feel good?"

"Yes, fuck," Shane groans, arms shaking a little as he keeps the toy pressed in and still, "oh fuck, you're so deep. You're so fucking deep, Roz."

Roz exhales over the phone, and hums. "Yeah? You're so fucking tight for me. Fuck, can barely move."

Shane flexes his wrist a little, breath catching as his inner walls don't give away, trapping in the toy.

“Yeah,” Shane mumbles, “I can’t… I tried pulling but it’s like it’s… being sucked in—“

Roz’s groan is loud. “Jesus *fuck* Shane,” he grunts, “fuck, what I would give right now to have my cock inside you. Sucked in- *fuck,* your perfect hole doesn’t want to let me go. I have to fight for every inch in and out.

He didn’t tell Shane explicitly but Shane does it anyway. “Oh fuck,” Shane gasps, whimpering at the drag as he pulls a little harder. It’s just one inch in and out but it still makes him feel dizzy. “Roz, please, I can’t—“

“In and out малыш,” Roz coaxes. “You’re doing so good for me. Until it's comfortable, Shane.”

Shane bites his lip as he obeys, eyes closed and whimpers, escaping him as he works the dildo in small movements like he had when getting it inside of himself. Eventually, it does get easier to slide and one inch becomes two becomes half the toy.

“Oh shit,” Shane breathes, “feels good, feels really good Roz.”

“Good,” Roz praises, “so fucking good for me. Do you think you can do more, sweetheart?”

Shane pauses. “More?”

“Mmm, let me make you feel even better,” Roz says, “do as I say, yes?”

“Okay,” Shane mumbles, “I trust you.”

Roz takes in a sharp inhale over the speaker, but Shane’s already starting to feel dazed. “Fuck,” Roz whispers, “okay, sweetheart, fuck, I want you to pull out the toy but keep the head in, yes? Almost all the way but not completely.”

Shane does as told, feeling almost uncomfortable at the loss, needing to be filed again.

“Good. Good, Shane. Now when I tell you to, you’re going to take the whole thing at once, yes? One fast thrust, like I’m fucking into you.”

“Jesus,” Shane whispers, already predicting exactly how overwhelming this was about to be. If taking the toy in small micro-movements had been a lot then this… “Shit, Roz, I–”

“Ready? Now, Shane.”

Taking a shallow breath, Shane plunges the dildo all the way inside.

“Oh *fuck!”* Shane cries, curling into himself at the sudden sensation of being filled, hand already moving back to chase the feeling again. “Fuck, fuck, Roz, please–”

“Again, Shane,” Roz murmurs. “Harder.”

He moans as he does, the head nudging at his prostate as it goes. He hears it then, the sound of skin on skin through the speaker.

“Are you fucking me, Roz?” Shane asks shakily. “Fucking me like with how you are your hand, I mean.”

“God, Shane, you are— *yes,* yes I’m fucking you, I’m fucking you right now,” Roz grits out. “Can you hear, малыш? Can you copy me?”

Shane listens, trying to discern the sounds of the strokes and times the next one with Roz. Roz hums in approval, encourages, “yes like that. Come on Shane, with me.”

The pace Roz sets for them makes Shane sob, lips parted as he has to gasp for breath. Like this, he can hear the way the toy slaps against his ass with each thrust, and it makes Roz swear.

“Yes,” he grunts, “fuck, you’re so fucking hot, take me so fucking well, Shane.”

“Roz please,” Shane moans, gasping. His hand is nearly cramping with how hard he’s fucking himself with the dildo. “Roz—“

“Ilya,” the man interrupts him, voice rough and just as breathless. “Call me Ilya, малыш.

Shane pauses, dildo still seated deep inside of him, because oh. He isn’t far enough gone where he can’t understand Roz is giving him what is likely his real name.

“Ah, unless, you don’t—“ Roz, *Ilya,* starts backtracking when Shane’s too quiet for too long but Shane doesn’t let him.

“Ilya,” Shane carefully repeats, soft and a little unsure. He tries to copy the way Ilya had emphasized the syllables, stressing the Il- and softening his mouth for the -ya.

Ilya lets out a punched out groan over the phone and swears in Russian. “*Shit,* yes, just as pretty as I imagined, you’re say my name so fucking pretty.” He can still hear Ilya jerking himself off, so Shane moves his toy again, jolting against the brush against his sensitive prostate. “Ilya,” he tries again, slowly working up to the pace they had gotten to. Then the angle of his wrist changes and the toy digs into his prostate instead of just brushing it.

He jerks, crying out. “Oh, *fuck,* fuck, Ilya, please—“ He’s rolling his hips into his thrusts, seeking and finding that sweet spot. Tears build in his eyes as he abuses his prostate, shaking as he fucks himself. “Jesus Christ, you feel so good, don’t stop, don’t—"

“Oh god,” Ilya chokes out, and he’s unraveling in a way Shane hasn’t heard before and it’s making Shane’s head spin, “that’s it, sweetheart, малыш, fuck so fucking good for me, *so fucking perfect,* there you go, come for me, Shane. Come for me, moan my name.”

He feels the orgasm shatter through him, and he gasps out, “*Ilya*” limbs shaking and toes curling as he struggles to keep the toy moving, trying to ride out his finish. “Oh *fuck, Ilya.”*

And Ilya follows shortly, choking out Shane’s name as he comes with a groan. “*Fuck.”*

They just breathe together for a minute, both trying to come down from a sky-high orgasm. Shane pulls the dildo out of himself with a wince as he closes his eyes and tries to calm

down.

Shortly after the high, comes a startling crash of clarity.

Ilya. Roz had told him his *personal* name. A small part of Shane is warm at the realization of how badly Roz wanted Shane to say it, like they really were fucking, like he really wanted *Shane*. A vastly larger part of him though was frozen with the implications.

This had gone too far. They can't be doing this; *Shane* can't be doing this. Everything they had been doing together, these weekly calls. The little nuggets of information that Shane had been subconsciously hoarding trying to make Roz real. When Shane damn well knows what he's wanting can't be. Not when he has to go back to a locker room tomorrow that already doesn't respect him as he is while they think he's *straight.*

"Sweetheart," Roz murmurs. "Are you with me?"

Shane closes his eyes, exhaling shakily. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm here Roz."

He hears Roz pause. "Good. How are you feeling?"

Like he was about to cry, Shane thinks, a sick feeling in his gut that spoils the rest of the incredible night.

For the first time since the first call, Shane lies. "I'm okay. Good."

And just like the first time since the first call, Roz clocks him. "Shane. You are lying."

"No, no I'm not," Shane denies, and he needs to end this now. He feels the build up of a sob, an aching sense of abandonment that he has no one to blame besides himself and his stupidity. "I'm not, Roz, I'm fine, really."

"*Shane*. You don't fucking lie to me about this. I told you, don't–"

"I need to go," Shane interrupts him, voice cracking. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Good night Roz. Thank you." Before he can hear Roz protest, he hangs up for what he knows has to be the last time. Then he curls up on his bed, body still aching from his orgasm, and crashes.

Chapter End Notes

sowwy.....

Chapter 4: lost signal

Chapter Summary

Ilya Rozanov and his terrible, no good, very bad month. It gets better though.

Chapter Notes

finals are OVER. I do NOT think i passed my microbiology final. fuck it we BALL.

Ilya does have sex with a stranger in this btw because this dramatic bi king is crashing out but it's literally like four sentences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After four weeks of silence, Ilya has to accept the truth. Shane is not going to call back.

The first Wednesday after, Ilya had been disappointed but not totally worried yet. Sometimes Shane's work sent him to different time zones, he had explained once, so trying to call in time for one of Ilya's shifts didn't always work out.

The way they had ended their last call made him uneasy. Shane hung up on him so quickly that Ilya hadn't been able to figure out why he was lying, hadn't even been able to say goodbye. But he wanted to give Shane the benefit of doubt, stayed hopeful because it wasn't the first time Shane had missed a week. Besides, he was knee deep in finals and there's not much time to worry about anything, let alone the hotline.

If he sat in the exam halls with a sick feeling in his stomach, he chalked it up to the test worth 70% of his grade.

Week two would have been enough to cause a pause, but Ilya's PI had assigned him a grant to write. He had been the one to cancel his own shifts that week, needing his nights to make the deadline. He's the only undergraduate the lab accepted from the tens of students who had tried to get in, and has been working with them since his freshman year. He's a senior now so he ends up getting similar tasks to the PhD students and post-docs, but with a steeper learning curve. He can't fuck it up if he wants those letters of recommendation from two of the most renowned astrophysicists in the world.

So week two was kind of a caffeine-induced haze in which Ilya was barely home to think like a normal person anyway.

Week three though is when Ilya started really feeling dread. It's finally break, so he had no other option but to overthink. He's forced to remember how they ended their call, Shane so obviously lying and so clearly upset before he hung up.

Their session was hot and intense, it always was with Shane, so Ilya picked through each minute to figure out what went wrong so quickly. Obsessed over their conversation before they started, if there was a moment he had pushed too far, if he had accidently hurt Shane asking him to fuck himself hard like that, if–

Fuck. Who is he fucking kidding? Ilya knew what he did wrong the minute he heard Shane call him Roz again after he came.

Telling Shane his name was selfish, purely selfish, but it had felt euphoric to hear it fall off his lips, the soft way he let it slip off his tongue. He said it right, the Russian way, and it was beautiful in his voice. He sounded beautiful.

Ilya had wanted to hear Shane say his name for so long, so badly, that he had asked, greedily. He needed their connection to feel a little more real. He should have realized he had gone too far. They both knew what they were actually doing.

Ilya might be endeared by him, but Shane was still just paying for phone sex. He almost didn't blame Shane for getting spooked.

Even though she wasn't in the city, it hadn't taken long for Svetlana to catch on that something was up and took even less time for her to figure out what it was.

"Jesus," she had sighed over the phone. She was at a finance conference in New York, calling from her hotel.

"Shut up Svetlana, it is nothing," Ilya had snapped.

"Ilyusha, I didn't mean you should actually go and fall in love with the boy."

Ilya had hung up. Ilya didn't even *know* Shane, didn't know where he lived, what he looked like, what he did. Ilya knew nothing besides the fact he was kind enough to ask about Ilya's classes and always wanted to know more about his day. The type of person to sincerely ask if Ilya was okay over a phone sex hotline. Maybe the only man to ever tell Ilya he trusted him, to tell Ilya that he was hardworking, smart, caring.

Svetlana didn't know what the fuck she was talking about. He wasn't in love, that would be fucking ridiculous.

So now it's week four, and Ilya's bitterly drinking shitty vodka at a club downtown on a weekday. It's a familiar one that has a decent mix of older college and graduate students and working professionals from the city. He prefers it to the ones closer to campus for that reason,which are practically all empty now anyway with the students having left to go home for winter break.

Despite his best intentions, Ilya finds himself not really trying to find someone to take home. When he had convinced himself to go out, he had done so with the goal of getting laid hoping it would drive out another man's moans from his ears. He had a plan: find the most different person possible. A woman, bold, experienced, maybe even let her take control instead. Remind himself there's more out there besides shy, pretty-sounding boys who could come on his command.

Except he's still at the bar, nursing his third drink of the night and has turned down four different women already. The fourth woman was someone clearly older, probably late 20s and hot as fuck with long legs in heels and a short dress than barely covered her ass. When she leaned into his space, she pressed her tits into his biceps, flirty as she ran a hand up his thigh. And Ilya had waved her off with "thank you, but no" and downed his alcohol. He's thinking about the way Shane sounds when he slips a second finger into his hole and finds his prostate like how Ilya had taught him. Fuck, he feels pathetic.

"Shit, that you Rozanov?" a familiar voice speaks up from behind him, shouting to be heard over the noise, before he feels a large and heavy hand grab his shoulder. "What the fuck are you doing here on a weeknight?"

He's forced to turn and meets Cliff Marleau grinning in his face.

"Marley, hello," Ilya grunts, turning back to down his drink and letting Marleau's hand slip off. He asks the bartender for another.

"You doing alright, Roz?" he hears Marleau ask with a touch of concern and he forces a smirk that feels more like a grimace on his face when he faces him again.

"Yes," Ilya lies, "Fine. I'm here to get drunk and find someone to fuck. Normal Tuesday night."

That is *not* a normal Tuesday night for Ilya, not when he's still going into the lab three times a week and usually taking the max amount of credits possible. If Ilya goes out, it's usually only over the weekend, even during break, and he knows that Marley knows that. The man was kind of an idiot sometimes but not actually stupid.

"Right," Marleau says skeptically but thankfully leaves it before sliding into the stool next to him. "So how's being the Russian Stephen Hawking going? Figure out the answer to the universe yet? I heard it was 42 or something."

"Jesus Christ. And you call *me* a nerd," Ilya mutters, but it still makes him huff out a laugh. "Definitely, I have not heard that one before. Very original, old man."

"Hey come on, my little nephew really likes *Hitchhiker's Guide*," Marleau complains goodnaturedly. "He always makes me read it when I'm over at my sister's before he goes to sleep for the night."

Ilya rolls his eyes, but he can feel a smile tug at the corner of his lips. Marley is good about getting him out of his head. The other man calls over the bartender, orders a beer before

turning to face Ilya with an elbow on the counter. For a second, it's just club lights and pounding bass and Ilya feels almost normal.

"So… this about a girl?"

Marley's also far too good at lulling Ilya into a false sense of security. Fuck, Ilya should know better by now.

"Fuck off Marley," Ilya scowls, but his friend stays quiet, knowing exactly how long to wait to make Ilya sweat in the silence.

Ilya glares at his glass, finally cracks."It was a boy."

Marleau whistles. "Must have been one hell of a boy to get you out here drunk on a Tuesday looking for a rebound."

"I am not drunk yet," Ilya corrects, but doesn't deny the rest of what he had said. Instead he gets up, effectively ending their conversation, and slapping Marleau's back. "And that is problem. Are you going to stay here gossiping like old woman or get shots with me?"

Marleau is an interesting character. He's loud and brash and sometimes says things without thinking which often landed him in hot water. But the second night Ilya had seen him while out in a club in Boston during Ilya's sophomore year, Ilya had watched him punch a guy trying to spike a college freshman girl's glass and then kept him held down until the cops showed up.

So Ilya went over and introduced himself offering to buy him a drink and that was that. Instant friends in the way only two half-drunk bros could be. He had tried scoping him out then, his gaydar usually flawless. Marleau wasn't exactly his type but he knows a good time when he sees one. But after knowing Marleau for almost two years now, Ilya's still on the fence on his sexuality and placed him in the "probably not, but maybe if he was drunk enough" category. A reasonable place on the Kinsey Scale.

Still, he had taken Ilya's bisexuality in stride, played wingman easily with either gender when Ilya was looking to take someone home. He's fun and chaotic in a way that reminds Ilya of his adolescence back in Russia–reminds Ilya of *Sasha*–but unlike Sasha, there's something wholesome about Marley that makes Ilya let his guard down a little.

The man would deny it vehemently, but Cliff Marleau has a heart of gold and tends to smother his friends with it in a very manly, very macho kind of way.

"Fuck, that tastes like disinfectant. I'm sticking to beer," Marleau coughs, downing a shot of tequila.

"Loser," Ilya calls him, taking his second unfinished shot. He can feel Marleau eyeing him.

"Hey, you wanna hang out with the boys?" Marleau asks, "they're back here somewhere. I'm sure they'd like to catch up."

Ilya shrugs. “Sure.” The Boston Bears players were all a little like Marleau, in a loud and aggressive way, but he’s met most of them and knows that their bark is way worse than their bite. They’ll be a distraction, if nothing else.

Marleau leads him farther back into the building away from the dance floor, toward the quieter couches and standing tables. A handful of Marleau’s teammates were holding drinks and settled in a booth to themselves. It was almost comical to see so many grown professional hockey players, all of whom were six foot or taller, crammed around the little table covered in drinks.

“Oh shit, it’s Rozanov!” one of Boston’s forwards, St. Simon, crows getting a round of cheers as the others recognize him. “When did they let you out of the nerd dungeon, space boy?”

“Early release on good behavior,” Ilya answers dryly. “I finished grant for project measuring red shift of a recently discovered object last week and my PIs took pity on me.”

“I don’t know what any of that means,” Carmichael nods sagely, clearly a little bleary. “But good for you.”

Marleau doesn’t have any visible injuries, but as Ilya gets close enough to see in the dim lighting, he clocks Carmichael’s black eye and the bruise on Kane’s jaw.

“You had game?” Ilya asks, sitting down in the space the others make for him and Marleau in the booth.

“Played Montreal tonight,” St. Simon sighs forlornly at his beer. “Got our ass handed to us by Hollander, as usual.”

“Mmm, and what about this Hollander makes the Boston Bears look like they just survived war?” Ilya asks, well into his sixth drink of the night and finally feeling properly tipsy.

“Man, because it feels like it sometimes,” Kane groans. “The rest of the Montreal roster are pretty average but that guy’s a one-man army.”

“Highest FO percentage in the league,” Carmichael lists, holding up fingers, “leading in most goals and most assists for the season. Won rookie of the year by a fucking landslide. There’s no one active who can keep up with him, besides maybe Hunter on a good day. He’s the youngest captain in Montreal Voyagers franchise history. Wouldn’t be surprised if he broke their decades-long Cup drought.”

“Wow,” Ilya drawls, and even as a non-hockey bystander he’s impressed. He knows enough about the sport through Marleau to grasp the picture Carmichael had painted. “Why are you bothering getting on the ice at all?”

St. Simon stares darkly at his glass. “Believe me, I ask the same thing.”

“He's been playing like shit though recently, by his standards,” Carmichael muses before taking another drink from his beer. “That failed drop pass in the second was almost amateur. Wonder why, I don’t think he’s picked up any injuries yet this season.”

“Maybe it’s a girl,” Kane shrugs. “Happens to the best of us. Maybe even Hollander, he can’t actually be a hockey robot, right?”

“Says a lot that him playing like shit is still better than all of you playing at your best,” Ilya ribs with a smirk. “I thought you were professional hockey players.” The players bitch at him, shaking Ilya by his shoulders as he laughs which feels familiar. He hasn’t been laughing a whole lot recently.

“Mark my words,” Marleau tells them all, holding up his bottle. “The day we get our star center, Hollander better count his days.”

“Here, here,” the Bears echo. Ilya rolls his eyes, but raises his drink as well.

“What are you doing out here anyway, Roz?” St. Simon asks curiously. “You’re usually too busy in that ivory tower fancy school to slum it with the rest of us poor high school dropouts on the weekdays.”

“All of you are multimillionaires,” Ilya responds unimpressed. “And is for the best you didn’t go to school. All that hockey, you have no brain cells anymore. Only thing that’s left is puck.” He raps his own head with his knuckles.

“You’re out on your own too after what, six drinks now?” Kane jumps onto the bandwagon, ignoring the dig. “Fuck, Roz, if I didn’t know better I’d say you were trying to forget a girl too.”

Ilya can’t help but wince. All four athletes, used to split second reflexes, catch it.

“Oh fuck,” St. Simon whistles. “Seriously? It’s not that Russian girl, right? I thought you two were tight and hooking up sometimes but just friends.”

“There’s no girl,” Ilya scowls, “drop it.”

“Guy,” Marleau coughs in betrayal, “not a girl.”

“Ah, shit, just assumed, Rozy, sorry,” Kane winces. “Who is this boy?”

“No one,” Ilya insists, desperately wanting another drink. He realizes now Marleau has been playing the long game— trapping him with all three of his nosy teammates to pry more out of him against his will. False sense of security, goddammit.“Fuck. He was no one. And I was stupid. Am stupid.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose, the lights getting to him. It’s unnerving to have all four men, usually loud and obnoxious, quiet and earnestly staring at him. He should have gone home with that last woman.

“Wow,” Carmichael draws out. “That’s… what happened dude, shit.”

Maybe he’s too drunk. Because he suddenly wants to spill everything to these oblivious but well-meaning men just to get it out of his chest in the hopes of relieving the pressure.

“I got too deep too fast,” he says carefully, “spooked him. Now he hasn’t talked to me in a month. See? I am stupid.”

“A month?” Kane gapes, “and you’re *still*—ow!” He can hear feet shuffling under the table.

“That sucks Rozy,” St. Simon sympathizes over Kane’s grumbling as if he hadn’t said anything.

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t think any of us have ever seen you hung up on, well, *anyone* like this.”

“Fuck off Carmy,” Ilya warns.

Carmichael raises his hands up defensively. “I’m just saying! You really like this guy. You sure it’s not fixable?”

Ilya scowls at the table, and feels something sharp in his throat. Fixable. As if there was something to hold, to break. There’s nothing to fix because they were nothing. He and Shane were nothing. “No. It’s not fucking fixable. Fuck.”

He knows all four players are still watching him as he fights to keep his face stoic. To his dismay he can feel his eyes prickle. Fuck, he’s too drunk.

“Okay,” St. Simon finally says quietly. “We hear you. Sorry Roz.”

“You came out to find somebody else, right?” Kane asks. “We can help you get laid, man, if you’re trying to get over this other guy.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. He downs his bottle, feeling a little sick from the amount of alcohol he’s had on practically an empty stomach as he stands up. “I would like this,” he lies.

Ilya doesn’t stick to the plan he made before he left his place earlier in the night. Even while the other guys wingman for him, he keeps turning down women, not feeling any interest.

“That boy over there’s been watching you for a hot minute,” Marleau jerks his head subtly near the end of the bar. “You wanna try a guy instead?”

Ilya glances where Marley had indicated, finding a pretty dark-haired boy with long eyelashes looking in his direction. When he catches Ilya’s eye, he smiles and ducks his head.

“Mmm,” Ilya murmurs. “Maybe.”

What color is Shane’s hair? Does he have dark or light eyes? What’s the shape of his mouth when he smiles?

When the boy comes over and asks if he wants to dance, Ilya says yes.

The boy’s not exactly shy. Maybe a little sweet, probably more coy. But Ilya likes the way he blushes when Ilya gropes his ass while they grind on the dance floor and he moans into his mouth when Ilya kisses him so he brings him home.

Ilya takes the boy apart on his bed with his hands, mouth, and cock until he's begging, a quiet, broken litany of pleas that don't sound quite sweet enough. When Ilya takes a hold of the other's cock, stroking him as he pounds into his ass from behind, the boy comes without asking.

It takes longer than usual to push Ilya over the edge, so much so it almost feels like a chore. And when he does finally finish into the condom, he silently gasps out someone else's name because he's forgotten the name of the boy Ilya has his dick inside of.

Aftercare feels cheap and the high from the orgasm doesn't last. It's gone by the time Ilya sends the boy home and Ilya's alone again in the silence. All of it doesn't even take an hour.

In the morning he's hungover and feels worse than he did the night before. It's fucking Wednesday and Ilya's sheets still smell like sex with someone else and he's still thinking about how soft his name sounds in Shane's mouth. He feels like he's crawling out of his own skin.

Thank fuck he's done with classes, because getting out of bed feels like an impossible task. He needs to eat, doesn't even know if he has food at home, but stays in bed instead and rots for a few hours, trying to sleep off the awful feeling he's been carrying for weeks. When he wakes up again groggily from a half-realized nap, it's already mid-afternoon.

He checks his phone, answers Marleau's text confirming his alive status before wincing at the missed call log. Fuck.

He slumps back in bed, staring at his ceiling and weighing how much worse it would be to make Alexei wait for longer versus just getting this over with now.

He calls back his brother. "Alexei."

"Ah, the perfect son can pick up his phone, hmm?" Alexei sneers in Russian. "

"I was asleep," Ilya replies, forcing to keep his tone even. "I called when I woke up."

"Lazy, Ilya," Alexei chides and for a second he sounds just like their father. "I do not know why they pay you to be useless at that American school."

"They don't," Ilya closes his eyes, "they don't pay me you know this."

"They pay you with the tuition, don't be stupid. I need some of it."

Ilya pinches the bridge of his nose, sitting up. Of course.

"That's not how it fucking works," Ilya hisses. "I've fucking told you this before, it hasn't changed. I can't just give you it. It's not really mine. Fuck Alexei, you're the one between the two of us who's supposed to have an actual fucking job!"

"Selfish," Alexei admonishes. "You've always been so fucking selfish, Ilya. You know nothing of what it means to commit, of duty. Maybe if you did you would have come home in time to help Papa."

Ilya mutes himself, inhaling sharply. Of course his brother would pick the absolute worst fucking day to make Ilya feel guilty on top of everything else.

“If you cannot give me school money, then I’ll use what Papa left you.”

“What money?” Ilya snaps, “the money you were supposed to keep fucking sending me so I could keep going to school?”

“You figured it out, didn’t you? I have a child, Ilya. You would let my daughter starve?”

“Shut up, just shut the fuck up, Alexei,” Ilya fumes. “I can’t give you the money. And I’m not fucking giving you anymore of what’s left after you snorted the rest up your fucking nose. Stop asking me.”

“You’re being foolish, Ilya,” Alexei sneers. “You do not want me to share what you and Sasha get up to, глиномес. Would make it very difficult to come back to Russia and get a visa renewed for your cushy American life, no?”

Ilya was wondering when he would play that card. Alexei is well aware of the visceral fear that follows when he does. But there’s no way Alexei has any real evidence. The logic helps settle him, lets him take a deep breath and find his control.

“Fuck you, you have nothing,” Ilya calls his bluff, “you can go fuck yourself. Don’t call me again,” and hangs up.

It’s startlingly quiet in his studio after, as Ilya simply sits there. It feels like he’s in the space between two different moments of time and none of it feels quite real.

Ilya doesn’t let himself break in the way the deep aching gape he’s been doing everything he can these days to fill wants him to. He forces himself up, goes to the kitchenette. He has time to kill before 8pm tonight so might as well get errands done. He already knows he’s going to be pathetically waiting for a warm, pretty voice to call the entire night and it’s going to hurt like fuck when it hits midnight and he doesn’t. A shitty end to a shitty fucking day.

His shift starts boring, and it’s difficult to pretend, to moan in the right way for the man who’s fucking his own hand over the phone imagining it’s Ilya’s throat. To really sell it when the woman who’s clearly unsatisfied with her husband judging from the way she asks him to roleplay as her brother-in-law. He’s had four callers already by the time he makes it to 11:00, and his phone rings for a fifth.

“Hello,” Ilya greets, stretching out his neck and only managing half the effort to sound sexy.

“Hi Roz,” the caller answers, voice careful, and Ilya freezes. No fucking way. Not fucking today.

He hates himself for the sharp thrill that shoots down his spine at the familiar voice. Four weeks of nothing and even just two words are enough to remind him of the effect this boy has on him.

“Shane,” Ilya replies, forcing his tone to stay calm. “What can I do for you tonight?”

“Oh,” Shane replies, voice small as he hears the distance Ilya creates. He sounds hurt. Ilya’s a little bitter about it. He wasn’t the one who hung up. “I just… I was thinking maybe we could…”

“Talk you through a blowjob? Or would you like fingers tonight?”

“No!” Shane rushes out, “no, that’s not—“

“Ah, I see. Let’s get you ready for the toy then, instead.“

“Stop. Fuck, just stop it, don’t do that,” Shane cuts him off, and he can hear how fragile Shane sounds, “That’s not what I called for Roz, shit.”

“Then what do you want from me, Shane?” Ilya fights to keep his voice even. His control, his discipline is what he can always rely on no matter where he goes and this boy eviscerates it in minutes. “Please, tell me what the fuck do you actually want from me?”

Shane is quiet over the line, chewing over his words. Ilya won’t be the one to crack here and waits. “Fuck,” Shane eventually exhales. “I’m sorry. I know I haven’t called.”

“Do not be sorry. You didn’t want to buy sex anymore, you stopped calling. I understand, you have nothing to apologize for.”

"No, no that’s not– Of course I have to apologize,” Shane insists. “I fucking ghosted you, probably made you feel like shit after and you have every right to be pissed.”

“I am not pissed,” Ilya lies.

“Bullshit,” Shane immediately objects. “Our rules, Roz.”

“Our rules,” Ilya scoffs, “yes, you care about our rules now, do you? You remember what I said to you, that first night about our rules?”

Shane hesitates. “You said we don’t lie.”

“No,” Ilya corrects bitterly, “I said as long as you do not lie to me, I will not lie to you. So Shane, did you lie to me?”

Shane is quiet enough that Ilya can hear him breathing. “I didn’t lie when I said how good you make me feel,” he finally answers. “And I’m not lying when I say I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Ilya scoffs, letting his head knock back on the back of the chair. His ceiling was a familiar pattern of water stains. “Ah. I make you come so hard it is hard to forget. I understand.”

“No,” Shane denies. “No, I told you that’s not why I called. That’s not what this is.”

“Maybe it should be,” Ilya scorns. “Maybe I should have you strip and punish yourself for breaking our rules. On your hands and knees and you spanking yourself with a ruler until I

tell you to stop. You would like that, wouldn't you, sweetheart? I bet I could make you come just like that."

And he hears it. He hears the way Shane's breath catches. Ilya spent over two months cataloguing every little noise that comes out of Shane's throat. He knows exactly what the one means.

"Yes. You would like that," Ilya murmurs, feeling a little sick that he was right. He was right that this was all he was good for. "That is what you need from me?"

"Fuck, no, Roz, just," Shane starts, before he pauses, hesitates. "Ilya. Please. That's not… that's not fair."

Ilya closes his eyes, jaw clenching, and instantly, within a single breath, he's dismantled. His name is just as pretty out of Shane's mouth now as it had been when he had cried it out coming.

"Shane," Ilya warns.

"I didn't mean to upset you, or lie to you," Shane rushes out. "You told me your name, and I just… I freaked out."

"Yes, I noticed," Ilya mumbles darkly, "hard to miss when I tell you my name and you immediately hang up on me after I make you come."

"I shouldn't have done that," Shane admits, apologetic. "I'm sorry, I just… this is scary for me, kind of really scary. I like you. A lot more than I should considering we're just–"

"Having paid phone sex?" Ilya finishes for him, dry. "You do not owe me anything, Shane. It was my mistake. I should not have told you."

"I'm glad you did."

Ilya needs him to shut up. He needs Shane to stop because he can't do this month all over again.

"Shane, we cannot—"

"I like knowing you," Shane interrupts him. "And I like what I know about you already, even if it isn't much. I want to know more about you."

"Stop, Shane, please. Don't do this."

"You don't have to do anything with it, Ilya," Shane reassures him, "if you never want me to call again after this then all you have to do is tell me and I won't. I just… I need to tell you this. Please."

And Ilya is a masochist apparently, because he swallows and backs down. "Fine."

Shane exhales in relief but then is quiet for more than a minute. Ilya is about to snap and tell him to just start talking when Shane takes a deep breath.

“I called the hotline because a couple of coworkers were bothering me about not getting any and had shared the number. And I called because they were right and it felt kind of pathetic. The hotline seemed like an easy way to… I don’t know, ease into it.”

Ilya clenches his jaw, and tells himself if Shane is trying to tell him this was a convenience thing or an experiment thing, he would cut off the bleeding arm and ask him not to call again. Even if it meant he couldn’t settle for the scraps of him like Ilya wanted.

“I was super nervous but Lana, the operator, sent me to you and I— I don’t think I’ve felt like that in my entire life. I’ve never felt the way you make me feel. And I got scared. Really scared. I’m not… I’m not in a place where it’s safe for me to be what I think I am.”

And that strikes Ilya to his core because oh, he knows a little of what that’s like, doesn’t he?

“Shane,” Ilya says, voice quiet.

Shane protests quickly. “No, wait let me finish. I got scared because everything with you suddenly felt so real all at once because of, you know. After you asked me to say your name. And I’m so sorry I freaked out. I just realized how much I actually like you, how badly I want to *know* you, because yeah, sure it’s a hotline and that’s what it started as for me but it stopped feeling like a transaction months ago.”

Ilya swallows. He should tell Shane to stop. He needs to tell Shane to stop before this becomes something Ilya can’t save himself from. In case Shane leaves again.

“And I could be completely off-base here,” Shane says cautiously, “but I think maybe… this might be more than just a transaction for you too?”

Ilya mutes himself and exhales shakily. It’s not a transaction anymore. It stopped being a transaction that first night when Ilya stroked himself listening to Shane choke on his fingers and come so beautifully over the phone. Stopped being a transaction when Shane asked so brightly what his favorite class was before wanting anything to do with sex. Stopped when he couldn’t stop thinking about Shane during every task of his damn day.

But he shouldn’t say that. Shane was right to break it off. This wasn’t going to work. Ilya needs to end this and tell Shane not to call again so Ilya can finally fucking move on.

“Yes,” Ilya betrays himself when he unmutes, closing his eyes. He leans back into his chair. “Yes, it is more than a transaction for me too.”

Shane sighs in relief and it crackles over the speaker. “Thank fuck.”

They’re quiet, with their honesty hanging between them, raw and fragile. Ilya didn’t want to touch it and risk losing all of this all over again.

“So,” Shane finally broke the silence. “What now?”

“Mmm,” Ilya makes a considering noise. “We could always fuck.”

“*Ilya.*” Something about his name in that admonishing tone makes Ilya grin. He would most definitely be finding ways to get Shane to say his name like that again.

“I was only kidding,” Ilya cajoles. “It is what we are good at, no?”
Ilya desperately wishes he could see the blush he knew was spreading across Shane’s cheeks.

“I just,” Shane sighs. “All we’ve really talked about is sex. I wanted this to be an apology call. And an explanation. I really do feel bad for dropping off the Earth like that.”

Ilya’s grin tapers off a little.

“I am sorry too,” Ilya confesses.

Shane makes a protesting noise. “What? You didn’t–”

“No, not for last call. Or, maybe a little for last call, for dropping my name on you like that and making you say it.”

“You didn’t *make me–”*

“I mean today, tonight,” Ilya continues over him. “When you called. How I acted. I have not had good day. And I did not think I could hear you again today without it breaking me after everything. So I was mean. I am sorry.”

Shane doesn’t say anything for a moment. “I see. Thank you, then. I forgive you. Do you… do you want to tell me? About your bad day?”

Oh god. “Fuck, Shane,” Ilya’s voice cracks, not muting in time and he was right. He couldn’t hear Shane again without it breaking him today.

“Shit, sorry, you don’t have to,” Shane assures him quickly. “Sorry, you just can, if you want to. I’ll listen. I want to listen.”

Ilya presses his thumb and pointer into the inner corners of his eyes, applying pressure against his lids.

“It was long night and my brother called to argue,” Ilya cleared his throat, “nothing more. Is okay, Малыш. I’m okay. Thank you for asking.”

“Okay,” Shane whispers, “and it’s okay if you’re not. You can talk to me whenever.”

Ilya hums, because he doesn’t think he can speak.

“Can I ask,” Ilya hesitates after a couple minutes of silence. “What made you call back again?” He tries to add a bite of tease. “Your hand is not doing it for you anymore without someone telling it what to do?”

“Fuck you,” Shane huffs, and Ilya smiles at the laugh he hears there. It’s the first of the night. “No, um. My best friend. He and his wife just had their third kid. We weren’t in the city, because we had a– uh, we were at work, we work together, and she went into labor early. So I drove him back to get to the hospital in time and just, he was freaking out the whole time. Their first pregnancy was hard, really scary for them. And this one was a mess too, emergency surgery again and everything. She’s okay now thank god, the baby too, but while we were waiting he was panicking so bad and I couldn’t figure out how to help. When they were together again though, just being around her made him calm down. She made everything okay, made it safe again, and he was able to breathe. And it just kind of hit, that um… for me I think there’s only been one place that I’ve felt comfortable enough to just… breathe. One person.”

Ilya exhales. “Oh.”

“I’m so used to having to fake everything, be someone who I am not. I have to be the perfect son, the perfect role model, and I have to fake who I am to meet those expectations. You’re the only person I can feel real with. Actually real. I never have to pretend with you.”

Fuck.

“It seemed kind of dumb,” Shane finishes quietly, “to just let something that makes me feel so good go. And I don’t just mean, you know, the sex. You make me feel safe, Ilya. Safe to, I don’t know, be myself. I don’t really get that a lot, to be honest.”

Ilya closes his eyes, throat tight. Because he hears *wife, kids, safe* and understands *stability.* Ilya doesn’t really get a lot of stability either.

“Ah, that was probably weird, wasn’t it?” Shane mumbles sheepishly when Ilya stays shocked quiet. “Sorry, I, uh, I know we’re still figuring things out and it’s early, I don’t want to scare you off getting too intense especially with… fuck, that was definitely way too fucking much, you know what you can ignore what I said–”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupts, heart racing. “Can I give you my phone number?”

“Your…”

“Phone number. Not the hotline.”

He hears Shane breathe in sharply, as if he wasn’t expecting that. To be honest, Ilya hadn’t been either until it was out his mouth.

“Yeah,” Shane replies, a little quiet, “yeah, sure. Please.”

It’s the please that does him in.

Ilya’s almost at the end of his shift when he’s expected to turn off his work phone so they end the call after Ilya gives him the list of digits. Ilya almost doesn’t want to check on his personal phone after he and Shane hang up. Just in case he had gotten his hopes up too high

again, had scared Shane off completely by trying to get too close again. He had liked saying Ilya's name before he had left last time too. He might be having second thoughts off the call.

There was a notification on his screen when he flipped his phone over. A new message.

+13146092481 ***Unknown Number*** **(11:57pm):** Hi. This is Shane.

Chapter End Notes

i said on GOD these boys are going to communicate. We're speed running 2010-2017 rn I'm not about that dramatic ass gay drama life. can you tell that i am wlw.

i love and appreciate your guys comments so much! i will do my best to reply more often

Chapter 5: leave a message

Chapter Summary

Shane's expedition into vulnerability.

Chapter Notes

yall really liked that last chapter, love that for us, here's a chapter thats double the length of the other ones because im insane <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shane? Shane. *Jesus,* Shane,” someone shakes his arm, jolting Shane out of his focus on his phone. He looks up with a startle, only to see mother raising an eyebrow.

“Your mom’s been calling your name for a hot minute, kiddo,” his dad informs him, bemused.

“Shit. Sorry,” Shane turns off his phone and flips it upside down. “Sorry, I’m here.”

He sees his mom and dad look at each other with that silent communication that used to piss Shane off as a kid.

“It’s not like you to be smiling on your phone during dinner,” she prompts knowingly. “Something you want to share with us, honey?”

Shane has to try hard not to flush. He doesn’t think he succeeds.

“No,” Shane shakes his head, “no, nothing new.”

His mom looks at him with disbelief. “Huh. Okay. If that changes, you can always tell us.”

“I’m just texting Hayden,” Shane lies, and he almost surprises himself with how easy it is. But he sees his parents settle with it, not questioning.

Why would they, Shane thought a little guilty, *I’ve never given them a reason to think I would lie.*

“How are the Pikes doing? Their baby okay? Adam, or–”

“Arthur,” Shane corrects. “And they’re okay. Jackie’s still recovering obviously. It’s been weird to not have Hayds around for games but I think he’s coming back in a couple weeks.”

“It’s been good of you to help with their twins,” Yuna approves, “you’re a good friend, Shane.”

Shane offers a thin smile because he’s reminded of how many people he’s actually been lying to. Good friend. Right.

He hears a chime from his phone and he has to physically restrain himself from picking it up. His mom notices, wry as she nods toward it. “You can check if you need, honey.”

“No, it’s okay,” Shane waves her off, “it wasn’t anything serious, really. Tell me about Italy. How was your trip?”

He doesn’t check his messages until after dinner, waving his parents goodbye from his doorway as they set off to return to Ottawa. The moment he can’t see them anymore he unlocks his phone.

Ilya (8:26 pm): socks in bed is psychotic

Ilya (8:26 pm): you will overheat

Ilya (8:29 pm): Shane i am serious it is real you take off socks with heat stroke for this reason

Ilya (8:51 pm): I assume you stop messaging because either you agree and can not admit you are wrong or you died from heat stroke

Ilya (8:51 pm): are you planning on wearing socks when i am fucking you stupid into the bed because this might be dealbreaker for me

Shane laughs to himself, going back up the stairs to his apartment as he reads his missed texts. He can feel a slight flush at his last message, but in the past two weeks he’s gotten a bit more desensitized to Ilya’s bold style of flirting. A little bit.

Shane (9:05 pm): sorry just finished dinner with my parents they just left

Shane (9:06 pm): it’s not weird to wear socks to bed I have bad circulation

Shane (9:06 pm): but if it really bothers your boner I can take them off for sex. You'll just have to deal with my ice feet in the morning

Ilya (9:07 pm): so I am staying the night?

Shane kind of wants him to stay forever. In his living room, he collapses into the leather sectional.

Shane (9:07 pm): only if you want. You don’t have to.

Ilya (9:08 pm): oh i want sweetheart

Ilya (9:08 pm): i will introduce you to wonder of slow lazy morning sex

Shane grins, chewing on the end of his hoodie string.

Shane (9:08 pm): I look forward to it

Ilya (9:09 pm): is now still good time to call?

He checks back to his sink, where the dishes from dinner are still soaking. Ideally he would deal with them before he goes to bed.

Shane (9:10 pm): yeah you can call now

Ilya's contact pops up on the screen immediately. Shane answers on the first ring.

"Hi," Shane greets, sinking a little into his cushions. He can feel the stupid grin on his face stretching his cheeks.

"Hello sweetheart," Ilya says back, voice warm and deep and settling in Shane's spine. "I missed your voice."

It was the first time they had called since Ilya had given Shane his number. Shane had been so excited to have and use such a direct connection but the timing ended up being shit; the next morning Shane had set off early for a coast-to-coast roadie with games almost every other day, no privacy in the hotels, and a curfew. He might have been able to convince Hayden to leave the room to take a call but Hayden's on paternal leave and Shane was stuck with Koch. Which would have been a nightmare conversation. Between Shane's games, practices, and travel and Ilya's classes, they hadn't had overlapping time. Shane just got back from Jersey at noon.

"Me too," Shane murmurs. "Schedule has been a nightmare."

"Mm. You were in California, yes?"

"And Colorado. Detroit. Down to Florida and then Dallas and back up to New Jersey. It's been a crazy couple of weeks."

"And your job makes you travel this much? What do you do?"

Shane pauses. He hasn't shared many identifying details to Ilya besides the fact he lives in Canada and travels a lot for work, too anxious of having texts hacked and leaked. It had happened to a handful of players in Los Angeles a couple years ago, and been an ever present anxiety for Shane ever since. Ilya likewise hasn't shared much besides living in Boston and going to college there. He also works at a lab but hasn't said in what department and Shane feels guilty asking without offering. He had been hyping himself up for days, trying to convince himself to tell Ilya now, with this phone call once they had scheduled it. He had mostly been successful.

“Um. I’m…” and Shane hesitates. He *hates* that he hesitates. He trusts Ilya, he really, really does. But despite all his planning and intention in opening up to Ilya, risking anyone knowing his secret is terrifying.

“Shane?” Ilya prompts when he’s quiet too long “Do you not want to tell me?”

“No, no,” Shane hastily stops him. “I do. Fuck. I really do. It’s just kind of fucking terrifying.”

“Okay,” Ilya replies carefully, and he knows Ilya is seriously confused right now. Shane has to explain, he *knows* he has to explain.

“So you know that I’m kind of, like. High profile, right?” Shane starts, palms sweating.

Ilya hums. “I wasn’t sure, but I assumed, yes. You were very nervous about my text messages about fucking you with my nine-inch dick being seen by… someone.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Shane scoffs. “I think anyone would be a little nervous of someone peeking over their shoulder and reading that.”

“Mm, maybe you, yes. But I think some would be happy to show off how well they get dicked down.”

Shane snorts. “Wow. Okay.” He then sighs, rubbing his eyes. “Okay. Okay. I’m… Jesus, this is stupid. I’m a hockey player.”

Ilya makes a surprised sound. “Hockey? Like ice hockey?”

“Yeah. Yes. I’m a professional hockey player.” And Shane is almost surprised at how much of a relief it is to tell Ilya. He meant it last time when he had told him how much more real and present he feels with Ilya more so than anyone else in his life.

“Huh. There are leagues, yes? Are you—“

“NHL, yes. I, uh, play for Montreal.”

And that’s enough information for Ilya to find him. There’s only one Shane playing professional hockey for the Montreal Voyagers. All it would take is one easy Google search.

Ilya is quiet over the phone, and Shane’s heart is pounding as he assumes he’s on a search engine finding Shane’s entire personal and professional history online.

“*Fuck,* okay, this is killing me. Can I please look you up?” Ilya rushes out in one breath. “I feel like I am losing my mind here.”

Shane’s heart goes from pounding to squeezed. “You didn’t? I just kind of assumed you would when I—“

“You did not say I could,” Ilya interrupts him. “I will not, mmm, break? No, in English is breach, I will not breach your privacy unless you give me permission, Shane. I need to earn

trust, no?"

And Shane wants to laugh because if he doesn't he might cry, unbearably fond and so, so grateful. He has to cover his grin with his hand.

You would be so easy to love, Ilya, he inexplicably thinks and that's another thought to shut down and lock in the vault. Immediately.

"Shit. You're so… Thank you, Ilya. Seriously. You can look, it's okay."

"Fuuuck, thank god, give me minute," Ilya groans in relief, and Shane's still grinning as he waits, hears Ilya mutter, "what the fuck is a *Montreal*, is not a real word—"

He cuts himself off, silent, and Shane holds his breath. Ilya had an Android phone and had complained via text how stupidly expensive Apple products were in Russia because of tarrifs, so FaceTime was never going to be an option. The Google search would be the first time Ilya sees his face.

Another reason he had been nervous was the anxiety around telling Ilya and letting him see what he looked like. Nervous that he wouldn't be Ilya's type, that the chemistry they had over the phone wouldn't translate into physical intimacy because he just physically didn't do it for Ilya.

"Shane Hollander," Ilya pronounces slowly, carefully, and it sends a bolt of lightning down Shane's spine, hearing his full name rolling in Ilya's accent. "Oh, *fuck,* Shane*."*

"Um," Shane hesitates. "Is that a good oh fuck or a "shit I can't fuck him" oh fuck?"

"You cannot be serious," Ilya mumbles in disbelief, "you are… you are serious? This is you?"

"...yes. Ilya if you're not—"

"I need my cock in that pretty mouth, *right now.*"

Shane cuts himself off and flushes bright red.

"Holy shit, Shane, you are so fucking hot. Un-fucking-believable. Oh my god. You kill me, Hollander. I am dead."

Ilya is bemoaning dramatically enough that it makes Shane snort out a laugh. "Oh my god, okay, you drama queen."

Ilya hums distractedly, clearly still scrolling. "You do not understand, Shane. This is… hold on, is this," he pauses before laughing, delighted. "Fuck Shane, Calvin Klein? I am so fucking blessed right now."

"Fuck, shut up," Shane is fire-engine red now and has to cover his overheating face. He shouldn't be surprised that Ilya had managed to find some of his more risque sponsorship ads. "My mom handles my sponsorship stuff, okay?"

“Your mother is pimping you out to Calvin Klein? Does she know what you look like in this?”

“Ilya…”

“You look like a *slut.* Fuck, I think you might be better than porn,” Ilya mutters to himself, and Shane bites down on a grin, inexplicably pleased.

“I don’t know about that,” Shane flusters.

Ilya snorts at him in disbelief. “Don’t be stupid. Hollander–” Ilya pauses, line suddenly quiet.

Shane blinks. “Ilya?”

“Ah, wait,” Ilya mumbles. “Why do you sound familiar?”

“What?” Shane laughs, caught off guard. “We’ve been talking for months, Ilya, I hope I sound familiar.”

“No, not your voice. I mean I have heard your name before. It is familiar. Why have I,” Ilya muses before he cuts himself off.

“Oh shit. Oh *shit, you* are Hollander. Montreal captain, leading league in goals, assists, whatever?”

“Uh,” Shane blinks, “yes?”

Ilya laughs suddenly, nearly startling Shane.

“The Bears *hate* you!” he crows, thrilled, and Shane is growing increasingly bemused.

“Oh. I guess? We’re division rivals.”

“No, no, I mean they hate you,” Ilya cackles, “oh if Marley knew, he would be so fucking pissed.”

“Marley,” Shane repeats, unease settling in. “As in Cliff Marleau?”

“Yes, ah, we met at clubs years ago and are friends,” Ilya explains.

“You’re friends with Boston Bears Cliff Marleau,” Shane clarifies with a flat affect. Ilya hums in confirmation, still amused, and he hasn’t picked up on Shane’s sudden drop of dread.

“Yes, Marley is very loud and annoying but good friend. He’s very nosy but—“

“He can’t know. Ilya he can’t know about me,” Shane cuts him off, unable to temper his panic, “If anyone at the NHL finds out, I could lose my captaincy or even my team and get

blacklisted from playing again, he can't–"

"Hey, hey, hey," Ilya interrupts gently, cutting off Shane's spiral. "Of course. I would never… I was never going to tell anyone Shane. It means a lot you told me at all."

Shane closes his eyes, heart pounding. What are the fucking odds the phone sex operator he's been flirting with for months is friends with a fucking Bears hockey player.

"I know," Shane finally murmurs, because he does. Ilya has never given Shane any reason to doubt his trust in him. "I know, you're right. I'm sorry. It's just–"

"It's not safe, yes?" Ilya deduces without any judgement. "That is what you said, I think."

"Yeah," Shane sighs, deflating. "Thank you."

"It is no problem. Besides, sweetheart I will be honest, I would do a lot of things to have you if you really look like *this,*" Ilya tells him mischievously. "Keeping this a secret is nothing."

Instantly Shane flushes again. "Thank you, I think. Um. You don't have to let me. But I would like to look you up too."

"You have not? I did tell you real name before you dropped off the planet."

"Yes, I know, and I'm *sorry, again*, for freaking out. But I guess… I kind of felt the same way." Shane admits. "Plus, you didn't tell me where you went to college or what you study or anything. There's like ten schools just in Boston, Ilya."

"Hmm, that is true. Okay. My full name is Ilya Rozanov. I go to MIT. Physics with a focus on quantum physics, mathematics, and astronomy."

"MIT— *quantum physics?"* Shane splutters. Shane may be essentially a glorified jock from Canada but even he knows the top schools in America. "What the *fuck?"*

"I am not just pretty face and hot voice, Hollander," Ilya teases. He likes saying his last name, Shane realizes, but it doesn't feel exactly like how his teammates say it. It's fond and warm and Shane wants him to curl it off his tongue with his pretty accent all the time. "I have a brain too."

"Yeah, yes, I didn't think you weren't smart or anything, just— Ilya, that's *crazy,*" Shane breathes. "That's space and shit, right? Fuck, you're actually… like, so cool."

Ilya laughs out loud, delighted. "Shane. You are captain of best NHL hockey team in Eastern Conference, according to Google. I think you win coolness factor with this one."

Shane vehemently disagrees, but is itching to see a picture.

"Whatever. We can argue later. You're sure it's okay if I—?"

"Yes Shane. Go ahead."

Shane makes his way to his desk and laptop in his home office, starting it up. He could look it up on his phone, but he likes the idea of seeing a well-defined version on the laptop screen as he talks into his speaker to Ilya.

The spelling is a little touch and go, but Rozanov sounds phonetic, and Google spits out a tidy list of results to "Ilya Rozanov MIT astrophysics." The first picture is of a headshot on a lab website for a man in a fitted suit and blond curls styled for the professional picture. He had a slight quirk to his lips, almost smug, like he knew something that everyone else didn't.

"First result is for Ilya Rozanov, undergraduate researcher with the Chikondi-Cohen lab," Shane says, almost too cautious to hope.

"Mmm, yes. That is me."

Shane clicks the file to make it larger and swallows.

"Jesus Christ," Shane mumbles.

Ilya chuckles. "I am hot, no?"

And yes. He was. Objectively, Ilya was model-level hot, all sharp jawlines and smolder. But what had struck Shane wasn't how sexy he was but how–

"Ilya. You're beautiful."

It's not often anymore that he can shock Ilya quiet. But he manages it now.

"Huh," Ilya breathes out eventually. "I have not been called that one before."

"That's stupid," Shane replies, still captivated by piercing blue eyes and perfect golden curls. Ilya has a smattering of moles that Shane wants to kiss for hours. "You're one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen."

Shane almost says *the* most beautiful man, because he could probably honestly say that was true, but he didn't want to risk scaring Ilya completely away.

Ilya is quiet for a little bit longer. "Thank you," he finally says, voice soft and sincere. "You are beautiful too."

Shane laughs. "Copycat."

"Mmm," Ilya doesn't disagree. "Shit, Shane, when we were calling and I imagine what you might look like, nothing I could have dreamed up would even compare. I could kiss those freckles and die a happy man."

"Fuck, okay, shut up Romeo," Shane snorts, but he's breathlessly pleased. "You too. I really didn't have anything to work off, besides the fact you were Russian. But god, you are…"

Shane trails off as the faceless vague fantasies he had while Ilya told him what to do to himself sharpened into something real.

“Tell me,” Ilya demands, and it’s a familiar tone. Shane responds to it like he’s conditioned to get hard when Ilya drops his voice.

“I– tell you what?” Shane asks, haltingly.

“Tell me what you think of me, малыш. Tell me what I made you think.”

There’s a lot Shane could say. And Shane knew Ilya was probably looking for something dirty, and *god,* there was plenty Shane could say on that topic. But.

“The first thing I thought when I saw you was that I really want to kiss your moles,” he admits sheepishly. “They’re so pretty.”

Ilya cracks up, and Shane is a little embarrassed but more enamored with Ilya’s unrestrained laugh. “Oh sweetheart, you are very bad at dirty talk. It is okay, we will make you better. Even if you are strange man with strange wish to kiss moles.”

“Hey, it is not weird that I want to kiss your moles. You wanted to kiss my freckles,” Shane protests with a huff.

Ilya hums, playful. “Mmm, no, I didn’t say that. Is a lie. Liar told you that.”

“Oh, really?” Shane feels a smile playing on his lips.

“Yes. I said I wanted to come on your freckles.”

Shane chokes, mouth parting in shock, and feels blood rush down to his dick so fast it makes him dizzy. “Ilya–”

“I want to make you take my cock in your mouth,” Ilya drawls, voice deep, “watch these perfect lips stretch around me. Then after I’ve fucked your throat, my hands keeping you still as you suck and choke and drool on me, I will come on your face and let it drip over those lovely fucking freckles.”

“Oh, fuck,” Shane breathes, frozen still.

“And because you are always such a good boy for me,” Ilya mocks with that touch of condescension that makes Shane burn, “you’ll look up at me with pretty tears in your pretty brown eyes, cheeks painted with my come and say, ‘Thank you, Ilya.”

Shane closes his eyes, gripping his erection and can’t keep in the small whimper that follows.

“Are you touching yourself sweetheart?”

“Shit. Yes.”

“Did I say you could touch yourself, Shane?”

Shane moans, letting go of himself and leaving his cock pulsing. “No. Fuck, no, you didn’t.”

Ilya exhales, making a soft, considered noise. “It has only been a few weeks and you have already forgotten our rules, малыш. What are we supposed to do about that?”

“I don’t… I don’t know,” Shane confesses, but he has an idea.

Ilya confirms it. “I think I need to punish you. That’s how we make sure you follow the rules, isn’t it sweetheart? It’s only fair.”

Shane swallows, heart racing. “Okay. Y-yeah. That’s fair. I’ve been bad. Want to be good for you, Ilya. You should make sure I’m good for you.”

He hears Ilya suck in his breath but before Shane can feel smug about it, he asks, “do you have a ruler?”

Shane is instantly thrown back to their last call when Ilya had derided him with how much Shane would like it if Ilya made him spank himself. He had done it then to be cruel because he was hurt but Ilya had been right. It had made Shane flush with heat, the thought of the act and imagining what Ilya would say to him—

“Oh my god,” Shane whispers, nervous anticipation flooding his veins.

“Shane? I asked you a question.”

With a shaking hand, he opened the drawer of the desk he was still sitting at, and it didn’t take long to find the long 12-in ruler made of black plastic. He rarely uses his desk but was particular about making sure he had all the necessary materials and stationary that an office should have and he would be paying for that anal-retentiveness now.

“Yes,” Shane answers, swallowing, holding it up. “Um. I have a 12-inch plastic ruler.”

“Very good. Strip and get on your hands and knees on the floor.”

Shane took one moment to close his eyes and take one deep, shuddering breath. And then he does as he was told. He sinks down to his knees, settling them on the edge of the rug while pressing his hands against the wood floor. The rug risks chafing against his skin and the wood feels sticky under his clammy skin. But he already knows choosing to hover over the wood instead of the carpet was the better move because he looks down and sees a bead of precome dripping from his cock to the floor.

“Okay,” Shane whispers. “Okay.”

“Before we start,” Ilya murmurs, tone softer than before, “I cannot see you. So if it gets to be too much at any point, you tell me red and we stop. Green is good, yellow is slow down. Yes?”

And it’s telling, that Ilya knows that Shane wouldn’t stop on his own even though he’s the one doing it to himself. Not without Ilya letting him. Shane’s not sure what it says about him but he’s surprisingly okay with it, if Ilya is this careful with his submission.

“Yes,” Shane replies in a whisper.

Ilya's voice deepens again. "Good. Reach behind you with ruler, drag it across your ass. How does that feel, малыш?"

Humiliating, if Shane is being honest, but not in a way he hates. "I'm… it feels stiff," Shane tries. "And thin."

"Hmm. Now hit yourself with it."

Biting his lip, he does as told, giving himself a dull hit with a hint of sting. It doesn't hurt terribly, but the debasing act of it makes Shane's head spin. He's on his hands and knees, smacking his ass with a ruler because a man told him to over the phone. It should be shameful. Shane's so hard he's aching.

"No. Not like that. You call that a hit, Shane? I need to be able to hear it. A spank, Hollander. I should hear it."

Shane swallows as he obeys. The next two slaps are harder, but still fairly dull, until he flicks his wrist in just the right way and a loud smack echoes in his office.

"Oh, fuck!" Shane cries, sinking to his elbows. He's breathing fast through the sting, almost hypersensitive with how turned on he is. His cock hangs down from between his legs and swings forward. A blurt of precome escapes him, dripping onto the floor.

"Yes, very good. Just like that," Ilya praises, and it's just as warming as the sting left behind. "That was one. Four more, just like that Shane. And I want you to count."

Shane's breathless as he raises a shaky hand again, tense now with an understanding of what was to come. The next spank was like the last, and he chokes out a gasp and he has to rest his forehead against the ground. The hand on the floor bracing his body curls, searching for grip on the traction-less wood.

"I'm not hearing numbers."

"Two," Shane whispers weakly and Ilya hums in approval. "Good. Three more, sweetheart."

Three and four have him whimpering, his breath short. Each one leaves a biting pain in short streaks across his skin, and the sting lingers as Shane's mind unfocuses. Ilya says nothing as he chokes out cries, and Shane would have thought he had left it weren't for the heavy breathing and occasional grunts from the speaker.

"Five," Shane groans finally, his ass smarting. It wasn't unbearably painful, the ache was nothing worse than a bad check but it made him so hard he was burning with it. "Ilya—"

"Mmm, I don't think that's enough," Ilya says carelessly. Shane feels the sharp dip of apprehension. "I'm not sure you've learned your lesson yet."

Shane is gasping for air, biceps twitching as they hold him up. "Fuck. Ilya, please, I—"

"On your back. Knees together and up to your chest.

Shane whines, and for a moment he considers tapping out. He feels unsteady with it, the submission, a haze that greys out his brain and makes his skin feel static. The moment doesn't last long, and the urge to please Ilya wins out again. Shane shifts, turning to lay on his back and draw up his legs. The tufted rug is coarse against his heated back and he's shivering from how exposed he is. Ilya must hear him move because he hums, pleased.

"Now. Spank the bottom of your thighs."

It feels demeaning, to hold himself up and on display like this. Shane tries to take a breath to settle himself. His hand is shaking as he lines up the ruler and brings it down.

Immediately, Shane knows why Ilya made him change positions.

"Oh, *fuck*," he sobs, his other arm coming up automatically under his knees to keep his legs up as his entire body jolts. The underside of his thighs is almost painfully more sensitive than his ass and he hadn't realized how the position exposed his balls. He had caught the very edge of the ruler against the very bottom of the soft skin of his sack and the painful impact was still tearing through him from his crown to his toes like a bolt of lightning. "*Fuck, Ilya."*

"Color?"

"Green," he gasps out, mind sinking deep with a low buzz. He feels almost spacey. Like if he lets go he'll be lost, untethered.

"Two more. Let's see how you do, sweetheart."

The next hit is worse, catching more of his sensitive skin and he nearly loses his grip on his legs as he cries out and lurches to curl in on himself. It had been enough for him to feel him approach that final edge, and he knows he needs to come, he needs—

"Ilya, please, please, I need— I'm so close, Ilya," Shane begs, his thighs shaking from where he's holding them up. "Please, can I—"

"One more for me. And then you can come for me, sweetheart. You did so good for me, just one more," Ilya coaxes. "My good boy."

The next hit is all it takes and Shane cries out loud and high in his throat as his cock jerks and he comes over himself. His mind whites out.

"Oh my god," Shane sobs, shaking uncontrollably. He feels unmoored. He feels like he's floating. "Oh god, fuck, *fuck—"*

"You did so fucking well for me," Ilya groans, and Shane realizes he had been waiting for him to finish because now he could hear Ilya stroke himself over the speaker. "Jesus Christ you did perfectly. Fuck. You are unbelievable, I wish I had seen it."

The praise grounds him but not enough. Breathless and still flying high from his orgasm, Shane isn't even thinking as he picks up his phone lying next to him.

While still on speaker, he changes apps and finds the camera. Carefully, he uses one arm to position it above him to include just the bottom of his face, teeth biting down on his bottom lip. The rest of it is tilted to capture the rest of his body: his abs and pecs sweaty, flushed, and covered in his own spend. The white is stark enough on his slightly tan skin to stand out and carefully, he uses his other hand to run down his torso, fingers slicking up and soon shiny with his own spend. His half-hard, softening cock is just barely visible at the bottom of the frame. There's no capture sound when he takes the picture. Without thinking about it too hard or checking over it to second guess himself, he sends it to Ilya via text.

"What— why did you text me?" Ilya grunts, and Shane feels a nervous thrill, like he's done something naughty.

"You should, um. Look. I sent you something."

He knows the instant Ilya opens the message, because he lets out a choked, desperate moan that Shane had never heard from him before.

"Holy *fuck,"* Ilya snarls viciously, and Shane can hear the sound of his hand speeding up at a pace that should be painful, "god *fucking* dammit, Shane, *fuck–"*

"Do you like it?" Shane asks shyly, partially to tease but mostly because he wants to know and hear Ilya praise him, "did I do good?"

Ilya groans deep, one that Shane's learned to contribute to him coming. "Oh my god, малыш. Ебать, *fuck*."

A soft moan leaks through over the speaker to Shane, like the orgasm had shaken something loose out of Ilya. But then he doesn't say anything. The quiet quickly becomes unsettling.

"Ilya?" Shane whispers, uneasy. "Are you— was that too much?"

Ilya barks out a disbelieving laugh. "Was that— Jesus Shane. Fuck, you look… oh my god. *God,* look at you. Came all over yourself for me. Perfect."

Shane relaxes, letting himself settle into the buzzy pleasure, the one that still makes him a little fuzzy.

"I'm glad you like it," Shane mumbles, shifting his head to the side. He feels exposed and vulnerable like this, laid out on the floor, but he's still too spacey to care too much.

"Fuck, Shane, I think you've ruined porn for me," Ilya replies dryly. "'Glad you like it,' fuck's sake Shane."

Shane lets out a noise that's far too close to a drunk giggle. But despite the incredible high, he inevitably starts thinking too much when he feels some rationality edge in from the sides. He had just sent his very first nude. Of all the dumbest things a closeted professional athlete could do, this is probably up there.

"I um, can you delete it?" Shane asks, hesitant. "It's just. I've never sent anything like that and if it gets, I don't know, hacked, I just…"

“Of course Shane,” Ilya reassures him. “It hurts my heart but I will delete it now. You will need to promise you will send me more though.”

Shane relaxes the knot of tension he hadn’t even noticed.

“Okay,” Shane agrees shyly, “maybe.”

“Only if you want,” Ilya reminds. “How are you sweetheart? How does your ass feel?”

“Sore, stinging a little,” Shane answers dutifully. He can imagine how red his cheeks must be. He suddenly has the urge to turn around and send Ilya a picture of his welted skin over his ass but controls himself. “I feel… I feel good though. Like I let go, or something.”

“Good,” Ilya praises him, “you did perfectly for me.”

Shane opens his mouth to reply but then yawns automatically.

“You are tired.”

“No, no,” Shane reassures him quickly, even if he has to fight down another yawn in the process. “I’m okay.”

“What have we said about lying, Shane?” Ilya asks him dryly, “do we need to teach you another lesson?”

Shane flushes. He doesn’t think he would survive another one of Ilya’s “lessons” this soon after the first one. “Right. Sorry. I’m tired I guess but I don’t… I don’t want to hang up yet.”

Ilya’s quiet for a second but when he starts talking again, Shane can hear the smile. “God, sweetheart, you are fucking precious, you know that?”

“Fuck off,” Shane grumbles, covering his heated cheeks with one hand as if Ilya could see them. “I just… I like talking to you.”

“I like talking to you too,” Ilya replies, soft. “We can talk again later. Tomorrow maybe, if you have time. Right now I want you to take a warm shower and then go to bed. Can you do that for me Shane?”

“Yes,” Shane mumbles, even though getting off of the floor with his weakened limbs feels like an impossible task. “I can do that for you.”

“Очень хорошо, малыш. You are such a good boy for me Shane.”

And what other option does Shane have besides doing as he’s told?

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A couple of days later without any calls but plenty of texting, Shane’s checking the game schedule in the lockers when he skims down a week and sees “BOS.” For the first time, it

makes his heart rate pick up because now he knows— that's Ilya's city.

They're playing the Bears in mid January, an away game. For the first time Shane and Ilya had exchanged numbers, they'll be in the same city.

Shane sends the message before he can overthink.

Shane (8:26 pm): Come to the Montreal-Boston game on the 17th. It's a Boston home game and I'll get you tickets. I want to see you.

Shane taps his fingers nervously against the back of his phone case before making himself walk back to his stall. He wasn't going to wait around for a boy to text, not when he has a job to do. His resolve lasts as long as the time between sending the text and feeling his phone buzz against his palm. He would pretend otherwise if asked, but he was nothing less than eager when he went to check his messages.

Ilya (8:29 pm): No

Shane's heart sinks. But before he can type out an apology, Ilya texts him again.

Ilya (8:29 pm): I mean yes to game, no to tickets.

Ilya (8:29 pm): People will ask questions if they see Shane Hollander give random college student in Boston game tickets. Better to avoid even if we can make excuses.

Shane (8:30): Oh. I guess that's fair. How are you going to get the game then? Don't say you're going to buy them, I'll kill you.

Ilya (8:31 pm): wow so violent like angry kitten 😾

Ilya (8:31 pm): no I will ask Marley. He will be happy

Ilya (8:31 pm): has tried to get me to go to game for two years.

Shane (8:32 pm): two years??? And you haven't gone? They're free tickets what do you have against hockey Ilya

Ilya (8:33pm): 😬

"Yo, cap?" Miitka calls for him, and Shane startles back to the present. He's suddenly aware of his unconscious grin and he quickly clears his throat, schooling his expression as his back up goalie stares at him.

"Yeah, what is it, Mitty?" Shane is proud of how steady his voice is.

"You, uh, get good news?" Miitka asks, eyes darting from Shane's face down to his phone. Shane shrugs, feigning nonchalance.

"Nah, just a text from a friend."

“A friend,” Miitka echoes slowly, “a… good friend, then?”

“Trying to say something, Mitty?” Shane counters, dry. He’s careful to keep his face slack, unimpressed.

Miitka raises his hands in a placating fashion. “Just asking, cap!

“A good friend that gets you grinning at your phone like an idiot?” Hayden suddenly interrupts, slinging an arm around Shane’s shoulders. Shane stiffens automatically, caught off guard, and feels a little guilty when Hayden notices and slips away. “Who’s not me? Fuck, you replacing me Hollander? I’m gone for paternity leave for like three weeks and that’s all it takes?”

“Jesus, you trying to sound like a needy girlfriend or is that just normal for you, Pike?” Comeau sneers, halfway undressed in the stall across from Shane’s, “your wife know you’re always gagging for Hollander’s dick like this?”

“Fuck off, Comeau,” Hayden snarks back easily, even if the words send chills down Shane’s spine. He’s suddenly very aware of all his teammates within earshot. His phone screen is turned off when Shane risks taking a glance down to check.

“I’m just saying you don’t have to be a fucking faggot about it.”
It takes everything in Shane not to flinch. He can hear his pulse in his ears and burning up his throat as he purposefully turns to his stall. His face is deadly impassive.

Hayden, for his part, simply rolls his eyes. “Fucker.” He nudges Shane’s shoulder silently, but it doesn’t do much to diminish the sick feeling in his stomach. The 17th. Shane will need to be careful on the 17th.

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It’s the 17th and the Montreal Voyagers have been stuck at the airport for five hours. Shane’s knee is bouncing as he anxiously checks his messages. Two from his mom about sponsorships, another from his trainer. Nothing from the person he wants one from the most.

It’s been snowing all week, almost two feet of snow in as many days, and the entire team has been silently gnawing at the bars as they wait for the all clear from the airport for their flight. That, or the game officially being cancelled. Theriault and the rest of the coaching team have commandeered half of the agent counter in front of the gate.

Shane leans back in his seat, unable to still his leg, and bites at the skin of his lip. A habit his mother has chewed him out for in the past but what she doesn't know can’t hurt her.

“Jeez, Shane, you good? We’ll find out from Coach if the game’s cancelled or not in like a second,” Hayden interrupts incredulously. Shane barely keeps from spiraling.

He manages a grimace-smile as he nods at Hayden. He forces himself to hold still. “Yeah. Yeah I know. Every game matters now, you know how it is.”

“Sure,” Hayden lets go, but Shane sees how Hayden side eyes him. He can’t fault his friend for not believing him. They both snap to attention when their coach calls out to them, drawing side conversations quiet.

“Flight’s are all grounded,” Theriault announces, and Shane’s disappointment is almost tangible. “Game’s cancelled. Sorry boys, you’ll all need to head home.”

“Sweet, Jackie’ll be ecstatic,” Hayden sighs, pleased, stretching out his arms. “It’s been hard for her to adjust to taking care of the baby on her own.”

Shane distractedly turns on his phone. He doesn’t need a mirror to know he’s frowning.

Shane (1:45 pm): bad news

Shane (1:45 pm): Montreal airports grounded all flights out because of the storm, we won’t be making it to the game on time

Ilya (1:47 pm): yes Marley just texted me

Ilya (1:47 pm): 😞 is sad I wanted to see how pretty your face looks when I make you come untouched

Shane flushes, snapping his phone to his chest to hide the screen. He checks out the corner of his eye at his best friend but he seems invested in his own messages.

Shane (1:48 pm): Jesus Ilya I’m still at the airport with my entire team

Ilya (1:48 pm): 😏 are they as curious as I make you?

Shane (1:48 pm): god shut up

Shane (1:48 pm): I am sorry about the cancel though. I really did want to see you in person.

Ilya (13:50 pm): next game?

The next game they were playing in Boston was in fucking March, more than a month away. Boston would be coming to Montreal twice in that timeframe instead and Shane didn’t know how the rescheduling would work out. Usually home ice was a coveted advantage but right now Shane wishes they would travel sooner. That was too long to wait to see Ilya in front of him, living and breathing and gorgeous.

Shane pauses, thinking.

Shane (13:48 pm): i have an idea

Ilya (13:49 pm): ?

Shane (13:48 pm): do you have skype

+++

They have to wait until Ilya's done with classes, so by the time they get online, it's almost the time of the would-be game in Boston. Shane rearranges the fringe of his bangs back and forth, checking his reflection on the dark laptop screen. It takes conscious effort to stop fidgeting.

"Don't be stupid," Shane mutters to himself, but he still jolts when he hears the notification that Ilya had come online. Within seconds, he gets an incoming call.

The screen takes a while to load, the small spinning wheel taunting Shane as he sees himself in his own little box. Then the call goes through and Ilya is in front of him.

"Wow," Shane breathes, making Ilya laugh.

"Yes, wow," Ilya murmurs, and his voice sounds exactly like it does over the phone but Shane can watch his lips form the words, a face to look at and read. Ilya has slightly longer, curlier hair than the photo on his lab bio but he looks, otherwise, exactly the same. Sharp features, gorgeous jawline. Bright blue eyes and the pretty moles Shane has been dreaming about. He looks even more beautiful moving.

"I can't believe we didn't think of this sooner," Shane can't fight down his smile. Ilya grins back.

"Yes, I do not use Skype. No one to call. Well. Except until now."

Shane hums, still taking the time to drink in the man.

"How are you?" Shane asks, and gets to see a soft, fond smile stretch across Ilya's face for the first time.

"I am good, even better now," he tells him, and Shane's sure he's blushing.

"I was so excited to see you today," Shane says, disappointment still a lingering sting.

"Yes. But this is good concession prize, no?"

Shane nods, biting his lip. He's bad at conversation on a good day but now he's seemingly forgotten how to speak in English. They're both quiet for a beat too long, and fall into quiet laughter in the awkwardness.

"Fuck," Ilya breathes, "I can't believe you are real."

"You're telling me."

They're quiet again, and it makes Shane fidget in place. He's sitting up against his headboard with his laptop on his knees. It's a habit now, to be talking to Ilya while in bed.

"I don't really know what to talk about," Shane admits sheepishly.

"Mmm," Ilya rests his chin on his fist. Shane thinks he might be at a desk. "What did you do when you got home from the airport?"

And just like that, it's surprisingly simple to fall into describing his day, Ilya listening and interjecting at all the right spots. Shane hates talking to strangers, because it's always a nightmare trying to figure out what the right thing to say is, but with Ilya, there's no right or wrong. Ilya takes Shane's rambling mess of word vomit and makes a conversation out of it. Shane can't remember the last time it was this easy to just talk to someone.

"What were you hoping we would do when we met up today?" Shane asks offhandedly almost an hour later. He doesn't think about what it might sound like until Ilya pauses and raises an eyebrow.

"What did *you* hope we would do when we met up today, Hollander?" Ilya volleys back, and Shane, bemused, sees a smirk playing at the edge of his lips.

"Oh. Um. Talk, I guess? Maybe get dinner. Take out probably, I'm always hungry after a game," Shane rubs the back of his neck. Ilya laughs softly before he lets his voice drop.

"Is that all you were hoping for?"

Shane understands all at once and flushes bright red. Ilya watches, delighted.

"Oh! Oh, right," Shane stammers. "Yeah. Um. We could also do *that*."

Ilya laughs properly at that, grinning. "*That.* Fuck, you are cute."

"Fuck you, I am not. I'm 200 pounds and beat up men for a living," Shane grumbles, but he can feel the heat at his ears.

"Mmm, no, you do not," Ilya smirks. "Lady Byng winner three times in five years. That is not given to fighter."

"You looked up my awards?" Shane mumbles, covering his cheek with a hand.

Ilya pauses, and then shrugs. "You know already you make me curious. And I'm curious now, what would you want to do, in person and all alone with me in Boston?"

"Um," Shane pauses, eyes darting down from the screen. "I mean… I want to know what it's like to kiss you. Yeah. Really want to know what that's like."

Shane can see the flash of Ilya's amused grin before he covers it with his knuckles. "Kiss me. Okay. And after we've kissed, where do you want to touch me next?"

Shane's breath catches, and he can't help himself from glancing down at the bottom of the screen, only to find the camera cut off right below his mid-abdomen.

"I don't… I don't know," Shane lies, because he does know. He's been thinking about what it would feel like to hold the weight of Ilya against his palm, so much like his own but different. He wants to know what it would look like to be the cause of Ilya's pleasure.

Ilya raises an eyebrow but simply exhales, leaning back into his chair and tilting his head. "Strip for me."

Shane flushes bright red. “What? Now? Like, on camera?”

“Yes,” Ilya slowly nods, both eyebrows raised now. “Go on.”

Shane fidgets for a second, stuck still, but then slowly brings his hands to the hem of his shirt. He hears a hitch of breath as he brings it over his head, leaving his chest bare.

“Fuck,” Ilya murmurs. “All of it sweetheart. Show me all of you.”

Shane almost protests before he looks back at the screen. Ilya’s expression is pure heat, watching Shane with dark eyes. He’s almost awed, just seeing Shane half naked.

Exhaling slowly with the thrill of Ilya’s captive attention acting as a drug, Shane shifts his hips and slips off his briefs. When he sits back against the headboard, he can see how far his flush travels down. Can see how his more than half-hard cock stands stiff in the camera, settled between two thick, corded thighs. Automatically, Shane goes to grip himself with a hand, fingers stretched to wrap around his dick but Ilya makes a protesting grunt. Shane freezes.

“No,” Ilya denies. “You don’t touch yourself there yet. Start at your neck. Down, slow.

Swallowing, Shane slowly does as told, bringing a clammy hand up to grip the side of his neck and drag it down his collarbone to his chest.

“Good, squeeze your tit, just like that,” Ilya coaxes, and Shane closes his eyes, teeth in his bottom lip as he clutches his left pec for Ilya. “Rub the nipple for me.”

A spark of heat shoots through him as he gasps and suddenly understands what Ilya was doing.

“Fuck, Ilya–”

“I don’t have to ask this time, do I?” Ilya murmurs with a teasing smirk, “I can see how hard I make you. Fuck, Shane, you’re so fucking hard for me.”

Shane is *dizzy* with it.

“Tell me what to do next,” Shane breathes without thinking, desperately needing permission to touch his aching cock. Ilya was right— he was so fucking hard it nearly hurt.

“Lube,” Ilya tells him instead of letting him seek relief. Shane inhales slowly and blindly grasps for the lube on his night stand, not willing to look away from Ilya as he purposefully rubs down on his lap off screen. Shane’s fingers are shaking as he uncaps the bottle.

“Good,” Ilya praises, “move your computer down. I want to watch you prepare yourself.”

“Shit,” Shane chokes, his clean hand clenching on the sheets.

“One finger, Shane. Come on,” Ilya encourages, and he’s far too amused with this whole thing. With that in mind, Shane is just annoyed enough to spread his legs wide, looking up at

Ilya under hooded eyes as he teases himself and slips a finger into himself. He lets a breathy moan escape him, head tilting and letting his neck stretch out.

He can just barely see himself in the corner to know what kind of picture he's painting and he would normally be mortified to set his body up like a play bunny slut but Ilya curses, mouth dropping.

"Fuck, *fuck,* Shane," he groans, and Shane's rewarded for his courage with Ilya quickly stripping, pulling off his shirt and pushing down his sweats farther past what Shane can see.

Ilya is *hot*. Shane is eager to drink in the new skin, even as his body adjusts to the new intrusion. His blood is pounding through his veins as he watches. The screen is blurry, the quality of the camera shitty, but Shane can make out the defined abs and generous pectorals. He thinks he can see moles dotting his skin and Ilya definitely has more hair than Shane does.

"Another," Ilya nods at Shane, even as Shane watches Ilya smooth a hand down his torso to his lap. The flex of his forearm tells Shane exactly what he's doing, and Shane's head is spinning as he obeys, the stretch of two fingers more of a burn.

"Shit, Ilya, can I," Shane exhales, breathing short. He crooks his fingers, digging into himself. "Can I see you? Please Ilya, want to see you touch yourself."

Ilya tilts his head, and shifts the laptop camera down from his face to his lower body with a deep exhale. The view shifts from his heaving chest down to his hand stroking an almost terrifyingly enormous cock.

"Holy fuck," Shane gasps, a jolt of heat running down his spine.

"Hmm?" Ilya grunts, a soft groan escaping him as he twists a hand over the head.

"You're so big," Shane rushes out, his fingers inside him instinctively pressing deeper. "Holy shit, you're so fucking big."

He doesn't have to see Ilya's face to know he's smirking.

"Jesus Shane," Ilya chuckles a little, as if the asshole wasn't preening "I know you're on camera but it isn't actually a porno."

"Fuck off, that's a weapon," Shane snaps, and Ilya laughs properly, squeezing himself tight. "Second thoughts, sweetheart?"

That's an almost shamefully quick answer. "No."

Ilya gives him a small grin before leaning his head back, his body a long, glistening line from the bottom of his chin to his cock. He was clearly showing off but Shane would be the first to admit that he had plenty to display. Shane exhaled carefully, restarting his fingers' movement inside of him after they had stalled. It isn't exactly the same, but if Shane lets his imagination run a little bit, he could time his hand with Ilya's strokes and pretend it wasn't his own fingers in his hole. He could imagine it was Ilya inside of him, that the stiff member

disappearing and reappearing in the clench of his fist was him entering Shane's body. Finding his prostate is almost a surprise.

"Fuck," Shane moans, curling into himself as his hand chases the flash of bright pleasure. "*Fuck,* Ilya, need you–"
After seeing exactly what he's missing, it isn't enough. His own fingers are awkward, not nearly thick or long enough. He's right on the edge, his orgasm almost frustratingly too close and too far.

"Close, sweetheart?" Ilya grunts, "fuck, lean back. You can come, малыш, but you have to show me. Come on, that's it. Come for me. *Shit*–" Ilya groans as Shane gasps, his back arching, "There you go, sweetheart."

Shane cries out, head buzzing white as his finish rushes over him. His cock twitches untouched as he comes over himself, streaks of white over his flushed, damp skin. His muscles go limp as he fights to catch his breath.

Shane can vaguely hear the hum of Ilya's low croon, and he blinks blearily at the computer until he can see the way Ilya's abs clench, his hand speeding up until his hips jerk into his fist, a loud groan escaping him as he comes.

Shane watches as Ilya slumps down into the chair, heaving out an exhale before huffing a disbelieving laugh, shaking his head.

"What?" Shane mumbles, still a little foggy. Ilya simply hums. "Nothing. How are you feeling, sweetheart? You were beautiful for me."

Shane flushes, and he forgets for a moment that he's still on the video call when he smiles shyly to himself, eyes drifting away.

"Jesus," he thinks he hears Ilya mutter. "I'm fucked."

Shane looks up at that, eyebrows furrowed but maybe he had misheard because Ilya simply clears his throat. "Shane? You are okay?"

"Yeah," Shane nods. "Yeah really good. That was really hot."

Ilya chuckles. "Yes. It was. Tissues?"

Shane reaches over to his nightstand again and finds a cloth to clean himself with. After a minute, they're both lax in the post-orgasm haze, a mock-version of pillow talk over the screens.

"Svetlana wants to meet you, you know," Ilya yawns. He had moved to his own bed, still shirtless. Shane makes a curious noise. "Svetlana?"

"My best friend. Oh. You know her as Lana."

Shane blinks, incredulous. "Your best friend is the sex phone line dispatcher? Wait," Shane suddenly felt a rush of uncertainty. "She *knew?* Did she tell you?"

“No, no, no,” Ilya shakes his head, “I would not ask, and she would not tell. Though, I know now she’s been laughing at me this whole time.”

Shane chews on the inside of his cheek, uneasy. “Laughing? Why?”

“She definitely knows who Shane Hollander is. Her father was a hockey goalie, in Russia, and then here, in Boston. Vetrova.”

“Your best friend’s the *daughter* of Boston Bears Hall of Famer *Sergei Vetrov?”*

“Oh,” Ilya grins, “you know him?”

“I can’t tell if you’re fucking with me right now,” Shane mutters faintly. “Fuck. Why is she working on a phone sex hotline? How are you even friends?”

“She does it because she thinks it’s entertaining,” Ilya shrugs, “she doesn’t really need the money. And we are childhood friends. Grew up together in Russia, and immigrated here together.”

“And she knows about… us.”

“And she wants to meet you, yes. She likes you very much. As hockey player, I mean. She thinks you are cute.”

“You told her.”

Ilya pauses, teasing humor slipping away. “No, I did not. She knew already, from the hotline. But she is good friend. Best friend. She is someone we can trust. She did not tell me anything about you and did not talk about you until you told me who you were. And I told her how much I liked you from the beginning.”

Shane rubs his finger with his thumb.“I don’t… I’ve never told anyone,” he furrows his eyebrows. “I can’t.”

“You can’t tell anyone about me?” Ilya clarifies, tilting his head. “It makes no difference to me, малыш. If it is someone close that you trust. I trust you. I do not mind if you tell a friend.”

“No, I mean. I’ve never told anyone about… *me*. About what I am.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything for a moment, frowning. Shane doesn’t look at the screen, focusing on the fraying edge of his duvet.

“So, you are alone?” Ilya asks finally. “No one knows?”

“No one can know,” Shane says, “I told you Ilya, it’s too much of a risk.”

“Yes, yes I understand why we can’t say but… Shane. It is lonely. Very lonely, being in the closet. I am not publically out either, would be risky to have paper trail with my visa application. But people I care about. Svetlana, old woman who is like grandmother, even

Marleau and his friends, they know. And it helps, a lot. To have someone you don't have to hide around."

"I don't have to hide around you," Shane mumbles, and he hears Ilya exhale softly.

"No, you don't," Ilya replies gently. "But it's not the same, Shane. I think you know that too."

Shane does know. Shane knows it when he's standing in the full locker room, sweating after a slur is thrown around and sure that this was the moment everyone would turn to him and see his secret plain on his face. He knows it when his mother is telling him how important his image is, how important he is to so many young Asian kids dreaming of playing hockey. When he's asked in yet another interview if there's a special someone, a special *woman*.

"I can't," Shane shakes his head, breath short. "Fuck, I can't tell anyone, I–"

"You don't have to. But there is no one you trust? Someone who you know cares no matter what?"

"My parents I guess," Shane forces out, "maybe my best friend. But if I'm wrong then—I can't. I just can't. I'm sorry Ilya." Shane is shaking, he realizes. His hands tremble. He finds his sheets and wraps his fingers around them, grounding.

Maybe that fear transfers over the speaker, his voice suddenly fragile because Ilya shushes him. "Hey, hey that is okay. You do not have to be sorry. Don't be sorry, not about this. It is okay. When you are ready, yes?"

Shane exhales, and nods. "Okay." He's not sure he'll ever be ready. He doesn't say that to Ilya.

"I think you should think about it, that is all," Ilya ends. "I think you might be surprised to learn how much people love you, Shane."

Shane clenches his jaw, looking away. He doesn't say that he was too scared to risk finding out that wasn't true.

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Once Ilya opens the can of worms, though, Shane can't help but think about it. The storm dies down in two days and the team gets sent out for another road trip, so they're stuck messaging again, sporadic short calls sprinkled in between. And it's *hard*, hiding. Shane's never been a good liar and he's never really had to be. But having something to actively be lying about while he's sneaking calls and covering up messages feels different from simply omitting the truth. It's worse when it's Hayden. Shane doesn't think his best friend noticed anything strange the first half of their trip, but going on week two, Shane knows his random night-time walks are raising eyebrows in their shared room.

"Why can you not tell Hayden you need to take phone call?" Ilya asks him one night while Shane's trudging around the sidewalks of downtown Detroit.

“Because there’s literally only four people I call regularly, and Hayden’s one of them,” Shane exasperates. “He’ll have questions.”

“And is that so bad?”

Shane scoffs, throwing up a hand. “Yes. Yes, because I’d have to lie. I’m a shit liar, Ilya. And I just… I hate lying to him.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything to that, thankfully, and simply changes the subject. Shane can still hear the unsaid option that Ilya wants to bring up again. But the thought of saying the words out loud to his best friend and imagining his closest friendship breaking apart because of this keeps him afraid. So he keeps taking his walks alone.

The last game before they can go home is in Tampa, which Shane can’t complain about. Better to be in Florida during the month of February instead of Montreal. They’re getting ready for the game, and Shane has that familiar dual feeling of exhaustion from two long weeks and anticipation to return to the comfort of his own bed. He’s got most of his gear on and he’s straightening his things while sitting in his visitor locker room stall. The rest of the team is their usual rowdy selves. It’s as normal as a pregame could be.

“Hey, Hollzy, is it true that new equipment manager’s gay?” Comeau calls out. Shane freezes, hands clutched around his roll of stick tape. Normal becomes just that much harder to maintain.

“What? I don’t know,” Shane clears his throat, not looking up from his skates. “It’s not something I asked.” He methodically sets aside the tape, goes through this ritual. Left skate, right skate. Double knots.

“Fuck, he better not be,” Comeau continues, not noticing Shane’s disciplined indifference. “We don’t need any fucking fairies anywhere near the locker room. I can only imagine that faggot creeping in to take a look.”

Shane needs to get out. His fingers are shaking too much to double knot his right skate.

“You don’t even know him,” Hayden frowns at Shane’s right. “He’s pretty nice. Really helpful.”

“He your boyfriend now Pike?” Koch sneers. “Replacing Hollander?”

Shane holds his breath, jaw clenched. He knows the drill. He’s well aware of the role he’s supposed to play right now.

“Shut up asshole. I just mean Diaz doesn’t deserve being called fucked up shit like that, that’s all. Fucking leave him alone,” Hayden rolls his eyes and turns away from the others to his stall casually, as if he hadn’t rocked the foundation under Shane’s feet. Shane has stopped moving, fingers stalled on his laces. His brain is trying to reboot.

Shane can’t think of a single moment in nearly fifteen years of playing hockey where another player had defended someone gay. Can’t remember anyone ever saying something, *anything*,

about the slurs and crude language being cruel. And Hayden had done it unprompted, without expectations, because it was about someone they knew.

“Hey, you good to go out?” Hayden asks, nudging Shane’s shoulder. Shane must have some kind of expression on his face because Hayden’s eyebrows furrow. “Oh shit, man, you okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane murmurs faintly. “Yeah, shit. I’m fine. Let’s go.”

It takes winning another whole game, plane trip, and sum of twenty four hours before Shane lets himself think about what Hayden said. Throughout the hockey and the trip home, Hayden doesn’t act any differently than he normally would, even if Shane is well past “acting normal” but he manages to get home without being asked questions.

He’s on his couch, staring at the wall with his phone in hand, screen dark. Part of Shane wants to text Ilya and tell him what happened but the other part doesn’t want to be convinced like he suspects he will be if he hears Ilya in his ear. If he tells Hayden, it has to be Shane’s own volition. Anything else that takes away even a bit of control about this would make him spiral.

Because he was really thinking about it. Telling Hayden. He’s hated lying to his best friend, and it’s only been a few months. God knows how much worse the sick feeling of guilt is going to get with more time. But just because Hayden had told Comeau off in defense of an equipment manager doesn’t mean that he’ll be cool with his best friend being gay. Cool with his *captain* being gay, fuck, Comeau had said it best. God forbid a gay man strip naked in the shared showers with all the other guys. All Hayden would have to do is mention it to the wrong person and Shane would be shunned immediately. The price of being wrong is more than he should be letting himself risk.

But even though Ilya hasn’t mentioned it in the past couple weeks since he had brought it up, Shane can’t stop thinking about what he said. *I think you might be surprised to learn how much people love you.* Hayden has been his first real friend since childhood. He and Jackie have both done whatever they could to make Shane feel safe. Was that not love? Hasn’t Hayden spent years trying to show Shane that?

Shane sends the text before he can psych himself out of it.

Shane (7:36pm): Hey man. Sorry this is out of the blue but are you free to talk by any chance?

Hayden (7:38pm): Come over around 8:30 the little demons should be asleep by then

About an hour later, Shane has kept his hands in his pockets since he locked the car door, standing in front of the Pikes’ front door for ten minutes. It’s freezing, but he still hasn’t managed to convince himself to press the doorbell since he got here at 8:20.

He doesn’t have to. Before he can bring his hand out to ring, the door opens.

“What the fuck man, aren’t you cold?” Hayden blinks, opening it wider for Shane. He’s holding a full garbage bag. “How long have you been standing there?”

“I, uh, not long. You said 8:30. Didn’t want to mess with the twins’ bedtime routine,” Shane covers surprisingly easily. It makes him feel sick how often he lies now.

“They went under easy tonight,” Hayden sighs. “Thank god. Get inside, I’m just going to throw this out.”

The churning in his stomach follows as he crosses the threshold. He waits awkwardly in the foyer before Hayden joins him again.

“Want a ginger ale?” Hayden asks casually as he walks down the hallway to the kitchen. The lights are mostly down, the upstairs hallway still glowing gold where the rest of the Pikes were. Jackie’s notably not downstairs.

Sugar after 8pm was usually an immediate no but he definitely wasn’t going to be accepting alcohol even though he really wants to. Soda would have to do.

“Sure. Thanks man. And thanks for letting me come over.”

“Yeah, ‘course. You don’t usually reach out to talk,” Hayden tosses him a can. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane reassures quickly, looking down to toy with the tab on the soda can. “Yeah, just… wanted to tell you something I guess.”

“Oh,” Hayden says, and Shane can hear how confused he is. Shane doesn’t blame him. He knows how fucking weird it is to show up to his best friend’s place in the middle of the night and then say he just wants to say something to him. “Sure, you can tell me anything dude. Come on, let’s sit.”

Shane’s usual armchair has a pile of blankets and a stack of toys on it, so he’s forced to sit next to Hayden on the couch. It helps a little to be able to look forward at the blank TV instead of directly at his friend.

“Did you want Jackie here too?” Hayden asks as he leans back, before hastily spluttering. “Not saying I don’t want to help! We just both know she’s better at this shit than me.”

“Maybe,” Shane exhales, rubbing his thighs. “Maybe later? I think I just… I think this is something I need to tell my best friend, because I’ve been keeping it inside for a long time.”

Hayden softens. “Yeah man, of course.”

Shane tries to breathe. The only two people in the world who knew he was gay both worked for a phone sex hotline. He knows he needs to tell someone, but he’s realizing that he might not ever be ready for this day. He’s going to have to do this without feeling ready.

“Um,” Shane breathes out, and can hear the way his voice wobbles, “shit, sorry. I’m realizing I’ve never actually said this out loud.”

“That’s okay,” Hayden reassures, “you can take your time Shane.”

“Right,” Shane inhales slowly. His leg won’t stop bouncing. “Right. Sorry. I know it’s late. I’m kind of freaking out.”

Hayden snorts a little, “Shane, buddy, I’m aware.”

Shane flushes. “Shut up,” he replies automatically. “I just. Really don’t know how to say this. And I’m worried how you’ll react.”

The honesty costs something, scrapping up his throat. He realizes too late that his statement sounds accusatory but to his credit, Hayden simply hums, lacing his fingers.

“Shane, you gotta know,” Hayden starts carefully, “nothing you say is gonna change how I see you.”

Shane can’t help but laugh wetly. “Oh, I think it will.”

“No it won't,” Hayden frowns, straightening. “Because when I look at my best friend I see the guy who’s the best in the league, probably the best active hockey player in the world, but never tells a rookie no when they ask for extra practice. I see the guy who drove me two hours to the hospital when Jackie went into labor early after an overtime away game because I was having a panic attack. The guy my kids trust like family, the godfather to my son. Nothing you say is going to change how I see you because it won’t change those things, Shane.”

Shane’s doing his best not to burst into tears. “Fuck. *Fuck,* okay.”

“Okay?” Hayden prompts. He wasn’t forcing Shane to make eye contact, recognizing Shane’s limits when he’s overwhelmed.

“Okay,” he breathes out shakily. “Okay. I’ll just… fuck it. I’m gay.”

It’s the first time Shane’s ever said it out loud, even with Ilya, and hearing the words out in the open feels like a pressure valve release. Something that Shane hadn’t realized was suffocating him loosens.

“Huh. Oh shit, that actually makes a lot more sense.”

That makes Shane snap out of it and whip his head around to look at Hayden properly, baffled.“What the fuck?” Shane gapes. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Oh, dammit, I just mean you never want to go out with the women Jackie introduces and you never really talk about sex, plus there was that thing with the yoga instructor that I told myself I was making up and I mean I guess there could be kind of a vibe? Fuck, this is why I wanted Jackie here,” Hayden groans, now looking just as distressed as Shane. That, for some reason, settles Shane.

“A vibe?” Shane repeats, a little incredulous.

“Shit dude I don’t know!” Hayden drops his face into his hands, “My cousin’s gay and she just has like… aura.”

Shane can’t help it. He cracks up. “Holy shit. An *aura*,” he wheezes, “*Jesus*, how can you be so bad at this?”

“Hey, you caught me off guard, man, fuck off!” Hayden complains, “let a guy process, asshole.” And it’s so normal, so *them,* that Shane kind of really does want to cry now.

“So you’re gay? Like totally?”

Shane gives him a deadpan look. “No, I’m just trying it out and risking my entire career for fun, what the fuck Hayds?”

“Fuck you, I mean, Casey’s dating a girl but she’s pansexual,” Hayden splutters, “I might be a stupid straight guy but I know there’s like, layers to this shit.”

“Oh. I don’t… I don’t actually know a lot about that,” Shane shrugs, a little uncomfortable. He’s never risked looking for anything about gay culture, let alone learning about the different aspects to being queer. “I just. I know I like men. I don’t like women.”

“Oh,” Hayden echoes eloquently. “I see.” Suddenly he furrows his eyebrows. “So, all those women that me and Jackie have been setting you up with, you didn’t–”

“No,” Shane shakes his head, looking at his hands. “I didn’t. And I mean, I really tried. I did, Hayds, I wanted to be… not this. And I know you were just wanting the best for me. But I just couldn’t.”

Hayden’s quiet after that. “Yeah, man,” he says finally, tone soft. “I don’t think this is something that you can just wish away. I’m sorry if… I don’t know. If Jackie and I made it harder for you.”

“No, no I mean. You guys didn’t know. It’s okay.”

“Am I the first person you’ve told?” Hayden asks. Shane coughs and nods. “Yeah, out loud at least.”

Hayden looks a little stunned. “Shit. So I’m the only person who knows…”

“Um, no,” Shane interrupts him, blushing. “Not exactly. You and uh, this guy I’m talking to.”

“You’re talking to someone?” Hayden repeats blankly, blinking before he cracks a grin. “Shit, *shit,* Shane, that's awesome, man. What’s his name? What does he do? How’d you meet?”

“You want… you want to know about him?” Shane asks cautiously. A little disbelieving. Hayden likewise raises his eyebrows.

“Uh, yeah?” Hayden replies, like it was obvious. “Dude, you’ve *never* talked to me about someone you’re into. I’ve been waiting for this day for literally years. Come on, spill.” He nudges Shane’s knee with his own.

Shane's shocked silent. Hayden isn't the type to set up someone to be cruel. But Shane's seen vulnerability be punished before. Hockey doesn't allow for softness.

"We met a few months ago actually," Shane starts slowly, "and how we met… that can be a story for another day." *Never.* "We've mostly been texting and video calling, he lives in Boston."

"Long distance," Hayden winces. "That sucks. Wait. Oh shit. Is that why you were freaking out at the airport when the Boston game got cancelled? You were going to meet up?"

"Uh, yeah," Shane shrugs, flushed. Hayden's easy acceptance helped ease some of the tension in his shoulders. "We had plans to meet. We ended up video calling for the first time that night, instead."

"Tell me about him, dude. He's gotta be a fucking catch to get Shane fucking Hollander's attention."

Shane snorts out a laugh. And he relaxes.

"He's," he smiles a little after thinking for a second, "really fucking smart. He's at MIT, does some crazy shit on black holes and pulsar stars and measuring frequencies or something, at least from what I understand on the internet. He works in this big shot lab there for astrophysics. And yeah, I mean. He's hot too, yeah. Kind of crazy hot, when I first saw him. Like, *wow.*"

Shane laughs nervously, a little giddy as he looks down at his hands. "The sex is good too. *Really* good. But he makes me feel so… comfortable. I didn't think it would be normal to like, laugh during sex, but it's so easy with him. Everything is so easy with him. I feel really safe with him."

"Wow," Hayden exhales, and Shane had almost forgotten he was there. He looks up and sees Hayden staring at him with a strange expression, one that almost looked sad. "You really, really like this guy."

Shane stiffens, trying to think what he might have said that made Hayden uncomfortable. Maybe mentioning gay sex was a step too far for tonight. "Um. Yeah. Yeah, I guess. I don't think… I don't think I've ever felt this way for someone."

Hayden nods woodenly, glancing at his hands for a second before looking up carefully, not meeting Shane's eye. "And you felt like you couldn't tell anyone. Because he's a guy and we play hockey and it's... Couldn't tell anyone for months, so you've just been doing this on your own. All this time."

"Uh," Shane chews on his bottom lip. "I guess. Yeah. I just… I can't. You know why, I just can't. Not with the league being how it is."

"Right," Hayden nods, inhaling sharply. "Right, yeah, I know. Fuck." He rubs the corner of his eye. "Fuck, Shane, I'm sorry."

“Not your fault,” Shane mumbles. “You can’t exactly kick the Commissioner's ass for being a homophobic piece of shit.”

Hayden laughs but it sounds wet. “No,” he agrees, “no, I guess not.”

“And you listening helps,” Shane presses, needing Hayden to understand. “I was so scared, Hayds. Even just saying it out loud. I told you, I’ve never done that before but you… I know I gave you shit earlier, but this was *everything* Hayds. You wanting to hear about him and just making it so normal. You made me feel normal. Thank you. You help. Really.”

Hayden exhales shakily before looking down to cover his eyes with a hand. “*Shit.* Shit, Shane.*”*

“Ah,” Shane winces. “Too much?”

Hayden laughs like a gasp, shaking his head. “No, not too much.” He looks up, blinking hard. “Can I give you a hug, man?”

Shane pauses for a second before turning fully towards his friend and nods. Hayden is one of the few people Shane accepts hugs from, and even if they don’t embrace often, Hayden’s arms around him still feel familiar.

“Thank you, Shane. For trusting me,” Hayden murmurs. Shane’s face is tucked into the crook of his shoulder. “I can’t imagine how hard it must have been to keep all this a secret. It means a lot.”

Shane feels a biting sting in his eyes, something tight in his throat. “Yeah. Yeah, ‘course. Thank you for listening.”

“And I mean, if it wasn’t clear already,” Hayden clears his throat. He pulls away just far enough to look at Shane with an open expression. Eye contact is always hard but Shane makes do, even with his eyes going red and watery. “I don’t care. I really don’t. You’re my best friend Shane. I love you. You being gay doesn’t change that.”

Something in Shane cracks, one last thread of fear snapping free, and finally, he lets himself cry. Hayden doesn’t let go.

Chapter End Notes

THE HOMIES HUG, CRY, AND PLATONICALLY SAY I LOVE YOU! ANOTHER L FOR TOXIC MASCULINITY!! FINISH HIM! my boys WILL be happy so help me GOD

Chapter 6: accept call

Chapter Summary

T-minus three days countdown until contact. The Boston-Montreal game.

Chapter Notes

ehehehehehehehehehehh

I was SO EXCITED for this chapter

I sincerely love the idea of older women adopting Ilya as their own where ever he ends up. They take one look at sad russian ragebaiter machine and are like "that's my son." honestly same.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time since he was fourteen with pimples and a voice crack, Ilya is nervous about a date. He's got it in his calender app, for fuck's sake. He barely uses that to keep track of his exams.

The Voyageurs and Bears' next Boston game is in three days on March 23rd. In three days, Ilya's going to be in the same room as Shane fucking Hollander.

Which Ilya only really recently understood the implications of. When Shane told him his profession last month, Ilya had more or less put him in the same category as Marleau and the other NHL players he knows, maybe a little better. The Bears had hyped him up, sure, but professional hockey was professional hockey. He didn't expect much.

He had most definitely not expected that he was talking the Canadian prince of ice hockey to orgasm over the phone for what was now nearly eight months.

After that particular Wikipedia rabbit hole the night of the first reveal, he called Svetlana at two in the morning.

"Ilya, you better be dying," Sveta had answered after the third ring, voice groggy.

"You are the one who is going to be dying," Ilya hissed in Russian "You are telling me you knew he looked like *that* and you let me spiral anyway? *Prince of fucking hockey.*"

It took Sveta a minute to catch on. It was two in the morning, to be fair. “Oh, wow, you know.” She sounded far too amused.

“Yes, I know, he told me,” Ilya exasperated, “you couldn’t have told me how fucking hot he was? Sveta.”

“I like him, and I would not betray a client’s trust,” Sveta sniffed. “Who do you think I am?”

“The bane of my fucking existence.”

“I am on your side,” Sveta protested. “Why do you think I was trying so hard to get you the boy, Ilyusha?”

“Because you enjoy watching me suffer. You didn’t have to tell me who he was but you could have said *something.*”

“I did say he has money. When you are a pretty little sugar baby for the best hockey player of this generation, you should get him to buy me a Louis Vutton as a thank you.”

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. “I hate you so fucking much.”

But that was over a month ago. And now it’s today. As in they would be in the same city in three days.

He and Shane text daily now, and it’s almost automatic to go to his phone and pull up his messages app when something new happens. They send each other the most banal comments like complaints about classmates and coworkers and what they ate for lunch. He’s the first person he thinks of in the morning and usually the last person on his mind before he goes to bed. He has never been more grateful for his unlimited texting plan.

It’s done a number on Ilya’s midterms. And it’s *definitely* done a number on his concentration in the lab.

“Ilya. *Ilya.”* Ilya snaps to, head looking up from his phone. Shane’s explaining what a CF percentage is because Ilya’s been teasing him about his 60.4% apparently not knowing that it was one of the best player CF% in NHL history. He just barely keeps from wincing as he sees Dr. Chikondi eyeing him, curious.

“Oh, shi- sorry, professor,” Ilya stops himself hastily, shoving his phone in his lab coat pocket. “I was just checking something and was distracted. Will not happen again.” He’s supposed to be running another round of simulations to test out an algorithm.

“You are allowed to use your phone, Ilya,” Chikondi laughs a little. The cadence of her Malawian accent rolls over his name in a way Ilya has always liked. “It is unusual for you though. Has something new happened?”

“Ah,” Ilya most certainly does not fucking blush. “Just… checking my messages.”

To his despair, Chikondi puts together the pieces almost frighteningly fast. The conseqeunces of working with a MacArthur fellow. She grins. “I see. There is some*one* new, then?”

Ilya maybe blushes a little. “Okay. Yes. They are coming to Boston for work in few days.”

“And you are nervous,” Chikondi deduces slyly. “*Zabwino kwambiri,* Ilya! That is great. Young love is very precious.”

He suspects Chikondi is having the time of her life teasing him right now.

“It is very new,” Ilya coughs, awkward in a way he usually isn’t. That’s new too– he’s the youngest in the lab, but adamant about not being perceived any less mature for it. He’s always been good at faking confidence, and this uncertainty wasn’t normal. Chikondi definitely notices.

“Yes, but you like her very much, no? I have not seen you like this before.”

Something in Ilya dims at the assumed pronoun. He’s not out at the lab, not really out at school either. He needs a work visa in about five months, and can’t risk homophobia keeping him from staying in the United States by messing up his sponsorship through the lab.

Chikondi is kind, but gay rights are not something that came up in astrophysics casually. No one else in the lab is queer, or at least, no one is out, so Ilya has no real way of knowing.

“Yes,” Ilya says instead of correcting her, managing a tight smile. “I do like them. I’m excited to see them.”

“I am glad,” Chikondi smiles, “you must tell me how it goes.”

“Right,” Ilya agrees, knowing he would be praying it slips Chikondi’s mind later. Unlikely, but he can hope.

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February

For Ilya’s first hockey game, he had folded when Marleau offered him tickets for the Boston V. New York home game the following week after the cancelled Montreal match. It would have been suspicious if he suddenly didn’t want to go anymore and asked for the Montreal ticket a second time. Svetlana hadn’t been able to go with him, having an exam at the same time so he brought the next best possible thing.

“Ilyushechka, what is this, ‘deep-fried pickle relish hot dog’? It sounds like diseased animal.”

“Maybe we should try it and see, Katya,” Ilya grins, replying in Russian. The old woman gives him an unimpressed look.

He had looked up a very basic summary for hockey rules the night before and stumbles through explaining his limited understanding to Katya when they find their seats. He thinks he might have left them both even more confused.

The seats were good though— Marleau was a veteran player and assistant captain so he got a good pick of them. The view of the rink was clear and close, the stands around them filling up with other fans holding popcorn and beers and their chatter. The players were warming on the ice, and Ilya can see Marleau with 47 written out on his back going through stretches.

“You said you have friends on team?” Katya asks, settling into her seat. Ilya had brought her a blanket from home, suspecting she might get cold in the icy rink and she was already using it.

“Yes, Marleau is a good friend. He got us the tickets. His teammates are also good people.”

“Hmm. And none of them are single?”

Ilya sighs but covers it up with a grin, giving her a sly look. “Wow, babushka, I did not know you were looking for a second young and beautiful husband. You should have told me, I would have offered in a heartbeat.”

Katya swats him with a hand, scowling, and Ilya bursts out in a laugh. “Bah! You are a rascal! Ridiculous.”

“Easy citizenship for me no?” Ilya chuckles. Katya shakes her head, finally amused.

“I would not remarry again,” she says instead, her voice a little quieter. “Ivan was a once in a lifetime love. I will never have that again and I don’t wish to try and replace it. I will cherish what I was lucky enough to have for so long.”

Ilya’s smile saddens with sympathy. Katya didn’t talk about her late husband often, a tailor she had met as a young girl in Russia while he was an apprentice. What Ilya does know is that he had passed away from a heart attack five years ago at seventy two, and had left Katya alone in the cafe they had started together in this foreign country.

Katya’s son and daughter both lived on the West Coast and she had insisted that they not come to her and she would not go to them. She claimed it was because she didn’t want to leave the restaurant, but Ilya knew it was actually because she didn’t want to be a burden to her adult children with their own families. Ilya has always resented them a little for abandoning a wonderful lonely mother who loves them unconditionally. They didn’t know how good they had it, exactly how lucky they were.

It was serendipitous that Ilya and Svetlana showed up when they did, so soon after Katya’s heartbreak. Ilya likes to think that they help.

“I understand, babushka,” Ilya replies, “besides, I would not trust any of them with you. You only deserve the best.”

“Yes, and I had it,” Katya clears her throat. “And I want you to have it too. Which one is the boy?”

Someone should study how effectively Katya managed to turn every conversation into a matchmaking one. Peer-reviewed and published in an anthropology journal. If Ilya wasn’t the

one always at the other end of it, he would almost be inspired.

“There are many boys here,” Ilya grimaces, deflecting, “you will have to be more specific than that.”

Katya scoffs, scowling. “Do you think I was born yesterday? You have never once been interested in hockey before and you have been friends with the team for a long time. You wanted to come here for a new reason. I know what someone will do for a pretty boy, Ilyushechka and coming to random, violent hockey games that you do not care about is one of them.”

“You would have been KGB if you stayed in Russia, Katya,” Ilya mutters, ears warm. He should have anticipated she would clock him almost immediately.

“Well?”

Ilya fidgets, thinking if he would be able to effectively lie to her. That idea crumbles up like dust within seconds and Ilya sighs.

“He is not here,” Ilya mumbles. “This is not his game.”

“What?” Katya blinks, “Ilya, you stupid boy, why are we here?”

Ilya shrugs awkwardly. “His team’s game was cancelled and it would be suspicious if I told Marley no now. My boy,” and fuck, the warmth that spread through Ilya’s chest and fingers with *those* words almost made him breathless, “he cannot… we cannot risk people finding out. That he likes men. Is risky for me too, with the visa and Russia. Would be very public.”

Katya is quiet for a long minute. “It is outrageous,” she finally says, but she is more solemn. She reaches over and grips his hand, her gnarled, over-worked one on top of his calloused one. “Is he worth it?”

Ilya looks out at the ice, pulse in his throat. There’s an announcement that the game will be starting in ten minutes.

He considers what he knows about Shane. He was complicated, anxious, and over-cautious. He tended to spook easily and was a little awkward, missing social cues often. In the week since their first video call, he’s spiraled by overthinking twice already.

He was also instinctively kind, and emotionally intuitive in ways Ilya was surprised by. He’s ambitious and hardworking. Ilya’s been delighted by his snark, sharp wit, and dry humor that only a few privileged people got to see. Shane is patient, listens, and cares deeply for the handful of people he lets in. Somehow, Ilya is one of them. And that’s just what Ilya’s learned about him so far.

Ilya is a scientific researcher. At his core, he is a curious individual. Worthiness, for him, is gauged by how much he wants to learn about it.

“I think so. Yes.”

Ilya wants to know everything about Shane.

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Two days before the Montreal game, Ilya is dead set on concentrating on his classes. He's almost two lectures behind which is two too many. He can't check his phone if he's neck deep in cosmological theory. So he sets himself up at the library, phone on mute, and hits his books.

The attempted distraction lasts about thirty minutes. He checks his messages halfway through his notes and sees Shane's texted him four times already, so Ilya knows he's done with this study session.

Shane (3:31 pm): I'm going to kill JJ

Shane (3:33 pm): first of all I can't understand how he can nap right before a game and not be groggy as fuck

Shane (3:34 pm): second of all, no one should be subjected to this auditory torture. He's been snoring for twenty minutes and I think I'm going to stab him to make it stop. Fuck he's worse than a lawnmower.

Shane (3:38 pm) fuck it going downstairs

Ilya (3:54 pm): you are not rooming with hayden?

Shane (3:55 pm): he's on injury reserve. Got a pretty bad concussion apparently last game so he's sitting this one out

Ilya (3:56 pm): tell him I am sorry and hope he gets better

Shane (3:57 pm): no i don't think I will, he's been giving me shit about meeting you constantly now. he sent me a link for an article about best condom brands.

Ilya (3:57 pm): you misunderstand me, I mean I am sorry he sucks and I hope he gets better at hockey

Ilya (3:58 pm): and you do not have to worry about buying condoms, I will be bringing plenty for us 😉

Ilya (3:38 pm): I need XXXL, can be difficult to find

"Hi!" a high-pitched girlish voice interrupts what's looking like the start of a very fun sexting thread if he plays his cards right. He looks up, squinting. A long-limbed slender girl with red hair and a short skirt is standing to the left of his table. She looks vaguely familiar.

“Hello,” Ilya greets, not caring that he’s being short, “do I know you?”

“Probably not, I’m Gemma,” she shrugs, unbothered by his rudeness unfortunately, “I think you sit in front of me in MATH 409.”

Ilya pauses, nodding without recognition, not remembering a girl like her in any of his advanced calculus classes. He normally would. She’s pretty enough with big enough tits to at least catch his attention.

Though, no one’s really been catching his attention these past couple months. Not when he’s usually on his phone more often than not talking to someone far more interesting.

“Right. So…do you need something?”

“Oh, just your phone number,” she smiles flirtatiously. Oh. This. Ilya sighs internally before outwardly giving her a thin smile.

“Ah, I see. I am sorry, uh, Gemma, but I’m not interested,” he turns her down. She doesn’t take the hint.

“I can’t convince you to get a drink with me over the weekend?” she presses, cocking her head in a way that makes her hair slip like a waterfall. “I would make it worth your while.”

Ilya opens his mouth to reject her again when his phone dings between them, only to show a series of texts from Shane.

Shane (3:46 pm): god you’re so full of shit.

Shane (3:47 pm): i might not let you fuck me on Friday if you keep being a dick about it.

He notices exactly when it clicks for Gemma, the text and the very masculine name.

“Oh!” her smile drops. “I didn’t realize…”

And then it’s a look of discomfort, the way she pulls away physically from him. Not wanting to be in his space like homosexuality was catching.

“You’re…” she waves her hand aimlessly, before wrinkling her nose, “gay?”

Ilya raises an eyebrow and shrugs. “What do you think?”

He feels no urge to correct her and tell her he was bisexual. It would probably make her leave him alone faster, thinking he only liked men.

“Right,” she nods, “okay. I’m actually…”

“Bye,” he dismisses, already bored and reaching for his phone. She takes the exit for what it is without replying. He doesn’t watch, already texting.

Ilya (3:50 pm): mm no i do not think so. I think you will be begging me to fuck you on Friday.

Ilya (3:50 pm): Especially if i keep being a dick about it.

Shane (3:51 pm): and how would you keep being a dick about it?

Ilya grins to himself, putting his feet up on the chair across from him.

Ilya (3:52 pm): i’m glad you asked sweetheart

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Early March

“You’re doing so good for me,” Ilya purrs, “Fuck, you take me so well, you make me so hard.”

A breathy moan floats over the speaker as Ilya plays sudoku in a cheap book he found on the side of the road being given out for free.

“Are you close for me, Amy?” He’s finished with the sevens.

“Yes, fuck, Roz, please, I’m so close,” she whines, “fuck, fuck I’m going to come, I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“Good girl,” Ilya praises as she cries out, knowing how much Amy likes it. She’s one of his regulars, usually calling once every couple weeks. Praise kink a mile wide and very into bondage fantasies. He doesn’t know too much about her outside of that, which Ilya kind of prefers for most of his clients, with one notable exception.

Which does remind him. He checks the time. “You did very good for me Amy. You’ll keep being good and take a warm shower?”

“Mm, yes, Roz,” Amy hums, “talk to you next time.”

She hangs up before Ilya can, and it’s two minutes before midnight. Ilya takes the gamble that he won’t be getting any more clients in the next 120 seconds and picks up his personal phone.

“Hey, you done for the night?” Shane asks, answering his call with a yawn.

“You are tired,” Ilya notices immediately. “You can sleep if you need, малыш, I know it’s late and you have early mornings.”

“No, no, it’s okay. No morning practice. Or, well, it’s optional.”

Something tells Ilya that Shane didn’t consider it *optional*.

“You will go anyway,” Ilya deduces wryly. Shane huffs a laugh.

“I mean, unless you give me a better reason to stay up and sleep in,” he says innocently, and Ilya grins, getting comfortable in his chair.

“You think you deserve it?” he challenges. “What did you do today, малыш, do deserve an orgasm?”

“Who said anything about an orgasm?” Shane teases, “maybe I meant we could play a game.”

Ilya laughs out loud. “Oh? A game? And what game would that be, Shane?”

“Mmm, that’s up to you isn’t it?”

“You are very right, it is up to me,” Ilya sucks on his bottom lip, with an idea brewing. “There is a game we played as children in school, Правда или действие. Truth or Challenge.”

“Truth or Dare?” Shane guesses, and Ilya hums, letting his voice drop. “Yes. Do you want to play with me, sweetheart?”

He gets his intended effect across as he hears Shane’s breath hitch.

“Okay,” he exhales. “How do we win?”

“Of course first thing you would ask is how to win,” Ilya scoffs, but it’s embarrassingly affectionate. “Everything is competition for you, isn’t it?”

“Not a competition if I always win.”

“Brat. Whoever gives truth or dare that other person will not do wins.”

He can hear Shane absorb that. “Hmm. Okay. Skype?”

Ilya pulls his laptop closer to him, booting it up. “Skype.”

Seeing Shane on his shitty computer screen brings the same exhilirating rush as it always does. He hangs up the phone as the video call connects, and sees Shane do the same.

“Okay,” Shane continues, “truth or dare.”

“Oh, I will go first then?” Ilya grins, “I will allow it. Dare.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Shane rolls his eyes. “Okay, I dare you to pretend like you’re picking me up at a bar.”

Ilya hums. “Huh. Interesting. Is difficult over video. I can’t touch you.”

“Just try,” Shane shrugs.

Ilya schools his expression into something more like a smolder, only to see Shane smother a smile and cough.

“You can’t laugh while I’m doing it!” Ilya complains and the chuckle escapes Shane.

“Sorry, sorry. We’re at the bar.”

“Hmm, good. Hello, beautiful,” Ilya starts, voice low. Shane raises an eyebrow, grinning. “Has that line worked on literally anyone you’ve tried it on?”

“Doesn’t matter. I only need it to work on you.”

Shane blinks, grin flickering briefly. Ilya’s smirk grows. “Why would I care about what anyone else thinks of my line when I could have you?”

“You think you could have me? That’s arrogant. You’re pretty full of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Mmm, no, it’s you who wants to be full of me.”

“Oh so you think I’m easy.” Shane gives him an unimpressed look that’s diminished by the way he’s trying to keep from laughing.

“Sweetheart,” Ilya gives him a shark-like grin, “I know you’re easy.”

“That was awful,” Shane shakes his head, “I’d probably throw my drink in your face if you showed up and acted like that.”

Ilya laughs. “Good, you probably should. Besides, I wouldn't need lines to pick you up at a bar.”

“No?”

“No,” Ilya says simply, and doesn’t elaborate. Doesn’t tell Shane that if he had met him at a bar, he would have come up to him, asked to buy him a drink. Would ask him questions, get to know him, make him laugh. And only when they were close enough to touch, when Shane was fully drawn in Ilya’s orbit, only then would Ilya grip his waist, hold his jaw, and press his lips against his. He doesn’t tell Shane he’s thought and fantasized about this exact scenario more than he should. A normal meeting as two normal men free to be exactly who they are, making out at a club. “Your turn. Truth or dare Shane?”

“Truth.”

Ilya gives him an amused look. “How unexpected.” Shane rolls his eyes.

“Okay. What is the most freaky kink you want to try?”

Shane blushes. “Jesus, Ilya.”

He raises both his eyebrows innocently. “What? I want to know. You do not have to worry about kinkshaming, I would not do that. Unless you want me to.”

“Shut up,” Shane says automatically but then pauses. He chews on his bottom lip, clearly wrestling with his answer. Ilya isn’t expecting anything wild but he’s intrigued what could be making Shane hesitate so long.

“Come on,” Ilya presses, “this is safe space, no? You can tell me.”

Shane sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Fine. I, um, think free use is really hot.”

Pump the fucking breaks. Ilya bolts straight up in his seat. “Hold on, what the fuck?”

“You said you wouldn’t kinkshame!”

“I am not kinkshaming, I’m rebooting, how does a total *virgin* know what free use is?”

Ilya has to focus on that discrepancy, because otherwise his brain would actually honest to god explode imagining trying *free fucking use* with *Shane fucking Hollander.*

“I’m not discussing this with you,” Shane dismisses, bright tomato red. “Truth or dare jackass.”

“We’re not done with this,” Ilya warns. “Dare.”

“I’m starting to think you’re too scared to pick truth,” Shane ribs.

“Oh, same way you are too scared to pick dare?”

“Whatever. I dare you to give me a strip tease.”

Ilya laughs, delighted. “Oh sweetheart, a dare is supposed to be something that’s hard to do.”

Ilya gets up to back up far enough to stand and be seen on the screen. He hasn’t actually done this for someone, usually the recipient than the giver but he’s happy to oblige. It helps that he doesn’t actually get embarrassed easily when it comes to sex, so he takes his time stripping out of his shirt. Drags a hand over his chest, rucking it up messily to show flashes of skin before pulling it off over his head. Bends over slowly, pulling down his sweatpants sticking out of his ass and leaving him in just his briefs. Arches as he comes back up to standing and sees Shane watching with his mouth dropped, hands pressing together so tight his knuckles are going white.

“Do you want to touch yourself Shane, watching me?” Ilya asks and enjoys the way Shane grows flustered. “Hmm?”

“Yes,” Shane admits in an exhale, “Yeah, I do.”

“That’s too bad then, sweetheart,” Ilya smirks and Shane scowls at him.

“Fucker. You’re not done,” Shane reminds him, clenching his jaw.

Ilya grins, reaching down to cup himself and squeeze through the black fabric. He’s watching the webcam camera as he pulls out his cock, tucking the band of his briefs under his balls and giving himself a few strokes.

“Shit,” Shane whispers, and Ilya’s sure if he was in person, he wouldn’t be able to see the irises of Shane’s dilated eyes. Ilya doesn’t tease him for long, stripping off to stand naked in front of the camera. He spreads out his arms and bows. Shane laughs, even if it is hoarse.

“Truth or Dare, малыш?” Ilya asks, sitting back down. Shane bites his lip before inhaling deep.

“Dare,” Shane breathes. Ilya smirks. “Excellent. I want you to go to your kitchen and get some ice cubes.”

Shane blinks, clearly caught off guard. “Oh. Um, okay?” Shane gets up to do as told, even if confused, and comes back with a glass with ice cubes, setting it next to him. “That’s it?”

“No, of course not. Take one of the ice cubes and put it inside of yourself.”

Shane blushes bright red, mouth dropping. “Ilya!”

“You won’t?” Ilya goads, “I guess that makes me the winner, hmm?”

Shane clenches his jaw, competition flashing in his eyes. Ilya just waits with a single challenging raised eyebrow. Slowly, Shane reaches to take an ice cube out of the glass.

Ilya watches his face keenly as Shane’s shaking hands disappear from the screen, moving underneath him. He knows when he’s touched himself with it when his breath hitches and he bites his lower lip.

He knows when he’s pushed it inside when he chokes out a moan and closes his eyes, balance faltering as he braces himself on his desk.

“Oh my god,” he gasps, the tremble traveling from his hands up his arms. “Oh— fuck!”

Ilya’s biting his tongue to keep quiet, drinking up the little whimpers and whines over the laptop speaker as the ice cube travels and melts inside of Shane.

“Good boy,” Ilya praises, voice low and raspy. He watches the words wrack through Shane. “Fuck, that was so hot. You were so good.”

“Fuck,” Shane breathes. “You’re an asshole, you know that? Truth or Dare.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t like it. Dare. Last one, it’s late.”

Ilya watches Shane tilt his head, considering, and thinks he sees a ghost of a smirk.

“Show me how you touch yourself. How do you get yourself off when you’re all alone, Ilya?”

It’s cute, watching Shane try to be seductive. Shane has always been seductive in an accidental kind of way. He didn’t even mean to be, but the way he moans and whimpers and begs has Ilya just barely keeping from going feral.

Ilya isn’t shy at all, moving his laptop to the edge of the desk and grasping himself with a hand. He relaxes, giving Shane a show as he strokes up and down, slow and lazy.

“I like it slow, at first,” Ilya narrates, watching Shane watch his cock. “All the way to the bottom and all the way to the top. Good pressure.” He squeezes his hand over the head of his cock and groans. “Fuck, like that.”

Shane swallows, silent as he watches and listens.

“Then I’ll speed up, slowly,” Ilya demonstrates, picking up his pace, “Really start to squeeze, because your pretty hole would be so tight for me, wouldn’t it Shane? You would grip me so well.”

Shane flushes bright red, lips parting in a gasp. “Oh, shit, Ilya–”

“Because you are what I think about, when I’m touching myself,” Ilya presses, leaning his head to the side as he strips himself fast and hard. He can feel the edge of his orgasm starting at the base of his cock. “When I’m fucking my fist, I’m imagining it’s you I’m fucking into. Or when it’s just my hand like this, I think about you riding me, hard and slutty. You would look so gorgeous bouncing on my cock, солнышко, begging me to come.”

“Oh my god,” Shane’s voice cracks as he grips the table in an effort to stay obedient and keep his hands off his probably aching cock.

“Fuck, touch yourself with me,” Ilya demands. Shane huffs a breathless laugh.

“I didn’t ask for a dare,” Shane challenges, even as his hands disappear under the desk.

“No,” Ilya smirks, “but you’ll do it for me anyway.”

A few minutes later, Ilya’s pretty sure he’s won the game when he watches Shane come with a perfect O-face, moaning Ilya’s name.

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Ilya only brings up logistics the day before the game. He hadn’t wanted to jinx it, because if their cancelled meeting after really talking for a few weeks was disappointing, Ilya thinks that another missed connection after really talking for *months* would be devastating.

“Oh, did you want to go somewhere?” Shane asks, and Ilya can see his hesitation. Meeting somewhere public would be counterproductive to keeping this whole thing a secret after all.

“No, no it should still be private space. I would offer my place, but I am not sure my student income studio is up to your standards, Mr. NHL Salary,” Ilya huffs wryly.

“What does that even mean?” Shane flusters. “Your place would be fine. I’m not even that–”

“Don’t say you’re not that rich. I’ve seen your contract, Hollander,” Ilya stops him. “Is public on internet.”

“Ah,” Shane shrugs sheepishly. “Right. I really don’t mind your place Ilya. But if you would be more comfortable meeting for the first time in a third space, I could get a room at a different hotel than my team.”

“Mmm, that might be good,” Ilya defers. An impersonal space like a hotel room would feel clinical, but he really doesn’t know how he feels about bringing Shane home to his place, with the cracked kitchen tiles and shower that only has hot water half the time. It's a strange feeling– he’s never felt self-conscious about what he has, knowing how hard he’s worked to get it. But bringing an actual multimillionaire to his apartment when its one shining feature is that it doesn't have rats like half the other buildings in Boston seems… unpleasant. Especially when he wants Shane so badly, wants to be wanted by him so much.

“That's the place covered then,” Shane says. “I’ll probably have press after the game so maybe we meet an hour later? I can leave a key at the front desk with your name.”

“No, too risky to have record. I will wait around the block until you are back and you can open door for me.”

“Okay. Okay we’ll do that. I’ll text when I get to the hotel.”

They’re both quiet after that. Being quiet with Shane has become easier and more comfortable over their talking phase. He doesn’t find the urge to fill the dead space with words to be interesting like he might with someone he knows less. He can be content with a soft crackle of Shane breathing. Ilya leans back in his bed, his phone on speaker next to him.

“Tomorrow,” is all he says. He can feel the reciprocal anticipation race back and forth between them over the line. An exposed live wire.

Shane exhales. “Yeah. Tomorrow.”

+++

Tomorrow

Ilya’s seen a handful of hockey games now. Doesn’t know all the ins and outs of the game yet but even he, with his incredibly limited exposure, can say that the Boston v. Montreal game is insanely good hockey.

“Holy shit,” Ilya says, probably for the fourth or fifth time. Shane had stolen the puck so quickly from Carmichael Ilya had lost track of it for a full thirty seconds. By the time Ilya saw it again, it was in Boston's net.

“He is very good,” Svetlana grins, watching with sharp eyes. “Maybe the best. You do not do things by half measures, do you Lyusha?”

“No,” Ilya replies faintly, unable to look away. Shane flashes a smile in their general direction, having asked for his seat numbers earlier, and it nearly does Ilya’s heart in. “Fuck.”

“There are children here, Ilya, you cannot get hard in public.”

“Shut up,” he hisses, “I got you tickets to sold out hockey game. Ungrateful bitch.”

“Marleau got me tickets to sold out hockey game,” Sveta corrects him and then smirks. “I will need to thank him. Thoroughly.”

“Oh, ugh. Gross. Stop that,” Ilya grimaces. He’s either had sex or thought about sex with both of them but the pair of them together feels viscerally wrong.

“This game is almost over,” Sveta comments, cracking her neck, “5-1 on home ice must be very hard for Bears.”

“Please don’t say you’ll be giving Marley a consolation prize.”

“I think I’ll give Marleau a consolation prize.”

Ilya decides to ignore her. There were only four more minutes in the third period. Which means in a little more than an hour, he would be walking into Shane’s hotel room. That’s more than enough of an incentive to keep the peace.

Ilya almost doesn’t want to risk the friends and family area in case he sees Shane in the flesh and has to pretend he doesn’t know what he looks like crying as he comes, but Marleau texted and Svetlana wants a hook up.

“There he is! And Svetlana, beautiful as ever,” Marleau’s voice booms over the chattering group of wives, children, friends, and players. “What’d you think of the game, Roz? Good?”

It was good. Ilya had to very vehemently think unsexy thoughts after Shane had checked a player hard enough to send them flying.

Ilya just shrugs. “I can see why you all have brain damage.”

“Tough game,” Svetlana offers, a little coy. Ilya just barely keeps from rolling his eyes. “You were good.”

Marley just laughs. “It’s alright, you can say Hollander fucked us hard.”

Ilya covers his snort with a cough, bringing a fist up to hide his sudden grin. Svetlana likewise smirks. “Ah well. He was playing exceptionally well, that’s true. Maybe he had someone to show off to.”

She glances briefly at Ilya, ignoring his pointed glare before smiling back at Marleau winningly. “Are you all going out?”

“Yeah, but not too late. Still have morning practice,” Marleau sighs, rolling out his stiff shoulders. “Would love it if you both joined us. Rozy, we haven’t seen your ugly mug out and about in months. You finally settle down or something?”

Ilya opens his mouth to shoot back one of his classic witty rebuttals but to his horror, stutters. Marley notices the stumble, and raises both eyebrows in shock. “No way. Seriously? You’re straight up blushing Roz.”

“No, no, I do not blush,” Ilya snaps too quickly. He is *not blushing*. “I do not do this. I am just talking to someone.”

Marleau whistles. “Oh wow. And how long have you been talking exactly?”

“Mmm, months,” Sveta stage-whispers to him, clearly amused.

“No way,” Marley laughs, “last time I saw you this worked up over someone it was over that boy that had you getting wasted on a random Tuesday–”

Ilya sees him cut himself off as the connection clicks. “Oh, shit, is it the same guy?”

“Svetlana wants to sleep with you,” Ilya announces instead of answering. Sveta scowls at him. “You two should go do that. I have somewhere else to be.”

“Um, what?” Marleau blinks. He vaguely hears Svetlana cursing him out but he’s too busy turning around and finding the exit. Forty minutes.

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The trip to the Hilton that Shane had sent the address to that morning is on the green line, to Ilya’s despair. When he checks the times on the platform he almost groans. It definitely had broken down at some point today. By the time he gets to the hotel, it’s past nine and Shane’s already texted.

Shane (9:05 pm): back at the hotel. 1410.

Shane (9:16 pm): you here yet?

Ilya (9:24 pm): Fuck, sorry, the train was slow. I’m here.

Ilya (9:25 pm): Coming up now.

The elevator ride up to the 14th floor feels like it would never end. He smiles awkwardly as someone joins him going up, very deliberately watching the numbers tick up one at a time.

Shane's room is down the hall, around the corner from the elevator. He pauses in front of it, heart beating out of his chest.

He inhales, and knocks on the door.

Shane opens.

"Oh," Shane exhales, and they're both frozen still.

Shane is fucking beautiful. None of the sponsorship ads and high quality photography could do Shane Hollander in the flesh justice. He's shorter than Ilya by a couple inches but Ilya can see the way his bulk muscle fills out the rolled up sleeves of his post-game dress shirt. Big, expressive eyes, a straight nose, and a pretty mouth. And the fucking freckles. Fuck, no picture could capture the art of Shane's freckles splashed across his skin.

The elevator down the hall dings and it wakes them both up.

"Oh, shit, come in," Shane flusters, stepping back to give Ilya room to enter. He follows Shane inside, letting the door softly click shut. Then, it's just them in the foyer.

"Um, hi," Shane greets, awkwardly sticking out a handshake automatically, "I'm, um, Shane."

He flushes immediately when he realizes, clearly mortified with himself as he moves to draw his hand back. Ilya is delighted to see how the blush spreads across his cheeks.

Ilya grins, and just like that, he is smitten. He grasps Shane's hand before he can pull it away completely, shaking it once before threading their fingers together. "Yes. Hello. My name is Ilya. What brought you here tonight?"

Shane recognizes Ilya playing along, and smiles, relieved. It brightens him, makes his eyes crinkle. He looks younger, softer. God, Ilya's in trouble.

"Was hoping to meet someone special," he replies, and Ilya raises an eyebrow, huffing a laugh. "Oh? Have you found what you were looking for?"

Shane's smile dials down to something shy. "I think so. Yeah."

God. Shane thankfully continues before Ilya does something stupid. "Um, what did you think of the game?"

Ilya turns, walking deeper into the room with his hands in his pocket. His heart is still racing. "I think if you were trying to impress me, sweetheart, you did a very, very good job."

He looks back at Shane just in time to see him flush red, pleased. Shane joins him, crossing the threshold into the bedroom area until he's standing directly in front of him. Close enough to see the white scar that bisects the corner of his left eyebrow, the way his lips are shiny from licking them.

“Wow.” He whispers, eyes moving back and forth across Ilya’s face. “Can’t believe you’re real.”

Ilya can’t take it anymore. He needs to kiss him, desperately.

Shane lets out a soft exhale, gaze automatically darting down to lock on to Ilya’s lips as Ilya places his hands on Shane’s waist. He lets himself be pushed until his back hits the wall with a soft thump.

Like this Ilya can appreciate that even though Shane is the professional athlete, Ilya is bigger than him. Maybe not in pure muscle mass, but he’s taller and broader and he can tell Shane is really into it. He crowds Shane in until they’re sharing air.

“Hi,” Shane whispers, eyes flicking up to meet Ilya’s. They look like black coffee in the dim hotel light. His freckles are stars, and Ilya wonders if he could map out his favorite constellations onto his face.

Ilya smiles fondly, reaching up to brush the endearing marks on his cheek. “Hello, малыш,” he replies, voice low and he gets to watch the way Shane reacts, breath hitching and eyes fluttering. He can’t believe this is what he had been missing talking to Shane over the phone all these months. Ilya leans down but pauses just before making contact, the tips of their noses brushing.

“Is okay?” he asks, and he sees Shane smile, nodding with an inhale before reaching up to press his lips against Ilya’s.

They both shudder into it, opening up immediately. Ilya can tell right away that Shane is new to this, unsure about what to do with his lips and tongue. He’s not bad though, not at all, and makes up for any inexperience with wonderful enthusiasm. Ilya sets the pace, slowing them down into a deeper, more intentional slide.

“Fuck,” Shane whispers against his lips, dazed.

“Mm?”

“I just,” Shane has his eyes locked on Ilya’s lips. “Just realizing that I’ve never kissed someone like this before.”

Ilya groans under his breath, cupping his face with both hands and pulling him in again, kissing him deeper.

“Mmm, fuck. Bed?” Ilya asks, panting for air. He drops softer kisses as he tries to catch his breath, unable to pull away for too long.

Shane doesn’t bother replying and instead pushes back on Ilya against his shoulders, guiding him backwards deeper into the room. Ilya goes willingly, collapsing back on the sheets of the bed and he shifts himself backward and up to reach the headboard.

“Come here,” he urges Shane with a hand reaching out. Shane takes it, and lets Ilya pull him on to the bed with him. With a hand on his thigh, Ilya encourages him to straddle him and sit

in his lap. Like this, Ilya's looking up at him to kiss him, something he enjoys very much as he succumbs to the need to pull him in closer.

When he's close enough though, all his hard lines and soft curves pressed against Ilya's body, he realizes suddenly that Shane is shaking, barely noticeable tremors under Ilya's hands.

"Hey," Ilya quiets, bringing a palm up to Shane's cheek. Shane won't quite look at him. "Hey, sweetheart. What is wrong? You do not want this?"

"No, no I do," Shane reassures him quickly. "I do want this, want you. I'm just…"

Ilya hums, tilting his head. "Nervous?"

Shane bites his lip and ducks his head. "I've never done this before," he reminds Ilya, looking up at him through his eyelashes. "I've told you that before, I think. You're kind of my first for all of this."

Ilya should not feel as giddy as he does at the thought of being Shane's first. Of being the first to see how completely Shane can fall apart in the way Ilya intends to make him tonight. First to know what he feels like inside. He knows he was already the first to hear him come.

"I know," Ilya tells him, voice low, "it is okay. We do only as much as you want to, yes? And we stop, if it is too much. I will stop, малыш, if you need me to, I promise. We go your pace, okay?"

Shane exhales shakily, nodding before leaning down to kiss Ilya softly. It's tender, barely a brush of lips with a quiet smacking sound as he pulls away. It's the sweetest kiss Ilya has ever received in his life.

"Sweetheart," Ilya whispers, brushing his nose against Shane's, swallowing hard. He thinks he might actually be as nervous as Shane. Shane replies by pressing more firmly, and it figures that Shane would be a fast learner because he's already urging Ilya's mouth open all on his own.

"Mm," Ilya pulls the noise from deep in his chest before tugging at Shane's hem, "mmph, off. I want to see you малыш."

Shane pulls back, breathing a little fast but leans away far enough to reach down and strip off his shirt in one smooth motion. Ilya groans at the sight of smooth pale skin over the most stunning set of abs he's ever seen.

"Fuck," he grunts, brushing his hands against Shane's abdomen up to his chest. He can feel the way his muscles twitch under his palms. "Fuck, you're fucking gorgeous."

"You too," Shane gasps into Ilya's mouth. "I want to see you too."

Ilya spares a second of self-consciousness but it flits away quickly. He might not play sports for a living, but he's always kept fit his entire life. He doesn't have as much muscle with how much he manages to eat regularly, but what he does have has been toned in the gym over several years. He knows he looks good naked.

He’s proven right when Shane lets out a little moan, hands touching bare skin as soon as he’s able.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Shane murmurs, awed. He’s tracing the moles dotted across Ilya’s chest and stomach, moving from one to the next. “God, you’re beautiful.”

“Mm, no that is you,” Ilya disagrees with little heat, before wrapping an arm around Shane’s back and pulling him into a kiss. He feels like a teenager again, with how hot just making out shirtless is making him feel, but everything about Shane makes his blood burn under his skin.

Shane is trembling again though, when Ilya reaches up to cradle his head. He pulls away and is gratified when he sees Shane unconsciously chase after him.

“What is it? You are still shaking,” Ilya questions gently, “you are still scared? We can stop, sweetheart, that is okay.”

Shane shakes his head immediately. “No, no I don’t want to stop, I— it’s stupid but I’m—“ he hesitates, closing his eyes.

“Not stupid, if it makes you nervous. Tell me.”

“I’m scared you won’t like it,” Shane confesses under his breath like he can’t look at Ilya as he does. “That I, um. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing so I’m worried I won’t make it good for you, I guess.”

Ilya makes a disbelieving noise. “Shane. Малыш. Hey, look at me,” he urges Shane’s face up with a hand gripping his jaw. He clicks his tongue as he meets Shane’s eye and sees uncertainty there. “That is impossible. Insane to even imagine. Do you have any idea—“

Ilya cuts himself off, taking a deep breath. Telling Shane is not going to be enough to convince him. So he finds Shane’s hand with his free one and slowly, giving him enough time to pull away, brings their joined hands to press against his crotch. They both gasp against each other’s mouths at the feel. Ilya gets to watch him through lidded eyes as Shane’s expression changes from caution to heated awe.

“Do you have any idea, how fucking hard you make me?” Ilya murmurs, “how much I fucking want you?” He lets go of Shane’s wrist, so he can move off if he wants to. Shane keeps his hand there though, and Ilya has to exhale shakily as he feels him hesitantly squeeze, feeling out the shape of his erection. “Fuck. I haven’t been able to get you off my mind for *months*, Shane. You do not have to worry about me not liking it.”

“Oh,” Shane breathes, lips parted as he touches Ilya over his pants. His grip is loose but it’s still enough to make Ilya’s head spin. Ilya surges up to kiss him and Shane responds eagerly until they’re panting into each other’s mouths.

“What do you want, sweetheart? Tell me, and I will give,” Ilya urges, breathlessly.

“I want,” Shane exhales, eyes fluttering closed before he makes himself look at Ilya, beseeching. “I want to suck you. Please? I want you in my mouth.”

Ilya makes a groaning noise he doesn’t think he’s ever made in bed before.

“Fuck,” he whispers, more to himself than to Shane, “fuck, okay. Yes, shit. Fuck, you are perfect.”

Shane flushes at the praise but with Ilya’s permission, he rocks back off of Ilya’s lap and moves down to spread out down the bed. Ilya runs a hand down his sculpted back, wishing suddenly he had asked Shane to finish stripping so he would be laid out before Ilya completely bare. The thought doesn’t last long though, as Ilya’s breath catches at the feel of Shane’s mouth and nose bumping against his clothed cock. He snaps his gaze down, refusing to miss a second of this.

Shane is hesitant as he unzips Ilya out of his jeans, glancing up at him under his eyelashes. Ilya helps him lower his jeans and boxers just enough to free his dick. Ilya is treated to the sight of his hard cock jutting up and superimposed over Shane’s reverant expression, mouth parted.

He runs his hand through Shane’s hair and his heart skips a beat as he leans into it, searching for his touch like a cat.

“At your pace,” he reminds him. “Only as much as you want to.”

Ilya exhales slowly as Shane grips around his base to keep him steady and brings his lips to his cock.

Shane kisses his head, unsure, before a flicker of tongue peaks out to lick at him. It should be embarrassing, how fucking close Ilya is with almost no stimulation. Ilya gasps out shakily as Shane continues to taste him, small but increasingly insistent kitten licks running over the entire length of him as Shane gets more enthusiastic. He swirls his tongue around the slit at the head of his cock, lapping up his leaking precome and it sends chills down Ilya’s spine to his toes.

“Fuck,” Ilya breathes, a hand resting on Shane’s head. “Oh shit, sweetheart. That’s it. Just taste me.”

Shane takes that as a sign to bring his mouth up and suck the head of Ilya’s cock into the soft, wet heat of him. Shane moans and Ilya can feel his tongue run under the edge of the head of his dick then trace a vein.

“Jesus,” Ilya swears. Unconsciously, his fingers gather Shane’s hair when Shane moves to take another inch of him deeper, sucking as he goes. It makes Shane look up at him, and it knocks the air out of Ilya’s lungs, seeing the blissful expression on his face with his lips wrapped around Ilya’s cock. “Jesus, look at you. You fucking love it, don’t you? Love having my cock in your mouth.”

Shane nods with his eyes closed, moving his head up and down, letting his spit run down the sides of Ilya's dick. Ilya breathes heavily, watching with his lips parted as Shane sucks at him, both his hands now resting around the crown of his head. He can tell how much Shane is enjoying this, the way he's losing himself to it, so much so Shane takes too much of him without realizing and chokes.

"Shhh, fuck, careful sweetheart," Ilya urges him, guiding him off his dick to get him to catch his breath. He slips off with a dirty slurp and a quiet plaintive whine escapes him as he's panting. He's flushed, painted pink under his freckles with glazed eyes. His mouth is cherry-red, slick, and bruised, a thread of Shane's saliva or Ilya's precome connecting his mouth with Ilya's cock briefly before it breaks away. Ilya can't fucking look away.

"Ебать," Ilya exhales, "holy fuck, Shane, come here."

Shane goes willingly when Ilya pulls him up to capture his lips. He's messy and uncoordinated like he's fucking cock drunk already and Ilya can taste himself on his tongue. Ilya feels like he needs to touch him more than he needs to breathe.

His hands leave Shane's hips, coming down to the button and zipper of his jeans. Shane lets him, pressing his forehead against Ilya's shoulder before helping Ilya undress and pull his jeans off entirely leaving him just in his briefs. He holds himself up briefly to give Ilya just enough room to do the same with his own open jeans and briefs until the only barrier between them is Shane's thin underwear.

"Ilya," Shane breathes against his mouth, and it's like Shane had struck him over the head, hearing his name in person with that heady desperation. He's looking down at their laps where Ilya is straining hard, still slick with Shane's spit. He absently brushes his knuckles along the side of his cock, touch fleeting but enough to make Ilya's dick twitch, and Ilya is convinced he had the world's most natural tease in his lap at that moment.

"*Боже*. How far do you want to go tonight, малыш?" Ilya asks, stroking down Shane's bare flank. He's captivated by the trail of goosebumps that follow underneath his finger tips.

"I–" Shane bites his lip as Ilya's hand gropes his ass. "I want you in me. Please, Ilya. Fuck me, please."

Ilya groans, knocking together their foreheads as he pulls Shane closer. It drags his ass over his cock, and Shane moans at the feel of him.

"Yes, fuck, anything you want, sweetheart. You have me."

He gently pushes Shane off his lap to lay down on his back, shifting to crawl over him. It would be easier, probably, if Ilya had put him on his hands and knees but he wants to be selfish. Ilya wants to memorize every flicker and twitch of bliss on Shane's face as he makes this boy come. Shane loves to kiss him, it seems, goes to reach for him every moment he can including now. Ilya lets the kiss grow hotter and hotter, sucking on his tongue until they were both panting into each other. Shane is making soft little whimpers in the back of his throat, and Ilya remembers how he sounds over the phone, when Ilya was directing him on making himself come.

Ilya kisses down his cheek, jaw and neck, stalling to suck at the skin there and bite gently, making Shane shudder. Then he continues his way down Shane's chest, and fuck, he's known for months now what Shane looked like, had known from the start that he was an athlete but this was practically obscene.

"Fuck, I knew your tits would be gorgeous," Ilya mutters, pausing to capture a stiff nipple in his mouth and sucking briefly. Shane gasps out a strangled cry, neck arching up and hands unsure in the air as if he wanted to touch. Ilya didn't waste too much time though, continuing down the sharp ridges of his abdomen and down the faint trail of hair to Shane's briefs.

"Can I?" Ilya asks, fingers just under the band of his underwear to be clear about his intentions. Shane swallows and then nods.

Having Shane laid out for him naked like some kind of hockey Adonis may be enough to convince Ilya there really is a god.

"Fucking beautiful," Ilya murmurs, hands stroking up thick thighs to the throbbing length between Shane's legs calling for his attention. Ilya is patient though, and can wait. Can make it last. "Fuck, you are unreal, Shane."

"Ilya," he breathes out, already breathing hard. "Fuck, need you. Please touch me Ilya, I can't–"

Ilya does him one better and leans down to suck the head of Shane's cock into his mouth.

"Oh my god," Shane rushes out in a cry, hand coming down to Ilya's head. He grasps his hair but doesn't tug and if Ilya's mouth wasn't already busy, he would have told him he could grip harder if he wanted. "Oh fuck, fuck, that feels so good." Ilya has had quite a bit of practice at this, so it doesn't take much effort to open up his throat and take Shane down all the way to the base. "Jesus, *Ilya.*"

Ilya pulls off with a slurp, instead using the flat of his tongue to lick up Shane's length. The other man is watching him with half-lidded eyes, bright and hazy with desire.

"One second," Ilya tells him, reaching back behind him to search in his jeans. He finds the packet of lube he had brought.

When he comes back to Shane, he holds it up in question. Shane chews his bottom lip before nodding slightly and spreading his legs for Ilya without being asked.

Ilya has to grip around the base of himself at the rush of blood that shoots straight down at the sight of that lewd submission.

"Thought about touching you here for so long," Ilya murmurs, worshipful as he traces up Shane's thighs. Shane melts into the mattress, watching him with his teeth in his bottom lip. He lets go of a thready exhale when Ilya finds the puckered rim of his entrance, this time his fingers lubed.

"Okay? This is good?" Ilya asks.

Shane nods eagerly. “Want to feel you inside me, please, come on, I felt empty—“

“Fuck,” Ilya groans brokenly, and he slips his middle finger past the tight ring, slow and steady up to his last knuckle. Shane whines, and Ilya can feel him clench, making the impossible hot grip of his channel somehow tighter around his finger.

“Jesus, you’re tight,” Ilya forces out. He shifts his finger in and out slowly, mindful of Shane’s hiccups. “Holy fuck.”

“I can do another,” Shane tells him hurriedly. His hips are already chasing a faster rhythm. “Ilya, will you put in another, please?”

Ilya thinks he’s dying.

“You beg for me so sweetly,” Ilya grunts, pulling out just far enough to push his pointer finger in with the first. Shane makes a small gasping noise, grasping at the sheets near his ears. “Such a good boy, asking for what you want so politely.”

“Oh fuck,” Shane breathes, a blush spreading down his cheeks. “Keep talking, please.”

Ilya cocks his head. “You like it when I tell you what a good boy you are? How fucking perfect you feel inside? Fuck, all I can think about is how good you would feel squeezing around my cock.”

Ilya crooks his fingers, to the second knuckle and up and Shane chokes out a moan as he brushes his sweet spot. “Oh fuck, god, Ilya— wait, wait stop—“

Ilya freezes, pulling out of him immediately. “Shane? Hey, what’s wrong,” Ilya asks, sitting up on his knees, “did I hurt you?”

“No, sorry, I was—I don’t want to come yet,” Shane admits, blushing.

Ilya relaxes when Shane is clearly okay. “Ah,” he says, a little amused. “How do you want to come then, Shane?”

Shane bites down on his bottom lip. “Um. I want to come with you inside of me. Want you to fuck me, please.”

Ilya can’t reply, simply leaning down to kissing him sweetly. It’s easy to be gentle with Shane in a way that it isn’t with others he’s slept with.

He finds a condom and slips it on, reapplies the lube before lining himself up to Shane’s entrance. The other man’s breath hitches when he bumps against him.

“Hey,” Ilya checks, “is still okay?”

Shane nods, biting his lip. Ilya wants to kiss the indentation but wants to watch more as he reaches down and finally guides his cock past the tight ring of muscle and into his ass.

Shane reacts beautifully, mouth gasping open as he moans, face tight as his head falls back. Ilya can't look away as he presses in deeper, even as Shane involuntarily closes his eyes.

"Oh god," he gasps, "Oh, *fuck*–"

"You are okay?" Ilya pants, fighting every instinct he has and making himself go slow. His head is spinning with how unbelievably tight Shane was.

"Yeah, yes," Shane replies, though it's a little strained. "I'm just– oh, *ow–"*

Ilya stops immediately, making Shane protest. "I am hurting you."

"No, no," Shane denies, "I mean, it hurts a little but I knew it would, it does with the dildo at first but–"

He whines when Ilya pulls out of him. "No, fuck, Ilya, sorry, I'm okay, really, please come back."
Ilya shakes his head a little, reaching back for the lube. "It's shouldn't hurt, малыш. Let me do this first."

Shane lets out a soft exhale as Ilya sinks two fingers back into him, even looser than before. He takes his time, working him open with two and then three fingers again. Ilya uses the opportunity to just look, taking in how Shane's body opens up for him, how his own fingers disappear inside of him. Shane lets him, and Ilya can feel the way he relaxes under his hands, quiet in a dazed, dreamy kind of state. Ilya wants to hold him close and never let go.

"How are you?" Ilya checks, brushing the back of his knuckles against Shane's cheek. "Do you want to try again?" He nods weakly against Ilya's fingers, closing his eyes. Ilya exhales, holding himself steady above Shane.

"Look at me," Ilya urges, making Shane turn his glassy eyes back up at Ilya. He can't keep from leaning down and kissing him, capturing his lips in a slow, tender kiss. He feels Shane sigh against his lips as Ilya reaches down to grasp Shane's cock with one hand, stroking him slow.

"Good?" Ilya murmurs, watching with lidded eyes between kisses. Shane nods, humming. His spine is fully relaxed, liquid against the mattress, so he doesn't expect it when Ilya grasps his leg by the back of his knee to lift it up and stretches him wide and exposed.

"Oh," Shane shivers, limp against Ilya's hold, and he lets Ilya see, lets Ilya catalogue his dusky hole, a slick curl of muscle under his hard cock and heavy balls. Lube shines from where it dripped down Shane's thick corded thighs and he can see the small pool of precome leaking from the head of Shane's dick onto his lower stomach, running up his abs. The pretty pink flush Ilya's spent weeks daydreaming about spreads down his neck and chest, across his heaving pecs. Shane himself looks fucked out, hair a mess from Ilya's fingers, mouth still bruised and open and eyes dark and lidded. He looks better than art.

"You," Ilya tries, made speechless. "Боже мой. I have no words. Fuck, Shane, you are so fucking beautiful."

Shane smiles something sweet and shy and Ilya is briefly struck stupid. Stunned by a pretty boy's smile.

"Take a deep breath for me малыш," he urges, "and out," then pushes back into him in one smooth motion with his exhale. They both groan. Shane grasps Ilya's head and pulls him down instinctively. Ilya follows easily, tucking his face into the hollow of his shoulder as he presses in deeper, kissing the skin there while Shane tightens his fingers in his hair and lets out soft whimpers while Ilya stretches him out. He's still almost unbearably tight, but the give inside him is easier and he accepts Ilya beautifully.

"Oh fuck," he gasps when Ilya's hips meet his own, bottomed out. "Oh my god."

"How are you?" Ilya urges, bringing his head up, "sweetheart, you are okay?" Shane nods blissfully, and Ilya watches every micro-expression that he couldn't catch over the screen during their video calls. "Good. You took me so well, Shane, fuck, you're doing so good for me."

He knows Shane needs the time to adjust, makes himself hold still even as his head spins from how Shane's body is pulsating around Ilya's cock. Shane is trembling again under him, holding himself almost too tight with tension.

"Shane, Дорогой, you need to relax," Ilya tells him, kissing the inside of his knee from where he's holding his leg up. His other leg brackets Ilya's hips and it's so fucking heady to see him open and vulnerable like this, to see where they're joined together.

Shane abortively shakes his head, breath shuddering and Ilya can see him trying to listen.

"Ilya," he keens breathlessly, "god, you're so deep. You're so fucking deep."

Ilya hums low in his chest, reaching down to grasp Shane's cock. Shane reacts instantly, gasping and clenching down on Ilya's dick inside him.

"Holy shit," They both exhale in unison. They pause for a second, looking at each other before Ilya can feel a smile tugging on his lips. He can't stop the huff of a chuckle that escapes him but Shane laughs with him.

"God, how do you feel so good?" Shane mumbles, biting his bottom lip while shifting his hips.

"No, no that is you," Ilya counters, breathing hard, "fuck you are so fucking hot and tight inside. Fucking heaven, you are."

Shane flushes, covering half his face. Ilya immediately protests. "No, no, do not hide. I want to see you."

He tugs at Shane's wrist, bringing it down to look at him. Ilya usually finds eye contact for too long during sex uncomfortable, preferring to kiss them as a distraction or fuck them from behind. With him though, Ilya can feel his own breath catch as Shane looks back at him with open, heated eyes. He sees trust and affection and Ilya is falling.

“Oh,” Shane gasps, mouth dropping open as Ilya rocks his hips in. “Yes, move, please Ilya, you can move.”

Ilya is still cautious with his thrusts, starting and staying shallow for a few minutes until Shane’s making pleading whimpers in the back of his throat.

“More, Ilya, please,” Shane begs. “Fuck, need you—“

Ilya cuts him off by fucking into him a little harder, relishing in the soft moan that escapes him.

“You are so fucking good for me,” Ilya praises, setting a faster and harder pace when Shane responds well. “Fuck, take me so well.”

Shane whines, looking up at Ilya with teary eyes and Ilya can’t *breathe*.

“Knew you would feel so good,” Shane mumbles, voice hitching with Ilya’s thrusts, “feels so good, Ilya, please.”

Ilya swallows his cries, panting against his mouth as he fucks Shane, and he can’t remember the last time sex felt like this. Shane grips his hair, kissing down his jaw with soft gentle caresses and Ilya doesn’t think he’s ever felt like this.

“Are you close sweetheart?” Ilya breathes, feeling Shane nod shakily. His entire body is trembling, tight with the pleasure racking up in his body. “Fuck, come on малыш, want to see you come for me. Want to feel you come on my cock, come on.”

Shane throws his head back, back arching as he cries out Ilya’s name, as his cock twitches and he does as told. Ilya watches captivated as Shane sobs once in ecstasy, unfocused as he looks back at Ilya, body shuddering with aftershocks.

“Ilya,” he whispers, reaching up a tired arm to cup Ilya’s jaw and tuck a small bit of hair behind his ear. Ilya finishes like that with a broken groan, under the sincere sweet touch and listening to the way his name rounded out on Shane’s tongue.

Ilya’s arms give out as he falls into Shane, who braces him easily. Eyes closed, he feels Shane’s fingers running through his curls from his place pressed against the crook of Shane’s neck. Ilya is still inside of him, cock softening.

“You okay?” Shane whispers, and Ilya smiles fondly, kissing his shoulder and pushing himself up again.

“I’m amazing,” he tells him, kissing him gently. “This will feel weird.”

Shane makes a disgruntled noise as Ilya pulls out, dealing with the condom.

“Stay here, okay? Will be right back.”

Ilya returns from the bathroom with a wet washcloth to Shane still sprawled out on the mattress, limbs slack and eyes closed. There’s a small smile on his face, flushed and pleased,

one that makes Ilya want to kiss it off him.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya murmurs, wiping Shane clean of come, sweat, and lube. He shivers at the cold touch, and Ilya follows with warm kisses in apology. Shane’s smile brightens briefly before he bites down on his bottom lip and looks back at Ilya.

“Thank you,” he tells him, earnestly with dreamy eyes.

God, Ilya *is fucked.*

“You don’t have to thank me for sex Shane,” Ilya tells him wryly, because otherwise he *will* say something stupid. Shane just laughs. “No, I know. I mean thank you for being so careful. I felt so safe. You took care of me the whole time and made me feel so good for my first time, so… thank you.”

Ilya exhales, heart pounding. He has to kiss him, tender as their lips linger.

“You were perfect for me,” he murmurs, “so good. Beautiful.”

Shane sighs happily, sinking into the pillows. “Stay?”

Ilya hums in agreement, shifting them both under the sheets until they are curled up into each other, Shane tucked against his chest as Ilya props himself up on his elbow, unwilling to give up this chance to take in every detail. Shane is silently watching him back, expression warm.

Shane’s freckles scatter across his cheeks and over his nose bridge, giving the impression of a dark blush. Some of them are more distinct than others and Ilya traces them with featherlight fingertips, moving from one to another to make patterns.

“What are you doing?” Shane asks, laughing softly. Ilya feels the way his face moves as he does, and it must tickle him because he nudges against Ilya’s hand. “Ilya.”

“Mmm, shh, I am mapping,” Ilya murmurs. “Pegasus here. Andromeda above. Aquarius, Capricorn.”

He leans down to kiss each constellation, down until he hovers just about Shane’s lips. Shane watches him with his lips parted, going a little cross eyed.

“You are like summer star map in Moscow. June.” he tells him and he feels Shane let out a shuddering exhale before reaching up to cup the back of his neck and pressing their mouths together.

“Are you sore?” Ilya asks, rubbing his shoulders. “I did not hurt you?” He traces some darker bruises he sees that he doesn’t recognize.

“No, no,” Shane reassures him. “Those are from the game. I’m okay.”

Ilya still frowns at them, ducking down to kiss each mark. “You were very sexy in game, you know. Svetlana had to tell me I could not get hard in public.”

Shane laughs. “Yeah, that’s usually frowned upon.”

“Mmm, but they do not know how fucking hot it is to see boy I like skate circles around absolutely everyone else on ice,” he kisses his hip, “best in the league.”

Shane’s shy again, but to Ilya’s surprise it's not because of the praise.

“You like me?”

Ilya gapes at him. *This fucking boy.* “Yes? Jesus, Shane, yes, I like you very much.”

“Oh,” Shane mumbles, flushing red. “I like you too.”

“Yes,” Ilya sounds out slowly, “yes, I kind of assumed. Risky for you to be with a man, as gay hockey player. Would be strange if you didn’t–”

Ilya blinks once, and Shane shuts down. Ilya has never seen it happen before, thinks he might have heard it at the end of one of their earlier hotline calls, when Shane had panicked when Ilya told him his name. But in person, he watches with concern as the warm glow of bliss snuffs out, a candle gone dark.

“What– hey, hey, shh, it’s okay, come here,” Ilya urges Shane up and into his lap, facing Ilya in a mirror to how they started their night on the bed. “Talk to me. What is wrong?”

“There are no gay professional hockey players in the NHL.”

“Okay,” Ilya replies cautiously, “I know you said you were not safe to share.”

Shane frowns, “no. There can’t *be* any gay professional hockey players. The league wouldn’t let them. The teams, the players. There can’t be any gay players in the NHL.”

“Shane,” Ilya furrows his eyebrows. “I do not know if I understand. You cannot be out right now, I get this but there have definitely been other gay players. You must know that.”

“No,” Shane shakes his head, “no I don’t. Why do you think I don’t know any out players, Ilya? What do you think happens to them?”

And suddenly Ilya really gets it. Exactly what Shane is risking. Because he’s met Marleau’s teammates and other hockey players through him. He knows Marleau would never be malicious, maybe a little stupid but never homophobic on purpose, knows even that his closer teammates that drink with Ilya are cool with him being bisexual but he can’t say the same about the other players he’s talked to.

And this is more than just Shane’s career. He knows, not from the internet but from the source himself, about Shane’s parents, about the role model initiatives he’s asked to be an ambassador for, the captaincy. Youngest captain in Montreal Voyager franchise history. Most successful Asian NHL player in *league* history. Shane means something to so many people. He can’t risk throwing it all out for a hot hook up.

“Will be bad for you? On ice with other players, I mean,” Ilya asks, unsure if he wants the answer. “Dangerous?”

Shane exhales shakily, and Ilya’s heart aches when he nods slowly.

“I see,” Ilya murmurs, “then… is this what you want Shane? I understand if this is too much, sweetheart. I do.”

It would break his heart but it would be worse to see Shane face the physical brunt of homophobia in one of the most violent sports in the world. He’s seen Marleau’s games. Seen the hits. He doesn’t think he would survive seeing Shane laid out like that on the ice because someone *wanted* to hurt him.

“I am sure,” Shane replies without hesitance and Ilya’s breath catches. “I’m so sure. I just am asking you to take on so much with this. I know what I’m asking is crazy, Ilya, and it’s not fair, at all, to you. We would have to hide, keep it a secret, and I don’t… I don’t know how long. But I just want you so badly I have to try. If it’s too much to ask, being with me, I would understand but I still need to try.”

“Ah, малыш,” Ilya exhales, reaching to rub Shane’s cheekbone. “How could I refuse someone like you?”

Shane misunderstands, grasping his hand. “No, no you can say no. It’s okay, Ilya, of course you can refuse–”

“Shane,” Ilya huffs affectionately, “I do not *want* to say no. I’m saying yes, sweetheart.”

Shane inhales sharply, eyes wide. “Oh. Oh, you mean…”

“I want to try,” he tells him, kissing his knuckles, “yes, it will be complicated and lonely for both of us, to be in secret but I–”
He pauses, not wanting to overshare but Shane’s still watching him with bright eyes that look too hopeful for Ilya to try and hide from.

“I have a feeling you will be worth it,” Ilya finishes, softly.

Shane swallows, eyes darting back and forth between Ilya’s searching for something. He must have found it because he leans down to kiss Ilya gently with a gasp, lips slotting together in a way that’s already so easy and familiar that it makes Ilya’s head spin. He smiles at Ilya as they pull back, noses brushing together.

Ilya hums. “We will be careful, yes? You save my phone number under a woman’s name. Lily. Less risk.”

Shane lets out an unexpected chuckle. “That’s… yeah, that’s smart. That’s good. You got into MIT for a reason, huh?”

“Mmm, yes,” Ilya lets his hand run down Shane’s back in big, heavy strokes. He watches Shane instinctively relax, head tucking into his shoulder. There’s power in these muscles,

brute force and strength. Pure skill. But like this, in Ilya's lap, he melts like a kitten and it makes Ilya incredulous. Like he needs to pinch himself to really believe this is real. "We can't all be big, dumb jocks."

That makes Shane properly laugh, even if it's still a little wet. "You think I'm dumb?" Shane asks, but he's clearly teasing.

Ilya hums, caressing his sides up and down. "Well, you did ask me if I liked you after I fucked you for over an hour straight and came so hard I saw stars, so."

Shane snorts, hiding his face against Ilya's skin. "Sorry, I'm new to this."

Ilya cups the back of his head, threading his fingers through his hair. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Shane pulls back just enough to see him, tilting his head inquisitively.

Ilya traces Shane's bottom lip, red and slick from their kissing. "This is new for me too. But we will figure it out together, yes?"

Shane grins, and it lights him up like the moon. Ilya has fallen, thrown overboard, and he doesn't want to be saved. "Yeah. Yeah, together."

Chapter End Notes

I love them so much your honor

Chapter 7: speed dial

Chapter Summary

Shane from May to December, speed run.

Chapter Notes

I will do absolutely everything in my power to avoid studying for this exam apparently. Bon appetite.

Mostly a fluffy filler chapter, until it is not. I don't love love this chapter but it's gotta get in there somewhere. Might end up rewriting the last scene a little if i have time later

CW: f-slur used once

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They're knocked out of the playoffs after the second round during Shane's first year as captain.

All in all, it was still an astonishing performance and season. The first time the Voyagers had made it to the playoffs in ten years not on a wildcard. First time they had made it to the second round in twenty. Everyone was gushing about how Shane Hollander was exactly the rebuild investment Montreal needed, and it's clearly paying off now. Winning a cup was just a matter of time.

In fact, the only person beating him up about it is Shane himself.

"Honey," Yuna sighs. "It's okay. You all played at your best. Not your fault Miitka got hurt during round one."

"I know that," he replies hastily, but it doesn't make him look away from the Eastern Conference Finals game on the TV.

"Well, I'm glad it gives you more time to recover," she says, standing up from the couch. They're at his family home in Ottawa, Shane staying with his parents for a few days before heading back to his own place in Montreal.

"Plenty of time to prepare and get ready to win the cup next year, son," David claps him on the shoulder.

Shane offers him a strained smile, letting his dad's hand fall off.

He knew, rationally, that they had done the best they could. Miitka had gotten an accidental puck to the head during the first round; an incredibly terrifying injury that thankfully only led to a moderate concussion but also meant their first string goalie was out of the playoffs. The Voyagers' defense has always depended on Miitka as their cornerstone with his incredible shutouts, but without him they fell apart. The fact they squeezed out even one win during the second round was a miracle.

But Shane didn't care about being rational. He wanted to be known as the man who got the Voyagers a cup during his first season as captain after a three decade drought. And now he never would. Second season would still be impressive but if he had done it this year— fuck, Shane would have been crowned as a hockey legend.

There is one benefit to not being in New York for the Conference Finals though.

Three days after that trip to his parents, he's on the streets of Cambridge, wearing a hoodie and sunglasses in May summer heat. He checks his phone again to make sure he's in the right place.

Shane (1:34 pm): here I think?

Lily (1:35 pm): I'll buzz you up

The front door clicks open and Shane slips inside the foyer entrance. It's a tight fit, with a narrow staircase leading up to the top floors. When he's on the third floor, he checks again and he knocks quietly on the door for apartment 301. The door opens not even ten seconds later.

"Hey," Shane can't keep from automatically smiling, a little giddy at the sight of Ilya. The other man tilts his head, stepping back silently to let Shane in through the doorway.

"Hello," Ilya murmurs when Shane's inside, and then Shane's being pressed against the closed door by the waist, Ilya crowding up against him. Shane laughs into his open mouth as Ilya kisses him, sliding his tongue up against Shane's.

"Mmm, I haven't even been inside the apartment for a minute Ilya," Shane chides but he chases after Ilya when the other pulls back. Ilya gives him an amused look.

"Yes, but I do not see you complaining," he teases. He still steps away to give Shane some more room. Shane inexplicably wants to grab him and keep him in place.

Shane then remembers he's *allowed to* and lets his intrusive thoughts win. Ilya laughs properly when Shane follows him, cupping his face to pull Ilya down and press another kiss against his lips. Ilya lets him lead, matching Shane's pace as they make out. The way their mouths fit against each other still makes Shane dizzy. When Ilya bites his bottom lip, Shane lets out a soft moan involuntarily.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Ilya pants when they finally have to part for air, “I would say you missed me, малыш.”

“Good thing you know better then,” Shane grins in the small space between them. “Okay, let me in for real this time.”

Ilya moves to the side, rubbing the back of his head before gesturing to the rest of the studio. “Make yourself at home.”

Ilya’s place is small, but clean and well-maintained. There’s some cracks on the tile and stains on the ceiling, but everything within Ilya’s reach has clearly been repaired or repurposed. There’s a worn tufted rug that covers most of the hardwood. The off-white walls have framed posters and pieces of art that Shane assumed were thrifted or free, gauging from the lack of theme between all of them. A wooden desk is tucked into the one large bay window across from the front door and a queen sized bed with a dark blue duvet is pressed in the corner to the right of it. A dresser and small couch cover the rest of the other wall which hits the half-wall and bar counter opening up to the tight kitchen.

“This is nice,” Shane says, turning in place at the center of the space. “Good natural light.”

Ilya scoffs, leaning back against the small wall near the entry. “You don’t have to be kind, Shane, you can say it sucks.”

“I’m serious,” Shane protests, “I like real estate. You have the space to yourself?”

Ilya shrugs, crossing his arms. “Ah, yes. Would be hard to take hotline calls otherwise.”

“Right,” Shane nods, keeping his voice as steady as possible while glancing around again. No risk of being overheard or seen by the public, nosy housekeeping, his teammates. Somewhere to physically be himself the way he was himself with Ilya over the phone. “So, we’ll be on our own?”

Ilya must hear something in Shane’s tone or maybe sees something on his face because he tilts his head, scanning Shane up and down before a small smirk tugs at his lips.

“What?” Shane asks, automatically defensive. He has to consciously make himself stay in place when Ilya, for a lack of a better word, stalks forward. When he’s directly in front of him, Shane looks up when Ilya nudges his chin up with his knuckle.

“Yes, we’ll be on our own,” Ilya murmurs, “all alone, in this empty little studio.” Ilya ghosts his mouth over Shane’s, and Shane feels the shiver of it down his spine. “What are we going to do, Shane, all alone?”

Shane lets out one shuddering exhale. “I think you should tell me.”

Ilya smirks, and that’s the last thing Shane sees before Ilya’s captured his mouth and Shane’s scrambling to keep up.

Ilya swallows his moan, holding him up as Shane gets dizzier and dizzier, barely able to match pace. Ilya's devouring him, tongue dragging against the inside of Shane's mouth. Shane has to gasp for air when Ilya pulls off, grasping onto Ilya's shirt and feeling the hard muscle on his chest.

"Get on your knees," Ilya roughly orders against his lips, and Shane's down on the floor before he can consciously decide to obey. Once he's eye level with the growing bulge in Ilya's jeans, something shuts off in Shane's head and he's freeing Ilya's cock from the confines of his pants. He lets it curve up to his belly for half a second before Shane has his tongue on him.

"Shit," Ilya gasps above him, and Shane feels a hand rake through his hair as he parts his lips and slides Ilya's dick into his mouth. Shane pushes a hand up to Ilya's stomach and chest to ground himself as works his throat, careful to not gag like he had the first time he had done this for Ilya. He rucks up Ilya's t-shirt, looking up at him with wide eyes, until Ilya gets the hint and strips it off.

Shane could lose himself to this, sucking Ilya's cock. The heavy weight of him on his tongue is heady. When Shane closes his eyes, he can shut off the rest of his brain and focus solely on the taste and feel of cock and the way Ilya twitches and curses under his breath as Shane swirls his tongue.

But Shane's on a mission, had even done some very clandestine research before getting on the plane to Boston. Taking in a careful breath, Shane swallows and then opens up his throat to guide Ilya's cock down into the tight space behind his tongue until Shane's nose was almost touching Ilya's pubic bone. Shane's throat makes a wet, filthy noise as it fills entirely with cock, one wrong move away from choking him.

"Holy *fuck,*" Ilya groans, fingers unconsciously gripping Shane's hair almost painfully tight and making him moan. It turns into a whine when Ilya drags him off of his cock. "Jesus Christ, where the fuck did you learn to do that?"

Shane presses his cheek against Ilya's thigh, looking up at him as Shane fights to catch his breath. "Was I good?" Shane asks hopefully, voice fucked out and hoarse. Ilya makes a punched out sort of noise before dragging Shane back up to his feet. Shane stumbles on weak knees but Ilya catches him, gripping under his thighs and pulling him up. Shane jumps instinctively and gasps as Ilya tightens his grip and carries him across the room.

"Oh shit, how–" Shane loops his arms around Ilya's neck but gets cut off from expressing his very horny shock at being carried like he was half the size he actually was. Shane hums into Ilya's mouth before Ilya drops him onto the mattress and crawls over him.

"You are sex fiend," Ilya scolds him, but the effect is diminished by the way he's just as breathless with lust as Shane is. "Fucking natural at sucking at cock, and you've only done it twice."

"I like to be the best," Shane smirks but it turns into a grin when Ilya barks out a laugh.

“What do you want, малыш?” Ilya coaxes, pressing kisses up and down his stomach and abs. “Should I jerk you off, suck you, fuck you?”

“Fuck me,” Shane doesn’t even have to stop to think about it, breath knocked out of him.

Ilya tilts his head. “Mmm, no, that’s not how we ask for things, sweetheart. Ask me nicely.”

Shane bites down on his bottom lip, holding out for all of twenty seconds before he folds. “Please. Please, Ilya, fuck me. Need you to fuck me.”

“Good,” Ilya praises and it lights Shane up. Shane holds himself in anticipation, waiting to be touched but blinks when Ilya pulls away, settling on his heels. “But I think you can do better.”

“What?” He can’t be serious.

Ilya gestures with his hands. “You heard me. Show me you really want it, котёнок. Prove it to me.”

Shane scowls at him, but Ilya’s clearly not budging, smug from his place at the end of the bed. Shane pushes himself up and shifts to his knees, face to face. Taking a deep breath, Shane moves to strip off his shirt, folding it neatly before getting off the bed to place it on Ilya’s desk. When he looks back at him, Ilya’s grinning a little, mirth in his eyes but he doesn’t say anything. Shane takes it as permission to reach down and unbutton his jeans.

He’s never done or seen anything like a strip tease before and he’s pretty sure there’s usually music involved, but that’s basically what Shane does for Ilya. It’s awkward shimmying the denim down, and it takes all of his hockey balance to not fall on his ass as he slips them over his feet. He folds his pants and sets them aside before turning and facing Ilya properly again, just in his black briefs. The grin fades, something a bit more heated, a bit more awed replacing it. It gives Shane just enough confidence to walk over and straddle Ilya, who had turned around to sit on the edge of the bed to watch Shane.

“That all?” Ilya asks, teasing breathlessly as Shane runs his hands up Ilya’s chest, brushing faint chest hair. Annoyance buzzes through Shane, making him grip Ilya’s shoulders. He grinds down on Ilya’s lap, making him gasp and his hands fly out to grasp his hips, and then kisses up Ilya’s jaw to his ear.

“Please,” Shane whispers, “fuck me please, baby. I need you.”

Shane gets to feel that shudder through Ilya’s entire body and then Shane’s in the air and flipped back to where they had started on the bed. This time though, Shane was more undressed and Ilya wasn’t taunting anymore.

Shane huffs a laugh as Ilya drags him down the bed by the thighs, the easy way Ilya manages to manhandle him making him leak in his underwear.

“That nice enough?” Shane asks, tilting his head coyly.

“What happened to that shy little virgin, Jesus,” Ilya mutters to himself, reaching across to grab what Shane realizes is lube.

“I don’t think you want that,” Shane cocks his head and stretches his arms above his head. He helpfully lifts his hips when Ilya tugs on his underwear, stripping him completely nude.

“No,” Ilya concedes with a wry look, “what I want is you.”

Anything other bratty quips on his tongue quickly die, Shane’s eyes widening at the easy admission. Ilya notices, leans down and kisses him between his pecs. “Smug asshole, sweet virgin, sex fiend. All of it. I want to know every version of you, Shane Hollander.”

“Fuck,” Shane breathes, heart racing. He can feel the heat of his flush down his chest. “Fuck, please Ilya, touch me. I’m–”

Shane lets out a shuddering gasp when Ilya grasps his cock, giving him a few lazy strokes.

“Can I open you up?” Ilya asks, and Shane nods quickly, spreading his legs.

Ilya’s fingers were so much better than his own. Shane moans softly as Ilya slips in one of his long fingers, reaching farther and wider than Shane ever manages on his own.

“So fucking tight,” Ilya groans, and Shane can feel the way Ilya’s rubbing against his walls. “God, can’t wait to have my cock inside you again.”

“I can take another Ilya, come on, I can do two,” Shane urges, rocking his hips up. He whines when Ilya holds him down with his forearm.

“No,” Ilya tells him, “I say when you can take another. When I have you like this, your body is mine to play with, yes?”

Something in Shane’s brain burns and then melts, sticky and heavy.

“Okay,” Shane agrees, just a touch of a slur to his words. “Okay. Yes, sir. Yours.”

“чёрт возьми,” Ilya exhales shakily, the grip on Shane’s knee tight. He’s rewarded with a second finger, the stretch making Shane force out a steady breath.

“That’s it, just breathe. You take it so well sweetheart,” Ilya coaxes, crooking his fingers inside him and Shane whimpers, bucking up against Ilya’s hold as he draws maddening circles on his prostate. Shane feels him add cold lube to his hole as Ilya scissors and carefully opens him up, slow and easy. Shane sinks farther down, far enough to barely notice when Ilya presses a third finger in. He does feel the way they stretch him though, keep him full, Ilya keeping him pinned with an arm shifted up to his chest as he fucks his fingers into Shane. He’s teasing Shane’s prostate now with every stroke.

Shane’s orgasm hits him by complete surprise, choking the air out of him as he curls into himself. “Oh *fuck*–”

“Shit, Shane,” Ilya huffs a laugh, helping Shane ride out the dizzying pleasure rocking through him. He’s dazed, even as his skin trembles from aftershocks. A soft sound escapes him when Ilya pulls out of him.

Ilya kisses his stomach, trailing up to meet Shane’s lips. It’s slow and grounding, enough so Shane can find his way back to Earth safely. Once he’s back, he’s realized what happened.

“Shit, I didn’t even–” Shane flushes, disappointment and a little embarrassment at finishing so quickly swirling now in his gut. “You didn’t get to–”

“No, no, believe me, I got *a lot out* of that,” Ilya reassures him with a quirk to his mouth. “You are so fucking hot, Hollander, it is unreal.”

“Still, you said you wanted to fuck me,” Shane frowns. He feels a little sensitive, but doesn’t like the idea of not helping Ilya finish too. “Do you… we can try.”

Ilya hesitates, then shakes his head. “Mmm, no. Will hurt you, being so sensitive. I am okay, малыш. Really.”

Shane bites his lip, before reaching a hand up to cup Ilya’s face.

He doesn’t initiate as often as Ilya, not because he doesn’t want to but because this was still all so new. He didn’t know if he was doing this right or if he was making it good for Ilya. Every time he did though, Ilya reciprocated enthusiastically, opening up against him and sliding their lips together. Shane drags his hand down Ilya’s chest, slightly shiny with sweat.

Shane must have had some crazy karma in a past life because his phone sex operator who could talk him through an orgasm also just so happened to be physically hot as hell too. Ilya was broad in the shoulders but with a slim waist, abs faint but noticeable. The muscles of his arms flexed attractively as Ilya held himself above Shane, grunting softly into Shane’s mouth.

He keeps his hand steady as it continues down until he has a hand brushing Ilya’s cock where it’s still hard and hanging out of his pants.

“Can I do this instead?” Shane asks softly, hand loose around his cock.

Ilya lets out a shuddering exhale, head ducking down to knock against Shane’s. “Jesus. Yes.”

Shane tightens his grip, watching Ilya take a deep inhale as Shane experiments. Ilya’s breath catches when Shane squeezes and twists hard near the head. There’s a soft grunt in between them when Shane reaches even farther down and rolls his balls in his hand.

“Ah, fuck, Дорогой, I’m close,” Ilya groans. His hips jerk into Shane’s hold. “Fuck, that feels good.”

“Come on me,” Shane whispers, heart racing as the lewd suggestion. He can barely believe it’s coming out of his mouth but once it does he *wants*. “Please, baby, mark me with your come, want you to come on me—“

“Holy shit,” Ilya chokes, and the first few spurts of his come streak over Shane’s heaving abs.

Shane helps him through, captivated by the way Ilya is trembling through a hard finish. Ilya is careful when he leans down to kiss him, taking care to not press against his torso. Once they’re both breathless, Ilya pulls back to sit on Shane’s thighs before tracing the lines of Shane’s abs and the rivulets of his own spend. Shane isn’t making up the naked hunger there.

“You like marking me up?” Shane asks but it’s rhetorical. Literally anyone would be able to read the thorough satisfaction on Ilya’s face as he looks at Shane covered in his come.

“Mm, yes,” Ilya agrees, “makes you look more like the pretty little slut you are.”

Shane flushes red, mouth opening in slight outrage and it makes Ilya laugh.

“Fuck off, can I shower? Feels weird drying.”

Ilya nods towards the only other door in the studio. “Go ahead. I’ll make something to eat.”

The soft kiss Ilya leaves him with feels startlingly domestic already. An omen for the rest of his stay here that makes him feel warmer than he should.

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“Shane, you can’t come to my graduation,” Ilya sighs. It’s the third or fourth time he’s said as much. “We have said this many times.”

Shane scowls. “I could be in the back, with a hat and sunglasses. No one would know.”

“Shane, sweetheart,” Ilya smirks, “you are not very, what do you say— sneaky.”

Shane does not pout. “I can be sneaky.”

Ilya laughs, reaching forward to press Shane closer to him, chest to chest. Like this Shane has to look up, their minimal height difference all the more apparent. They’re getting better at non-verbal communication after a few days of staying together. Ilya knows to lean down and give Shane the kiss he’s asking for. It makes the tassel on his cap fall forward and brush against Shane’s face when they break apart.

Shane had six days off before he’s supposed to meet his mom in San Francisco for a shoot, the day after Ilya’s graduation. It had sounded like forever, the most time they would have spent together by a longshot.

Ilya’s graduation is today. Shane’s leaving tomorrow. It feels like no time’s passed at all.

Maybe it’s a honeymoon phase but Shane has never once felt so comfortable with another person so quickly in his entire life. Not even Hayden who is objectively his closest friend. The first two days took some navigating, learning habits and forgiving annoying ones when necessary. Some accident toe-stepping, figuratively and literally— Ilya’s place was nice but… small, especially for two over-six-foot well-built men.

But a fragile but real routine popped up around day three and now Shane's alarmingly getting used to waking up to the feeling of Ilya's broad chest under his cheek, breathing slowly in his sleep.

"I need to go if I want to catch up with Svetlana," Ilya says apologetically, kissing his forehead. "I am sorry, малыш. I wish you could come."

Shane has no right to be upset with Ilya– and he's not, if he really stops to think about it. He's mad that their secrecy is causing problems already, frustrated that they have to keep it a secret at all. He's heard all about how difficult Ilya's last semester of college was and Shane is fucking proud of him, okay? He wants to celebrate with him as his— well. Something. Even if it was from a distance and they had to pretend; at least Shane would be in the same room.

"I'll watch the livestream," Shane replies, reaching up to fix a haphazard golden curl. It'll fall back out from under his cap soon and Shane will see if on the livestream and remember being here. Maybe not there in the ceremony, but here. "And text you the whole time."

"Looking forward to it," Ilya grins, giving him a peck, "okay, really need to go now. I'll see you later, малыш."

"Bye," Shane waves, watching the door close and he's alone in Ilya's apartment for the first time for a prolonged period of time.

He's not used to being in others' spaces while they're not there– the closest he can think of was in high school when he was dating his second girlfriend and she had left him coyly in her bedroom alone to "get something." She came back in nothing but lingerie.

Shane didn't know how a teenager got her hands on something like it, but he had been blindsided, which in retrospect was kind of dumb of him. In Shane's defense, he really had thought they were going to do homework. They had an assignment due the next day.

Shane toys with the idea of snooping, but guiltily puts it aside for now. He's curious, *so fucking curious,* but it feels awkward at this stage of their semi-relationship. Because Shane's still not entirely sure what they are and hasn't wanted to bring it up in case they were somehow not on the same page. Going through Ilya's things felt like something almost too personal at this stage.

Shane sits back into the small couch against the wall with a huff. It really was all a mess; they had gotten into this all in the wrong order. Having phone sex before they even met, Shane catching *feelings* before they even met. They've technically been talking since October, if you ignore the first three months where Shane was paying for it. That's a reasonable talking phase, right? Shane had no idea. It felt like they were moving fast but at the same time not fast at all.

Shane could technically leave and explore the neighborhood– the graduation ceremony for the physics department wasn't until later that day at 3pm. But Cambridge was absolutely crawling with graduating students and their families and Shane did not want to end up in a surreptitious video on Twitter with people asking why he was in Boston during the off-season. It's fine; Shane can easily entertain himself. He's used to being on his own.

He gets a bodyweight workout done, a shower, and puts together something to eat from the groceries they had gotten for Shane's stay before it hits 2:45 and Shane can set up his laptop.

He settles in on Ilya's bed, cushioned by his abysmally few pillows. Shane has half a mind to buy him more and he would have if he didn't know Ilya would throw them back in his face. He sinks into the sheets, the scent of Ilya's cologne and home now mellowed with enough of Shane's own smell to notice the blend.

The livestream starts promptly, and Shane listens to the class speaker and graduation speaker for their department, someone from the C-Suite of some aerospace company. The actual reading of names thankfully starts sooner rather than later.

Shane sometimes thought about how his life might have played out if he hadn't picked up a hockey stick as a toddler. Not often, but sometimes. Would he have gone to college? He's handy around tools– maybe he would have done engineering or gone into a trade. He hadn't ever actually seen a graduation ceremony, Shane realizes, besides his own middle school one. He had homeschooled for this senior year of high school and didn't have one. He hadn't thought it was a loss, but watching beaming students walk across the stage and be handed a shiny diploma cover before they're set loose in the real world– he can't help but wonder.

If he had gone to college, he would probably have an easier time with his workouts and nutrition routines, wouldn't have broken his arm three times by the age of twenty and gotten four concussions. Wouldn't need to worry about the press and stalker fans and breaches of his hard-fought privacy.

He might not have been afraid to be himself. Might not have been afraid of kissing a pretty boy like Ilya out in public, would be able to hug and tell Ilya he was proud of him at his school rather than watching alone over a screen. He shakes himself out of it. No point in wondering over something that won't be.

They hit the R's sooner than Shane thought they would and it's only three students later the announcer reads out "Ilya Grigovich Rozanov."

Shane briefly lets himself think he didn't know Ilya even had a middle name before he sees Ilya on the screen.

There isn't the same loud, obnoxious cheering like other students but people clap and Shane knows Ilya has Svetlana and Katya— it was lucky that she was graduating next year. It doesn't seem to bother Ilya, who is beaming with an uninhibited grin as he shakes the hand of his dean and accepts his stand-in diploma. The pesky curl Shane had toyed with earlier hangs loose. Shane opens up his messages on his phone

Shane (3:36 pm): your hair is a mess again

Shane (3:36 pm): you look cute

Shane (3:37 pm): and hot

Shane (3:37 pm): I'm so proud of you

Shane almost hesitates with the last text, not knowing if it would be weird with how new their relationship was. But he is proud.

Shane decides to himself that he can be proud of Ilya for succeeding. It lessens the sting of his own season loss.

Ilya won't be back until much later, Shane knows— he'll be meeting with Katya and Svetlana at a mini-graduation party at Katya's Cafe. Shane could tell Ilya's hesitance at leaving him alone, since it would still be risky to be out in public together like that even in a small restaurant, so he had quickly reassured him that it would be fine, he should celebrate with them. He didn't let Ilya suggest he come with.

He would be home later and Shane planned to give him his own graduation welcome, a dinner and small cake Shane had ordered before congratulating Ilya thoroughly with his mouth. And at the time it had felt like enough. But seeing Ilya posing for his graduation photo, looking younger and happier than Shane has yet to see him, Shane kind of wishes he had let Ilya ask. For a second, he thinks he might have considered it, just to see that smile in person.

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Ilya had been pissed off that they had missed Shane's birthday in May and had almost withheld his own from Shane in revenge. It had taken a puppy dog eyes and a very thorough blow job the last time Shane was in Boston to get him to spill the date only for Shane to realize he had to scramble. June was here before he even knew it.

They really had only been apart for three weeks but it had felt longer. Shane is already dreading the longer breaks between Boston stays once the season starts up again. He knows how to get to Ilya's apartment easily now, and he has to rearrange his surprise behind his back before he knocks on the door.

"Hey," Shane grins, reaching up to kiss Ilya hello once he opens. "Happy birthday, baby."

Ilya laughs. "You didn't even wait to get inside this time." But he accepts the chaste kiss anyway before pulling Shane and his things into the apartment and closing the door. "What is that behind you?"

Shane shyly reveals part of his gift, a bouquet of pink lilies, red roses, and lily-of-the-valley sprigs. He had ordered it ahead at a nearby flower shop and had almost bailed with the very feminine, very romantic arrangement, but he thought Ilya would understand and appreciate the intention with which flowers he chose.

"Солнышко," Ilya blinks, and that's a new one, "this is for me?"

"No, it's for the other guy I'm seeing who's birthday is also today," Shane deflects, sweating through his own nervousness as he waits for Ilya's reaction. He knows that he's caught Ilya off guard when he doesn't quip back, instead accepting the bouquet with a hesitant hand, rubbing the petals thoughtlessly with the other.

“Shane,” Ilya starts before clearing his throat. He gives Shane a familiar smirk but it’s tempered by a much more vulnerable sheen that Ilya can’t quite cover. Shane relaxes an inch. “You know you do not have to wine and dine me, I will fuck you anyway.”

“That’s not why I got it for you,” Shane shakes his head. In for a penny. He’s not sure how to formulate his thoughts into actual words so he stutters. “It’s not so I can get something from you, I don’t want something from– well, I mean, I do want to be with you so I guess that’s something I want but that’s not why I got the flowers. I got them because I just–” Shane shrugs helplessly, “thought you deserved flowers. I just wanted to give them to you, to make you happy.”

Ilya’s staring at him, expression frustratingly blank. Shane’s noticed that Ilya sometimes does that, shuts down when he thinks he’s feeling an emotion that’s dangerous. Shane can’t do much else but wait.

Or that would be the case, if Shane had a patient bone in his body. “Um. Do you like them?”

Ilya lets out a shuddering exhale, setting the flowers on the counter top next to him. He reaches forward to cup Shane’s face with both hands and pull him into a deep, sweet kiss.

Shane melts easily— they don’t actually kiss like this that often, usually getting too hot too fast to keep it gentle but Shane loves it. He feels cherished, when Ilya holds like this and presses his lips against Shane like he was precious.

Ilya smiles softly when they break apart, sharing air. He bumps his forehead against Shane’s. “I love them, sweetheart. Thank you. No one has ever gotten me flowers before.”

“Oh,” Shane says stupidly, flushed red and still trying to mentally catch up to the present. “I’m— I’m glad I’m your first.”

“Mmm, yes, I’ve taken so many of yours it is only fair if you take one or two of mine, no?” Ilya smirks and Shane huffs a laugh, the delicate moment dissipating.

“Shut up,” Shane rolls his eyes. “I have other stuff for you too.”

“Really?” Ilya asks, narrowing his eyes. “It’s not something crazy is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Are you sure—“

“*Yes*, I’m sure. I know what a crazy and not crazy gift is, Ilya.”

In fact Shane’s worried that his gift might end up being *too* boring. But that was a problem for later. “You can open it when we have cake.”

That makes Ilya beam, perking up at the mention of sugar. Shane learned very quickly that Ilya has one hell of a sweet tooth. “This is already best birthday ever.”

Ilya lets him wash up and change from his airport clothes before commandeering his space, draping his body up against Shane's back. Shane doesn't falter but does have to brace himself for the unexpected weight, amused. He's being particularly physically affectionate today. Shane will most definitely be bringing flowers more often.

"We will watch movie, have good food, good cake, and then amazing sex," Ilya announces. "I have decided."

Shane snorts, but then chews on his bottom lip.

"You're really okay with not celebrating your birthday with Svetlana? You said she's your best friend," Shane brings up, like an idiot. It was something they had talked about at length, whether or not Ilya would also be inviting Svetlana over and inevitably meeting Shane. Shane knows logically that Svetlana knows who he is, knows *what* he is, but it still made his heart pound and skin sweat at the thought of having an actual witness to what he was to Ilya and what Ilya was to him. Enough to make him nauseous. But he had wanted to try, for Ilya, and Shane had tried to keep that tension from showing. Ilya, however, is incredibly adept at figuring out when Shane is trying to hide something and shut down the idea.

"Yes, like we said before, it is okay," Ilya sighs, wry. "I have celebrated twelve birthdays with Svetlana, in Russia and America. I have not ever celebrated a birthday with you."

Shane deflates, smiles fondly. "Okay. Okay, as long as you're sure."

"Besides, I will not be able to strip you naked and have you walk around for me nude if she's here," Ilya notes slyly, toying with the hem of Shane's shirt. Shane slaps at his hand.

"Jesus you're insatiable. Dinner first, you freak."

"Wine and dine," Ilya sighs, despondent, "I see, I have to wine and dine *you* in order to fuck you."

"That is literally not true. Go pick out a movie, asshole, I'll order takeout."

Later, they're finished with the Mediterranean food and the movie, some braindead action flick that had Ilya invested and Shane horrifically intrigued, starts playing credits. Ilya slumps back against Shane, his laptop being pushed aside. Shane had insisted they pause the movie earlier and throw out the takeout containers right after they were finished. He had only let eating in the bed pass this time because it was Ilya's birthday.

"Stay here," Shane tells Ilya, kissing his shoulder.

Shane extracts himself from Ilya's grasp despite his grumbling, and crosses the room to the kitchen. Once at the fridge, he carefully takes out the small round cake with simple lettering on top and finds the candles he had brought with them.

Ilya sits cross-legged with a fond smile as Shane lights the candles and brings the cake over in both hands.

Shane sings happy birthday quietly as he approaches the bed, carefully kneeling and sitting across from Ilya. He finishes with a soft “happy birthday to you” and holds out the cake for Ilya to blow out the candles.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Ilya grins. He uses a finger to scoop some frosting before rubbing it on Shane’s lips unexpectedly. Before Shane can protest, Ilya leans forward and kisses him to lick it off. “Delicious.”

Shane goes back to the kitchen for a moment to grab utensils and they take bites straight from the cake instead of cutting it. Ilya laughs as he tries to feed Shane, much to his consternation, until he misses and smears it on his cheek.

“Ilya,” Shane frowns, bringing his hand up to wipe it off but Ilya beats him to it. Ilya drags two of his fingers across his skin, still grinning.

“Sorry, малыш.” He catches Shane’s eye, tilting his head coyly. “Maybe I can do something to make it up to you.” He brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean, pushing them in far deeper than he needs to before pulling them out with a pop. Shane flushes, ready to put the cake away and get to a different kind of treat but then straightens, suddenly remembering.

“Wait, I have one more thing,” Shane drops his fork before getting up to find his bag. He returns with a simply wrapped box-shaped present. It has heft to it, so Shane passes it to him carefully instead of tossing it.

“Ah, I forgot other gift,” Ilya takes it eagerly, testing the size and shape of it. He slips his fingers under the tape, peeling them instead of ripping. Shane had expected him to simply tear it off, but is endeared to see how carefully Ilya pulls along the creases, not allowing a single tear in the wrapping paper.

Shane’s nervous when he finally reveals the box, Ilya curiously inspecting the sides.

“These are books,” Ilya notes, surprised, “what—“

He pulls out one of the four books from its case and pauses, eyebrows raising high. “This is Chertok. These are Chertok’s memoirs.”

“I figured you’ve definitely read them before but didn’t know if you had copies,” Shane shrugs awkwardly. Ilya is quiet, mouth slightly parted as he flips through the pages, all in their original Cyrillic.

“No, I do not have copies. Or at least not all of them, I think I have the third at home in Russia. I read them in library. Where did you even—“ Ilya breathes, tracing the gold leaf lettering on the cover. “I have never seen this edition before.”

Because it wasn’t technically a published edition. Shane doesn’t bring up that he had these copies specially bound, having frowned at the original covers and not being impressed by the textbook plastic feel. So he had commissioned getting them bound with a higher quality cover, all matching and elegantly designed with matte finishing and gold leaf designs and Russian lettering.

“Ah, do you like it?” Shane asks, fidgeting a little with the duvet. Sue him, he wants this to go well.

“Do I— Shane, these are *beautiful,”* Ilya shakes his head in disbelief. “I love it. Jesus.”

He’s still tracing over the covers, almost reverent. “Thank you.”

Shane’s shoulders relax, relieved. “Of course. I’m glad you like them.”

Ilya scoffs a little, shaking his head abortively before looking up and leaning forward. Shane’s expecting this kiss, humming happily as Ilya thanks him a second time. He pulls away for two seconds to reach over to drop the books on his desk, along with his laptop and the remnants of the cake before dragging Shane closer to him, pulling him onto his lap as Ilya flops down onto the mattress. Shane goes with a laugh, bracing himself over Ilya as they kiss slow and deep.

Shane could easily become addicted to the way Ilya kisses him. It leaves him breathless, head dizzy from both the lack of oxygen and overwhelmed adrenaline from having Ilya like this, under his hands. In the dim kitchen light, the only light still on, Ilya is shadows and highlights and completely beautiful.

They have to eventually part for air but Ilya doesn’t go far, kissing Shane between words while Shane tries to keep up.

“I want to fuck you,” Ilya pants into his mouth, “can I fuck you, sweetheart?”

Shane moans softly, nodding against Ilya’s forehead. “Yeah. Yes. Anything you want.”

Ilya makes a soft noise before tugging on Shane’s clothes. “Off, come on.”

They both strip quickly, not willing to prolong the wait when there’s something warm and tender like embers between them tonight. Ilya has his hands on Shane’s bare skin the second he can, running over his body and leaving goosebumps in his wake.

“Fuck, still can’t believe you are this pretty,” Ilya whispers, reaching up to cup Shane’s face. His thumb gently presses down on Shane’s bottom lip before moving up to brush his cheekbones. “Your freckles— I cannot stop thinking about your freckles. Drives me insane.”

Shane leans into Ilya’s touch with a ghost of a smile. “That’s not very hard. You’re definitely crazy.”

Ilya barks a laugh. “Yes, maybe, but you still like me. What does that say about you, Hollander?”

“That’s true,” Shane intentionally drops the teasing for a second. He rubs Ilya’s eyebrow. “I do still like you. I like you a lot.”

And maybe it’s because they’ve been naturally honest with each other today, or maybe Shane had managed to make Ilya’s normal walls shakier, but Ilya doesn’t divert, doesn’t try to play it off. His eyes soften, kissing him once before flipping them, getting Shane underneath him.

“Let me open you up,” Ilya whispers against his skin as he trails kisses down between his legs. He teases his cock with his tongue briefly, enough to make Shane let out a sharp gasp but then sets to work lower than that. Shane’s not expecting the first finger inside of him either.

“Where did you even get the lube?” Shane exhales incredulously, breathing deep to adjust to the intrusion.

“Pillow,” Ilya replies, giving him a playful grin, “I planned ahead.”

Shane snorts but cuts himself off with another gasp when Ilya reaches deep and drags across his prostate.

“Add another, come on, want you inside me,” Shane urges, widening his legs as he rocks up into Ilya’s hand. Ilya is definitely just as desperate because he doesn’t tease, simply stretching Shane out without a word. He’s still slow though, thorough, opening him up for long enough that Shane’s gasping, whimpering, and writhing on the bed. He can’t even complain, his thoughts too syrupy to come together into something coherent.

“I think you’re ready,” Ilya murmurs, Shane’s only warning before Ilya slips out of Shane leaving him achingly empty. “On your stomach, малыш.”

Shane obeys, even if his limbs start feeling a little slower than usual. Shane grips the duvet with his fingers while he’s on his hands and knees which helps.

“Good,” Ilya says, “You still want?” Shane nods, and arches his back to spread his knees a touch wider and present. They've never done this position before.

“Yeah. Yes, please. Feel empty,” Shane confesses with a slight slur.

“Jesus,” Shane thinks Ilya mutters to himself, but he’s distracted quickly with the blunt feel of Ilya’s cock against his entrance. He cries out sharply when Ilya breaches him, spreading his rim around his head.

“Shh, shh, that’s it, relax, sweetheart,” Ilya soothes, pressing in slowly. “*Fuck.*”

Shane had thought he would know what to expect, having taken Ilya’s cock plenty of times now. But the soft, easy missionary position, even the way Ilya pushed his legs up and folded in half sometimes, was nothing like how deep Ilya managed to reach inside him while fucking him from behind.

It was like it would never *end.* “Ilya,” Shane gasps, pressing his forehead into the mattress and trying to breathe. “Oh god, *Ilya.*” He could feel his cock up to his throat.

“You’re doing so good, малыш, so fucking good for me, shit,” Ilya curses. Shane feels his thumb brush against the rim of his hole where he’s stretched around Ilya’s cock. “Almost. That’s almost all of it.”

A broken noise escapes Shane when he finally feels the press of Ilya’s hips against his ass. They both have to pause to breathe and calm down. Every nerve ending in Shane’s body was

sparking.

“So much,” Shane breathes. “Oh my god, it’s so much. You feel so big like this.” He whimpers when Ilya shifts his hips, dragging against his walls.

“Fuck, I can barely move,” Ilya mutters, gripping Shane’s hips tighter and planting his knees, “your perfect hole just sucks me in. Won’t let me go.”

A louder cry drags out of Shane when Ilya flexes and pulls out just enough to thrust back inside him. “You are okay?” Ilya pants, checking even as he crouches over and presses his forehead against Shane’s middle back to catch his breath.

Shane moans, nodding. “Fuck me Ilya, please. You can fuck me.”

He gasps as Ilya does exactly that, fingers clenching in the sheets again as Ilya rears back and thrusts in hard. “Yes! Oh, fuck baby, yeah, like that—“

He hears Ilya curse behind him in Russian before Shane’s head is pushed into the bed by a hand and another props his hips up. Then Ilya *fucks* him.

Any other pleas devolve into broken, desperate whimpers as Ilya pounds into him, harder than he has ever fucked him before. The clap of their skin is pornographic and if Shane could think, he would flush at the sound of how wet his lubed hole is.

“God, Shane,” Ilya grunts, breathless, “fuck you’re so tight. Take me so fucking well.”

“Mmmn, oh, fu— please,” Shane slurs, eyes rolling back. He writhes against Ilya’s hold, “pleas’ so close m’so close, lemme—“

“Come,” Ilya demands, and Shane’s back arches as he obeys instantly, his vision whiting out.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya groans watching him, rhythm faltering even as Shane sobs trying to ride through the mind-shattering finish. He feels Ilya press close, riding through his own orgasm until they’re both fighting for breath. Ilya drapes himself across Shane’s back, ignoring his grunt. It drops him directly on the wet spot that Shane had made.

“Ew, gross,” Shane mumbles, slurred. He hears Ilya snort. It’s enough to get him off, pulling Shane up with him until he’s slumped upright against Ilya’s chest. He hums when Ilya nudges at his cheek and then kisses him deep.

“Go shower,” Ilya instructs softly when they part. “You’ll be grumpy the entire time you stay here and aren’t clean.”

Very true. Except Shane had no words to describe how viscerally seen the easy statement makes him feel.

Ilya’s almost done changing the sheets when Shane comes back from the bathroom, toweling his hair. “I’ll be quick,” Ilya switches with him, kissing his forehead and leaving Shane alone to settle into bed, claiming his usual right side.

In the privacy of the dark room and quiet, muffled sound of the shower running, Shane sinks farther under the duvet, not bothering to hide his little grin. He feels sore, the good kind of sore he rarely feels outside of a good game. His limbs feel light as air, anxiety and tension quite literally fucked out of him leaving him sleepy.

Ilya is quick as promised and once he finishes drying his own hair he slips into bed next to Shane. He stretches out an arm to encourage Shane to wedge into the space it creates, head against his bicep as they cuddle.

“You are okay?” Ilya asks, hand in Shane’s hair petting him in a way that would make him purr if he could.

“Mmhmm,” Shane hums, kissing his neck. “Happy birthday Ilya.”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “Thank you. Today was very good.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t do more. You know, outside.”

He feels Ilya shake his head and brings his chin up to look up at Ilya.

“No, no, no,” Ilya is quick to deny, “this was perfect, sweetheart. I have good cake, good presents, and good sex with boyfriend. What else could I need?”

Shane feels that jolt down his spine, and he sits up, ignoring Ilya’s grumble.

“Boyfriend?” Shane repeats, heart racing.

Ilya furrows his eyebrows at him. “Yes. I think so, yes. What do you think we’ve been doing, Shane?”

Shane shrugs, and he can feel the way his cheeks flush. “I don’t know! We didn’t talk about it.”

“Shane,” Ilya huffs, pushing himself up onto his elbows. “I’ve been telling people I have a partner since April.”

“You… what?”

“Telling people I am not single,” Ilya raises his eyebrows. “At clubs, yes? I turn down men and women who come to dance, say, ‘No thank you, I have very pretty boyfriend.’”

“You’ve been telling people… what the fuck?” Shane blinks rapidly. He’s still rebooting from the first ‘boyfriend.’

“Did I not understand?” Ilya cocks his head, and his exasperated tone cools into something more cautious. He’s gone stiff from where he’s laid out on the bed. “Did you not want to be exclusive?”

“No, no, I mean yes, exclusive, I’m not seeing anyone else, obviously, but *April?*”

“I just assumed we started dating after Boston-Montreal game when we first met in person,” Ilya shrugs nonchalantly, relaxing again. “March 23rd. Is anniversary.”

Shane thinks he lost the plot three or four sentences ago. “*Anniversary?*”

Ilya is clearly growing more amused at the way Shane hasn’t been able to contribute much besides repeating whatever Ilya says incredulously. “Did I break you, Hollander?”

Shane shakes his head. “Sorry. Sorry, I just… we didn’t say anything about being official.”

“I think saying we are willing to risk visa status and entire public career to be together is very official, don’t you?” Ilya asks wryly. A surprised laugh bubbles out of Shane at that. “Oh. I guess so. Okay. March 23rd.”

Shane has a new repeating calendar event to add on his phone ASAP.

“You are good with it? Boyfriends?” Ilya checks, and maybe it’s because they spent so much time over the phone but Shane can pinpoint the inflection of Ilya’s words, the faint hesitation. He might have missed it if he hadn’t spent months attuned to the way Ilya’s voice hitches and rolls and learning what it means.

Shane shifts over, dragging his leg over Ilya’s hip to settle in his lap and straddle him. Ilya’s still propped up on his elbows, so Shane doesn’t have to bend far to reach his mouth, pressing their lips together silently. Ilya exhales into it, eyes fluttering shut as Shane encourages him to open his mouth so Shane can suck on his tongue the way he’s learned Ilya likes.

Ilya chases after him when Shane pulls away, enough to make Shane press a last fleeting peck. Ignoring the crick in his neck, he touches their foreheads together, sharing air.

“I am very good with it,” Shane confirms, unable to keep from smiling a little giddy, “boyfriends.”

Ilya smiles back before snorting. “You know this means I will hold the fact you did not know we were dating for three months over your head for the entire time we are together, yes?”

Shane frowns. “Hey.”

“I am more romantic and better boyfriend because I remember the date. You are already behind on boyfriend points Hollan-hey, hey!” Ilya continues loftily before Shane jabs his fingers into Ilya’s ribs, making him yelp. His arms give out under him as he tries to squirm away. “Abuse! Abuse, Hollander, you know we are dating for all of five minutes and already you mistreat me.”

“Oh, I think I know how my boyfriend likes to be treated,” Shane teases, biting down a laugh as he grasps Ilya’s wrists before they can retaliate, holding his hands down against the pillows and hovering over him. Ilya doesn’t put up a fight, smirking up at Shane from where he’s held down. “But,” Shane says, leaning down to rub his nose against the side of Ilya’s, “I’m happy to provide a refresher.” He feels rather than sees the way Ilya’s lips curve up into a smile before Shane sets off to remind him.

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The rest of the summer drags on, and it has nothing to do with the fact Ilya had left the US in July to return to Russia and renew his visa, officially an H-1B. Shane's learned a lot about American, Russian, and Canadian immigration law these past few months. He feels Ilya's absence like a withdrawal, the time zone difference not helping his mood at all. His taciturness is noticeable enough that his mom mentions it at one of his advertisement shoots.

"I'm fine," Shane tries not to snap. He fights to stay still as a stylist works with his hair between takes.

"It's okay if you aren't," his mom reassures, "we have a break coming up if all this brand work is making you tired. Is it too much?"

It does feel like too much, it always has. He hates people touching him, judging him, watching him anywhere they want. But Shane's never brought it up with his mom, sucking it up to keep her appeased and keep her approval. He knows how much work she puts into it, and in the end, he knows she does it for him.

"No," Shane tries to smile, "I'm okay. But I do want to keep that break in August, if that's okay."

Ilya was flying back to Boston on the 2nd.

"Plans?" his mom asks idly. Shane wishes she hadn't because now he has to lie. She's looking away thankfully so she doesn't see Shane wince. He hates lying to his parents— he's never been really good at it, especially as a kid.

Ilya isn't pleased with it either. It's subtle because Ilya tries not to show it and he hasn't pushed since he brought it up months ago, but he had frowned quietly to himself when Shane admitted one sleepy post-afterglow night that his parents still didn't know that he was gay.

"No, no. Just want some time to relax before preseason picks up," Shane replies, not looking at his mom.

"Of course honey," his mom smiles, "I'm glad you're taking care of yourself."

It's not that he doesn't trust his parents. He does. He knows they love him. But every time Shane mentally runs through his coming out simulations, every time he thinks about sitting them down and saying *Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you* all he can picture is their disappointment. Disappointment he's not the role model they've been making him since he was a child, an inspiration for the hockey world. Disappointment that he had lied to their faces for so long. Disappointment that he wasn't the son they had raised him to be.

He feels his phone vibrate and when he makes sure his mom is busy, he checks his messages on WhatsApp, the platform they've been using while Ilya's international.

Lily (3:24 pm): going to bed

Lily (3:24 pm): is sad

Lily (3:25 pm): my bed feels very cold and lonely without you

Shane bites down on his lip to hide a smile.

Shane (3:25 pm): I think you'll live

Shane (3:25 pm): goodnight baby

It's a habit now, to swipe to his calendar app and look at Ilya's arrival date, as if checking it more often will make the day arrive faster. He scrolls through the August date, finding his flight details waiting primly within the agenda.

"That Hayden again?" his mom asks casually, and she's raising an eyebrow when Shane looks back at her. There's something patient in the way she's standing, like she's waiting for something.

"Um, yeah. Yeah, sorry. He says hi," Shane lies again and his mother hums. She doesn't move away.

"You know you can tell me anything, right?" she says carefully. Shane suddenly feels his palms sweating in a way they never do, not even during a game.

"Yeah. Of course, mom, I know," Shane tries to smile weakly. He feels his stomach roiling. "I will when I have something to say."

His mom nods slowly. "Good. As long as you know."

When Shane looks back down to avoid his mother's gaze, he sees the sleepy and kissing face emojis Ilya's sent him. He can't make himself smile at it. It feels like a betrayal to more than one person.

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It's fucking hot in Boston in August. Shane's never going to complain about Montreal summers ever again.

"Why doesn't your place have AC, fuck," Shane complains from his place shirtless and in boxers on Ilya's floor. Ilya laughs.

"Oh I am sorry Mr. Hockey Man, not my fault you were born in ice palace. Half the buildings in Boston do not have AC."

"That has to be illegal."

"Summer in Russia is not like this. Very cool, not too hot. Pretty."

Shane rolls over onto his stomach, resting his head on his arms. His skin is disgustingly sticky with a thin film of sweat. "That sounds nice. I'm glad the Olympics will be in Sochi. It'll be nice to see the country you grew up in."

“Next winter, yes? I will give you tips. Things to try, places to avoid. Useful Russian.”

“Useful Russian,” Shane repeats, skeptical. “Do I want to know what you think useful Russian is?”

Ilya grins with all his teeth. “Yes. Phrases like yes, sir, harder, please—“

Shane yanks on Ilya’s ankle from his place on his floor, relishing his laugh.

“You are very sure you will be going to Olympics,” Ilya states, idly going through his mail. Shane shrugs his shoulders with his head down again. “Who else if not me?”

Ilya doesn’t say anything for long enough to make Shane look up. Ilya’s leaning back on his chair, quietly amused. “You are very confident. Almost arrogant. Is very hot. Media does not know this about you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means everyone thinks that Shane Hollander is sweet, modest, polite Canadian hockey prince who can do no wrong. But I know better.” Ilya tilts his head. “I know that Shane Hollander is an asshole.”

Shane barks a laugh, chuckling. “Wow. Don’t tell the papers.”

“And funny. The world knows you are hot and boring but does not know all other things like your jokes and the way you moan when you’re fucked full—“

“Fuck off you fucking perv. Go back to your mail.”

“And bossy!” Ilya laments, but doing as told. “You like being told what to do and when to come but is cover up. You are actually very pushy.”

Shane does his best to hide his grin, closing his eyes as he listens to Ilya’s papers rustle over the faint buzz of the overworked fan above them. It’s peaceful in a way that Shane’s not used to, especially not in the presence of others. The fact he hadn’t gone to his parents’ cottage in Ontario this summer doesn’t feel like a loss. Shane doesn’t know how long he dozes, content to stay on the floor where the wood is cool until the silence is broken by a soft Russian curse.

“Something wrong?” Shane mumbles sleepily. When he doesn’t get an answer, he props himself up a little. “Ilya?”

Ilya’s frowning at a sheet in his hand, fingers curling into the paper. He clenches his jaw before he answers.

“My housing contract ends this month,” Ilya sighs, tossing the letter to the table, “but they’re increasing the rent and taking away the student discount they gave me since I graduated.”

“Oh,” Shane says stupidly, “that sucks.”

Ilya looks down at him, a wry quirk to his mouth. “Thanks.”

“What are you going to do?” Shane tries. He knows it’s obvious but he doesn’t want it to be clear that he can’t relate. He’s never had to worry about income or paying for needs, especially not as an adult. He signed a multimillion dollar contract when he was seventeen.

“Don’t know,” Ilya rubs his eyes. “Maybe find somewhere cheaper but this late in the fall there won’t be much left.”

“Could your family help?” Shane spitballs and Ilya snorts.

“No,” Ilya laughs, and Shane doesn’t know what’s so funny about his suggestion but Ilya’s amused. “No, they cannot.”

Shane flushes a little, but he’s not sure why. He locks his gaze on the notice still on the table, biting his lip. Shane is a problem solver. He gets it from his mom and it’s obvious in his planners and contingencies and expert referrals. He likes to fix things; it makes him a good captain. It shouldn’t be a surprise it carries over to Ilya too.

“What if,” Shane starts, perking up, “what if I helped? I can definitely afford it. Wouldn’t be a problem to pay your rent—“

He looks up just in time to see the way Ilya shuts down.

“No,” Ilya scowls, “I do not want to live off your money. Do not offer again.” It’s the most upset Shane’s seen him and it makes Shane shrink back a little. He had hit a sore spot without realizing.

“Okay,” Shane placates carefully, “okay, we won’t do that.” He pauses, another idea popping up. “What about this? You find a place, one bedroom, two bedroom, whatever that you think is reasonable, that you can afford half of with your lab salary. I’ll pay the other half of the rent, and it’ll be where I stay when I come to Boston. Like… splitting rent between roommates. I won’t need to stay at the hotels and I’ll be—“ Shane realizes he’s rambling, and that Ilya’s suspiciously quiet.

“You’ll be what?” Ilya prompts when Shane cuts himself off. Shane glances at Ilya just to see his infuriatingly blank expression.

Shane makes himself finish, eyes locked on his own hands. “I’ll be coming back to you.”

Ilya is startlingly silent after that, and Shane has to tamp down on the wince. He almost opens his mouth to retreat and take it back. Ilya stops him when he gets out of his chair and joins Shane on the floor, sitting back on his heels.

“Shane,” Ilya is trying to keep from grinning. “Are you asking me to move in with you?”

Shane frowns immediately, “shut up. No. We’ve only been dating for five months, that would be crazy.”

“Because it sounds a lot like you’re asking me to move in with you,” Ilya continues over him, and Shane’s just relieved to see that dark frustration from Shane’s earlier offer has disappeared.

“I’m just being pragmatic. I’ve been investing in real estate for a while now. Boston market is always a good investment; a lot of students. Maybe I’ll buy the place later.”

“Right,” Ilya nods, biting his lip, “good investment. Well, Mr. Real Estate, even if you are not asking me to move in with you and just being *pragmatic*, I accept your business proposal.”

Shane lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Shit, really?”

“Solves my actual roommate and rent problem,” Ilya shrugs. “I can still work the hotline but it’ll be a better place than the studio that I can afford on my own. I like the idea of you being with me when you’re in Boston and it would be nice to have more space when you’re over. Studio is small for two people.”

It’ll probably be an unconventional rent contract but Shane is already mentally planning out who he’s going to have to reach out to, his lawyer for sure plus finding a real estate broker who’ll sign an NDA here in Boston—

“Are you okay,” Ilya asks, a little cautious in a way that sets off Shane's alarm bells. It makes Shane pause in with his checklist making. “With me still working with hotline, I mean. While we are dating.”

“I mean,” Shane shrugs, “do you mind when I do more revealing advertising?”

“Not the same,” Ilya counters immediately, “I benefit very much from your sexy brand ads. I have Calvin Klein photos saved on my phone.”

Shane rolls his eyes in an effort to hide how flustered that makes him. “Okay, okay. I mean, so long as you’re not getting off to them like you did with me, I don’t really mind. It’s just work.”

“Never,” Ilya promises, “I told you. I had never actually come with a caller on the line before you.”

“Then no problem,” Shane shrugs. “I’m still the one who actually gets to have you.”

He doesn’t think too much about what he said until he sees Ilya with a small grin on his face.

Shane’s immediately suspicious. “What?”

“You are very romantic,” Ilya teases, and Shane flushes. “What the fuck. No, I’m not.”

“Mmm, yes you are. Flowers, pretty gifts, asking me to move in. Romantic.”

“Shut up. Fuck you. When does your lease end? We can start looking to make that deadline so you’re not homeless.”

“Very practical,” Ilya grins, and he shifts from in front of Shane to his side. Shane complains when he slumps onto him, his body heat stifling against Shane’s. “Is hot.”

“You’re hot,” Shane whines, pushing him off, “and sweaty. New rule, your place needs to have AC. Non-negotiable.”

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Pre-season flies by, mostly because Shane can get away with a couple trips to Boston between games. He gets lucky when the Bears end up as one of their six matchups, on Boston home ice. It doesn’t take much negotiation to convince his coaching team to put him on the Boston-Montreal split squad roster, citing he wants to scope out their new goalie.

It’s Ilya who ends up even busier than Shane in the fall as he adjusts to his new role in the lab. He starts working as staff researcher at the same lab he had been in throughout undergrad and if Ilya had been working hard in school last year, he’s in the fucking grinder now. It doesn’t help that he’s neck deep in his PhD applications too. He's had to cut down on the hotline hours.

“English is terrible fucking language,” Ilya rants to him one weekend over the phone. Shane has him on speaker while he heats up one of his meal prep dinners in his apartment in Montreal. “Stupid grammar and sentence structure. And your articles. Russians do not need this. We are not so stupid that we need to use different words talking about *your* bag and *a* bag. Is just fucking bag.”

“How many essays do you still need to write?” Shane asks, amused as he opens up the microwave.

“Too fucking many.”

Shane laughs as he sits down at his counter. When he has Ilya on speaker like this, it feels a little like they’re having dinner together, side by side. And Shane is just so relieved with the return of their easy banter, eager for every minute he could get with his boyfriend tonight. Ilya has been quieter the past couple weeks, initiating less and less and shortening their calls. Shane had chalked it up to the December 1st application deadline just four weeks away, a couple of his school applications due earlier in just one or two. Still, he sometimes felt like he was missing something while they called when Ilya seemed mentally every mile away from Shane as he was physically.

“Well, I’m definitely not as smart as you but I’m not all that bad at English. I can help you edit if you want.”

Ilya’s quiet in the way Shane’s learned to wait through as he processes. Ilya sometimes needs time to gather his thoughts, but not in the same way Shane does. Shane needs time to put together his words into something coherent. Ilya needs time to wrangle his feelings into something manageable.

“If it isn’t too much,” Ilya finally says carefully. “That would be very nice.”

“Not too much,” Shane reassures with a smile. Every acquiesce to an offer for help is a victory in Shane’s book. Shane learned very early on that Ilya doesn’t like to be a burden, no matter how stupid Shane thinks that is. “I wouldn’t have offered otherwise.”

“Mmm. When you come to Boston next Thursday, yes? You can help me put together idiot dresser.”

“Is it still in pieces on the floor since I last visited?” Shane sighs, exasperated. “Ilya. The instructions are all pictures.”

“Yes, like little ancient Egyptian pictures. Why do you think I can read this?”

“Aren’t you a physicist?” Shane scoffs incredulously. He’s so endeared he feels ill with it. “You literally have a degree in like, quantum mechanics.”

“I did not learn to build dumb Swedish furniture in college, Shane. I have big, manly boyfriend to do this for me instead. He is very sexy with hammer, you know this?”

Shane gets this ache between his ribs when he’s talking to Ilya over the phone, tender to the touch. It burns like a star, a miniature sun in the place where his feelings for Ilya grow.

“Is he really?”

It ebbs and flows in how much it hurts but it’s almost always there when they’re apart like this.

“Yes,” Ilya sniffs. “So do not try any funny business, Mr. Hollander. I am taken man.”

Sometimes, he can’t breathe with it.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Shane smiles, voice soft.

The need to kiss Ilya feels like a sickness. It’s only cure is when he steps into the private haven they’ve started building together and can touch him again without fear. Thursday is so far away.

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“Hey Hollzy, we’re going out,” Drapeau calls out, “you coming?”

The win against the Bears is as satisfying as always, but it was harder than usual to keep his focus. It didn’t come through in his play but Shane knows that hockey wasn’t his biggest source of anticipation tonight. Ilya’s already sending texts about the win and all the ways he was planning on rewarding Shane. They haven’t had sex in weeks and Shane definitely feels it.

“Ah, sorry boys,” Shane shrugs, not looking up from his phone. “Have plans.”

There’s a chorus of groans and protests. “Don’t fucking be like that Captaine,” JJ complains, leaning against Petrov’s stall next to Shane’s. “What do you possibly have to do in Boston that you cannot go out and celebrate a hat trick win against the Bears tonight?”

Shane makes a noncommital noise. “Ah, you know. Just meeting up with someone.”

Wrong fucking thing to say. The room goes briefly silent before crackling with energy that sets Shane on edge.

“Oh,” JJ grins. “I see. This is about Boston Lily.”

Shane feels dread like ice douse his spine, his head snapping up. “What?”

“Ah come on Hollander. We know you have a regular puck bunny in Boston since last season,” Comeau snorts. “You never come out with us when we’re here, you’re always grinning at your phone, and Pike says you usually don’t even sleep in the hotel.”

He glares at Hayden who puts his hands up defensively. “They kept asking for you! Something about the rookies and I had to tell them you weren’t here.”

Hayden looks particularly guilty though, because of everyone in the locker room, he was the only one who knew who Lily actually was.

“And I saw that her name’s Lily,” Miitka pipes up, and he turns his glare to the goalie. “What, your phone was right there and I thought it was mine! She’s spicy.”

“Jesus,” Shane feels a migraine as he pinches his nose between his eyebrows. There’s low grade panic in his gut, the kind that Ilya is getting so adept at calming down, either with his words or his hands, but he’s not here. “Fuck, what did you read, Miitka?”

He at least has the decency to look contrite. “Nothing much! But uh, I’m glad you’re getting good head, Cap?”

He groans, even as the rest of the locker room jeers, a few, “good for you, Hollzy!” thrown in. Tame, considering the crazy shit Ilya sends him most of the time. Not quite Defcon 1 but not great either.

“Guys,” Shane starts, shoulders up to his ears. But JJ shakes his head, throws an arm around them and forces him to relax.

“Non, Captaine. This is good! We are glad for you,” JJ reassures. “This girl makes you smile. That’s good enough for us, Hollander.”

Shane stills, unexpectedly touched, surprised with this sincerity. He also feels a sudden pang of guilt because he’s not exactly being entirely honest with them. “Oh.”

“Plus you go easier on us in practice when you’re getting your dick wet on the regular,” Drapeau adds and that’s more of what he was expecting.

“You trying to do bag skates this afternoon, Drapeau?” Shane scowls. The goalie backs off immediately with his hands up.

“Don’t be like that, Hollzy!” JJ cackles. “So she’s here? In Boston?” And he looks around, realizing his entire team was turned, looking to him as they wait for his answer. God. It won’t be just JJ; everyone in this locker room wasn’t going to let this go.

“Um. Yeah, she lives here,” Shane stammers, looking down at his feet. “She’s a recent graduate. MIT. Works there now in a lab.”

Drapeau whistles. “Oh wow. A smart one. How’d you land that?”

Shame absolutely can never let them know he started hooking up with his phone sex worker. His *male* phone sex worker.

“Mutuals,” Shane shrugs and does his best to sound disaffected.

“Okay and?” Miitka probes. Shane flushes, crossing his arms in a way that he knows looks defensive but fuck, maybe he is.

“And what?”

“What is she like?” McGee exasperates, waving a hand, “come on Hollzy, you’ve *never* talked about a girl. She a good lay? How’s her head? How serious is it?”

“Fuck, you guys can’t ever say shit about WAG gossip from now on you’re all just as bad as them,” Shane scoffs, but he’s aware how hot his ears feel.

“Just give us one thing, come on, Hollander.”

Shane groans, rubbing the back of his head under the attention of his entire team roster before he realizes he’s copying one of Ilya’s habits. “Fuck, okay, okay you fucking vultures, shut up.” What could Shane share about Ilya, out of all the little details he’s hoarded of him the past year?

Ilya is 22, like Shane. Recently graduated from MIT with a degree in physics with a focus on quantum physics, mathematics, and astronomy. 3.95 GPA, summa cum laude. He works there now, continuing with his lab as a full time researcher while he starts putting together his applications for PhD programs. He’s published in multiple journals, including a first author paper in Nature Astronomy which Shane gathers from his precursory Google searching is an insanely big fucking deal in Ilya’s world.

Shane’s learning he might have a bit of a competency kink.

The personal details were admittedly still scarce but Shane’s managed to eke out a few of those too. Ilya immigrated from Russia for school when he was 17, where the rest of his family lives. He was born and raised in Moscow. He and Svetlana have been best friends since they were nine years old, when Svetlana had kicked him in the shin and called him stupid. Then told him to eat lunch with her. His favorite constellation is Ursa Minor. When Shane thinks of him, he imagines him as one of the celestial bodies Ilya loves so much, something bright and all-consuming.

“She studies space,” Shane offers, praying it’ll be enough. It’s not. They pounce on it like sharks tasting blood in the water.

“Shit, so she’s *smart* smart,” Brown huffs, impressed. “You thinking of locking it down anytime soon?”

Stupidly, Shane answers. “Um. I mean. We’ve been official for a while.”

You would have thought he had just dropped a nuclear bomb, the way the locker room erupts into chaos.

“Official?” Comeau repeats and if Shane wasn’t frantically trying to think of a way to mitigate the damage he would laugh at how comically shrill the man’s voice goes. “Since fucking *when* Hollander?”

“Um,” Shane says weakly, because what a fucking grave he’s dug for himself. “March?”

“*March?”*

“Why the fuck isn’t she in the WAG’s chat?” Trevors calls out, outraged, “Audrey is going to be pissed that Hollander’s girlfriend hasn’t been in the group chat for this long.”

“How have we not *met her?”*

“Captain, this is unacceptable. She is coming out with us tonight, you can fuck later.”

“Come on, guys, maybe we should lay off,” Hayden says when he notices Shane shutting down. It doesn’t help.

“You fucking knew, Pike!” Drapeau cries suddenly, with an accusing pointer finger. “Traitor!”

“What? Why?” Hayden protests, indignant and gesturing with his hands, “for not narcing on my captain?”

“She’s not coming,” Shane interrupts, captain voice loud and firm as it cuts through the noise. “She wants privacy, so we’re going to keep it that way. Fucking sue me guys but maybe I didn’t want my new girlfriend to have to deal with all of… this.”

“She’s not going to last if she can’t handle all this,” Trevors snorts. “What are you going to do, hide her away from everyone for your entire hockey career? You’ve got at least another decade in you, Cap.”

He doesn’t know it, but Trevors hits on a truth that feels like a knee to the gut.

“We cross the bridge when we get there,” Shane manages to keep his voice steady, as if he hadn’t just been reminded of exactly what keeps Shane up at night, the unsustainability of their secret. Exactly how long was Ilya going to wait for Shane? “Do not make me have to come and bail any of you out of jail tonight.”

“Don’t worry Hollzy, we won’t cockblock you,” Comeau winks. “No midnight calls while you’re balls deep in her, swear.”

Shane feels a little sick. He’s sure they wouldn’t be joking if they knew he was going to be the one to have someone balls deep in him, not the other way around.

“Appreciated,” Shane replies, his throat dry. He’s always fucking hated lying.

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He doesn’t bring it up with Ilya. Which, probably isn’t the best move when it comes to open communication, but he doesn’t want to worry Ilya about it. Not when it was Shane’s fault they had to work so hard to keep it a secret.

Yes, Ilya’s visa would be at risk if the Russian government accused him of being queer under their new propaganda law but he would have had an easier time of hiding it and still having a normal relationship in the US if he wasn’t dating a fucking celebrity. Ilya would never be able to go home if he became known as Shane Hollander’s boyfriend. Another reason why it was risky for *anyone* to know. Hayden and Svetlana were more than enough. Anymore meant more chances of someone slipping, even by accident. More avenues for a leak.

At least, that’s why Shane’s telling himself when he and Ilya have their first real big fight almost a month later.

“I do not understand why you will not tell your parents,” Ilya huffs. They're on the couch in the one bedroom apartment they had found back in September, slowly being filled with furniture and a mix of their things. “They will not react badly, you have said this.”

“I mean, I don’t think they will,” Shane shakes his head, “I don’t know. I’ve lied to them for so long.”

“Yes, maybe, but for a reason. They will understand.”

Shane’s not sure how their evening devolved so quickly. He thinks maybe it was when he had brought up the holidays, the Christmas traditions his family still keeps during his limited time off between games in December. It hurt that he couldn't bring Ilya home with him this year but when he brings it up to commiserate, Ilya had pulled away and asked with a twist to his mouth why he couldn't come with. Now they were here.

“You don’t know that,” Shane frowns. “Fuck, you don’t– there’s way too much at risk here Ilya. More people knowing is more risk.”

Ilya scowls. “You do not think I don’t know that? Of course it is risk. But how long are you going to keep this from them Shane? Your *family?* You have said how much you hate lying to them. How much longer can you keep doing this?”

“I don’t know,” Shane crosses his arms, unease trickling like tar down his windpipe. He wishes people would stop fucking asking because he didn't have a fucking answer. “As long as I have to. Not right now. We can’t now.”

Ilya sighs, exasperated. “Then when! Tell me when, Shane. When are you going to wake up and accept this as real?

“It’s not that easy!” Shane cries, throat tight. He's terrified, and its not the same as telling Hayden, it's not. He loves Hayden, yeah, but these were his parents. Rejection and

disappointment meant something so much more serious here. And god, he would have to look his parents in the eye and tell them he's been lying. All this time. Shane has lived with this secret his entire life, locked up tight in a box he threw so deep in the closet it's a miracle Ilya found it. The thought of showing this part of him to his parents too, after twenty something years, douses him in such abject fear that it makes him want to throw up.

He's suddenly standing not knowing when he got up off the couch. Ilya follows.

"I get why we cannot tell everyone. But it is your *parents.* What are we even doing, if you will not even tell them you are gay? Because it makes me think that you do not want to make this real," Ilya points in between them. "That you do not plan to ever tell them, so they will never know when you eventually break up with me."

Shane straightens. "No. Jesus, Ilya no. That's not–"

"How would I know?" Ilya scoffs. "You have been hiding us for nine months, Shane. How much is enough time? A year? Two years? You want to lie to your parents for that long?"

"Fuck off. Are you telling yours?" Shane snaps back, sharp. He realizes the second it leaves his mouth he's gone too far past a line that Shane didn't even know existed. A wall that Shane had never seen before slams down between them so fast, he gets whiplash.

"No, Shane, I am not," Ilya intones, face still as stone. "I am not telling my parents because both my parents are fucking dead."

Shane rears back like Ilya had slapped him. Oh shit, Shane's fucked up.

"Ilya," Shane exhales, the fight bled out of him. There are cracks there now, under Ilya's skin. Shane had been too angry to see and now it was too late to stop them. "I'm–"

"And it wouldn't have mattered if they weren't," Ilya continues, seething like Shane hadn't interrupted. "Because my police father would have turned me in the second I said it. If he didn't beat me to death first. My police brother learned it from him, and makes sure I know how much of a useless faggot I am every time he calls."

That hits Shane like a bullet. Ilya hadn't shared anything about his family the entire time they've been dating, would always deflect and change the subject when Shane asked. All he knew was that Ilya had a brother. Nothing he could have imagined would have been this fucking bad, this painful. He reaches forward for Ilya automatically and his heart breaks when Ilya flinches away.

"Fuck. *Fuck,* Ilya, I'm so–"

"You do not know how lucky you are," Ilya inhales sharply. "To have two parents who love you. Do not make me watch you waste it."

Shane flinches. "Ilya, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Ilya clenches his jaw, forcing a steady, even breath. Shane wants to hold him, rub away the lines near his eyes, apologize. "I will sleep on couch. Unless you want me to leave."

“No, never. I don’t ever want you to leave. This is your home, Ilya,” Shane shakes his head. He feels each mistake he’s made tonight like a stone in his gut.

Ilya laughs, but it isn’t kind. “Yes. My cage that you help me pay for with your millionaire money. Waiting patiently for when you finally let me out, hmm?”

Shane kind of wishes Ilya *had* slapped him. Maybe it would hurt less.

“I’ll go,” Shane clears his throat, tears burning too fast. “You don’t have to– I can go.”

Shane waits for Ilya to stop him, to hold him back so they can finish this and fix it. Shane wants to fix it.

Ilya lets him walk out the door.

Chapter End Notes

i hadn't actually planned to end the chapter here but it was getting too long and the cliffhanger was clean so....

Chapter 8: voicemail

Chapter Summary

Ilya, alone until he's not. He also has mail.

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter of anything i've ever written in my life and its my favorite so far. Literally go nuts. your comments from the last chapter have been so much fun to read, i love the response!

A lot fucking happens in this one so buckle up folks. Mind the content warnings

cw: depression, suicidal ideation, illicit drug use, explicit homophobia

The discussion on depression and suicidal ideation is based on my own real experiences with mental health and i'm sure it'll feel personal to some people so be careful <3 there is catharsis and this will have a happy ending, promise

To the reader who lowkey predicted shit in the comments with mcgill: are you in my walls

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya wants Shane to turn around the second he walks out the door. Stupid. So fucking stupid, wasting even a minute of the precious time they get to have together.

He knows Shane is scared. He's been scared since the summer, Ilya's seen it. Seen how he keeps himself locked in Ilya's apartment to avoid being seen. Read between the lines when Shane tells him about his team, the culture there. Felt every time he flinches when he gets a text from his mother while Ilya's holding him.

Ilya shouldn't have pushed. He knows that. Shane has every right to decide to come out on his own terms.

But Ilya's been so fucking lonely.

He can't pinpoint exactly when the fog had started coming in, just knows that by the time he was aware of it, it had settled so completely that Ilya could barely see through it. In the past month, it got harder to get out of bed, harder to make sure he was eating. Harder to pretend that any of it was worth it.

Svetlana knows he can get like this, and she's usually good about being a buffer between Ilya and how dark his thoughts could become. But Svetlana isn't here— she's been giving Ilya space to be with Shane quietly, privately. Not knowing that sometimes it was too much space. That the longer he goes alone the more numb he feels, until he doesn't remember what it was like to feel anything at all.

The campuses empty out by the end of the week for the winter break and it doesn't help Ilya's general mood of isolation. The lab is a good distraction, makes him think about something other than the emptiness that's gnawing at him from the inside out but then the lab is off for the holidays too. He doesn't have any other distractions, no reason to leave the apartment, so he doesn't. For days, he's listless, just as lazy as his father accused him of being. He spends longer in bed than he does out of it, until he's not quite sure which day it is, when his last shower was, the week blurring into one smear of grey. If he could feel anything right now, he thinks the hollowness in his chest would hurt.

The week passes without Ilya. One indescript night, just as flat as the others, his phone buzzes. It's one message after another, just enough of a trigger to get Ilya to move. He hasn't worked the hotline for two weeks, not with his mood so low, a very substantial hit to his savings considering the risk of Alexei meddling again, so it's not work. He hasn't said much to Sveta lately, who was in Moscow with her father for the break, giving her just enough of an update that he was still alive. He thinks it's her again, time difference be damned, thinks to check the multiple messages. He sees it's not his best friend.

Shane (11:24 pm): Merr ry Chrisymas

Shane (11:25 pm): though I knowy ou celebrate laher

Shane (11:25 pm): rusdia christmes is later

Shane (11:26 pm): sor ry

For the first time in nearly two weeks, Ilya feels something. It hurts like an open sore, watching the texts come in. Ilya doesn't think he's ever seen Shane wasted, usually so strict around alcohol and his diet during the regular season. Ilya doesn't want to think about what it means that Shane would let go of that hard rule now.

He wants to text back. Wants to amuse himself with his sweet Shane sincerely and drunkenly trying to text him about his dad getting drunk off eggnog and his mom's annual cookie baking marathon. Wants Shane here, in his bed, curled up against him and kissing Ilya's forehead so, so softly. Like Ilya deserved being treated gently.

He lets his phone screen turn off without moving. He doesn't think he can move, if he wanted to. He's still for long enough to see when his screen flashes on again with another notification.

Shane (11:32 pm): I miss you

Ilya exhales and it's shakier than it should be. He turns off his phone completely with a stinging in his eyes before turning towards the wall, curled up tight. It's a white Christmas, a

new blanket of snow falling outside his window. Ilya shudders under the covers, breathing unevenly as quietly as he can. He's thirteen years old again, learning the cost of being both vulnerable and overheard.

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He wakes up to knocking.

It takes Ilya a second to recognize it as knocking, groaning softly as he shifts in bed. The knocking doesn't stop.

For a brief, breathless moment, he thinks maybe, maybe it's Shane. He's lost track of how many days it's been since they spoke but it's not been so long that the last bit of hope has died.

It's enough to drag himself out of the bedroom, bringing his duvet with him before he shivers in the cold of the living room.

The knocking continues up until Ilya unlocks and swings the door open.

Katya stands in front of him, bundled up in thick wool, her full grocery cart trailing behind her.

"Боже мой," she frowns, speaking Russian. "*What is wrong with you?"*

"Katya?" Ilya manages before he's pushed to the side, Katya making her way in. She sniffs in disapproval at the sight of his place. He hadn't exactly been in a state to be cleaning up after himself.

"You have not answered me or Svetochka in days," Katya answers his unspoken question. "She called me last night. Asked me to check on you." She busies herself in the kitchen without asking, pulling out the bags she's brought with her to reveal full Tupperware.

"You didn't— Katya, you did not have to," Ilya protests, but it's weak. He's too tired to put up much of a fight.

Katya stops moving just long enough to stare Ilya down and make him shift uncomfortably like a boy who got caught misbehaving.

"When was the last time you showered?" she asks instead. Ilya winces. "Hmm. As I thought. Go. I will heat this."

When Katya turns Ilya deflates and the flash of energy that had momentarily been enough to get him out of bed drains out of him all at once. Stupid to think that it would be Shane at the door. Pathetic. He wants to go back to bed. Better yet, just drop to the floor.

"Ilyuschka. Ilya. *Ilya,"* Katya is in front of him, gripping his arm. When she manages to make him meet her eye, whatever she sees makes her frown. "Господи. Come."

Ilya lets her lead him towards the bathroom. Once inside, she turns on the light and then the shower head to heat up the water, leaving him to lean against the wall with the door open. She comes back moments later, or maybe it was longer because she's holding what is probably his last set of clean clothes and a spare towel he keeps in his dresser for—

"Wash," she instructs, leaving the clothes on the sink counter. "I am outside."

She closes the door behind her as she bustles out, setting everything up for him.

He strips and steps under the water mechanically, going through motions of a shower without being quite aware of them. By the time he's done rinsing his hair though, he does feel a bit more human.

He doesn't have the wherewithal to dry his hair, so it drips on his clean shirt as he leaves the bathroom. Katya had kept busy; the bedsheets were stripped, dirty laundry in a corner near the in unit, and the trash that accumulated around the apartment in one neatly tied garbage bag.

"Katya, you did not need to do this," Ilya exhales, feeling something close to guilt.

She clicks her tongue. "Hush. Come sit."

She gestures at the small square table he's only ever shared meals with Shane on. He forces himself in a chair with the countenance of a man set to hang.

She places a bowl of borscht as he settles, steaming invitingly. He stares at it.

Katya sits in the chair perpendicular, facing him. It's silent, Ilya not looking up from the table, Katya not looking away from Ilya, and the soup cheerfully in between them.

"Sveta told me," Katya finally breaks the silence, "that sometimes you fight very dark battles in your head. And that it is not good for you to be alone during the last week of the year."

Ilya inhales, slow.

"I understand," Katya sighs, settling in her chair. "This, I know. When Ivan passed, it felt like all the good in this life went with him. I did not know how to do this without him. Every September is like this."

The borscht is cooling, but Ilya hasn't been able to convince himself to pick up a spoon. It makes him tinged with guilt–he does not want Katya to think he is ungrateful. He thinks he hasn't had a full meal in… he isn't sure.

"It does not help, either, knowing that today will be the start of another new year without him."

"It is New Year?" Ilya interrupts, voice breaking. Oh.

He had lost track of the days. His mind wasn't aware, but his heart and body always were. He reaches up to his neck and finds his mother's cross, the gold-plated metal cool to the touch.

“Yes, дорогой,” Katya answers carefully. She’s noticed the way he’s frozen up. “It is.”

Ilya suddenly finds it hard to breathe. He forgot. For the first time in eleven years, he forgot. He wants to crumple into himself, squeeze himself tight and compact to maybe make this sharp shame go away. Katya is still waiting for him to say something, but Ilya’s trying his best not to sob.

“It is my mama’s birthday,” he finally manages. His breath catches.

This would be the first year he would not be at his mother’s grave on her birthday; he had renewed in the summer for his work visa so there had been no reason to spend the money for plane tickets to go to Russia this winter. He didn’t trust Alexei to go to maintain her grave this year. Which meant Ilya had left his mother’s final resting place unattended.

Katya softens, reaching forward to grasp Ilya’s hands. “Oh, Ilyushenka.”

Ilya feels a tear drop and watches it splash on their joined knuckles. He misses his mother. He wants to be in her lap, have her comb her fingers through his curls. He wants her to comfort him through this heartbreak, hold him as he lets himself cry over the loss of a first lo–

“Is this why you are struggling?” Katya asks, and it surprisingly doesn’t sound at all like an accusation.

It would be easy to say yes and get Katya off his back. She would leave it at missing his dead mother, and Ilya could get his apartment to himself to rot in self pity again. It’s cold enough in the living room for Ilya to lose sensation in his toes. Boston is a sludgy grey outside that feels familiar. Somewhere out on the outskirts of Moscow, his mother’s body is rotting in the ground and Ilya’s not there with her.

But in the other direction, a freckled boy with a smile that fills Ilya with moonshine exists like it doesn't shatter Ilya into pieces to be apart from him.

“There is… *was,”* Ilya corrects himself with his voice breaking, “a boy.”

Katya lets out a heavy sigh, sitting back into her chair. “I see.”

She makes him sit in silence then, lets him fidget with the spoon so he doesn’t have to meet her eye.

“There are many boys, Ilya,” Katya finally says, rationally comforting in the only way Slavic men and women know how. “There will be another.”

Ilya nearly laughs, something sad and bitter seeding in his chest. Another? There is only one Shane Hollander. And Ilya had let him slip through his fingers. There would be no replacing him.

“No, babushka,” Ilya whispers with a melancholy twist to his lips, “there will not be another. He is… there is no one like him. I think… I think if we had been allowed, he would have been my Ivan.”

He doesn't have to explain any further, because he knows that Katya would understand his meaning. Ilya will not be lucky enough to find someone else who fits his broken edges so seamlessly. He's not stupid enough to think he's going to get that again, in the same way Katya had no desire to try and find someone to replace a love that was irreplaceable.

She gives it up then, simply sitting with him. He's not sure if he's glad that Katya's stopped pushing or not. Maybe bringing up Ivan was too much, Ilya winces.

"Eat your borscht, малыш," Katya tells him with a sigh. "It will get too cold."

Ilya does as told, quiet as he brings the spoon to the bowl. Katya brings him a plate with pelmeni when he's done and even though the thought of eating another bite makes him feel a little sick he knows better than to fight with her on it. He does feel warmer once he's full, a little more present. His head stops aching once Katya forces a glass of water down his throat. By the time he's done, the sun's started to set.

"I will come back tomorrow," Katya tells him, petting his head before standing up with creaky knees. "I will bring medovik."

Ilya protests, "Katya, no, this is already enough. You do not have to come all the way here–"

"My children are no longer home," Katya stops him, firm, "and my Ivan is long gone. I am alone, Ilyushenka. Both these hands empty with no one left to take care of. Do not take this one thing away from an old woman, hmm?"

The fight goes out of Ilya, falling prey to the tried and true immigrant family guilt-trip tactic. Katya hums, smug and pats his cheek. "I have left more pelmeni in the fridge for you later. Make sure you heat it with water."

She shows herself out, bundled up again in her scarves and coat, and takes the energy of the apartment with her. Right before she leaves though, she pauses at the door and tells Ilya, "this will pass Ilyuschenka. You are strong enough to survive this too."

She shuts the door behind her with a soft click.

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Having Katya check on him forces him to act a little more human. She doesn't let him stay in bed for too long, a little less aggressive than Svetlana when it's her dragging him to his feet but just as apathetic to Ilya's complaints. It's enough to get him to the next week, when the lab opens again. It's two days before Рождество Христово, Russian Christmas as Shane had called it, but he's used to not being able to celebrate it while in America with their work calendar.

He thinks this year won't be any different the day of, getting back home from work around seven only to find the apartment occupied.

"Sveta? How did you get in here?" Ilya squints, closing the door behind him, "the lock–"
"Not important," Sveta waved her hand dismissively. "I come all the way from Russia to see

you on Christmas and I do not get a simple С Рождеством?”

“С Рождеством, Svetlana,” Ilya rolls his eyes, accepting her hug. She smells like her perfume, a warm floral she had latched onto as a teenager and that Ilya’s attached to comfort.

“Very touching,” another voice drawls from deeper in the apartment, and Ilya stiffens. “It is like one of your American Hallmark movies, hmm?”

It’s a man’s voice. He pulls away from Sveta, grasping her upper arms ready to push her behind him before his eyes adjust to the dim light. There’s a tall, slim figure half hidden in the shadows of Ilya’s living room and it takes half a second for Ilya to recognize him.

“Sasha,” Ilya stops short. His throat goes a little dry.

“You did always cry during those movies,” Sasha mocks with a lilt, hips cocked from where he’s leaning against the wall. “Always so sensitive.”

“Sasha, behave,” Sveta scolds. “Is like dealing with two feral dogs. Any minute now one of you will piss on the ground to stake claim.”

“What are you doing here?” Ilya asks, ignoring Sveta as she pulls herself out of his grip and steps away. She goes to the kitchen bar counter, where the two of them had already dug deep into his alcohol supply. He sees a bottle of vodka that had not been there though, so he knows she had at least brought something for him from home.

Sasha just smirks, pushing off the wall in one long line of black and silver. Sveta had called them dogs, but Sasha is entirely feline, a wild cat prowling and marking his prey. He’s grown taller than when Ilya last saw him, asleep in a hotel bed after Ilya had fucked him for an easy lay. He has the same jewelry and sultry makeup, dangerous in Russia which is exactly why he puts them on.

“Wow,” Sasha laughs breathily once he’s in front of Ilya, “one year and I do not even get a hello kiss?”

Ilya scowls, pushing him away just as Sasha leans forward to brush their lips together. “Sasha. Why are you in Boston?”

“Graduating college has made you boring,” Sasha rolls his eyes, scoffing. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a cigarette and lighter before sauntering to Ilya’s couch. “Is it so strange that I wanted to see you, dear childhood friend? Come sit, Ilyusha. We have so much to catch up on.”

“Sveta,” Ilya turns to frown at her, and she shrugs.

“You are depressed,” Svetlana states plainly. “Sasha was very good at getting you out of your head.”

“Yes, when we were *sixteen,*” Ilya emphasizes loudly as she passes him and joins Sasha on the couch, leaving space for Ilya in between them. She takes his cigarette without asking and takes a drag.

Sasha pats the cushion of the couch.

Shane used to hold him on that couch, letting Ilya drape himself on top of him and playing with Ilya's hair absently many slow afternoons. They had spent golden hours sinking deep into the plush leather until they were melded to both the couch and each other. He can't sit on that couch without remembering the phantom touch of Shane's lips gently kissing his forehead.

He sits.

"Sveta tells me you have a boyfriend," Sasha smirks, teasing the word out, "congratulations, Ilyusha. I never thought we'd see the day someone would lock you down and make you a kept man."

"You told him?" Ilya turns sharply towards Sveta, frowning.

She shrugs, sipping her vodka. "He asked. And I did not say anything important."

"No," Sasha agrees, "only that he is rich and helped you with this very nice apartment. How is sugar baby life, Ilyusha? Nice, no?"

"Shut up," Ilya snaps with a flash of rage, "that's not what that is. *Was.*" He stops himself suddenly before taking Sveta's glass from her and taking a draught. "He is not like that."

"Huh," Sasha says, tilting his head analytically. "Interesting. So he left?"

Ilya purses his lips, and keeps his mouth shut.

"Ilya," Sveta sighs, quietly. "You can talk to us."

"Nothing to talk about. He is gone." Shane had gotten on his ass about smoking but he needs the nicotine when he takes it from Sasha's hand. The rush that comes from the hit doesn't help as much as he hoped it would.

"Well, then why don't we make you feel better, Lyusha?" Sasha purrs, hand gripping his inner thigh. Ilya nearly jumps. "Sveta wouldn't be opposed I'm sure." His hand travels farther up the seam, brushing him between his legs where he's soft under his jeans.

His touch makes Ilya's stomach roil, and he pulls away unconsciously. Sasha's hand is not the one Ilya wants on him right now. Sasha just huffs a laugh. "Ah, don't be like that. We used to have so much fun, do you remember? I brought us something, for old times sake."

Ilya doesn't need to see the small plastic bag that he knows is in Sasha's pocket to know exactly what he's brought with him.

For a second, he considers it. He hasn't used in over a year now, already sober for a few months before he met Shane and feeling no need for a manufactured high while with him. But now, he's just so tired. Maybe falling back to one of his old vices would keep the numbness away like it used to when he was younger. He's aching to feel something closer to human.

Ilya, Sveta, and Sasha's adolescence was a montage of poor decisions – from risky sex with strangers and each other that he didn't always want to have, to hard drugs that made Ilya feel something other than cold, angry, and empty. Sasha's cocaine wouldn't solve his problems, but it would make him forget about them, just for a little while.

But it's only a second. Shane doesn't need to be here to make Ilya want to do better for him. Ilya might never have him again, but the nine months he did–

Shane had never looked at Ilya like a failure. Had never looked at Ilya like he was a fuck up, or destined to be a fuck up forever. With Shane, Ilya could see a version of himself worth fighting for.

"Нет," he tells him, standing up to distance himself completely. "No, Sasha. And I don't want it in my apartment either."

Sveta is watching him carefully. There's something like understanding unfolding on her face, along with something like guilt. Good. She shouldn't have sprung Sasha on him like this, not when he was Ilya's worst enabler. "Okay. Okay Lyusha, we won't—"

"Блядь, *boring,*" Sasha groans, dropping his head back. "Jesus, this boy isn't even here and he has you wrapped around his little finger. He can't be that good a lay."

"God, shut up," Ilya snaps, "don't talk about him like that. If you can't fucking behave you can get out of my house."

Sasha raises both his eyebrows, whistling. Ilya suddenly realizes from the glassiness in his eyes and the way his limbs are only half functional as he stands as well that he's actually already high. Ilya stiffens when Sasha steps closer, languid. The way Sasha looks him up and down makes Ilya feel like he could see right through him, through skin and muscle to what's left of a heart Ilya's been doing his damn best to hide and protect.

"Oh," Sasha says suddenly, before a harsh laugh escapes him. "Oh, I see."

"I said get out."

"You are in love then, Ilyusha?" Sasha mocks, ignoring him, and Ilya clenches his jaw.

"I won't ask again, Sasha. Out."

Sasha suddenly smirks before leaning in close, the smell of vodka sharp on his breath. "Well. Send him my way when he inevitably gets tired of you. He must be such an amazing hole to get you this worked up about him–"

Ilya snarls, fist coming up before he even realizes he's moving. He only stops when Sveta plants herself in between them, pushing them both back with a hand against their chest. He just barely keeps from hitting her by accident.

"Out, Sasha!" she snaps, shoving Sasha farther back towards the front door.

Sasha holds up his hands, stumbling a little with a laugh. “Okay, okay. Good bye Ilyusha. Let me know when you decide you want to have a good time again.”

Sasha snags one of Ilya’s bottles of alcohol on his way out, slinging his coat over his shoulder. “Come, Sveta,” he calls back, “we will go and find somewhere else to have fun. It smells too much like pathetic desperation here anyway.”

He’s out with the door closing shut with a slam leaving Ilya with just Svetlana and Ilya finally manages to take a full breath in.

Sveta won’t quite look him in the eye.

“I am sorry,” Sveta finally says to the floor, seriously. “I thought he would be a good distraction. I did not realize–”

She cuts herself off before sighing and pushing herself up to her toes to press a kiss to Ilya’s cheek. “С Рождеством, Ilyusha. You should call him.”

As if Shane would pick up, after what Ilya said to him. As if he deserves to call Shane and hear his mouth curl around the letters of Ilya’s name.

“Good night, Sveta. Do not bring Sasha here again.”

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Sveta doesn’t come back, giving Ilya space as an apology. Again, not what Ilya needs. He’s alone, fragile enough to shatter with the wrong push and no one there to catch him. The lab can only do so much.

He manages to avoid spiraling again, but it’s a close thing— Sasha does this to him, enables his bad habits and encourages Ilya’s worst choices. He finds it entertaining, needs the thrill of risky behavior and wants others to join him. It worked when Ilya was a teenager, with something like a death wish and no one left who cared about his safety and good decisions. But neither of those things were true now. At least, Ilya thought so.

He’s starting to get news about the Winter Olympics as it approaches. The Russian outlets he still follows are reporting live from Sochi, going through the massive production of the Village and competition space, and Ilya pictures Shane in the background. He’s self-destructive enough to listen to the podcast analyses of the Olympic hockey teams, something digging into him every time Hollander and Canada were mentioned like a splinter Ilya can’t remove. He’s not stupid enough to find Shane’s actual interviews though.

The closer the end of January creeps in, the more Ilya thinks about Shane. They hadn’t had the chance to talk about Russia before their fight. Ilya hasn’t been able to tell him about the things he loved about his country, from the specific snack brands and the traditional food to the architecture and rivers. He had only gone to Sochi once as a child during the summer months. It had been the first time he had seen the beach and felt real sand under his feet. There was a cafe there that his mother had been fond of which sold some of the best ice cream Ilya had ever had. He had wanted to ask Shane if he could try and find it.

In the last week of January, Ilya gets back home from the lab and has just enough time to change before there's a knock at the door.

Ilya doesn't let himself hope this time. It'll be Katya, or maybe Svetlana even though Ilya still hasn't figured out how she gets into his apartment. He gets up to unlock it with a sigh, cracking his neck as he goes. When he opens the door, he freezes.

Maybe the trick was not hoping.

Shane looks terrible. He looks beautiful. They're both silent, drinking the other in after weeks of drought. His hair is longer and a little shaggier, skin a little pale. His freckles are still Ilya's favorite stars.

"Um," Shane clears his throat, and Ilya's missed the familiar sound of his voice, "can I come in?"

Ilya wordlessly steps back, giving him room to enter. The apartment is mostly clean, Katya having been a dictator about it when she came to visit, so there's not much in the space that gives away just how awful Ilya's been when Shane looks around with his hands in his pockets.

It gives enough time for Ilya to recover and slap on a mask. If Shane leaves again for the third time, Ilya might not survive it.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya asks at the same time as Shane asking, "how are you?"

Shane winces. Ilya makes himself not react.

"I tried texting you," Shane shrugs, glancing down. "I wanted to talk."

"Talk," Ilya repeats, "okay. I remember last time you said this too."

Shane presses his lips together and falters. Ilya thinks he's going to drop it and leave but then he straightens, looking at Ilya determinedly. "Please Ilya. I leave for Sochi in three days and I can't— I can't leave it like this. Can't leave *us* like this."

"No," Ilya scoffs, bitter, "you can't. Would mess with your Olympic Games, no? Can't win a gold if you're feeling guilty—"

"No," Shane snaps, so sharply that it nearly startles Ilya. "Stop that. Stop it. You don't do that with me. You don't get to be mean just to try and push me away. I'm not fucking going anywhere Ilya. I'm not. But I need you to meet me in the middle."

"Not going anywhere?" Ilya repeats, sardonic, "you have been gone for almost two months Shane. What am I supposed to think?"

"You didn't reply," Shane counters. "You didn't answer any of my texts or calls. I thought you… I assumed you didn't want me to be here, Ilya."

Never. His heart is screaming even if Ilya himself is silent. *You will never be unwanted here.*

When Ilya doesn't respond, Shane sighs, rubbing his eyes.

"I want to fix this. I'm trying, Ilya. I'm really trying and I'm scared, I'm *terrified,* and I'm not sure what I'm doing but I want you so much. You mean so much to me. So I'm still trying. Please. Will you try with me?"

It astonishes Ilya, sometimes, how completely Shane can flay himself open. Not always, he's usually locked into a straitjacket of nerves and overthinking so tight it's a miracle he can even breathe. But one of the first things that had drawn Ilya to Shane was how beautiful his vulnerability could be.

That's why it's been awful to watch him hide from all the people he cares about.

Ilya's realized the past few months that Shane is a much better liar than he thinks he is. It just eats at him so much he can't keep it up for too long. He's been watching Shane destroy himself lying for so long, and Ilya can't fucking understand why.

The relief in Shane when he told his best friend was palpable. He had been glowing for days. Ilya knows that telling his parents will be so healing for Shane, and wants it for him more than for Ilya himself. He wants to see him whole and not hiding, because he's seen how stunning Shane is when he's himself in the small refuge they've made in this home.

Shane asked him to meet him in the middle. He hasn't realized yet there's very little Ilya won't do if he's the one asking.

"Okay," Ilya gives in, the fight leaving him. "Okay. I will try."

Shane exhales. "Thank you. Can I start?"

Ilya sighs. "Yes. Let's sit first. And I need a drink."

They settle on the couch, a distance apart that feels like the North to South Poles. He takes a healthy pull of vodka before nodding. "Okay."

"I'm sorry," Shane starts immediately. "I'm sorry for not listening when you were telling me how you felt about being kept a secret. You're right. It isn't fair to you. So I'm sorry."

Ilya nods again. "Okay."

"I'm sorry about bringing up your parents too," Shane hesitates, watching carefully. "I didn't know about them but it wasn't fair to throw them at you when this was about me not telling my family."

Ilya winces. "That you do not have to apologize for. You are right. I didn't tell you. You had no way of knowing. My family is… not like yours. They are hard to talk about."

"Yeah, I kind of got a sense," Shane admits, a little wry. "Okay. Those are my apologies. Now I want to explain."

“Did you practice this before you came?” Ilya asks, but he already knows the answer. It still makes Shane flush.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Shane mutters but with no heat. “This is important. I want you to understand me this time.”

Ilya leans back, silently opening the floor for him again. Shane is still strung tight but it feels right to see him here again, in the apartment on their couch. With Ilya.

Shane thumbs the seam of his jeans while he speaks. “I know that my parents will probably be okay with me being gay. But I— the change is what’s scaring me. And not knowing what will happen after. You’re right, telling them does make it a lot more real. And that’s terrifying. Everything we had felt so easy, like a dream. I didn’t want to lose that. Making it real means making this hard.”

Ilya sets his glass down on the coffee table, pulse heavy and painful in his throat as he swallows. So this is how it was going to end. “Shane. I don’t know if I can do this if you don’t want to make this real.”

“I know,” Shane shakes his head quickly. “I know. And I really thought about it, about you and how I feel about you, how I feel when I’m *with* you and… I want this to be real too, even if it is difficult. So I’m going to tell them.”

It’s enough to shock Ilya quiet, who sits stock still and stares at Shane. “What?”

“I’m going to tell them,” Shane repeats, firmer. “I want you to meet them, Ilya, and I want them to meet you. My parents are the most important people in my life and you… you’re starting to become one too. So I want you to meet.”

Ilya’s heart is racing. He’s not sure he’s breathing. He hasn’t even let himself dream of this once Shane left.

“Can you say something?” Shane asks, a little timid.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Ilya finally says, voice raspy. He continues when Shane starts nodding, “no, I mean really. I know I made it sound very all or nothing but… I need you to really want this. I do not want you to resent me if this is something you feel forced to do.”

“I don’t feel forced,” Shane shakes his head. “This is scary, and hard, but the right next step. I just… I just needed a wake up call, I guess.”

Ilya breathes out, a little dizzy. “Wow. I thought you were coming back to get your things and tell me to move out.”

Shane gapes at him. “No! What the fuck? That’s not— I mean it Ilya. I want to commit. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you, so of course. Of course I need to tell them. You’re worth it, even if it’s scary.”

Worth it. Ilya doesn't think he's ever been called worthy. Shane had called him important like it was a given, effortless. It's not quite loud enough to drown out two decades of being told otherwise— but it still means everything.

"Thank you," Ilya whispers, voice tight. His eyes are burning in a way he can't stop.

"It… it's going to be in a little while," Shane admits apologetically. "Not because of second thoughts or anything it's just timing— I'm gone for the Olympics in a few days and then it's the playoffs a few weeks after that. I want to tell them in June at the latest. Or whenever we're done with the season."

June. Six months. It's not great, but it's a timeline Ilya didn't have before. And that's what he needed more than anything else.

"Okay," Ilya agrees. "I understand. June. Thank you Shane."

Shane exhales, releasing the tension in his shoulders. He wears relief well. "Okay. Okay, good. Now I… I wanted to talk about what you said. Before I left."

Ilya bites the inside of his cheek. He thinks he knows where this is going. "Shane..."

"The money," Shane continues over Ilya, focused. "I know that it's not easy to talk about, and maybe we should have done that before we signed a lease and everything but… I didn't realize you probably felt like you couldn't tell me. Tell me what you were really feeling, I mean, in case it made me leave. It would have put you in a difficult position, financially. Just, living-wise. That is a trap. And I didn't see it."

Ilya knows logically he would have figured it out if he had suddenly gone homeless after breaking up with Shane. Svetlana would have taken him in. Katya maybe too. But it was precarious in a way that Ilya has worked years to avoid, resorting to sex work to find something like stability even if it was just an illusion. Maybe Ilya did hesitate from talking honestly to Shane to avoid confrontation.

But it hadn't been right to throw it at Shane like that— he had said it because he had wanted Shane to hurt for something that wasn't his fault.

"No, I am sorry," Ilya exhales, fingers tight against his thighs. "What I said… It was not fair. This is not a cage, I know it isn't. You aren't trapping me. I would have figured it out, could have gone to Svetlana if I needed to. I chose this. And I will keep choosing you, Shane. If you let me."

"Oh," Shane whispers, making Ilya look up.

It strikes Ilya, right then, how pretty Shane is. He's glowing in the sunset light, lips parted and eyes wide and adoring. There's not a single part of him hiding from Ilya, at this moment. What Ilya sees is Shane in his entirety.

Of course Ilya will keep choosing him. What Ilya sees is someone he's desperate to keep, if he can. If he's lucky.

“Yeah, I’ll let you,” Shane says, and the little relieved laugh that escapes him feels warmer than the sun. “Fuck.”

He leans closer and presses a kiss to Ilya’s cheek, and Ilya can’t breathe. It’s somehow one of the most intimate gestures he’s ever received.

“Good,” Ilya whispers when Shane pulls back again. Ilya doesn’t let him go far, kissing him gently on the lips, close-mouthed. Shane smiles at him and rests his forehead against Ilya’s. The distance they had started with has vanished, legs pressed against each other as Shane caresses every bare inch of skin he can find like he was relearning Ilya with his fingertips.

“You seem tired,” Shane murmurs, rubbing under Ilya’s eyes. He’s sure they’re puffy from this entire conversation, but he knows there’s dark circles there that have only gotten worse in the past seven weeks. “Are you okay?”

“I am now,” Ilya smiles a little, and oh— he’s not sure when he last really smiled. “I am much better.”

“I’m sorry, for leaving you like that,” Shane says. He’s playing with one of Ilya’s loose curls. “Your holidays must have sucked.”

“That is not all your fault,” Ilya reassures him. “I was already not doing well, sort of. That wasn’t your fault. The holidays are never easy for me.”

“What?” Shane straightens, frowning a little. “What do you mean? Did something happen? Before?”

“No. No, I sometimes get… foggy,” Ilya tries hastily, waving a hand. He creates space without registering he’s pulling back. “It can make things hard. I will be fine, though.”

“Foggy?” Shane furrows his eyebrows, catching Ilya’s free hand in his own. “What does that mean?”

Ilya inhales sharply, and doesn’t realize he’s trying to pull away from Shane’s grasp until Shane threads their fingers together and tugs to keep him in place. “Hey, hey, I just want to understand. You said it makes things hard. What things?”

Ilya hesitates, feeling his shoulders tighten. His father had drilled into Ilya exactly all the ways he was weak, soft. That his laziness is what made him useless. He doesn’t want Shane to see that, this laziness.

He doesn’t know what he offers Shane and Ilya didn’t want to give him proof that he isn’t actually worth keeping. Not after he’s gotten a taste of what it feels like to be wanted.

He just barely keeps from flinching when Shane cups his cheek. His jaw clenches under it before he inhales sharply. “Shane—“

“You don’t have to tell me,” Shane stops him, gentle, sincere in a way that hurts, “but I want to know you. I want to help. Please, let me help?”

“Fuck,” Ilya’s voice cracks, and he can feel the way a tear tracks down his cheek. Shane brushes it away before Ilya can turn.

“Hey,” Shane soothes, and he’s moving to bring his leg over Ilya’s, sitting in his lap to hold him closer. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

Shane brushed his lips against his brow, breathing deep and slow. Ilya feels his own chest pressed against his, matching the steady up and down motion. For a short while, nothing exists except Shane and Ilya, chest to chest and proving they’re here with every inhale. It’s easier to be honest when the world is turned off and it’s just Shane.

“I am like my mother, I think,” he whispers finally, admitting a decade-long secret. Shane rubs absent circles against his cheekbones.

“You’ve never told me about your mom,” Shane murmurs. “What was she like?”

Ilya exhales, closing his eyes. He had felt wretched after throwing his parents at Shane during their fight. This was the bare minimum that he could give him.

“She was beautiful,” Ilya starts, voice wet. “So kind, and funny. She would tell me stories, outside at night. She knew all of the constellations, but she would make up new stories for me because I kept asking.” Ilya swallows roughly. “She loved me very much. And I loved her. But my father was so hard on her. And she was so sad.”

Ilya hadn’t been enough to make her want to stay. He doesn’t know for sure if he’s enough now, if he’s done enough since.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” Shane mumbles, kissing his temple. “How did she pass?”

“An accident,” Ilya huffs, bitter. “She accidently swallowed a bottle of pills.”

Shane’s silent, still in Ilya’s arms. He hears him let out one shuddering exhale before Shane presses him closer, letting Ilya tuck his face into the crook of his shoulder, a respite.

“How old were you?” Shane asks softly. Ilya presses his lips tight, the memory of finding his mother cold and lifeless in her bedroom etched into his retinas. Of holding her hand and begging her to wake up until he was sobbing so hard he couldn’t breathe.

“Twelve.”

“God,” Shane exhales, voice hoarse and doesn’t say anything more. He hugs Ilya tighter, hand in his curls. Ilya doesn’t tell him how much it reminds him of Irina.

They’re quiet, Shane giving Ilya the time to learn how to breathe again. No one has held Ilya the way Shane does in over a decade, and it still dismantles him. He breaks Ilya into pieces but he’s the only one who’s come back and stays long enough to put him back together.

He’s not sure how long they stay like that, but eventually, Shane inhales slowly and pulls back to look at Ilya again, cupping his face in both hands.

“Ilya,” Shane starts, pauses, continues, “when you say you think you’re like your mother. What does that mean, baby?”

Ilya closes his eyes, ducking his head to press into the comfort of Shane’s touch. “I get… sad, sometimes. Very sad. And everything becomes foggy. Hard to feel. Hard to move.”

“I see,” Shane whispers. “Have you ever thought about… like your mom?”

Ilya’s quiet for too long and Shane makes a soft, involuntary noise, face crumpling for a second before he forcibly composes himself. “Okay. Okay. Do you still think about it? Now?”

“No,” Ilya replies, tired, “not… not in the same way. Sometimes I think it doesn’t matter to me. Either way. Living or not.”

“Fuck,” Shane can’t get a hold of himself fast enough the second time, biting his lip as he tries to take an even breath.

“But not so much now. Not since you,” Ilya says quietly, holding Shane steady. “You help.”

Shane takes another half a minute to calm down, before clearing his throat roughly and softly kissing Ilya. “Thank you. For telling me. You were feeling foggy these past couple months, right?”

Ilya simply nods.

“I think… I think I might have noticed but didn’t know what it was or what it meant,” Shane admits quietly, guiltily. “I thought maybe it had to do with applications. I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. You did not know.”

“Maybe,” Shane sighs, rubbing Ilya’s eyebrow, “but you still must have been so lonely. I’m sorry that you’ve felt so alone for so long.”

Ilya didn’t think feeling so utterly seen would hurt as much as it does then. It’s a good hurt, a needed one. One that gives way to relief.

“I’ve felt alone ever since my mother died,” Ilya admits in a whisper. “But I don’t feel alone when I’m with you. I don’t feel lonely. You make this space feel like a home, Shane.”

Shane exhales quietly, bringing Ilya up to kiss him chastely in reply. The tenderness in his touch makes Ilya sob once against his mouth.

“What do you need?” Shane asks softly, tapping his forehead against Ilya’s.

“Touch me,” Ilya gasps, and he doesn’t try to stop the tear that leaks. “Please. Make me feel something good.”

Shane hums, thumbing his cheekbone before leaning forward and pressing their lips together again.

Ilya melts into him, trusting Shane to catch him.

Shane kisses him with everything he has. He rocks against Ilya in his lap, coaxing his mouth open under his until Ilya's panting into him. Ilya can't help but hum when Shane brushes his tongue against his, slick and strong.

When they part, Shane doesn't pull away entirely. Instead he drops soft kisses over Ilya's face, two on his brow, one on his nose, so many down the line of his jaw. It makes Ilya grip Shane tighter. It makes Ilya want to crawl into Shane's skin.

"Do you want?" Shane checks, resting a hand on Ilya's clothed cock. Ilya nods, and Shane reaches for his shirt, stripping Ilya and then himself to get them skin to skin before hurriedly bringing their mouths back together again. It's messy and uncoordinated in a way they never are unless they're both right about to fall over the edge.

"Do you still have—" Shane exhales and Ilya pulls back just far enough to reach the side table drawer and find the lube they've taken to keep there.

Shane takes it from him and finishes undressing before lifting himself up with his knees on the couch cushions. It brings Shane's half hard cock closer to Ilya, and it's impossible not to reach forward and take him in hand when he hasn't touched him in weeks.

"Shit, Ilya," Shane gasps, hips rocking instinctively into his grip. His hands are shaky as he opens up the lube and brings his wet fingers behind him to his ass.

Ilya watches his face as Shane presses a finger inside of himself. Catches the hitch in his breath, the way his eyelids flutter, the soft sound that escapes him before he bites his bottom lip.

"You're so beautiful," Ilya whispers, stroking him slowly as Shane fingers himself open. "Shane. You are perfect."

Shane moans, bracing himself with one hand on Ilya's shoulders. It's fast, probably too fast, but he's already at two. There's a slight rock to his hips as he fucks himself onto his fingers, eyes closed with his mouth parted.

"That's it sweetheart," Ilya coaxes, stroking his side. He takes a moment to push down his sweatpants just enough to free his erection. He grasps both of them in one hand, matching his rhythm and then using Shane's precum as lubricant as he strokes them together.

"Oh, *fuck,"* Shane groans, shuddering as Ilya grunts, kissing his jaw, trailing up to capture and open up his mouth. Ilya only manages to get a few strokes in before Shane's pulling his fingers out and positioning himself.

"That can't be enough," Ilya pulls away, protesting breathlessly. Shane shakes his head, and Ilya can feel the way he's shaking through a dry gasp, already desperate.

"No, no it's fine, I can take it. I need you in me, Ilya. I can't wait, please don't make me wait."

He's wrestling with the lube, and Ilya inhales sharply as Shane slicks his cock, preparing him between them.

"At least let me get a condom," Ilya murmurs against his lips, reaching blindly to the side table again. Shane's other hand stops him, lacing their fingers together.

"Wait. Wait, I, uh, haven't had sex with anyone besides you," Shane tells him, hesitant. Ilya can feel his hand sweating. "So I'm clean."

Ilya blinks. "Okay."

It hadn't been a concern until Shane said it out loud and he's almost surprised with how much relief floods him knowing that Shane hadn't seeked comfort from someone else the past few weeks alone. Ilya had felt too sick and upset to even consider it himself— Sasha's touch had been revolting for more than one reason.

"Um, are you—?"

"Clean? Yes. I haven't… no one else, since you. But I have always used condoms with you, sweetheart, you do not have to worry."

"Actually…. Actually I was wondering if maybe we don't, tonight."

Ilya freezes. "Sorry?"

"I was hoping you would fuck me raw," Shane manages to get out in one big rush. Ilya's staring at him. "And I mean, I just thought, if we're boyfriends, we could. But if you think it would be better if we kept using protection because you… I'm just telling you I'm clean, that's all. So you could. If you wanted. I trust you."

Ilya swallows once. "You are sure?" he asks, cupping Shane's jaw. He nods against Ilya's hands, biting his lip before he shifts back up to his knees.

"Yeah," he whispers, reaching down to hold Ilya's cock in one hand, "yeah, I'm sure about you."

Ilya's not sure what knocks the breath out his lungs: Shane's easy devotion or the feel of Shane stretching open on him as he slowly guides Ilya's cock inside of him.

"Oh," Shane gasps, thighs faltering for a half second before he catches himself on Ilya's chest with his other hand. Ilya slips in another inch, another two and Shane whimpers, eyes fluttering as he takes him.

"Christ," Ilya chokes, swallowing hard. He grasps Shane's hips to steady him as Shane braces with both his hands against Ilya's pecs and sinks down persistently. Soft, quiet noises escape Shane as he takes more and more of Ilya inside. "Shane. *Shane,* holy shit—"

He's so tight. He is *so fucking tight.* It's so much that Ilya spares a thought that they hadn't spent enough time prepping, that Shane wasn't stretched enough, but Shane hasn't moved off of him or complained. Shane breathes unsteadily as he begins rocking to get the last inch in

before he's bottomed out into Ilya's lap. The condom is thin, and Ilya's never thought it made much of a difference in sex. But the tight, soft heat of Shane's hole hugging his cock from all directions with no barrier made him nearly lose his mind.

"Fuck," Shane whimpers, fingers curling against Ilya's skin as he tries to adjust.

"Sweetheart," Ilya gasps, reaching to find Shane's hand and threading their fingers together. He brings their clasped hands up to press a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "Shit. Are you okay?"

Shane nods, but his eyes are glassy as he pants. "Yeah. Yeah, just—"

He moves his hips, barely, and it makes them both inhale sharply. Eyes closed, Shane takes another careful breath and does it again, Ilya's cock sliding an inch in and out of him.

He keens, biting his lip and bracing himself more against the back of the couch behind Ilya for leverage and doesn't warn Ilya before he works to set a shallow pace.

"God," Ilya groans, watching Shane as he slowly but surely rides him. "*God, Shane.*"

Ilya has fucked a lot of people. Men, women, he's never been picky, just wants them to be pretty.

He doesn't think he's ever seen anything as holy as Shane Hollander over him, skin glistening with sweat and muscles flexing as he determinedly fucks himself on Ilya's cock. The pace he sets isn't slow, but it isn't dirty either—though the twist of his hips should be illegal for the way it has Ilya seeing stars. He's intentional, focused on the feel of Ilya inside of him with a concentration he's only ever seen Shane reserve for the rink. But his gaze is still soft, looking at Ilya in a way that leaves him feeling more exposed than being nude.

"Come on, baby," Shane breathes, leaning down to kiss Ilya between words. It's messy, their lips not quite catching as they both fight for air. Ilya's gasping into Shane's mouth, soft sounds escaping him with each drop of Shane's hips and he feels a wave threatening to take him away. "I've got you. Let go, come on."

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya moans, voice cracking, and he's close, he's so fucking close. Shane picks up on it, and locks their lips properly together before grinding down, taking Ilya's cock deep, and squeezing tight around him. Ilya shatters with a sob.

It's almost painful, how overwhelming his orgasm is. After spending so much time feeling so little, it's too much finishing inside Shane raw. He feels himself pulsing, his own spend making Shane's hole wet and sloppy around his cock. He knows when Shane reaches the edge too, a soft moan of Ilya's name on his lips as his walls contract and he milks the rest of Ilya's orgasm out of him while his cock leaves ropes of come on Ilya's abs.

He goes limp against Ilya, warming Ilya's cock as he softens while they catch their breath. Shane pulls back just far enough to nudge his nose against Ilya's and kiss him. It settles him unlike anything else, the comfort of Shane's lips warm and kind.

“Are you feeling better?” Shane asks, shy. Ilya closes his eyes, nodding dazedly. He feels something familiar, something deep. It’s silver like the moonrise through the windows, soft like pale lily petals, lovely like a raspy laugh.

“I do,” Ilya replies, smiling a little. “You okay?”

Shane hums, before grumbling to himself a little as he leans back to let Ilya’s cock slip out of him.

“Oh,” Shane exhales, legs and abs tightening as he immediately starts leaking. Rivulets of Ilya’s cum drip from Shane, streaking down his thighs onto Ilya’s sweatpants. Ilya can’t look away, lips parted and eyes hooded as Shane reaches under himself to *keep Ilya’s cum inside.* His fingers press against his hole to try and keep more from seeping out.

Ilya is going to have him again. Tonight. Preferably on their bed, Shane face down, ass up so Ilya can watch his own cum leak out of his gaping hole.

“It’s okay,” Ilya tells him, voice hoarse. He reaches to pull Shane closer to sit back in his lap. “I’ll wash them.”

“Messy,” Shane mumbles, but doesn’t resist as he snuggles against Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya kisses the top of his head, so utterly endeared. He had resigned himself to never feeling this kind of contentment again. He couldn’t have predicted this morning that this is where his day would end, holding this beautiful boy and hearing a missing piece snap back into place. It’s that same feeling he’s felt when Shane kisses him hello, brings him flowers to make him smile, this feeling of moonlight. Something that threatens to take over Ilya’s lungs, making him need it more than air.

He’s almost startled when Shane stiffens like he was in pain, his breath cut short.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asks, suddenly vigilant. Shane’s muscles are tired, skin bruised from Ilya’s fingers and the hockey he played this week. But Ilya hadn’t taken charge tonight, and there was always a chance Shane had accidentally hurt himself, what—

“I didn’t ask for permission,” Shane admits in a small voice, contrite. “To, you know, come.”

Ilya huffs, unable to stop the snorting laugh and smile that curves his mouth as he relaxes again. Moonshine becomes liquid silver, drips down every inch of him. “I think I will give you a free pass this time, sweetheart.”

Shane clocks that he’s teasing and rolls his eyes, shoulders loosening. “So generous.”

“Mmm,” Ilya hums, holding him closer and urging him to settle against the crook of his neck again. As Shane closes his eyes and lets out a soft sigh, Ilya traces Ursa Minor on his cheek.

He knows this familiar feeling, one that Shane’s smile and touch manages to bring out of him. This moonshine he’s feeling is love.

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“No, no, no,” Ilya protests, “Hollander. If you really care for me, you must do this.

“Wow, that’s not dramatic at all,” Shane huffs. His voice is frustratingly tinny over the WhatsApp audio but there was no way they were going to manage regular international calls with Ilya’s budget.

“Yes, is not dramatics. You have to try medovik. Is impossible to find good medovik in America unless you make it. Shane. Please. I am on my knees begging.”

“Promise?”

The teasing surprises a laugh out of Ilya. “I see. So I must resort to bribery to get you to eat delicious honey cake. Blowjobs and dessert. You are terrible, малыш.”

“It’s the *Olympics,* Ilya.”

“Yes and you do not have game until tomorrow. Enough time to digest medovik. Bakery, *now,* Shane.”

“Fine,” Shane says, amused. “I have to hang up then. I’ll lose WiFi.”

It’s not the first time Ilya wishes he was in his home country with Shane as he explores Russia for the first time. He wants to watch Shane’s face as he tastes his favorite dessert. Wants to hear him butcher a greeting he had endearingly practiced for days with Ilya. Wants to hold his hand as Ilya shows him his childhood memories.

Well. Maybe not the last one. He would still need the government to let him go back to America.

“Okay,” Ilya sighs, “you will take pictures. And then give review. Remember, there is only one correct opinion.”

“Wow,” Shane laughs. “Good to know. I’ll talk to you tomorrow after the game then?”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, leaning back against his chair. “Good luck sweetheart. I will be rooting for you.”

“I know,” Shane says back, cheeky. “Bye.”

Team Canada has been on a fierce winning streak, landing them in the quarterfinals after two back-to-back shut outs. He’s been listening to the highlights and analyses from hockey pundits while he’s at work; it’s been hard to remember he can’t be grinning like an idiot at his bench listening to sportscasters rave about his boyfriend’s brilliance. Shane is one of the youngest captains of a Canadian Olympics hockey team. If he manages to get them to the final in a few days, he could be the youngest captain to win his country Gold in men’s hockey history.

It’s incredibly sexy to hear exactly how good Shane really is at what he does. Not great for the workplace environment though—he can only shift in his seat so much before it gets weird.

He feels his spine slump a little as Shane disappears from his ear, absently playing with his phone in his hand. Shane's coming back right after the Closing Ceremony early next week, but he has to go to Montreal first. Then if he comes to Boston, it'll only be for a couple days before he's back on the League schedule.

The phone calls are good, great even. But it is getting much harder to say goodbye every time and return to an empty bed.

The secrecy is one challenge. With how deeply Ilya has fallen for Shane over the past months, the distance is becoming a whole other one.

"Ilya? Are you busy?" he hears behind him, making him straighten and turn. He pushes up his safety glasses and stands up to face his PI.

"No, no," Ilya reassures her quickly, "did you need something, doctor?"

"Mm, no, but I do have something for you." She's grinning a little, and hiding something behind her back. Chikondi has a bit of a prankster streak, so he's already on guard.

"Okay…" Ilya hesitates, holding still in case he has to bolt.

"I asked them if I could give it to you," Chikondi winks at him before revealing her surprise, holding out a large envelope with the MIT logo on the corner. Ilya's heart stops. "Congratulations Ilya."

Ilya accepts it slowly, like it would disappear if he moved too fast. It's heavy and thick and has Ilya's full name on it at the top.

"Dr. Chikondi," Ilya exhales, "is this— are you—"

"Ilya, you will have to open it, yes?" She laughs a little. "Go on, *mwana.*"

With a dry throat, he carefully unsticks the flap, opening the packet. Inside is a folder and information booklet.

Inside the folder is an acceptance letter.

"I would be honored to mentor you through your graduate education, Ilya," Chikondi says softly as Ilya's hands shake the paper. "You have a brilliant mind, and MIT would be very lucky to keep you."

Ilya can't speak, mouth open. He had applied, had hopes, but MIT has one of the most competitive astrophysics programs in the world. It was also the work he wanted to do most, dark matter cosmology and quantum physics that no one else was doing the way Chikondi and Cohen did. Completing his graduate training here would set his research career up for life.

"Thank you," Ilya exhales, smiling even as he sniffles. "I have loved working here, Dr. Chikondi, it's— it's been a dream since I was in secondary school. Thank you. Really–"

“I will let you celebrate. Tell family and friends, yes?” Chikondi smiles. She reaches forward and gives Ilya a hug, which Ilya easily accepts. “You deserve this very much.”

He wants to call Shane first, damn the international rate. Of course he does. He wants to hear his sincere pride. Shane’s opinion has quickly become one of the most important in Ilya’s life. It was the only one that could compete against Grigori’s in a way no one else has managed.

He calls Svetlana and Katya.

Svetlana screams when he tells her, openly and enthusiastically excited for him in a way she rarely was. She’s genuinely elated in a way they weren’t often allowed to be at home. Katya doesn’t quite understand the implications of an MIT PhD acceptance beyond the fact it means Ilya will be able to stay in Boston, which she’s much more satisfied with.

Every time he goes to select Shane’s contact, though, he hesitates. Each time he does, he hears how ecstatic Sveta and Katya are with the idea of Ilya staying here. In Boston, 300 miles away from Montreal.

He doesn’t end up calling Shane.

Going home and checking the mail makes it even worse. Inside he finds nestled between regular spam mail, an electricity bill, and random catalogs he never asked for two additional packets. One of them is addressed from Princeton. The other is from McGill.

He has all three packets in front of him on his desk once he’s back at his apartment, just staring at them.

He should be thrilled. He’s going to go to graduate school. He was going to get a PhD. Not one, not two, but *three* acceptances out of the five he applied to, and he hasn’t even heard back yet from Cal-Tech or Harvard. Though he knows that it’ll really only come down to two schools.

He’s going to have to turn one of two choices down. His career. Or Shane.

He carries it with him throughout the next day, even as he smiles through the other veteran lab members’ congratulations and talks to his other co-PI about his acceptance. There’s a new undergrad in the lab, since Ilya’s long since graduated, a sophomore named Rebecca, who remains in the periphery the entire time. As the newest member, she’s definitely not quite settled into her role, a distinct level of awkwardness Ilya recognizes from his own experience starting at the lab–he was usually better at including her, but there’s only so much he can fake today. He distractedly goes through the motions from the lab back to home and it must be obvious, so much so that Shane notices it even over the phone thousands of miles away.

“Hey, I’m not boring you with the hockey stuff, am I?” Shane asks, and it startles Ilya back.

“No. No, of course not. Was very impressive goal, sweetheart. The finals will be so soon and then you’ll come home and I’ll get to fuck an gold medalist Olympian stupid in our bed. Believe me, I am not bored.”

“Mmm,” Shane laughs, “our bed, huh?”

Ilya pauses, clenching his jaw. He hadn’t even noticed his slip. “I mean… I think so. Yes.”

“Me too. I miss our bed,” Shane murmurs, warm. “Miss you holding me. Feels weird these days sleeping alone, even though I’m not even in Boston that often anyway.”

Ilya needs to tell him. It’s exactly what he needs to talk about, their cities. His letters sit in front of him, accusatory. “There actually was something,” Ilya closes his eyes and takes a deep inhale, “I needed to tell you.”

Shane makes a curious note. “Oh, okay. What’s up, baby?”

Ilya’s never considered himself a coward.

“I, uh,” he hesitates, “applied to McGill. For PhD, I mean.”

Shane’s quiet for a split second before Ilya hears his grin through the speaker. “Shit, seriously? My dad went to McGill.”

Ilya huffs over the phone. “Yes. I know. I didn’t want to say, in case, you know. It doesn’t happen. Is hard to apply to Canadian school from here, but I got in.”

Shane gasps, voice pitching. “Fuck. Oh my god. Really? I mean, obviously you got in but you seriously– you got into a school in Montreal. You could come to Montreal, move there. We could be together, Ilya, really live together!”

“Yes,” Ilya can’t help but smile at how enthusiastic Shane is. He doesn’t want to ruin it by asking how they would be roommates if they were still a secret. “McGill is a good program right?”

“Yeah, it is,” Ilya says, and he’s not lying. McGill’s physics PhD isn’t a bad program. It has plenty of research, and the mentor they had matched him with does some amazing work with the Goodsell Observatory at Carleton in Ottawa. He could be happy there.

But it’s not MIT.

“Shit, that’s amazing, Ilya— fuck, you’ll have to come visit and see the city, it’s so fucking beautiful there Ilya. It’s old like Boston but still so different— oh shit, I know you’ll get a kick out of the Underground City—“

Looking at his desk, a dark red envelope sitting on it innocently, and listening to Shane’s excited chatter about his favorite parts of Montreal, how much Ilya would love the cafes there and the river, he doesn’t end up telling him about his other letters. He considers himself a coward.

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Ilya’s been watching Shane’s win and gold medal ceremony on repeat. He can’t help it. Shane’s winning goal, the roar of the Canadian team around him, the open triumph on his

boyfriend's face: Shane has never looked as beautiful as he does on top of the world. Ilya especially rewinds a specific thirty seconds of B-reel film, ignoring the sportscasters dissecting the game over the video and instead focusing on how the camera pans to Shane while he talks on the phone, wearing his medal. The first call he had made was to his parents, which hadn't been captured on camera.

The second, which had been recorded so Ilya can watch however many times he wants, is to his boyfriend.

He had watched the final with Svetlana in his apartment, so she had seen him pick up his phone at the same time they both saw Shane on the screen calling him.

"Ilya—" Shane gasps, breathless with his joy over the speaker and red-eyed on the screen. "I —"

"You did it, малыш," Ilya says fondly, fiercely. His own voice is tight, eyes burning, and he's watching Shane beam for him through live television. "Fuck, you did it. Olympics Gold Medalist Shane Hollander. God, I'm so, so fucking proud of you."

That was five days ago. Shane got back to Montreal three days after his finals victory, leaving directly after the Closing Ceremony. He's been booked and busy ever since— everyone wants a piece of Shane Hollander, Team Canada's captain who led his team to gold on his very first try. Ilya understands the sentiment, even if he desperately wants more than just a piece of Shane, wants him whole and in his entirety in Ilya's arms. Ilya has had to content himself with this recorded private and public moment of pride and affection. One that the entire world saw, but almost no one understood.

He's only able to get away with it because he's on his own in the lab, waiting for a program to finish executing. He's stuck on campus on a Saturday so the lab building is practically empty.

He doesn't really have to be here, to be fair. He could probably run his sims at home, just really slowly on his shitty laptop. Without a supercomputer, his work usually took ages anyway. The two or three hours he saves with the lab GPUs would probably not make that big a difference.

But if the lab building feels empty, his apartment feels like a chasm. Every minute there alone is another reminder exactly how distant his boyfriend was. And how that was their normal. He's never done a long-distance relationship like this. He's never had to learn to cope.

He sighs, slumping against the bench as the computer runs, slowly ticking away. His phone dings with a notification.

Shane (2:32 pm): hey, you're at the Kavli Institute, right? McNair?

Ilya (2:33 pm): … yes. why.

Ilya (2:33 pm): please do not tell me you are sending something to be delivered here I will never hear the end of it from Carlos

Shane (2:33 pm): Carlos?

Ilya (2:34 pm): front desk person for mcnair. He signs for packages.

Shane (2:34 pm): I'm not sending anything, but I do need you to go to the east stairwell

Ilya (2:35 pm): Shane.

Shane (2:35 pm): please?

Ilya sighs, exasperated. He really has no clue what Shane sent if it's in the stairwell. It doesn't even make sense for it to be sent to the stairwell. And he even said east, the one closest to the Chikondi-Cohen lab; Ilya has no clue how Shane would know that unless he was here to see the floor directory—

Ilya blinks. Unless he was here to see the floor directory.

He bolts up, just barely remembering to grab his badge. Thank god no one was here right now, because he would have no way of explaining away why he was speed-walking out of the lab like a bat out of hell. Speed-walking. Not running.

The door for the stairwell is down the hall and heavy, the bar mechanism loud as he opens it.

Inside, the stairwell looks grey, barely lit through the small prison-like windows, and empty. He's almost disappointed in himself with how quickly he deflates. Of course he's not here, Shane's in fucking Montreal, why would he be—

"Ilya," a soft, sweet, *familiar* voice speaks up from behind him, nearly hidden by the opened door.

Ilya spins around. Shane's leaning against the wall next to the exit with his arms behind him, biting down a grin. He's wearing a baseball cap and hoodie with sunglasses on top of his head, but even with the shitty celebrity disguise he's so completely Shane.

"No fucking way," Ilya breathes. "You're here. You're fucking here, how-?"

"Hey," Shane smiles, stepping forward and leaning in to kiss him. Ilya grins back, beaming incredulously as he accepts Shane into his space. He's so fucking warm and solid under his touch as Ilya cups his face, and he drinks in him like water.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya whispers between kisses, laughing when Shane tries to pull away before giving in and going back for more. When they have to part for breath, Ilya strokes his cheekbones. Freckles. He's missed these freckles.

"Wanted to surprise you," Shane shrugs. He brings out the present he was hiding behind his back. "Surprise."

Ilya laughs delighted, smiling as he accepts the bouquet of white lilies Shane had brought.

“I feel that I’m supposed to be giving these to you, Mr. Gold Medalist,” Ilya teases. He relishes in Shane's blush. He had nearly forgotten how it blossoms like paint in water under his freckles.

“I’m just happy to see you,” Shane mumbles, “I don’t need flowers when I have you.”

Ilya melts.

“Fuck, come here,” Ilya reaches for him again, kissing his face, from his brow to his cheeks to the corner of his lips until Shane is giggling.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” Ilya tells him, “so, so proud. Fuck. You are incredible, Shane.”

Shane smiles, and Ilya has always thought he looks prettiest happy.

He steps closer, wrapping his arms around Ilya. Ilya easily accepts his weight, letting Shane tuck himself tight against him until there is no gap separating the end of Shane and the start of Ilya.

“I missed you,” Shane whispers into his neck, and Ilya aches.

“Me too,” Ilya replies, kissing the side of his head. “God I can’t believe you’re really here. On my campus. What do you think?”

“Feels like a business center, kind of,” Shane laughs. “Is all of Cambridge like this?”

“No, no. Harvard side feels more like college I think. And there’s houses in between. Wow. *Wow,* you’re really here.”

Shane smiles indulgently. “What are you working on? It’s the weekend, baby. You should be home.”

“Simulations,” Ilya replies automatically, then pauses. “Do you want to come to the lab?”

If seeing Shane in his research building was unbelievable, seeing Shane in the place he spends the most of his time doing what he loves most would be a dream. Ilya is used to only ever seeing Shane in the context of their apartment or on TV. This feels so normal that it doesn’t feel real.

Shane opens his mouth but then hesitates. “Is that… are you sure that’s a good idea? Am I allowed?”

“Chikondi and Cohen aren’t here today,” Ilya shrugs. “They won’t know. And I want you… I want you to see.”

Wants Shane to know this part of him too, arguably the biggest part of him. The research he does here, on dark matter quantum physics and deep-space scanning, is some of the first of its kind in the world. He loves being on the frontier of space, and has never been able to explain

to Shane with words just how it makes him feel, this place of curiosity and discovery where no one else has gone before.

“Okay. Show me then,” Shane agrees, holding out a hand. Ilya threads their fingers together, and something between their skin pulses. It comes to mind that he’s never held Shane’s hand outside of their apartment.

Ilya buzzes them back in and into the lab, the motion-sensor lights still on for some reason.

“I don’t actually do a lot of experimental stuff, which is why there’s not a whole lot of equipment on this side,” Ilya says, guiding Shane around the workbenches and computers. It’s tight and compact in the ways a lot of research laboratories with limited grant funding are, but it’s still large for a partially-theoretical lab. “Cohen does experiments, observations, and data collection and Chikondi does the theory, modeling, and simulations; I work with her the most but sometimes Cohen wants me to help model something that his team’s working on so I’m still certified for a lot of the plasma physics instrumentation and the LIGO, out of the city.”

“So you’re running a simulation here,” Shane says, “what does that mean?”

Ilya shows him the computer he had been at before he went to find him, the progress bar only about 10% past where Ilya had left it. “It’s still going right now. It takes a lot of computing power. Would be much faster using a supercomputer but the cluster we use needs priority booking and I just didn’t bother. I made a model based on some data that Cohen found on dark matter interactions and we’re going to see if it works the way we think it will.”

“Dark matter has a lot of gravity, right?” Shane says, “But you can’t see it, you can only really detect it using general relativity theory. So you need to use the simulations because dark matter doesn’t follow the same rules that the rest of physics does. You kind of have to guess and check.”

“...Yes. Yes, that’s exactly why we use simulations,” Ilya gapes at him. “How do you know that?”

Shane shrugs a little, turning red. “Oh. I tried reading all your publications, a while ago actually. Um, I looked stuff up but I don’t think I really understood it all. Not really sure I know exactly what general relativity is but I think I get the gist of it.”

“You read all my papers?” Ilya repeats, faintly.

Shane fidgets under Ilya’s stare. He’s still a little pink as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Um. Yeah? Was I not supposed to?”

Not even Svetlana has read his papers. She had tried, once, to read his first one and gave up on the abstract. He didn’t blame her; if he didn’t live and breathe everything to do with space he wouldn’t bother either.

“Why? It’s all equations and modeling. Boring physics shit, why would you—“

“Because it’s important to you,” Shane furrows his eyebrows with a small bemused frown. “Of course I looked them up. You love this, and I—“ he clears his throat, flushing. “I want to know about all the things that make you happy.”

Ilya is speechless. Shane is still looking at him with a slight tilt to his head, trying to read whatever expression Ilya must be making.

I want to know about all the things that make you happy. The moonshine in his chest is almost blinding. It squeezes his heart tighter than he can bear. He can’t breathe with it, how much he loves this boy.

He swallows before stepping forward, grasping Shane by the waist to pull him closer. When he leans down to press their lips together, Shane melts, letting out a soft hum as he opens up his mouth without prompting.

“I will send you something simpler,” Ilya promises, voice tight as they part, “important to start with strong foundation, yes? Understand basics first.”

“Okay,” Shane exhales, smiling a little. “Sure. I’ll read it.”

“You don’t have to–” Ilya starts but stops with the unimpressed look Shane gives him. Ilya huffs, shaking his head a little. “Okay, okay. It… means a lot that you want to know.”

“Yeah well, wanting to know is pretty different from actually knowing,” Shane sighs, burrowing closer into Ilya. He’s touch-starved, judging from the way he keeps seeking his heat but Ilya is in the same boat. “The last time I did anything with physics was in high school junior year science.”

“You were busy ruining little hockey boy dreams and destroying egos,” Ilya shrugs, making Shane snort. “Makes sense.”

Shane toys with the zip on Ilya’s hoodie, and it feels so much like how they are at home that Ilya almost keeps forgetting they’re out in the real world. It makes him feel inexplicably hopeful– it’s March, leaving just a little over three months before Shane will tell his parents. They’ll have another safe space then, hopefully, where they won’t have to hide. Another corner of the world unlocked where they can have each other like this.

“Does it bother you?” Shane asks, hesitant and waking Ilya up from his daydreams of stargazing with Shane out in the Ontario countryside. Ilya makes an inquisitive noise. Shane doesn’t continue for long enough for Ilya to pull away.

“Does what bother me, малыш?” Ilya prompts, and Shane exhales.

“Just… you know. You’re so smart. No, that’s not right– Ilya, you’re literally a fucking genius at this. And you said it yourself, months ago. I’m just a big dumb jock who barely finished homeschool high school and never went to college.”

“No,” Ilya shakes his head fervently, “no, I meant it as a joke. That’s not fucking true, Shane.”

“It kind of is,” Shane mutters, pulling away and looking down at their feet. “And maybe it’s fine now, when we’re a secret, but what about when you have to introduce me to people like your coworkers or other big shot researchers when you have your own lab? I’m going to embarrass you. I’m not going to keep up—“

If Ilya doesn’t immediately trap the utter joy at Shane’s casual confession that he wanted this to last long enough to be introduced to Ilya’s *future colleagues,* he’s going to desecrate the lab. Plus, Shane looks so much like a kicked puppy, tense and pulled into a tight ball of anxiety that Ilya doesn’t think that he would be the most receptive to him dropping to his knees right then and there.

“Shane, you’re the best hockey player of your fucking generation,” Ilya stops him, firm. “I’ve read the articles. Fastest player with the highest hockey IQ in the league. Youngest captain in league history to get a team to the Stanley Cup playoffs. Youngest captain to win gold at the *Olympics*. They fucking *study* your plays, Shane. So fucking what if you didn’t go to college? You’re a genius at what you do too.”

Shane blinks, rambling cut off. “That’s not—“

“Yes it is the same,” Ilya interrupts. “No, it doesn’t fucking bother me my boyfriend is the best at what he does and that it isn’t space research. It’s fucking hot, Shane, how good you are at hockey. I do not ever want you to be anyone or anything but you. I think you are perfect as you are.”

Shane, for some reason, looks a little like Ilya had just struck him, eyes wide and a little pale. Ilya almost opens his mouth to ask if he was okay, thinking back quickly over what he just said to see if it was too much but then Shane’s dragging his face down by his cheeks and kissing him breathless.

“Need you,” Shane pleads between gasps, hands trailing down his chest. “Fuck, I need you, Ilya.”

“Not here,” Ilya catches his hands, “I won’t be able to look Chikondi in the eye next week if I know I sucked your dick here. Not the right kind of vacuum physics this lab sees.”

Shane throws his head back and laughs, loud and abrasive. He folds into Ilya with it, flush with giggles and Ilya snorts, unfathomably fond of this version of Shane that doesn’t shrink himself like he does for the public.

It feels right. Shane feels right in a way nothing else in his life has, easy, obvious, effortless. Everything else can come second. He knows what school he’ll be choosing. He knows who he will choose.

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Ilya’s world implodes on a Thursday in March.

He’s unaware when he wakes up. All in all, it’s a perfectly average morning. He gets up, goes to the bathroom, makes breakfast, his normal weekday routine before lab.

Shane is going to be flying back to Boston in two weeks for their anniversary, and Ilya's been counting down the days. He hasn't seen Shane since his surprise visit on the 4th.

It's normal enough that the unexpected trilling sound of his ringtone nearly startles him and his coffee mug. He has to scramble to steady the mug before finding the phone, having left it on the kitchen counter and he spares half a second to frown at the contact ID.

"Sveta, don't you have class—"

"Ilya, do not check your social media," Svetlana interrupts, tone sharp. "And don't go to the lab today."

Dread drenches him from head to toe. Svetlana damn near sounds panicked.

"Svetlana…"

"Please just trust me," Svetlana pleads, and it shuts up Ilya immediately. Svetlana never begs. "Has Shane called you?"

"No," Ilya breathes, voice cracking. "No, not yet. Sveta, you're fucking terrifying me, what happened? Is it something in the news, is he okay?"

"He is…" Sveta hesitates for a second too fucking long and Ilya folds, panic enough to overrule any good judgement like listening to what Svetlana has to say. "Ilya– don't–"

Looking up *Shane Hollander* on Google doesn't give Ilya an ESPN article on NHL All-Stars player Shane Hollander's horrific accident and subsequent hospitalization in critical condition. It gives him something that actually might be worse.

"Oh fuck, Sveta," Ilya breathes, paling, "Oh, *fuck.*"

"I'm sorry," Svetlana says helplessly. "Боже мой, I'm so fucking sorry Ilyusha."

There are almost a dozen new articles, trustworthy sources and not, about Shane published in the past four hours. None of them are about his recent return to Montreal and subsequent winning streak or even his Olympic medal.

They're all about a couple of blurry, poor-quality photos of Shane pulling Ilya into him and kissing him in the middle of his lab.

They look like screenshots, and it doesn't take any time at all to find the video that they were from, a Twitter post from user @beckyk with a one minute clip of Shane gazing up at Ilya with an open look of wonder before cupping his face and pressing his lips against Ilya's. It's deep and intimate and Ilya feels his stomach turn at the nonconsensual voyeurism of someone watching them like this, vulnerable. Of the entire fucking internet watching them at their most unguarded, something they've both spent so long trying to protect. The video captures the way Ilya stops him breathlessly, saying something low and deep and making Shane laugh hard, unquestionably happy and comfortable before the camera shakes and stops.

"God," Ilya's voice cracks, "oh god, Shane. I need to talk to Shane."

“Yes,” Sveta takes a deep breath, “yes, you should talk to Shane. Email Dr. Chikondi and tell her you’ll be calling out sick. I don’t know if they’ve seen it yet, they might not have but–”

“It was recorded in the lab,” Ilya suddenly interrupts. “Fuck. Someone in my lab did this. It’s fucking badge protected, Sveta, it had to have been someone who had access–”

He cuts himself off, staring at the post again. He had almost missed the caption, too sick over the video.

puck bunny
@beckyk

Ummmm montreal metros shane hollander is in my astro lab making out with my russian male coworker? Someone call the papers? #montreal

8:14 PM · March 10, 2014

45.3K Retweets **27.2K** Quote Tweets **99.1K** Likes

“It’s the sophomore,” Ilya closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It was the new undergrad. Fuck.”

Svetlana is quiet as Ilya tries to catch his breath. Out of all the people to be betrayed by like this, Rebecca is by far the best option. He doesn’t know her, isn’t close to her. Hasn’t gone to her baby showers and weddings and sat with her at the hospital because she was alone in this country and had no one else. The way he has done all those things and more for his other lab coworkers in the past five years. Being betrayed by Rebecca is one thing. Being betrayed by one of the researchers, one of the people Ilya has grown closest with during his time here in America would have been an entirely different fucking story.

“Call Shane, Ilyusha,” Sveta tells him, steady. “You need to figure this out with him. And you will figure this out. Shane cares for you, Ilya. He will figure this out with you.”

“Shit,” Ilya laughs bitterly, raspy, “I can’t imagine why he fucking would. I was the one to ask him to go to the lab. He hesitated. This wouldn’t have fucking happened if–”

“Don’t,” Sveta stops him, firm. “Don’t start blaming yourself for this. Talk to Shane, Ilyusha. You need him, Да?”

Ilya sits down heavily into a dining chair, letting it creak under his sudden weight. “Okay. Okay.”

“You will get through this, Ilyusha, I promise you,” Svetlana swears, and then hangs up. Leaves him to a silent phone that he needs to unlock again and pick out a contact.

The earliest article dropped a little over three hours ago. The others had followed like dominoes, one after another in a wave. Shane most definitely had seen it. He’s most definitely already dealing with a fucking shitstorm. Ilya is probably the last person he wants to hear from right now in the middle of disaster management.

The phone starts buzzing in his hand again before Ilya can do anything with it, and it lights up with Shane's contact name, the blue heart emoji he had added to it mocking him before he answers.

"Ilya," Shane breathes over the line, and Ilya cracks.

"Shane," Ilya exhales, voice breaking, "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. This is my fault."

Shane had been the one to hesitate, to note the risk of being caught. Ilya had been careless, reckless. He hadn't even checked if the lab was empty for fuck's sake.

"Hey, it's not your fault," Shane soothes. "None of this is your fault, baby. I knew it was risky too, and I still wanted to see you. I loved seeing your lab and your work. I loved learning about what you're passionate about, okay? Loved it. So please don't blame yourself for just wanting to share something important to you with your boyfriend. This is the Twitter poster's fault. Not yours."

"You didn't even want to come to the lab," Ilya gasps, dragging a hand over his face, "this isn't want you wanted, you just wanted to visit and then I made us do something stupid, was fucking stupid to bring you there knowing that anyone could come in. It was one of my fucking lab coworkers, Shane. Rebecca. New undergrad. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't brought you to the lab."

"No, not stupid. It wasn't stupid. Ilya, I'm serious, I wanted to come see, okay? I don't blame you at all. I'm more worried about your visa right now. Is it… Do you know what will happen?"

"No. I don't– I think I should find a lawyer, maybe. It is okay," Ilya says, even as he swallows. "I went back this summer, so I am safe here for another two years without having to go back to Russia for renewal. After that..."

"One step at a time. Okay. We'll find a lawyer. We'll figure this out, baby, okay?"

"How are you being so calm about this?" Ilya asks, a little incredulous. It's helping though; Shane's uncharacteristic cool logic helps Ilya find space to breathe. "Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?"

"I already freaked out. Two hours ago. I've been up since five. Kind of tired myself out, I guess. My mom's here now too, so that's helped. I waited to call you until now because I knew you wouldn't be awake until eight thirty on a weekday."

That makes a lot more sense.

"Fuck," Ilya exhales, voice cracking. "Okay. What are we going to do about the media?"

Shane is quiet for half a second too long. "We?"

What Ilya feels next isn't dread, it's despair. Fuck, this was it. This is where Shane was going to leave, going to cut his losses and let go because of course he would. Why wouldn't he?

This was already a fucking disaster, why would Shane want to tie himself to fucking train wreck like Ilya?

“Unless,” Ilya gasps, squeezing his eyes shut. “Unless you don’t want me—“

“No, no, no wait, that’s not what I meant,” Shane rushes, catching on quickly when Ilya struggles to breathe, “I mean I would understand if you want to take a step back Ilya. The public spotlight is bad enough on its own but a scandal like this? It’s fucking hell. I can take care of this myself, baby, if you want to avoid the masses. I’m used to this. Media training and everything. I wouldn’t be upset with you at all if this is too much, I understand.”

“What?” Ilya shakes his head in disbelief, “you think I would leave you to these animals on your own? That I would, what, hide so you can take all the damage? No. That’s not what this is. We do this together. Okay? Together, Shane.”

He hears Shane exhale shakily, and there is the anxiety Ilya was expecting. “Okay.”

“How are you, sweetheart? What’s happening on your end?”

“It’s, um,” Shane laughs a little nervously, “it’s kind of a fucking mess. I’m benched, for one.”

Ilya sits up, eyes widening. “What? Why? How are they allowed–”

“It’s a media circus,” he sighs, “They’re trying to limit the vultures from getting new content.”

“Could they just not have you do interviews? Your team will fucking lose without you.”

“It’s out of my hands,” Shane pauses, before his voice pitches an interval lower. “The uh, Commissioner asked for a meeting. Mandatory.”

Ilya blinks, inhaling sharply. “Shane.”

“I know,” Shane sighs. “Fuck, I’m fucking terrified but I don’t know what else to do. Everyone’s blowing up my phone. Everyone but my team. I don’t know what to do.”

“Hayden?”

“Damage control in the group chat but no one’s said anything.”

“Fuck,” Ilya swallows. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, Shane.”

He hears Shane take a shallow, wet breath and Ilya’s never hated the distance between them more than he does right now. He should be holding Shane right now. They should have each other for comfort, not this shoddy example of connection through a phone speaker.

“How are… how are you parents taking it?”

“Well enough. Actually, no. Really good. Was fucking terrifying being alone at home and getting a text message that my mom and my dad were on their way to Montreal but it was… it was good. You were right. It was good to tell them.”

Ilya would give anything to not have been proven right *like this.*

“I’m glad it was good,” Ilya says softly, “And that they are there to help you. You said your mom is there?”

“Yeah. She’s in the kitchen, on the phone too. I actually don’t know who she’s yelling at now. I’m supposed to call Farah– my agent, I mean– again right now.”

“She can say, yes? What we should do next?”

“Yes. She’s good. She’s a great agent, I know she’ll help but god… it’s such a fucking mess.” Shane exhales but it's too unstable and Ilya can see him crouched over, head down and between his knees as he tries to regulate himself through an anxiety attack. Ilya knows how to bring him out of these now, gentle touches and soft words grounding him to reality. But he’s too fucking far now.

“It will be okay, Shane,” Ilya tries anyway, “you have your parents. Farah. Hayden. You said Hayden’s wife is also very kind. You have me. Always. You have support. You are not alone, okay, Любовь?”

He hears Shane pace his breathing, slow in, hold, slow out.

“Lyblov?” Shane repeats eventually, butchering the Russian but much calmer. “That one’s new. What does it mean?”

Ilya had called him *love*, a slip of the tongue. It’s lived there for so long, he’s almost not surprised it escaped today when his nerves and attention are shot, gone from 0 to 100 and back around again.

“I will tell you another day,” Ilya says instead of answering. “To look forward to. Maybe you will guess, hmm?”

“You called me something like *little laundromat*, didn’t you,” Shane sighs, and he sounds normal again. Crisis averted.

“I do not kiss and tell Hollander,” Ilya sniffs playfully. He sobers quickly though. “Should… is there something I should do? I do not know these… scandals. Rules.”

“Don’t post anything, for one,” Shane replies, “probably best if you avoid the public.”

“Svetlana said to call out of work today.”

“Yeah that’s probably for the best.”

“I should also quit,” Ilya admits, thinking through the worry spots, “the hotline. It is illegal for me to work on it, but it was good money. There is always a chance a previous caller will

make a connection later.”

He’s been thinking of quitting anyway for a while. He doesn’t need the income in the same way he did when he was a student paying tuition and Alexei has been suspiciously quiet for a while now. And besides, Shane might say he was okay with Ilya still working the line, but he can’t imagine that would have been forever.

“Shit. *Fuck,* I didn’t even think of that. Do you need— I can give you the income you’d lose.”

Ilya manages to tame the knee-jerk reflex to hit back with defensiveness. Shane has no idea offering to give him money reminds him too much of his relationship with his brother and father; at some point he had started feeling more like a living bank account than family.

“No. No, I don’t need it. The lab pays enough. I was mostly using the hotline money for savings and applications.”

“Okay,” Shane exhales. “Okay. But I’m serious, if that stops being true for whatever reason. It’s not charity. It’s fucking not, Ilya. You would go to Svetlana if you needed help, if you really needed help. Why can’t you ask your boyfriend?”

Ilya grimaces but can see his point. “I don’t like asking for help.”

“Baby, I’m well fucking aware,” Shane huffs, sardonic. “But right now— I think we’re going to need all the help we can get, okay? Just… There's enough going on. If we can make something easy, we should, just until the clusterfuck is over.”

“Okay,” Ilya sighs, even if it tastes sour. “I will ask if I need it.”

“Thank you.”

“I will keep my head down then,” Ilya summarizes.

“What about you? What are you going to do now?”

Shane is quiet, long enough for Ilya to sit up in concern. “Shane?”

“I’m benched,” Shane says, and Ilya can hear the strain in his words, how it hurts him to say. “League didn’t say for how long. I have that Commissioner meeting in New York, probably tomorrow or the day after, but I was thinking, um. I might come down to Boston? If it’s okay with you. I just think I, uh, I really need you right now and um–”

“Yes, Shane,” Ilya exhales, closing his eyes. He feels the missing space in front of him, between his arms and against his chest, like an open wound. “is not even a question. You can always come home. Come home to me. Please.”

“Fuck,” Shane’s voice cracks and he can hear how wet his breathing suddenly went. “Okay. Okay, baby, I’ll come home.”

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Marleau doesn't even spare a greeting. "*Shane Hollander?* Motherfucker, your boyfriend is Shane fucking Hollander?"

"Hello to you, Marleau, how are you doing?" Ilya responds dryly. Shane's washing their coffee mugs from breakfast in the kitchen. Marleau makes a noise over the speaker not unlike a teapot.

"No, no, this is crisis mode Rozanov," Marleau rants, almost too fast to understand. "It had to be the fucking captain of the Montreal Voyagers? Him? Did our friendship mean nothing to you.?"

"Marleau it's not that deep—"

"That's why you wanted the Montreal tickets," Marleau gasps. "Holy fuck, since *last year?* You traitor—"

"Fuck, shut up, Marleau," Ilya snaps rubbing his temples. "Look, I get it is surprise but can we not— can we not do this right now? This is all just… we're dealing with enough Cliff."

Marleau thankfully quiets. Ilya sees Shane look up from drying his hands, hearing the sharpness in his tone. When he walks around the bar counter, Ilya accepts the hand Shane offers him, taking comfort in the quick squeeze. Ilya is so grateful Shane had made a flight the same day, so that he was back in Boston by the evening the day of the outing and back home in Ilya's arms to fall asleep with. It's been a full 24 hours now since Ilya saw the Twitter post and watched every aspect of his life turn inside out. He's surprised it even took Marleau this long to call.

Shane kisses the top of his head and silently makes his way to their shared bedroom, leaving Ilya the living room for privacy.

"Right," Marleau exhales. "Right. Sorry, Rozy. How you holding up?"

Ilya closes his eyes, dropping his head back against the couch.

Marleau knows this world, he's a part of it. Sveta has been a pillar of support through it all but she had been too young when her dad was playing for the Bears to really get a good grasp of the toxicity in men's hockey. He knows Sergei definitely worked to keep some things out of the house. If anyone's going to understand what Shane's going through, it's him.

"What do you think, Marley?" Ilya asks, but it comes out sad and quiet instead of aggressive. "It's fucking terrible. Fuck. Ended up deleting all my socials because I started getting death threats, half of them in Russian. They found me the same day and now I'm either getting messages about corrupting hockey's golden boy and ruining the sport or dishonoring my entire lineage and country. I can't even begin to imagine what Shane's been getting and not showing me."

Shane's been tight-lipped about his DMs, but Ilya's seen enough from the public shit people have been callous and audacious enough to post. If Ilya's getting heat, Shane was facing a wildfire.

“Fuck,” Marleau swears. “Shit, that’s fucking awful. I’m sorry Rozy. I’m really fucking sorry. Anything I can do?”

“Can you order hit on the NHL Commissioner?” Ilya asks, dryly. He’s really only half kidding. Shane’s taking the train later today to New York for the meeting and Ilya’s fucking stressed about what it’ll do to him. He wanted to come as support so badly, but Shane told him no.

“Fuck, would if I could. Crowell’s always been an old fucking piece of shit. How are the Voyagers taking it?”

“They’re not,” Ilya rubs his face. “Fuck. They’re fucking shit. Hayden is the only decent person in the entire team. They haven’t said anything to Shane since the leak and he hasn’t mentioned it but it’s fucking tearing him apart.”

“Shit. I’m not going to lie, I’m not all that surprised,” Marleau sighed. “Comeau is… a lot on the ice. Koch’s even worse. If it helps, Cap made it clear in the locker room that no one was going to give you or Hollander shit for it or they would have to go through him. The team likes you, Roz. They’re really sorry about all this too.”

Thompson was one of the Boston vets, a Bears lifer with nearly sixteen years of NHL hockey under his belt and their longtime captain. He never struck Ilya as a hardcore ally and Ilya saw him rarely on nights out since he had long since grown out of his party years. But it does mean something, that such an older player would lay down the ground rules like that to support a gay player he’s only ever had as an opponent.

“That does help, actually,” Ilya replies softly, “thanks, Marley. Maybe if there are more teams like Bears, Shane will be okay.”

“Ottawa, New York, and Tampa, surprisingly of all places, all have good guys on them. Wouldn’t be surprised if they said something to their players. Oh and San Francisco, obviously.”

“That is good. Maybe there can be more public support from players? If more hockey people are more vocal about supporting Shane, it might help him feel less alone.”

“That I can do,” Marleau says, and it’s with a hint of a smile. “I’ll get word around. I think Hunter and Vaughn would be on board. Rodriguez and Miller too. And I’ll reach out to Pike, if he’s been supporting Hollander.”

“Thank you. Pike will be good person to go to first. He, uh, knows about me. And Shane,” Ilya says, awkwardly, “from before I mean. Hayden supported him this whole time. Shane came out to him first. He’s actually… he’s the only person Shane got to come out to, on his own terms.” Ilya feels his jaw clench, a shallow grief for the cathartic release of acceptance that Shane was never going to get now, his outing a trial by storm.

Marleau’s silent again. “Damn. Are you fucking serious? Just Pike? Not even his parents?”

“We had a plan,” Ilya sighs. “We were going to go to Ottawa after the playoffs in June. He was going to introduce me to his parents as his boyfriend and come out to them then. That’s obviously fucking not an option anymore but they’ve been good about all this, thankfully—“

“He was going to tell his parents about you?” Marleau interrupts. “Shit. Shit, this is like… actually serious. You’re serious about him.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, and it’s easy. There’s no hesitation for him. “I’m serious about Shane. He’s…” Ilya spares a quick glance at the closed bedroom door before lowering his voice. “I love him. I’m in love with him. I’ve been serious about him for a while.”

“Fuck, never thought I’d see the day Ilya Rozanov catches feelings,” Marley whistles, but it’s light-hearted. “I’m happy for you, man. Obviously all this shit sucks, but I’m glad you have each other. I’m glad he’s serious about you too.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Ilya laughs, but it’s resigned. “I think maybe, before, but now —“

“Roz, I’ve met Yuna Hollander,” Marley huffs dryly. “For a whole thirty seconds at an awards show. Felt like I was being dissected right then and there, she’s fucking intense. If he was going to tell his mom, he’s fucking serious about you too, man.”

The moonshine glitters a bit. Serious. They were serious about each other.

“Oh,” Ilya exhales, pleased. “I guess it makes sense he was worried about telling them then. I’m surprised they were okay with him leaving Montreal to come to me, with everything going on.”

“He’s in Boston?” Marley asks, surprise clear in his voice. “Shit, he’s staying with you?”
“We share apartment.”

Marleau’s quiet so long Ilya checks if the line is still connected.

“When you’re finally not dealing with an entire fanbase of homophobes,” Marleau finally says, “I think I’m going to kill you.”

“I will tell you whole story another time,” Ilya sighs, exasperated. “Well, most of story. He’s here because the league benched him.”

“*Benched* him? *Hollander?* What the fuck were they thinking– is that why the management’s fucking freaking the fuck out?”

“I guess? Is why it would be good for hockey players to support him.”

“Yeah. Yeah, *fuck*, that’s— he’s done nothing *wrong*,” Marleau sounds properly outraged, which is to say, completely. “You only get benched like that if you’re in trouble and sometimes not even then— that’s *fucked.* I'll make some calls. Text me if anything else comes up, alright? Hang in there.”

“Thanks Marley,” Ilya replies tired, “this means a lot. To both of us.”

Ilya seeks out Shane after Marleau hangs up. He's on his laptop, sitting cross-legged on the bed, looking cozy in one of Ilya's MIT hoodies. He's wearing his glasses, which always makes Ilya want to tackle him into the closest surface and have his wicked way with him. Now is not an exception.

"Jesus," Shane huffs as Ilya launches himself at Shane, taking his weight. He pushes away the laptop out of the line of fire and then lets Ilya push him flat against the bed.

"Glasses," is all Ilya says before leaning down to kiss him hard, swallowing his chuckle as he opens up against him.

"Like clockwork," Shane teases, still smiling when they part for air. Ilya simply nuzzles his nose against Shane's, feeling the rim of his glasses bump against it. "You okay baby? That was Marleau, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was okay. He wants to help. Says there are players who will support you, they will say something. I think he will talk to Hayden first."

"That's," Shane stills underneath Ilya, "they don't need to do that. It could cause problems for them, attaching themselves to me right now. I haven't even met with the Commissioner yet, he might-"

"They are good people," Ilya interrupts him, kissing him softly when he sees the way Shane was starting to spiral. "Thompson told Bears that they were not allowed to be homophobic. And Marley said New York, Ottawa, San Francisco, and Tampa will be supportive too."

"Wow," Shane exhales, stunned. "I hadn't— Thompson really said that?"

"Mmm. You really are not alone, sweetheart. I know it feels scary, but there are good people too."

"I know. I know that. I just… didn't think people would risk themselves like that."

Ilya doesn't say anything to that, simply tugs Shane's arms around himself and lets his own arms give out to slump against him. Shane takes his full weight with an oof but takes the hint and holds him easily. They're quiet for a while, and Ilya closes his eyes, simply relishing in the way he feels himself rise and fall with each movement of Shane's chest under him.

Besides Svetlana, Ilya isn't used to this kind of quiet intimacy. It feels habitual, grounding, to have Shane like this. He feels more off-centered without Shane than he does with him.

"Your train is at eleven?" Ilya finally asks. Shane stiffens against him, tense again, and he regrets saying anything at all.

"Yeah," Shane sighs. "I should leave soon. Farah is meeting me there."

"Good. You are sure I cannot—"

"I don't know how bad it'll be," Shane says. He draws up one of his hands and starts playing with Ilya's curls. It's a self-soothing habit he's done often enough that Ilya recognizes it. "It's

safer if you stay here for now. I'll be okay."

Ilya still doesn't like it. He knows when Shane is trying to downplay something so he knows that Shane is fucking terrified. It feels viscerally wrong to let Shane walk into this alone.

"Call Svetlana, have her come over," Shane tells him. "Maybe you can plan what to tell your PIs?"

Ilya gives in with a tired sigh. "Yes. Okay. You will call me?"

Shane gives him a fleeting peck against his forehead. "Of course."

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Shane leaves not long after that, and the apartment immediately drops ten degrees in temperature without him. He recognizes Shane's suggestion for what it was: a distraction for Ilya when he inevitably is alone. Svetlana promises to be there soon, skipping her afternoon classes and taking the train now. For now, in a very ill-advised manner, Ilya is scrolling through social media.

He knows the shitstorm of gossip the hockey side of the internet has become, everyone having something to say and microanalyze. It feels a little sick to read the way people interpret their relationship. There are people who curse them, calling them sinners, of course with plenty to say about the sanctity of hockey and how they need to "think about the children."

However, there's also a chunk of people, mostly women, who have been more than a little too enthusiastic about it— they were the ones to have found Ilya's personal information and had plenty to say about how sexy it was to have two hot men making out. The hypersexualization was nauseating, and one particular post about a user talking about how she had touched herself to the video sent ants crawling under Ilya's skin. It feels different than the hotline. That, for the most part, was consensual. Ilya could set his boundaries, could hang up and shut down a session when it became too uncomfortable. There's no way for him to stop this, not when it's in the hands of the entire internet.

Still, that was just hockey. Shane was already more than well-versed on how to handle that side of celebrity gossip. What Ilya had his feed focused on was the Russian side of things.

Twitter access in Russia was limited to VPN users so he's mostly doomscrolling through VK. It's a much smaller group of people— a random Russian researcher and a random Canadian hockey player dating in the US doesn't really make headlines—but it's enough. His name is out there, with the handful of doxxers putting out information about him on a government-controlled social media platform with people talking about it. It'll be enough.

It's not all bad. Smaller, more regular accounts have posted under the hashtag that's cropped up with condolences, the quiet but very present Russian queer counterculture actively commiserating for Ilya and what he must be going through. Ilya was a part of the underground gay community in Russia and has loved the queer culture there for a long time. He'd gone to the parties and clubs and knew that it wasn't nearly as scary for the average

queer Russian citizen who knew how to keep under the radar as the Western media portrayed it as with their propaganda.

But it's the people like Ilya, the people that get Russians talking about homosexuality on a global scale, who the government makes an example of. It will take a background check for his immigration application very little time to flag all of this.

Alexei hasn't called and he doubts he'll be on VK to see the news, but Ilya knows it'll be a matter of time before someone tells him. Part of Ilya is relieved though; it's one less axe for his brother to hold over his neck.

Svetlana arrives while he's watching a video about other gay Russians with semi-celebrity contact and what happened to them. She lets herself in with what Ilya's assumed is a key she made for herself.

"You are on VK," Svetlana clocks him immediately. "Stop it."

Ilya sighs, putting down his phone. "Привет, Sveta."

She takes off her shoes, a rule that Shane had put in place when they moved in and Ilya is adamant in maintaining, before joining Ilya on the couch.

"Shane?" she asks. She settles under Ilya's arm, leaning against him.

Ilya shrugs. "On his way to New York."

"Mmm. And you?"

"God, Sveta," Ilya sighs. He drops his head back. "It's such a fucking shit show. They benched Shane. And I haven't even talked to the lab since yesterday."

"Have they said anything?"

Ilya's been avoiding his email like the plague since he told Chikondi he wasn't coming in. By now, they most definitely know. He almost wonders what Rebecca has been saying.

"I don't know. Haven't checked."

Svetlana heaves a sigh, and gets up to go to the bedroom. She comes back a few minutes later holding Ilya's laptop.

"Go on," she goads and he takes it from her with a grimace. She's watching like a hawk until Ilya concedes and brings up his email.

There is a message from the lab. Chikondi had replied to his email, a simple message telling him to not worry about coming to the lab. There's nothing about the leak, aside from a request to meet tomorrow, when he comes in.

"She wants us to talk tomorrow morning," Ilya groans, dropping his head in his hands. "Fuck."

“Well, I think that is a given, Ilyusha,” Sveta rationalizes dryly. “Of course you’re going to have to talk. It was in your lab wasn’t it?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Well, in that case, what are you going to say?”

Ilya scoffs incredulously. “Fuck, Sveta, I don’t know? Sorry that you had to see video of me sucking face with my boyfriend in the workplace. This is my life’s passion so please do not fire me because I like dick?”

“Solid start,” Sveta shrugs. “We’ll work on it.”

She does help though, keeping him from coming up with the worst case scenarios for tomorrow. At some point, she raids the cupboards for snacks, turning her nose up at the high-performance bars and meal replacements Shane keeps stocked here and somehow finding Ilya’s stash of junk food that he keeps hidden from his boyfriend. They waste time on the couch after that, watching stupid American sitcoms until dark. It’s the most normal Ilya’s felt in two days.

The door unlocks quietly enough that neither Ilya nor Sveta notice it under the sound from the TV. Ilya does hear the sound of shoes though, and a familiar jingle of keys.

“Малыш?” Ilya sits up, dislodging Sveta as he moves abruptly. He turns his head to look over the back of the couch to see Shane shrugging off his leather jacket at the entry.

“Hey, baby,” Shane greets tiredly, but then freezes when he sees that Ilya is not alone. “Oh.”

Svetlana stands up, facing Shane properly. With a wry expression, she sticks out her hand. “Shane Hollander. Svetlana Vetrova. Though, you know me as Lana?”

Shane flushes but crosses the distance to take Sveta’s hand. Ilya knows first hand exactly how firm her handshake is, and judging by the flash of surprise on Shane’s face, he now does too.

“It’s um, good to meet you. Officially. Sorry, we um, haven’t before but—“

Svetlana cuts him off with a wave of her hand. “You have been very busy making my Ilyusha happy, I know this. That is all I need to know.”

A soft gentle smile curves on his lips. “He makes me happy too.”

“Yes,” Sveta grins, squeezing Shane’s hand with both of hers. “I know. You would not have called the hotline every week for two months if he wasn’t good at making you *very* happy.”

Shane goes bright, bright red. Ilya snorts, shaking his head. “Sveta, don’t tease him. That is my job.”

Shane gives Ilya a deadpanned, unimpressed look. “The couch is free if you want to sleep somewhere else tonight so badly.”

Svetlana laughs, bright and loud. “Ah yes, you are funny! I miss your calls. You were the highlight of my night, you know. Only weird men with piss kinks keep calling now.”

“We can call off the hotline, if that helps,” Shane offers, shy again. Ilya wants to kiss him all over his face, starting with every single one of his freckles. It’s disgusting how cute he is.

Sveta doesn’t look like she’s doing much better, wearing a very fond smile. “I would like that very much, Shane.”

Ilya comes around then, getting a sixth sense that Shane was starting to fray at the seams with everything that happened today. He opens his arms and Shane doesn’t hesitate, disregarding their audience as he falls into him gratefully.

“I will clean bowls in the kitchen,” Sveta says without being prompted, gathering their snacks and giving them space. He had no doubt that she could still hear them, but being out of sight helps Shane feel safe enough to relax his shoulders.

“How was it?” Ilya asks softly. Shane tightens his grip.

“Um. Pretty shitty to be honest. He wanted me to downplay it. Make it a joke or lie about it and blame you or something. Basically told me to go back into the closet.”

That hadn’t even occurred as an option to Ilya, not after seeing just how much noise the leak had been causing. Apprehension drips syrup-like, heavy and sticky. It’s the easiest option. The one that’s safest, the most comfortable. And Shane isn’t the risk-taking type, not really. “Oh. Are you—“

“No. Um, I told the Commissioner to go fuck himself?”

Svetlana cackles out loud before she can catch herself, and Ilya hears her slapping a hand over her mouth. Ilya can’t stop his own grin. “Sweetheart, you didn’t.”

“Um, yeah,” Shane mumbles, and Ilya can see his ears go red. “Farah has a recording, she and my mom said it would be a good backup plan in case Crowell tries something.”

“Jesus,” Ilya laughs a little, pressing his grin into Shane’s hair. “You… I can’t believe you. Fuck. I would pay to hear that recording, Shane.”

“I couldn’t help it,” he mutters and he sounds upset again, sobering Ilya. “He wanted me to make you some kind of predator. Say that you made me kiss you, forced yourself on me or something. I wasn’t— I just got so mad. I was so angry. You would *never* do that. I’ve never felt as safe as I do with you. I just couldn’t let him say shit like that.”

Ilya exhales softly, kissing Shane’s head. “Sweetheart. Fuck.”

His heart is beating to a staccato rhythm. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

“I’m probably going to make a statement though. Explain I guess. Come out properly. If it’s okay with you, say you’re my boyfriend.”

“Is that,” Ilya furrows his eyebrows, “Shane is that what you want?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?” he shrugs, “ I do know I don’t want the league to spin this. So I have to say something before they do, Farah was pretty clear about that.”

Ilya kisses the side of his face, silent. He had been growing tired of being hidden, yes. But he’s understanding now, when it was too late, exactly what Shane was so afraid of. He hates that Shane was going through this, so publicly.

“You can say I am boyfriend,” Ilya tells him, softly. “We are together in this, yes? We do this together.”

Shane pulls back just far enough to smile against Ilya and press his lips against his. It’s soft and tender in a way the rest of the world wouldn’t allow them to be right now.

“Did you guys talk about what to do about the lab?”

“Yes. Chikondi wants me to come in tomorrow. We will talk,” Ilya swallows once. “I do not know what they are thinking about all of this.”

“None of it is your fault,” Shane says, rubbing his cheekbone. “You like Chikondi, right? She’s always been nice. Maybe it will go well.”

Shane isn’t the optimistic type, so Ilya knows he’s making an effort for his sake. He offers a tight smile. “Maybe. Maybe.”

Chikondi is an adult immigrant from Malawi. Cohen comes from a Jewish family with Orthodox roots. He has no idea what their stances are on queer rights.

He does know that some cultures like his own, like Shane’s in hockey, are a lot less forgiving. He knows all the ways the tradition you cherish can hurt you, how sometimes culture can outweigh logic. He just doesn’t know where his mentors fall on the spectrum.

He doesn’t say more, instead seeking Shane’s firm touch, his grip the only thing keeping Ilya on the ground.

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Ilya’s not sure what to expect of his coworkers when he exits the elevator on the Kavli Institute floor, where the lab is. He doesn’t even think any of his lab mates have ever watched a hockey game.

Well. Except for maybe one. He’s not sure what he’s going to do if he sees Rebecca today.

Most of the other lab personnel are already there. Gigi the lab manager was at her corner, already going through what must be tens of emails, majority of which will be Ilya’s fault. The post-docs and PhD students are still up and milling around, socializing in the morning the way they usually do before really getting into the work. It was one of Ilya’s favorite things about the lab, the comfortable working environment here. That wasn’t always a given at big, important labs like these.

They don't notice him at the door at first, but that quickly changes.

"Rozanov," Adam, a post-doc, calls out, and it's suddenly pitch silent. "Hey."

"Hello," Ilya replies, not giving them anything with his expression. He drops his bag at his seat.

"You… doing okay, Ilya?" Nina asks cautiously. She's an older post-doc too, one that Ilya works closely with. He had gone to her wedding, one full of color and song and his first traditional South Asian wedding. He wonders, briefly, if Shane is the marriage type.

"Yes," he answers shortly. He kind of hates the number of eyes on him.

"Chikondi and Cohen wanted to talk to you," Adam tells him. "They're, uh, in the conference room."

"Okay," Ilya says, leaving them with his one word responses. He thinks he hears the unsettled buzz of people talking about him behind him as he leaves.

Outside the conference room, Ilya takes the privacy to take a single deep breath and shoot Shane a text. He responds instantly.

Ilya (9:45 am): going in to talk to Chikondi and Cohen. Fuck.

Shane (9:45 am): you got this baby

Shane (9:45 am): I'm right here waiting for you

It helps Ilya gather enough courage to knock and open the door.

The conference room where they host lab meetings isn't all that big, sitting maybe nine or ten people comfortably. Chikondi and Cohen are sitting together on one side of the long synthesized wooden table, a clear sign of where Ilya is supposed to sit.

"Ah, come in, Ilya," Chikondi smiles softly. "Please sit."

Ilya does as told, slowly approaching his seat as an execution chair. He keeps his expression level. Once he's sitting down, facing them both, that Russian stoicism is much harder to maintain.

"You are feeling okay?" Chikondi asks, kind in the way she always is. It makes Ilya's throat burn and he only trusts himself to nod. He can't lose this.

"Alright," Cohen says, clearing his throat. "We'll get started."

When Ilya first met Cohen, he had thought, briefly, that he had met the American version of his father. He was cold, rarely smiled, and communicated through progress and deliverables. He maintained extremely high standards and was the main reason why most undergrads washed out of the lab early. Cohen's precise and detailed criticism could be a devastating blow to someone not used to being torn down.

Still, unlike his father, Cohen's criticism was always legitimate and fair, if simply not sugar-coated. He had never once turned a genuine question away and Ilya knew he was truly invested in the growth of his students. Ilya had survived a man who was worse so held his ground and gained something like respect from the researcher over the years. Or at least he had. He expects that'll change after this.

"Ilya," Chikondi starts carefully. "We've heard there is some news that you might have to share."

Ilya huffs a laugh, but it's wet. He pinches the bridge of his nose to make the sharp ache go away. "You do not already know? Is all over the fucking internet, isn't it?"

"We'd like to hear it from your perspective," Cohen says blandly.

Ilya exhales, closing his eyes. "My perspective. Okay. I have been dating a NHL hockey player for about a year now. He is very famous, the hockey league is very cruel, and Russia would put me in jail for loving a man so we had to keep it a secret but we were outed. Here. Now everyone and their mother has an opinion and he can't play anymore even though he's the best in the league and I will lose my visa–" Ilya cuts himself off, biting his tongue.

Chikondi and Cohen give Ilya time to cool down as he stares at the table, the silence cloying and opaque. He has no idea what they were thinking.

"We've been getting… emails," Chikondi says hesitantly. Ilya's heart drops. Chikondi continues, not noticing because she's booting up her laptop. "Messages from mostly strangers, hockey fans it seems. Most of it is… not good. Some other researchers are talking as well.

This was Ilya's worst nightmare. It was one thing to be an uncomfortable presence. It was another to actively be causing problems for his PIs to have to deal with. He had no doubt that these emails were filled with derogatory details and demands for his termination.

Astrophysics is a small world. And Ilya isn't someone unknown in this world, with how much impact his research so far has made. People know who he is. His name was recognizable enough. Their entire scientific community would find out about this, one way or another.

"Please don't drop me from the lab," Ilya pleads, voice small. "This work means so much to me."

He's spiraling, recognizing the same signs he sees in Shane when he panics in the way his hands shake and his breathing quickens. He can't look at them, eyes blurring with tears.

"Oh, no!" Chikondi quickly denies, shaking her head. "Ilya, we were not going to do that. We know this is not your fault—"

"Now, wait," Cohen interrupts, "I think before we continue, I think we should have a conversation about bringing… guests to the lab."

“Dr. Cohen, now is not the time,” Chikondi frowns.

“I think we should be honest and clear with each other while we discuss next steps,” Cohen counters. “It is inappropriate for lab members to be bringing their partners to the lab unsupervised, especially not regularly.”

“It’s not regularly,” Ilya insists, “I swear I haven’t. It was the first time he has come here, really. You can check. He just,” Ilya’s breath hitches because all of this is so fucking unfair, “we hadn’t seen each other in *weeks.* He was at the Olympics for a month. He just wanted to surprise me and be a good boyfriend.”

Ilya closes his eyes but it’s too late to stop a tear from falling. He hastily rubs it away. “He just wanted to learn more about what makes me happy.”

He almost startles when he feels a warm hand on his and looks up to see Chikondi holding him with a sincere, pained expression.

“I’m very sorry this is happening Ilya,” she tells him, gently. “It is not fair. We fired Rebecca. Effective immediately. It was unprofessional and inappropriate for her to do what she did and cause so much harm.”

“You— oh,” Ilya blinks. “I’m… thank you. I did not want to see her today.”

“I can imagine why,” Cohen sighs a little wryly. “Okay. I’m glad we’re clear that having unapproved guests in the lab isn’t allowed. And I’m also sure we’re clear that inappropriate behavior such as in the video is definitely not allowed in the lab.”

Ilya winces. “Yes. I am sorry. It will not happen again.”

Cohen nods once. “We recognize that the visitor protocol might not have been shared with you. Moving forward, you should know we need to be here if he’s visiting. It’s standard procedure to have a PI in lab with non-personnel around. Even if he’s not near the equipment, it can be a safety hazard.”

Ilya stops fidgeting. Cohen, one of the most stoic, impersonal men he’s ever met, could not be saying what he thinks he’s saying. “You… want to be here,” he repeats slowly. “When he visits. You would meet him. You want to meet him?”

Chikondi and Cohen look at each other then for a second before turning to him again, seemingly puzzled.

“Well,” he answers, furrowing his eyebrows. “I mean sure. I don’t see why not. We’ve met a lot of the other researchers’ partners at our social events.”

If Ilya doesn’t get a hold of himself soon, he’s going to burst into tears, as overwhelmed as he was. “You’re okay with it. You’re okay with him being a man, that I am… not straight?”

“Oh. *Oh,* Ilya, of course,” Chikondi rushes, horrified, and that’s what sets Ilya off. He tries pressing his lips together to keep in a sob but he doesn’t quite manage. That seems to be enough for Chikondi, who gets up and goes around the table to sit in the chair next to Ilya.

She wraps an arm around his shoulders as he tries to stop crying. "*Mwana,* that is not a problem for us. Not at all. Who you love will never be a problem here, *chabwino?"*

"I did not know," Ilya gasps, "and could not risk it. Is not safe in Russia, to be what I am. Very bad propaganda law. Is getting worse and I could go to jail because he is famous. And I couldn't— if you were not okay with it, I would lose work visa."

"It is not safe in Russia," Chikondi connects, a small frown settling on her face, "so you could not be sure it was safe here."

Ilya sniffs, nodding slowly.

"Oh Ilya," she exhales, "I am sorry. We did not make this a safe enough space for you to tell us. This will change. We do not mind at all if you are gay. Right, Dr. Cohen?"

"Makes no difference to me," Cohen shakes his head a little, shrugging. "All I care about is your publication productivity."

"Ethan!" Chikondi scolds with a scowl and he holds up his hands placatingly.

"I'm just saying he is a prolific researcher, it would be a shame to lose him—"

Ilya laughs. It's so incredibly on-brand of his mentor, so very ordinary, that it makes the fear wash away. He doesn't think anything else would have made him feel truly forgiven. "Thank you Dr. Cohen. I appreciate it."

They're both clearly a little bewildered by the tone shift. Cohen fidgets with his bow tie like he does when he's caught off guard by a question and buying himself some time.

"Yes, well," he clears his throat. "You are a very good scientist, Ilya. That's what matters to me."

He beams. Cohen's compliments were like gold in the lab. "Thank you, both of you. I am sorry for causing problems and for disappointing you with the video but I will not let it happen again, I promise. And I will learn the visitor policy."

"Good," Chikondi smiles, squeezing his arm. "That is all we wanted, Ilya. Simply clear the air. We are not angry with you and most certainly not for who you love. I am sorry, actually. I think I might have made assumptions, over the years. I should not have assumed you would be with a woman."

"No, no, it is okay," Ilya shakes his head. "I am… I like both. I am bisexual."

"I will admit I do not know much about this word. But I will learn more, hmm?"

Ilya smiles back, struggling to keep his composure. "Okay. Thank you. Really. Thank you so much."

Chikondi gives him one last side hug. "Come. We will figure out what to do about emails and then we can do science again."

“Oh thank god, we can do science again,” Cohen groans under his breath. Ilya doesn’t think he meant for them to hear.

Still it’s a recognizable sentiment. Ilya grins to himself. He had not ruined everything. He still has Shane. He will get to do science again. They can figure out the rest of it together.

Chapter End Notes

Listen i am in the biosciences and humanities. I have never really stepped foot in a university astrophysics lab i do not know what they are like. i just read astrophysics books for fun. Next time i’ll make one of them premed and put them in a wet lab idk.

one more real chapter and then the epilogue!! I'm excited

Chapter 9: hang up (the phone)

Chapter Summary

Meeting family, playing hockey, and ending the call

Chapter Notes

It only took +110k words but professional hockey player Shane Hollander finally plays hockey. Don’t want to be accused of moving too fast.

God you guys i can't believe we got here. This is the longest writing piece I have ever finished in my life. thank you so much to everyone who's been here from the start. I've loved reading your guys' comments; it's genuinely been the highlight of my day these past couple months. I hope that this is the happy ending that everyone was hoping for!

CW: mild hockey-related violence, explicit homophobia with use of slurs, anxiety attacks

(also some people have mentioned that they found this through recommendations???? hello??? omg literally crazy to me people like this enough to be sharing it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane is not freaking out. He’s a normal amount of nervous for meeting the equivalent of his boyfriend’s family, a very exacting and protective Russian grandmother who would cut off a man’s dick before letting something happen to Ilya, according to Svetlana’s texts. He’s being very normal about it.

Katya’s Cafe is warm and cozy, decorated with pictures and textiles of Ilya’s home country, but seemingly empty. It smells of dill and something tangy. When they walk in, the bell on the door chimes and it sends a streak of black shooting across the wood floor to which Ilya makes soft kissing noises at.

“This is Sofiya,” Ilya smiles, crouching down to the cat. Sofiya trills happily, rubbing her head against Ilya’s outstretched fingers and purring as he scratches under her chin. “She is Katya’s cat and cafe enforcer.”

“Does it really get that crazy out here?” Shane huffs, amused. The black cat immediately starts meowing for Ilya’s attention again when he glances up to look at Shane.

“The Bratva never crack, Shane,” Ilya answers solemnly, and Shane’s only half sure he’s kidding. “Law of thieves.”

Shane likes cats, but they don’t always like him. He’s cautious as he joins Ilya near the ground, offering the cat an uneasy smile and his hand for her to smell. “Привет, Sofiya.”

He knows he probably butchered the Russian, but Ilya still beams at him so he figures he’ll get a pass from him.

Not so much from Sofiya, though. She sits primly in front of them, her black fluffy tail slowly sweeping side to side as she stares Shane down with bright yellow eyes and small pupils. If a cat could sniff haughtily, Sofiya would be doing so right now.

She meows once, loud, and turns her back on both of them to trot to her cat castle.

“Ah, tough crowd,” Shane laughs weakly. Shit.

“She only likes people Katya likes, so her approval comes later,” Ilya shrugs. He reaches over and threads their fingers together when Shane stands up again.

“No pressure,” Shane mumbles, but accepts the soft kiss to his cheek.

“Katya? It’s Ilya,” Ilya calls deeper into the store. He lets Shane pull him closer to the walls, partially to get out of the line of fire and also partially to look at the black and white photos covering the wallpaper.

“Relax,” he tells Shane under his breath. “You’ll be okay. I like you very much, and Katya will see that.”

The stupid, besotted smile in reaction to Ilya’s sincerity is not under his control. Shane leans in to kiss him softly, heart pounding as he tastes him with a quiet smack of their lips. He wants to kiss him again right away when he pulls back.

“Ilyuschenka,” someone behind them calls out, and there’s a short, stout woman with greying hair and strong frown lines approaching them. She stops when she sees Shane behind Ilya. “You brought a friend?”

“Ah, not exactly. Katya, I would like you to meet Shane, Мой возлюбленный.”

There’s an immediate shift in the woman’s face. It’s tense, stoic. Shane recognizes the word for ‘my’ and can infer the rest of the Russian. Not a great response to being introduced as the boyfriend.

“I see,” Katya purses her lips. “Hmm. Sit. I will bring tea.”

She turns without another word, leaving Shane sweating.

“That doesn’t seem good,” Shane mumbles. Ilya squeezes his hand.

“Katya seems tough but she is soft inside. Just give it time, let her ask questions. It will come.”

Ilya leads Shane to the corner booth, leather seats worn and well-used and simple embroidered placemats in front of them. Ilya tugs Shane into the same side as him, leaving the seat in front of them open for Katya. Shane bites down that it feels a little like an interrogation setting.

Katya returns with a samovar of tea and small ceramic cups before she seats herself.

“So,” Katya starts as she pours the tea. “You are the hockey boy.”

“Yes, that’s me,” Shane tries with an awkward smile. Katya doesn’t return it.

“How do you know Ilya?”

Oh, fuck, how could they not have planned for this? Of course people would ask them how they met; a college student and NHL hockey player? That’s a whole question on its own.

“Oh, um, we uh…” Shane stammers, bright red. Ilya huffs, rolling his eyes.

“Katya, Shane is sweet but shy. He does not want to tell you we met through sex.”

“Ilya!” Shane protests, shrinking a little. Still, he’s a little relieved. It’s not a lie but not nearly as bad as saying paid phone sex.

“Sex. Hmm. You young people do not know proper courting. Is terrible.”

“Shane is very good at courting,” Ilya grins a little. “He brings me flowers. Makes me food. Very romantic.”

“Plus, it wasn’t really sex the whole time because I travel for work,” Shane jumps in, “I knew I liked Ilya because of how much I liked talking to him during our phone and video calls.”

Ilya smiles at him, fond, but Katya ignores his point and hones in on something else.

“So you do not live in Boston. Hmm.”

“Uh, no,” Shane stammers. “I live in Montreal. I play for the hockey team there. But we travel to Boston for games throughout the year.”

“And you think my Ilyuschenka will, what, wait around all year for you to come see him for a few hours every month?” Katya sniffs. “Like pet?”

“No!” Shane shakes his head quickly in horror. “Oh my god no, we just—“

“You can have all of it, career, travel, partner waiting at home, but what about him? What does he get from you?”

“Katya, please,” Ilya is hesitant now. When Shane looks at him, there’s something upset and a little lost in his frown. He hadn’t expected this. “I— Я забочусь о нем. Я люблю его.”

Shane vehemently wishes he had locked in sooner with his Russian language learning app, because the only words he recognizes are the pronouns “I” and “him.” But whatever Ilya had said made Katya straighten, eyes narrowing. She turns away from Ilya then, looking directly at Shane.

“You are the boy who left my Ilyuschenka.” Katya doesn’t ask. She’s stone stiff.

“Babushka,” Ilya protests, flushing. “That’s not—“

“Yes,” Shane interrupts, looking down. “I am. It was a mistake.”

“A mistake?” she scowls. “And you think you deserve to come back and hurt him again?”

Shane winces a little, slipping his hand from Ilya’s despite his protests. Then he straightens, taking a deep breath as he makes himself look Katya in the eye.

“I can’t promise I won’t hurt him by accident again, or make any more mistakes,” he says steadily, carefully. “But I can promise I’ll keep trying to do better and that I won’t waste this. I promise I’ll keep trying everyday to deserve him.”

Katya doesn’t let him off the hook. “Why?”

At least this answer is easy. “Because I know Ilya deserves everything. He deserves the best.”

Ilya parts his lips, openly breathless. Shane is flushed red but he doesn’t back down, willing himself to stay still and braced for Katya’s judgement.

“Hmm,” Katya narrows her eyes, before nodding brusquely. “I like him. You choose well, Ilyuscheka. Good.”

Shane exhales in relief. Ilya relaxes too, with a bright happy smile that crinkles his eyes and shines like the sun. Shane wants to kiss it off him and squeeze his cheeks. The urge to hug him until he can’t breathe is strong.

He refrains himself though, because Katya is still eyeing them and it feels immodest to touch Ilya in front of her. He knows he’s already on thin ice.

“Thank you,” Shane breathes. “I know you’re Ilya’s family. So thank you for your approval.”

“Yes, well it can change any time,” Katya sniffs before getting up again. “Stay. I will bring my pelmeni.”

“She likes you enough to feed you. Passed level one,” Ilya mutters into Shane’s ear with a wry grin and laugh. “Good job, малыш.”

“Laugh all you want, my mom won’t go easy on you either,” Shane warns him, and enjoys the tinge of pink on his boyfriend’s face.

It’s been four days since the leak and Shane’s life has only just started to ebb down from post-apocalyptic to major wildfire status. Everyone everywhere has had something to say, it seems.

Everyone except his team. He hasn’t heard anything from any of the Voyagers besides Hayden and his coach emailing him to tell him he’s benched for the foreseeable future, League orders. Ilya’s been doing his best to help with the anxiety but Shane is barely keeping it together.

Meeting Katya was a suggestion and distraction from both Svetlana and Ilya, and Shane had agreed despite the absolute terror of doing so. Svetlana had not helped when telling Shane about her these past few days over text. Still, she was one of the most important people in Ilya’s life and Ilya was one of the most important people in Shane’s. He desperately wanted Katya to like him.

“You are okay?” Ilya checks, like he has been doing frequently for the past few days. It should be irritating, but he’s so sincere about it, Shane can’t help but kiss him, soft and sweet, every time.

“Yes. I was just nervous,” he tells him after their lips part. “She loves you very much. I understand she wants the best for you. And I get that. I meant what I said, you only deserve the best. ”

Ilya’s smile is bright and beautiful. “See? Romantic.” He rubs Shane’s cheekbones, right over his freckles. “She will see, sweetheart. She will love you.”

Shane wants to kiss his fingertips, knuckles, palm. Wants to breathe what he feels in each touch of his lips. Something sacred. Something whole.

He settles for leaning against his touch, eyes fluttering shut. “Okay.”

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Shane had escaped Montréal as soon as he was able, the same day of the leak, and now, five days in, he’s feeling pretty guilty answering his mom’s calls.

“Hey mom,” Shane mumbles. He’s in the living room, stirring a cup of tea while on the couch. Ilya was still asleep in their bed, knocked out until mid-morning, probably. Shane’s circadian rhythm on the other hand got him up at 5 am whether he liked it or not. His mom was much the same. “How are you?”

“I’m okay, honey. I’m more worried about you. You’re still in Boston?”

He had told his mom he was booking a flight to Massachusetts immediately after his call with Ilya, and she had opened her mouth once, closed it, and then conceded. It would probably be

better for him to leave the city where Shane Hollander was a franchise name and face, until things started dying down.

It hasn't died down, not really. At least not in the hockey world; they had briefly shown up on mainstream celebrity news for a brief blip but then Rose Landry announced her new lead role for the next Revengers movie and got the attention off of them. He would thank her personally if he could.

Still, hockey pundits and fans were still buzzing with the leak, kept aflame by his continued lack of presence in games and his own, concise social media post.

"Yeah," he answers his mom. "Still in Boston. I've been, um. Seeing the response to my statement."

He hears his mom sigh softly. "Oh Shane."

Farah and his mom had both gone through and approved it before he put it up, but it still made him want to crawl out of his skin, reading it and seeing his honest vulnerability out in the open. He had shown Ilya before he pressed *post*, and the way his expression had softened by the time he got to the end almost made it worth it.

He went to his own instagram profile to find it again. It was simply a black box with white text, not even bothering with a photo. The words were what was important anyway.

"Yesterday, a video clip of me was taken and posted without my consent and promptly went viral.

There have been many questions about if it was real, who the other man is, and what this means. I'll answer some of them now.

The video is real. I am one of the men in it. I was visiting MIT to see my long-term partner, a researcher, who I had not seen for several weeks. My partner is brilliant, kind, and funny and he does not deserve any of the vitriol he's currently facing on the internet. I will not share more about him due to concerns of his safety and privacy.

As for what this means: I am gay and I am still Shane Hollander. For as long as you have known me as a hockey player, I have been gay. Nothing before and after the video has changed besides it being known now. I understand that this may seem like a shock to many people, but all I can ask for now is your respect and acceptance. I still want to play. I still want to win. Who I care for doesn't change what happens on the ice. Thank you to everyone who has extended well wishes and we appreciate your support as we navigate this period."

He's only managed to scroll through the comments for a few minutes at a time at the risk of another panic attack.

"I'm proud of you," his mom tells him, gentle. "This is an awful thing that happened, but the statement was very brave. I'm proud of you for being open about who you are."

Shane bites his lip, curling up into the sofa cushion. “Mom. I just— I know I’ve said it before but—“

“Shane Hollander,” his mom stops him firmly. “You are not going to apologize for this again. I meant what I said that day, honey. I love you no matter what. I understand that this was really hard. Your dad does too. We don’t hold it against you.”

Shane exhales shakily, eyes stinging. “Okay. Okay, mom.”

“So… are your dad and I going to meet him?” she asks almost casually. Shane knows better. Yuna Hollander wouldn’t know casual even if it came and spat in her face.

“I mean,” Shane stammers. “I want you to. That was always the plan. It’s just… Montreal…”

“You’ll have to come back eventually honey,” Yuna says not unkindly. “Your life won’t be on pause for forever.”

“I know,” Shane closes his eyes. “I know that. He’s back at work. I don’t know if he’ll want to take time off right now with… everything.”

“Just think about it,” she tells him. “Your dad and I both want to get to know him.”

“Yeah.” Despite it all, it’s easy to smile thinking about them meeting, “I want you to too. He’s… I care about him. A lot. He’s really important to me.”

He almost says the L word, which has been coming up his throat now almost everyday. But he’s not sure if Ilya’s up to overhear.

“I’m glad, honey,” Yuna tells him gently, “let me know when you plan on coming up. Bring him along too.”

“Okay. I love you mom.”

“Love you too, baby.”

He sighs as he hangs up, slumping into the couch. His parents really had reacted well. He had been terrified, on the brink of collapse, when he saw their texts that morning. But when they had arrived, all they had cared about was Shane and how he was feeling. They made it clear they weren’t mad at him, simply mad at the situation. His mom had anchored down to figure out who to sue and after his dad had managed to get him breathing normally, Shane called Ilya.

Which reminded him. He wandered back into their bedroom, only to see Ilya still passed out, starfished on the mattress with the extra space Shane had left behind. He’s on his back, snoring softly and nude under the sheets. His hair is a nuclear disaster.

He still sometimes can’t believe he gets to have Ilya like this, warm, rumpled, and soft. Shane is careful as he climbs up onto the mattress, crawling over to him and settling against his chest. The sigh Shane releases when he melts against him, feeling Ilya’s steady breathing move him up and down, is entirely involuntary.

He wakes Ilya up slowly, rubbing his chest before reaching for his face. Shane drops butterfly kisses over his eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, knowing that Ilya finds them ticklish and soon enough his face begins scrunching up, regaining consciousness.

“Hey baby,” Shane murmurs, smiling at Ilya’s small pout as he blinks awake. Ilya answers with a grumble and wraps his arms around Shane. He flips them so he’s on top, trapping Shane against the mattress with his heavy weight and promptly closes his eyes again. Shane laughs a little, running his hand through his curls as Ilya stubbornly snuggles closer.

“It’s almost 10, Ilya,” Shane coaxes. “Come on, I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Mmph,” he groans, “you have been awake?”

“Since five, yeah. Went on a run, showered, called my mom.”

“You are terrible. Something is wrong with you.”

“Yeah, it’s called being a professional athlete.”

Ilya huffs, looking up and resting his chin into Shane’s chest. “You called your mother?”

“Yeah. Just checking in. She, uh, mentioned something though and I wanted to ask you about it.”

Ilya hums to encourage him, and the way he tilts his head in curiosity makes him think of the golden retriever puppy he had to pry away from Ruby and Jade when he last took them to the park while on babysitting duty.

“Do you want to come to Montreal?” Shane suggests, hesitant. “You could stay with me. Um, I can show you around and I mean— my parents want to meet you.”

Ilya blinks. “You would introduce me to your family? You want them to meet me?”

“Yes. Yeah, I’ve told you that. What better time than now, right? No reason why they shouldn’t know you,” Shane shrugs but he’s blushing bright red.

Ilya smiles as he reaches for Shane, grasping his waist to tug him closer. “I would love to meet your family.”

Shane smiles back, relieved, moving his hands again to touch warm, soft skin. “Yeah? I’ve told you before, my mom’s kind of intense. She’s going to have a lot of questions.”

“I can handle questions. That’s my whole thing. Asking and answering questions.”

“So you’ll come?” Shane asks, almost breathless. “We can visit McGill too, and I’ll show you the city. Especially since you might be moving there.”

Something in Ilya’s eyes wavers but it’s gone before Shane can figure out what and Ilya nods, nudging Shane’s nose with his own. “Okay. We should do this. I need to tell the lab though. And finish up assignments so that I can leave. Might need a day or two.”

“That’s fine,” Shane says quickly. “It might be good for me to leave a day earlier. I can make sure there’s groceries and stuff. And then you’ll come when you’re done.”

“Okay,” Ilya agrees, and Shane can’t help but grin giddy.

“Okay,” he repeats, and kisses him quick and sweet.

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Shane has vacuumed the floors, wiped down the counters, cleaned the bathroom, and remade his bed *twice.* There’s objectively nothing left for him to worry over. He’s still somehow at his bookshelf wiping down dust that’s not really there.

He’s already stocked up for the week, even though they haven’t decided how long Ilya was staying.

Ilya texts his arrival time, making Shane jump up nervously before sitting back down feeling foolish. Jesus, they’d been dating for a year. There’s no reason to be acting like it was their first date.

Ilya was supposed to be here in ten minutes.

He’s pacing near the windows when he gets the text buzz just a few seconds before the door knock, and Shane’s quick to open. Ilya’s in hot-guy-at-the-airport attire, dark shades, black jeans and leather jacket. He looks frustratingly sexy, and Shane kind of hates him for making him this horny already not even thirty seconds in.

“Hey,” Shane tries, as if his hands aren’t sweaty. He accepts a chaste hello kiss at the door before Ilya grins down at him.

“Hello. Will you be letting me in?”

Shane startles, stepping back almost too far and knocking himself off balance. “Oh right, of course.”

Ilya simply follows him in, hefting up his duffel bag. Shane lets him walk in, watching as he stops in the middle of the living room and slowly turns to take in the space.

“Wow,” Ilya murmurs. “This is… wow.”

Shane flushes, rubbing the back of his neck. “Um… feel free to make yourself at home.”

“This is not home,” Ilya raises an eyebrow, “this is fancy mansion apartment. Jesus… that is a view.”

Shane frowns a little to himself as Ilya wanders over to the floor to ceiling windows. He knows his place is a lot but he wants it to be a home, like the place they share in Boston is to him. His apartment was clean and large, finished with modern accents and decorated with expert-curated interior design. But it never really felt warm enough to be a home.

“I mean,” Shane mutters, “it’s not that crazy. It’s not like I decided to buy a house.”

He doesn’t say he was planning on building one near his parents’ cottage.

“Yes, so you bought penthouse instead,” and Ilya is teasing as he takes off his jacket and glasses to drop on a chair but Shane still feels off kilter. He’s quiet for too long though, and has to forcibly shake himself out of it when he hears Ilya stop moving.

“What is it?” Ilya asks, teasing gone. Shane tries to smile but suspects it looks like a grimace.

“Nothing, baby, really.”

Ilya isn’t impressed. “Come here.” The order is in *that* voice, the one that clicks a switch off in Shane’s head and tells him he can stop thinking for a while. He’s walking over before he realizes he’s obeying. Once he’s close enough, Ilya takes Shane’s chin between his pointer finger and thumb, shaking him a little.

“I’ll ask one more time,” he warns gently. “What is it?”

Shane shrugs, flushing before forcing his words out. “I just… want you to like it here. I want you to be comfortable. I want this to feel like a home too.”

Shane doesn’t know what worst case scenario Ilya had in mind, because once he admits his wish, Ilya’s shoulders relax.

“Ah, малыш,” Ilya breathes, smiling a little. “Can I admit something? Is embarrassing.”

Shane blinks, bewildered by the pivot. “Oh. Um, yeah, sure.”

Ilya nudges his chin up with a knuckle to meet his eye. “I think I feel at home wherever you are. Fancy apartment or not. All I need to feel comfortable is to be with you.”

Shane flushes bright red, and he can’t bite down his bright, delighted smile. “Wow. You were right. That is embarrassing.”

Ilya groans, playfully slumping against Shane. “So cruel, Shanya. I will never recover from this betrayal. Here I am trying to be romantic but my mean, cold boyfriend teases! Devastating—"

Shane laughs hard, kissing his jaw until he can get Ilya back to press his lips against Ilya’s. There’s something radiant there, celestial and reverent. He wants his love to be something solid instead of ephemeral, like Ilya’s starlight made into crystal he could hold and protect.

Ilya takes control of the kiss only a minute in, setting their pace to something deep and slow. It makes Shane dizzy, makes him needy. He barely notices when Ilya turns them, pushing him up against the glass. He’s aware of the clear view behind him, open for anyone to peer in and see. It makes his cock twitch, something that doesn’t escape Ilya’s notice.

“Huh,” Ilya exhales, pulling away for air. Shane’s not quite present enough anymore to really notice how Ilya’s looking at him, too caught up in staring at his lips for more of what he wants. Which is why he makes a surprised noise when Ilya turns him, makes him face the window, and presses up against him. Shane moans shakily when he feels the line of Ilya’s hard cock against his crease.

“Do you like that they can see you?” Ilya asks, rubbing a hand over Shane’s covered stomach. “Like it when I show you off?”

Something like lava trickles down Shane’s spine, and he arches back into Ilya involuntarily. When his ass rubs against him, he can feel Ilya stiffening. Ilya retaliates by dragging his hand lower and squeezing Shane’s half-hard cock through his jeans.

“Ilya—“ Shane gasps, bracing himself with a hand on the glass.

“You remember our colors?” Ilya asks him, and Shane bites his lip. They’ve used the color system often now ever since Ilya had introduced it to him months ago over the phone. He twitches in his briefs, because he knows what it means if Ilya’s asking him that.

“Yeah,” he answers dutifully, and has to bite down a whimper when Ilya immediately unbuttons his jeans with one hand and then undresses him just enough to pull out Shane’s cock. The window still shows bright blue skies and the rest of the city unaware. He can see cars crawling down below like beetles.

“So hard and wet for me already,” Ilya murmurs, stroking Shane firm and slow. Shane would be embarrassed about how much he’s leaking if he could think. He presses back against Ilya, hips chasing after Ilya’s touch instead. “You want them to see, don’t you? Want them to see what a slut you are for me.”

“Fuck,” Shane chokes out. They’re too high for anyone to realistically see them, not even with a camera, but maybe their silhouettes will be noticeable. Maybe even enough to guess what they were doing. He’s so turned on it hurts.

He’s surprised with his reaction, so soon after being recorded and outed. He’s not sure why the idea of it gets him off, not when being seen turned his life upside down. He knows he would be horrified if they were actually recorded. But for some reason the manufactured risk as they pretend gets his heart racing.

Shane whimpers when Ilya lets go of him, removes his hands entirely. He’s been quiet for too long. “No, no, wait—“

“Answer me when I ask you a question,” Ilya warns, voice low. “You know our rules, Shane. Tell me you want them all to see Shane Hollander desperate and begging for my cock like a good little whore.”

Shane whines, dropping his head on the cool glass. He would say anything right now to get Ilya’s hand back on his dick. “Fuck. Fuck yes, yes I want them to see how good I am for you. Please, Ilya, want them to know I’m yours, that I’m your perfect slut, please.”

And maybe that's it. After having to hide for months, it feels dirty and hot to pretend Ilya was showing him off for once. To show everyone he was Ilya's, on his own terms.

"*Fuck*," Ilya groans long and low, and Shane hears unbuckle and unzip himself before undressing Shane further to bare his ass and the tops of his thighs. "Fuck, sweetheart, what you do to me—"

Shane gasps when Ilya returns his hand to his cock, dragging his fingers through the mess of precum he's been dripping this entire time, running down his balls and thighs. He furrows his eyebrows though when Ilya lets go again, feels his wet hand drag briefly between his thighs and then disappear. "Ilya—?"

He cuts himself off when a hard, blunt protrusion nudges between his thighs, still trapped together by his jeans only partially down his legs. Shane whimpers, a hand reaching back behind him to grasp Ilya's hip when Ilya thrusts his cock in the wet, tight space under his ass.

"Squeeze your legs," Ilya grunts and he groans as Shane obeys, "fuck, such a good pussy."

"Oh my god," Shane breathes, feeling Ilya's cock drag across the sensitive skin between his hole and dick before catching on to his balls. Ilya is wet too, and it makes each slide smoother than the last. "Fuck, baby—"

He doesn't have to beg for it and moans when Ilya strokes Shane off again, matching his pace with his hips.

"Love these thighs," Ilya pants into his neck, fucking into Shane hard enough to making his ass clap. "Been thinking about fucking you like this for ages. Ever since I saw you undress the first time. Fuck. Olympic Gold-winning thighs."

The city under them carries on unsuspecting, and Shane's drifting, climbing higher and higher the closer he gets. He feels *used*, simply a toy for Ilya's pleasure and it has him making little fucked-out noises.

He knows when Ilya's close, can feel him losing his rhythm, cursing. Shane whimpers when he hears him finally groan and feels the inside of his legs flood, dripping with his boyfriend's spend.

"Ilya, I'm— please," Shane feels his orgasm ebbing as he chases Ilya's touch as he pulls out. He feels empty inside in a way that makes him desperate. "I'm close, I'm so close, please let me— I need—"

"I know what you need," Ilya grunts, and Shane gets no warning when Ilya drags his fingers through the mess between his legs again before slipping one into his hole in one smooth motion.

Shane bucks against him, moaning. His hands curl against the glass. "Oh, *fuck—"*

It doesn't take long at all for Ilya to finger fuck him with one and then two fingers, lubed with Ilya's cum. Shane whines as Ilya stuffs another two into his mouth with his other hand, pressing down on his tongue as he fucks his hole. Stuffing him full on both sides.

"Show them how gorgeous you are coming for me," Ilya orders softly, and Shane cries out as he finishes instantly.

Ilya helps him ride it out, catching him as his knees give out. He brings them down to the ground carefully, though Shane's too dazed to notice.

It takes a few minutes for the haziness to fade, to hear Ilya murmuring gentle Russian endearments and notice him stroking Shane's bare skin feather-light. He mumbles unintelligibly a little, feeling the buzz under his skin ebb away and Ilya shifts under him.

"Okay?" Ilya asks, quiet and kisses the side of his head. Shane hums, nodding drowsily, both of them silent as they catch their breath and watch the city outside the window, tucked into each other.

"I think I like Montreal," Ilya tells him nonchalantly, and Shane can't help but snort out a laugh.

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"They'll like you, Ilya," Shane murmurs, reaching over to trap Ilya's tapping fingers with his own. He locks their hands together on top of the tablecloth, and it sends butterflies straight down his throat. "Seriously, they just want to make sure my boyfriend's a good guy, and you are so they'll like you."

They're out. In public. The restaurant is one of his family's regular spots, both for their food and blanket discretion. Ilya looks like he belongs in the spare fourth chair they never use.

The outing has been a fucking nightmare, but this–sitting side by side with Ilya, holding his hand—this was a nice concession. They've settled into what Shane's been calling their Montreal routine: bright, lazy mornings in his apartment, exploratory days in the city, and searing evenings of sultry sex. He waited a few days for Ilya to get used to the city before setting up this dinner with his parents.

Feeling particularly daring, Shane leans over and presses a kiss on Ilya's cheek. He feels the way his mouth broadens into a smile under his lips, and when Shane pulls away, Ilya looks at him with stars in his eyes.

When he sees his parents enter the restaurant, he automatically stands to greet them.

"Shane, how are you, honey?" his mom has her arms out and Shane dutifully gets up to accept the hug. She smells like bergamot and cedar, a smell he's long attributed to the cottage in Ontario and lazy, sweet summers.

"Hey Mom, Dad, I'm good," Shane clears his throat. Ilya had also gotten up with him, giving Shane the opportunity to reach over and thread his fingers together with his. "I want you guys

to meet my boyfriend, Ilya."

Ilya smiles softly when Shane reaches out to hold hands. He holds out his right one to his mother, who's closer but also the correct first choice. "It's very nice to meet you. Shane has said much about you."

Yuna accepts his handshake, offering a polite smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes and makes Shane internally cringe. His dad is significantly more relaxed when Ilya does the same for him, his expression kind.

"It is good to finally meet you Ilya," Yuna says. She sits as his dad pulls out a chair for her, and the men take the cue to sit as well. "I'm afraid we haven't gotten to hear nearly as much about you."

She raises an eyebrow at Shane, and he has to hold back a sigh. "Can we maybe order before you send the Inquisition, Mom?"

"What Inquisition, I'm simply getting to know my only son's significant other," Yuna gestures with one hand and opens the menu with another.

"Ah, yes," Ilya laughs a little, "I can imagine you have questions. That is okay. Maybe as we eat?"

"The steak here is to die for," David offers with a wry grin. "Only medium rare though, with a side of the potatoes."

"Get a vegetable," Shane warns Ilya when he opens his mouth.

Ilya sighs with feeling. "Yes, okay, I will try the steak then and get potatoes and boring broccoli. Will that make you happy?"

"Yes, it actually will," Shane sniffs, glancing down at his menu as if he doesn't get the same order every time for the past three years. "When you're still alive in forty years with a healthy heart and normal cholesterol you'll thank me."

He only catches a glimpse of Ilya's pleased grin when he looks up to see his parents watching them with open bewilderment.

"So we will be together still in forty years? Very optimistic, Дорогой," he teases, gripping Shane's thigh under the table. Shane blinks and then flushes, repeating his words back to himself again. No wonder his parents were caught off guard.

"Yeah, well, only if I don't kill you first," Shane mutters, rubbing his red cheeks nonchalantly and avoiding his parents' gaze. Ilya laughs, delighted and Shane pouts at the table. "Shut up."

They order smoothly, going with their regulars and then it's just the four of them and a bottle of wine they had ordered. Shane is probably going to need it, judging by the way his mother is swirling her glass like she does when she's calculating.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, Shane tells me you live in Ottawa. You both come to Montreal often to see Shane, yes?” Ilya asks, quietly thanking the waiter who comes by to fill their water glasses as well.

“Well, he’s our only child,” Yuna replies, giving him nothing. “It is obvious we would want to see our only child regularly.”

Shane winces. Not even ten minutes in and his mother had managed to step on a proverbial land mind. “Mom—“

“Is not always true,” Ilya says, a little quiet before sipping at his glass. “You are both good parents, I know because of how kind Shane is. So it is obvious to you. Is good.”

Shane’s heart squeezes, hating the brief moment Ilya looked small. The implication flies over his mom’s head, but not his dad’s. His face softens, and he grasps Yuna’s wrist resting on the table before she can drop another bomb. “Ilya, how are you liking Montreal? Different from Boston? I’ll admit we don’t go down to New England often.”

Thank god for his dad. Ilya brightens. “It is very Canadian here. I made Shane show me frozen maple— maple…?”

“Taffy,” Shane fills in for him when Ilya turns to him for the word.

Ilya snaps his fingers “Yes, maple taffy. My friend in Boston said that Canadians will eat frozen maple syrup on a stick for dessert and I did not believe him.”

“And what did you think?” David asks, amused as he sips his water.

“He had five of them,” Shane sighs. He knows he sounds disgustingly fond.

“Was very smart invention. I approve,” Ilya grins. “Is a very beautiful city as well. We went to see the Basilica Notre Dame but Shane did not tell me you had such a big science center, so we will go there tomorrow.”

“Ilya’s a scientist.”

“Oh?” his mom grabs both their attention, “we’re both very interested in learning more about you, Ilya. What do you do as a scientist?”

Shane turns in time to see the way Ilya lights up with the question. “I am a researcher. Astrophysics and theoretical cosmology,” Ilya replies, “I recently graduated from college and spent the past year applying to PhD programs.”

“Ilya got into McGill,” Shane can’t help but jump in, setting out the bait. His dad takes it.

“Oh, really?” David grins. “I went to McGill. Played on their hockey team for all four years of college.”

“Yes, Shane has said,” Ilya smiles. “Is very good school.”

“You would move here? For Shane?” his mother interrupts. “Leave Boston?”

Ilya pauses, tilting his head. “I think so. Yes. It has been hard to be apart so long. I know Shane will be traveling for the season but we will have more time if we live together.”

Shane smiles a little at the reminder of what was to come and nearly misses the way his mother raises her eyebrows.

“Live together? You’re already thinking of moving in?” she probes. “How long has this been going on?”

Ilya glances at Shane for a cue, unsure.

“It’ll be one year next week,” Shane answers for him, knowing that it would be its own grenade.

“A *year*,” David repeats, whistling. “Wow. You hid this for a year?”

Shane flinches imperceptibly. Ilya notices though, and reaches over to grasp his hand, the touch steady and grounding. “It was complicated. Shane could not be out to too many people and risk being outed. And I cannot be dating famous gay hockey player if I want my visa reapproved in Russia.”

“I see,” Yuna frowns, taking a sip of her wine. “I understand that there’s risks involved and it was daunting but Shane… we could have helped.”

“I know,” Shane mumbles, something like panic bubbling up again. He knows rationally his parents aren’t angry. But there’s that disappointment he was so scared of. Of letting them down, making them upset. “We wanted to tell you this summer. We had a plan, and I… I was really excited for you to meet Ilya. I’m sorry.”

Yuna softens immediately. “Oh, honey. We’re not mad, baby, you know that right? We just wish you felt like you could come to us with this sooner. A year is… it’s a long time to keep a secret, Shane. That’s hard.”

Shane is trying his best not to react, and it’s Ilya’s hand holding him under the table that’s keeping him together.

He’s saved by their food coming. The waiter is quick and efficient, bringing their meals to them and it’s a good breaker between the first conversation and the next.

“This is very good, Mr. Hollander,” Ilya praises, trying his steak and offering Shane another redirection. “Thank you for recommendation.”

“I’m glad you like it, son,” David grins. He’s definitely growing much more comfortable with him. Yuna is still clearly on the fence, but she’s not defensive anymore.

“So Ilya, what did you study in school? I’m assuming you went to school in Boston?” she asks, spearing an asparagus.

“Ah, yes,” Ilya answers. “I graduated from MIT last year with a bachelor’s in physics with a focus on quantum physics, mathematics, and astronomy.”

“Wow,” his dad says, suitably impressed. Shane doesn’t preen with smug secondhand pride, even if he does feel the urge. “That must have been a wringer to get through.”

“Ah,” Ilya hesitates, “um. Yes.” He shifts a little uncomfortably before glancing at Shane. The question clicks.

“Wringer,” Shane explains patiently, “he means it must have been really hard. It’s a difficult subject.”

“I see,” Ilya’s expression clears and it's heady to be able to do that for him, to wipe away the unease. “It was not easy but is just numbers. I have always liked numbers.”

“What do you hope to do with it?”

Ilya pauses. “Not very many options with physics degree, is true. I am also Russian, so American government jobs like NASA or JPL are harder to get and I know I do not want to go into defense. But,” he shrugs a little, “I love research. Discovering something new. And I like to teach, even if English can be hard. I used to tutor in secondary school. I think being a professor at a university wouldn’t be too bad.”

Shane has to bite down on his lip as he pictures it. Ilya in formal slacks and a dress shirt wearing glasses in front of a classroom of students. That ease and suave confidence mixed with stunning competence. Maybe he could make Ilya try on his glasses at home as practice.

“A researcher,” David considers. “How on earth did you two meet?”

They had thankfully gotten their shit together since Katya and came up with a believable cover story. “JJ,” Shane replies, not even lying. “Funny enough, Ilya knows the Bears players.”

Two unrelated but true facts. No need for his parents to know he paid for phone sex for two months.

“Yes, I am good friends with Cliff Marleau,” Ilya continues. “He is good guy. He’s trying to help with everything going on, I think.”

“Marleau? Oh,” Yuna blinks, “is that why he’s been posting with that hashtag?”

Shane’s avoided the internet as much as he can, but he’s on it enough to see the surprising number of teams and players who had spoken up about Shane’s suspension. There had been enough backlash from them and the public to ease the heat sooner rather than later, with talks of having Shane back on the ice in about a week.

“Yes,” Ilya grins, “when we talked, he said the Bears captain would not allow homophobia in the locker rooms. So I suggested more teams saying something publicly might help. Good attention, yes?”

“Smart,” Yuna smiles a little. “It’s a good strategy. I didn’t realize Marleau was so internet savvy to start a hashtag.”

“He’s not,” Ilya snorts. “I think he said Hayden helped.”

“Which means it was actually Jackie’s idea,” Shane shakes his head but he’s achingly grateful for all of them.

“What about your family? Your parents? What do they do?” Yuna asks, oblivious and not knowing any better. Both Shane and Ilya freeze for a second. Fuck. He should have warned his parents not to bring up family.

“Ilya—“ Shane starts, hushed but Ilya shakes his head.

“My parents both passed,” Ilya tells them smoothly but there’s a tightness near his eyes. “My father was police. My mother used to be professional figure skater, before she was married.”

“Oh,” Yuna exhales, and her mouth turns in distress. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Ilya. You’re so young to—“ she clears her throat, cutting herself off. “Well, I think it’s lovely that your mother was a skater. Must be fate that you found a hockey player.”

Ilya laughs, and it sounds real. “Yes, she tried very hard to make me skate. It was fun to spend time with her but I liked her constellation stories better.” He smiles at Shane, who aches knowing how much Ilya still struggled with his mother’s loss. “She would have loved you very much, I think. Would have had fun having someone to race. She was very competitive.”

“Sounds like she and our Shane would have gotten along just fine then,” Yuna says kindly.

“Ah, yes, малыш you are ridiculously competitive,” Ilya teases, “we play games sometimes, on Skype, and first thing he asks every time is how to win.”

“Shut up,” Shane grumbles, but there’s no bite while it makes his parents laugh and Ilya looks a little warmer. He doesn’t mind the ribbing if it helps ease the discomfort.

“He was worse as a kid, if you believe it,” David grins, “wouldn’t let us leave a game or competition without someone winning. We learned not to play Monopoly very early.”

“We will need to play this game, Shane,” Ilya says slyly, any sign of being upset gone, “you are very cute when you are worked up and losing.”

“In your dreams, Rozanov,” Shane retorts instinctively.

Ilya only grins wider. “Ah, like feisty, angry kitten already. We didn’t even need the game.”

Yuna has to hide her grin with the rim of her glass and his dad coughs, not bothering to cover his laugh otherwise.

Shane can tell his mom’s growing more than endeared with him. His dad is probably totally won over already. Ilya’s also clearly relaxed as well, probably sensing he had passed the

biggest hurdle. It was the best possible outcome and Shane finally feels like he can exhale. Something truly good coming out of this week.

He hears a scuffle, some chattering in his periphery. Nothing unusual but it still snags on Shane's instincts, feeling eyes on him. He turns and sees the phone cameras at another table, and the good feeling in his gut crashes and shatters.

"Oh, no," Shane mumbles, ducking his head down. The others catch on quickly, and see what he noticed.

"Oh that is just unacceptable," Yuna scowls, already standing, "waiter, we need security."

"Fuck," Shane whispers, fingers curling around his silverware. He's aware of the attention they're garnering, others turning to see the commotion. In the spotlight, again, for doing nothing but having dinner with his parents and his boyfriend.

His mom and dad are trying to crisis manage, get the fans away, but he feels the eyes of the other restaurant goers like a brand. He's sinking, feeling that control slip and leaving him unmoored.

"Hey," Ilya murmurs softly, a hand on the scruff of his neck. The weight grounds him like an anchor after being adrift at sea. "Hey, it's okay. You're okay."

"Fuck, I think— I think I need to go," Shane admits miserably. He feels his eyes burn. He's not even sure why he's reacting this badly, not when everything these past few days have been so much worse than some fans with cameras. "I can't—"

"Shane, honey," Yuna whispers, and he looks up to see his mom and dad with their attention back on him. His jaw locks, trying to keep himself together. "Hey, they're gone now, baby."

"Sorry," Shane manages to choke out. "I don't— I don't know why I'm..."

"No, no sorry. Just breathe with me, малыш. I'm right here. Your parents are here. The cameras are gone. We're okay." Ilya's thumb is rubbing deep circles in the base of his neck and it's bringing feeling back into Shane's hands. "Just in and out, sweetheart. Like we have practiced at home, yes?"

Shane obeys, even if the breath is harsh and sharp. It instantly makes it a little easier to think, the numbness turning to ants which is so much better than feeling nothing.

"Good. Good job, малыш," Ilya praises and he's so gentle with the way he says the pet name it kind of makes Shane want to cry. "Can you do one more for me?"

Ilya discreetly helps him come back up for air, soft touches and equally soft words returning him to his skin. He ignores Shane's parents throughout, solely focused on helping Shane.

"There we are, Любовь," Ilya finally says when Shane is back to breathing normally. "Very good. I'm proud of you."

Despite their obvious audience, Shane accepts the sweet kiss to his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispers, throat a little shredded.

“No, honey, Ilya’s right, there’s no need to be sorry,” his mother says. She reaches forward to take his hand, smiling sympathetically.

Shane bites his lip, shaking his head. “I don’t even know why I was so upset. I’ve never done that with fans taking pictures before.”

“I think,” Ilya starts, his tone gentle, “that being outed by a fan with a camera is what makes it different this time. It is loss of control. Was… taken without your permission. There is English word— violation? It makes sense why you would be upset now so soon after the violation. Is still fresh.”

“Yes,” Yuna agrees, smiling softly at Ilya. “That does make sense. It’s okay honey. You’re dealing with a lot these past few days. It’s okay to be upset.”

Shane nods woodenly, reaching to thread his free hand with Ilya’s. “Sorry. Thanks.” He smiles more genuinely, small but real, up at Ilya, deeply grateful that he was here next to him, for bringing him back up so effectively. “Thank you, baby.”

Ilya simply brings their joined hands up and kisses his knuckles.

“Let’s get the bill, hmm?” David offers, straightening and stretching. “Enough excitement for the night, I think.”

After a brief fight with his parents and Ilya, ridiculously, Shane pays for their dinner and they exit the restaurant into the cold night. Ilya sneaks an arm around Shane’s waist, casually possessive in public in a way that made Shane want to go down on his knees for him.

“It was pleasure to meet you both, Mrs. Hollander, Mr. Hollander,” Ilya says, holding out his hand, and Shane can tell from his smile that he really means it. “I can see where Shane gets his kindness from.”

David grins, accepting his hand. “David, please. And the pleasure was all ours, son. We’re glad our boy found a good partner. That’s all we ever wanted for him.”

Ilya flushes. “Ah, thank you. Your approval means a lot.”

When he turns his hand to his mom, Yuna smiles, holding his hand in both of hers instead of shaking it. “You make my son very happy, do you know that?”

It catches Ilya off guard and the open wonder there, the softly pleased smile, makes Shane want to kiss every inch of skin he can see.

“He makes me very happy too, Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya tries to clear his throat but his voice still cracks.

“Yuna, dear,” she corrects, before moving to rummage through her purse. “Now, Shane told me that you might need a lawyer. I’ve got a list of Boston-based immigration lawyers, ranked

by experience and geographical expertise in Russia along with successful asylum cases, but added a few Canadian ones too in case that was of interest to you–”

“Mrs Holl— Yuna,” Ilya stammers. “You did not have to do all this—“

“It was nothing,” Yuna waves him off, “what is your phone number honey? We can text another time to figure out who would be the best person to reach out to first.”

“But—“

“I learned a long time ago that it’s just easier to let her loose,” David tells him, clapping his shoulder.

“He’s right,” Shane adds wryly. Ilya still looks befuddled.

“Okay,” he says uncertainly. “Um… thank you.”

“Next time Shane plays in Boston, we’ll come down and get dinner together as a family again, how does that sound?”

The way Ilya fits so seamlessly within his family unit almost feels unreal, and it’s like Shane’s floating. His mom and dad hug Shane goodbye, and his mom holds on a second longer than usual.

“He’s a good one, honey,” his mom whispers conspiratorially in his ear. “Let’s keep him.”

Shane laughs breathlessly, grinning wide.

They watch as they get in their car, waving and then it’s just the two of them.

“Wow,” Ilya exhales, and his voice sounds a little wet. Shane reaches up to caress his cheekbones.

“I knew they’d love you,” Shane beams. “I know they’re a lot but—“

“No, no, was great,” Ilya interrupts him. “They are wonderful. Thank you, Shane.”

And Shane knows he means more than just introducing him to his parents.

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The morning of March 23rd, 2014 Shane wakes up before Ilya. That’s not particularly unusual since Shane’s long learned that Ilya is nowhere near the realm of being a morning person but it’s important today because it’s crucial for his plan.

He shifts as carefully as he can out of Ilya’s grip— his boyfriend had curled up around Shane to hold him close, which would usually be incredibly endearing but a hassle at the moment. Once Shane’s able to extricate himself, he has to time Ilya’s shuffling movements with a pillow barrier that keeps him from rolling on to his stomach and instead falling onto his back. Perfect.

Ilya's still dead asleep so Shane takes the time to just look.

His boyfriend is heartstoppingly pretty in the morning sun. Shane's bedroom has always felt a little clinical, too much model house interior design and not enough family and love. Ilya's changed that since he came to Montreal. He looks soft, sharp edges blurred in Shane's cream Egyptian cotton sheets. His hair is a mess and he's got a small pout on his lips ever since Shane slipped out of his grasp, unconsciously displeased with the loss of body heat.

They usually sleep nude nowadays, the heater on anyway during the winter months so Ilya is sprawled and exposed, long pale limbs tangled with the sheets and cock half hard with morning wood between his legs. If Shane wasn't on a mission, he would have taken the time to kiss each pretty mole up and down his body, trying to infuse the love he held tight on a leash otherwise with each touch. He does, however, have a goal.

Shane settles lower on the bed, between Ilya's spread legs to position his face right under Ilya's cock. With the fingertips of one hand, he carefully and delicately brushes up and down his shaft, soft enough to not wake him up but enough simulation to watch his cock slowly engorge with blood.

He presses a gentle kiss to his length, wetting the sensitive skin with little kitten licks until he gets up to the head. There, he sets his tongue to work.

Shane is maybe a little obsessed with Ilya's cock. He doesn't usually get the dedicated time to really enjoy it the way he wants, both of them usually too worked up to let Shane take it as slow as he would need. But like this, Ilya still breathing slowly and deeply, Shane relishes Ilya in his mouth, tracing over every crack and crevice. It's silent in the bedroom, just the wet noises of Ilya's cock in Shane's mouth, so he can hear the way Ilya's breathing hitches in his sleep and the subtle rustling of the sheets as he twitches unconsciously.

He's fully hard in Shane's mouth now, and Shane closes his eyes, sucking hard. When he opens them again, he sees Ilya shifting, slowly awakening as his body chases after the pleasure. He groans softly, hips subtly thrusting up and Shane watches his eyes slowly flutter open, hazy and drowsy.

Shane clocks the exact moment Ilya realizes what's happening with the low, deep moan that escapes him, a heavy, uncoordinated hand reaching for Shane's head to thread his fingers through his hair.

"Fuck," Ilya rasps, voice hoarse with sleep as his mouth drops in a gasp. Shane hums, and feels Ilya's cock twitch on his tongue.

It doesn't take long once Ilya's awake. Shane uses every trick he knows and has learned solely from Ilya and he hears the warning grunt when Ilya's hand tightens involuntarily as Shane deepthroats him. He's not fully present enough to be cognizant of his reactions so he's beautifully responsive in a way he usually isn't, open and desperate under Shane's touch. Ilya brokenly groans Shane's name as his hips jerk and he comes down his throat, Shane diligently swallowing.

He eventually slides off his cock with a pop, leaving them both gasping for air. Ilya tugs on him, trying to bring him up and Shane follows, cupping Ilya's flushed face.

"Happy anniversary," Shane murmurs with a slight slur, kissing Ilya as he tries to catch his breath. Ilya laughs in disbelief, barely able to keep up with the kiss, sloppy and uncoordinated.

"You sucked my brain out of my dick, fuck," Ilya grunts, and he lets his head fall back onto the pillow. Shane curls up against his chest tucked under his arm, feeling Ilya's hand reaching up to stroke Shane's bare back. "Jesus."

"Good?" Shane mumbles, and Ilya hums.

"Fuck. Yes, sweetheart. Happy anniversary."

Ilya returns the favor, holding Shane close to his chest with one hand pressing down on his head as the other jerks Shane's cock. He has Shane gasping, soft involuntary noises escaping him and he moans into Ilya's mouth when Ilya grabs his face one handed and pulls him into a dirty kiss. Shane comes like that, crying out and writhing in Ilya's hold.

For once, Shane is content to laze in bed in the morning, post-coital and cuddling, but Ilya is uncharacteristically the one dragging him out of bed grumbling and pouty.

"We have anniversary plans," Ilya chides with a laugh. "We promised. Morning for me. Evening for you."

That is what they promised. Shane reserved the Chaos Theatre at the Rio Tinto Alcan Planetarium for two hours with dinner at a Russian restaurant vetted by Svetlana's contacts. Only fair that the morning is left to Ilya.

"Ugh," Shane mumbles, but lets him pull him up.

When they've changed and brushed their teeth, Shane follows Ilya into the kitchen, sitting when directed and warned to stay there.

Shane has no urge to disobey, content to rest his chin on his forearms as he watches Ilya bustle around his kitchen, comfortable enough in his space to know where things go. Ilya is a much better cook than Shane, simply for the fact he doesn't have a team-mandated nutritionist meal prepping for him weekly and has to feed himself. The full spread that he sets in front of Shane with a flourish is plentiful.

"Wow," Shane praises, eyebrows raised. "Did you practice this?"

Ilya shrugs, grabbing his own plate before joining Shane at the island. "I looked up recipes. Is not hard to follow *written* instructions."

Shane is hopelessly endeared by his little scowl; he still hasn't forgiven IKEA.

"So what's the rest of our morning look like?" Shane stabs a cube of melon. He had woken them up fairly early so Ilya had plenty of time still.

“We will need to drive there,” Ilya tells him. “But I was thinking we could go to Mount Rougemont. Go for a hike.”

Shane grins, delightfully surprised. “I love hikes.”

“Yes, I know,” Ilya sighs, but it’s fond, “you are strange nature boy and exercise for fun in your free time from exercise for job. Is your only hobby, Shane.”

“I haven’t done Mount Rougemont,” he shrugs, ignoring the rib. He can’t really argue. “Don’t usually stick around here for the summer.”

“Good. Will be new for both of us. Can be a new memory.”

Shane softens at that. “Yeah, new memory.”

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“Ilya, this was your idea,” Shane bites back a laugh. His boyfriend is panting, hands on his knees a few feet behind him.

“Yes, but I did not know hikes were evil,” Ilya scowls, trying to catch his breath. “I thought it was just long walk!”

Shane snorts, endeared, and just hands him a water bottle. They’re almost at the top anyway, with just half a kilometer to go.

Mount Rougemont is beautiful in the early spring, and Shane wants to come back in the fall, when the leaves will brown and turn the sky around them orange. It’s not really the tallest mountain, more of a hill if he was being honest, but the route through the sugar maple forest and view of apple orchards surrounding them are peaceful.

“Okay,” Ilya exhales, stretching his back. “Let’s go.”

“When we go back home, I’ll start you on a cardio regimen,” he tells Ilya, mostly joking. The look his boyfriend gives him is dripping with disdain and betrayal.

“You are not complaining about my cardio when I’m fucking you speechless for an hour.”

Shane can’t help but flush, shoving Ilya lightly in retaliation. It’s only 15 minutes later that they reach the peak, the rest of the flat plains around them stretching far.

“Is not as tall as I thought,” Ilya furrows his eyebrows.

“I think it was plenty tall for you, baby,” Shane teases and watches him roll his eyes.

“Let’s sit. I have snacks, Mr. Comedian.”

They settle at the lookout, and Shane enjoys his usual favorite snacks— Ilya had been careful the entire morning to work around Shane’s regular season diet, even though Shane had been

prepared to swallow his tongue and take a cheat day to make him happy. The fact that Ilya didn't ask him to warms Shane to his toes in the chilly Quebec air.

"When we go back down, I thought we could go to cider mill," Ilya says, munching on some trail mix. "I called before and they have no-alcohol versions of their ciders."

"When did you even think of all of this?" Shane asks, grinning. "You knew you were coming to Montreal less than two weeks ago."

"I planned before I left Boston," Ilya shrugs obliviously. "In case we did not get back to Boston for anniversary. My plans for Boston were very good, you know, but it can be regular date instead of anniversary date so—what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Shane knows he looks smitten, can feel the dopey, dumb grin on his face. They're alone on the peak, so Shane doesn't really have any qualms in crawling over the miniscule space between them and drawing up his leg to settle in Ilya's cross-legged lap.

Ilya accepts him easily and lets Shane press a deep, devoted kiss against his lips. Shane can feel him smile before he opens for him.

They're both out of breath when they part, Shane unwilling to drift too far away and resting his forehead against Ilya's.

"What was that for?" Ilya asks with a laugh. Shane closes his eyes for a moment, enjoying sharing air.

"You are wonderful, you know that?" Shane murmurs and he can see the lightest pink crawl up the ridge of his cheekbones. "I like you so, so much."

He almost says it, right then and there.

Almost says it when Ilya smiles at him, bright and sunny, and Shane can't breathe because of the way this boy makes him feel golden. It warms him from his fingertips to his chest, makes him catch his breath. This miniature star in front of him, close enough to touch.

Shane wants to kiss every inch of skin and mark Ilya as his. Shane wants to listen to him laugh, the soft one when he's delighted, wants to bottle up his happiness and get intoxicated off of him. Shane *wants.*

He thinks love shouldn't burn so much. He still wouldn't trade it for anything.

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For the first time in his life, Shane dreads going to hockey practice.

"I'm right here with you, man," Hayden clasps his shoulder. "Promise. You're not going in there alone."

"I know," Shane breathes. "I know. Thanks Hayds. You have no idea what this means to me."

The league had begrudgingly agreed to allow Shane back on the ice. It'll be the first time in two weeks since the outing that he'll be seeing his whole team and putting on skates again. Shane is expecting the worst, as usual.

"Of course, dude. Always. Not even a question," Hayden crackles his knuckles. "If any of these fuckers try shit with you—"

"No," Shane stops him, throat tight. "No, I don't want you to jump in if they start talking shit, okay?"

"What?" Hayden frowns. "Fuck. Why? I don't want to stand around and hear them call my best friend a… you know what."

"It won't be worth it," Shane shakes his head. "It won't change anything, you know that."

He's missed skating, but it's telling that his team hasn't said anything to him since. He's felt isolated in the clear rejection. It doesn't help that Ilya had to leave for Boston that morning. The apartment was immediately colder and silent the moment it was empty.

Hayden's frown deepens, and then to Shane's surprise, Hayden reaches over and hugs him. He recovers quickly enough to reciprocate.

"Sorry that you're dealing with this, man," Hayden murmurs. "No matter what happens you've got me, alright? In the locker room and the ice."

Shane can't help but smile a little, and Hayden manages to siphon off a bit of his tension.

"Huh. Hollander. Pike."

Hayden and Shake startle apart whipping around to see JJ with his sports bag standing a few feet away.

"JJ—" Hayden starts, and Shane can see the way his friend is standing up taller, automatically puffing himself up for a confrontation. "What are you—"

"So is this going to be normal now, in the locker room?" JJ asks, and it's so bizarre that it shuts Hayden up.

"What?" Shane braves asking, bewildered.

"You know," JJ huffs, then proceeds to point in between Hayden and Shane. "*This*. Is there team PDA rule?"

It clicks for both Shane and Hayden at the same time.

"No!" Shane denies, horrified. Hayden chokes on his own spit as Shane continues to splutter. "JJ, what the *fuck?* We aren't together!"

JJ makes a confused noise. "Merde, I do not know! You are gay now and Pike is here with you very close, hugs and kisses and everything. What else am I supposed to think?"

Shane is going to kill JJ. He means it this time.

“Literally *anything but that Boiziau,”* Hayden wheezes, coughing, “what part of ‘I am fucking married to a woman’ is unclear? Are my three children a joke to you?” He clears his throat, eyebrows suddenly furrowing before facing Shane again seriously. “Not that I wouldn’t date you, man. You would be first on the list if I swung that way, honest.”

Shane reassesses. He’s actually going to kill both of them.

“Huh,” JJ exhales, puzzled. “So the video, with the blonde guy. You are not cheating on Pike, Hollander?”

“No,” Shane shuts his eyes, gripping the bridge of his nose in light of his incoming migraine. “No I am not cheating on my straight, married best friend with my boyfriend of a year, JJ. Jesus.”

Shane wonders what it might be like to live in this man’s head. He must have so much room up there.

JJ whistles, eyes wide. “A year? *Incroyable*, Hollander, you are committed type, very impressive.”

Both Hayden and Shane pause, glancing at each other in silent communication. JJ doesn’t *sound* like he’s taunting. But JJ was also their team’s equivalent to a court jester. Unpredictable, chaos-driven, and not a little bit insane.

“Yes,” Shane tries carefully. “I guess so. Wasn’t really ever interested in hookup culture. You know that.”

“Sure, but that was all women,” JJ shrugs, “maybe you get around with the boys, I don’t know.”

Shane hackles go up immediately. This is what he had expected. Being called a slut, degraded, hypersexual. The gay stereotype.

“Oh fuck yo—“

“JJ, you fucking idiot, shut up,” Hayden interrupts, heaving an exhausted, frustrated groan. “You think Shane was going to risk being forced out the closet to fuck around with strangers when he’s got the entire fucking league breathing down his neck? What do you think we’re going to be getting the second we walk into that fucking locker room? Do you have any idea how dangerous this actually is? Where do you get off on calling Shane a whore?”

Both Shane and JJ are shocked and silent by Hayden’s outburst, who only gets more worked up as he rants. When he’s done though, he deflates almost instantly. Hayden’s never been the type to stay angry for long.

“Shit, sorry Shane, didn’t mean to snap,” Hayden mutters. JJ looks a lot more contrite though.

“No, I am sorry, Hollander. Pike. I did not realize— that is not what I meant, Captaine. Really. It is okay with me if you are gay,” JJ hesitates. “I know that this must be terrible to deal with.”

Shane forces himself to take a deep breath, grounding himself. “Okay. Okay. Thank you JJ.”

He shrugs a little awkwardly. “*Oui*. You are still Shane Hollander. And our only chance at a Cup.”

“Nice, JJ,” Hayden sighs exasperatedly. He closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Shane can’t help but snort when JJ looks at him bewildered. “What? It is true. What did I say wrong, Pike?”

JJ’s overall tone-deaf but well-meaning reaction gives Shane hope though as he follows them into the rink. Maybe his return to the team won’t actually be that bad. Maybe he’ll be okay and everything will be back to normal once he gets his skates on.

The locker room goes silent the moment Shane walks in. He can feel the oppressive air of their stares like heavy lead, and he clenches his jaw and ducks his head. Hayden is clearly pissed off but doesn’t say anything as Shane just as silently makes his way to his stall with no detours. Without a word, he sets off to get his gear on. The room around him disappears; it has to. Otherwise Shane’s iron-clad restraint will slip through his fingers and he’ll break down in front of his entire team.

He holds his tongue until he sees everyone is mostly dressed. When he speaks up, the subdued conversations that had picked up while he was making himself invisible shut up.

“We’ve got a game tomorrow night, and it’s New Jersey so I want you to take it easy today,” Shane says, and he manages to keep his tone normal. “No overworking and no injuries, just some passing drills to keep the muscles hot and a couple scrimmages. Good?”

No one says anything.

“What?” Shane almost snaps. “You heard me. Captain’s orders.”

He hears someone snort, and they sound like Wilson when they say, “right. Like we’ll take a fucking queer’s orders seriously.”

“What did you just say?” Hayden snarls, rounding on Wilson.

“Pike!” Shane barks. “Cool it!”

But it’s too late, and there’s some muttering and defiance bubbling up among the players. Not everyone, but enough.

“I’m not gonna say it again,” Shane grits, “everyone out on the ice.”

They listen this time as Shane’s tone goes cold, even if their belligerence drags their feet. Shane waits to be the last out so he can steal a few seconds to breathe. He wants to call Ilya.

He wants to go home, get on a flight and go home to Ilya in Boston.

He picks up his stick and goes out to play hockey instead.

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He shouldn't have bothered. It's like he's not even there.

The second they step out on the ice, Theriault steps up and for the first time since Shane's made captain, starts leading their practice. He ignores Shane's plan and instead of easy passing drills, he puts them through boot camp. Bag skates followed by full contact scrimmage practice that leave their lungs gasping for air and their muscles burning. Shane will be playing with some bruises when they face off an already aggressive Jersey tomorrow and he knows he's not the only one.

Theriault is a hands-off coach, something that Shane had to struggle his way through when he first made captain and suddenly was responsible for the behavior, skill, and performance of his teammates. He's at games and practices, keeping up with stats and player statuses, looking at the game from an outside perspective, but Shane has always been expected to be just as involved. And he hadn't minded— they started winning when they used Shane's plays, his practice drills, his strategies. Montreal became a challenger because of him.

The fact that Theriault had so blatantly stripped Shane of his command without any say or warning leaves a foreboding knot in his chest.

"Coach," Shane makes himself say at the end of practice, letting the rest of the team go ahead so they wouldn't hear. "I wanted to check with you— am I not supposed to lead practices?"

Theriault scowls. "You got a problem with my drills, Hollander? What, you win some games and get some media attention and you know better than me now?"

"No, sir," Shane straightens, the back of his neck sweating, "it's just… I've always planned out our drills."

"Yeah well things have changed, haven't they?" he sneers. "You can lead practice again when I think you've earned it.

Earned it. Shane doesn't understand why he lost it in the first place.

"Coach," Shane falters, hesitant, "sir, I just—"

He nearly startles when Theriault suddenly gets in his space, stabbing a finger into his chest, hard.

"I don't know what the Commissioner or management or whoever the fuck said to you, but I'm going to say this," he snarls, tone low and vicious, "I don't want to see it in the ice. The second your lifestyle ends up fucking up our play, you're back on that fucking bench, you hear me?"

Shane's throat closes up, and he can't keep himself from flinching. Theriault has always been an aggressive coach, but Shane has worked his entire life to be the golden child of hockey. The Asian slurs growing up were bad enough. He can't lose hockey because of another part of his identity.

"Is that going to be a problem, Hollander?" Theriault asks sharply, when Shane can't string together words.

A problem. Shane was going to be targeted the second he steps on the ice. His teammates already didn't respect him, had maybe started to warm up to him when they thought he was fucking a woman, but now any hope of being a captain for them was gone. His own coach blatantly ignores his expertise and status as a captain. And he's just expected to take it.

"No, coach," Shane answers after clearing his throat, because that's what he's supposed to say, "it won't be a problem."

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His return to play is… rough, to say the least.

They win in New Jersey, because Shane doesn't give them any other option. He knows what the crowds, the commentators, the other players are whispering about and he fully intends to play such incredible hockey that they're forced to leave any other topics of discussion out of the conversation. He scores a hat trick with two assists. When he watches the video review later on his own in his apartment, his goals get brought up once.

It's hard. Specifically harder for reasons Shane hadn't anticipated.

He doesn't catch on to it until their next game, at home against Pittsburgh. He gets checked harder than before, the refs are more lenient with dirty plays against him, and there's some nasty signs in the audience. All of which he expected.

The puck stops coming to him.

He realizes when he finds himself open in the neutral zone, a clear shot to Pittsburgh's goal, and makes eye contact with McGee. He taps the ice on instinct, and braces himself for the puck. McGee turns away, and drop passes it to Taylor. Who's just as surprised and unprepared for the terrible move and misses it; the puck ends up in Pittsburgh's possession.

For a moment, Shane is speechless, brain whirring faster than the ice around him. At first, he tries to justify it. McGee saw something he didn't. There was a defender coming up behind him. He panicked.

But then it happened again— Trevors doesn't even make eye contact and avoids his gaze as he ignores Shane's prime position in front of the goal. They lose the puck a second time.

They win, barely, because at least Miitka is doing his damn job, but it shakes something loose in Shane, leaving him unsteady. Never, since he was ten years old, has the puck not come to him.

It’s confirmed during the press scrum— Shane is still banned from the media, so it’s Drapeau covering him as second AC. A reporter asks about the two missed passes to Shane, and he simply shrugs.

“Dunno,” he says, nonchalant and bored. “Things happen fast out on the ice. Seems like they didn’t see it.”

The second change he notices later than he can afford. He figures it out when he ends up flat on the ice three times in one game, something that’s never happened before. The hits from the Dallas players had only progressively gotten rougher and rougher, because they had caught on to it sooner than Shane did— his teammates had started leaving him to fend for himself in open ice.

JJ and Hayden played like they usually did, Hayden in particular trying to pick up the slack from their teammates. Younger players like Petrov and Taylor aren’t nearly as blatant at it and simply seem more confused than not. But the vets. The vets leave him to the wolves.

He’s shaking with rage when they get off the ice, just barely keeping it together until they’re in the locker room again. He hurls his gloves into his stall with too much force, causing a small crash that catches attention.

“What the fuck was that?” he snaps, at no one in particular. “Is this a fucking team or what? Couillard, Koch, are you fucking defensemen or do they pay you to stand there on the ice and look pretty?”

“Don’t need a faggot to be calling me pretty,” Koch snarls, drawing himself up to his full height.

“That’s fine because this faggot thinks you’ve got an ugly mug anyway,” Shane snips back, teeth flashing. “Do you assholes want the Cup? You want to win? Then fucking play like it.”

He goes home still shaking with tremors but it’s not until he’s inside his apartment, sliding down the front door to the ground, does he feel the tears pool in his eyes. Pulling out his phone for a familiar number is instinctual.

When he hears Ilya pick up on the other side within two rings, everything he had been holding back all week pours out of him in a heaving sob.

“Shane?” Ilya frets, breathless, “Shane, sweetheart what’s wrong? Лунный свет, talk to me.”

He has to take a harsh inhale before he can manage words.

“I miss you so much,” Shane admits roughly. “Fuck. It’s so hard. It’s so fucking hard to go to practice, to go to games, and walk into that locker room and just take it. I can’t—“

“Hey, hey, shh, it’s okay,” Ilya soothes, and he can hear him pacing. “Breathe, okay? With me.”

Shane tries, until he’s getting enough oxygen to stop feeling dizzy.

“Does this have to do with tonight’s game?” Ilya asks, hesitating. “You fell more often than usual, I saw. Are you hurt?”

“No, not this time, luckily,” Shane exhales, closing his eyes. “But it’s only a matter of time. I shouldn’t have been hit like that at all. The defensemen besides JJ stopped guarding for me.”

Ilya doesn’t have as much hockey experience as Shane but he’s smart enough to understand the implications. “They are leaving you unprotected. This is allowed?”

“No,” Shane mumbles, “but Theriault’s not going to stop them. Fuck, I wouldn’t even be surprised if he was the one who told them to do it.”

“Shit,” Ilya swallows. “Oh, sweetheart.” Shane squeezes his eyes tighter as they sting. “I’m sorry, малыш. I wish I could make this easier for you.”

Already though, Shane’s able to breathe again, his heart finding its regular rhythm just listening to Ilya’s voice. He’s familiar in a way that makes Shane feel at home, even if he’s hundreds of miles away.

“You do,” Shane whispers. “You are.”

“One more week, sweetheart,” Ilya murmurs, and he sounds as achingly empty as Shane feels. “One week, and you’ll be in my arms again.”

Shane exhales, trying to regulate his heartbeat again. “Okay. Okay. One week.”

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The Boston game is a harder win than it should be. That seems to be becoming a pattern.

They eke it in with a 3-2 score in overtime, which they shouldn’t have needed to go into. His defensemen are still not guarding him, but it turns out okay in Boston. The Bears are no more aggressive than usual, and Shane can anticipate it. He has less shots on the goal than he normally wouldn’t because he’s not being passed the puck as often as he should. Two of the three goals are still his despite the handicap.

Hayden’s the only one to celebrate his game-winning goal, and there’s something tight and upset in his expression.

“You alright?” he asks Shane, tapping his helmet with his own in their familiar, comforting ritual.

“Yeah,” Shane sighs, feeling the exhaustion down to his bones that had nothing to do with the game they played. “Yeah, I will be. Ilya’s here.”

Hayden smiles for real at that. “Yeah? That’s awesome. You gonna introduce us?”

Shane tries not to wince. Any other day it wouldn’t even be a question. But. “Maybe tomorrow morning before the flight? Sorry, fuck, sorry Hayds, I really do want you to meet him I just—“

“Hey don’t sweat it,” Hayden claps his shoulder in understanding, “I get it. You’ve had a rough fucking go of it, man. Let him take care of you. We’ll meet up tomorrow. Coffee?”

Shane relaxes, grateful neither for the first nor last time for his best friend. “Sounds great. Thank you Hayds. Really.”

“Hollander, hey,” someone speaks up behind them, making them stiffen and turn. Marleau’s a few feet away. “Pike. Good to see you both.”

Hayden loses the tension, and Shane remembers they had been texting about the social media situation. “Hey, man. Good game.” Marleau accepts his handshake.

“It was something,” Marleau tries but he can’t quite stop his wince. “Uh, you doing okay Hollander? It’s just— we noticed some discrepancies with your lines, I guess.”

So the Bears had noticed his lack of guarding, just like Dallas had. They just were kind enough to not exploit it.

“There’s some differing opinions on my sexuality within the Montreal Voyagers roster,” Shane answers, and he can taste how bitter the words are.

“Yeah,” he grimaces, “Rozy’s mentioned something like that. You’re not going to get any of that from us, Hollander,” Marleau squeezes his shoulder. “And if you do, you let me and Thompson know. It’s not something we want in our locker room.”

How incredibly different from the Voyagers. It seems like homophobia is all that’s left for Shane in the Montreal locker room.

“Thanks Marley,” Shane says, and he means it. “Seriously. For everything. Can’t tell you enough how much everything you’re doing to help means to me. Means to me and Ilya.”

Marleau clears his throat, uncomfortable in the face of sincerity and feelings the way many straight white bros are. “Nah, man, don’t even worry about it. Let me know if there’s something else I can do to help. Anything. Rozy’s a good friend. And you don’t deserve this.”

Shane nods, ready to thank and dismiss the offer but then thinks.

“Actually,” Shane pauses. “There might be something.”

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Shane waits on the ice, leaning against the boards. He had changed and showered, with no one around in the lockers, as per usual, and had sent Ilya a text around twenty minutes ago with a meeting time.

Ilya shows up right on time, granted, a little confused.

“Малыш?” he asks, eyebrows furrowed. He leans in dutifully when Shane reaches for him, kissing him over the boards. Ilya’s lips on his feel like a hit of morphine; tension melts away

from his neck and shoulders, and he feels Ilya searching for his touch as Shane cups his cheek.

“Hey, baby,” Shane whispers when they part, unwilling to pull away further. “I missed you.”

“Me too,” Ilya says, then tilts his head. “But why are we here?”

Shane smiles a little. “I just thought, if we’re not hiding anymore then… there’s no harm in a little ice skating date, right?”

Ilya blinks before a grin stretches on his face. “Romantic. Whisking me away on exciting surprise adventures.”

“It’s the TD Garden,” Shane replies dryly, “how exciting can it be.”

Ilya just laughs. “I do not have skates.”

“I think those will be your size,” Shane nods toward the pair he had asked Marleau for near the benches. “You can put them on yourself?”

“If I say no, will I get to see you on your knees for me?” Ilya winks cheekily. Shane rolls his eyes.

Ilya does manage to find and lace his skates, a spare set of hockey skates from the Bears equipment room that Shane had promised to return before leaving.

Shane’s prepared for some hand-holding, a little bit of an adjustment period near the boards as Ilya gathers his courage to go farther out on the ice. He’s expecting some clumsy but romantic gliding, wrapped in each other to keep Ilya’s balance.

Ilya steps on the ice like he was born to. He takes a few minutes to get used to the new ice under him and Shane just watches, amazed. He sets off smoothly with a single skate push, letting Shane follow as he warms up out of habit and does laps.

He’s a little rusty, but Shane can see the raw talent in his balance and movements. He has all the fundamentals down like instinct, evidence of drills and technique that came with years of practice.

“Holy fuck,” Shane laughs in disbelief. “You can *skate*.”

“Is in my blood, Hollander,” Ilya skates around him with a grin and wink. “My mother was Olympic material too.”

Shane’s trained with figure skaters before, it’s why he holds the All-Stars agility course record, so he recognizes the moves Ilya does. Watches as he goes through a shallow rocker turn and steps into a simple chasse. His balance as he changes foot doesn’t even shake.

“You’ve been hiding this from me,” Shane scoffs, in awe as Ilya sloppily but successfully manages a crossover and follows it with a Mohawk turn.

“You never asked,” Ilya counters playfully as he glides past him.

He shows off then, leading into a toe loop jump. Without a toe pick he can’t gain much height so it’s only a single turn. Ilya wobbles on the landing, and he nearly loses his balance but manages to stick it. Shane laughs, delighted as he claps for him and Ilya takes an exaggerated bow.

“Are you just going to stand there Hollander?” he chirps out, “I did not know they let sloths play hockey these days. Very progressive of the NHL.”

Shane snorts, something competitive curling in his gut as it does when Ilya purposefully goads him. He kicks up into a sprint, chasing after Ilya and relishing in the sharp peal of laughter that escapes his boyfriend as he races away.

They chase after each other for a while, laughing and yelling like children, until they’re panting with their hands on their knees both trying to catch their breath. Shane probably shouldn’t have exerted himself so much right after an entire game, but he feels him grinning, cheeks flushed as Ilya laughs breathlessly. He realizes, suddenly, that he hasn’t had this much fun on the ice since he’s come back to the team.

Once they can breathe normally again, Ilya turns and stops gently in front of him, scraping up some ice. Shane steadies him with hands against his waist.

“Hi,” Shane says and Ilya’s eyes crinkle as he smiles.

“Hello. Was decent skating, no?”

“You’re a beautiful skater, Ilya,” Shane shakes his head, brushing away a stray curl that had come loose. Some sweat borders Ilya’s hairline.

Ilya laughs softly. “I am very out of practice, but thank you. I learned from one of the best.”

Shane’s smile tempers into something bittersweet, and he kisses Ilya feather-light.

“I wish I could have seen your mother skate,” Shane whispers, “she must have been incredible.”

Ilya swallows, eyes fluttering closed for a moment before he agrees. “Yes. She was.”

“What was her name?” Shane asks, reaching down to hold his hand.

For a moment he thinks Ilya won’t answer, a downturn to his lips. Shane nearly takes it back before he sees him take a deep breath.

“Irina,” Ilya smiles sadly. “She competed as Irina Sokolova.”

“Have you tried—“

“Looking for her? Yes. Not very many videos of junior Russian figure skating so long ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane exhales, leaning in close. He presses them tight, chest to chest, hoping that if he gets close enough he can push some comfort and relief into his boyfriend. “You said you learned to skate with her?”

“Yes,” Ilya gives a fleeting grin. “I did mostly figure skating, until my father found out. But I was good enough that he tried to get me to play hockey, if you can believe it.”

Shane’s eyes widen. “Holy shit. Seriously? Would you have played for the NHL?”

Ilya shrugs. “I did not know so much about ice hockey back then, didn’t really care for it but maybe. When my mother passed, though, I preferred school over the rink to escape. Too many painful memories.”

“Fuck. You would have been an amazing hockey player. You have that skater instinct.”

Shane can see it. Ilya and Shane on rival teams, pushing each other higher and higher until no one could reach them at the top. Or maybe they would play on the same team, same line. Someone who could finally keep up.

“Mmm, maybe,” Ilya tilts his head. “My mother wished it for me, I think. She missed the rink and I went with her to make her happy. And I liked it, of course. I loved skating with her. But I liked math more.”

That surprises a laugh out of Shane. “Wow. Okay, nerd.” He knows he sounds way too fond to make it any kind of tease.

“I am too sexy to be a nerd, Hollander, you know this,” Ilya smirks. “My dick is too big. Ass too thick.”

Shane almost pushes him flat on said ass. He refrains though when he sees Ilya’s laugh die down too quickly.

“It didn’t matter really,” Ilya shakes his head, sobering again, “I stopped skating with her when I was around ten years old. The only way out after that was school.”

“Why’d you stop?” Shane asks gently. Ilya looks faraway in his thoughts.

“My father found out and wouldn’t allow it. He didn’t want my mother to be too happy,” he finally murmurs, and there’s old, old hurt there. He only mentions his mother but Shane can see Ilya’s father’s cruelty reached farther than just his wife.

Shane’s seen parts of this jagged gash before, but this might be the first time he’s seen it in full. Seen just how painful his father had been.

“I’m sorry Ilya,” Shane breathes, pain tight in his chest. Ilya won’t look at him, so Shane pulls him closer, urging him into a deep kiss. Ilya sinks into it, slow and sweet and steady in a way that makes Shane’s eyes burn. When they part, Shane brushes his nose against Ilya’s, staying close.

“All I want is for you to be happy,” Shane whispers. “You know that right?”

Ilya smiles genuinely, and it's like the first star of the night, blinking into view. "Me too," he replies softly, "you are beautiful when you are happy. I want you to be happy, always."

Shane smiles back, rubbing his thumb against the back of Ilya's hand and feels him sigh against his lips.

"Thank you for skating with me," Shane says, feeling lighter than he has in days. He pauses, considering. "Was it too much? Coming back? I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

"No," Ilya gives him a slight smile, shaking his head. "Not at all. Was good actually. Having something nice and fun on the ice again. I have always been too nervous to think of her, I think. But it felt good to remember her when we were happy."

Shane rests his head against the flat of Ilya's shoulder, and he feels Ilya's hand wrap around his back, holding him close. Their hearts beat long enough together to synchonize.

"Come on, let's go home. It's cold. I got groceries for dinner," Ilya tells him, kissing him on the forehead before tugging him towards the boards.

The sheer domesticity of the sentiment flared deep inside Shane, something that he could see himself getting addicted to.

Shane returns Ilya's skates and grabs his gear before driving them back in a rental car. It's a habit to toss his keys in the small bowl on the accent table near the front door as Ilya takes his coat and hangs it with his own in the closet.

"Go change into sweats, something comfy," Ilya urges him, kissing his cheek, "I will start making dinner. You rest, you had hard game."

Shane wants to protest but his hamstrings twinge, leaving his knees unsteady. A yawn betrays him, signaling a crash, and Ilya just looks at him knowingly.

"I'll wake you for dinner, if you fall asleep," Ilya promises and Shane sighs, smiling despite himself.

"Okay, okay. Thank you, baby."

Shane showers again and changes in their room, pulling from the bottom two drawers of the dresser Shane did have to build on his own months ago while Ilya salaciously and unhelpfully commented from his perch watching. His things have evenly spread between here and his place in Montreal, though it's instinct to steal one of Ilya's hoodies that hangs off his frame. He's not a small guy, not even close, but Ilya was tall enough and broad enough that wearing his clothes made Shane feel cocooned.

He goes to charge his phone on his side of the bed, only to realize once plugged in that it doesn't flicker on. The end of the cord that Shane had kept forgetting to replace had finally frayed out entirely.

"Fuck," Shane grumbles, trying the wire again before giving up. He goes to Ilya's desk instead, trying the drawers to see if he had an extra cord.

He's in the third drawer, a deep one filled with clutter that had Shane optimistic, when he notices the document on top wearing a familiar university logo. Shane picks it up to find a stack of papers, and he goes through them, curious.

The one on top is an acceptance letter from McGill. The others were ones Shane hadn't seen before. Chilling understanding replaces his confusion.

He finds Ilya in the kitchen, cutting carrots. He smiles exasperatedly, hearing Shane come in. "Sweetheart, you should be in bed–"

"Ilya, what are these?"

He must not manage to keep his tone steady, because Ilya looks up immediately. He hones in on the stack of paper Shane's holding up, five acceptance letters in his hand, and he falters.

"Where did you find that?" Ilya asks, frozen still.

"Your desk," Shane replies, refusing to budge. "I needed a phone charging cord. Ilya, *what* are these?"

"It looks like you already know," Ilya mutters, but his shoulders are hunched in and his eyes are not quite meeting Shane's. He doesn't move at least when Shane joins him in the kitchen, silence between them until Shane breaks it again.

"You got into MIT," Shane breathes, "Ilya, why wouldn't you tell me?"

"Because I chose McGill. I choose you," Ilya shrugs, but it's behind a familiar stubborn wall. Shane feels a little sick. "The other schools aren't important."

"Aren't impor– Ilya, you *love* MIT. And you love this lab, it says– fuck, it says Chikondi would be your advisor, that's– how could you turn this down?"

"How could I turn down option that will keep me three hundred miles away from you for the next five years?" Ilya asks, sardonic. "Hmm, I wonder."

"I can't be the reason why you turn down something like this," Shane shakes his head, truly horrified. "Fuck, are you going to honestly tell me that if I wasn't in the picture you would go to a program like fucking McGill over MIT? I know they don't even have their own observatory."

"You are in the picture though. Very big part of the picture."

"This is your entire future, Ilya! *You* were the one who told me how important the name of the institution can be with getting funding, faculty positions. I can't let you throw away your future for *me."*

Ilya deflates, and for a second Shane thinks he got through to him. Then Ilya mumbles, words almost incomprehensible under his breath, "I am not throwing away my future. I want my future to be *you*."

Shane still hears him though, and it rocks the foundation under his feet. It steals his words.

If Shane took the time to reflect, he would pick through the mess of his emotions and sort them in order of magnitude. And if he did that, he would find terror front and center of being trusted with something this fucking important. If it had been a year ago, Shane might have even run from it.

But it's not a year ago. And Shane is too in love with Ilya to let him destroy his potential like this.

He swallows, reaching up to cup Ilya's cheek. Ilya automatically presses into his palm but won't look at him. "Baby. I'll still be here. I'm not going anywhere. You can have me and have MIT."

"But not in the way I want," Ilya shakes his head. "I want *this,* Shane." He gestures at the space around them. "I want a home. I feel at home with you."

"Fuck, Ilya," Shane's voice cracks.

"I want to come home to you every day you're not traveling, not just once or twice a month," Ilya continues, frowning at the counter. "Want to fall asleep in bed with you and not wonder if I'll wake up in time to see you leave. Want to grocery shop with you and do laundry with you and make a chores list because you're home long enough to need one. I want *this* Shane."

Shane exhales, shaky. "And for the days I can't be here. When I'm traveling. Would McGill be enough? The way MIT is?"

He feels Ilya flinch under his hands, and gets his answer.

"We will make it work, baby," Shane whispers, kissing his jaw. "It might be hard but this… Ilya, you can't turn down an opportunity like this. This is your entire career. This is what you love. What makes you happy."

Ilya looks like he's biting down on something, lips pressed tight against each other.

"I don't want another five years like this past one, Shane," Ilya says, voice quiet. "I don't think I'll survive it."

"It won't be," Shane reassures, clutching onto his shirt. "It won't, baby. We don't have to hide anymore. That changes everything. And then when I'm a free agent, I'll sign with the team in whatever city you end up in, for post-doc. It won't be as bad, I promise."

Shane can't promise anything, not when he's so uncertain about the future too. But he sees Ilya's hesitancy and he can't let it win. If he needs to project false confidence, so be it. He's had plenty of practice.

"Did you already submit your acceptance?" Shane asks quietly. Ilya's jaw jumps, but then he shakes his head.

“No,” he admits, “was waiting until last day. 15th.”

Which tells Shane plenty. For Ilya to be hesitating for this long, waiting until the last minute — he had been just as unsure about McGill as Shane thought he should be.

Shane tips up on his toes to press a chaste kiss to his lips. “Pick MIT, baby. I want you to pick MIT. You’re so fucking brilliant, Ilya. I can't see it go to waste because you decided to settle for me.”

“Choosing you is not *settling*,” Ilya scoffs, a flicker of a smile on his lips. “You’re Shane fucking Hollander.”

“Sure,” Shane shrugs, and then makes Ilya meet his eye. “But you’re Ilya fucking Rozanov.”

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In an act of compromise, the bedrock of any healthy relationship, Shane agrees to celebrate his birthday one month early before the playoffs start. He wouldn’t have bothered with a birthday celebration at all but Ilya had looked at him like he had just shot a dog in front of him when Shane offhandedly suggested they would probably not be able to do anything for his birthday if the Voyagers made it to the second round. Shane was not going to mess with Stanley Cup superstitions in the middle of the playoffs and that included no sex, no sugar, and no alcohol.

“No,” Ilya frowns deeply, “is not acceptable. We did my birthday last year. Skipped your birthday. We will not do this again this year. Non-negotiable.”

So they settled on April 10th, one full month before Shane’s actual birthday, as the replacement.

Ilya asked unprompted what Shane would want to do for his birthday, because he was aware just planning a full blown surprise for him would stress Shane out so close to playoffs. Once Shane could swallow past the tightness in his throat at the face of being utterly *known,* he admitted that he really just wanted a day with his friends and family together. Ilya happily makes it happen.

The day of the party, Ilya and Shane show up to Hayden’s place. It strikes Shane that this will be the first time his friends in Montreal will really get to know his boyfriend. He reaches over and threads his fingers with Ilya’s as they wait for the doorbell to ring out. Ilya tightens his hold.

“Hey man,” Hayden grins, opening the door and then stepping back. “Happy early birthday.”

“Thanks for hosting this Hayds,” Shane tells him. His apartment was big, but not for a bright, familial gathering like Shane wanted. Something else Ilya anticipated and had apparently reached out to his best friend about.

“Don’t even worry about it,” Hayden waves dismissively. “Saves me and Jackie from having to find a babysitter. Nice to see you again Ilya.”

“Yes,” Ilya grins, “is almost worth the drive to suburban hell.”

Both Hayden and Shane roll their eyes.

When they enter, Shane realizes they’re not the first to get there. JJ is putting out appetizers at the direction of Jackie who has her hands full with her one year old son, and his parents are milling around with glasses of wine. There’s a happy buzz of chatter and energy, warm and comforting and exactly what Shane wanted most.

“Hi, honey!” Yuna beams, reaching over to hug Shane tight and kiss his cheek. “Happy birthday!”

“Thanks mom,” he laughs. “When did you guys get here?”

“Only fifteen minutes ago,” his dad shrugs, wrapping him in a one arm hug. When he pulls away, he sees that his mother has gotten a hold of Ilya in a hug of his own, Ilya vaguely surprised but not looking upset about it.

“*Bon anniversaire*!” JJ grins, blowing on a noisemaker.

“Please don’t tell me you brought more of those,” Shane sighs tiredly, already anticipating chaos. His boyfriend’s eyes are alight with glee. He doesn’t know where the gremlins are, but he can foresee two very excited three and a half year olds.

JJ just blows it again.

The last guest arrives when they’ve all gotten drinks and Shane’s already hugged Jackie, Ruby, and Jade then introduced them to the “giant” man with a funny voice. Ilya’s busy with the others as Shane answers the door to find the elegant and lithe woman, wearing a stunning little black dress that would have made Shane double-take out in the wild and he’s staunchly homosexual.

“С Днем рождения, Shanya,” Svetlana greets, reaching her arms out as she comes in.

“Thank you for making the trip,” Shane smiles, accepting a hug and letting the door close behind them. Svetlana simply grins broadly, before kissing both his cheeks.

“I would not turn down an invitation to Shane Hollander’s birthday party,” she winks. She spots Ilya almost immediately. “Ilyusha! You have left your lovely, pretty boyfriend all alone? I might just steal him away from you.”

Ilya scowls at his best friend, coming over and wrapping a possessive arm around his boyfriend. “Don’t you dare, Sveta.”

“She’s only kidding, baby,” Shane laughs, amused.

They counter him in unison.

“No I’m not.”

“No she’s not.”

“Oh, *ouf*, who are you?” Someone interrupts behind them breathlessly.

When Shane turns, JJ is looking at Svetlana with wide eyes, starstruck.

“Oh,” Shane says. “JJ, this is Svetlana, Ilya’s best friend from Russia. Sveta, this is JJ— he’s one of Montreal’s defencemen.”

“Oh, I know,” Sveta smirks a little shark-like, “Jean Jacques Boiziau, 16, defenseman for the Montreal Voyagers, rookie season 2007. CF% of 51.4 and finishing the 2014 regular season with 42 points. I’m aware.”

“*Ostie de tabarnak*,” JJ mumbles hoarsely.

Shane coughs into his fist in an attempt to hide a laugh. Ilya doesn’t bother.

“I should probably also add Svetlana’s last name is Vetrova,” he grins.”

JJ stares at him. “Boston Vetrov? Hall of Fame Vetrov?”

“The very same,” Ilya clears his throat, broadly amused.

JJ looks at Ilya, Sveta, and then returns his gaze to Shane.

“You really are gay, huh, Hollander,” JJ says to Shane solemnly.

There’s no agenda with no expectations, and Shane gets to enjoy the company of all the people who most matter to him. Later, he smiles into his glass of sparkling cider as he looks around, taking a moment to lean by the wall and just watch both his worlds meld together seamlessly and joyfully.

His mother and Svetlana are on the couch chatting, Yuna taking notes of whatever the Russian was saying. David and JJ put on a football game, Real Madrid v. Arsenal, harmlessly bickering over one play or another. He’s not sure where their hosts are, though he suspects Hayden’s upstairs with Arthur who had his naptime soon.

Ilya had been endeared with Ruby and Jade immediately, happily joining them on the floor as they brought their favorite toys to him for show and tell, adequately oohing and aahing as necessary. It looks like he’s watching them prepare a play scene, overseeing an argument. Shane steps up just close enough to overhear.

“We can’t decide who’s going to be the princess and who’s going to be the knight,” Jade frowns. “Ruby always picks knight, but I want to do it this time.”

“Why can’t you be both?” Ilya asks.

“Both?” Ruby repeats dubiously. “It’s Princess and Knight. The princess is supposed to be smart and pretty. The knight is supposed to be strong and brave.”

“Well, can a princess not be strong and brave?”

The girls ponder it for a bit. “I guess.”

“And a knight can be smart and pretty.”

“Yeah,” Jade mumbles, eyebrows furrowed.

“Well, then you two can be world’s first princess knights,” Ilya offers. “Smart, pretty, strong, and brave.”

Both Jade and Ruby look at Ilya like he had just solved world peace and hunger at the same time and light up in agreement, deciding on their tiaras and swords in a quick debate.

“You’ll be the dragon,” Ruby says seriously. She gives him a green blanket as a costume, one that Ilya drapes around his shoulders. It’s comically small. “You’re supposed to be guarding the princess, but we’re both princess knights, so now we just have to beat you.”

“You can try, Princess-Knight Ruby,” Ilya shows his teeth, hunched over. “But you won’t win.”

He lets them run around him, pretending to take hits as they shout war cries. Ilya mock-growls, making the girls squeal in delight, pouncing on him. He flops over, playing dead as Ruby and Jade hit him with pillows, swords long forgotten.

“No! No!” he bemoans, “I am defeated! The princess knights have beaten me, no!”

The kids laugh as they jump around and then on him, Ilya making mock pained noises like he was being stabbed. It reduces the girls into giggles, and he grins at them as they celebrate their successful defeat.

“I know that look,” Jackie says from next to him, and Shane doesn’t even startle, enchanted by the scene in front of them.

“What look?” Shane asks distantly, knowing he’s got a stupidly besotted smile on his face.

“The, ‘fuck, I need to make a baby with him right now’ look,” Jackie answers wryly. Shane flushes bright red, caught off guard enough to tear his eyes away and turn to her.

“What?” He splutters, blushing. Jackie is still grinning at him.

“Why do you think I already have three kids, Shane?”

“Making a baby might be kind of hard for us, I think,” Shane replies, still red. “And Jackie… seriously. Condoms.”

She laughs. “I’m being serious though. You want them with him?”

Ilya’s tickling the girls, making them shriek in laughter before they attack him again. It’s not hard to imagine a little boy or girl with Ilya’s curls or Shane’s eyes pouncing onto his partner,

looking a little older with smile lines, a little more mature with some graying. To imagine Ilya scooping them up and making them laugh in delight, happy and loved.

“I think so, yeah,” Shane murmurs, “but it’s still so early. I don’t know what he wants or if he even wants to be with me long enough for that, getting married, having kids, picket fence. Nothing’s sure. We haven’t talked about it yet.”

“Sweetie,” Jackie sighs, exasperated, “anyone with eyes can see if there’s anything that man is sure about, it’s you. He wants to stick around. That won’t be the issue.”

Shane blushes, unable to stop a wistful smile. “Maybe. I mean, I know he’s it for me. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want him.”

Jackie rubs his shoulder, beaming at him. “I’m glad, sweetie. You deserve someone who makes you light up. That’s all Hayds and I ever wanted for you. And he’s a good one, Shane. He really, really is.”

He accepts the hug from Jackie, grateful for how easily she accepts him. She always has—from the day she and Hayden had met, Shane has always known her as someone kind and generous. She had seen how much Hayden loved Shane, and loved him too just the same.

“Can you make sure my husband hasn’t dropped the baby?” Jackie asks, nodding up the stairs. “I’m on oven duty.”

“Sure, Jackie,” Shane laughs, “Husband Wrangler 101.”

“It’ll be practice for you later,” she tilts her head towards Ilya and then winks.

Shane finds Hayden in the nursery, frantically shushing a very upset and grumpy baby.

“Dude,” Shane furrows his eyebrows. Hayden’s neck shoots up.

“Oh thank god,” he groans, “he’s been fussing for almost fifteen minutes and I can’t get him to calm down.”

“Uh,” Shane blinks, “can I help—?”

“Yes, oh my god, here, take the baby,” Hayden drops Arthur in Shane’s arms.

After a brief second of panic, Shane rearranges his limbs to hold the infant comfortably, cradling his head with one hand. He had played babysitter after Ruby and Jade were born too, so he’s actually pretty well-versed in baby care. He rocks automatically, humming softly as Arthur gurgles.

Arthur quiets instantly, looking up at Shane with big, brown eyes. Hayden scoffs.

“Like fucking clockwork,” he mutters.

“Swear jar,” Shane tells him automatically.

“It’s not like I’m his father or anything,” Hayden continues to grumble. Shane laughs a little, holding Arthur closer, protectively.

“It’s no big deal,” he says, “I can stay up here for a bit, put him down to sleep. Then I’ll come down for cake—”

Every muscle in Hayden’s body freezes. His eyes are wide and unblinking.

“You forgot the cake, didn’t you,” Shane sighs. Hayden claps his shoulder, leaning in to kiss the top of Arthur’s head.

“I gotta go. Please don’t tell Jackie.”

He bolts, leaving Shane with Arthur, a warm and precious weight in his arms making soft burbling noises, unbothered by his father’s chaos.

He would never tell Jade or Ruby, but Arthur might already be his favorite Pike. The one year old was usually quiet, easily pleased, and endearingly addicted to being held. It helps that the adults had learned very early on that Arthur tended to shut up immediately when placed in Shane’s hold, and Jackie and Hayden had abused that fact egregiously whenever Uncle Shane came over and Arthur was upset.

He’s never minded. Shane has long associated his baby powder soft scent to settling in Jackie’s rocking chair with him and soothing him to sleep, warm, comfortable, and domestic. His godson held a very special part of his heart. He had cried when Arthur’s fourth word was “Shay.”

“Your dad is a disaster, huh,” he mumbles to him quietly. He likes talking to Arthur when they’re on their own and listening to his babbling responses. “That’s okay. We love him anyway, hmm? He should really use that planner I gave him before your mom kills him though.”

He doesn’t know how long he whispers to Arthur, long enough that the baby grows sleepy against his shoulder. Shane sings him something quiet, forgetting half the words but Arthur doesn’t seem to mind as he sighs baby soft and wraps his fingers in Shane’s shirt. He’s thinking he’ll probably be able to get Arthur down for his nap when he nearly startles as he turns and sees Ilya at the doorway, watching them.

“Jesus fuck, Ilya,” he whisper-shouts, careful to keep his hand behind Arthur’s head. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Ilya doesn’t reply, simply watching with unreadable eyes. Something grows there, barely restrained in a way that rocks Shane’s gut.

“Ilya?” Shane asks, unsure, and he holds still as Ilya pushes himself off the door sill, crossing the distance between them in a few long strides.

Shane exhales softly when he feels Ilya’s hand gentle on his waist, holding him close and trapping Arthur between them. With the knuckles of his other hand, he strokes Arthur’s

cheek, making the baby coo, and Shane thinks he's going to die with how big his heart is inflating.

"You are so good with him," Ilya says quietly, voice shredded. "You are good with all of them."

Shane flushes, eyes darting down before he can stop them. "You're good with them too. Ruby and Jade love you."

Ilya huffs a laugh. "They are rascals. Takes one to know one. No, you are good with them like this. Taking care of them." He moves his hand away from Arthur and cups Shane's cheek instead. "You would be so good with your own babies too."

Shane feels his breath catch. There's something solid stuck in his throat, remembering his conversation with Jackie. "Would you— um, I mean… do you want, you know… kids?"

Ilya smiles softly and it's a sunbeam shining through dust motes, treacle sweet and slow. "Yes. I do. I want a family." He leans in to kiss Shane's forehead. "Would be nice. A family with you."

Shane can't breathe. He's burning, every cell in his body aflame. If Ilya cut him open, his heart would be replaced with starlight.

"Yeah," he manages, voice breaking. The fantasy downstairs reappears, solidifies. "Would be really nice. I would like that. I would really, really like that."

He doesn't have to ask for Ilya to lean in and press a butterfly soft kiss to his lips. As Shane stands still, holding his godson and letting this man hold him, he's only thinking three words.

I love you, Shane thinks as Ilya kisses his forehead.

I love you, as he kisses Shane's cheekbone

I love you, when their lips meet again.

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Playoff season hits Shane like a truck. Or like a 250 pound hockey player titling at full speed. Which is to say, painfully.

Shane either had the worst luck or did something to personally offend the Fates, because Montreal, second seed, is matched for Round One with the the North Carolina Storms. Who had proved to be one of the most blatantly homophobic teams in the league far before Shane's outing, right up there with Toronto.

"We win this game, we're in the next round," Shane tells the locker room. They're for the most part listening to him– despite their bitterness about it, most of them know that the only way they were going to get through these playoffs was following the captain who had gotten them there. "One game. And we're that much closer to the Cup. Don't fuck around. Protect

the team. Protect the goalie. If you find a window to shoot, then shoot. Otherwise you get the puck to me and I'll get us that win. Got it?"

There's some muttering and Shane internally curses. "*Got it*?"

A disgruntled smattering of "yes, cap" makes it around, and they head out to the rink, passing Shane as they go. He doesn't offer them his customary fist bump. He learned a while ago that there wasn't a point when no one except JJ and Hayden accepted it.

He's first shift and center for the starting puck. In front of him is the Storms' captain, Jeffery Blake, with three domestic abuse accusations and good old evangelical Christian homophobia to boot. Shane's already braced himself before he even opens his mouth.

"You know, I've been thinking," Blake mocks. "You're the one who probably takes it up the ass, aren't you, Hollander? Fucking fairy like you is probably begging for it. Does your dick shrivel up the longer you don't use it like a man?"

"You seem pretty interested in how gay sex works, Blake," Shane replies blandly without taking his eyes off of the ice. "Need tips?"

Blake snarls, automatically straightening to fight in Shane's peripheral vision. The puck drops and Shane wins the face-off.

The past five games against the Storms had been brutal from the start, and Game Six is no exception. Shane grits his teeth through the first and second period, taking hit after hit but pushing through to get his team the goals they need. They start the third period up two, and Carolina's getting nervous and getting meaner.

He sets off with the puck from the neutral zone, focused on getting to the other side of the rink. JJ's out for the game, checked against the boards and rang his bell, so it's Petrov and Koch for defense. Hayden's somewhere ahead of him, but a Storms player's blocking Shane's view and he can sense his right wing tracking the puck on the short side. It doesn't matter, because Shane has a clear shot, the goal directly ahead of him.

Shane doesn't see the other player. He hears Hayden shout instead.

He can't turn fast enough; the check hits him from behind hard and dirty, knocking the air out of his lungs and making his skates skid out under him as he drops. His head knocks hard against the ice, making his vision spot for a second and a low groan catches in his throat.

He's still trying to catch his breath when he feels and hears ice skid next to him.

"Faggot," Callahan spits. It hits the ground next to him. "Fuck off out of hockey you fucking cocksuc—"

Shane doesn't hear the rest of it, because the other player is cut off by a punch.

"*You motherfucker*!" Hayden yells, hitting him hard again. Shane's head is still ringing as he pushes himself shakily on his knees. He's almost expecting the sound of chaos to overwhelm him, the noise of testosterone-soaked hockey players going at each other, and for a second, he

thinks his hearing is still fucked. It doesn't click until Shane looks up through double vision, vaguely seeing a medic coming his way. He slips, vision going dark again as he slumps back on the ice but he knows.

No one else besides Hayden was fighting. No one else tried to defend their captain.

+++

He ends up in the infirmary. Dr. Khan has always been good to him, and she's kind as she makes him go through imaging and the concussions checks, going over his cranial nerves and balance. He's still a little shaky by the end of it, but he's seeing straight again and his hearing's back to normal. Shane's well enough to think about what happened out on the ice, and what didn't.

"I want to monitor you for a few more hours, get another CT tomorrow, and it would be good to have someone watching you tonight," Khan finally says, pulling away. "But you seem okay. How's the pain?"

"Fine," Shane shrugs, a little lost.

"And no vision changes with the light?"

"Mm-hm."

"And how about the pink unicorns and mermaids?"

"Great."

"Shane," she sighs. "What's going on?"

Shane blinks, looking back at her. "Nothing. I'm–"

"Hollander, I was trained to know when fine isn't fine," she interrupts dryly. "Try again."

He hesitates. "It doesn't matter. Just team stuff. Locker room dynamics. You know how it is."

"I see," Khan says, quietly. "You can tell me if I'm off base here, but does this have to do with what happened last month with Twitter?"

Shane doesn't answer.

"Ah," Khan exhales. "Well. Can I offer some advice? Non-medical."

"Sure, I guess," he shrugs.

"I don't know what it's like right now for you in the locker room," she says, "but I can imagine it's not great. It sucks that we can't control what others say or do. But we can decide what's most important to us, and go for it, fuck the haters."

That forces a huff of laughter out of Shane.

“And I think it would be good for you to remember,” she finishes carefully. “That no matter what you choose, the Voyagers need Shane Hollander more than Shane Hollander needs the Voyagers.

Shane considers her words, and feels a small smile on his lips. “Huh. Thanks Dr. Khan.”

She returns his smile, stripping off her gloves. “You know the drill Hollander. Fluids, rest, and no screens for twenty-four hours. You don’t need to be watching that hit, alright?”

And then Shane suddenly remembers, heart dropping. Ilya had been watching. *He* had watched that hit.

“Fuck,” he rasps, getting Khan’s attention again. “Can I— can I call? I won’t text, just— I need to call someone. They’re going to be worried. Please.”

Khan purses her mouth, but then exhales, nods. “Okay. If someone else sets up the call for you.”

“Thank fuck, okay, could you—“

“I figured that’s what you would ask next,” Khan says dryly. “Sure, Shane. I’ll send someone to go grab your phone from your stall.”

“Thanks. Thank you so much.”

Once an equipment manager runs back and Khan has her hands on his phone, he directs her through unlocking it with 0615 as the passcode and to his most recent contacts.

“I’m guessing you’d like to call ‘Ilya’?” Khan asks, wry.

Shane blinks. “Um, yes, how did you—“

“They’ve left six voicemails.” He winces.

Khan waits with him while the phone rings just once before Ilya picks up.

“Shane? Sweetheart, you are okay?” Shane’s heart twists at how desperate Ilya sounds.

“Ilya, hey, hey,” Shane automatically soothes. “Right here baby. Um, Dr. Khan—“

“I’ll step outside, give you some privacy,” she smiles gently and then points warningly. “No screen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shane breathes, relieved. Ilya had gone quiet, likely hearing the second conversation. “Thank you, doctor.”

When the door clicks closed, he brings the speaker back to his mouth. “Ilya, baby. I’m okay. I’m fine—“

“I saw the hit, Shane. I saw. Is not fine. Is not fucking fine,” Ilya interrupts, and his voice is hoarse, “you didn’t move on the ice and then fucking cameras cut away when medics got to you.”

“I got up and then got dizzy,” he admits, “but I’m fine now. Passed all my checks. They think I’ll be able to play next week.”

Ilya’s quiet for too long. “You will play again next week. After that hit.”

“Baby,” Shane sighs, hearing his unimpressed tone. “That’s how it goes during playoffs. I’ll be monitored by the medic team and the coaches will probably cut my shifts but… it’s the playoffs. And I’m their first line center.”

“Безумие. Они все сумасшедшие,” he hears Ilya mutter to himself before he exhales. “You are really okay? What happened?”

“Dirty check,” Shane answers, closing his eyes, “didn’t see him coming up behind me so couldn’t brace for it. Passed out from the dizziness but when I woke up, vision and everything was fine. I got really lucky.”

Ilya’s silent, and Shane almost asks hesitantly if *he* was okay when he hears Ilya inhale sharply.

“I was so scared,” Ilya confesses, and Shane’s heart breaks at how small he sounds. “Yuna and David were busy with doctor at first so didn’t answer my calls until later and I didn’t know what happened to you. I was terrified.”

“Oh baby,” Shane whispers, aching to be with him, close enough to touch rather than 300 miles away. “I’m okay. Promise. It’s a hazard of the job, you know? We all get our bell rung eventually.”

“Right,” Ilya croaks, voice hoarse. “This is normal.”

“Ilya,” Shane exhales. He doesn’t say it, because he thinks it’ll probably make Ilya even more upset, but this honestly wasn’t normal. It was rare for a player to be hit that devastatingly hard, even during the playoffs. The only reason why he had been was because his team had abandoned him. His boyfriend clears his throat.

“Fine. Okay. You are going to play again. Will you at least rest for few days?”

“Yeah,” Shane answers, glad he can be honest. “Mandatory bed rest. My parents will be staying with me for a bit. It’s lucky that I’m still in Montreal.”

“Okay,” Ilya whispers, and Shane wants to be selfish. He wants to beg Ilya to make the flight to Montreal, to be there when he gets home. Wants to tuck himself against his chest and soothe himself to sleep with Ilya’s heartbeat. He wants to be *selfish.*

“I’m going to be okay,” he says instead, softly. “I’ll call you later tonight, alright? Please don’t worry too much.”

“Too late,” Ilya half-laughs but it’s wet. “You will call?”

“Promise.”

“Okay,” he sighs. “Okay. I will talk to you then, малыш.”

Shane doesn’t want to, but he’s still sweaty and disgusting and in his uniform. After he hangs up, he makes his way to the locker rooms, praying that either the game had ended already and everyone had gone or that it was still ongoing and the lockers were empty.

He gets neither.

The team goes quiet when he walks in, as is the norm these days. Shane’s gotten depressingly used to it, and he’s too tired and aches too much to care right now. He goes through taking off his gear methodically.

“Shane, man,” Hayden whispers, tight with worry.

“Not here,” he murmurs back, just as quiet and Hayden sighs, nodding.

He doesn’t expect to be stopped, thinking it’ll be a quick in and out as usual so he can shower at home, but someone clears his throat and catches his attention.

“Captain,” Petrov pipes up nervously, “you are okay?”

He doesn’t know what the older players had said to the younger ones, but he’s suspected that the rookies are more than a little lost on what to do. It’s a tough break to be stuck on a team as toxic as the Voyagers were right now for your first year with the NHL.

He wanted to check in with them, one on one, but he had done so with Laine only to find out Comeau and Koch had berated him for it after, terrifying the eighteen year old silent and back to avoiding his captain’s gaze. Shane had left them alone since then, asking Hayden to keep an eye on them instead.

For Petrov, a young Russian rookie who was quiet on a good day, invisible on a bad one, to be coming up to him now all on his own took some massive balls.

“Hey Petzy,” Shane smiles briefly. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for checking.”

Petrov nods a little woodenly, turning away jerkily before he stops again, swallowing. “Captain, I just… I wanted to say about the hit— I should have— I’m sorry that—“

“Hey, don’t,” Shane shakes his head, risking touch for comfort and clapping him on his shoulder. “I know how far you were on the rink. There was no way for you to get there in time. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

He doesn’t say, however, that he knew that Koch had been plenty close enough to help. He can’t keep from glancing at the older player’s stall where he was undressing and blatantly eavesdropping.

Koch immediately bristles, scowling. “The fuck you looking at Hollander? I don’t want a fucking queer staring at my dick.”

A distinctly Ilya-like retort bubbles up his throat. Normally Shane would just swallow it, let it go. But his ribs ache and his head hurts and Shane is *tired.* Bitterness lets it loose. “Nothing much to stare at anyway. Can your girl even feel it when you’re fucking her?”

The room freezes, sensing that they had just reached the point of no return, the bubbling tension that had been boiling and simmering under the surface these past few weeks finally overflowing.

“The fuck did you just say to me?” Koch snarled, puffing up.

“*Du calme,* alright, let’s cool down,” JJ tries to mediate, clearly nervous. “Koch, let’s fucking calm down, *oui*?”

Shane knows JJ’s trying to help, that he’s right to try and lower the temperature in the locker room, but he can’t help but feel a little deserted.

“Fuck, you too Boizeau?” Wilson scoffs before he turns to mock Shane, “fucking golden boy Hollander too much of a girl now to take a little heat? You need someone to hold your hand, Hollander? You gonna cry?”

Shane grits his teeth, turning away. But Wilson’s on a roll.

“Maybe if he had hit harder, we wouldn’t have to deal with a fucking faggot in our locker room anymore. Callahan would have done us a favor.”

“Fuck you, Wilson,” Hayden seethes, at his limit, and he pushes him back hard, hands against his chest. “Are you fucking serious? He’s our fucking captain, asshole. The only reason why we’re even here in the running for the *Stanley fucking Cup* is because of him. Show some fucking respect.”

“Maybe I don’t want my name next to a fucking cocksucker’s on the Cup, you think of that?” Wilson sneers.

“Well then I guess you’ll never see your name on that Cup, period,” Hayden snaps back.

“I do not understand why you care so much about who he fucks,” JJ furrows his eyebrows, “so what? It will make no difference on if we win or not. That is more than enough, no?”

“I don’t know what it’s like where *you’re* from, Boizieau, but back home the faggots know their place. They twirl around in their little tutus with the girls and leave the hockey to actual men,” Koch sneers, “someone ought to teach you better, Hollander.”

Shane can’t do it anymore. Without looking back up, he shoves the rest of his things in his bag and walks straight out.

“Yeah, fucking run away, pussy,” Comeau scoffs.

Shane barely perceives his journey out, only vaguely hears Hayden before a hand on his arm stops him.

“Shane, hey, hold on,” Hayden pants, “fuck, dude, I’m—“

“I really can’t do this right now, Hayds,” Shane interrupts, and he clenches his hands to try and hide the tremor there. “I really, really can’t. I’m going home.”

Hayden hesitates, before nodding slowly. “Okay. Okay, just wait a few minutes outside alright? I’ll grab my things and we can—“

“Alone, Hayden,” Shane interrupts, sharper than he means to be. He forces himself to soften. “Please.”

He doesn’t wait for Hayden’s reply, and finds his car, drives home without seeing the road. He’s still in a daze when he walks into his apartment, ready to fall and shatter into a million fragile china pieces on his doorstep alone. Only to find the lights on already.

His mom and dad stand up from their waiting place on the couch at the sound of the door.

“Baby,” his mom softly starts, hands out as if pacifying a creature. “Hey. Hayden texted, told us what happened.”

And it’s the last straw. Shane breaks, sobs bubbling up and over as he falls apart on his doorstep. His mom and dad bolt into action, and Yuna tucks him into her arms right away, holding him as he cries and helping him to his knees.

“Hey, shh, shh, oh honey,” Yuna whispers, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry, honey.”

He doesn’t know how long he sobs in his mother’s arms, but once he’s done, he feels wrung out, empty. He hasn’t felt this numb in a long, long time.

“Hey, son,” his dad murmurs, approaching where he had been waiting. He crouches to his heels and if Shane could speak, he would tell him to not, it’s hell on his knees. “Let’s get you in the shower, in some clean clothes. I’ll put something on for dinner, and we’ll stay in for some family time, alright?”

Shane hears it through jello, but eventually slowly nods.

His shower goes by in a blur, the rush of water taking away the sweat, blood, and betrayal down the drain with no notice from Shane. After, he changes, not bothering to look at what his mom handed him until he had already started putting on the shirt.

It’s one of Ilya’s, one he had left behind from his visit what feels like ages ago. It hangs from his frame, soft and breathable from tens of washes. He doesn’t know if his mother knew that it was his boyfriend’s but it still smells like him, like when he’s tucked under Ilya’s arm.

He follows his mother back into the living room, his dad still busy in the kitchen. The normal bustle and clatter of his cooking in the quiet is surprisingly welcome after his breakdown.

“Come sit with me, my baby,” Yuna settles against the corner of the couch and reaches for Shane. He lets her pull him down, until he’s nearly on top of her, so she can wrap her arms around. He’s too big to be held like a child, but Yuna doesn’t let that stop her. Shane melts against her chest, and feels five years old again, not understanding why the other kids don’t like playing with him. He breathes in cedar and bergamot and tries to return sensation to his fingertips, one exhale at a time.

“I don’t think I can stay with the Voyagers, mom,” Shane murmurs finally, head tucked into her neck. He feels her inhale and sigh, fingers curling in his hair the way she used to soothe him after a nightmare when he was smaller.

“No,” she replies quietly, “no, I don’t think you can.”

He had been nervous to bring it up. His mom was the biggest Voyagers fan on the planet and had said so in every interview after his draft. It felt like a betrayal to her to even speak about it.

“I know,” his voice cracks, “I know they’re your favorite team, and that this’ll be, I don’t know, a disappointment but I really tried mom, I tried so hard to stay but—“

“Oh, no, no, no,” Yuna hushes him, horrified. “Oh honey, I’m not disappointed with you. I’m fucking infuriated that team has been treating my son the way they have. They’re the ones who are a disappointment. Not you. Never you.”

Shane lets out a wet exhale, eyes tight to keep the tears from slipping again.

“I gave them so much mom,” he breathes, "my rookie season. My pain. My youth. I got them to the playoffs. It still wasn’t enough.”

“I know,” she murmurs. “It’s not fair.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“My brave boy,” Yuna whispers, brushing back his bangs. “No matter what you decide, you’ll have us, okay? Me, your dad,” she smiles a little, hugging him close. “Ilya.”

“That’s a lot to ask of Ilya. I don’t know,” Shane mumbles, and is surprised when Yuna snorts.

“Honey, that boy is gone on you,” Yuna laughs softly. “He’s not going anywhere, baby.”

Shane feels his boyfriend’s absence like a physical cavity, like he’s missing one of his vital organs.

“Can we call him?” Shane asks, feeling young and smaller than he is. Being in his mother’s arms like this does that to him.

“Of course,” Yuma smiles, fondly. She already reaches for her phone, “I’m sure he’ll love that.”

Shane closes his eyes and waits to hear three of the most important people in his life surround him entirely. Waits to feel truly at home when Ilya picks up, a familiar voice over the phone.

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Nothing changes the next day. He's expected to show up to morning practice as always, to captain his teammates who call him slurs like always, to play hockey, as always.

So Shane does what Shane does best. He plays some fucking hockey.

The second round is just as taxing, but at least not as brutal. Tampa had been just as fair and consistent as the Bears had been since Shane's outing— one of their ACs had even stopped him after a regular season game to check in. He shared that his brother was gay too, and that he was sorry that Shane got outed that way. They win against Tampa 4-1, Shane feeling the cost of dragging his teammates through the games to a win in his bones. The commentators chat and jabber and babble about Shane Hollander's monster winning streak, the best performance of his career, a legendary single player playoff run. Someone on his team dumps a stash of rotting eggplants in his practice bag in the lockers. Shane plays hockey.

Round three is against the Admirals, and Shane doesn't say it, but he doesn't expect to win. Scott Hunter could go toe to toe with Shane on a good day, and his team was still a cohesive unit supporting their star center.

Then Hunter gets slammed against the boards by Koch at just the wrong angle during their second game. When he pulls back, he can see him clutching his arm and wincing. They later find out Hunter's out of the playoffs with an arm fracture that can't be splinted well enough to get him back on the ice. The rest of the Admirals give them a run for their money, but the Voyagers clinch it in Game Seven during overtime. Shane is pretty sure he has a broken rib, because Theriault has stopped running JJ as defense with Shane's shifts, leaving him utterly alone out in the ice. Shane keeps his head down, and plays hockey.

And now they're at home. Game Seven against the Los Angeles Emperors of the Stanley Cup finals. The bleachers of Bell Centre are filled to the brim with Montreal fans, waiting for their team to bring home the Cup for the first time in decades. There's a feral energy in the arena. A promise of blood, win or lose.

Shane doesn't care. He's in an empty hallway in just his compression shirt and hockey pants, tucked against Ilya's chest and neck. His boyfriend had flown in that morning and Shane successfully managed to sneak him down to the player tunnels. He soaks him in, and the rest of the world around them fades away into an insignificant buzz. Shane times his breathing with the beat of Ilya's heart.

"They don't deserve it," Ilya grits his teeth, forcibly keeping his enraged shaking to keep Shane in place. Shane's been careful to keep his boyfriend fully clear of the lockers since he arrived in Montreal. He doesn't personally know any criminal defense lawyers, though he's sure his mom could find one. "The Cup. They don't deserve *you*."

"Maybe," Shane mumbles, exhausted. He had looked himself in the mirror that morning and hardly recognized the man staring back at him, with sunken and bruised eyes and cheekbones

sharp enough to snap. “But I want it. I want it so badly. Don’t I deserve it?”

Ilya sighs, pulling back just far enough to rest his forehead against Shane’s. “Дорогой.”

He doesn’t finish, and Shane watches with hooded eyes as Ilya lets go of his rage for just a few seconds to kiss him long and deep.

“You will show them that a gay man is the best hockey player in the world,” Ilya vows vehemently, when they part. “You will win this Cup, and the entire world will know Shane Hollander is gay and the best hockey player in the world.”

Shane accepts the gentle kiss on his cheek before bringing Ilya back midline. He makes a decision.

“If we win,” Shane whispers against his lips. “Come down to the ice, okay? With my parents and the other families.”

Ilya looks a little stunned. “What? You are serious?”

“Yes,” Shane says, without any hesitation. There’s no doubt here, “I want you there. I want to celebrate with my boyfriend just like everyone else gets to celebrate with their partners. I deserve that. If we win, I deserve to have you there.”

He’s tired of hiding and being told he should be ashamed. He wants to love Ilya loudly, visibly, proudly. He’s given Montreal enough, he’s not giving up the best part of his life for them too.

The fans and players and media mean nothing, not when Shane has starshine.

Ilya softens, and there’s gentle pride in his smile. “Yes. You do. You deserve this and more, sweetheart. I will come down to ice when you win. Promise.” \

When he returns to the locker room, it's to the normal indifference of his team. He sits at his stall, slipping on his headphones as he gets ready to put on his skates and pauses.

If all goes well, this will be the last game Shane Hollander plays as a Montreal Voyager.

He looks up then, to take it in one more time. Sees the rookies arguing about the best hockey tape, a recurrent debate that had started months ago and shows no sign of conclusion. Some of the vets are going through their rituals. Comeau puts on socks then takes them off and then puts them back on backwards. Miitka in deep stretches on the floor. JJ is still shirtless for no reason.

He had started his career in the NHL with these boys. He had trained them, won with them, lost with them. He had thought he would be here for years, retiring his number up on the rafters in Bell Centre.

He finishes with his skates, standing to put away his headphones. One more game. Shane is going to play the best fucking hockey of his life for one more game and show Montreal exactly why they need Shane Hollander more than Shane Hollander needs Montreal.

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Shane's watching the clock with something like dread, if he had the energy to feel anything at all. Six minutes left in the third period and the Voyagers are down two, 3-5. The Emperors could taste victory; they've clamped down on their win and were refusing to let go and Shane still doesn't have a defense.

Anyone else would have called it in. Maybe try for one more goal so that the final score isn't too painful. Play out the last few minutes with a funeral dirge in their ears and try again next year.

Shane takes one deep breath through his nose and exhales through his mouth, crouching down at center ice with every muscle in his body primed and tense. The clock's not his problem anymore. His one job for the next six minutes is to get the puck in the back of the Emperors' net three times and he wasn't going to look up again at the wall until he's done.

"Tired yet, Hollander?" Jameson smirks, clearly smug in what he assumes is his done victory. His mistake. The puck drops and Shane goes off like a bullet.

He passes it to Hayden the second he gets clear of the other center and sprints out to open ice past the blue line; Hayden reads his mind and sends it back before anyone else can catch on.

Shane drives it around the goal, going behind the goalie. He's less than a foot away from the crease when he wraps his stick around and sneaks the puck right under Gunderson's pads with a five-hole.

He barely hears the bell and Montreal cheering, immediately heading back for center ice. 4-5. Two more.

Jameson huffs a laugh, still not worried as he joins Shane. "That was a pretty goal, Hollander. Showing off to your boy?"

It's tame, all things considered, and true, technically. Shane locks in, biting into his mouth guard with clenched teeth. He doesn't let Jameson blink before he's got the puck again, turning sharp around the other player.

The Emperors' defense had wised up, guarding Hayden better than last time. He doesn't trust Koch, so Shane sprints on his own, picking up three other players behind him. They clearly think that he's planning on a home run with a dangle, getting the puck from center ice to the goal line all on his own. Shane doesn't look at him to give away his next move, and passes it like a shot to Petrov. The rookie's not expecting it, nearly fumbles it, but keeps it out of the reach of the defenseman guarding him long enough for Shane to swerve to where he would be clear of his shadows. He taps the ice twice.

Petrov passes it perfectly, a drill that Shane had practiced with him for hours and hours and finally paying off at the eleventh hour. He feints, and gets the puck in with his deke, right over the goalie's left shoulder.

Shane takes a second to heave for air, a bit more sound filtering through. The crowd is wild with energy, and he can hear his name in the chanting. Petrov crashes into him.

“Captain!” he shouts, beaming, “fuck, that was a fucking beaut, Captain!”

Shane grins, sparing a second to knock his knuckles against the back of the boy’s helmet. “Great assist, rookie.”

He sees out of the corner of his eye Theriault switching out Koch for JJ, a merciful move that he hadn’t expected from his coach. It’s JJ and Petrov on defense, and Hayden and Taylor for his wings– all people Shane could trust.

Shane cheats, sneaking a glance at the clock. It’s counting down to 00:56, with the score 5-5 underneath. One more in under a minute. Shane was going to win the Stanley Cup in regulation time.

Jameson isn’t grinning anymore when he joins Shane at the center line for the third time in five minutes.

“You’re fucking crazy, Hollander,” he scoffs, but there’s something like respect under his breath. “Fuck.”

Shane doesn’t bother replying, and wins the face-off for the third time in a row.

He doesn’t manage to get the puck over the blue line, all three of the opponent forwards crowding on him the second his stick cradles the puck. Their left wing, Lemar, snags it and sets off towards the Voyagers’ goal.

Shane pivots hard, dodging Jameson with a mohawk turn and tracking down Lemar. He’s the Emperors’ fastest player– but Shane’s faster. In an almost dirty move, Shane reaches underneath his legs between his skates and with a flick of his wrist, steals the puck back without tripping Lemar, avoiding the penalty.

“What the fuck!” the other player curses, half a second behind when he realizes he’s lost the puck. Shane doesn’t hear him because he’s already over the blue line into the neutral zone. No one else catches onto the change in possession quick enough so Shane manages to get into the offensive zone before someone tries to check him and he sends it to Taylor, who shoots it off to Hayden almost immediately.

“Bring it home, Hollzy!” Hayden shouts, shooting the puck not at Shane but at the frame of the goal with a loud ding. Shane catches it on the rebound, and sends it home to the back of the Emperors’ net.

Shane looks up to the clock properly. 00:08. 6-5. He nearly loses his balance as Hayden barrels into him, followed by Petrov, Taylor, and JJ in procession.

“Holy fuck,” Taylor repeats feverishly. “Holy fuck, holy fuck.”

“Stanley Cup Champions!” Petrov shouts, giddy.

“Come on, let’s go!” a ref shouts at them, but he’s staring at Shane in awe. “Center ice, Hollander. Finish the game.”

Jameson’s quiet when Shane meets him one last time.

“Tired yet, Jameson?” Shane chirps with a slight smirk. He doesn’t blink at the answering glare. The puck drops and doesn’t even make it over the blue line, stuck in the neutral zone when the buzzer goes off, ending the game and making the Montreal Voyagers the 2014 Stanley Cup Champions.

All his teammates on the ice pile on to him immediately, pulling off their helmets to throw to the side and then knocking him to the ice. Around them, the arena shakes.

“*Mon ostie de saint-sacrament de câlice de crisse*!” JJ shouts in québécois, nearly lost in the cheering crowd. “*Champions! On est champions!*

“Holy fucking shit, Shane,” Hayden gasps, grabbing his face, “holy shit. *Holy shit.”*

His other teammates join them from the bench, piling on. It’s the physically closest he’s been to most of them in months, and even then Koch and Wilson manage to keep apart. It makes no difference to Shane anymore. He did it. He had to drag them kicking and screaming, but he got Montreal the Stanley Cup for the first time in thirty years.

Family was on the ice now, searching for husbands and sons and fathers. Jackie and the kids have already tackled Hayden and Shane looks up, finding his parents immediately.

“Fucking hell, Shane,” David laughs in disbelief, wrapping him in a firm hug. “A hat trick? In the finals? My god.”

“*Two* hat tricks,” Yuna corrects, beaming and red with smugness. She grabs Shane as soon as his dad lets him go. “That’s my *fucking* son. Stanley Cup Champion. *Fuck.*”

“Thanks guys,” Shane laughs, giddy. He’s still floating when his mom releases him, and he checks over her shoulder automatically, searching.

“He’s over there, baby,” Yuna quietly laughs, pointing behind Shane.

Shane turns, and finds his boyfriend a few feet away, apart from the rest of the crowd and unsure. His hair’s a little messy like he had been running a hand through it, and he’s gone a little pale in the cold of the arena. He’s a personal galaxy, beautiful, brilliant, and entirely Shane’s.

“Congratulations, малыш,” Ilya tells him, smile gentle and a little hesitant. He has his hands in his jeans pockets and Shane is so in love with him. “I was not sure if you still wanted me to come down but–”

Shane skates the last few feet to get to Ilya, stopping gently in front of him. In his skates, he’s the same height as Ilya.

“I’m going to kiss you,” Shane tells him, and he’s breathless in a way that has nothing to do with the game. “Is that okay?”
Ilya gapes at him before a disbelieving laugh escapes him. He reaches for the back of Shane’s sweaty head and pulls him down, making their lips meet. Shane finally feels like he’s won.

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“Please don’t frame it, Ilya, I look disgusting," Shane sighs, not for the first time.

“I am framing it,” he beams, holding up the picture. “It is romantic, Hollander.”

Said picture had come in the mail, sent by Shane’s mother. She had managed to find and print out a shot of Shane and Ilya on the ice after the win, a perfect candid of them wrapped up in each other’s embrace. Shane looks like he had skated through hell and back in it.

If the post-interviews after winning the Olympics Gold had been crazy, the post-interviews after one of the most ridiculous upsets in a Stanley Cup finals are bonkers. He’s been getting calls nonstop. Farah and Yuna have been booked and busy between interview requests and sponsorship offers. Shane Hollander, 2014 Stanley Cup Champion and Gold Medal Olympian, is the latest hottest commodity.

He doesn’t really engage with any of it, beyond what he’s forced to with the management and Farah. He’s far more content curling up on the giant beanbag chair Ilya has convinced him to buy and watching Ilya happily hum as he maps out photos for the wall, using the pictures his mom had sent in an envelope. Some of them were with their friends while others were Shane and Ilya on their own, both aware and not. Most important though, is that it showed a life together that Shane hadn’t ever dreamed for himself, all those months ago. All because he didn’t hang up on a phone sex line.

“What do you think?” he asks Shane, looking back while holding up two large pictures of Shane’s birthday and a picture Yuna had taken of them curled up on the couch together, asleep.

Shane smiles, pushing himself up out of the beanbag and meandering over to Ilya. He wraps his arms around from behind him, holding him close as he presses his cheek against Ilya’s back, feeling the muscles there shift under him.

“Whatever looks good to you, baby,” Shane murmurs.

“Very helpful, thank you Hollander,” Ilya scoffs, sarcastic, but he leans back into Shane’s hold. He’s warm and solid and Shane squeezes tight, hopelessly endeared.

Ilya sets down the photos, and wriggles in Shane’s grip to turn, wrapping his arms around Shane as well when they’re chest to chest. He feels Ilya kiss his forehead.

“Stanley Cup Champion,” Ilya murmurs, quiet. He glances at the silver cup on the dining table, gleaming and looking comically out of place. “You want me to fuck you in front of it again?”

Shane shoves him, flushing red as Ilya cackles.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Shane scoffs, exasperated.

Ilya kisses him soft and quick and extricates himself from Shane’s hold to go back to the couch for his laptop.

It’s peaceful, being in the same space silently co-working. There’s no need to perform or entertain; they were simply together and sharing time. Feels domestic, normal, and routine in a way that makes Shane smile. Ilya’s working on a paper, and the clicking of his keyboard while he types is comfortable background noise as Shane goes through emails.

His phone ringtone startles the silence, making both him and Ilya look up.

“Sorry,” he tells Ilya, getting up to avoid bothering him. It’s an unknown number, which gives Shane pause. Still, only select people have access to his personal cell number, so it’s probably someone he can trust.

“Hello?” Shane answers.

“Hey,” the caller starts, “it’s, uh, Hunter. Scott Hunter. Got your number from Vaughn who got it from the Montreal WAGs.”

“Oh. Hey,” Shane blinks, holding himself still, cautious. Hunter has never called him a slur, but ever since his win, he’s gotten just as many hate messages as he’s gotten congratulatory ones. “Uh, how are you? Your arm healing okay?”

“It’s healing just fine, kid. I’ll be ready to steal that Cup back next year, don’t you worry,” Hunter answers, but it’s dry and makes Shane huff a laugh. “No, I, uh, wanted to say congrats. That was a fucking crazy Game Seven, Hollander. I don’t think anyone’s going to stop talking about it anytime soon.”

“Oh– thanks.”

“Two hat tricks in a playoff finals game, with one in the last six minutes of the third period. You’re batshit insane, Hollander. Jesus.”

Shane snorts. “Thanks, Hunter. I appreciate you calling–”

“Ah, wait,” he interrupts suddenly, “that’s not the only reason I called.”

Shane stays quiet, letting the silence prompt Hunter.

“About March,” the older player starts, hesitant. Shane’s hackles go back up. “I don’t think I’ve said it, but I’m sorry. Everything that happened– that was fucking awful. You didn’t deserve any of the shit you got.”

“Oh,” Shane exhales, eyebrows furrowed as he deflates again. “Uh, thanks?”

“And I’m sure you didn’t mean to be the first out gay player of the league, and it sucks that you were forced to be,” Hunter continues, ignoring Shane as his words start rolling. “But when you kissed your boyfriend on center ice– fuck. I can’t tell you in words how that made me feel, to see on the screen. I didn’t feel alone, for the first time in probably the entire time I’ve played hockey. Since I was a teenager.”

Shane gets it, all at once in one solid strike. “Hunter.”

“I just,” Hunter exhales. “I just wanted you to know you weren’t alone. Because you made me feel not alone. So thank you.”

“Yeah,” Shane replies, voice hoarse. “Yeah, of course. Thank you, man. For trusting me.”

“Man?” Hunter asks, and Shane can hear the teasing there, “what happened to ‘Mr. Hunter, sir’ rookie?”

“Not a rookie any more.”

“You’re always going to be the rook who can’t handle his liquor to me, Hollander.”

“Jesus,” Shane half groans, half laughs. “Are any of you geezers going to let me forget those tequila shots?”

“Maybe when you have more than a single beer at a function, Hollander.”

“Shane,” he corrects him without thinking about it. “Call me Shane. We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, alright. You’ll have to call me Scott then.”

“Cool. Okay. Scott.”

“Hey, next time we end up matched in the same city, we should grab drinks. There’s a great place I know in New York. Catch up.”

“Yeah, I’d like that,” Shane smiles, “we’ll meet up next time for drinks. Thanks for calling, Scott. And telling me. It… it means a lot. If you want to talk about it, or anything really, just shoot me a text.”

“Thanks Shane. For listening. For everything. Enjoy your win.”

“Bye Scott.”

When he hangs up, still smiling faintly, he realizes the apartment is completely silent. Ilya's typing for some reason stalled.

“Who was that?” Ilya asks, tilting his head. There’s an inscrutable look on his face.

“Huh?” Shane blinks, looking up. “Oh. Hunter. Scott Hunter. Captain for the New York Admirals?”

“Scott Hunter has you smiling and giggling over the phone,” Ilya says blankly. “Okay.”

“He just wanted to say that I wasn’t alone,” Shane shrugs, feigning casual even though he’s breathless over the fact he’s not *alone.*

“Of course you are not alone,” Ilya grumbles. “I am right here.”

“Not like that. I think he meant… you know. I think he meant that I wasn’t alone in the NHL. Being gay.”

“He’s gay,” Ilya echoes. He’s still not looking at Shane. “Scott Hunter, millionaire captain of Admirals, called you to tell you he is gay and that you aren’t alone. Calls you by your first name and makes you laugh and asks if you want to go out for drinks. Okay.”

It clicks embarrassingly slow.

“Are you jealous?” Shane asks, incredulous. He can’t stop the grin creeping up on his face.

Ilya sees it and answers with a scowl. “No. Shut up.”

“Baby,” Shane laughs a little. “Hey.” He walks up closer. Ilya crosses his arms and his scowl turns into a pout. “I’m not interested in Hunter. There’s nothing that’s going to be happening there.”

“Yes,” Ilya mutters, “but does he know that?”

“Doesn’t matter if he does or doesn’t,” Shane smiles, slipping into Ilya’s lap. “You know why? Hmm?”

He nudges Ilya’s gaze up with a hand, locking eyes. There’s insecurity there, something unsure and defensive. Ilya should never be looking at Shane like that.

Ilya huffs a sigh, feigning exasperation. “Fuck. Fine. Why, Hollander?”

Shane replies simply, making sure Ilya’s still looking as he says it. “Because he’s not you. He’ll never be you.”

He gets to see the way Ilya’s eyes widen and the lines around them soften. He smiles so gently Shane has to kiss him, sweet and chaste.

“Romantic,” Ilya murmurs against his lips with a laugh.

“I’ve never looked at anyone else since I met you,” Shane tells him, earnest. “You don’t have to worry, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

Ilya stares at him, looking between both his eyes searching for something. He must find it because he swallows and pulls Shane close to rest on his chest. Shane feels him press a gentle kiss to his forehead and run a hand through his hair and he melts. He feels *safe.*

Like this, Shane can listen to the steady, strong beat of Ilya's heart under his ear and pace his breathing with the sound. He could stay like this forever, rot into the cushions intertwined. Everything, from the outing, to the team, to the breach of privacy– all of it was worth it if it means Shane can have Ilya like this without hiding, for as long as he wants.

Lazily, Shane lightly drags his fingers up and down the firm cushion of his chest, daring as he goes farther and farther down nonchalantly. Ilya huffs but doesn't move as Shane reaches between his legs, rubbing down firmly against his soft bulge, and he returns to petting Shane's head as Shane works him over his sweats.

Shane feels like he's moving slower than usual, syrupy in this bubble haven they've made for each other. He shifts and presses his lips between his pecs, trailing kisses down until his face meets Ilya's lap, nuzzling in. Ilya's regular scent is thicker with musk here, one that has Shane's brain chemically rewired– his mouth starts salivating with the association. He only kisses Ilya's clothed cock until it's about half-hard before he tugs at the waistband. Ilya, who had been stroking Shane's skin wherever he could find it, including under his shirt, helps him pull his sweats and briefs down just far enough to free his cock and balls.

Sinking his mouth down onto his boyfriend's length makes Shane close his eyes and moan, buzzing already with the pleasure of something heavy and thick against his tongue.

"Fuck," he hears Ilya exhale almost silently, and he feels the grounding pressure of his hand against the back of his neck, neither pushing not pulling but instead keeping Shane steady.

Shane loses himself to the motions, letting his spit soak down his cock until the slide of his lips is silky and easy and Ilya is fully hard in his mouth. Shane stretched his elbow out in front of him over Ilya's thigh and another between the space of his back and the back of the couch, finding leverage to take him deeper until he could feel the press of his head against the very back of his throat. With one deep breath, Shane forcibly swallows, feeling space being created as his throat opens up and Ilya's cock slides deeper in the tight channel behind his tongue smoothly until Shane's nose is pressed against his thigh.

"Sweetheart," Ilya groans, his fingers tightening in Shane's hair. "Боже мой, that's fucking incredible– Oh, *fuck*."

Shane sucks as he draws back for air and then plunges back, creating a solid rhythm that's punishing against his throat but has Ilya letting out involuntarily broken moans that only encourages Shane to go faster.

"Shane," Ilya gasps, pulling suddenly. "Shit, Shane, I'm going to–"

Shane pulls back just far enough to rest the head against his tongue and he strokes the rest of Ilya's length, slick with his spit. It takes no time at all before Ilya grunts, cock jerking as he releases in pulses in Shane's mouth. Shane swallows down every drop, suckling him for more until Ilya's dry and tugging him off in oversensitivity.

"God," Ilya pants for air, watching as Shane tries to catch his breath. Shane wipes his mouth with the back of his hand clean of his spit and the remnants of Ilya's finish. "Fuck, you are perfect."

Shane flushes, like he always does at the face of Ilya's blatant praise, and leans in when Ilya directs him into a kiss, hand creeping down Shane's stomach.

His phone rings *again.*

"Fuck," Shane sighs, voice hoarse, reaching for it buzzing on the coffee table to both of their disgruntlement. He's still half-hard but Shane climbs off of Ilya, who briefly tries to keep him trapped for another half second with a grumble.

"Leave it, fuck, I want to suck your cock," Ilya whines.

"Ilya," Shane admonishes, laughing as he trips. "It could be important."

"It better not be another gay hockey captain confessing they are in love with you and want to have your babies," Ilya mutters but releases him reluctantly.

Shane checks the caller ID, and freezes.

"Shane?"

Shane swallows, clears his throat, and greets Theriault. "Coach."

Ilya holds still, watching nervously as Shane listens to the tightly controlled venom of his former team coach as if he had witnesses. Listens to the trade deal the Voyagers had made, shipping off the captain that had gotten them the Stanley Cup because of who he loved.

He's waiting for the worst to drop like a bombshell which is why he almost misses it.

Shane's breath catches. "What? Seriously?"

"You heard me Hollander," he replies through his teeth. He was seething.

"Okay. Holy shit. Okay. I, um. Thank you, Coach."

"It's strategy, Hollander. We didn't do it for you."

Theriault hangs up before Shane can reply, leaving him standing and staring at his phone, which had just given him a potentially life-changing option that he hadn't been sure he would be lucky enough to have. Every piece of the puzzle fits together into a perfect image that feels almost too good to be true.

"Shane?" Ilya calls, briefly shaking him out of his stupor. "Малыш, is everything okay?"

Shane's quiet for too long, thoughts racing too fast to make anything coherent, and Ilya gets up in concern. "Hey, sweetheart, Shane, what is it? What's wrong? We can figure it out together, Лунный свет."

Shane sees Ilya start towards him and finally manages to string together a full sentence that leaves him in a single exhale. "Boston needs a star center."

It stops Ilya in his tracks and he stares at him with furrowed eyebrows.“What?”

“I, uh,” Shane stutters, “I told Farah that I was considering dropping my no-trade clause this summer, and had her ask around quietly and um. Boston. Boston needs a star center and had top draft picks and the cap space. I wasn’t sure if they would bite, but that was Theriault, telling me Boston was taking me. Trade just went through.”

Ilya approaches him slowly, and wraps a hand around his waist. “Boston,” he repeats faintly. “As in, here. My city. You would play for the Bears?”

“Um, yeah,” Shane replies, uncertain. “They don’t have a strong center and Thompson’s set to retire in a year or two. They want a captain and someone to anchor their first line and I uh, I guess Montreal wants to rebuild with the first draft picks—”

Ilya’s not saying anything, working his throat as if trying to get the words out mechanically.

Suddenly, a seed of doubt drops in Shane’s gut. “Unless… Unless you don’t want me here. I just— I know you want to stay at MIT and I thought when you said you applied to McGill you wanted to live in the same city too but I know a lot has changed since then so if you don’t want me here um–”

“Я тебя люблю,” Ilya interrupts him, breathless.

Shane stops abruptly. “Ah, sorry?”

Ilya gives him a ghost of a smile, squeezing his waist. He lets out a laugh that sounds almost like a sob as he cups Shane’s face which he knows is openly bewildered. Carefully, he says it again.

“Я,” he repeats, pointing at himself.

“Тебя,” pressing a finger to the center of Shane’s chest.

“Люблю.” Ilya kisses him heartbreakingly soft, transcending language. Shane understands all at once and he feels his eyes burn with tears.

“Holy shit,” Shane whispers, throat tight. His voice cracks.

“I love you, Shane,” Ilya tells him, pressing his forehead against Shane’s gently. “It is only ever going to be you.”

“Fuck,” Shane gasps against his lips. He surges up into a messy and desperate kiss. “Fuck, I love you too. I love you so fucking much.”

Ilya half-laughs, bright with joy that sparkles and he kisses Shane again, on his lips and then over his face, soft and chaste pecks that have Shane giggling.

“Boston together then?” he asks, breathlessly and hopefully. He looks stunningly young and happy in a way that Shane wants to memorialize forever.

Shane smiles, feeling the star inside of him pulse to the same beat as Ilya's heart under his palm. "Yeah, baby. Boston together."

+++

July is lazy, blissful, golden and free.

It's not public yet where the trade was going to be, but it was a well known fact that Shane Hollander would be leaving the Montreal Voyagers. It's set to be announced any day now, his transition meetings with the Boston management and coaches leaving him cautiously optimistic about his new team. For the most part, everyone seemed ecstatic to have snatched up *the* Shane Hollander.

There would be hiccups and hurdles of course; Shane was not a player that well suited the aggressive playing style of the Boston Bears, preferring clever plays and agility to score. He anticipated the learning curve would be steep, and was still uneasy about a new locker room despite Ilya's reassurances after being burned so badly in Montreal.

But that's a problem for August Shane. Right now, he's trying to convince his boyfriend they did not need fourteen novelty mugs in their new apartment.

"When did you even pack all of these?" Shane sighs, exasperated holding up two. One had a meme of a dinosaur and a comet while the other had a math joke that Shane honestly had no clue about.

"When you were with Svetlana," Ilya shrugs. "I knew my evil boyfriend would try and take them away from me.

"Fourteen, Ilya?"

"They are sentimental!"

Shane mentally includes cupboard organizer shelves to make more room in the kitchen.

The new apartment was an upgrade, one that Shane had fully invested his first week finding since signing his new contract. It was bigger than their last place with an open space plan and had beautiful natural light with dark maple wood flooring. When they had been touring listings, Shane had fallen in love with the matching wood accents in the kitchen and living room and tasteful lighting. Ilya agreed solely for the soundproofing through the walls with a smirk.

Which Shane knew Ilya was looking to test out judging from the look he was giving him, tapped out after putting away their joint book collections in the bookshelf Shane had built already. Most of the furniture in the living room was built, but the bedroom was still unfinished. They've been unpacking all day, and it was, granted, getting very late.

"Ilya," Shane admonishes as Ilya abandons his task to get into Shane's space. He huffs, pushing against the heavy weight the drops onto him where he sits on the floor.

"Finish for the day?"

Shane hates how fucking cute he is. Ilya's pouting was a fucking Grade A weapon. "I'm not done."

"Mugs will still be there if we leave them until morning. I think we should break in the bed," Ilya purrs, stroking up and down Shane's sides, "christen the apartment."

"We haven't built the bed yet," Shane counters, trying to play off unamused even as Ilya nuzzles into the soft crease of his neck and shoulder.

"We break in mattress on the floor then."

Ilya looks up with a smirk playing on the edges of his mouth, mischievous and eager, and Shane would do a lot to keep him carefree and boyish. He pretends to hedge a little longer, lowering Ilya's guard as he tries to convince Shane with more chaste kisses.

Then he bolts up, dumping Ilya on the floor to sprint to the bedroom to start off a race.

"Hey!" Ilya complains, "cheater!"

Shane cackles as he races down the hallway skidding a little in his socks on the new, clean floor. He almost makes it. The air in his lungs is knocked out of him as he's tackled into the mattress from behind, making him laugh as Ilya holds him down to keep him still.

"Brat," Ilya growls, and Shane bites his lip with a grin as he feels Ilya grind into him from behind.

"I've been telling you, baby," Shane teases. "Cardio training. Can't have you getting out of shape–"

Ilya flips him over in one smooth motion, bearing down on him with his arms caging him.

"I will show you cardio training, Hollander," Ilya promises with a curl to his lips, and sets to strip him brusquely. Shane eagerly returned the favor.

It doesn't take any time at all before Shane's naked on his hands and knees with three of Ilya's fingers inside him, stretching him out almost too fast, right on the border of pleasurepain that has him breathless and moaning.

"Greedy fucking hole," Ilya pants, kissing down his back open mouthed. A twist of his wrist has Shane whimpering, clutching onto the sheets under him. "Taking it so fucking well."

"Jesus, Ilya, just fuck me," Shane gasps, eyes shut as he feels his rim stretch to take a fourth. "I don't need another one, fuck, please, I need your dick."

He's almost worried Ilya will tease him for longer, but he must be getting just as desperate because Ilya has him on his back in seconds. With a tight grip on his hips, he drags Shane's body up and straight onto Ilya's cock like a sleeve with a flex of his arm muscles. Shane cries out, hips held up in the air and immobilized as he's suddenly filled, three and half fingers still not enough to be prepared for the stretch.

“God,” Ilya exhales, throat shredded as his eyes flutter shut. “*Fuck,* you’re fucking tight.”

Shane’s still trying to get air into his lungs, heart skipping beats as he tries to adjust. He grips Ilya’s shoulders with his nails as Ilya thrusts into him, bending him forward and pushing Shane’s knees back towards his shoulders in a fold. “*Oh my god.”*

Ilya doesn’t ease him into, fucking him hard and fast from the start. He’s not fully conscious of the soft, involuntary whines and pleads that escape him with each thrust in a filthy staccato as he slips closer to a hazy, dazed subspace.

Shane can feel a devastating finish curl up at the base of his spine as his cock leaks onto his own abs. He’s right there, almost there, he needs–

Ilya gets a call, ring sharp in the air and it startles both of them enough for Ilya’s rhythm to falter.

“Fuck, ignore it,” Shane gasps, and Ilya grunts in agreement, capturing Shane’s cry with a kiss when he picks up his pace. “Oh, fuck, yes, there, right there, come on fuck me—“

The ringing finally stops, and Shane’s grasping at the pillow above him and struggling to breathe, Ilya merciless as he pounds into him.

“So good for me,” he groans, kissing him between words and his own heavy breathing, “fuck, you’re always such a slut for me—“

The ringing starts again.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ilya growls against Shane’s lips, somehow still coordinated enough to swallow Shane’s next moan and swat his hand behind him to grab the ringing offender from the charger on the floor.

“What?” he snaps, settling deeper in Shane and rolling into him as he talks. Shane is burning hot, eyes wide as Ilya shallowly continues to fuck him while on the phone without missing a beat.

“Rozanov,” a man starts, and he’s clearly breathless. Shane can tell it’s noisy, wherever he’s calling from. “We’re giving you Folsom’s firstborn child.”

The low grade pleasure of Ilya’s movements has Shane dizzy, and he has to bite down on his tongue to keep from begging out loud.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The Bears are formally and preemptively recognizing your part in getting Boston the Stanley Cup. We thank you and your dick for your service.”

Said dick is still pulsing inside of Shane, hot and hard and fucking him full to the brim. His boyfriend frowns, reaching down and absently stroking Shane’s hard cock with his free hand. Shane has to slap his own over his mouth to hold back a moan.

“Who is that?” Shane asks fighting to keep his breathing even and voice quiet. Ilya brushes his prostate in a way that makes him want to whine.

“It’s fucking Marleau,” Ilya swears, scowling. “Fuck you, I’m hanging up—“

“Is that Hollander? He with you?”

“Yes, he is in Boston and looking very pretty in my bed, so *fuck off*—.”

“Hollander, it’s good to have you. Rozy, for the love of god, don’t fuck this up. Keep your boyfriend happy and *here*. Do not blow this for us. At least not until we win the Cup.”

“Yes, I was doing that,” Ilya grits out, “before you called me at 11 pm and interrupted.”

“Any time this asshole gets on your last nerve Hollander, and trust me, it’ll happen, you just let me know. Me and the boys will set him straight– or you know, maybe not *straight* but–”

“Thanks Marleau,” Shane answers dryly, heart racing. Ilya twists his hand around the head of his cock so viciously in punishment Shane bites his bottom lip to keep a groan in, eyes fluttering shut as his hips rock up into his grip.

“Marleau,” Ilya growls, “did your only brain cell get lost? What part of ‘you are cockblocking me right now’ is not clicking?”

“Jesus, Rozanov, we just found out about Hollander, give us a–”

Whatever patience Ilya had while on the phone clearly vanishes in that second, because he doesn’t care that Marleau hears his next thrust, hard and rough. He manages to nail Shane’s prostate in a way that makes his toes curl, forcing a desperate cry out of Shane that he’s not able to hold back fast enough.

“Oh, *fuck! Ilya–”*

“Oh! Oh, you mean right— okay, okay, I’m going. Hollander, don’t hold back from telling him if he does a shit job of it.”

“*Fuck off,* Marley*.”*

Ilya hangs up without another word, carelessly tossing his phone to the rug and bracing himself over Shane.

Shane loses the little control he has and bursts out laughing.

“You’re laughing?” Ilya mock gasps, kissing down Shane’s neck, “Marleau accuses me of not fucking you brainless every time with the best cock you’re pretty hole has taken in your life and you are laughing.”

“To be fair,” Shane exhales, a soft moan escaping him as Ilya punches deep and hard, setting a new rhythm, “you’re the only cock I’ve taken in my life.”

“Yes and I will be the only cock you take ever, hmm?” Ilya pants, leaning down to kiss him almost chastely. “Because you are mine. Mine to keep, to kiss, to fuck.” Ilya nails his prostate in a way that makes him cling to the sheets. He’s close. He’s been close since Ilya answered the phone and kept fucking him while on it. Shane hiccups as Ilya rests his forehead on Shane’s, sharing air. “Mine to love.”

“Ilya—“ Shane’s voice breaks, and he feels his eyes burn, so overwhelmed. “Please—“

“Come for me, my love,” Ilya urges, fucking into him hard, fast, and deep. “Show me how beautiful you are when you come for me.”

The command sinks in and Shane’s back arches, wordlessly crying out as pleasure drowns him. Ilya keeps him still, makes him ride it out as he chokes, eyes closed and mouth open as he tries to breathe, toes curling.

“Fuck,” Ilya whispers, watching him like he was something sacred, and Shane can feel his rhythm falter when Ilya thrusts inside of him deep one more time and fills him. His cock pulses in him and his come coats Shane’s walls, leaving him slippery inside.

They both catch their breath, Ilya slumping over him as his arms give out. Shane reaches up and runs his fingers through Ilya’s curls, soothing.

Finally, Ilya pulls out carefully, letting his spend drip out of Shane’s fucked out hole, and settles against Shane’s side, tucking in against his chest.

“Okay?” Ilya asks, soft. Shane closes his eyes, tracing invisible patterns against his boyfriend’s shoulder now.

“I’m perfect,” he murmurs, kissing Ilya’s forehead.

“Well. I think we can say you will not have problems for being gay in Bears’ locker room,” Ilya says dryly. Shane laughs, but his voice cracks a little.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees roughly, and it feels unreal. He gets to keep Ilya, keep his home, and find a team that seems like one that could become a family. Ilya had everything he wanted too, MIT and his friends and family, the perfect happy ending that feels too good to trust. Too easy. Anxiety sticks in his throat, tempering his joy and he can feel himself thinking too much and too fast. Ilya must sense it, the spiral incoming and halts it in its path.

He reaches over, pulling Shane’s face towards Ilya’s. He clicks his tongue at the uncertainty Shane knows is in his expression.

“You deserve this,” Ilya tells him quietly but firm. “You deserve to have all of this and be happy Shane. Мой лунный свет. This is exactly how everything is supposed to be.”

Ilya knocks his forehead against Shane’s and Shane lets him, letting his words settle him as he takes one deep breath. “Okay. Okay.”

Ilya smiles, pride clear in its lines. Shane doesn’t think he’s ever been held the way Ilya holds him before meeting him. Like he was beautiful, invaluable, precious.

“What does that mean? *Luny svet?”* Shane mumbles, feeling a little drowsy, guard safely down in this bubble. “You’ve been calling me it for months now, I think, but I can’t figure out what it means.”

Ilya exhales quietly, pressing his lips against Shane’s forehead before drawing back. He cups Shane’s cheek tenderly. Shane thinks he’s the loveliest sight he’s ever seen.

“Moonlight,” he answers, soft, “Мой лунный свет. It means ‘my moonlight.’”

“Oh,” Shane whispers, and he feels his smile turn shy. “That’s beautiful. Um, but why call me that? Because we used to call at night?”

Ilya huffs a laugh, shaking his head before propping himself up on his elbow to hover over Shane.

“You are my moon light because you are the brightest light in my night sky,” Ilya replies quietly, almost reverent as he brushes Shane’s cheekbones. “No matter how dark it gets, in life, in my head, I have you. I will always love you, the way the sun loves the moon.”

What’s Shane supposed to do with *that*, not cry?

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane exhales, breath shuddering. He can’t keep down the sob that escapes him. “God. I love you so much. So, so much.”

Ilya smiles, silently kissing one of the stray tear tracks that made it past his waterline. It takes a second for Shane to calm himself, curling into Ilya as his boyfriend traces his freckles, his favorite pastime when they were drunk off orgasms and each other.

“How do you say ‘*my stars’?”* Shane finally asks, breaking the comfortable silence and looking up at him. He sees the way Ilya’s breath catches, something so tender in his expression it burns like the starshine he is.

“Мои звезды,” Ilya replies, voice cracking.

“Мои звезды,” Shane repeats carefully, slowly, until the syllables feel comfortable on his tongue. “Мои звёзды.”

He practices with the limited Russian he’s learned so far, cupping Ilya’s face as he sounds out the words.

“Вы мои звёзды. Я тебя люблю.”

You are my stars. I love you.

Ilya smiles bright with a happy laugh, leaning in to kiss him soft and sweet. Shane’s eyes flutter shut, lips barely brushing—

When one of their stupid fucking phones *goes off again*.

It’s Shane’s, and without a second thought, he reaches over to where it rests with his folded sweatpants and turns it off without looking at caller ID.

“Fuck that,” Shane huffs, returning to fit into Ilya’s hold again, brushing their noses. “We don’t need the phone.”

Everything important was right here anyway.

Chapter End Notes

We're at the end!! just the epilogue left and it's not nearly as long as these other chapters so will hopefully be out sooner. Much love, thank you so much for reading!

Edit: so I lied, I have 67 more hours of med school content to go through in less than two weeks so epilogue will be out after I finish my finals 😔

Chapter 10: ring tone (epilogue)

Chapter Summary

Five years later.

Chapter Notes

Passed my first year of medical school babes and I'm rewarding all of you for it.

This might be my most favorite chapter you guys, it actually ended up so sweet i might throw up.

There were like one million loose ends to tie up and i am nothing if not ambitious so lock in folks its a doozy. I hope this is a satisfying end to this piece for y'all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The regalia for MIT's PhD hooding ceremony is, in Ilya's opinion, a little embarrassing. Not to mention the fabric is uncomfortable, stifling, and not worth the nine hundred dollars he had spent on it. The gown itself is white-grey with red accents on the arms and down the front paired with a white tam cap and red tassel. He feels a little like an altar boy at church, not a great start to his graduation day.

Shane has been thoroughly into it though. He seems a little obsessed with the cap.

The hooding ceremony is a huge tradition but technically a formality. Ilya passed his thesis defense a little less than a month ago and that high had already come and gone with his little family and inner circle.

His public defense had been in one of the smaller classroom auditoriums which seated around 100 back in April. When he was booking it, he had been worried that it would be too big and the empty space would psych him out.

The day of, the entire room had been packed, including not just his friends and family but also other students and faculty members he didn't know but had heard of his work.

He had been a nervous wreck, hands shaking with his notecards, and terrified his grasp on English would slip through when he needed it most even if he had grown practically fluent in the past years. He had made it through his presentation and the questions from his committee,

then waited alone in the hallway in front of the deliberation room sweating through his shirt and tapping on the floor with his foot.

When Cohen, his thesis advisor, had come back out, Ilya was barely keeping together, not at all consoled by the man's stoic demeanor. Then Cohen reached out his hand, and with the slightest quirk to his mouth greeted him with the words, "congratulations Dr. Rozanov."

(Shane knew that Ilya needed his boyfriend more than anyone else that day, even though he had been too guilty to outright ask when his defense landed in the middle of one of his away roadies. He had flown in back to Boston on a redeye the day of his defense just to be there in the audience, let Ilya fuck him face down into their bed until he was sobbing, and then boarded another flight to be there on time for practice and another game the next day within 16 hours of landing.)

There isn't nearly as much pressure today which means he could really just celebrate. The School of Science Advanced Degree commencement ceremony was held in Kresge, and the theatre was alive with excited chatter and anticipation after the speakers sat down.

Well. Not nearly as much pressure here at the ceremony. Ilya's heart rate has been half a tempo faster than usual all day ever since he had snuck into the kitchen while Shane was showering for the empty box of Girl Scout cookies at the back of one of the taller cupboards. The box proved to be a very good hiding spot, better than any sock drawer, since his boyfriend knows better than to touch Ilya's Thin Mints if he wanted to sleep in the same bed at night.

There is a very short list of Master's students who line up first and Ilya claps with the rest of the auditorium for the younger students. Then the conferral of doctoral degrees begins with the biomedical department.

"Excited?" the girl, Noor he thinks, next to him asks in a whisper while they wait to be called to stand. She had been to his thesis defense and they had shared a few core classes before the qualification exam, and Ilya thought of her as a friendly face even if they weren't close.

"Very," Ilya grins. "About time, right?"

Noor laughs, nodding in agreement.

Then the announcer introduces Chikondi who would be inferring hoods on behalf of the department of physics, and it was their turn to line up. There were twenty one other PhD students graduating in the physics department with the School of Science, and Ilya found himself in the middle of the pack. Dr. Chikondi smiles at him from her position on the stage as the names begin to be read.

After the eleventh person finishes walking, he hears his legal name, Ilya Grigovich Rozanov, and wonders for a brief moment: if his father was here, would he be proud? Would his brother? He'll be holding the first doctorate in his entire lineage. Or would having a queer son be too much for Grigori Rozanov? He hadn't heard from Alexei, his last remaining family, since a scathing, hateful slur-filled message he had left for him five years ago after their outing— his one trump card finally forever useless.

The thought is fleeting though, because in the next second there's a crash of noise from the left side of the theatre.

"Let's go space boy!" someone he thinks is Carmichael yells, loud and distinct in the clamor of way too many professional hockey players. Nearly a quarter of the Bears active roster was in the audience, and the only reason why there wasn't more was because Ilya couldn't wrangle together enough guest tickets.

They had gotten really fucking lucky with the playoffs schedule. Or, probably more likely, Shane had driven the Bears into the ground and then made them dig. Still, whatever he did got them their second round win in four games, a straight 4-0 victory, so that they could make it to Ilya's graduation. If they had had to play Game 5, the Bears would have been in Detroit right now instead of here.

Ilya grins as he walks over to his academic advisor, the mentor who had become family for him over the decade he had been at MIT. She's wearing a small rainbow flag crossed with a bisexual pride flag pin on her gown.

There's some smattering of laughter as Ilya has to stoop down far lower than anyone else for Chikondi to be able to put on the science gold hood over his head, and when he straightens, he holds out his hand in anticipation and respect for one of the most brilliant scientists he knew. She ignores it, instead pulling him into a hug to the sound of cheers at the sweet gesture.

"I am very proud of you Ilya," Dr. Chikondi tells him, squeezing him tight, and Ilya's breath catches. They separate and she cups his face in both her hands, and Ilya realizes she's tearing up too. "It has been a joy seeing you grow these past ten years."

Ilya nods, sniffling, quickly rubbing at his eyes as he gives her watery smile. "Thank you Dr. Chikondi. For everything. Thank you so much."

Chikondi clicks her tongue, nodding to the other end of the stage where the dean of the School of Science was standing with the empty diploma covers. "Go on, *mwana,*" she urges with a smile wiping her cheeks, "your future awaits."

He shakes the hand of the dean and sits down in his seat to run his fingertips over the red embossed leather cover, stamped with MIT's seal. He held in his hands the symbol of the last ten years of his blood, sweat, and tears in academia and that he had really managed to reach the stars. There's a half-forgotten promise on his tongue as he reaches down and fishes out the golden cross under his gown. When he kisses it, he remembers cold concrete, warm hands, and a blanket of stars. And a promise.

The rest of the ceremony goes by quickly, physics being the last department in the School of Science, and they're all released into the world as MIT's newest batch of scholars. He doesn't toss his cap while the students cheer, but he understands the sentiment.

It's not difficult to find a horde of loud, obnoxious, and giant professional hockey players, even through the thick crowd of family, friends, and students filing out of Kresge. They're

tucked into a slightly more private part of the courtyard where the physics departmental reception was being held, probably to avoid risking any fan interactions.

That becomes meaningless when they catch sight of him and all holler and cheer, clapping and drawing the startled attention of everyone nearby. He is not blushing, because he's told Marley, Russians do not blush. But if he wasn't Russian he probably would be beet red.

"There he is!" Yuna beams, arms out, and approaches him. Ilya eagerly falls into her hug. After this many years, he's associated her bergamot perfume with *maternal*, even if he doesn't remember what Irina used to smell like. "We're so, so proud of you honey."

"Thank you Yuna," he says, "it is thanks to your black sesame cookies. Miracle workers."

"Oh, stop," Yuna scoffs, "this was all you, Ilya. You worked so hard for this."

The rest of his friends and family crowd around them after, waiting their turn to congratulate Ilya.

"Space boy!" St. Simon yells, dapping him up in typical fratboy fashion. "Look at you with your fancy hat!"

"Congrats man," Marleau laughs as they hug, "here's to you doing a bunch of science that none of us himbos can understand."

"Ah, Ilyusha," Svetlana beams as she squeezes tight, "doing my math homework in Grade 9 paid off, huh?"

He has to search for Katya in the crowd of burly hockey men; when she finds him she's quick to busy herself with straightening his robes, tutting. "Ilyuschenka, really, you are entire doctor now you cannot be messy."

"Not that kind of doctor, babushka," Ilya laughs, pulling her into a hug despite her huffing.

The other players along with David hug and congratulate him too and he can't believe it sometimes, how lucky he is to have all of this. Eventually he makes it to the edge, where Shane's waiting to the side with a soft smile and his arms behind his back, watching as their friends and family have their moment with Ilya first.

"Congratulations baby," Shane murmurs when he notices Ilya's attention, unfolding his arms from behind him and presenting Ilya a bouquet of white lilies and dark maroon roses— MIT colors. Ilya laughs as he accepts them with one hand.

"My love," Ilya grins, and he's so incandescently happy as he reaches for Shane's waist. Shane beams back at him and Ilya impatiently ducks closer and captures his lips in a kiss, catching Shane's soft laugh as well. The tassel of his cap slips and hits Shane in the forehead making them both snort and pull away.

Shane's smile turns fond as he cups Ilya's face and then moves to hug Ilya close. Ilya melts into him. He always feels most tender and safe when Shane holds him like this, every time.

“I love you so much,” Shane murmurs into his ear, arms tight around him, “you worked so fucking hard for this baby, and you did it. I love you. Я горжусь вами, мои звёзды”

Shane had picked up a good bit of Russian in the past six years of their relationship. He understands a bit more than he can speak, and when he does speak it’s usually still with pretty elementary sentence structure and grammar. But still, he has plenty of the important Russian vocabulary down.

Ilya is incredibly appreciative of his talented boyfriend and the effort Shane put into to learn what was his fourth language when he’s begging Ilya to fuck him harder in his native tongue or calling him sweet pet names in a frankly terrible but endearing accent.

When he pulls back, Shane gives him another loving kiss, cupping his face. When they try to part, however, there’s an immediate protest behind them.

“No, wait, wait hold it,” Yuna raises a finger while taking a photo on her camera with her other hand, “it was perfect.”

“Mom,” Shane complains, flushing. Ilya simply beams, wrapping an arm around Shane’s waist and pressing a kiss to the side of his temple for Yuna to take her pictures. He ignores the Bears players miming exaggerated affectionate poses to tease the two of them from behind Yuna.

“Ah, you two are very sweet!” A familiar voice pipes up nearby. “Ethan, they are sweet, no?”

Chikondi and Cohen round the group to join them, both decked out in their regalia and making Ilya feel not as ridiculous on his own. They must have broken off from the rest of the faculty early to not still be stuck inside.

Chikondi is quick to wrap Yuna in a warm hug, who smiles at the sight of her friend.

“Yuna, *nzanga,* how are you?” Chikondi greets her, kissing the air near her cheek familiarly. “You had a good flight to Boston?”

It meant the world to Ilya that all three of his found families had managed to meld so well together, from his lab to Katya and Svetlana to the Hollanders.

A few years back, Ilya had brought Yuna to the lab while she was in the city visiting and had asked to see the work he did. He had been careful to clear the visit with his PIs, so Chikondi was there to meet them when they had gotten to MIT.

The two women had hit it off immediately. Chikondi had a bright, playful energy that melded well with Yuna’s focus and subtle mischievousness; both of them cared for Ilya as if he was their own. He’s pretty sure that Yuna calls Chikondi for insider information on how Ilya’s doing when she doesn’t trust Shane or Ilya’s word but he doesn’t really mind.

“Dr. Cohen, we were expecting to see you later tonight at the party, not here at the ceremony,” Shane reaches out and shakes his hand, not moving from his place next to Ilya. It

had been endlessly amusing to Ilya to see how well Shane and Cohen got along. Both of them tend to be content hugging the walls at the back of the summer lab social events, nursing a single drink, and bonding over the same undemanding topic of conversation of the real estate market and Western Conference chances. Cohen was apparently, much to their surprise, a hockey fan.

His mentor hums. “No, I don’t usually come to commencement but I also don’t usually have a student graduating.”

Cohen had come for Ilya, to see him walk, Ilya realizes. He feels his eyes sting.

With Chikondi as his academic advisor, she couldn’t be his primary reader. Yet, choosing Cohen as his thesis advisor had been an incredibly easy decision during his second year. He was still not someone who talks about feelings, but over the years he’s shown his care in smaller, subtler ways. Cohen had quietly kept a pride flag on his office door since Ilya started his PhD at the lab.

“Thank you very much for taking care of our Ilya these past few years,” Yuna smiles, turning and shaking his hand. His advisor flusters a little, but takes it.

“Ah, well,” he shrugs, “he’s the future of astrophysics if you ask me. It was an honor to train him.”

“Dr. Cohen,” Ilya’s voice breaks a little. He’s definitely going to cry. Cohen notices, panics and pivots the conversation with Yuna quickly. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Oh, no, I’m Yuna, Ilya’s mother-in-law,” she smiles. “Well, soon to be.”

“Mom, you really can’t keep introducing yourself like that,” Shane sighs, rubbing his temples.

Ilya had absently introduced Yuna as his future mother-in-law when meeting Chikondi years ago, not thinking much of it since it seemed like a given to him. Still, Yuna had hugged him so tight later that night at home with tears in her eyes she managed to choke all the air out his lungs. She had taken to introducing herself as that now to everyone, much to Shane’s flustered bewilderment.

Yuna flashes Ilya a glance while Shane looks away and gives him a wink. Today, of all days, she most definitely can. She’s all business again within the next blink.

“I would love a picture of all three of you, is that alright? Yes? Okay, Shane, come here, honey. Wait, fix Ilya’s hair first, yes, good.”

Ilya poses in between his faculty mentors, all three clad in their regalia— Dr. Chikondi in her Harvard bright red, Ilya in MIT altar boy grey, and Dr. Cohen in his Princeton black and orange. It’s surreal for him to stand next to them like this, essentially their equals. He still has post-doc to do but by all accounts, he was a PhD holder too and an expert in his field.

“That’s lovely, thank you,” Yuna beams, checking her viewer on her camera, “I will send it to you, Evaleti.”

“Yes, please do,” Chikondi agrees.

“Yuna, honey, I think the others are setting to head out soon, we’ll want to reach the venue first,” David interrupts. He smiles at both Chikondi and Cohen before offering them his hand, “ah, Ilya’s mentors. David, Ilya’s future father-in-law.”

“Dad, not you too,” Shane groans, missing the way David grins at Ilya knowingly.

“We’ll be seeing you later tonight?” David asks them, ignoring his son.

“Yes, we would not miss it!” Chikondi laughs. “We will see you soon.” She reaches up and pinches Ilya’s cheek. “The entire lab is *very* excited to celebrate you, Ilya.”

He knows that laugh. It was the same laugh he got when he had found the first picture of one of Shane's underwear ads taped under his mouse at the lab when he checked the bottom. The rest of the week had been his lab mates finding more and more incredulous spots to surprise Ilya with racy photos of his boyfriend. The real betrayal had been finding out they had secretly run the idea by Shane first and gotten his approval.

Ilya sighs, rubbing his cheek. “There’s going to be a prank, isn’t there?”

Cohen just gives him a sly little grin.

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The restaurant they’ve booked for Ilya’s graduation party is reserved entirely for them. It’s farther out past the city, in the greener parts of Massachusetts on a lovely slice of private land right at the edge of the forest with a hidden garden and small lake within walking distance. They had gone the first time for their fifth anniversary with a recommendation from a WAG, and after dinner had walked the trail carefully etched out within the trees. The nature reminded him a little of Shane’s house he had built in Ottawa, where Ilya spent golden private summers with Shane and learned for the first time what it meant to feel completely and truly free. When Shane had realized how much he liked the restaurant, he insisted on covering the cost and planning the graduation party himself.

Ilya’s grown more comfortable with Shane’s money over the years, especially after Shane officially moved to Boston. He had put up a half-hearted fight about contributing to rent and Shane had given him an unimpressed look and told him they would be buying. He had shut up after that, a little flustered.

Buying a home in Ilya’s city felt far more permanent than renting.

His measly PhD stipend was generous for a student, but nothing in comparison to the money Shane had lying around. He still doesn’t like having money spent on him, but Ilya’s acquiesced with him handling living costs. He used his own funds to treat Shane the way he wanted, taking him on dates he wouldn’t have been able to afford otherwise. It worked for

them surprisingly well– Ilya knew now that despite his protests, Shane adores being spoiled. Not with materialism, but shared experiences and thoughtfulness, both of which Ilya had locked in on early in their relationship.

It also made it a lot easier to save up. He had gone shopping with Hayden and Jackie over a weekend visiting in Montreal around six months ago— Hayden had been no help but Jackie knew what to look for in a jewelry store.

They're early to the venue, but it's barely enough time to change out of his robes, much to Shane's consternation. Staff were already set up, with appetizers set out for a light dinner, decorations and a black, white, and red graduation cake centerpiece that's surprisingly tasteful, considering how involved the Bears had been while Shane was planning. He had been expecting anything along the lines of a go-go dancer to live wildlife.

Ilya's never had a celebration just for him like this. All their birthdays and anniversaries were purposefully kept lowkey. There's a buzz of embarrassment under his skin, but he can't deny he's pleased to see and greet his friends when they start arriving.

The said Bears arrive first, since they would likely have to be the ones to first leave. Shane has them on an unforgiving playoffs regimen, which includes a set number of hours of sleep everyday. He would have been endlessly amused by his boyfriend whipping the rowdy players into shape if Shane didn't have Ilya on an even shorter leash: Ilya was on a strict greens per blowjob exchange rate at home ever since he went to get a physical done for the first time in over a decade and found out he had slightly high cholesterol.

Still, despite their bitching, the Bears didn't seem to really mind abiding by Shane's neuroticism. For all of Shane's worrying before joining the team, he had clicked incredibly well with the Bears players. Shane was talented enough to adapt to any player and still play at ideal performance and most of the Bears were more than willing to learn to accommodate so he could play at his peak. Shane's captaincy was one that sparked loyalty. At least, among people who knew how to be.

There had been two trouble spots, two defenseman who had made it clear through snide muttering or blatant avoidance what they thought of their new gay AC the first year. Despite the rest of the Bears' kicking a fuss about it, they didn't warm up to Shane at all.

Boston's management wasn't stupid though, the way Montreal's had been. The Bears knew who was going to get them the Stanley Cup, and it wasn't going to be the homophobes. The last straw had been when the homophobia had leaked onto the ice, with their play and attitude towards Shane while they played. Both MacDonald and Graham had been quietly traded away a year later for draft picks, and the Bears became a well-oiled, terrifying machine on the ice with Shane at the helm after Thompson retired. If they win this year too, they'll be setting up a dynasty in Boston. The Bears players had correctly accepted the price of those Cups being an average of eight hours of sleep and three servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

The Bears greet Ilya but then rally around Shane, the rookies in particular flocking towards him like ducklings. Ilya leaves them to it, instead making his rounds on his own as more guests arrive. Svetlana brings Katya with her and Ilya lets them tease him for a while in

Russian until Marleau steals Sveta away and Katya goes to find Chikondi or Yuna. His lab mates and co-researchers arrive one at a time, and he's on high alert every time he goes for a hug or handshake; he hasn't forgotten the stupid buzzer-in-hand trick that they had gotten him with while in undergrad. There's still no sign of the dreaded prank and it has him checking him over his shoulder every once and a while.

The Montreal entourage arrive together, and it's instinctual for Ilya to kneel down so Ruby and Jade can bound up and launch themselves into his arms.

"Oof, did you two get replaced by rockets?" Ilya teases as he catches them, "There are space shuttle engines with less thrust than the two of you together."

"Are you going to space now?" Ruby asks excitedly, nearly vibrating in place. "Daddy said you finished space school."

"Can I go to space school Uncle Ilya?" Jade continues, running off of her twin's question. "We could go to space together."

"Maybe get through third grade and we can talk about space school after," Hayden sighs, keeping them still with a hand on each of their heads, a tried and true trick to get the terror twins to calm down. He gives Ilya a nod hello though. "Congrats dude."

"Thank you, Pike," Ilya grins broadly as he stands up, "and yes, one day if you want you can go to space school Jade. I know you are smart enough for it. You are very lucky you got so many of your mother's genes."

"A-hole," Hayden censors himself with a scowl. "I just said congrats!" It makes Jackie snort though.

"Congratulations Ilya," Jackie kisses his cheek as she hugs him with one arm, "a PhD! That's incredible."

"Thanks, Jackie," Ilya accepts the greeting before crouching down to peer at the youngest and newest addition to the Pike family in Jackie's hold. He pretends to shake her little hand. "And what about you, Miss Amber? Do you think you will want to one day go to space?"

The one-and-a-half year old giggles, hiding her face in Jackie's sweater. Amber was adorable, but they had all been silently relieved when Hayden admitted he had finally caved and gotten a vasectomy after her birth. Ilya had even sent him an apologetic text, *"sorry that your balls don't work anymore"* and received an affectionate middle finger emoji back.

"I cannot believe all the Bears are here, in the middle of playoffs," JJ whistles. "I think I would be in an ice bath trying to recover as we speak."

"Yes. Thank you both for coming as well," he waits for their dual surprise at the unexpected sentiment before diving in for the kill. "Must be difficult for you to be around actual winners. I appreciate the sacrifice."

Ilya receives two tired, deadpan looks in reply.

“Man, it hasn’t even been five minutes,” Hayden sighs but it’s without heat and neither of them denies it. They know Ilya’s right.

The Montreal Voyageurs hadn’t made it to the Stanley Cup playoffs once in the past five years since the win Shane had gotten them in 2014, much to Ilya’s loud and Shane’s quiet vindication. Ilya hadn’t been wrong when he had accused Golden Canadian Hockey Prince Shane Hollander of being an asshole and he hadn’t been wrong when he called out how good he was at hiding it. Ilya has the sadistic pleasure of getting to see his incredibly sexy boyfriend deploy psychological warfare against the worst of his old teammates right under the refs’ noses in 4K every time the Bears play Montreal. It really was better than porn.

He hadn’t had any reservations when inviting JJ and Hayden though, knowing they would have an early start to the summer compared to the Bears. Even if Shane, Ilya, and their collective found families hate the Voyageurs, Hayden and JJ had proved again and again that they rejected the pack that had thrown Shane to the wolves, and willingly pay the price for it. Ilya had no doubt that the locker room wasn’t pretty for them, JJ especially as the only remaining person of color, and the incomprehensible way the Voyegeurs play now on the ice only proved it. The two of them were simply waiting out the rest of their contracts until free agency, Hayden in particular hesitant to lift his no-trade clause too early and have no say in where he would have to translocate his family.

No, Hayden and JJ were Shane’s first and foremost, and Ilya knew it would be important for them to be here tonight, for what he planned to do.

“Is, ah, Svetlana here yet?” JJ asks, running a hand through his hair before checking around the crowd.

Ilya almost feels bad to tell him. “She is here somewhere with Marley, I think. Probably getting drinks.”

Surprisingly though, JJ doesn’t wilt and there’s no sign of jealousy. He simply nods, heading towards the bar to find them and furthering Ilya’s suspicion about the three.

He’s convinced that they’ve had a threesome at some point. Perhaps multiple points. It may even be a continuous line of points. Sveta is suspiciously coy when Ilya flat out asks what she was doing with her hockey boys and has been quiet about it for months.

He hasn’t pushed her, though. Ilya can’t exactly blame her for having a type when he has the same one.

“Hello Arthur,” Ilya leans down to greet the last Pike he hadn’t spoken to, quieter than how he had been with the girls. “How are you?

Arthur blinks, gaze flitting away as the six year old shrugs a little and ducks behind his father’s legs. It had taken almost three years for Arthur to start talking properly, his verbal development stalling shortly after he turned one. It had terrified both Hayden and Jackie, worried they had been doing something wrong and that their son would grow up mute.

It was Yuna who had talked them down when she told them Shane had been the same. She simply advised them to wait and let Arthur come to them, and eventually he had caught up with the rest of his age group by the time he was four. It helped that it was much easier for Arthur to talk when it was with Shane, who had spent hours of video calls with the boy over the years to help with his speaking skills. He knew in a way that the rest of them didn't how overwhelming the world could get. In the early days, he was the only one who could coax Arthur out when everything got too much for him and had been the one who taught him how to cope well enough to go to school.

"Uncle Shane is with some of the hockey players, do you want to see him?" Ilya asks kindly. Arthur looks up at that, and nods.

"I'll go find him," Jackie smiles, "come on girls, let's go see Uncle Shane. Here, baby."

Jackie trades Amber to Hayden and leads the other three children to the crowd of hockey players near the back of the restaurant. Ilya and Hayden watch as the Bears see them approach and make a quick corridor to their captain. Arthur immediately lights up at the sight of him, joy that Shane mirrors as he picks him up to hold against his hip. The easy way Shane is with Arthur always sends something desperate, primal, and fierce down Ilya's gut. A future Ilya would gladly fight for.

"Sometimes I think it's because some part of him knows Shane was there for him first, right from the beginning," Hayden murmurs quietly, dragging Ilya away from the sight of his boyfriend being paternal. Hayden's tone sets off an alarm bell. "He's told you how he got me to the hospital, hasn't he?"

"He has said, yes," Ilya confirms carefully. "I know that it was very hard for you and Jackie."

"Yeah," Hayden exhales. He bounces Amber a bit, looking down at her to avoid Ilya's gaze. "Was terrifying, actually. Jackie wouldn't wake up for days because of the blood loss. I was such a mess, couldn't even look at Arthur without breaking down. You know Shane was actually the first to hold him? He did skin-to-skin contact the first two days on his own before Jackie's mom made it through the snowstorm. I couldn't touch my own son without having a panic attack."

The guilt was clear in the lines of Hayden's frown.

"Pike," Ilya starts, voice low but the other shakes his head, cutting Ilya off.

"I held him properly for the first time only after Jackie did, when she woke up days after he was born. I think sometimes that's why he's… I just think maybe it's my fault. That it's so hard for him sometimes. That Shane's the only one who can really connect with him on the bad days."

Ilya stays quiet, considering his words carefully as Hayden absently plays with Amber.

"I do not think that's fair to you," Ilya finally replies, gentler. "If it had been me, with Shane not waking up for days… I do not know what I would have done. I know I would not have been okay. I do not think it was your fault— it was very terrible situation. Besides, Shane is

happy to be there for Arthur. He is a very sweet boy and we all care for him very much. You and Jackie raised Arthur well, Hayden."

Hayden shrugs, fidgeting with one of Amber's curls. Ilya didn't like this reticent version of Pike, and decided to try a new tactic.

"Did Shane tell you you were the reason why we got together?"

That makes Hayden look up, bewildered. "What?"

Ilya hums, tucking his hands into his pockets. He feels the small box under his fingers and thumbs at the black velvet. "Yes. We were… not talking for a while, early on. He was scared of what it would mean for him to want a man, because of hockey. I thought I had lost my chance, if I even had one. But he reached out again, after Arthur was born. Said that seeing how much you and Jackie loved each other convinced him to try again. And now we are here. Because of you."

"Shit," Hayden covers Amber's ears automatically with a hand, even if his voice goes tight. His breathing is wet. "Fuck, man. Shane's never said. God, that asshole."

Ilya huffs a soft laugh. "Everything turned out okay in the end, yes? Everyone is safe, and happy, and loved. That's what matters, doesn't it?"

Hayden sniffs, and gives a quick nod before wiping at his cheek.

"So," Hayden clears his throat and lowers his voice, "you got everything ready then? For the you-know-what?"

"Yes, yes," Ilya rolls his eyes. He can read the topic change for what it is. "I made list and everything. Most important part is right here." He reaches down to pat his jacket pocket.

"Good, I'm glad," Hayden nods a little like a bobble head and Ilya can't help but poke fun at him a bit.

"Ah, so do I have the Pike best friend approval then?" Ilya teases, trying to find a thread of levity after the heaviness.

"Actually, yeah man," Hayden shrugs, not taking the bait. Amber moves up with his shoulder. "I mean, you're one the biggest assholes I know, but you're also the best thing to ever happen to Shane. So, yeah. I do approve. I know you'll take care of him. He deserves someone who loves him as much as you do."

For the first time in six years, Pike manages to leave Ilya speechless. Ilya forgets sometimes that Hayden has loved Shane for years longer than Ilya has, even if it isn't in the same way. "You are a very good friend, Hayden," Ilya finally mumbles quietly. "Thank you. I promise I always will."

"Yeah, you already know they won't find your body if you don't," Hayden grunts. "Besides, you had provisional approval when it was obvious you weren't after Shane for his money or citizenship and could make him laugh"

That makes Ilya snort. “*Provisional.* Wow, very big word, Pike. I would make a very pretty foreign trophy husband, I think. Even though I did not need Shane for citizenship.”

Shane had offered, of course, but Ilya had shot him down then, refusing to get married for paperwork.

Ilya’s US green card was approved three years ago, just barely in time before his visa expired. With the help of the lawyer they had found, a no-nonsense Ukrainian immigrant herself, they had gone the “extraordinary ability” route with an asylum claim to avoid needing to go back to Russia for an immigrant visa.

They had managed to sell that Ilya was talented enough to warrant it: he had first-authored a breakthrough in dark matter in his second year of research in support of the superstring theory — something that had only been a hypothesis before. It had won him the 2016 Kavli Prize for Astrophysics and un-fucking-believably, a Nobel Prize in Physics nomination with Chikondi and Cohen. They hadn’t won that, but it had been dizzying to even be considered. It was easy after that to convince the American government to let him stay.

"Yeah, yeah, you’re a big shot scientist,” Hayden rolls his eyes but Ilya can see an amused grin that he’s trying to hide. “Go celebrate or something man. It’s your big day, Dr. Rozanov. I’m going to find something baby-safe for Amy.”

Ilya goes off to mingle again as Hayden leaves for the refreshments. He drifts, saying hello to new guests, catching up with others. When he finds Nina and Gigi from the lab, they send his blood pressure higher with each stifled giggle every time Ilya checks his surroundings for whatever trick they have planned, which doesn’t help his paranoia. He lets Yuna and Chikondi tease him again and charms them back all the same. He finds David, who he hadn’t really spent time with all day. Everyone keeps giving him knowing glances, and he knows most of the guests are still watching the clock, the way Ilya is.

He hasn’t forgotten his surprise. Svetlana had texted five minutes ago that everything’s set up and ready for him, all he has to do now was find Shane.

He’s not entirely shocked with the steady wavelength of nerves all night. The repeated reminders of the big deal question he wants to ask tonight don’t help and eventually, Ilya has to find a place alone near the wall to take a break and observe.

Everyone had made it, the party in full swing by now. His labmates are playing some kind of game with a few of Shane’s teammates, one that the Bears are clearly being outmatched on. Cohen had arrived with his wife and his two sons without Ilya noticing, and they had found Jackie and the Pike children, Arthur being coaxed out to play with the boys and his sisters. He thinks he can see Katya harassing a waiter over something about the food.

His families meshed together in a lovely, happy mosaic of people who didn’t make much sense together in theory but in practice all carried the same exact thread that tied them together and brought them here tonight. From his alcove near the wall, he can’t believe this many people love him. Everyone important in Ilya’s life, all under one roof.

Well, almost everyone. He knows where his missing best friends are but he can't seem to find–

"Hey stranger. There you are."

Ilya's soft smile is entirely involuntary, Pavlovian. "Here I am." Shane smiles back, steady, brilliant, and warm, lips pressed together and eyes crinkling. He's so pretty it takes Ilya's breath away.

"I think we're going to cut the cake soon but I can't find everyone. Where did Sveta, Marley, and JJ go?" Shane looks out from Ilya's little summit. He's clearly been managing the behind the scenes all night, a little distracted. "I talked to them at the bar a little while ago but I haven't seen them for a minute so thought they were with you."

"Дорогой, my love," Ilya tells him dryly, "are you sure you want answer to that question?"

Shane's eyebrows furrow, leaving the adorable little divot between them that Ilya loves to kiss smooth. "What does that mean?"

Ilya actually does know exactly where the three of them are, but he can't exactly tell Shane without ruining his plan so he improvises.

"Sveta, Marley, and JJ. Sneaking off during a party together," Ilya spells out, amused, "what do you think they are doing, all alone, малыш? What do *we* do, when we sneak off during a party together?"

It takes him a second. "*No*," Shane's eyes widen and he gasps when Ilya's insinuation clicks. *Fuck*, he's cute. "No way. All three of them? Seriously?"

"Seriously," Ilya confirms, and he grins a little, excited to share this bit of news early. Usually they debrief any new gossip while getting ready for bed together. "Today especially made me think yes."

"Oh. *Oh,* God," Shane pinches the bridge of his nose with a dawning look of horror, "the fucking *nightmare* it'll be if the league finds out a Voyageur and a Bear are fucking. And Marleau better just be fucking watching, we play the Admirals *next week*–"

"Marleau knows better than to break one of sacred playoff rules, don't worry," Ilya huffs, but then smirks, leaning in closer. "Besides, you are missing the point."

Shane eyes him warily. "What point?"

"The three of them together. Is hot, no?"

Shane gapes at him, and Ilya laughs, obnoxiously loud and real, at the way he blushes hard. "Oh, fuck off! Fuck you, you fucking freak, those are our friends!"

"Me? A freak? You are calling *me* a freak, Mr. Free-Use? Mr. Please-Put-Your-Entire-Fist-Inside-Me-Sir? Mr–" Ilya is still cackling as Shane frantically slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Our *entire* families and my *entire team* are *right* there,” he hisses, bright red. Ilya grins, unrepentant. He gives Shane's palm a wet smack in reply because he knows it’ll make Shane scowl again.

He realizes, suddenly, that there would be no better time than right now, Shane inadvertently handing him a perfect opportunity by finding him alone. Everything was ready, their friends and family having done their part to help. The rest of it was up to Ilya.

Ilya tugs Shane’s hand free, bringing it up to kiss his knuckles absently before threading their fingers together.

“Hey,” Ilya murmurs, quieter, heart in his throat. He swallows once. “Sneak away with me?”

“You’re going to have to wait for graduation sex until until after the playoffs, Rozanov,” Shane warns him wryly.

“Yes, yes I know,” Ilya rolls his eyes, “I am looking forward to the marathon sex we will be having in June to celebrate everything, Cup, graduation.” He leans in to nip Shane’s ear, knowing it’ll make him shiver. “I will fuck you so well you will forget everything except that you are mine.”

“And that you are *mine,*” Shane replies, a simple correction that sends Ilya’s heart into overdrive. “I’m yours. And you’re mine.”

“Yes,” Ilya whispers, voice hoarse when he can finally catch his breath, “and I am yours.”

He thinks the weight in his pocket is *burning* him.

“Come with me,” Ilya steps away towards the exit, before reaching out his hand. Shane hesitates for a moment. “Hollander.”

“Everyone’s still inside,” Shane protests weakly, “they’ll notice we’re missing, you’re literally the guest of honor and the cake–”

“Hollander, no one will *care,* they’ll all assume we’re making out anyway–”

“That does not help Rozanov–!”

“I just want time with you,” Ilya confesses, cutting him short. He chooses the quietly honest route instead, the one he hadn’t known existed until he met Shane. “We have not been alone all day since the morning. I miss you.”

Shane melts immediately, voice going soft. It’s easy to crack himself open when Shane treats what’s inside as if it were gold. A newborn star. “You’re such a simp. I love you.”

“Who taught Shane Hollander what simp means?” Ilya asks, rearing back and properly affronted. His boyfriend laughs and Ilya continues, distressed even as Shane accepts his hand. “No, I am fucking serious, who told you what that means, they have to pay consequences.”

“Where are we going, Rozanov?” Shane shakes his head. “Come on, before I change my mind. We’re on a time schedule.”

“I think there were Russian dictators less strict than you, Любимый,” Ilya pretends to bemoan, and yelps when Shane pokes him right where he’s ticklish. “Hey! I have bones of the survivors, Hollander! My genes tell stories of struggle, redemption, and revolution. I am walking history monument, through me we remember the cost of totalitarianism–"

“I’ll show you walking history.”

Shane still follows Ilya outside though, nipping at each other playfully with familiar banter, right up until they get to the woodland edge.

“The woods?” Shane wrinkles his forehead, skeptical. “It’s pitch fucking dark Ilya. We’re going to get lost.”

Ilya laughs. “No, no, we will not.” He kisses Shane’s cheek before nodding up at the sky and the full moon above them. “Moonlight, Мой лунный свет. I will never get lost when I am with you.”

“I don’t think that’s how that works, Rozanov,” Shane replies, but he’s trying to hide a smile and doesn’t resist as Ilya pulls him towards the trees.

He does know where he’s going, even in the dark, because of the little fake candles his friends had laid out as a guide. They light up like tiny beacons, drawing a twisting path deeper to where they know the hidden garden is.

“Oh that’s smart,” Shane notes, oblivious, “I wonder how often the restaurant has to check the batteries on these. Maybe we could do something like this at the cottage.”
Ilya bites down on a smile, and simply hums. “Yes. Summer project, maybe.”

Shane and Ilya follow the trail, holding hands to keep each other steady and stay close. It feels wrong to break the quiet as they walk, so it’s just the sound of leaves under their feet and the white noise of critters and bugs in the forest's living symphony. It’s not long before Ilya sees the neat line of five lights blocking their way, Sveta’s signal.

“Okay,” Ilya stops them there. “Close your eyes.”

Shane squints at him in suspicion. “What.”

“Is a *surprise* Shane.”

Shane finally catches on, and Ilya can see the little smile that plays on his lips. “Oh, you planned this.”

“Yes, and you are going to ruin it,” Ilya groans dramatically and throws his head back, just to make Shane laugh. “Come *on,* just close your eyes. I will tell you where to go.”

“There are *tree roots,* Ilya, I’ll twist my ankle–”

He lets his voice drop, knowing what it does to his boyfriend, and cuts him off. “Oh, but you have always been so good at following my instructions, малыш. You can be good here too, can’t you? My good boy.”

Shane shuts up like Ilya had flicked a switch. He flushes red, eyelashes fluttering in surprise as his breath hitches involuntarily. Ilya can just barely see his pulse jump at his neck.

“That’s sneaky, Roz,” he mumbles, cheeks warm. But Ilya smiles when he obeys, eyes shut. “Don’t let me trip.”

“Never,” he kisses under his jaw before stepping in front of him to guide him in. He checks behind him every few paces, telling how high to raise his foot to clear an obstacle, and how many steps to take before a turn. Shane follows each instruction to the letter.

It’s not far at all, and he gets to their destination in just a few minutes. It’s bright here, with light and color, and the glow is golden on Shane’s skin.

“The ground just went flat,” Shane notices. “Are we here?”

Ilya swallows once and lets go of Shane to give him a clear view. “Yes. We’re here.”

Shane takes that as permission to open his eyes.

“Oh, wow,” Shane gasps, eyes widening as he takes in the decorated garden. “*Wow.”*

Both Marleau and Svetlana–and probably JJ, if he thinks about it– had set it up for him while he had Shane distracted at the venue, and he had at least trusted that Svetlana would do a good job. Fairy lights and tens of little candles bathe the gazebo with warm, golden light. Copies of polaroids Ilya had collected over the years were strung up around the intimate space while bunches of the same flowers that Shane has so lovingly made a tradition over the years fill the air with sweet perfume. Lilies, lily-of-the-valley, roses.

But there’s also bundles of Ilya’s own choices, flowers he had painstakingly read up on and picked one by one for their symbolism and their shared history. Purple bellflowers, for enduring affection and resilience. Blue flag iris, for one of Ilya’s favorite memories with Shane on a beach hike in Quebec. White carnations, pure love. Cherry blossoms, their first trip together to Japan.

It’s, for the lack of a better word, romantic. He briefly considers if it’s too much.

He follows a few paces behind Shane as makes his way forward to the gazebo, slow and careful of the lighted path all the way up the steps and the open deck. He sees Shane quietly mouth *wow* again when they make it to the middle. Some of the lights here are hidden among the denser purple and blue flowers, and give the impression of stars in a galaxy. He’ll have to thank Sveta for her creative vision.

“Fuck. *Fuck,* it’s beautiful, Ilya, oh my god,” Shane slightly shakes his head as he slowly turns in place He reaches out and brushes the petals of an iris with his fingers, smiling softly. His voice wavers. “A blue flag. Like on the beach. And the pictures– oh, that’s when we went

to the aquarium with the Pikes. And this one's Canada Day, fuck you were so cute in this, I– Ilya. This is— you did all this? For me?"

Ilya shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck with a hand. "I planned and put it together, yes. I had help."

"Fuck," Shane whispers again, but the bright pleased smile tells Ilya exactly what Shane thought of this surprise. "Jesus, Ilya. Thank you. This is so lovely. I love it. I love *you.* But why– I feel like this is something I should have done for you. It's your graduation day."

"No, no," Ilya shakes his head, deflecting. "I know I am the best, but today can only be about me for so long before it gets old. I wanted today to be special for you too."

Shane just laughs softly. "Baby, it already is. Getting to see you walk on that stage, after knowing how hard you worked all these years– that's so fucking special." He kisses Ilya's cheek. "You *are* the best to me. The best *for* me."

Ilya swallows, unable to speak so he reaches for Shane's hands. He regrets it for a second when he realizes he's shaking. Shane doesn't mention it though, and simply steps closer, close enough to share air and nudge Ilya's nose with his.

The kiss is familiar, Shane keeping it slow and tender. It steals the air out of Ilya's lungs, how every kiss they share can feel so much like the first, young and shy in a hotel room, and at the same time unlike anything he's ever experienced before, brand new even after all these years. When Shane opens his mouth against his, Ilya swears he can taste Shane's love for him on his tongue, sweet and effervescent.

"Congratulations, Dr. Rozanov," Shane whispers against his lips, just for them when they part for air. "God, I'm so fucking proud of you."

Ilya swallows as Shane leans forward to kiss him again, a chaste peck.

"Ah, that's not quite right," Ilya laughs a little breathlessly. He watches Shane's eyebrows furrow. "I do not think it's Dr. Rozanov. Or, at least, I hope it won't be for much longer."

"What does that mean?" Shane frowns a little. Ilya inhales, discretely slipping his right hand to his side, distracting Shane by stroking his cheek featherlight with his other. His fingers tremble a little as reaches into the inner pocket of his jacket, easily hidden. They're still a little unsteady when he finds the box. "Ilya?"

"I am hoping," Ilya inhales, "I am hoping if you let me, that I could be Dr. Rozanov-Hollander instead?"

"I don't understand."

He laughs a little, shaking his head. That's alright. He knows Shane works best with direct communication. "Mm. Okay. I will just show you then."

Shane tilts his head endearingly when Ilya takes a step back, pulling away from Shane entirely. His confusion turns into shock as Ilya kneels down on one knee.

“Oh my god,” Shane inhales sharply, eyes wide as he takes a startled step back. Ilya presents him the box with slightly shaky hands, and he makes a small overwhelmed noise when Ilya opens it to show him the ring. “Fuck. Oh my *god,* Ilya—“

Ilya smiles, and takes a deep breath, glancing down for a moment to collect himself.

“I thought about what I would say to you for weeks, you know. But nothing I came up with was right, nothing in English, nothing in *Russian*. Nothing could properly represent exactly what you mean to me, because what I feel for you has no words. So, I thought maybe, instead of telling you what you make me feel, I would talk about what you *do* makes me feel.”

“Oh no, this proposal isn’t going to be safe for work is it?” Shane mumbles, but he’s still beaming.

“I don’t mean the sex, Hollander,” Ilya chides dryly. “Even if it is the best I’ve ever had. I mean the things you do for *us*. Like your flowers. They make me feel cherished. How we split up dish washing and drying and the laundry and the grocery runs. That makes me feel steady, stable, these routines that are habit now and mean home. When you watch my shitty reality TV with me even though I know you hate it, just so we can cuddle, you make me feel wanted. I feel remembered when you make coffee for me right before you leave for practice, so it’ll still be warm when I get out of bed.”

Ilya pauses here, swallowing and Shane must sense the shift, because his expression softens and he moves closer, radiating warmth. He smiles briefly when Shane silently brushes Ilya’s curls back with his fingertips in reassurance.

“When I can’t get out of bed,” he continues, softly, “and you hold me until I can see the sun again, I feel safe. When you learn an entire new language for me, so I can tell you how I’m feeling on my bad days without having to translate, I feel seen. When you stay close, even after I lash out, even when we’re angry, because you never want me to feel alone so you stay. Out of everything you do, my love. It is the most important. You *stay*, Shane.” A grateful laugh slips through. “Sometimes, I think that maybe you saved my life, just by picking up the phone.”

“Fuck,” Shane whispers, his voice cracking, and Ilya watches a single tear streak down and drip from his chin. Ilya clears his throat, rubbing under his waterline as well before looking back up at him.

“I want to keep doing *life* with you. I want to wake up next to you every morning and fall asleep in your arms every night. I want to make you happy and be somewhere safe for you to always come home to. I want to love you for the rest of my life, more than anything I’ve ever wanted before. So. Shane Hollander,” Ilya rolls the syllables of his name like he had the first time, hopeful. “Will you marry me?”

Shane’s in full tears. He rubs at his cheeks and nose and his breath shakes as he nods vehemently. “Yeah. Yes. Shit, fuck yes, I’ll marry you. Holy shit.”

Shane waits just long enough for Ilya to slip the ring, though it’s touch and go because both their hands are shaking. Ilya had listened to Jackie and Svetlana and sneakily measured

Shane's finger while he slept with a string so it's a perfect fit. Once it's on, Shane drags Ilya up and kisses him hard, desperate, like he wants to crawl into his skin. Ilya laughs into his mouth, and it's almost a sob.

"I love you," Shane chants breathlessly, deliriously against his lips. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

"Sweetheart," Ilya whispers, and he can't remember the last time he was so happy. Shane presses close, hugging him tight and tucking his face against Ilya's neck. Ilya can feel Shane's heartbeat pulse against his where their chests are melded together and he hides his helpless smile against Shane's hair.

"And our names aren't going to be Rozanov-Hollander," Shane sniffles, "Hollander first."

"*Wow*, Shane, not even three minutes into engagement and you are already being bridezilla."

"It's *pragmatic,* Hollander is first in the alphabet, our kids won't have to be at the end of every fucking line at school—"

Ilya kisses him quiet, mostly because he needed Shane to shut up about their future kids if he wanted to stay fully dressed in the next five minutes.

Neither of them want to break apart for long, so Ilya hugs him from behind, chin resting on Shane's shoulder as Shane looks at the proposal setup, the pictures Ilya had chosen, the flowers. There's more tears as Ilya explains each one.

"We should get back," Ilya mumbles, kissing the back of Shane's shoulder. "It's getting late."

"I don't want to ever leave," Shane tells him, and he hasn't stopped smiling since the ring slipped onto his finger. "I want to stay right here, like this, with you. God, I'm so fucking happy, Ilya."

But eventually Shane is shivering too much, not having expected to be out for so long without a jacket, so Ilya finally convinces him to return, hand in hand as they walk back through the woods. It takes longer to leave than it took to get to the garden because Shane stops them to kiss him against a tree every few minutes.

When Ilya guides them out of the forest, they exit only to find all of their loved ones crowded around the edge of the treeline, cheering the moment they see them.

"Oh my god," Shane laughs wetly. "Everyone knew?"

"I am surprised no one gave it away, honestly," Ilya mumbles dryly and Shane snorts before their family finds them. David and Yuna get there first.

"Oh, my baby," Yuna smiles, and she's clearly already started crying as she holds Shane close, "look at you!" She makes him show her the ring, a simple but stated black and gold band with an inlaid black diamond. "Oh, that's gorgeous—"

“Looking forward to having you officially part of the family, son,” David hugs Ilya, grinning as he claps him on the back. He pulls back just far enough to look Ilya in the eye when he earnestly tells him, “we’re so happy it’s you.”

The Russians ambush them next, Ilya’s little makeshift family.

“Very good Ilyushenka,” Katya beams, squeezing his arm before cupping his face. “I will see a wedding, yes. It will be perfect wedding— Yuna, dear, come, we have much to plan and discuss–”

“Congratulations, Ilyusha,” Svetlana smiles wryly, “you best believe I’ll be taking all the credit during my wedding speech.”

Ilya laughs hoarsely, hugging his closest and oldest friend. “You deserve it, Svetochka. Thank you. For everything. I love you.”

“Congrats, dude,” Hayden beams, finding Shane and the first of their friends to hug him, “I’m so fucking happy for you.”

“I can’t believe you were here in Boston for it,” Shane shakes his head, finally having collected himself on the walk back. “I was surprised when you said yes to the grad party, actually, I know you and Ilya aren’t the closest—“

“That’s why he invited us, man,” Hayden huffs, tilting his head towards Ilya. “He texted and said he was planning to propose. He said you would want your best friends here for your engagement.”

Shane looks like he’s about to burst into tears again.

“*Oye*, your finance is going to be so fucking smug now,” JJ sighs, resting an arm on Ilya’s shoulder. “You get twelve hours to be insufferable, Rozanov. It’s your engagement day after all.”

Ilya huffs. “Yes. Thank you. Very generous. The garden was beautiful by the way, JJ. Appreciate the help.”

JJ blinks, mouth dropping open before his cheeks flush dark. “How— What—“

Shane is glowing as their loved ones celebrate them, smile as bright as the moon and Ilya can’t look away. When he sees the ring on his finger glimmer as Shane brushes back his hair, Ilya knows he will never have to.

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Their apartment was a home now, five years in. He had meant, all those years ago, when he confessed and said that home for him was wherever Shane was. But now their space served as real, tangible proof, evidence of a well-loved life together, cherished and shared.

Shane is latched onto him before the door even closes behind them.

“Need you,” he pants against his mouth, hands moving down to Ilya’s belt. “Fuck, need you to fuck your fiancé *right now.”*

“Hey, no, sweetheart” Ilya laughs, cooling down the kiss and stopping his hands on their journey, “It is playoffs, no? You will be upset if we break no sex rule now and you lose next game. You cursed out Marley for this. And you need to sleep, my love.”

“But we just got engaged,” Shane pouts a little. He kisses down Ilya’s neck but Ilya knows a distraction when he sees one. He pulls back, grinning as he kisses Shane’s forehead.

“Yes, and in four days you have to play Admirals for Conference title again and dinosaur Scott Hunter knows it's his last chance before he’s out to pasture so he’s playing like it. They’re going to win their round 4-1 and with no injuries. Sebby said something I liked– oh, yes: you have to lock in Hollander.”

Shane just blinks at him, and then shakes his head a little disbelieving. “What the fuck, I turned you into a hockey freak too.”

“You know I’m right,” Ilya chides, amused. “Besides, if I quizzed you on star formation right now you will get them all right. I have made you space nerd as well.”

“This is terrible fucking timing for a proposal, Ilya,” Shane groans into the crook of Ilya’s neck. “No engagement sex. Are you kidding me?”

“Ah, so you just want me for my body, that is why you said yes?”

“Engagement, graduation, and *maybe* a Stanley Cup,” Shane grumbles, ignoring him, “I’m not letting you out of bed for a *week.”*

By the time they get to their bedroom, their first night as an engaged couple actually ends up… completely normal.

They maybe exchange more soft kisses in between changing out of their day clothes than usual and Shane smiles every time he sees the glint of gold on his finger in the mirror as they get ready for bed together in the bathroom. But the rest of it is just their regular night routine, side by side as they brush their teeth and talk about their day. It means more to Ilya than anything.

“So JJ, Sveta, and Marleau,” Shane puts away his face wash in their designated slot, next to Ilya’s shaving cream. “That’s maybe a thing. Do *not* say anything horny.”

“Yes, I have been wondering for a while. Sveta has been very mysterious for very long time. Usually I hear too much about the people she’s fucking against my will. Then JJ was suspiciously okay with Svetlana being with Marley even though we both know how he is with her,” Ilya shrugs, “and Marleau asked me three months very detailed questions about gay sex and pretended it was because he was trying to be a better ally.”

“Of course he did,” Shane sighs, breaking off a thread of floss. “God, that sounds like a trainwreck waiting to happen.”

“She’s going to eat them alive,” Ilya agrees gleefully.

Shane’s phone trills on the counter between them with a notification, which Shane takes a glance at it habitually. “My mom just sent an email about wedding planning, by the way. Katya has notes.”

“Jesus, it’s been three *hours*. The devil works hard but only because he is terrified of Yuna Hollander.”

Shane nags him into washing his face too before Ilya brushes his teeth. Somehow, he’s finished sooner than Ilya despite having several more steps to his skin care but he stays, sitting up on the counter next to him to wait for Ilya as they chat.

“It was suspicious that the lab did not trick me today,” Ilya eventually muses after spitting in the sink. “Cohen even laughed earlier at the reception, so I know they were all in on it—“

Shane is innocently, purposefully quiet as he needlessly fidgets with the bottles on the counter.

“You know what the prank was!” Ilya gasps and Shane snorts as he slips off the counter. Ilya makes a frustrated noise when Shane leaves the bathroom without a word. “Hollander! Get back here!”

He finishes rinsing out his mouth just in time to see Shane serenely make his way to the bed. In just a few strides, Ilya closes the space between them and tackles him into the mattress, making him shriek in laughter as he slips his fingers up his shirt.

“Spill, Hollander. What did I miss?”

Shane snickers, batting away his tickling. “Baby. *This* was the prank.”

“What?”

“There was no actual physical trick,” Shane grins, “they knew you’d drive yourself crazy trying to anticipate it so they just pretended.”

Ilya stared at him and then groans, burying his head into Shane’s stomach

“They are evil,” Ilya mutters, “Fuck. Do not work with geniuses, Shane. They will create mind games like you have never seen before.”

“Your lab loves you a lot,” Shane smiles softly. “I’m really glad we're able to have Boston together. MIT was good for you. They made you happy.”

“*You* make me happy,” he kisses Shane’s neck until he giggles, ticklish. “They are supplementary.”

But Shane is right. MIT *had* been good to him. He’s loved living with Shane these past five years, and he knows it would have been worth choosing McGill to have him close if he had

stayed with the Voyagers. But the lab here had made Ilya the scientist he was, and they had done so in one of the first real safe spaces he had in Boston. He was going to miss them.

Still, he wouldn't be going far. He had accepted a post-doc position at Harvard's astrophysics department working with a lab Chikondi collaborates with often. And they had agreed that Shane would sign on with the Bears again when his contract expires later this summer. They would get to keep Boston together.

When they settle in bed for the night, they curl up facing each other, exhausted from the long, emotional day.

Shane has his hand up between them, an absent minded smile on his face as he admires his ring.

"If you do not like it, you can blame Pike," Ilya murmurs, watching him with a warm expression.

"I fucking love it, Ilya," Shane shakes his head, sniffling. "It's perfect."

"Oh. In that case you can thank Jackie. I will also take final credit for the inscription."

Shane's eyes snap up. "There's an inscription?"

"I know usually you engrave wedding rings," Ilya shrugs feigning indifference as Shane immediately goes to slip the ring off, "but I thought it wouldn't hurt if we did both."

Shane squints, struggling in the low light and too stubborn to reach for his glasses. Ilya hadn't made it easier for him with the inscription either, as Shane has to make out each of the unfamiliar Cyrillic letters.

"*Moy samogon, moy lyubov',*" he finally sounds out, tilting his head. "*Samogon.* I don't know that one."

"Mmm," Ilya hums, pressing his lips to the bridge of Shane's nose before he translates for him. "It says, 'my moonshine, my love.'"

Shane exhales, a tiny endearing noise escaping him. He kisses the ring before slipping it back on and then kisses Ilya, deep and molten.

"I'm so excited to marry you," Shane confesses when they have to part for air, eyes bright. Then he gives Ilya a mischievous smile, the one he got from his mother. "We should elope."

"Do you want me dead, Hollander?" Ilya deadpans, "Katya and Yuna will take turns killing me when they find out."

"I'll protect you," Shane smirks. "But you're right. Maybe it's a mom thing, babies officially leaving the nest or something. Making a new family.

Ilya hums, but his smile dims without his permission.

Katya, Yuna, and Chikondi to some extent all fill in the maternal role for him. It means the world to have all three women love him so much. They're already ecstatic about the wedding. It should be enough.

He's going to get married without his mother ever meeting the love of his life.

"Hey," Shane soothes, drawing his attention again by capturing Ilya's fingers which had started gripping Shane's shirt. He kisses his knuckles, "where'd you go?"

Ilya clears his throat, shaking his head and attempting a smile again. "Nowhere. I'm right here. There's nowhere else I want to be."

Shane doesn't buy it, eyes darting back and forth over Ilya's face, searching for something.

"Was it something I said?" he asks, hesitant. "I'm sorry. I was joking about eloping."

"No, no sorry," Ilya reassures him. "You did nothing wrong, sweetheart. I am being silly, I just–"

Shane gently rubs his eyebrow, waiting for him to collect his thoughts. Ilya can't believe he's found someone who can love him so effortlessly.

"I wish my mother had been here today," he finally whispers and he feels his eyes sting.

"Baby," Shane exhales, quietly sad, "oh, love. Ilya, that's not silly at all."

"It is silly wishing for something I can't have," Ilya shrugs, still unable to meet Shane's gaze. He only looks up when Shane makes him with a hand under his chin.

"Baby," he says, gentle enough to settle Ilya's skin but firm enough to make him focus, "it makes all the sense in the world that you would want your mom today. You got your doctorate, got engaged. It's one of the biggest days of your life and it's not stupid to want your mom. Have you been thinking this all day? I wish you had told me."

"No, not all day," Ilya sighs, "maybe once or twice. But it's fine; today has been one of the happiest of my life. Yes it is sad she is not here. But I am still so happy, knowing I'll spend the rest of my life with you."

Shane smiles, but it's still melancholic. "Can you tell me when else you were thinking about her?"

Cold concrete, warm hands, and a blanket of stars. Ilya finds the cross under his t-shirt instinctively, and turns on to his back. Shane follows, sneaking closer, a comforting line of warmth pressed against his side. He drapes his arm over Ilya's abdomen in a loose hug.

"I remembered, during the ceremony," Ilya murmurs. "A promise. One I made her, when I was a boy."

"Yeah?" Shane encourages quietly, running his knuckles featherlight up and down Ilya's bare bicep. "Must have been important, the promise."

“Mmm. I told you before, I used to stargaze with my mother, as a boy?” Ilya exhales to see if the stitch in his lungs would loosen as he stares up at the ceiling. “Back when I was too little to understand why my mother was afraid sometimes to be inside the house. I learned about the stars from her. She loved them so much, Shane, loved all the stories and myths but the science too. She knew everything about the USSR space race, read everything she could about astronomy when my father wasn’t looking. She was my first teacher. She was just so *smart.* ”

They would stargaze at night on the cold concrete outside their home when inside was too much, back when he was still small enough to curl into the warmth of her lap. Ilya learned his first constellations in Russian in her warm hands, through the sound of crickets and his mother’s low voice. Had watched his first lunar eclipse with her when he was five, and been entranced as the moon glowed red in front of his eyes, almost disappearing and then reappearing, playing hide and seek. He’s been chasing the wonder he felt that night for the rest of his life.

“She must be where you got it from,” Shane mumbles, and it makes Ilya’s breath catch. “Beautiful, kind, and smart. Just like you.”

Ilya brings his arm up from under Shane to wrap it around his back and pull him closer. He’s quiet for a while, listening to Shane breathe like a lullaby. His fiance doesn’t push him, and lets him recalibrate using the rise and fall of Shane’s chest.

“She loved skating, yes” he breaks the silence suddenly, and he doesn’t think about this often because it always broke his heart. “It made her very happy to be on the ice. But I sometimes wonder if she would have chosen skating again, if she had been given the choices I had.”

Because he knows now, almost two decades later, that he was incredibly lucky. Lucky to have options, to have the choice to give up skating and hockey and whatever could have come from it. Lucky to choose wonder, when his mother had spent her whole life trying to find whatever scraps of it she could. And still, she shared what little she had with Ilya, because she loved him so much.

On his worst days, he thinks that if she had had the choice, she wouldn’t have gotten married to his father. He thinks that maybe, if she hadn’t had him and Alexei, then maybe she would still be alive, chasing her wonder.

He would be feeling the cold of remembering in his bones right now, if it weren’t for Shane’s warm hands still on him. He stays quiet, simply waiting patiently until Ilya can take another deep breath.

“I was eight when I promised her I would bring her the moon,” Ilya smiles a little sadly, when he feels Shane’s fingers on his cheek wiping away a stray tear. “I told her that one day I would go to the stars to meet *Ursa Minor* because it was her favorite constellation, and bring the moon to her. I just said it because I wanted to see her smile. She always seemed so sad those days. When she laughed, I made it a promise.” A promise he almost fulfills twenty years later.

His degree got him to the stars. But he had found the moon in a boy.

“I wish I could have brought you to her,” Ilya closes his eyes as his voice breaks. “I know she would have loved you. The way she loved the moon. The way I love you.”

Shane’s breath hitches, and he pushes himself up to reach Ilya’s face. Shane cups his cheek, brushing his cheekbone before dipping down to kiss him chastely.

He drops his forehead against Ilya’s, and Ilya can’t bear the affection he sees. It threatens to drown him.

Shane bites his lip, and Ilya can see the way his brain is whirring, thinking and overthinking.

“Sorry,” Ilya whispers, “that was too much. It’s our engagement night. I have ruined it.”

“No,” Shane quickly and vehemently denies. “Not too much. Never too much. Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done, and you telling me how you feel will never ruin anything, I–”

He pulls back, something decisive sliding over his face. To Ilya’s bewilderment, he slips out from under the covers, finding his house shoes.

“What? Shane, it is almost midnight,” Ilya sits up, unsure. He makes a protesting, baffled noise when Shane rounds the bed to get close enough to Ilya and pulls him out of bed too by the hand. He goes, stumbling a little with the sheets. “Дорогой. What is it?”

“Come on, just trust me,” Shane deflects, threading his fingers with Ilya’s to pull him along.

He has Ilya grab one of their phones and their house keys as he picks up the throw blanket on the couch on the way to the front door, stopping only to change into their outside shoes.

“Where are we going, Shane?” Ilya huffs, letting Shane lead him to the end of the hall, all the way to the roof access. When Shane opens the door to the stairs though, making Ilya follow, he starts getting an inkling.

By the time they’re outside, and Shane has Ilya sit on an open space on the roof, he thinks his heart is growing too big for him to breathe. Shane sneaks into his lap, throwing the blanket over him, his back against Ilya’s chest. Wrapping his arms around him is instinctual.

“Shane,” Ilya exhales, voice tight, even as Shane wiggles to get comfortable, “what are we doing here?”

Shane messes with the blanket a little bit before answering, making sure they’re both warm.

“You said you wanted to bring me to your mother,” Shane says. He leans back into the cradle of Ilya’s hold so they can both look out at the faint trace of constellations that manage to fight through Boston pollution. Ursa Minor, with Polaris shining bright, is one of them, trailing behind Ursa Major. “So introduce me.”

Ilya closes his eyes, but it’s not anywhere close enough to stop the tear that manages to leak out, running down his cheek. He squeezes Shane closer, as close as he can, so maybe he can

join them together into one and see if it'll make this all-consuming love a little more bearable.

"Shane," he chokes, voice breaking as he mumbles into his soft black hair. "I–"

"It's rude to keep her waiting, Ilyusha," Shane says mildly, but he brings one of their joined hands up to kiss their entangled fingers in acknowledgement. Ilya exhales out a tortured laugh, shaking his head a little before he looks up.

He hasn't done this in a long time. At twenty-seven, with an entire degree in astrophysics, Ilya only looks up at the stars to measure, study, and observe. Clinically objective, to find new answers and new questions. Even when he's shown Shane the constellations on hikes and trips, he's stayed detached to a degree.

In the years after Irina died, it hurt too much to sit outside and just feel the stars without her. He couldn't shoulder the pain of it alone.

"Привет, мама," Ilya breathes, eyes on the North Star as he speaks in Russian. "*I proposed to the moon today. I want you to meet him.*"

Then Shane surprises him, speaking up."Здравствуйте, госпожа Розанова." He sounds out the syllables to the formal greeting carefully, like he needs to make sure they're perfect. He even turns to look at Ilya and quickly checks. Ilya gives him a helpless laugh, nodding and he turns back again, satisfied. "*It's nice to meet you.*"

Ilya smiles, pressing a kiss against Shane's temple. Then he tells her everything.

Tells her about meeting him, even if the handful of words Shane understands make him blush when he realizes what Ilya was doing. About the journey of ups and downs they faced before and after being outed. About living together.

He tells her about falling in love.

Shane shifts to lean his cheek against Ilya's heart and listens to it beat with the cadence of his native tongue as Ilya tells his mother about this beautiful boy. Tells her about how Shane loves, and cares, and *knows* Ilya. How wonderful he is, how brilliant, how he's the love of his life. He tells her that when Ilya looks at him, he sees moonlight and it feels like home.

Eventually, he runs out of words, voice hoarse and tears dry. The air around them goes abruptly quiet when he stops.

He breathes out slowly, closing his eyes. He would have thought Shane had fallen asleep if he hadn't felt him gently rubbing Ilya's gold cross between his fingers, the chain tugging gently.

"I miss you, Mama," he admits quietly, "so, so much. But… I think I will be okay now. I think I can be happy. I hope you can be proud of me."

It took a couple decades, but Ilya brought her the moon.

Shane must recognize the natural end, twists to face him properly. "Okay?"

Ilya nods, brushing his nose against Shane's. He feels so much lighter. "Okay. Thank you, Лунный свет." His answering smile is the brightest celestial object Ilya has seen tonight and Ilya has no choice but to kiss him under the blanket of stars.

"I love you," Shane whispers against his lips. "Only you, мои звёзды."

"И я люблю тебя," Ilya replies. Shane kisses his cheek before twisting around to face out and up.

"Show me the summer constellations again."

Ilya laughs but acquiesces with the demand, threading their left hands together to make a makeshift pointer. Shane's ring is cool under his fingers.

I did it, *Mama,* Ilya thinks to himself, smiling a little even through the sting. He nudges down, pressing a soft kiss to the side of Shane's hair. *Your little bear did it.*

Chapter End Notes

WE FUCKING DID IT FOLKS! THIS IS THE FIRST FIC I'VE EVER FINISHED. I'm literally emotional I love them so so much.

Some ending thoughts and notes because I hadn't expected so many people to latch on to this and it makes me feel so :')))))) I had a general idea of how I wanted the plot to go when I started but actually making it all come together was just as new and exciting to me:

-- Fun fact! Ilya's little "I did it Mama" is so incredibly personal to me because I latched onto my dream when I was eight years old, and I'll be achieving it at twenty eight too.

-- Not so fun fact! Ilya in this fic and I will have suffered through the same number of years in higher education! Ten years in elitist academia hell! Then we continue to be abused for like three-five years before we can get a big girl job but at least people have to call us doctor while they do.

-- Ilya's little eclipse wonder moment is my wonder moment when I first saw a total lunar eclipse! I thought I would be an astronaut for literally all of my childhood and wanted to do space medicine before i found out back then you needed to have 20/20 vision and how much i genuinely hate calculus. It actually broke my heart i think. I still chase solar eclipses though and have seen three total ones.

--Did i make myself cry? Maybe. Did i write a 130k gay fanfiction just to project myself onto one of my favorite depressed bisexual characters of all time? Mind your damn business.

-- Me in a blindfold: yeah what if I make uh *Throws darts* Sveta, *throws dart* JJ, *throws dart* and Marleau a throuple. There's going to be a Boston-Montreal hockey romance no matter what universe we're in. Im envisioning the boys are obsessed with Sveta first but fall for each other while on the road on their own during the regular season. Eventually they all decide to be exclusive with each other. lya figures it out and tells Shane. Hayden knows but only bc JJ tells him bc he's shit at keeping his mouth shut and Hayden loses ten years of his life being the assigned gay secret keeper of Montreal. Walk with me.

-- I'm also a strong believer in wlw roselana nation and one of my biggest regrets was that I couldn't figure out how to incorporate Hollywood star actress Rose Landry into the plot besides a throw away comment. Can you imagine the combined chaotic psychological warfare roselana would have inflicted on these homosexuals? Cinema. Rose would have sent a U-Haul truck to Shane's door by chapter three.

-- There is a scene somewhere here of Ilya crashing the fuck out over the margins of page 78 out of 112 of his dissertation at three in the morning in cartoon pjs eating dry uncooked ramen with mustard Ryland Grace style. Shane is in the corner performing a possession cleansing ritual. Sometimes grad school is just like that.

--Speaking of, I went to grad school but got a masters so i pulled from the doctoral defenses I've sat in for at my old undergrad lab. Plus my PhD roommate who's going through it as we speak. Yes doctoral regalia can be almost $1000, which you do need to buy if you plan to go into academia. I too was gagged when I learned. Also was gagged when I realized I will have to pay that much for my med school regalia

-- I was thinking of having some component of the proposal include a phone call, as a throw back to how they met but then i thought about it more and I liked it like this. They hung up the phone last chapter because they were finally open and honest about themselves so they don't need them now! Did I just make the whole phone theme and chapter headings a loose metaphor for dealing with unresolved internalized homophobia/secrecy? Damn i guess i did. Don't ask too many questions.

-- Also! They get married a year later and then adopt a dog. They name her Laika not Anya though because I KNOW this Ilya SOBBED for hours as a child learning about what they did to Laika when they sent her to space.

I might add some one shots to this universe and make it a series at some point! I had some scenes I had to cut out because they didn't make much sense in the plot. Also, if there's any missing scenes that you were hoping for, feel free to comment and I might try writing it if I'm feeling inspired (no promises though 😔) Stick around with a follow to the series if you want to be updated!

Meanwhile if you like my writing, shameless plug but consider reading some of my other stuff! I'll give this piece a final edit and then working on some unfinished stuff plus maybe another longer piece. Ideas I'm considering are a neighbors to lovers au or Antarctic expedition au where they're BOTH scientists this time.

But that's all I had for now! Thank you so much to everyone who's commented and left kudos. so much love mwah!

End Notes

where we at y'all.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!