Enemy Lines

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Enemy Lines

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Summary

"Why the fuck do you care what happens to Rozanov?"

Shane doesn't answer.

He's already running for the Raiders' locker room.

Or, Ilya has a panic attack in the Raiders' locker room after getting a phone call from his brother telling him about his father's death.

Notes

This fic has been on my mind for a while, finally got the chance to start writing it.

Hope you enjoy reading :)

Chapter 1

Shane sat in his cubby in the Raiders' guest locker room, tightening the laces on his shoes one careful tug at a time. His fingers worked automatically, muscle memory taking over while his mind wandered somewhere else entirely.

Around him, the locker room buzzed with the familiar chaos that always followed a game. Equipment clattered against the floor as players stripped off shoulder pads and elbow guards, tossing sweat soaked gear into open stalls without much care. A few guys were heading toward the showers, while others were already back, towels slung low around their waists, hair dripping onto the floor. Steam drifted through the open doorway, carrying the sharp scent of soap that mixed with sweat, damp fabric, and a sting of athletic tape.

Shane had showered and gotten dressed almost immediately after walking into the locker room after the final buzzer. He had stripped off his gear, showered, dressed, and packed everything away in what was probably record time.

Today, he had a reason. He was supposed to see Ilya again after the game.

The thought alone had him rushing through his post-game routine. If he could get through media quickly, he could slip out sooner.

Now, as he sat tying the last knot in his laces, Shane mentally rehearsed what he would say to the reporters. After years in the league, he had a pretty good idea what was coming. Questions about the loss. Questions about the Raiders' game winning performance. Questions about *Ilya*.

The Raiders had managed to hold off the Metros tonight, though if Shane was being honest with himself, it hadn’t been the Raiders so much as Ilya. Ilya Rozanov had been unstoppable; he scored a hat trick. Shane himself had two points, but it hadn’t been enough. The sting of the loss was still fresh. Shane hated losing, he always had, and losing to Ilya somehow made it worse.

Still, he couldn’t deny how incredible Ilya had looked on the ice tonight.

Shane found himself replaying the goals in his mind: the speed, the precision, the way Ilya had slipped past defenders like they weren’t even there. He was halfway through reliving the second goal when a voice cut through the locker room chatter.

“Did you guys hear about Rozanov?” One of the rookies said, standing a few lockers away, surrounded by a small group of teammates who suddenly looked interested.

Shane’s head snapped up immediately. “What about Rozanov?” he asked.

His mind instantly spun through possibilities. Did Ilya get hurt during the game? No. Shane would have noticed that. Maybe he said something insane to the press. That felt more likely,

Ilya had never been great at filtering himself in front of the media. Or maybe he'd gotten into a fight with one of his teammates. No. That didn't sound right either, Ilya loved his team, and they loved him.

"A buddy of mine on the Raiders—" the rookie began saying.

"You've got a *buddy* on the Raiders?" J.J. interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. He's a rookie too, and the same draft class as me. So… yeah, we still talk sometimes." The rookie shrugged defensively.

Shane resisted the sudden urge to grab the kid by the shoulders. *Finish the story. Tell me what the fuck is going on with Ilya.* Instead, he forced himself to stay calm.

"You were saying about Rozanov?" Shane prompted, keeping his voice even.

"Oh— right." The rookie rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry, Cap. I was saying… One of the Raiders' rookies texted me. Apparently Rozanov's having some kind of… mental breakdown in their locker room."

For a second, Shane didn't fully register the words being said. But then, they hit him all at once.

Oh no.

"What do you mean 'mental breakdown'?" someone asked.

The rookie frowned slightly, glancing down at his phone like he was rereading the message. "Apparently he answered a phone call right when they got back into the locker room," he said. "Whatever the person said to him must have really messed him up. He said Rozanov just… sat down on the floor, and he hasn't moved since. He won't talk to anyone. He's just staring straight ahead. It's like he's not even there."

A few guys exchanged confused looks.

"He completely shut down," the rookie added.

A couple lockers down, J.J. snorted. "That asshole had it coming."

"Always knew he was bound to break at some point." Someone added.

Another voice chimed in from near the showers. "Couldn't he have gotten the call before the game? Would've spared us a few bruises."

A couple of guys laughed under their breath.

Shane felt something cold crawl through him. Earlier that day flashed through his mind. Ilya lying beside him in bed, his phone buzzing over and over on the nightstand. Ilya had said it was his brother calling, but he had ignored the call every time. Shane knew part of the story, Ilya had told him enough. Alexei treated him like a walking ATM machine, calling whenever

he needed money, guilt tripping him about family duties, but Ilya had always handled it. He never let Alexei get to him like that, so there was no way Alexei could have said something to him so vile that it would cause this type of reaction. Unless—

Shane's thoughts halted abruptly as another memory surfaced.

Ilya's father.

Ilya's father had been sick, and Alexei was taking care of him back in Russia. Which meant —

The realization hit Shane like a punch to the ribs.

Shane shot to his feet. Several heads turned at the sudden movement, but he barely noticed. He was already moving, pushing past teammates as he headed for the door.

He had to get to the Raiders' locker room. He had to get to Ilya. Shane knew the risks. Everyone thought they hated each other. If anyone saw him rushing into the Raiders' locker room, questions would start immediately. People might start wondering if there was more between them than the rivalry they showed on the ice, if maybe they didn't actually hate each other at all. And that wasn't even mentioning the obvious problem: crossing into another team's locker room was a massive violation, especially after a game like this.

But right now, none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was Ilya.

"Shane," Hayden called after him. "Where are you going?"

Shane barely slowed. "I need to—" He ran a hand through his hair, trying to find the words. "I just need to make sure he's okay."

"Why the fuck do you care what happens to Rozanov?" Comeau said sharply, suspicion heavy in his voice.

But Shane didn't answer.

He was already out the door, running for the Raiders' locker room.

Chapter 2

Shane bolted out of the locker room without a second thought, the door slamming shut behind him as he broke into a sprint. His shoes pounded against the concrete floor, each stride echoing through the arena corridors as he wove around scattered staff members, equipment carts, and security personnel, barely slowing as people stepped out of his way. The Raiders' locker room sat on the opposite side of the arena, and every second it took to get there felt agonizingly slow.

Footsteps echoed behind him, quick enough to nearly match his pace. Shane didn't bother looking back. It was probably Hayden or J.J., more likely J.J., considering he'd already been dressed while Hayden had still been standing in the locker room wrapped in nothing but a towel. Whoever it was, it didn't matter. They could call after him all they wanted, but nothing was going to stop him from getting to Ilya.

The only thing on Shane’s mind was Ilya. He needed to see him with his own eyes, to know he was okay instead of wondering. He needed to hear his voice, to wrap his arms around him and hold him close, to kiss him, to remind him that he wasn't alone. Whether Ilya needed comfort, reassurance, or simply someone to sit beside him in silence, Shane would give him whatever he needed. He didn't know what he was going to say once he got there, only that he had to be there.

Shane rounded the final corner at full speed before skidding to an abrupt stop outside the Raiders' locker room. The heavy door stood only a few feet away, suddenly feeling like the only thing separating him from Ilya. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he caught his breath, adrenaline still rushing through his veins.

He had no idea what was waiting for him behind that door. Were Ilya's teammates gathered around him? Was he alone? Had he already left? What if the rookie had misunderstood what he'd seen? What if Shane was about to storm into the opposing team's locker room for absolutely no reason?

The doubts pressed at the edges of his mind, each one trying to slow him down, but he shoved them aside before they could take hold. None of it mattered. If there was even the slightest chance Ilya was in there and needed him, Shane wasn't about to walk away.

Even so, standing in front of the door was somehow harder than sprinting across the arena. His hand hovered inches from the handle, but doubt kept holding him back. Should he knock? Maybe wait until someone walked out of the room? Or should he just walk in?

Before he could second guess himself again, Shane wrapped his fingers around the handle and pushed the door open.

The room fell quiet almost instantly. About half a dozen Boston players stood clustered in the center of the locker room, their backs partially turned toward the door. From the way they

were gathered, tight and tense, Shane could only assume someone was sitting on the floor in the middle of them.

Several heads snapped toward the door. The moment they realized who had walked in, the atmosphere shifted.

Cliff Marlow and Victor St. Simon immediately broke away from the group and strode towards him. Both of them were bigger than Shane, broader through the shoulders, and when they stopped in front of him, they completely filled the doorway, cutting off his view of the locker room behind them.

"Hollander?" Marlow barked. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Now's really not the time for whatever dumb rivalry bullshit you've got planned," St. Simon said, his voice cold enough to make it clear Shane wasn't welcome.

Shane knew how Ilya's teammates felt about their captain. They didn't just respect him, they would follow him anywhere. It showed in every interview, every game, every time they stepped in to defend him on the ice without a second thought. And it showed now, too, in the way they had instinctively closed ranks around him, putting themselves between Ilya and anyone they thought might make an already awful situation even worse.

Oddly enough, seeing them protect him so fiercely, even a little aggressively, caught Shane a bit off guard. Ilya had people in his corner, people who would stand up for him when things got bad and shield him without hesitation, and Shane was grateful for that. Right now, though, he almost wished they cared a little less, perhaps just enough to let his longtime rival through the door. He just wished they'd trust him enough to let him through.

Shane leaned to one side, trying to catch a glimpse past them, but both men shifted immediately, matching the movement and blocking his view again.

"I..." He swallowed hard, frustration and worry seeping through him. "I just need to talk to him."

Marlow let out a short, humorless laugh. "I've heard people say you're a decent guy, Hollander," he said. "So prove it and fuck off."

Shane's jaw tightened. He wasn't leaving. Not until he knew Ilya was okay.

"Please, Rozanov and I are friends. I promise I'm not here to cause trouble. I just need to make sure he's okay."

“Friends?”

The voice came from behind him. J.J.’s. Shane had almost forgotten he was there.

“Yes,” He said firmly, not bothering to turn around to face him. “Friends.”

Marlow and St. Simon just stared at him, clearly trying to figure out what to make of his words.

“Hollander, if you’re fucking with us—”

"I'm not," Shane cut in before Marlow could finish. "I swear... Look, if I make things worse, you can throw me out. Drag me out if you have to. Just... let me see him. Please."

Shane Hollander had a reputation around the league, he was Canada's Golden Boy. He almost never got into fights, rarely chirped, and kept his emotions under control even when most players would have lost their temper. Despite the long-running rivalry between him and Ilya Rozanov, one of the league's most physical and explosive players, the two of them had somehow never once dropped their gloves. People noticed things like that. So the idea that Shane Hollander would lie just to get inside the Raiders' locker room and take advantage of whatever had happened to his biggest rival felt really unlikely.

St. Simon glanced over his shoulder toward the rest of the locker room. A quiet murmur rippled through the players Shane still couldn't see. After a few seconds, he looked back. "Okay," he said slowly. "Fine. You can come in."

Shane’s shoulders loosened slightly with relief—

"But one wrong move," Marlow interrupted, stepping closer until they were nearly chest to chest, his voice low and edged with warning, "and I'll throw you out of here myself."

"I know," Shane answered immediately.

“Oh, and only you, Hollander,” Marlow added. “Boiziau stays outside.”

“Fuck you, Marlow,” J.J. snapped from behind him. “I’m not leaving my capitaine alone with you fucking Raiders.”

Shane finally turned around to look at J.J. He stood only a few inches behind him, arms crossed tightly over his chest, jaw set as he stared past Shane to lock eyes with Marlow. Every inch of his posture dared someone to challenge him.

“J.J., you can wait for me outside,” Shane said.

"What?" J.J.'s head whipped toward him. "Hollander, come on. You can't be serious."

“I am.” Shane said.

J.J. searched his face as if waiting for him to crack.

"And even if Marlow had said you could come in," Shane continued more quietly, "I wouldn't have let you."

"Shane—"

"I heard what you said back in our locker room," Shane cut in.

J.J.'s expression faltered, his anger and confusion turning into something closer to guilt.

"So you can wait out here, or you can go back to the team." Shane said, turning back toward the doorway, "But you're not going in."

Without giving J.J. another chance to argue, Shane stepped past Marlow and St. Simon. The heavy locker room door swung shut behind him with a dull, echoing thud.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Shane stepped through the door of the Raiders' locker room, the noise inside died almost instantly. Soft murmurs cut off mid-sentence, and heads turned in his direction. No one said a word. They just watched him with guarded expressions, suspicion plain on their faces.

Shane felt like he'd just walked straight into a lion's den.

The Raiders' players were gathered in a loose circle near the center of the room, their broad shoulders and tense stances blocking his view of whoever they were surrounding.

Ilya.

It had to be.

Shane's gaze swept quickly across the room, taking in the familiar faces. Most of them were veterans, players who had been with the organization long before Ilya arrived in Boston. The rest were teammates Shane knew Ilya trusted, the ones he'd heard him mention the most over the years. Eight players in total. Eight sets of watchful eyes tracking his every movement.

The players standing between Shane and the center of the room looked torn between throwing him right back out the door and dragging him over to help their captain. Beneath the suspicion and hostility though, there was something else written plainly across every face. They looked terrified. And absolutely helpless.

Thankfully, the rookies and younger players were nowhere to be seen.The older players must have sent them out. And after hearing that Boston's rookie had already texted someone outside the room, Shane was relieved they weren't there to witness this. The last thing Ilya needed was for one of the worst moments of his life to become locker room gossip spreading throughout the entire league.

No one dared to speak or move, they just carefully watched Shane. Then St. Simon broke the silence.

"Guys," he said, motioning toward Shane. "Make some room."

The players hesitated at first. A few exchanged uncertain glances, clearly unhappy with the decision, but one by one they stepped aside, opening the circle just enough for Shane to see.

His stomach dropped at the sight in front of him.

Ilya was sitting on the floor in front of his stall, still wearing most of his hockey gear. His back rested against the wooden cubby, his knees pulled tightly to his chest, his arms wrapped

around them firmly. His golden curls were still damp with sweat, falling messily across his forehead which rested against his forearms, hiding his face completely. His shoulders were rounded inward, his entire body curled into itself as though he were trying to make himself as small as possible. He looked nothing like the man Shane knew.

Ilya Rozanov was many things: confident, loud, cocky as hell. On the ice, he carried himself like he owned every inch of it, shoulders back, chin high, daring anyone to challenge him. But the man sitting on the floor looked nothing like that.

Shane couldn't move. He just stood there, staring. Something inside of him twisted painfully.

St. Simon stepped up beside him, lowering his voice as if speaking too loudly might make things worse.

“Right after we got back to the locker room, he answered a phone call,” he explained. “He seemed fine at first. Then... a minute later..." He gestured helplessly toward Ilya. “He just dropped down like that.”

Marlow rubbed a hand over his face, frustration and worry both visible. “We’ve tried talking to him, but… nothing.”

“He won't answer us,” Carmichael added quietly. “He won't even look at us.”

“And if anyone gets too close…” Hammersmith hesitated. “He flinches.”

One of the veterans let out a weary sigh. “It's like there's nobody home.”

Marlow’s gaze shifted back to Shane, his expression hardening. “Well,” he said, a trace of sarcasm creeping into his voice, "since you and Roz are apparently such good buddies..." He folded his arms across his chest. “Any idea what the hell could’ve caused this?”

Shane didn't answer right away, his eyes still set on Ilya. Then almost imperceptibly he nodded.

He took a few slow steps forward, getting up close to Ilya. It looked even worse from that distance.

Every muscle in Ilya's body was rigid with tension. His shoulders were locked, trembling beneath his gear, and his fingers clutched the fabric of his jersey so tightly that his knuckles had gone pale.

Shane stopped a few inches away from Ilya. And suddenly, he had no idea what to do. Should he say his name? Maybe sit beside him? Wrap his arms around him? Touching him might only make it worse, but not touching him felt unbearable.

Behind him, eight Raiders players stood in complete silence, watching his every move. Their eyes burned into his back. They were desperate, waiting for Shane to do the one thing none of them had been able to. At least they didn't seem hostile anymore. But their presence was still nervewracking. How much could he do with an audience like this?

He fought to keep his frustration in check.

Come on. Think.

Shane dragged a hand on his face, his frustration flaring into anger directed entirely at himself.

Whenever *he* spiraled, Ilya always knew exactly what to do. He knew when to talk to him and knew when silence was better. He knew when to crack a joke just to pull Shane's attention somewhere else, when to distract him, and when his touch was all that Shane needed.

Ilya somehow always knew just what to do. And now, when it was Shane's turn to be that person… he had no idea where to even begin.

Here Ilya was clearly falling apart, clearly needing someone, *needing Shane*, and Shane stood there completely fucking useless.

Shane drew in a steadying breath before taking a couple of steps forward. The room remained silent behind him. He could feel every Raider watching, every one of them ready to step in the second they thought he was making things worse.

When he reached Ilya, Shane lowered himself carefully until he was crouched on the floor a few inches away. Close enough that he could reach for him if he needed to, but not so close that he risked crowding him.

For a few long seconds, he simply stayed there. The only movement was the shallow rise and fall of Ilya's breathing. Then softly, Shane spoke.

"R— Rozanov?"

Nothing.

Ilya didn't lift his head, he didn't move, he didn't answer. Shane wondered if he hadn't heard him at all, but then he noticed something. Ilya's breathing. It was still uneven and coming faster than it should, but it had changed slightly. The frantic rhythm slowed down by the smallest fraction, as though the sound of Shane's voice had managed to reach him.

Shane held onto that tiny change. It was proof he was doing something right. At least Ilya could hear him, and that was something.

Encouraged, Shane moved a little closer on the floor, careful not to move too suddenly. Then he tried again, his voice a little steadier this time.

“Ilya?”

Ilya slowly lifted his head. The movement was cautious, almost hesitant, making sure it was safe before he dared to look up. As though he couldn't quite trust his own ears, couldn't believe Shane Hollander had really just said his name.

A pair of piercing blue eyes met Shane's. Up close, he could see how bloodshot his eyes were. At some point with his face buried against his arms, Ilya had been crying.

Now he was staring at Shane like he was trying to solve an impossible puzzle, studying every feature of his face trying to decide whether Shane was actually sitting in front of him, or whether he was just something his exhausted mind had conjured.

"Sh– Shane?" Ilya asked quietly. His voice was hoarse and barely above a whisper.

The uncertainty in Ilya's voice pierced Shane. "I'm here, Ilya," he said gently. "I'm right here."

Behind them, someone drew in a sharp breath. A few quiet whispers rippled through the locker room. Shane had managed to get more of a response out of Ilya in less than a minute than the rest of the team had since they returned from the ice. But Ilya didn't seem to hear them, his entire world had narrowed to a single point. His gaze never left Shane's face, as though everything else in the room had ceased to exist.

Slowly, Shane reached out. But halfway there, his hand stopped.

If you try to touch him, he flinches.

Hammersmith's warning rang through his mind. But Shane knew Ilya. *His* Ilya had always been effortlessly affectionate, always leaning into him, always seeking out even the smallest touch. He was the kind of man who drifted into Shane's space without realizing it, who bumped their shoulders together whenever they stood side by side, who reached for him without a second thought. Somewhere along the way, touching Shane had become instinct, an unconscious habit that was as natural as breathing whenever they were together.

So Shane moved slowly, giving Ilya plenty of time to pull away if he needed to. Carefully finding the small gap in the protective gear Ilya was still wearing beneath his jersey, Shane gently rested his hand against his arm.

He braced himself for the reaction, for the flinch, for Ilya to recoil from the touch or shove his hand away, to fold back in on himself until Shane lost him all over again.

Instead, Ilya seemed to melt into it. The rigid tension locked into his shoulders eased ever so slightly beneath Shane's hand, as though the simple contact had reminded him how to breathe. Then, Ilya slowly lifted one trembling hand and wrapped his fingers around Shane's wrist, tight enough to just hold it there. As though he needed to make sure Shane wasn't going anywhere.

A small, helpless smile tugged at Shane's lips. The simple gesture told Shane everything he needed to know. Ilya knew he was here, and more importantly, he wanted him to stay. Shane didn't move his hand. Instead, he let his thumb begin tracing slow circles over Ilya's arm, the same quiet, grounding motion Ilya had used on him whenever Shane needed it. Beneath his fingertips, he could still feel the tension coiled through every muscle, the faint tremor running through Ilya's body. But Ilya never let go of his wrist.

Shane just stayed there with him, letting the silence settle around them. The locker room, the players standing only a few feet away, the game they had just finished playing... all of it faded into the background. Right now, there was only Ilya, and all that mattered was keeping Ilya anchored.

Shane hated the question already forming in his throat, but if he understood what had happened, maybe he could figure out how to help.

“Ilya…” he started softly. “Is your father—?” Shane could not finish his question. He wasn't sure whether saying the words aloud would make any of this more real than it already was.

But Ilya did not need to hear the rest of the question to know what Shane was asking. His fingers tightened around Shane's wrist, then he nodded slightly. It was the smallest movement, and somehow the heaviest. It was the saddest nod Shane had ever seen.

Shane didn’t need anything more than that. He understood that Ilya’s father was gone. *Dead*. The realization settled into his chest like stone.

Ilya's gaze met his, soft and searching. There was something unspoken in those piercing blue eyes, something vulnerable that didn't need words. A silent plea. Shane didn’t hesitate, not this time.

Slowly and carefully, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Ilya's shoulders. Ilya's grip on Shane's wrist loosened, his hand sliding away as his arms moved around Shane's waist instead. He pulled himself closer, burying his face in the curve of Shane's neck, hiding himself from the rest of the room.

The position was awkward with the way they were both sitting on the floor, Shane crouched low and Ilya still half-curled in on himself. Or at least Shane hoped it looked awkward. Some detached part of his mind hoped anyone watching would see nothing more than two friends comforting each other after devastating news. Nothing more intimate than that.

But the moment Ilya's weight settled against him, Shane stopped caring about how it looked. All he could focus on was the quiet trembling running through Ilya's body. At first, the sounds were so faint they were almost impossible to hear, muffled against Shane's collarbone. Small, broken breaths that shuddered against his skin. Then Shane realized what he was hearing. Ilya was crying.

Not loudly. Never loudly. It was the quiet, tightly controlled kind Shane had only witnessed once before, the kind that meant Ilya was fighting with everything he had not to fall apart in front of other people. For someone who hated crying where anyone could see him, these silent tears carried the same weight as deep, wrenching sobs.

And it was the most heartbreaking sound Shane had ever heard.

His own eyes burned almost immediately, tears blurring his vision. He forced them back before they could fall. He could cry later if he needed to. Because right now, Ilya needed someone steady, someone who could hold everything together until he was able to do it himself. So Shane tightened his arms slightly and held him. He began tracing slow circles

across Ilya's back, the same soothing motion Ilya used on him times whenever *he* was exhausted or overwhelmed. After a moment, he remembered the thick shoulder pads beneath the jersey, muting the touch almost completely. So he slid one hand higher instead, gently threading his fingers into Ilya's damp curls and combing through the soft golden strands in slow, familiar strokes.

Gradually, the sobs began to quiet and the trembling eased. Ilya's breathing, though still uneven, became just a little steadier. For a long while, neither of them spoke. Then, in a voice so quiet that was meant only for Shane to hear, Ilya said, "I do not know why I feel like this." His accent was thicker than usual.

Shane continued stroking his hair, his voice just as soft. "Like what?"

Ilya was silent for several seconds before answering. “Sad.” The word sounded almost confused, as though he didn't fully understand it himself.

Slowly, Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, his hands sliding from Ilya's shoulders to rest on his forearms. Up close, his eyes were still red and glassy, his lashes clumped together from tears. There was something heartbreakingly fragile about his expression, something Shane had never seen before.

“Ilya—”

“He was a terrible man,” Ilya interrupted. His jaw tightened. “And a very mean person.” He swallowed hard before looking back at Shane. “I am not supposed to feel like this.”

Shane shook his head. “Ilya… you can still feel sad.”

Ilya frowned, looking confused.

Choosing his next words carefully, Shane said, “Ilya, you can feel sad about losing your father. You can also be sad for everything you never got from him.”

Tears began to fill Ilya’s eyes again. He dropped his gaze toward the floor.

“You can grieve the father you had. And you can grieve the father you never got to have… the father you kept hoping he might become someday.”

At first, Ilya said nothing, then his voice returned, rough with emotion.

“Nothing I ever did was good enough for him.” His fingers tightened slightly in the fabric of Shane’s sweatshirt as the memories began to spill out. “When I was drafted first overall… he told Boston manager I was lazy. And that I needed discipline.”

Shane felt his jaw clench.

“When I became captain of Raiders, he said it did not mean anything if I did not win Cup. Like the C on my jersey was silly decoration. And when I won the Cup… he reminded me that I did not win a medal in Sochi.”

Shane had always known Ilya's father put impossible pressure on him. He thought he had recognized it when they were in Sochi, but now, hearing Ilya finally put it into words filled Shane with a painful mix of anger and sadness.

"All I ever wanted—" Ilya's voice faltered. "I just wanted him to say he was proud of me."

Shane felt his heart break. He had never had to wonder whether his parents were proud of him. They had spent his entire life making sure he knew they loved him, celebrating his successes and reminding him that their support never depended on trophies, medals, or championships. No child should have to earn their parents' love. No child should spend their life chasing a single word of approval that never came. Shane had always known he was lucky. But until this moment, he had never truly understood just how cruel a parent could be.

"When he got sick," Ilya continued, his voice softer now, "I thought maybe… maybe the illness would take that part of him away."

Shane listened silently.

"The part that hated me." Ilya gave a small, humorless breath. "I thought maybe then he would finally say it." His eyes lowered again. "I was stupid to believe there was a part of him that did not hate me." He paused and took a breath to steady himself. "But at least he was still alive." His voice cracked slightly. "And now…" Ilya whispered. "I have no one left."

Shane's heart twisted painfully at that.

"Ilya…" he said quietly. "That's not true."

But Ilya didn't respond, he just shook his head no. So Shane tightened his grip on Ilya's forearms, hoping Ilya would be able to feel the words if he's refusing to hear them.

"Ilya, you have a team that would go to hell and back for you," Shane said confidently. "They'd do anything for you." He gestured faintly toward the players around them. "You've got an entire city that practically worships the ice you skate on."

A faint flicker of doubt crossed Ilya's face.

"You have Svetlana," Shane added gently. "She's been by your side since you were kids. You both know she's not going anywhere." Then Shane's voice softened. "And you have me, Ilya."

Ilya finally looked up, and their eyes met.

"You'll always have me," Shane said quietly. "I promise."

There was so much more Shane wanted to say. *You'll always have me. You've always had me. You can always lean on me. I'd do anything for you. I love you.*

The words pressed against the back of his throat, desperate to escape. But he didn't say any of them, not here, and especially not with half the Raiders' locker room still standing around them, watching his every move and listening to every word he said. So instead, Shane let the

words remain unspoken and hoped desperately that Ilya could see them anyway. That somehow they were written in his expression, in the way he was looking at him.

Ilya studied his face before giving a small nod. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was small and tired, but it was real. Shane felt some of his worry start to ease at the sight of it.

But the moment didn't last long, and the smile faded almost as quickly as it had appeared. Something else had crossed Ilya's mind. Shane watched the change happen in real time, the softness leaving his expression as the sadness returned to his eyes. Ilya hesitated before speaking again.

"But I have no mother and no father." It was such a simple statement, yet hearing it said aloud made the truth impossible to ignore.

Shane thought for a moment, then he shrugged lightly. "Okay, then we can share mine."

Ilya just stared at him.

Shane's lips twitched slightly. "I'm sure you'd even end up being their favorite son."

A weak, tired laugh escaped Ilya. "Shane, that is very stupid. They hate me."

Shane rolled his eyes. "They don't hate you, Ilya. They hate the Raiders." It probably wasn't the smartest thing to have said while currently surrounded by Raiders players.

Ilya gave him a look that very clearly said *those are the same thing.*

Shane sighed dramatically. "Okay, fine," he admitted. "Maybe they don't like you. But that's only because they don't know you."

Ilya remained looking unconvinced.

"Next time you come to Montreal," Shane continued, "I'll introduce you to them. And once they get to know you, the real you, and not the asshole you pretend to be on the ice, then they'll love you. I promise."

Ilya studied his face for a while, then finally nodded slightly. "Okay," he whispered.

"Okay," Shane repeated, a small smile forming on his lips.

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds, but Shane could tell there was something else on Ilya's mind.

"I need to go to Russia… for funeral." Ilya finally said.

Shane's stomach tightened. "Are you sure?"

Ilya shook his head slowly. "No. I don't know. But I have to go. Not for him," he added quietly. "For me."

“Ilya… I don’t want you alone in Russia.”

“I will not be alone,” Ilya replied. “Svetlana will come with me.”

“Is she here in Boston?” Shane asked.

“Yes.”

Shane lifted his head then, glancing toward the group of players still standing around them. For the first time since he had walked into the locker room, he really looked at their faces. Some of them were quietly wiping at their eyes. Carmichael had his arms folded across his chest, staring down at Ilya with an expression that was equal parts sadness and helplessness. Connors was openly worried, his brows drawn together like he was still trying to figure out how to help.

No one looked angry or suspicious, and no one seemed to be judging Ilya for falling apart in front of them, or Shane for being the one holding him together. They only looked concerned for their captain.

“Um, guys,” he said, addressing Ilya's teammates, “one of you grab his phone and call Svetlana. Tell her to meet us at Ilya’s house.”

“Yeah man, of course,” someone replied, but Shane didn’t even bother to check who it was. His attention had already drifted back to Ilya.

Across the room, Connors picked up the phone from where it had fallen earlier.

“Give it to me, I’ll call her,” Marlow said, stepping forward. “I’ve met her a couple times when I was out with Roz, she knows who I am.”

He took the phone from Connors and turned it over in his hand. “Uh… Roz?” Marlow asked carefully. “What’s your password?”

“Fourteen-ten,” Shane replied instantly, the number slipped out.

The room went quiet, and several Boston players shared looks before slowly turning to look at him.

“How the *fuck* did you know that?” Marlow asked surprised.

Shane glanced up at him. “Marlow,” he said almost angrily, “I don’t know how many more fucking times I can tell you that Ilya and I are friends.”

Ilya snorted. It was quiet but it was the first sign of Ilya’s true self returning.

Marlow blinked. “Right. I’ll go call her now.” He said, then stepped out of the locker room.

Shane turned back to Ilya, giving him a gentle nod. “Come on, let’s get you home.” He then turned to whoever was standing the closest to Ilya, “St. Simon, help me get his gear off.”

Together, Shane and St. Simon began helping Ilya undress. Shane carefully pulled off his jersey, then started removing the shoulder pads and protective gear, while St. Simon focused on the skates. Piece by piece, the layers came off until Ilya was down to his compression shirt and pants. By the time they were done, Marlow had returned, phone in hand.

“Roz,” he said softly, “Svetlana’s on her way to your house now.”

"Okay," Ilya nodded.

“Ilya, do you think you can stand?” Shane asked, already offering his hand to help him up.

Ilya’s weak fingers curled around Shane’s hand, and Shane pulled him up. His knees wobbled, and he leaned heavily on Shane. Shane looped Ilya’s arm over his shoulder, supporting him as best he could.

“Marlow, grab some clean clothes from Ilya’s bag.” Shane said.

Marlow jogged over to where Ilya's bag was resting in his locker, rifled through it, and returned with a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. As he began to start helping Ilya put on the clothes, Ilya spoke quietly.

“I need to shower first."

Shane shook his head. “Ilya, you can barely stand. You can shower at home.”

“Okay,” Ilya mumbled. Clearly he was in no position to disagree.

Marlow helped him step into the sweatpants and pulled the sweatshirt over his head, while Shane and St. Simon kept a steady hand on him. Shane’s arm never left Ilya’s waist.

Once Ilya was dressed, Shane gave him a small, reassuring squeeze, “Come on. I’ll drive you home.” He grabbed Ilya’s bag and began to guide him towards the door.

Marlow immediately stepped forward. “Hollander, wait. I’ll drive,” he said, grabbing the bag from Shane. “You don’t know the roads in Boston, plus I need to make sure Roz is okay.”

Shane hesitated, but he could see the worry on Marlow's face, clearly wanting to make sure his friend and captain was okay, but also wanting to feel needed. He nodded and said, “Okay, fine. You drive.”

“I’m also coming,” St. Simon said, stepping up.

“Wait, me too,” Connors added.

Shane held up a hand, keeping his tone firm. “I know you all care about Ilya, but it’s better not to overwhelm him right now. Marlow will keep you all updated.” He turned to Marlow, “Right Marlow?”

"Yeah, of course."

“Alright, fine,” St. Simon muttered, though Shane could see the worry still lingering in his eyes.

Shane resumed guiding Ilya toward the door but paused, turning back to the group of men. “Oh, and if you really want to support your captain, make sure none of your guys talk. Not to the press. Not to other players in the league.” His voice was calm but it carried the weight of authority.

“You don’t have to tell us, Hollander. None of our guys will talk,” Carmichael said firmly.

“You sure about that?” Shane asked, raising an eyebrow. “One of your rookies already *did* talk, he texted *my* rookie. That’s how I knew to come here.”

The Raiders players gave each other looks, some even lowering their heads down looking embarrassed.

“Get your guys under control.” Shane said, giving his rival team an order.

Ilya smirked faintly. “Mm, very assertive. Maybe you can be a captain like me one day.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane shot back, a small grin tugging at his lips. “I’m already a captain.”

He chuckled quietly, glancing at Ilya. Even exhausted, broken, and weighed down by grief, Ilya still managed to chirp. It was impossible not to admire him.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason people seem to forget that Shane can command a room of grown-ass hockey players, like that’s CAPTAIN Shane Hollander.

Also, he does NOT play about his man.

Chapter 4

Shane knew exactly what he was leaving behind as he stepped out of the locker room, a room full of Raiders players with more questions now than when he had first walked in.

He also knew what was waiting for him outside. J.J. Who would probably be demanding an explanation.

Shane tried to think of what he would say. How would he explain any of this to him? Why did he walk into the opposing locker room, why was he now walking out with their captain who he supposedly hated, why did he say they were friends?

But the thoughts didn't stick, they didn't matter. Right now, Shane did not care about explanations, all he cared about was Ilya.

Still, he found himself bracing as he stepped out of the Raiders' locker room.

But J.J. wasn't there.

The hallway outside felt too bright after everything that had just happened, too loud, and yet somehow too quiet at the same time. The world continuing on like nothing had changed felt almost wrong.

Shane barely registered any of it as they stepped out. His focus was entirely on Ilya.

Ilya's weight leaned heavily into him, his arm draped over Shane's shoulders. Shane kept one arm firmly wrapped around his waist, holding him steady, while his other hand secured Ilya's wrist where it rested across him, grounding him, making sure he didn't slip.

"I've got you," Shane murmured quietly, leaning in just enough for only Ilya to hear. "I'm right here."

Ilya didn't respond, but his grip tightened slightly in Shane's shoulder, and that was enough.

Marlow walked a step ahead of them, glancing back every few seconds, clearly torn between giving them space and making sure Ilya didn't collapse.

"All good back there?" Marlow asked. "Anything I can help with?"

"Uh, thanks, we're good," Shane replied, even though they were definitely not 'good'.

They moved slowly through the corridor and out toward the player parking lot. The cold night air hit them the moment they stepped outside. And that's when Shane saw them.

J.J. and Hayden were standing near the edge of the lot, mid-conversation.

Hayden had Shane's game day bag slung over his shoulder, while J.J. leaned against a car, arms crossed, his posture tense despite the casual stance. Their voices were low, but not low enough.

Shane caught fragments as they approached.

"I don't know, man! He said they were friends," J.J. muttered.

"Are you sure that's what he said?" Hayden asked, skeptical.

J.J. huffed. "That's what he fucking said—"

The sound of footsteps cut them off. Both of them looked up at the same time. Their attention landed on Shane first, then shifted to the man leaning heavily against him, and then to the other man walking beside them.

Ilya kept his head down, his face mostly hidden, his weight still pressed into Shane, but the golden curls were recognizable. There was no mistaking who that was. That was Ilya Rozanov, leaning on their captain.

And beside them, just as telling, was Marlow. Ilya's right-hand man. The two of them were rarely seen apart.

The realization hit Hayden and J.J. at the same time. Shane wasn't just *near* Raiders players. He was with them.

Hayden and J.J. exchanged glances, as if to see whether the other was witnessing the same thing..

"What the fuck is going on, Shane?" Hayden asked, stepping forward as the reality sank in.

Ilya lifted his head at the sharpness in Hayden's voice.

"Back off, Pike," Marlow warned, his tone low and threatening.

As Ilya raised his head to meet the gaze of the men standing in front of him, Hayden's eyes roamed the scene again, taking in every detail, his posture slumped, red-rimmed eyes that showed he had been crying, the way he struggled to stay upright, and how Shane was holding him steady.

"Fuck off, Marlow," J.J. snapped, pushing off the car. "We're just trying to understand what the fuck is happening here. Shane, since when are you two—"

"Wait— fuck—" Hayden interrupted, stepping closer, voice sharper than before. "Is he okay?"

Shane didn't slow down. "Guys. I can't— I can't right now," he said, his voice tight and controlled. "We'll talk later, okay?"

Hayden frowned but fell into step beside them, eyes still fixed on Ilya. "Shane—"

Shane shook his head slightly. “Not now.”

As they reached Ilya’s car, Marlow had already moved ahead to unlock it. Shane exhaled quietly, trying to map the next steps in his mind.

“Shane, your bag,” Hayden added, breaking through his thoughts, holding it out.

“Marlow.” Shane nodded toward Marlow. “Take that too.”

Marlow didn’t hesitate. He pulled Shane’s bag onto his shoulder, and then went to place it in the passenger side of the car, next to where he had placed Ilya’s bag.

J.J. let out a quiet huff. “Are you the captain of the Raiders now too?” he muttered.

Under any other circumstances, Shane might have snapped back. Now… he didn’t even glance at him. All his attention stayed on Ilya.

Hayden and J.J. watched as Shane opened the back door of Ilya’s car. He moved slowly, carefully, helping Ilya into the seat. One hand hovered over the back of Ilya’s head, making sure it didn’t hit the frame.

Marlow, already settled in the driver’s seat, started the engine. The low hum filled the car, mingling with the quiet night air outside.

Shane began sliding in after Ilya.

“Shane, wait,” Hayden called, his tone different this time, less confusion, more intention.

Shane paused, one foot halfway in the car.

“Hayden, please,” he murmured, exhaustion bleeding into his voice. “I can’t do this right now.”

“No, no,” Hayden said quickly, raising his hands slightly, stepping closer. “I wasn’t gonna start anything.” He lowered his voice, steady but insistent. “Just… tell me what you need.”

The words hit Shane differently. There was no judgment or pressure behind them. He just sounded concerned.

Shane’s throat tightened. He wanted to say so many things, maybe everything, but the only thing that mattered was Ilya.

How could he explain that all he needed right now was to get Ilya home? That he needed Ilya to get some rest. That he needed to make sure Ilya ate. That he needed to know Ilya would be safe in Russia.

He opened his mouth, hesitated, but Hayden spoke first.

“You don’t have to think about it now. But just know… if there’s anything I can help with, I will.”

Shane eased slightly. He nodded. “Thanks, Hayden.” Then finally slid fully into the backseat.

Once inside, Shane pulled Ilya close, draping an arm over his shoulders, steadying him against himself.

“Come on,” Shane murmured softly, leaning his head just enough to brush against Ilya’s. “Let’s get you home.”

The car ride was quiet. It wasn’t the tense silence from earlier, full of questions and awkward glances. This was different.

Streetlights passed in slow intervals outside the window, casting brief flashes of gold across the inside of the car before fading back into darkness.

In the backseat, Ilya had fallen asleep. At some point during the drive, his body had given in completely, the exhaustion finally catching up to him. His head rested in Shane’s lap, his breathing slow and uneven but no longer panicked.

Shane hadn’t moved since. One hand rested lightly against Ilya’s shoulder, keeping him steady with every turn of the car. The other drifted absently through his curls, fingers threading gently through the soft strands.

It was a familiar and instinctive motion. Something he did without thinking. It had calmed Ilya. And, if he was being honest, it had calmed him too.

Up front, Marlow kept his eyes on the road, both hands on the wheel. He was quieter than usual, not as sharp as Shane knew him to be. After a while, he spoke.

“Is he asleep?” he asked, his voice low enough not to disturb him.

Shane glanced down, brushing a curl away from Ilya’s forehead. “Yeah,” he replied softly, “he’s asleep.”

"Good."

Silence settled back in the car. Another streetlight passed. Marlow shifted in his seat, then shifted again.

Shane noticed it. In the rearview mirror, he caught Marlow’s expression, tight and thoughtful, like he wanted to say something but kept changing his mind. He adjusted his grip on the wheel one too many times. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

Shane exhaled quietly. “Just ask what you want to ask, Marlow.”

Marlow huffed under his breath, like he'd just been called out. There was a brief pause, like he was gathering his thoughts, then he spoke. "You and Roz…" he started, glancing up at the mirror. "You're friends?"

Shane's gaze lifted, meeting him through the reflection in the dashboard mirror. He glared at Marlow and held his stare.

Marlow nodded slightly, like he expected that non-answer, but it didn't quite satisfy him. "Yeah, yeah, I know you said that already," he continued. "I just mean…"

There was something guarded in Marlow's expression, it wasn't hostile, it looked like he was trying to understand the situation. He hesitated before he spoke again, searching for the right words.

"I'm just surprised, I guess." He glanced through the mirror again. "Did you guys what… like wake up one day and decide you didn't hate each other anymore?"

Shane's hand stilled briefly in Ilya's hair. Then, he shook his head. "No. Not one day. From day one," he said quietly. His fingers resumed their gentle movement.

"We've never hated each other." Shane added.

Marlow frowned, glancing at Shane through the rearview mirror. "What do you mean you've never hated each other?" he asked. "I've heard your chirps, or more like *Roz's* chirps and whatever your attempts are." There was a hint of dry amusement in his voice, but it didn't quite hide the confusion. "You guys are always checking each other into the boards—"

"We're competitive," Shane said simply.

Marlow let out a quiet scoff. "Hollander, Roz calls you boring all the fucking time," he said. "And I'm pretty sure I've heard you call him an asshole more than once."

Shane glanced up, meeting Marlow's eyes in the mirror.

"He *is* an asshole," he said without hesitation. "Come on, you're his friend too. You can admit that."

Marlow huffed out a short laugh. "Okay. Okay, fair enough."

"But still…" Marlow continued, "I mean… the rivalry, is that fake?"

Shane shook his head. "Uh, no. The rivalry's not fake. Like I said, we're both really fucking competitive." He glanced down briefly, smiled softly at Ilya who looked peaceful asleep in his lap. "And we love competing against each other. We push each other to be better."

Marlow absorbed that in silence for a moment.

"So then… how did you even become friends?" he asked. "I mean, you barely even see each other."

Shane leaned his head back slightly against the seat.

“We’ve done a lot of press together,” he said. “Conferences, awards shows, All-Star weekends… commercials.”

Shane’s mind drifted for a moment, back to the CCM commercial before their rookie season. The two of them were barely able to get through a single take without breaking. Ilya’s laugh, loud, bright, completely uncontrollable, had set him off every time. It had been impossible not to laugh with him.

Shane swallowed slightly, his fingers slowing for just a second in Ilya’s hair. He’d do anything to hear that laugh right now.

Marlow nodded faintly, like that explained part of it, but not enough. “But still, that doesn’t explain *this*.”

His gaze flicked toward the backseat, toward Ilya.

“You knew about his dad, you knew something was wrong before he even said anything.”

Shane hesitated. “Yeah… I mean, I knew his dad was sick. It wasn’t hard to put togeth—”

“I get that,” Marlow cut in, his voice tightening slightly, as did his grip on the wheel. “But fuck, we’re with him every day and none of us even knew his dad was sick.”

Shane didn’t answer right away, he wasn’t really sure how to. How much could he say without saying too much? His eyes dropped to Ilya again, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest, the way his face had softened in sleep despite everything.

“We were drafted together,” he said quietly. “Got pushed into a rivalry from before the NHL. We became captains at the same time. We carry the same kind of weight.” He paused briefly, searching for the right words.

“On the ice… we deal with the same expectations. From teammates, coaches, fans… hell, even our countries sometimes. There’s no one in this league—” he corrected himself, “no, no one in this world, who gets me like he does. And there’s no one who gets him like I do.”

He took a small breath.

“We confide in each other. So… in some way… we’ve kind of always been there for each other.”

Marlow nodded slightly.

After that, neither of them spoke again. The car fell into a quiet, heavy silence, like everything that needed to be said had already been said.

Streetlights flickered past, casting brief shadows across Ilya’s sleeping face before disappearing again into the dark.

Shane didn't move. His hand continued its slow, steady path through Ilya's hair, over and over again. It grounded him just as much as it grounded the man resting against him.

Marlow kept his eyes on the road, but his grip on the wheel had loosened.

Something in the air had shifted. Understanding, maybe, or at least the beginning of it.

The car rolled to a slow stop in front of Ilya's house. The engine idled softly, the quiet hum filling the space as the reality of where they were settled in.

Marlow opened the door and stepped outside of the car first.

Shane glanced down to where Ilya was still asleep, his head now fully resting in Shane's lap, his features softer now, peaceful in a way that felt almost undeserved after everything that had happened.

Shane hesitated. He didn't want to wake him, but they couldn't stay here forever. Carefully, Shane began to caress Ilya's shoulder, and lowered his voice.

"Ilya… we're—" He paused.

Home?

The word caught in his throat. Was this home? Boston? Or was Moscow home? Or was home somewhere else entirely?

Shane swallowed, correcting himself softly. "Ilya… we're at your house."

Ilya stirred. His brows furrowed slightly as he came back to himself, blinking slowly. He looked disoriented, caught between sleep and reality. Then his gaze found Shane. And everything else seemed to fall away.

A small, warm smile spread across his face, so soft, genuine, and unguarded. For a few quiet seconds, nothing else existed. Not the game, or the locker room, or the loss that was waiting for him.

Then it hit him, and Shane saw it happen in real time. His smile faded, replaced by something heavier and sadder. Shane's chest hurt, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Come on," he murmured gently instead, "let's go inside."

Together, they stepped out of the car. Shane first, followed by Ilya. Shane moved carefully, helping Ilya to his feet. This time, Ilya managed a little better. He still leaned into Shane, his arm draped over Shane's shoulders, but there was more strength and awareness in him now. Shane kept a steady hold around his waist anyway, just in case.

Marlow had already stepped ahead of them, heading toward the front door. As they approached, he glanced back over his shoulder.

“I suppose you know the code to the house too, right?” he said dryly.

Shane gave him a look. “Yeah, it’s—”

The door swung open before he could finish. A beautiful woman stood in the doorway.

Shane recognized Svetlana immediately, from the photos Ilya had posted on social media over the years, and the occasional paparazzi shots that surfaced online. She looked exactly the same, only more real somehow.

The second she saw Ilya, she rushed forward. “Ilya—” The rest came out in rapid Russian, too fast for Shane to catch.

She wrapped her arms tightly around him, and Ilya leaned into her immediately, his grip tightening around her as if grounding himself. His eyes filled with tears again.

Shane stepped back just enough to give them space, though his hand remained lightly at Ilya’s side, ready to catch him if he needed it.

They spoke quietly to each other, their voices low, soft, and entirely in Russian.

Shane couldn’t understand a single word, but he didn’t need to. He recognized the tone, the same quiet reassurance, the same soft grief, the same kind of words he had given Ilya earlier in the locker room.

When they pulled apart, Ilya shifted back instinctively, leaning into Shane again, his arm finding its place over his shoulders. Shane reacted without thinking, his arm tightening around Ilya’s waist to steady him.

That was when Svetlana finally looked up. Her gaze moved between them, taking in the closeness, the way Shane held him, the ease of it. Recognition flickered in her expression. It did not look like confusion, or silent questions being asked. Then, unexpectedly, her lips curved slightly, amused.

Shane blinked, caught off guard. He had no idea what that meant.

She stepped aside, gesturing toward the house, and the three men followed her in. The warmth of the house wrapped around them immediately, a sharp contrast to the cold outside.

Svetlana started speaking again, her voice quick as she addressed Ilya in Russian. Ilya cut her off gently, replying with something short. She stopped, then let out a small, exasperated huff.

“Fine,” she said.

Then she turned to all three of them.

“I was telling Ilya that I’ve booked me and him a flight to Moscow for ten in the morning,” she said. “That’s the earliest one available.” Her English was smooth, clearer, more practiced than Ilya’s. She glanced back at Ilya. “We’ll have a layover in Istanbul, and should arrive in Moscow by 9 am the next day.”

“Okay.” Ilya nodded quietly.

After a moment of silence, “I—” Ilya started to speak, but the word hung there, unfinished. His lips parted slightly, like he was trying to push through the rest of the sentence, but nothing came.

Shane didn’t rush him. He only tightened his hold slightly, his voice soft when he spoke. “What do you need?”

“I don’t need—” Ilya started, then shook his head faintly. “You don’t need to help. I will handle everything on my own.”

Shane’s expression softened, but he didn’t let that stand.

“Ilya, I know you can handle everything on your own,” he said gently. “But I don’t want you to. I’m here to help.” He glanced up to look at Svetlana and Marlow. "We're all here to help. Please… just tell us what you need.”

“I—” The words caught again. He couldn’t say it.

Shane waited a second longer, hoping he would. But when no words came, something in him shifted. He took action.

“Okay. Okay,” Shane said, his tone changing slightly, sounding purposeful and focused. He looked up.

“Svetlana, could you make a list of everything that needs to be done for the funeral?” he asked. “Paperwork, arrangements, anything we should be ready for.”

She nodded immediately, already pulling out her phone. “On it.”

“Marlow,” Shane continued, turning to him, “order us some food. Something Ilya can get down quickly.” His eyes flicked briefly to Ilya. “I don’t think he’s going to have much of an appetite.”

Marlow nodded without hesitation. “Yeah, sure. You got it.”

“And I’ll pack your suitcase,” Shane added, glancing back at Ilya. “And Ilya, you—” His voice softened again. “You need to take a shower.”

Shane took a more careful look at him, really assessing the situation.

“Ilya… do you think you can stand on your own long enough to shower?”

Ilya shook his head. A small, quiet no.

Svetlana stepped forward immediately. “Come,” she said gently. “I’ll help you.”

Ilya shook his head again. More firmly this time.

“No.”

There was a brief pause.

“Shane will help me shower.”

The words landed a little too loudly in the quiet room. Svetlana and Marlow both looked at Shane, then at Ilya, then back at Shane.

Marlow raised an eyebrow, clearly not even trying to hide it. Svetlana, on the other hand, wore a smirk on her lips as she lifted her hands in surrender. Shane felt heat rush to his face.

Under any other circumstances, he might’ve stumbled over his words. Might’ve tried to explain, but the moment passed just as quickly as it came, because Ilya was still leaning against him, still needing him. And that mattered more than anything else.

“Yeah,” Shane said, steady again. “Of course.”

He adjusted his grip around Ilya’s waist.

“Come on. Let’s go upstairs.”

Shane guided him toward the stairs, very deliberately not looking back at either Svetlana or Marlow. He could feel their eyes on them anyway, but he ignored it. Right now, there was only one thing that mattered, and it was the man leaning into him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Guys this fic was supposed to be 4 chapters only...

I promise next chapter will be the last (I think)

Thanks for reading :)

Shane guided Ilya into the en suite bathroom, moving slowly and carefully. He positioned Ilya against the edge of the sink, making sure he was stable before stepping away to turn on the shower. The sound of running water filled the room. When Shane turned back, Ilya was watching him, but not in his usual sharp, teasing way. He was just watching as though Shane was the only thing anchoring him.

Shane took a step closer. His hands moved carefully as he began helping Ilya out of his clothes. Ilya instinctively lifted his hands to help remove his sweatshirt, but Shane caught them before he could. “Just let me take care of you, okay?”

Ilya nodded. He didn’t protest, he didn’t try to help much after that either. He let Shane guide him, piece by piece, trusting him completely. Shane took his time, making sure every movement was slow and deliberate. All the while, Ilya’s eyes stayed on him, following every motion.

Once Ilya was undressed, Shane quickly removed his own clothes. When he stepped back in front of him, Shane placed his hands on Ilya’s hips.

“Okay,” he murmured. “I’ve got you.”

He drew Ilya toward him, and together they stepped into the shower. The warm water cascaded over them, steam quickly filling the room. Shane reached for the shampoo, working it into Ilya’s hair with careful movements. His fingers massaged through the damp curls, steady and grounding. Ilya held onto his waist the entire time, not because he still couldn’t stand on his own, but because he didn’t want to let go.

Shane stayed close, letting his touch speak where words couldn’t. He rinsed the shampoo out, then moved on to washing his body with the same quiet care, never rushing or pulling away for long. Every movement was so gentle, intentional, and reassuring.

By the time he finished, Ilya’s breathing had steadied again. Shane quickly rinsed himself off, then reached to shut off the water.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Let’s get you out.”

He stepped out first, grabbing a soft towel and wrapping it around Ilya’s shoulders as he followed him. Shane dried him off carefully, making sure he was warm before grabbing another towel for himself.

Once they were both dry, Shane moved them to the closet. He grabbed comfortable clothes from Ilya’s closet; boxers, sweatpants, a tshirt, for both of them. Shane did not want to put his game day outfit back on. He helped Ilya into his boxers and sweatpants, guiding him through it without a word. Then he put on boxers and sweatpants himself. Then he helped Ilya put on the tshirt he picked out.

As soon as the shirt was over Ilya’s head, Ilya reached for him, pulling Shane into his chest with a tight hug. Shane wrapped his arms around him instantly, one hand taking its place on his back, drawing circles. He had always known this about Ilya, that when everything became too much, Ilya seeks physical comfort. And right now, he needed to be held.

They didn’t speak. They just stood there, holding onto each other, breathing each other in like it was the only thing keeping them grounded. Time stretched, and neither of them made a move to pull away. Then Shane felt it, a slight shift, followed by a tremor. Ilya was trembling, crying again. Shane started to pull back, instinctively wanting to see his face, but Ilya only held on tighter.

“No… don’t go,” he whispered, voice rough and breaking.

Shane’s heart clenched. “I’m right here, Ilya,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere. Okay? I'm right here.” He tightened his hold, pressing him closer.

Ilya nodded against his shoulder.

They stayed like that for another minute. Then, gently, Shane leaned in closer. “Hey,” he whispered near his ear. “Come lie down with me for a bit.”

Ilya paused, considering Shane’s words, but then he nodded again. “Okay.”

Reluctantly, they pulled apart, and Shane guided them towards the bed. He climbed in first, settling back against the pillows before looking up at Ilya. He opened his arms, offering him a silent invitation.

Ilya moved into him immediately, curling into his side, resting his head against Shane’s chest.

Shane wrapped his arms around him, holding him close. One hand drifted into his hair again. The other moved slowly along his back. They stayed like that for a long time. Ilya’s breathing gradually evened out, becoming calmer. Every now and then, he would shift slightly, pressing kisses on Shane’s chest. And Shane returned each one, pressing his own kisses to the top of Ilya’s head.

“Thank you… for taking care of me.” Ilya said.

“Thank you for letting me,” Shane replied softly.

Ilya lifted himself up just enough to look at him then leaned down and kissed him, soft and slow, like they had all the time in the world. Shane kissed him back just as tenderly.

When they pulled apart, Ilya lingered for a moment, close enough that their breaths mixed, before resting his forehead against Shane's.

Neither of them moved at first. Then Ilya shifted closer, brushing a few soft kisses along Shane's jaw and down his neck. Then he whispered something so quietly Shane could barely make it out. He kept repeating it, over and over again.

At first, Shane didn't quite catch it. The words were muffled against his skin, blending into the rhythm of their breathing, but then it clicked.

"Ya tebya lyublyu." Ilya kept repeating.

Shane's breath caught and everything in him stilled, his hand in Ilya's hair, the slow rise and fall of his chest, even his thoughts. He swallowed, then whispered it back.

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

The words felt unfamiliar on his tongue, but right.

Ilya pulled back slightly, just enough to look at him. There was confusion in his eyes now, like he wasn't sure he had heard correctly.

"You— You understood that?"

Shane nodded, a small, almost shy smile tugged at his lips. "Yeah, I understood that," he said. "I love you too, Ilya. I love you so much."

Ilya just stared at him. It was as though he was trying to piece something together, like he didn't quite believe what he was hearing.

Shane exhaled slowly, his thumb tracing small patterns against Ilya's bicep.

"I wanted the first time I said it to you to be in Russian," he admitted, his voice quieter now, almost vulnerable in a way he rarely allowed himself to be. "So… I've been practicing."

"How long have you been practicing?" Ilya asked.

Shane's lips twitched. "Since All-Star weekend."

Ilya just blinked at him. "Fuck, Hollander," he let out in a breath that was caught between a laugh and disbelief. There was no bite to it, only affection. The look he gave Shane was so full of love it nearly undid him.

Ilya leaned in and kissed him again, this time it was slower and deeper, before settling back against Shane's chest again. Shane's arms came around him automatically, holding him close, his hand returning to its place in Ilya's hair. And that's when he felt it. Tears. Ilya's tears. Ilya was crying.

But this was different to how he had cried in the locker room or earlier when they had been holding each other. There was no panic in it this time, it was more like grief.

The concern in Shane's expression melted into tenderness. He moved up, tilting Ilya's head back so he could see him. "Hey, Ilya… talk to me."

Ilya hesitated. And Shane could feel the way the words caught in him before they even reached his lips. When he finally spoke, he sounded so vulnerable. Like he wasn't sure the words were meant to exist outside of his own thoughts.

"The last person who told me they loved me… was my mother. I forgot what it feels like… to be loved," Ilya whispered, his breath hitching slightly.

Shane felt something in his heart crack. He forgot how to breathe. He couldn't think. All he could see was the boy Ilya must have been, carrying that kind of absence for years, learning to live without something he should have never had to lose.

He pulled him closer immediately, his arms tightening around him like he could somehow make up for all of it at once.

"Oh, Ilya…" he said, his voice breaking despite himself. "I love you." He pressed a kiss into his hair. "I love you." Then another kiss, even gentler. "I love you so much."

Ilya lifted his head, his movements were slow, almost afraid that if he moved too fast he might somehow break the illusion and make Shane's words disappear. Then he leaned in and pressed a kiss to Shane's lips. When he pulled back, he didn't go far, resting his forehead against Shane's, their breaths still mingling in the small space between them. Shane's hand continued its slow path along Ilya's back, grounding him, reassuring him, and never stopping.

He could feel the tension still sitting in him. So Shane spoke again, more firmly this time, needing the words to sink in. "Ilya… you are so loved."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I lied, this is not the final chapter....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane and Ilya were tangled together in the sheets, the world reduced to just them. Ilya's head rested on Shane's chest, rising and falling with each breath. Shane absentmindedly played with his hair, his fingers threading through golden strands, then drifting down to trace lazy circles along his back. For a while, nothing else existed. Ilya's fingertips moved across Shane's chest, tracing invisible shapes over his heartbeat.

Then the sharp ring of the doorbell that echoed through the house shattered the stillness. The both of them flinched slightly but didn't make an effort to get up right away.

Shane was the first to come back to himself, exhaling softly as reality rushed in. "That must be the food."

Ilya's body tensed just a little against Shane's. "No… I do not want to eat anything," he said. "I'm not hungry."

"Ilya," Shane said, "you just played an intense hockey game. You need to get your energy back up. And you've got a long trip ahead of you." He paused, then added almost pleading, "just a couple of bites. For me. Please. I need to know you're taking care of yourself." His expression was almost desperate now.

Ilya exhaled softly, then lifted his head to look at him. "Anything for you."

Smiling, Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to Ilya's forehead. Then Ilya pushed himself up and extended a hand toward him.

"Come," he said. "Let's go see what Marlow ordered for us."

Shane nodded, but as he started to sit up, he stopped. It all came rushing back. Everything he had shoved aside when he ran out of the Raiders' visitors' locker room, Marlow, Svetlana, what they had seen, what they had definitely noticed. The way he had held Ilya. The way Ilya had asked for him. The way neither of them had even tried to hide it.

They know. *They definitely know.*

A bolt of panic shot through Shane. His stomach dropped. Even if the rest of the Raiders hadn't picked up on it, Marlow had. Svetlana had. And what if they talked? His career. *Their* careers. Everything they had built, gone.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice cut through the spiral. "Hey… where did you go?"

Shane blinked, his gaze snapping back to him, but the panic didn't fade. He pulled his knees up to his chest, curling into himself.

"Marlow… Svetlana…" he said, his voice tighter than he meant it to be. "Ilya, they definitely figured us out." His arms wrapped around his legs, holding on too tight. "Fuck. Ilya what if… what if they tell someone?"

"Hey, hey," Ilya said gently, moving closer and sitting in front of him. The mattress dipped under his weight. He reached up, cupping Shane's face, grounding him the same way Shane had done to him all night. "Is okay. We can tell them we are just friends."

Shane shook his head faintly. "There's no way they will believe we're just friends."

"No, I don't think they will," Ilya admitted. His thumb brushed lightly along Shane's cheek. "Is okay, Shane. I promise."

Shane let out a sharp breath, shaking his head again. "It's not okay. It's not—"

"They won't tell anyone," Ilya said, more firmly this time.

"How do you know that?"

"Because Svetlana is my best friend," Ilya said. "And she is Russian. She understands what this means. She understands the risks if people find out."

Shane's breathing slowed a little, but not enough. "And Marlow?" he asked.

"He won't say anything."

"You don't know that," Shane said.

"I do know."

"How can you be sure?"

"I am sure, because he is my friend." Ilya replied simply.

"But… he's a Raider, Ilya. And I know how my team feels about you… so it must be the same for how your team feels about me."

"No. Is not the same." Ilya shook his head. "My team does not hate you, not like the Metros hate me. I am an asshole to your team, I always chirp at them, of course they do not like me." He gave a small shrug. "But the Raiders are not like that with you. They hate how good of a

player you are, yes. And they hate how you embarrass us on the ice. But they don't hate *you*. Not as a player, and definitely not as person. They all respect you, Shane."

What Ilya was saying made sense, but the scared part of Shane's brain kept coming up with all kinds of things to worry about.

"I know that… but I'm going to be on edge now every time we play Boston, what if I go too hard on the ice and Marlow throws it back in my face?"

"Shane, Marlow is…" Ilya paused, searching for the right words. "A lot of things. He is loud, and a little annoying, and asks questions that are too personal, but… he is a good person. And a good friend. And he is very loyal. He knows this is bigger than hockey. He would never say anything."

"Also," Ilya continued, "I think it's better if we tell Marly the truth. He can help convince the others. I am sure they will all have questions after today. He will say we are just friends."

Shane nodded slowly. "Okay." Shane whispered.

"Okay?"

"Yes, okay." Shane said with a soft smile. "I trust you, Ilya. If you say he won't say anything, and that he will help us… then I have no reason to think otherwise."

Ilya smiled, then leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane's forehead. "Thank you for trusting me. I love you."

"I love you too." Shane whispered back. "And I'm sorry for making this about me," he said quietly, a little embarrassed. "You've already got enough going on without having to deal with what I'm feeling—"

"No, no, Shane is okay," Ilya said. "I always want to know what you're feeling. Please don't ever hide how you are feeling from me." When Shane didn't reply quickly enough, Ilya spoke again. "Promise me."

Shane nodded. "I promise."

Ilya gave a satisfied little nod, but before he could say anything else, his phone rang. The sound felt too loud in the quiet room. Both of them froze. There was a flicker of something uneasy crossing Ilya's face. He hesitated before he reached for his phone on the bedside table. He glanced at the screen and frowned.

"Who is it?" Shane asked.

"I'm not sure. It is… Russian phone number."

"Will you answer it?" Shane asked.

Ilya nodded.

Shane sat up. “Do you want me to stay with you?”

Ilya shook his head, already slipping into something more guarded. “No. Go downstairs. I will take it, then come find you.”

“Are you sure?” Shane asked. “I can stay with you.”

“Is okay,” Ilya said. “I will make it quick.”

Shane took a second then nodded. “Okay.”

He got up, grabbed a tshirt and put it on, then crossed the room. At the door, he paused, turning back to give Ilya a small, reassuring smile. Then he stepped out, pulling the door closed behind him.

Shane braced himself as he made his way downstairs. The kitchen lights felt too bright after the quiet upstairs. Svetlana and Marlow were seated at the counter, leaning toward each other, their voices low and whispered. They stopped the second he walked in. Shane couldn’t make out what they’d been saying, but he didn’t need to. His stomach tightened anyway. *They were talking about me and Ilya.* Or maybe that was just the anxiety clawing its way back in. He stepped up to the other side of the counter, putting a small stretch of marble between them. He had no idea what to say. Luckily he didn’t have to figure it out.

“Where’s Ilya?” Svetlana asked, her tone light but her eyes observant.

“He’s taking a phone call,” Shane replied. “He should be down in a minute.”

Marlow was already looking at him. Shane avoided his gaze, focusing instead on the counter, on anything else.

“Oh, okay,” Svetlana said. “And how is he doing?”

Shane nodded slightly. “He’s… better. I think,” he said honestly. “He can stand on his own now. And his head seems clearer.”

Svetlana hummed softly.

Then Marlow cleared his throat. “Uh— yeah. I, uh… got us some food,” he said, a little too quickly. “There’s chicken parm from this place downtown. It’s one of Roz’s favorites, he’s always ordering from there.” He gestured vaguely to the takeout containers on the counter. “And I remember hearing that you were on some kind of strict diet or whatever, so I got an extra order of grilled salmon and rice, in case you didn’t want to break it.”

Shane blinked, caught off guard. This wasn’t what he was used to.

With his own team, Shane's diet had always been a joke, something his teammates poked at, something that earned groans the second he walked in with his own meals. Most of the time, if he was invited over, he'd just bring his own food. It was easier that way. He never expected anyone to accommodate him in their own home. And still, the comments came. The teasing and the quiet disappointment. Like he was making things difficult just by existing. Like he was an inconvenience. Hayden and J.J. were the only exception.

So he'd never really expected anyone else to accommodate him. He never expected anyone to even bother thinking about it. So Marlow's casual and almost awkward consideration meant more to him than it should have.

"Oh," he said, a little quieter. "Thanks, Marlow. I appreciate it."

Marlow gave a small nod, like that was enough.

Shane moved to the cabinets pulling out plates, then drawers for utensils. He set everything down on the counter, moving around Ilya's kitchen like he belonged there. But he could still feel Svetlana and Marlow's eyes on him watching him. He ignored them and instead focused on lining up the forks, knives, plates. Anything to keep his hands busy.

"So…," Marlow started.

Shane stilled, his breath catching before he could stop it. He didn't look up right away, he didn't want to see it coming.

"You and Roz… you said you're friends, right?" Marlow finished.

Shane let out a short, awkward laugh. "Yeah," he said. "Something like that."

Svetlana's lips curved, clearly unconvinced. "Something like that?" she echoed.

Shane hesitated, then shrugged lightly. "More like… best friends, I guess." he said, the words coming out flatter than he intended.

"Best friends?" Svetlana repeated, her amusement more obvious now.

Shane opened his mouth, but before he could say anything—

"Boyfriends."

Ilya's voice cut cleanly through the room. All three of them turned to him. He stood at the edge of the kitchen, phone still in his hand, expression unapologetic. No one seemed to know what to react to first. The fact that Ilya was standing there, steady on his own two feet, looking like a completely different man than the one who could barely stand earlier, or the fact that he had just casually dropped *that* into the room.

Svetlana made the choice first. She was on her feet in an instant, crossing the space between them and pulling Ilya into a tight hug. She held him there, one hand gripping the back of his shirt, the other pressing firmly between his shoulders as she murmured something in Russian,

low, fast, and emotional. Shane couldn't make out a single word, but he didn't need to. Ilya's posture loosened in her arms.

Across the room, Marlow just stared at Ilya, then at Shane, then back at Ilya again. Shane, for his part, suddenly found the countertop very interesting. He didn't look up, not until Svetlana finally pulled back and Marlow stepped forward next. He wrapped his arms around Ilya in a firm, quick hug.

"Good to see you standing on your own again, Roz," he said, his voice rougher than usual. "You really scared us, man," he added, quieter.

"I'm sorry," Ilya murmured back.

When they pulled apart Ilya didn't linger, he crossed the remaining distance to Shane slipping in close and wrapping an arm around his waist like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Shane glanced at him, a little unsure, and a little shy. "Boyfriend?" he asked.

Ilya's lips curved. "Yes. I think so. Probably." And then he leaned in and kissed him. It was the first time they had kissed each other in front of other people.

"Who was that on the phone?" Svetlana asked, once Shane and Ilya broke apart.

"It was embassy," Ilya said, a shadow passing over his face. "They called to tell me about my father's death… Apparently, is proper way to do things when you live outside Russia."

Shane's hand slid to Ilya's back, slipping under his shirt, his fingers brushing against his bare skin. He didn't say anything. He just let his touch comfort Ilya in the way he knew it could.

"Come," Svetlana said, turning back to the food on the counter. "Let's eat before the food gets cold."

Slowly, they shifted into motion, opening containers, passing plates, the quiet clatter of utensils filling the space. Shane moved automatically, grabbing drinks from the fridge, three cokes, and a ginger ale. He set them down in front of everyone, keeping the ginger ale for himself.

Marlow noticed immediately. "Oh," he said, pointing lightly. "So that's who you keep the ginger ale for, huh?"

Ilya laughed. "Of course." He said, then winked at Shane.

Shane blushed, ducking his head.

They settled around the dining table, Shane and Ilya sitting next to each other, Shane with his grilled salmon, while Ilya, Svetlana, and Marlow dug into their chicken parm. For a few minutes, the only sound was the clink of forks against plates. Then Svetlana was the first to break the silence.

"I would just like to say, I knew it." Svetlana announced.

Shane blinked. “What?”

“You did not know anything,” Ilya shot back immediately.

“Okay,” she admitted, waving her fork, “not that you were dating *the* Shane Hollander. But I knew Jane was a man.”

Marlow froze mid-bite. “Holy shit. Montreal Jane is Montreal Shane?”

Shane and Ilya glanced at each other, smiled. Both turned back to Marlow, Shane nodded and Ilya confirmed, “yes.”

Marlow lowered his fork slowly, staring at them. “Wait. Weren’t you texting ‘Montreal Jane’ back in your rookie season?” he asked.

Ilya didn’t answer right away, which was answer enough.

“Jesus Christ,” Marlow muttered. “I thought maybe you got together after All-Stars this year. So you’re telling me you two have been in a relationship since your rookie season?”

“No, no,” Ilya said quickly. “We only got serious around All-Stars. But we were… seeing each other since rookie season. Well summer before rookie season actually.”

“And by ‘seeing each other’, you mean….?” Marlow asked

“Fucking, Marly. We were fucking.” Ilya answered with a smirk.

“Jesus Christ, Ilya,” Shane muttered, his cheeks turning red.

Across the table, Svetlana watched them both, *really* watching this time. She watched the way Shane leaned into Ilya without thinking, the way Ilya’s attention kept drifting back to him, like a compass that had already decided Shane was the correct direction.

“Honestly,” she said, looking between them, “you two make so much sense together.” She leaned back in her chair, folding her arms loosely, a small, deeply satisfied smile tugging at her lips. “You’re in a league of your own. And of course Ilya would go after the only person who’s better than him at hockey.”

Ilya scoffed under his breath, rolling his eyes slightly. “He’s not better than me.” Ilya said, but there was no real heat to it. If anything, he looked faintly amused.

Svetlana’s gaze shifted to Shane, more focused and curious now, as if she was matching the stories she’d heard to the person sitting in front of her.

“He’s always been obsessed with you, you know?” she said plainly. “Since he first heard the name Shane Hollander." Then she turned to address Ilya. “How old were you Ilya? Sixteen? Seventeen?”

Shane blinked, caught off guard.

“I just couldn’t tell if it was a crush…” she continued, tilting her head slightly, “or if he was just obsessed with playing against you.”

“Both,” Ilya said, already looking at Shane when he said it.

Shane’s smile softened without him meaning to. He held Ilya’s gaze. “Yeah, I’ve kind of been the same.”

The smile on Svetlana’s face softened, her earlier amusement fading.

“So… you guys are bi, right?” Marlow asked curiously.

“Oh, Cliff,” Svetlana said, disapproving. “Don’t just assume people’s sexuality.”

Marlow immediately raised his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m sorry,” he said quickly, glancing between them. “I didn’t mean to assume or put you guys on the spot. You obviously don’t have to answer that.”

Shane and Ilya exchanged a quick look, sharing a silent conversation, weighing how much they wanted to share. Ilya gave a small nod, and Shane took the cue.

“It’s okay, Marlow,” Shane said, his voice steady, watching relief wash over Marlow. “Ilya is bi. I’m gay.”

Marlow looked at Shane confused. “How can you be gay? What about Rose Landry?”

“I was gay when I dated her. I just… didn’t know that yet.”

“Wait, so *that’s* why you were in a bad mood for weeks when Hollander dated Rose Landry?” Marlow asked Ilya.

Ilya shrugged, voice soft. “Maybe.”

Shane noticed the faint shadow of sadness cross Ilya’s face. Instinctively, he reached over, taking Ilya’s hand in his and pressing a gentle kiss to his knuckles. Their hands stayed intertwined, resting on Ilya’s lap.

Marlow shook his head, grinning. “This is fucking amazing! And here we were thinking Hollander stole your girl. Turns out Rose Landry stole your man instead.”

Shane glanced at Marlow, and hesitantly asked, “so… you’re like, not mad at us, right?”

Marlow looked genuinely confused. “What? No. Why would I be?”

Shane shrugged, his shoulders tight. ”I mean, we hid our relationship from you, from everyone.”

“Of course I’m not mad, Hollander.” Marlow said in a sympathetic tone. “This is your relationship, you and Roz’s. It’s no one’s business. You guys can hide it for the rest of your lives or reveal it tomorrow, it should not matter to anyone else.”

Shane let out a relieved breath.

“I mean—” Marlow pointed his fork at Ilya, “I *am* mad at this guy.”

Ilya frowned. “What? Why?”

“Bag skates,” Marlow said flatly.

“What do you mean?” Shane asked.

“When you started dating Rose Landry,” Marlow continued, “Roz over here decided to take it out on the rest of us.”

“I did not—” Ilya started.

“You did,” Marlow cut in. “I’m telling you, Hollander. Bag skates. Every. Single. Fucking. Practice.”

Shane winced. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to cause that.”

Marlow snorted, waving it off. “Relax. I’m just teasing Roz. That’s not on you.”

Ilya glanced over at Svetlana, one brow raised slightly. “You are very quiet,” he said. “You do not have any questions?”

Svetlana let out a laugh, shaking her head as she picked at her food. “Oh, I have about a million,” she said, glancing between him and Shane. “But I’ll let Cliff have his turn.” Her smile turned just a little more mischievous. “I’ll ask you everything on the plane,” she added. “Remember, you’re stuck with me for the next twenty three hours.”

Ilya groaned, leaning back in his chair. “Great,” he said dryly. “I can’t wait.”

Marlow, meanwhile, had been watching the exchange with growing amusement. He took another bite, chewed thoughtfully, then pointed his fork at Ilya again.

“Actually,” he said, “I’ve got another question.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly. “What?”

Marlow leaned back in his chair, gaze flicking between the two of them.

“How the fuck did you land *the* Shane Hollander?”

Shane huffed out a laugh, Ilya shaking his head beside him.

Chapter End Notes

If you notice a typo, please point it out, or else I'll be really sad if you don’t.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I think I'm happy with how this story ended, but honestly, I might end up writing another chapter or two.
>
> Who knows...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They finished dinner rather slowly, conversations flowing easily. Ilya only made it through about half of his portion, more than Shane had expected, honestly. Shane found himself watching without meaning to, feeling more at ease with every bite Ilya managed to take.

At some point, Ilya had started nudging pieces of his chicken parm onto Shane's plate. And Shane ate it all without giving it a second thought.

Afterward, everyone rose from the table. Marlow and Svetlana gathered the containers and plates, carrying them toward the sink before anyone had to ask. Shane and Ilya started to help, but Svetlana quickly waved them away.

"Go, finish packing. We've got this." she said.

Ilya didn't protest.

Upstairs, the house had gone still. They packed together, or rather, Shane packed while Ilya lingered nearby, passing him whatever he needed before getting distracted by simply watching his boyfriend move around the room.

By the time the last bag was zipped and left by the front door, fatigue had begun to catch up with them. Marlow and Svetlana disappeared into the guest rooms down the hall, while Shane and Ilya retreated to Ilya's bedroom.

They lay facing one another with barely any space between them, knees brushing, breaths mingling in the darkness.

"How do you feel about Marlow and Svetlana knowing about us?" Ilya asked.

"I think..." Shane let out a slow breath, searching for the right words. "I think I feel okay. Actually, better than okay, maybe."

The corner of Ilya's mouth lifted. "The world did not end."

“No, it didn't.” Shane laughed under his breath. “And honestly... it felt really good talking about you to other people. Saying everything out loud.”

“Mm.” Ilya smiled. “Yes. I liked it too.”

“It also felt really good,” Shane admitted, his voice quieter now, “not having to hide how much I love you.”

“Yes. It did.” His expression filled with unmistakable affection. “I love you, Shane.”

Shane closed the barely existing distance between them, brushing his lips over Ilya's before kissing him again, lingering this time.

“Come on,” Shane murmured as they pulled apart, “let’s try to sleep for a bit.”

He slipped an arm around Ilya, pulling him closer, even though they were already close enough to feel each other breathe. They stayed that way, pressed together, breathing each other in, until sleep finally came.

Shane woke up an hour before he needed to. Ilya was still curled into him, his breathing was slow and even, one hand loosely fisted in Shane’s shirt.

Shane carefully slipped out of his hold. He moved quietly, not wanting to wake him. He finished packing the last of Ilya’s things, double-checked his passport was in his backpack, and laid out a simple airport outfit on the chair. Then he headed downstairs.

The kitchen was already awake. Svetlana stood by the counter, pouring coffee.

“Good morning,” Shane said softly as he stepped in.

She glanced up, smiling. “Oh, good morning, Shane,” she said. Then, with a teasing tilt of her head, “Or do you prefer Jane?”

Shane huffed a small laugh. “Shane is fine.”

“Coffee?” she asked, already reaching for another mug.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She handed it to him, watching him over the rim of her own cup.

“So,” she said casually, “what’s his name on your phone?”

“Lily.” Shane smiled into his coffee.

Svetlana blinked once, then laughed. “Lily and Jane,” she repeated. “Those are the most obvious code names I’ve ever heard. I’m guessing Ilya picked them?”

Shane nodded, smiling. “Yeah. He did.”

“That makes sense.”

“Does anyone know about you two? I mean other than me and Cliff.”

“No." Shane shook his head. "Not really. My friend Hayden knows that I see someone in Boston. And my friend Rose, she knows I’m gay, and that there might be someone. But she doesn’t know anything else.”

Svetlana nodded slowly. “Oh,” she said. “So Rose is like your version of me. Or maybe I’m Ilya’s Rose Landry.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Shane smiled. “I actually think you two would get along.”

“Really?” she raised a brow. “Well, feel free to introduce us. I wouldn't mind being friends with a big movie star.”

They both laughed.

After a moment of silence, Shane hesitated, then he said nervously. “So… you’re not… mad at us?”

“Shane,” she said, setting her cup down, “you *need* to stop asking people that.”

He winced slightly. “Sorry.”

“Shane, if anyone in your life is mad at you for being your true self,” she continued, her voice firm now, “and for being in love, then they don’t deserve to be in your life. And if they’re already not in your life?” she added with a small shrug. “Then fuck what they think.”

“Okay… maybe not mad,” Shane said. “But… disappointed?”

Svetlana studied him for a second.

“You know,” she said slowly, leaning back slightly against the counter. “I always wondered who Jane would be. I hoped he would be someone good enough for Ilya. Someone kind, understanding, patient. I don’t think I could have imagined anyone better for him than you.”

Shane blinked, caught off guard.

“Shane, Cliff told me what happened in the locker room last night,” she said. “Ilya deserves someone who looks after him like that. Someone who loves him boldly like that.”

“Also,” she added lightly, “I think it’s good for him to be dating the best hockey player in the league. Maybe you can fix his speed issues.”

“Aren’t you supposed to think *he’s* the best hockey player in the league?”

“Constructive criticism,” she said simply. “Very important.”

They both laughed.

Then her expression shifted again, more serious now. “Does he make you happy?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking Ilya if I make *him* happy?”

“Oh, I will, but I already know the answer to that.” She gave a small smile. “I’ve seen him when he’s texting you. When he’s watching your games. I’ve never seen him happier. So I’m asking you. Does he make *you* happy?”

Shane didn’t hesitate this time. “Yeah,” he said softly. “He does. Extremely.”

Svetlana nodded once. “Good.”

There was a pause before Shane spoke again. “Can I ask *you* something?”

“Of course.”

He hesitated for a few seconds, trying to find the right words. “What’s waiting for him? In Russia I mean.”

Svetlana’s expression changed immediately. “Ah,” she said quietly. She set her cup down.

“What’s waiting for Ilya in Russia is…” she exhaled, choosing her words carefully. “A brother who resents him because of who he is, but still leeches off of him. A niece he loves dearly… but can’t have a proper relationship with because her father thinks his brother is a bad influence on her.”

She took a breath in before she continued.

“The funeral of a man who has never been satisfied with any achievement his son made. And a country that would punish him for who he is. And who he loves.”

Shane’s stomach tightened. His eyes began to burn.

“I’m sorry,” she said gently. “I know that’s hard to hear. But you need to understand the risks.”

“I do,” Shane said quickly. “I do understand the risks. I just… Am I being selfish?”

Svetlana's expression filled with sympathy. “Shane—”

“Am I being selfish for wanting him?” he pressed. “For wanting us to be together? Wouldn’t he be safer being with a woman?”

“Oh, Shane…” She took a step closer. “There are different kinds of safety. Yes, if he ends up with a woman, it would be safer from the Russian government. Safer on paper. But he would

be so unhappy. He would be miserable." She reached for his hand. "He would be so lost without you."

Shane couldn't speak. He didn't know what to say.

"If you're asking if it would be easier for him," she continued, "then no. I don't think there is a universe where being without you would be easier for him."

Shane nodded, unable to say anything.

Svetlana took another step forward and pulled him into a hug. For a second, he stiffened, he wasn't used to this, not really. He rarely welcomed physical comfort from anyone but Ilya, his parents, and his closest friends. But to his surprise, Svetlana's hug felt grounding. He relaxed into it quickly. There was something familiar about it, something that reminded him of Ilya. When they pulled apart, Svetlana pressed a quick kiss to his cheek and Shane blushed. He cleared his throat softly, then turned back toward the counter, reaching for ingredients.

"I'm going to make him something to eat," he said, almost to himself. He put together a bowl of yogurt with strawberries, blueberries, banana, and granola, finishing it with a drizzle of honey. Then he headed upstairs.

Ilya was still asleep.

Shane paused in the doorway for a moment, watching him. The rise and fall of his chest. The way his hair fell across his forehead. He waited a couple of minutes for the alarm he had set to go off. When it did, he reached over quickly and turned it off before it could fully ring. Then he leaned down, gently nudging Ilya awake, his fingers brushing Ilya's curls back from his forehead.

"Hi," Shane said softly.

Ilya blinked awake slowly, his eyes focusing on Shane, warm, blue, and still heavy with sleep.

"Good morning," he mumbled.

He sat up almost immediately, leaning in for a kiss. Normally, Shane would have pulled back, told him to brush his teeth first, but right now, he didn't care. He met him halfway. The kiss was soft, a little sleepy, a little uncoordinated, but warm in a way that made Shane's heart flutter.

When they pulled apart, Shane reached for the bowl and handed it to him. "Here, I made you breakfast. You should eat." he said.

Ilya glanced down at it, then back up at him. “Shane, sweetheart… I’m really not hungry.”

Sweetheart. The word hit Shane instantly. It filled him with a kind of joy he hadn't been expecting. Still, he gave Ilya a look.

“Ilya you’re never not hungry.”

“That is true, but this is a lot of food. Is more than I normally eat even when my appetite is perfect.”

Shane didn’t budge. “That’s because we’re sharing,” he said, holding up a second spoon before placing it in Ilya’s hand.

Ilya raised a brow, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Ah,” he said. “We are now the type of boyfriends who eat from the same bowl?”

Shane shrugged lightly, a small smile slipping through. “I guess so.”

Ilya eyed the bowl again, then looked back at him.

“Okay,” he said simply, like he didn’t need much convincing. Then he added with a small smile, “But I will not drink your awful green smoothie, so don’t bother bringing two straws.”

Shane snorted. “Don’t worry, asshole. I wasn’t planning on sharing that with you.”

That earned a quiet laugh. They sat back against the headboard, shoulders brushing as they ate. Ilya picked through the bowl, going mostly for the granola and honey, while Shane stole most of the fruit.

Once they were done with breakfast, Ilya disappeared into the shower. Shane lingered for a moment, standing alone in the bedroom, Ilya’s absence already settling in. Then he moved. He made the bed slowly, smoothing out the sheets where they had been tangled together not long ago. He then carried the bowl downstairs, washed it, dried it, then returned to tidy up Ilya’s room, straightening things that didn’t really need straightening, just to have something to do.

By the time Ilya came back out, dressed and ready, Shane was waiting for him. They went downstairs together. Svetlana was already by the door, her coat on, bag resting on the kitchen counter, her posture alert and ready. Marlow leaned against the kitchen counter, half-awake, sipping his coffee.

“The car is five minutes away,” Svetlana said, glancing at her phone.

“I should have driven you to the airport,” Shane said quietly, leaning into Ilya, like he was already trying to close the distance that hadn’t happened yet.

“Is okay,” Ilya murmured. “I don’t think I would have handled not being able to hug you when we arrived there.” Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane and pulled him in tightly, like he was trying to memorize the feeling. Shane held on just as tightly, his face pressing into Ilya’s neck.

For a moment, everything else faded, the kitchen, the packed luggage, Svetlana and Marlow, the ticking clock. It was just them.

“Promise you’ll call me when you’re in Russia,” Shane said, his voice sounding much rougher now. “I don’t care what time it is over here. Please. I need to hear your voice.”

“I promise, moya lyubov.” Ilya whispered. “I’m going to miss you so much, Shane. I already miss you so much.”

Shane tightened his grip. “I’m going to miss you too, Ilya.”

“It will only be one week,” Ilya added softly. “Then we’ll see each other again in Montreal.”

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. “Ilya, you should take more time off if you need it.”

“And what, let you get ahead of me in the scoring race?” Ilya teased lightly, though his eyes stayed soft.

“Ilya, I mean it.”

“I know. But the sooner I can get back to you, the better I will feel.”

“Speaking of Montreal…” Shane started, “what I said yesterday… about introducing you to my parents, I was serious about that, you know."

“Shane—”

“I mean, if it’s okay with you,” Shane continued quickly, nerves slipping through the words, “I’d like them to meet my boyfriend. Or, if you’re not ready, we can just say we’re friends.”

“Shane… I would love to meet your parents,” Ilya said. “As your boyfriend.”

Shane’s breath caught, just a little. “Really?” he asked.

“Of course.”

The kiss that followed was slow and lingering, like they both knew they were running out of time.

“Car is here,” Svetlana cut in gently.

The moment broke. Reluctantly, they pulled apart. Ilya kept his hand on Shane for a second longer before letting go.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya said quietly.

“Ya tebya lyublyu.”

Then, Svetlana stepped forward, pulling Shane into a quick, tight hug.

“We need to work on your Russian pronunciation,” she said with a grin.

“Don’t listen to her,” Ilya added. “You say it perfectly, moya lyubov.”

Shane laughed, then leaned in, lowering his voice. “Take care of him.”

“Always.”

Ilya moved to Marlow next. Their hug was quicker, with something unspoken passing between them. Shane couldn’t catch everything, but he heard the quiet sincerity in Ilya’s voice when he said thank you. Then Ilya pulled back and glanced over at Shane before looking back at Marlow.

“Marly, you will drive Shane back to his hotel.”

Shane felt heat creep up his neck. “No, please, that won’t be necessary,” he said quickly. “I’ll just call an Uber.”

“No, sweetheart,” Ilya said, already firm. “Marlow will drive you.”

“Hollander, really, it’s no problem at all,” Marlow added easily.

Shane knew Ilya would feel better knowing Marlow would take him back to the hotel. “Alright. Thank you, Marlow.” Shane agreed.

“And you,” Ilya said, looking back at Marlow, his tone turning threatening, “if one hair on my beautiful boyfriend’s head is missing, I will come for you.”

“Jesus Christ, Ilya,” Shane muttered, embarrassed.

“Jeez, Roz,” Marlow said, shaking his head with a grin. “I told you, man, he’s safe with me.”

“He better be. Remember, I know where you live, Marlow.”

“Was that really necessary?” Shane asked, glancing at him.

“Yes, very necessary.”

Ilya stepped closer again, like he couldn’t quite leave without one more moment. He cupped Shane’s face briefly, kissed him, soft and deep.

“Bye,” he whispered.

Shane didn’t trust himself to say anything back, so he just nodded.

Ilya turned, grabbed his bag, and headed for the door. Svetlana followed. And Shane stood there for a moment longer, watching the door after they left before the quiet of the house settled back in.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I appreciate all the kudos and comments! As always, please let me know if you notice a typo so I can fix it before anyone else sees it :)

P.S. I don't respond to comments because it overwhelms me a bit, but please know I read them all and appreciate each person who wrote one <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> I don't know if you I was lying to you guys or to myself, but apparently I am not done with this fic.
>
> Here's another chapter (or two) :)

Shane and Marlow moved quietly through Ilya's house, tidying up what little mess they'd made. Shane worked on the living room, straightening cushions that Ilya probably has never ever straightened, stacking magazines, wiping down surfaces. Marlow stayed in the kitchen, the soft clink of dishes and running water filling the space as he loaded the dishwasher.

After a few minutes, he wandered into the kitchen, carrying a couple of empty cups. He handed them to Marlow, who took them without looking, rinsing them and placing them carefully into the rack.

"I should be done here in about fifteen minutes," Marlow said, glancing over his shoulder. "Then I can give you a ride to your hotel. How does that sound?"

"Oh. You really don't have to do that. I'll just call an Uber."

Marlow snorted lightly. "Hollander, please. You know Roz will kill me if I don't drive you back." Then, with a crooked grin, he added, "Honestly, man, you'd be doing *me* a favor."

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Plus," Marlow went on, "I live not too far from the team hotel anyway. So I'm heading that way regardless."

Shane thought for a second, then nodded. "Yeah. Alright. Thank you."

Marlow just waved it off, like it was nothing.

They finished tidying the house in comfortable silence. Once everything was done, Marlow grabbed a car key from Ilya's neatly arranged collection by the door. They locked up behind them and headed outside.

The car Marlow unlocked was different from the one they'd taken from the ice rink the night before. Black exterior, sleek, subtle, but still unmistakably Ilya. It was probably the least

flashy car in his collection, and somehow still felt like him. The interior was all black leather and tinted glass.

As soon as Shane stepped inside, the scent hit him. Ilya's cologne, layered with the faint trace of cigarette smoke. It was so *Ilya*. Shane settled into the seat, his fingers brushing lightly against the leather. An unexpected thought tugged at his chest. He'd never really been in one of Ilya's cars before. Not just the two of them, driving somewhere with nowhere else to be. That realization hit him heavier than it should have.

They pulled out into the street, heading toward the center of the city. It was still early, the bright sunlight reflecting off glass buildings and empty sidewalks.

For a while, they talked about hockey; the season, stats, matchups. It was an easy and familiar territory for them.

Shane tried to stay in it, he tried to follow the conversation, to respond at the right moments, to keep his voice steady, but the further they got from Ilya's house, and the closer they got to his hotel, the harder it became.

His thoughts drifted to Hayden and J.J. What was he walking back into? What would he say to them? What was he going to say to his team? They all saw him run out of that locker room to go see Ilya.

And then, another thought popped in his head. What about the Raiders? What had they seen? What had they noticed? His focus last night had been entirely on Ilya. He hadn't even looked at anyone else. He hadn't registered their reactions. Now, that felt like a mistake.

"Something on your mind?" Marlow asked, glancing at him briefly. "You worried about Rozanov?"

Shane was pulled out of his thoughts. Then his worry was briefly replaced with guilt. Ilya was on a plane right now, dealing with something far heavier, and Shane was sitting here, worrying about himself. He exhaled quietly, trying to shake it off.

"I—"

"Or is it my team?" Marlow cut in, like he'd figured it out. "Or is it your team that's worrying you?"

Shane let out a small breath. "Would you think I'm a bad boyfriend if I said… I'm worried about my team?" he admitted. "Well… and yours."

"Hollander," Marlow said, a small sympathetic smile tugging at his mouth, "after what I saw yesterday? You sprinting into our locker room, practically ready to fight off anyone just to get to Roz? I'd never think you're a bad boyfriend."

Shane let out a breath, and with it some of the tension drained away. He gave Marlow a grateful nod.

“Alright,” Marlow continued, glancing back at the road. “So what is it? You think your team’s going to be suspicious? Because our guys bought the whole ‘friends’ thing, and I seriously doubt your team’s any smarter than mine.”

Shane turned to him, surprised. “Wait, so the Raiders didn’t suspect anything?”

“No. No. They didn’t suspect anything, they’ve just been asking about Roz in the group chat. Oh and they keep repeating ‘I can’t believe he’s really friends with Hollander'.”

Shane just stared at him.

“I mean hell,” Marlow continued, “I didn’t really suspect anything until Roz literally said ‘boyfriends’.”

“What?” Shane said, shocked. “Marlow, he asked me to help him shower. That didn’t give it away?”

Marlow shrugged. “I don’t know, man. I just thought you were, like… really, *really* close friends.”

Shane let out a disbelieving chuckle, shaking his head.

“Straight hockey players, man,” Marlow said. “We’re not exactly a smart breed.”

“Yeah,” Shane snorted. “No argument there.”

“So what’s actually bothering you?” Marlow asked.

“Hayden and J.J.,” he said as he stared out the window. “I’m not sure they’ll buy the whole ‘friends’ thing. J.J. might… but he’ll be upset I didn’t tell him sooner. And Hayden, he knows me too well. He’ll know I’m lying.”

Marlow nodded slowly. “You think Pike wouldn’t be okay with you being gay?”

Shane shook his head immediately. “No. He’ll be fine with it. J.J. too. I'm sure.”

Marlow looked at him again, and something seemed to click. “Oh,” he said. “So it’s the Rozanov of it all.”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Marlow said. “They *really* fucking hate him over there in Montreal. He hasn’t exactly made it easy, huh?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Shane admitted, a small smile creeping in. “Plus… I think I want to tell my parents first before anyone else.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I just don’t want to keep lying to the people in my life.”

Marlow shook his head. “You’re not lying,” he said. “You’re just not ready to share that part of yourself yet. And I don’t know about your parents, but Pike and Boiziau? They should

understand more than everyone else why you would want to keep it a secret. Especially in a league this toxic."

Shane nodded slowly. "I guess you're right." he said.

They drove in silence for a bit after that, until Marlow spoke again.

"Can I ask you something?"

Shane glanced over. "Sure."

Marlow hesitated for exactly half a second, before he said, "Roz… is he really *that* good in bed?"

"What?" Shane choked on absolutely nothing, staring at him, eyes wide, mouth slightly open, but Marlow kept going.

"I mean, on the road… I've shared a wall with him. I hear things—"

"Oh God," Shane groaned, dropping his head into his hands.

"Yeah, I've heard that through the walls too." Marlow said, grinning.

Shane couldn't even look up if he wanted to.

"He can't be *that* good, right?" Marlow pressed.

Shane let out a long, defeated sigh.

"…Yeah. No. He's— he's *that* good," he admitted, voice muffled, cheeks burning.

"Fuck," Marlow muttered. "Guess he just likes being the best at everything."

Shane finally lifted his head, his freckles standing out against the blush in his cheeks. Marlow just laughed and kept driving toward the hotel.

Despite the nerves, the questions waiting for him at the hotel, the uncertainty of what's to come, Shane found himself relaxing slightly into the seat. Questions about his and Ilya's sex life aside, he felt okay. Safe, even.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane walked into the hotel lobby, his game bag slung over his shoulder, the strap digging slightly into his collarbone. He kept his head down as he crossed the polished floor, moving quickly, hoping, *really* hoping, not to run into any of his teammates.

The last thing he wanted right now was looks, or worse, questions.

The lobby was quiet, only a few scattered guests and the low murmur of conversation near the front desk. Still, Shane didn't slow down. He made it to the elevator, pressed the button, and stepped inside the second the doors opened.

Empty. *Thank God.*

He let out a breath, leaning back briefly against the mirrored wall. He just stood there as the elevator began moving, staring at his own reflection, tired eyes, slightly rumpled clothes, and the faintest smile found its way onto his face as he remembered Ilya's soft touches and the sweet things he'd whispered to him the night before.

Then the elevator doors opened, and reality snapped back into place. By the time he reached his room, his stomach had already started to tighten again. He adjusted the strap of his bag, bracing himself, and then he pushed the door open.

"Hey—" The word died in his throat.

Hayden wasn't alone. J.J. was there too, sitting on Shane's bed, elbows resting on his knees, his whole posture tense. Hayden was stretched out against the headboard of his own bed, looking more relaxed, but his eyes were alert.

Both of them turned toward the door the second Shane stepped inside. He stepped in fully, letting the door close behind him, and dropped his bag onto the floor with a dull thud.

"Hollander, where the fuck have you been?" J.J. asked, his voice was sharp, caught somewhere between anger and concern.

"J.J.," Hayden said immediately, in a warning in his tone. "We talked about this." Then his expression softened slightly as he looked at Shane. "Shane, are you okay, buddy?" he said more calmly.

Shane nodded, a little too quickly. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Hayden studied him for a second longer, like he didn't fully believe it, but decided to let it go. "And Rozanov?" he asked. "Is he okay? He didn't look too good last night."

“He’s— he’s doing better.”

Shane sat down on Hayden’s bed, facing J.J., his arms crossed as if to shield himself from the conversation. Hayden moved forward and sat beside Shane, placing his feet on the floor.

“Okay, great,” J.J. said flatly. “So where the fuck were you all night?”

“I—uh—I stayed at Rozanov’s house.”

“You stayed with Rozanov?” J.J. repeated. “Just the two of you?”

Shane shook his head quickly. “No. No, of course not. Marlow was there. And… his best friend, too.”

J.J. looked like he did not like Shane’s answer. “So are you going to tell us what the fuck happened last night?” he asked, irritation creeping back into his voice.

“I will,” Shane said, “but you have to promise me something first.” Both Hayden and J.J. looked at him. “Not a word leaves this room, okay?”

“What? Why” Hayden frowned.

“Just—” Shane exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “Just promise me.”

“Yeah, man,” Hayden said after a brief pause. “I promise. I won’t say anything.”

J.J. sighed, rolling his eyes slightly. “Relax, Capitaine,” he muttered. “You’re not the only one who knows how to keep a secret.”

Shane chose to ignore the edge in his tone. He took a breath, and spoke quietly, as if afraid his words could be heard through the thin walls of the hotel room.

“Rozanov’s dad passed away. He got the call from his brother after the game letting him know. And it hit him… hard.”

Hayden’s expression wavered immediately, sympathy replacing the confusion that had taken place earlier.

“So that’s what happened to him yesterday?” he asked. “That was a breakdown?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” J.J. said. “That’s… That sucks. Really. I’m sorry for his loss. But what I still don’t get why the fuck *you* were there.”

“J.J.” Hayden warned.

“No, I’m serious,” J.J. cut in. “Why were *you* the one helping him? Why did *you* have to stay at *his* place?”

“Because I wanted to, J.J.,” he said, almost shouting. “Because he needed me.”

“But why *you*?” J.J. pressed. "Why did he need you?"

“J.J., I told you. Me and Il—” he caught himself, “—Rozanov are friends. Just like you and Hayden are my friends. If you guys ever needed me like that… I’d drop everything to be there for you too. You know that.”

“Yeah but we’re your best friends, that’s different.” Hayden added.

Shane met his gaze. “He’s my best friend too.”

J.J.’s eyebrows shot up slightly, disbelief written all over his face.

“Hm,” he said. “And when exactly were you planning on telling us that you and Rozanov are ‘best friends’?” he added, making air quotes.

“I’m telling you now,” Shane said, his voice steady.

“Okay,” Hayden stepped in, trying to ease the tension. “I think what J.J.’s trying to say is, we’re just surprised. This kind of came out of nowhere.”

“I know,” Shane said quietly.

“Shane… how do you know he’s not just trying to mess with you? Trying to get in your head to throw you off your game?” J.J. asked.

“He’s had eight years to use all that he knows about me against me. And he still hasn’t.”

J.J. frowned. “Eight years?” he repeated. “Wait, when the fuck did you even become friends with that cocksucker?”

Shane cringed at the word. He stood up suddenly, and snapped at J.J. with a sharp and immediate anger.

“Don’t use that fucking word in front of me, J.J. Actually, don’t use that word in front of anyone.”

J.J. went quiet, his expression caught somewhere between shock and embarrassment.

“You say he’s a bad guy,” Shane continued, his voice still tight, “but at least he’s never used that fucking word.”

J.J. shifted uncomfortably where he was seated, looking a little taken aback.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right. Je suis désolé.” *I’m sorry.*

“Shane what J.J. meant,” Hayden said in a calmer tone, “is that Rozanov has been terrorizing you on the ice for years. He’s been going at you since your rookie season”

“Has he?” Shane shot back. “We’ve never fought on the ice. Not once. Neither of us has ever thrown a punch at each other. He’s never chirped anything offensive at me. Never said

anything personal. Never talked shit about me to the media."

His gaze didn't waver.

"So tell me, exactly how has he been terrorizing me? By being good at hockey? By being the only real competition I've ever had on the ice?"

Hayden didn't have an immediate answer.

"Come on, man." J.J. said. "He's always shit talking your backhand, saying it's weak or whatever."

Shane let out a quiet breath, shaking his head.

"Guys," he said, "I don't mean to sound arrogant, I swear I don't. But I have one of the best backhands in the league, if not the best. Rozanov knows it too. You do know he doesn't actually think I have a weak backhand, right?"

He huffed softly in disbelief.

"He calls Scott Hunter a dinosaur all the time, and the guy's only three years older than us. You think Rozanov actually thinks he's old?"

Hayden and J.J. were left speechless. Shane couldn't help wondering how they had never thought of it this way before.

"When did you even become friends with him?" Hayden asked.

Shane hesitated, trying to choose his words carefully. "Uh… the night of our draft," he said. "We ran into each other in the hotel gym."

Both Hayden and J.J. leaned forward listening.

"We just… talked for a bit," Shane continued, his voice a bit more measured now. "He asked me about Boston. About Montreal. Stuff like that."

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as the memory of their conversation in the hotel gym flashed in his mind.

"He was cocky. Obviously," he added. "But he also seemed… kind of nervous. Moving to a new country, and not really knowing the language that well. I don't know, I think it just… started there. After that, we'd run into each other over the years. At the All-Stars. At NHL awards. Things like that. And sometimes… we'd meet up after the Montreal and Boston games."

The moment the words left his mouth, he felt it. Hayden's look. It wasn't judgmental, but it was like he was putting things together. Shane pretended not to see it, focusing instead on the floor for a second before forcing himself to look back up.

“Okay, but how do you just *meet up* with a guy like that?” J.J. pressed, gesturing vaguely. “Your teams hate each other. You guys are like on opposite sides of everything. You don’t just casually grab a drink with your biggest rival.” He leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowed. “What, are you going to tell us now that the rivalry isn’t real?”

Shane let out a breath, his shoulders rising and falling as he tried to steady himself. He could feel both of them watching him, waiting for an answer.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “The rivalry is real. It’s always been real. But it’s also… played up, you know? By the league, by the media, by everyone.” He paused, choosing his words more carefully now. “We’re competitive, yes. We want to beat each other every time we step on the ice. That part’s real. But there's never been any… hatred. Not between us.”

J.J. frowned, but didn’t interrupt this time.

“People expect a lot from us,” he continued. “They built this whole narrative around us. Like we’re supposed to be enemies all the time. Like that’s all we are. But they don’t see everything else.”

Hayden’s expression had changed now, looking less skeptical, more thoughtful.

“We both carry a lot of pressure and have expectations to meet, from our teams, and the league, and from fans… from everywhere. And there aren’t a lot of people who understand that. No one really. He's the only other person who does.”

Shane swallowed, then added, “We relate to each other. We talk. We… confide in each other. Honestly… me and Ilya’s friendship is probably the most natural thing that came out of this rivalry.”

“Oh, so he’s Ilya now,” J.J. said, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Shane shot him a look, sharp at first, but it softened almost immediately. He didn’t have the energy to snap back.

J.J. leaned back slightly, processing what Shane had said, while Hayden kept his eyes on Shane, like he was seeing something he hadn’t fully understood before.

“Shane, buddy,” Hayden said, leaning forward slightly, his tone more earnest now. “I’m sorry. Look… we trust your judgment. We shouldn’t have doubted you. If he’s important to you, then that’s enough for us.”

Something in Shane’s expression eased. He gave Hayden a small, grateful look, but then his gaze drifted to J.J., who was suddenly very interested in the floor.

“Right, J.J.?” Hayden added, nudging him lightly.

J.J. huffed under his breath, then nodded. “Yeah. Of course. We trust you, Capitaine.”

It wasn’t as warm as Hayden’s response, but it was something.

“Thanks, guys,” Shane said quietly. “I really appreciate it.”

Hayden gave a small nod, then added, almost as an afterthought, “We still don’t like him, though.”

J.J. snorted, nodding in agreement. Shane let out a soft laugh, the corner of his mouth lifting just slightly. “That’s okay,” he said.

A few minutes later, J.J. pushed himself off the bed and muttered something about grabbing his stuff before heading out, leaving the room a little quieter behind him.

Now it was just Shane and Hayden. They moved around the room, packing up their suitcases in silence, with just the soft zip of bags and rustle of fabric filling the space. It didn’t feel tense anymore, but it wasn’t completely normal either. Shane could feel it, something had changed.

“Shane?” Hayden said, breaking the silence.

Shane looked up. “Yeah?”

Hayden paused for a moment, like he was deciding how far to push. “You said you sometimes meet up with Rozanov… after the Montreal and Boston games.”

There it is.

Shane’s throat tightened instantly. “Yeah,” he said. “I said that.”

He couldn’t quite meet Hayden’s eyes. If he did, he wasn’t sure what would show on his face and how much Hayden would see.

“Is that in Boston too?” Hayden asked.

Shane’s stomach dropped. He could see exactly where this was going now, each question stepping closer to something he wasn’t ready to say out loud.

“Sometimes,” he answered, his gaze fixed somewhere just past Hayden’s shoulder.

“You also see Lily after the games in Boston,” Hayden said. It wasn’t a question. More like a piece of a puzzle.

“Sometimes,” Shane repeated, quieter this time.

He could feel Hayden connecting the dots, the lies, the timelines, the overlaps, all the things Shane had kept separate for so long, suddenly sitting too close together.

“Shane—” Hayden started, his voice careful.

“Hayden.” Shane cut him off. He lifted his head then, forcing himself to meet Hayden’s eyes.

For a second, he thought about it. About just saying it, about letting it all fall into place. No more hiding, no more careful wording, no more splitting himself into parts depending on who he was with. But the moment passed just as quickly. Because this wasn't how he wanted it. Not like this where he was half-cornered into it. Not when everything already felt too raw. His vision blurred slightly, tears gathering but not falling.

"Please don't." he said. His voice wasn't loud.

This wasn't how he wanted this to happen. This wasn't how he wanted to come out to Hayden. He wanted it to be his choice, his timing, and not something pulled out of him piece by piece.

"Please," he said again, quieter this time.

And Shane braced himself for disappointment or even frustration, but instead, everything in Hayden's expression softened.

"Okay," he said quickly. "Okay, buddy."

He crossed the space between them in two steps and pulled Shane into a tight hug. Shane didn't hesitate, he leaned into it immediately, gripping the back of Hayden's shirt like he needed something solid to hold onto.

"I don't need to know everything right now," Hayden said. "Alright?"

Shane nodded against his shoulder.

"But I need you to know something," Hayden continued, his voice steady. "I love you. No matter what. There's nothing you can say or do or be that would make me love you any less. You will always be a part of my family, Shane."

He believed him. That was one of the things Shane liked about Hayden, he had always been honest and straightforward with him. Shane let out a relieved breath. Part of him, the part he kept buried the deepest, had been afraid of exactly that, of losing this, of losing Hayden, and now, he was almost sure he wouldn't.

When they finally pulled apart, Shane wiped quickly at his eyes, letting out a shaky breath.

"Thanks, Hayd," his voice sounded rough but the sincerity was there.

Hayden smiled softly, like it was no big deal. And that made it easier for Shane to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t really like Hayden, not in the books or the show, but I thought Shane deserves more people in his corner, so Hayden is an ok person in this universe.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane was the last one to board the team bus. It wasn't something he ever did. Usually, he was among the first on, already settled into his seat before most of the team had finished grabbing coffee. Today was different though. Today, he needed everyone present. He needed every conversation to stop. He needed every set of eyes on him.

He'd spent most of the morning avoiding his teammates. The handful he'd crossed paths with had all received the same response. *I'll explain later.* But now there wasn't any later left, there was no more putting it off.

The second he stepped onto the bus, the atmosphere changed. Conversations died mid-sentence, heads turned towards him, and every pair of eyes found him.

Shane lingered at the front of the bus for the briefest moment. Addressing this group of men had never made him nervous before, he'd worn the captaincy long enough that speaking in front of the team came naturally, but this wasn't a pregame speech or a discussion about strategy. This felt different.

“Alright, everyone,” he began, his voice even and steady despite the knot he felt in his throat. “I figure I owe you all an explanation for why I ran out of the locker room after last night’s game.”

The bus stayed silent, no one dared to interrupt.

“A friend of mine was going through something personal, and I went to be there for him. That's all there was to it.”

“You mean Rozanov?” The question came from somewhere near the middle of the bus.

Shane didn't hesitate. “Yes… that friend was Ilya Rozanov.”

He looked around the bus, his teammates’ reactions were immediate. A few sharp inhales, several muttered *what the fuck*s, someone leaned back hard enough in their seat to make it creak, but Shane ignored all of it. He didn’t react or give it any room to grow.

“He and I have been friends since the day we were drafted into the NHL,” he continued. “This isn’t something new for us. And it is not something new to the league, or to you guys. I know a lot of you are friends with players on other teams.”

“Yeah, but none of our friends are that fucking Russian bastard,” Comeau shot back sounding irritated.

You’re one to fucking talk, Comeau,” Shane snapped. “I’ve seen you all buddy-buddy with Dallas Kent.”

Comeau's mouth opened for a split second before closing again. He didn't have an argument, and everyone on the bus knew it. For all the resentment directed at Ilya Rozanov around the league, Dallas Kent had a reputation that went beyond a rivalry, a reputation meaner, dirtier, and harder to justify.

Shane let his gaze move across, meeting a few eyes. He took a breath, steadying himself before continuing.

“As I was saying,” he went on, “Rozanov and I are competitive. We take our jobs very seriously. When we’re on the ice, we’re trying to beat each other. Off the ice, we’re friends. Those two things aren’t mutually exclusive.”

His gaze swept across the bus.

“And nothing about yesterday changes how I expect this team to play. So, I still expect each and every single one of you to give me your absolute fucking best next week, because we are not fucking losing to Boston again. Am I fucking clear?”

A few players answered immediately. “Yes, Cap.” Others followed a second later.

Shane gave a single nod before making his way down the aisle toward his usual seat. He caught a few glares from some of the older guys but didn't acknowledge them. Hayden and J.J. patted his shoulder as he passed them, though there were signs of confusion still visible on J.J.’s face. Or maybe it looked more like hurt.

As he reached his row, his eyes went toward the back of the bus. The rookie who had broken the news about Ilya’s breakdown in the Raiders’ locker room sat exactly where Shane expected him to be, squeezed in at the very end of the bus with the rest of the younger players, staring at his phone with far more concentration than the screen deserved.

Shane held his gaze for a second before pulling out his own phone.

‘Hey, Rook. Come sit with me.’ He hit send.

A minute later, there was movement behind him, hesitant steps making their way to him. The rookie appeared beside his seat, standing a little awkwardly in the aisle, awkwardly shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like he wasn’t entirely sure he was allowed to be there.

“Hey, Cap,” he said in a voice a little too small.

Shane looked up at him, his expression softening almost immediately. He gave a small nod toward the empty seat beside him.

“Sit.” he said.

The rookie hesitated for half a second, then lowered himself into the seat with stiff shoulders. His hands fidgeted in his lap, fingers picking at the edge of his sleeve.

They sat in silence for less than a second before the rookie began to speak, though not yet able to meet Shane's eyes.

"Look, Cap... about yesterday… I'm really, *really* sorry. I shouldn't have—"

Shane lifted a hand slightly, cutting him off gently.

"Hey, rook," he said. The kid looked up. "It's okay. I know you're sorry."

The rookie blinked, caught off guard.

"And yeah," Shane admitted, "you shouldn't have done it. But… if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have known what was happening with Rozanov. I wouldn't have known that my friend needed me… and I wouldn't have been able to get to him."

The rookie nodded slowly, too stunned by his captain's reaction to respond with words.

"Actually," Shane went on, "what I really wanted to talk to you about was— When you got that text about Rozanov—"

The rookie straightened in his seat immediately.

"Look, we all get caught up in the rivalry sometimes, that's normal. Me and Rozanov probably do it more than anyone else. But," Shane chose his next words carefully, "the moment you let that rivalry come before basic human decency… that's when you start losing sight of what actually matters."

The rookie's gaze dropped to his hands. Shane let the words sit for a second.

"We all want to win," he continued. "That's the job. But we do it by playing better, and stronger, and smarter, and *not* by celebrating when our rivals get hurt."

Another quiet moment passed with the rookie avoiding his gaze.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Shane asked.

The rookie nodded immediately. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. Yeah, I do." He sighed. "I guess I just... got carried away."

Shane studied him before giving a small nod. "It happens, just don't add to it."

"I won't."

And Shane believed him.

"You didn't tell anyone else about what happened to Rozanov, right?" Shane asked.

The rookie shook his head immediately and lifted his gaze. "No. I promise. I didn't."

"Good."

“Well… I told my mom,” the rookie admitted, glancing down, a little sheepish. “But she won't tell anyone I swear.” He rubbed the back of his neck again, looking embarrassed. “She was not exactly happy with my actions either. Said I took it too far.”

A quiet laugh escaped Shane before he could stop it. “Smart woman.”

The rookie laughed too, some of the stiffness finally melting out of his shoulders. He stayed seated beside Shane for the rest of the ride to the airport, a little more relaxed now. The conversation flowed easily, giving him a chance to pick his captain’s brain.

Chapter End Notes

CAPTAIN Shane Hollander.

That's it. That's the chapter.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane moved through his apartment like a man on a timer, energy sharp and restless, never settling in one place for long. He adjusted the table settings for what had to be the fifth time, straightening cutlery that was already perfectly aligned, smoothing out invisible wrinkles in the table runner. He crossed back into the living room, fluffing pillows that didn't need fluffing, stepping back to assess, then stepping forward again to fix something no one else would ever notice.

Everything *had* to be perfect.

If this went wrong, if the words got stuck in his throat, if his voice shook, if his parents looked at him differently after today, then at least the space around him would hold steady. At least something would be exactly as it should be.

He exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair before turning back toward the kitchen. Drinks. Check. Food. Check.

Control what you can. That's what this was.

He and Ilya had talked about this for hours over the past week, across time zones and bad connections, voices soft in the late hours of the night. The plan was simple in theory: Shane would come out to his parents first. And then, if it felt right, if he could breathe, if the moment allowed it, he would tell them about Ilya.

Ilya had made it easy for him. Too easy, almost. '*You don't have to do anything you're not ready for',* he had said. '*We can wait. We can always wait.'* He had even offered not to come at all.

Shane hadn't hesitated, he wanted Ilya by his side, and he wanted to do this.

He had wanted this for years in a quiet, almost painful way. Late at night, on long road trips, in hotel rooms that never felt like home, he had imagined this exact moment. Introducing Ilya to his parents. Letting the two parts of his life finally meet instead of existing in careful separation.

He had never been sure of how Ilya would feel about this, especially when he was just 'Rozanov' to Shane for the longest time. But it was different now, and he wanted this more than anything. Shane wanted the three people he loved most in the world to be in the same room.

Ilya had spent the past week in Moscow for his father's funeral. They had talked every day, sometimes for hours, but it hadn't been enough. Shane had hoped Ilya would arrive early, just a few minutes before his parents even, enough time to hold him, kiss him, and for them to be themselves before everything changed.

It didn't matter, because that wasn't happening.

The Raiders had only landed in Montreal that evening, and Ilya was coming straight from the airport. Which meant there would be no quiet moment, no stolen kiss, no arms wrapped around him to steady his nerves. They would have to pretend, at least for a just a little while longer.

"I was surprised when you called and asked us over for dinner," Yuna said as Shane opened the door for his parents. Shane stepped aside to let her and David in. They each pulled him into warm, familiar hugs.

For a split second, an unwelcome thought slipped in. *Would this be the last time they hug me like this? Like nothing's changed? Like they're still proud of me?* He felt sick at the thought, but quickly pushed it down. He couldn't let himself go there.

His parents had arrived exactly on time, predictable as always. He clung to that.

"Yeah… I thought it would be nice if we had a home cooked meal tonight." he said.

Yuna's eyes were already scanning the apartment, taking everything in with precision. They landed on the dining table.

Four plates.

"Is someone else joining us for dinner today?"

Shane felt his shoulders tense. "Yeah. I invited a friend. I hope that's okay."

"Oh," Yuna said, her expression brightening with curiosity. "Is it Rose Landry? Are we finally going to meet your girlfriend?"

Shane exhaled, a small, slightly annoyed breath. "Mom, Rose isn't my girlfriend," he said. "And no. It's not her."

"Well, that's fine if she's not. You know you don't have to put labels on things." David chimed in.

Shane nodded, but his gaze dropped to the floor. "No, it's not that," he said quietly, the words trailing off before he could stop them. He didn't bother to elaborate.

They moved into the living room, taking seat on the couch. The space that had felt so carefully arranged minutes ago now felt disorganized now.

“Did you hear about Rozanov?” Yuna asked, changing the conversation. “It’s very unfortunate, about his father.”

“Yeah,” David added. “That’s tough. I hope he’s doing alright.”

Shane looked up, a flicker of relief passing through him. At least his parents were able to feel sympathy for the man they deemed as Shane’s enemy. Maybe this will be easier than he thought.

“I wonder if he’ll play tomorrow,” Yuna continued. “The Raiders haven’t submitted their roster yet.”

“He’s going to play,” Shane said, without hesitation.

Both of his parents turned to look at him.

“Really?” Yuna asked. “How do you know that? I didn’t even see anything about him even coming back from Russia.”

Shane shrugged, not really giving an answer to his mom. He pushed himself to his feet. “I should check on the food.”

He didn’t really need to, everything was already prepared. The grilled chicken sat covered on the counter. Rice portioned neatly for him. Pasta set aside for his parents and Ilya. The salad just needed dressing, which he poured slowly, like it required all of his attention.

He just needed something to do with his hands. Something to keep himself from thinking about the clock, from thinking about the door, and the moment everything would change.

Then the doorbell rang. His heart jumped into his throat.

“I’ll get it,” Yuna said, already standing, making her way to the door.

“No—Mom, I’ll—” Shane started, but she was already halfway there. He followed quickly, pulse loud in his ears, but he was too late.

Yuna reached the door before Shane could get to it. She opened it and froze. Because standing before her was a tall, smiling Russian man.

“Wha—” Yuna started, her voice catching. “Rozanov?”

“Hi,” Ilya said simply.

He looked… different. Not in a way most people would notice, but Shane definitely did. His shirt was neatly pressed and buttoned almost all the way up, his hair was brushed back, not falling into forehead the way it usually did, and his posture was straight and composed.

Ilya was nervous.

He wore a soft smile. It wasn't the sharp, teasing smirk Shane knew so well, or the cocky grin he wore on the ice. It was something much gentler.

Shane had never seen Ilya look more put together. Ilya did always look really, *really* good, but now looking at him, he knew he put in the extra effort because he was meeting his boyfriend's parents.

Shane's heart skipped a beat looking at his boyfriend. He had missed him more than he thought it was ever possible to miss someone. And it was unfair that he couldn't just run into his arms, kiss him, tell him just how much he had missed him, and how much he was grateful he was here to be by his side.

Yuna turned to Shane, confusion written plainly across her face. "Shane… what is going on?"

"Mom," Shane said carefully, stepping closer, "I told you. I invited a friend."

Ilya was still standing outside, not wanting to step in without being invited in.

David appeared behind them, drawn by the sudden silence. His gaze moved from Yuna to Ilya, recognition hitting him a second later. Now all three of them were just staring.

"Ilya," Shane said, his voice steadier than he felt, "please, come in." He gestured toward the apartment, and Ilya took a step inside.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ilya… Rozanov. But you already know that," Shane said a little awkwardly. "Ilya, these are my parents, Yuna and David."

"Is nice to meet you," Ilya said. "Shane speaks very highly of you."

His hand twitched slightly, like he was considering offering a handshake, but hesitated, unsure if it would be welcomed. He settled for a polite nod instead.

"Thank you for inviting me." he added. He lifted the bottle he has in his hand, "I brought this for you, from Russia." He then turned to David, "Mr. Hollander, Shane tells me you drink vodka sometimes, I hope you will like this one."

David looked a little surprised, then smiled as he accepted the bottle. "Oh, thank you. Yes, I do enjoy the occasional drink. And please, call me David."

Ilya nodded politely.

"You know, Shane doesn't drink vodka," Yuna said, her tone cautious. "And he definitely doesn't drink the night before a game."

Ilya let out a small chuckle. "Oh, I know. That is why—" He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a can of ginger ale. "—I brought this for Shane." He handed it to him with a wink.

Shane took it with a confused look. “Why did you bring me ginger ale? You know I already have some here.”

“Oh I know,” Ilya said easily. “But I didn’t want to come to your home empty handed.”

Even now, even like this, Ilya was thinking about him.

"Well, that's... thoughtful." David said.

Ilya slipped off his shoes by the door and hung his coat neatly on the rack like he’s done dozens of times before, then he followed the Hollanders further into the apartment.

“Ah… would it be okay if I wash my hands first? I just came from the airport.” Ilya said.

“Yeah, of course,” Shane said quickly, but Ilya didn’t move. For half a second, Shane didn’t understand why, then it clicked. Ilya *knew* where the bathroom was, he just couldn’t act like he did.

“Right,” Shane said, correcting himself. “Guest bathroom is this way. You can follow me.”

He led him down the hallway, just out of sight of the living room. Ilya stepped into the bathroom first, then reached back and pulled Shane in with him. He closed the door quietly behind them, careful not to make any noise. He caught Shane by the front of his sweater, pulling him forward and pressing him back against the door, kissing him hard.

Shane barely had time to react before he was kissing him back just as desperately.

“Fuck, I missed you,” Shane breathed against his lips.

“I missed you too, *moya lyubov*,” Ilya murmured.

Shane’s hands moved over him instinctively, grounding himself in Ilya. He avoided Ilya’s hair, maybe for the first time ever, not wanting to ruin the careful effort he’d clearly put in.

The kiss didn’t last long, maybe ten seconds at most, but it was enough. It hit him like a jolt and felt steady all at once. Everything Shane needed in that moment, he found on Ilya’s lips.

“I should go back,” Shane said, reluctantly pulling away. “Before my parents start suspecting something.”

Ilya nodded, but before Shane could turn around, Ilya caught his chin gently between his fingers, lifting his gaze.

“Shane, I love you,” he said quietly. “And I’m proud of you for doing this. And I will still be proud of you if you decide to not do it.”

Shane nodded, something inside him eased at Ilya’s words. "Thank you for being here. I don't know if I would be able to do this without you."

Ilya pressed one last soft kiss to Shane’s lips before Shane slipped out of the bathroom.

When he stepped back into the living room, his parents were sitting close together on the couch, speaking in hushed voices. Shane cleared his throat lightly causing them both to look up.

“Shane,” Yuna said, standing and crossing the room toward him. “What is going on? Why didn’t you tell us you invited Rozanov?”

“I don’t know.” Shane said, avoiding his mother’s eyes. “I didn’t think you’d believe me if I just said, ‘Hey, by the way, Rozanov’s joining us for dinner,’” He added.

“Okay, then why didn’t you tell us you’re friends with him? And since when *have* you been friends? I thought you hated him.”

Shane opened his mouth, but before he could answer, Ilya stepped back into the room, stopping a few steps behind him, clearly unsure where to place himself. After a moment of silence, David cleared his throat, and said “Shall we eat?”, trying to cut through the awkwardness.

“Yes, of course,” Shane said quickly. “I’ll just grab the food and drinks from the kitchen.”

“I will help you,” Ilya offered.

“It’s okay, Rozanov,” Yuna said, already moving towards the kitchen. “I’ll help him. You can take a seat.”

Shane didn’t miss it, she clearly wanted more answers.

David and Ilya moved to the table, sitting across from each other. Meanwhile, Shane and his mother stepped into the kitchen.

“Shane,” Yuna whispered, “why is he here?”

“Because he’s my friend, mom. Because I care about him. Because he *just* lost his father, and I wanted him to be around family, even if it’s not his own.”

The words felt incomplete. They weren’t wrong, but they weren’t the whole truth either. *I’m his family,* Shane thought, but he couldn’t say that. Not yet at least.

Yuna’s expression softened, as if Shane had just said something she did not consider before.

“And please,” Shane added, more gently now, “any questions you have… ask them in front of Ilya. I don’t want him to think we’re talking about him behind his back.”

“Okay, honey.” It looked like she wanted to ask more, but reluctantly let it go for now.

They returned to the table with the food and drinks. Shane set a can of Coke beside Ilya’s plate, and the ginger ale Ilya had brought beside his own. He poured wine for his parents, hands steady out of sheer will.

They all sat and began to eat. After a few bites when no one spoke, Ilya said, “Thank you for having me for dinner,” looking around the table. “The food is great.”

“Glad you're here,” Shane was the only one to reply.

Silence quickly crept back in. Shane knew his parents must have about a million questions, but they were either too shocked to ask them, or they were just following his lead.

“Rozanov…,” thankfully David broke the silence, “we heard about your father. We’re very sorry for your loss. It must have been a difficult week for you.”

“Ilya, please,” he corrected. “And thank you. Yes… it was difficult, but… is good to be back now.”

“Really?” Yuna asked, sounding more suspicious than Shane thought she probably intended. “I would have thought you’d want to spend more time with your family back home.”

Ilya tensed slightly, then said, “I do not have any family left in Russia.”

“Oh, so then your mother, does she live in Boston with you?”

“Mom,” Shane warned under his breath.

“Is okay,” Ilya said, glancing at him with a small, reassuring smile, telling Shane that he did not mind sharing this information with the people Shane trusted the most in the world.

He then turned back to Yuna. “Ah, no. My mother is dead. She died when I was young.”

Yuna’s expression broke immediately. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I can’t imagine what you’re going through,” she said in a warmer voice. “Maybe you should have taken more time off.” She sounded like a concerned mother, it just wasn’t entirely clear who she was concerned for in that moment, Ilya or Shane.

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. “And let Hollander catch up to me in scoring race?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “You’re only one goal ahead. I’ll catch up tomorrow.”

“With your weak backhand?” Ilya shot back. “I’d like to see you try.”

“You just took a week off, Rozanov. You’re going to be rusty.”

“Ah, no. I am well-rested. You do not stand a chance, Hollander.”

“I won the scoring race last year.”

“Yes, but I’ve won it more times than you.”

“I have more Stanley Cups than you.”

“For now,” Ilya said, a smirk tugging at his lips.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, then suddenly remembered where he was. He glanced up to see his parents watching them. Surprisingly though, they looked amused.

“Well that answers one of my questions.” Yuna said as she took a measured sip of her wine. “I was wondering how real the rivalry actually is.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, rubbing the back of his neck. “No, it’s very real.” Then, before he could second-guess himself, he added, “What other questions did you have, Mom?”

Yuna set her glass down carefully. “Well… I guess… since when have you two been friends?”

Shane hesitated for half a second. “We properly talked for the first time the night of the draft,” he said. “But it was at the CCM commercial shoot that we became… friends.”

Yuna’s expression shifted, recognition flickering. “Right, I remember that day. You two couldn’t stop laughing.”

“But why did you hide it for so long?” It was David’s turn to ask.

Shane felt his heartrate quicken. He didn’t answer right away, instead, he glanced at Ilya, and thankfully he understood immediately what Shane needed from him.

“From before we played in the NHL,” Ilya said, his tone calm and measured, like this was something he’d rehearsed. Because he had. “The league built up this rivalry. They built our public... personalities.” He said ‘personalities’ as if he wasn’t sure that was the right word.

“Personas.” Shane corrected.

“Yes, personas.” Ilya continued. “Shane is Canadian golden boy. I am Russian bad boy. Everything we did on the ice or off the ice was compared. We were young. We thought that was what we were supposed to do. So we hide the friendship.”

Yuna nodded slowly, absorbing that. “Okay, I understand that. But,” she then turned to address her son, “Shane… why did you hide it from *us*?”

Shane exhaled quietly. “I guess… everyone just expected us to hate each other,” he said. “Even you and Dad. So I just… played the part.”

“I mean, can you blame us?” David said, leaning back slightly. “The first time you met Rozanov, your mother asked what he was like, and you said he was kind of an asshole.”

“He *was* an asshole,” Shane said immediately.

Ilya shrugged, laughing. Shane couldn’t help but laugh too.

“Well,” David said with a chuckle, “now you know why we thought you hated him.” He paused, then added lightly, “Any other friendships you’re hiding from us, kid? Anything else we should know about?”

Shane tensed up, the room suddenly seemed to tighten around him. It felt like everything narrowed, his parents across from him, the table between them, Ilya beside him.

Did his dad know that he was hiding something? Should he come clean? It seems as good a time as ever. He glanced at Ilya, who was already looking back at him. Ilya gave him a small nod. It was subtle and easy to miss, but it was just what Shane needed. This was the moment.

Shane looked back at his parents, committing the moment to memory. If what happens next does not go as planned, he can think back to this moment before everything changed. If this went wrong… he wanted to remember this version of them.

“Well,” Shane said, his voice quieter now, “kind of.” His parents’ expressions tightened, concern creeping in. Shane swallowed down the lump in his throat.

“I—” he started, then forced himself to keep going. “I’m gay.”

Silence. Complete and immediate.

Yuna’s gaze flicked between Shane and Ilya, something like an alarm flashing across her face.

“Shane… are you sure you want to be doing this in front of Rozanov?” she asked, her voice tight with worry.

“What?” Shane did not understand what his mother meant by that, but Ilya clearly did.

Ilya leaned forward slightly, brow lifting. “You think I would use this information against Shane?” he asked. He didn’t sound offended, just mildly incredulous.

“I don’t know,” Yuna said quickly. “Given your rivalry, I just—”

“Mom,” Shane cut in, his voice sounding sharper now. “Ilya already knows.” He exhaled, pushing forward. “He’s known for a long time. He's the first person I came out to. He’s actually the one who helped me... figure it out.”

“Oh.”

David leaned forward slightly, curiosity overtaking everything else. “And how exactly did he do that?”

Shane’s face flushed immediately. “Well… I kind of realized I might be gay... when I... kissed Ilya…” he said, his voice dropping, “and really liked it.”

The words hung there. Shane stared down at the table, heat began to spread though his entire body. He couldn’t believe he had just said that out loud, let alone to his parents.

Yuna looked between them again. “So are you two—”

“Yes,” Shane said, before she could finish. His voice was steadier now. “I love him.”

Shane's parents froze. The silence that followed felt suffocating. It could have been a few seconds or several minutes, Shane genuinely couldn't tell. His pulse was loud in his ears, drowning out everything else.

Why weren't they saying anything? They could tell him they were disappointed. They could say they didn't approve. They could say anything. Anything would be better than this silence. What was this going to change? What would his relationship with them look like after this?

Shane suddenly felt a light tap against his foot under the table. *Ilya*. It was subtle, but it pulled Shane back just enough to breathe. A quiet reminder: *You are not alone in this.*

"I'm sorry. I know this is a lot at once. But… can someone *please* say something?" Shane asked, the edge of pleading slipping into his voice despite his effort to keep it steady.

His parents' frozen expressions softened almost immediately.

"Oh— sorry, honey," Yuna said gently. "I think we're just… surprised."

Shane crossed his arms over his chest, fingers curling into his sleeves as if he could hold himself together. He leaned back slightly into his chair, trying to make himself smaller.

"I think we both… suspected… that you might be… gay." Yuna continued.

Shane blinked. "You did?"

"I mean we thought it might be a possibility."

"I had no idea you thought that."

"We know you pretty well, Shane," Yuna said, offering him a small smile.

"But what we didn't expect was Ilya," David said, shifting his attention toward him. Slightly embarrassed David said, "You've always had such a reputation as a, you know, a ladies' man."

"Is not untrue," Ilya said. "I am bisexual."

"Oh." Yuna's brows lifted slightly, and she and David exchanged a quick, uncertain glance.

"I have been with many women," Ilya said, calm and composed. "That was not… fake." He paused, then looked at Shane. Shane felt his breath catch, like the moment stretched just for them. "But I have only ever been in love with one person."

And suddenly Ilya looked very blurry through Shane's eyes. Shane swallowed down the urge to cry, and said, "Me too. Just one."

His parents let them have a moment, but because Shane knew his mother couldn't help herself, she eventually asked, "So… when did this happen?" She leaned forward slightly. "You said you were friends. When did it become more?"

“Wait,” David added, thinking back. “Was it the All-Star Game? You two had so much chemistry.”

Shane let out an overwhelmed breath. “Uh, no. It was… It was before that.”

“So when?” Yuna pressed gently.

Shane hesitated, then ran a hand along his face. “So when I said we’ve been friends since the CCM commercial… that wasn’t entirely true,” he admitted. Both of his parents went still again, readying themselves for what they were about to hear. “We’ve never really been *just* friends.”

Yuna’s eyes widened slightly. “So you’ve been in love since before your rookie season?”

“No!” Shane said quickly.

“God, no,” Ilya said at the same time.

“But then...” Yuna started. “Oh,” she said. And blushed. “I see.”

Chapter End Notes

> For Shane’s parents who know him so well that they even suspected he was gay, the line “You didn’t ever let him win, did you, Shane?” never made any sense to me, and I refuse to acknowledge it.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane and Ilya spent the rest of dinner walking his parents through their relationship, carefully and selectively, leaving out anything too intimate.

It was still awkward and intense, but underneath it all, there was something else too, relief.

They finished dinner rather quickly, trying to occupy themselves with food during the awkward moments of silence. Shane and Ilya cleared the table together in quiet coordination, then they followed Yuna and David into the living room, where his parents were already seated side by side on one end of the L-shaped couch.

Shane and Ilya sat close on the opposite end. Too close, maybe. Their shoulders brushed and their knees touched. It felt natural and instinctive, especially in the confines of Shane's home.

When Shane looked up, he immediately noticed his parents watching them. He felt tense under their gaze, so he quickly shifted a little further down the couch, creating space between himself and Ilya.

He glanced back up and caught his mother quickly brushing a tear from her cheek.

His stomach dropped. His gaze flicked to his father, who was now watching Yuna with quiet concern. And suddenly, the relief from earlier disappeared.

Is this how it's going to be now? Every time I sit close to him… she cries? The thought lodged itself deep in his mind. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped loosely together as he stared at the floor.

"Mom," he started, "I need you to know… I really *did* try." The words felt clumsy, but he couldn't stop them. "I tried really hard," he continued. "But I just— I can't help it." His throat burned.

"Oh—" Yuna started.

"And I'm really sorry," Shane said, the words rushing out now, his voice cracking slightly. Tears began to blur his vision.

"Oh, Shane—" Yuna was beside him before he even registered her moving. She sat close, one hand immediately reaching for his hand. Shane was still not able to meet her eyes.

"You have nothing—*nothing*—to apologize for," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Your dad and I… we are so, so proud of you. And there is nothing you could ever do that would change that."

Her thumb gently brushed his knuckles.

David had moved closer too. Ilya instinctively shifted, ready to give them space, but David reached out and rested a firm, reassuring hand on his shoulder, keeping him there. Then David crouched down in front of Shane, placing a hand on his knee.

“Shane,” he said, his voice calm but firm, “we love you unconditionally.” He held his gaze.

“And even if our love for you was conditional,” he added softly, “this would not be one of the conditions.”

Shane believed him, he really did, but the image of his mother wiping away tears wouldn’t leave his mind. *He* had made her cry. And he hated himself for that.

“Then… why was mom crying?” Shane asked, his voice small despite himself. He felt like a kid again.

Yuna’s expression softened even more.

“I was crying because I’m sad I didn’t get to see you fall in love.” Her voice wavered. “And I’m sorry that I made you feel like you couldn’t tell me.”

That broke something open in him. Shane finally looked up at her, tears spilling freely now.

“I’m sorry too, Shane,” David said quietly. “Please forgive us.”

For a second, Shane just stared at them. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around it. His parents were apologizing to *him*. After everything, after all the years he had kept this from them, all the half-truths and deflections… they were the ones saying sorry. It didn’t feel fair. But then, just as quickly, Shane realized that this wasn’t about keeping score. It wasn’t about who owed who more. They needed this, they needed to say it out loud, just like he had. And maybe this moment wasn’t about blame at all. Maybe it was just about meeting each other in the middle.

Shane let out a shaky breath, some of the tension draining away. “I forgive you,” he said.

The relief on their faces was immediate. “Thank you,” Yuna whispered, pulling him into a tight hug. David stood and pressed a kiss to the top of Shane’s head, something he hadn’t done in years.

Then David turned to Ilya. He gave him a firm pat on the shoulder, followed by a small nod, it was simple and meaningful. It felt like an acceptance.

Yuna, still half-wrapped around Shane, leaned slightly and reached past him to take Ilya’s hand, squeezing it gently. When she pulled back, she gave them both a warm smile.

Shane turned to look at Ilya. He was already looking at him, with the softest eyes, filled with tears that did not spill, holding everything in.

Only then did Shane realize that his hand was wrapped tightly around Ilya's wrist. He must have reached for him at some point, instinctively, without thinking. Needing something solid to hold on to. Needing *him*.

He loosened his grip, and slid his hand further down until his fingers were intertwined with Ilya's. His thumb began tracing slow, absent circles against Ilya's skin.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Shane whispered.

"Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu," Ilya whispered back.

"This is great vodka," David said, taking another sip from his glass. Once the emotions had calmed down a little, they'd opened the bottle Ilya had brought. Everyone but Shane had a drink in hand.

"It really is," Yuna added.

"I'm glad you like it," Ilya said.

"I don't think I can ever go back to the non-Russian stuff," David continued, clearly pleased. "I'll have to find somewhere that sells this."

Ilya shook his head lightly. "You won't find this in North America. Believe me, I have tried. I get mine shipped from Russia."

He hesitated, then added, a little more carefully, "I can bring you some. If you would like." Then trying to correct himself so as to not come off too strong, he added, "If that's okay."

David smiled. "Deal."

Ilya's expression brightened in a way Shane didn't think he'd ever seen before, not on the ice, not in interviews. It was softer, almost boyish. He looked genuinely pleased to be bonding with Shane's dad over something that had nothing to do with hockey, or Shane.

At some point, Shane had drifted closer to Ilya. Now his hand rested on Ilya's thigh, his body leaning into him without thinking. Ilya's arm had come up around his shoulders, holding him there easily. It should have felt strange, sitting like this in front of other people, in front of his parents. It should have made him nervous, self-conscious, on edge, but it didn't. It just felt peaceful.

Shane glanced over at his mom. Yuna was watching them, one hand raised, fingers tapping lightly against her lips. Shane knew that look. Maybe he should have warned Ilya about it earlier. He braced himself.

"All right," she said, straightening slightly. "So what's the plan?"

There it was.

“Plan?” Ilya echoed.

“Yes, plan,” Yuna said, already in motion, already organizing. “Do you want to come out publicly? Or maybe just to your teams first? There are a lot of possibilities here, brand deals, media strategy—”

“Mom,” Shane cut in gently, “can we slow down a little? We’re not ready to come out,” he continued. “Not right now, and especially not when Ilya still only has a Russian passport.”

Shane saw the immediate shift in both of his parents’ faces as the realization sank in. This wasn’t just about hockey, or image, or timing. It was about safety. They hadn’t fully considered what it meant for Ilya to be bisexual, or how much more dangerous things could become for him because of his relationship with Shane. They hadn’t realized just how much risk Ilya was taking simply by being with him.

“We just want a future together,” Ilya added.

“Maybe once we retire,” Shane said, “and we’re no longer in the spotlight as much… then it won’t be such a big deal.”

“That’s a long time from now,” Yuna pointed out, her tone was sympathetic. “You two could be playing for another fifteen years.”

“We know,” Shane said. He exhaled, his fingers pressing slightly into Ilya’s leg without realizing it. “It’s already hard enough being in different cities most of the year. Maybe it was manageable before, when things were… less serious, but now… one week apart and I could not breathe properly until I saw him again.”

Shane had no idea he was saying these words before he said them. He hadn’t even told Ilya this, but he felt like those words needed to be heard.

“I have been thinking,” Ilya said after a silent moment, drawing everyone’s attention. “I am a free agent after next season.”

Shane turned to him, surprised. “You’d leave Boston?”

“I have been considering it,” Ilya said. “Maybe… a Canadian team.”

“Holy shit. Really?”

“I would like to be closer to you.”

Shane's mind was already going somewhere he’d tried not to let it go before. He had pictured Ilya actually living with him, coming home after games and knowing he’d still be there in the morning, waking up beside him, spending slow afternoons together when neither of them had anywhere to be. Building something together instead of just a few fleeting moments. It was such a simple thing, really, but Shane had wanted it for so long that the thought of actually having it felt almost unreal.

It felt dangerously close to hope. He wanted that. God, he wanted that more than anything.

Yuna looked between them, her expression turning more serious now. “You would really leave Boston for Shane?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, without hesitation. Not even a second of doubt.

Shane’s heart suddenly felt so full it almost hurt.

Yuna frowned, as if she couldn’t believe anything he was saying was real.

“Oh my god, mom!” Shane exclaimed. “You’re bothered by his lack of loyalty to his team!”

“Well!” Yuna said defensively, as if that were a perfectly reasonable concern. “Loyalty is important.”

“He’s trying to be loyal to *me*,” Shane shot back, then turned to Ilya. “My mom cares about hockey a little too much.”

Ilya snorted. “Now I know where you get it from.”

Yuna shot Shane a look, but it lacked any real bite this time. Then, just as quickly, she pivoted, like she always did, back into problem-solving mode. “Okay,” she said, recovering. “So where would you go?”

Ilya leaned back slightly, considering it for a moment. “Not Montreal,” he said. “They could not afford both Shane and me.”

That much was obvious. Shane nodded faintly, already running through numbers in his head without even meaning to. Although that didn’t stop him from picturing what it would be like to play on the same team as Ilya.

“What about Ottawa?” David suggested.

Yuna made a face. “Honey. I know Ottawa is still your team, but be serious, they’re not exactly cup contenders.”

“Actually…” Shane said slowly, something clicking into place. “That might be a good idea.” He could see it forming the more he thought about it. “They need a star center, and they’re nowhere near their salary cap.”

Ilya turned toward him. “Is it close to you?”

“Two-hour drive from Montreal,” Shane said. “Way closer than Boston.” *Close enough to not feel like distance all the time*, he thought.

Ilya held his gaze for a second, like that was the only detail he needed. He then nodded once. “Okay. Then I go to Ottawa.”

Shane blinked, a small, disbelieving laugh escaping him. Ilya's certainty of it surprised him. The way he said it like it was already decided.

Yuna blinked too, clearly thrown. "Just like that? You don't want to think about it more?"

Ilya shrugged lightly. "If Shane says it is a good idea, then it is a good idea."

"It won't be easy, you know." Yuna warned. "You'd have to help rebuild that team."

"I rebuilt Boston, I can do it again." Ilya said simply.

"You'll miss winning," she pressed.

Ilya didn't answer right away. Instead, he looked at Shane. Then he tightened his arm slightly around Shane's shoulders, pulling him just a little closer. He then turned back to look at Yuna.

"I would rather miss winning, than miss Shane."

Shane's heart gave a little flip.

He turned back to Yuna, who was watching them with an expression that could only be described as fond.

"Okay," Yuna said, already shifting into something more practical. "I can talk to Farah. Tell her to ask around in Ottawa, see what we can expect."

Ilya glanced at Shane, confusion flickering across his face.

"Farah is my agent," Shane explained.

"Ilya, it might be better not to have your own agent ask around right now," Yuna added. "We don't want to tip off the Raiders that you won't be re-signing with them."

Ilya nodded slowly, processing that.

"Actually… I think I need to change my agent," he said after a moment. "He is Russian. And when I choose to come out, or… if something happens before that, I do not want him to get in trouble with the Russian government. His family is still there."

The reality of Ilya's words hit Shane hard, like a weight dropping into his stomach. He knew this, of course, he'd thought about it before, but hearing Ilya say it out loud, so plainly, made it feel a lot more real.

"That makes sense," Yuna said gently. "We can set up a meeting with Farah in the off-season. See if she'll take you on as a client."

Ilya nodded.

“And speaking of making sure nothing comes out before you’re both ready,” Yuna continued, “who else knows? Anyone we need to have sign an NDA?”

Shane huffed out a small breath, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ilya’s best friend, Svetlana, knows. And so does Marlow. Oh, and Rose knows I’m gay.”

“I’m sorry, can we go back over that? Did you just say Cliff Marlow knows about you two?”

“Yeah.”

“How did that happen?”

Shane felt Ilya tense slightly beside him, not in a way anyone else would notice, but Shane definitely did.

His mind immediately started turning, trying to anticipate, trying to protect. He didn’t know how much of that night Ilya would want to share. How much he’d be comfortable saying out loud, especially here, in front of Shane’s parents. There were parts of it that still felt raw and vulnerable. Shane considered stepping in and answering, skimming over the details before anything too personal surfaced.

But then Ilya spoke first.

“When I got the call about my father, it was after Boston - Montreal game,” he said. “I was still in the locker room. The news was… difficult to hear.”

Shane felt his throat tighten again, just hearing it.

“I do not remember what happened right after,” Ilya continued. “like everything went dark. Until I heard Shane’s voice.”

Shane’s fingers curled slightly against his own knee.

“He was standing in front of me, in the Raiders’ locker room,” Ilya said. “He came to take care of me.”

Yuna’s expression softened immediately.

“And then he took me home,” Ilya added. “But Marlow, he is a good friend, he did not want to let me leave with the captain of the Metros by myself. So he came too. And… it became too obvious. So we told him.”

“Ilya, honey, I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Yuna said softly. “I’m glad Shane was there for you.”

Ilya gave a small nod.

Then Yuna turned to Shane, her tone sharpening just slightly. “Shane, did you really walk into the Raiders’ locker room?”

“Yes, he did, he was very brave.” Ilya added immediately, a hint of pride slipping into his voice. “He pushed his way in and started giving my players orders. And they listened to him!”

Shane groaned softly. “Okay, that’s not—”

“Is true,” Ilya continued, amused now. “But I guess it shouldn’t be surprising, their captain listens to Shane’s orders too.”

“I don’t give you orders,” Shane muttered.

Ilya turned his head slightly, one eyebrow lifting. “No? Then you think I just stopped smoking for no reason at all?”

“That was a suggestion.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “A suggestion I listen to.”

“And the Raiders?” Yuna asked, pulling the conversation back on track. “What do they know?”

“We told them we’re friends,” Shane said. “And I think Marlow helped sell that.”

Yuna nodded, then turned to Ilya. “And your team is fine with that? Being friends with Shane?”

“They are… surprised,” Ilya admitted. “But no one actually hates Shane. Not like how the Metros hate me. So it is acceptable.”

That sounded about right.

“What about Marlow?” Yuna pressed. “Is he good about all this?”

Shane let out a small breath, thinking back to the car ride, to the easy way Marlow had talked to him, like he was talking to a friend he had known for years, like none of this was strange or wrong.

“Yeah,” he said. “He’s been great. He’s a really good friend to Ilya. And he was… really good to me too.” He paused, then added, slightly embarrassed about the next part, “He helped calm me down when I was kind of spiraling about talking to Hayden and J.J.”

“I actually sort of had to tell the whole team we’re friends,” he added. “I ran out of the locker room when I heard about Ilya. Hard to explain that one away.”

Yuna nodded slowly, already thinking ahead again. “You know, you can use that,” she said. “Change the narrative. Your teams know you’re friends, let the rest of the league catch up gradually. You don’t need to start tomorrow, or even next month. But build it over time. That gives you space to be seen together without raising alarms.”

Shane considered it. “I guess that could work. But I think first I’ll need to convince my team that Ilya and I are actually friends. I think they’re having a hard time wrapping their minds around it.”

“Do you think you’ll tell Hayden or J.J. about you and Ilya?” Yuna asked.

Shane leaned forward, elbows on his knees, staring down at the floor. “I think Hayden already knows,” he admitted. “Or… suspects.” His heartbeat began to quicken, remembering that look Hayden had given him.

“I didn’t confirm anything. I wanted to tell you guys first.” He exhaled slowly. “I want to tell them. I do. I just…” He hesitated. “I’m worried they won’t be okay with Ilya.”

“They hate me,” Ilya added smugly.

“Oh, that’s ridiculous,” Yuna said immediately. “I mean, I hated Ilya too—” she paused, then glanced at him, “—sorry, Ilya.”

Ilya let out a small laugh, looking very much unoffended, like he’d been expecting something like that.

“But all it took was one dinner,” Yuna continued, “and now I like him.”

Ilya blinked, clearly caught off guard. “You… like me now?” he asked, like he wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard her right.

“Yes, Ilya. I do.” Yuna said, more certain this time.

“For the record, I never hated you.” David added, leaning back into his seat.

Ilya huffed out another laugh, this one a little fuller, the tension in his shoulders easing as he dipped his head in acknowledgment.

Shane found himself watching Ilya instead of his parents. He caught the exact moment it registered, there was a shift in his expression, subtle happiness taking over him, like he’d just checked off something important. It was obvious this mattered more than he’d let on.

“Maybe they just need to meet Ilya as your boyfriend,” Yuna said.

“Maybe,” Shane echoed.

But even as he said it, his thoughts were already spiraling again. He could tell Hayden and J.J. But Hayden knowing meant Jackie would know. And if Jackie knew… A week ago, no one knew. Now it was his parents. Svetlana. Marlow. Maybe Hayden. Maybe J.J. And maybe Jackie soon.

It felt like something slipping through his fingers, something he’d held onto so tightly for so long that he didn’t know how to exist without gripping it. His breathing turned shallow before he even noticed.

“Shane?”

Ilya’s voice cut through everything. A hand came up to the back of his neck, warm and steady.

“Shane,” Ilya said softly. “Where did you go? Come back to me.”

Shane let out a weak breath.

“Sorry,” he murmured, keeping his gaze down, not able to look into Ilya’s eyes. “I just— I think it hit me how many people know. About us.” He shook his head slightly. “I know it sounds stupid. It’s, like, four people. But…”

But it didn’t feel small. It felt like the beginning of something he couldn’t control.

“It does not sound stupid,” Ilya said immediately. “Four people is a big number when a few days ago it was zero.”

Shane swallowed.

“But these four people,” Ilya continued, gentler now, “Shane they all want the best for you. And they all love you.”

“Even Marlow?” Shane asked, trying to joke, but his voice still came out thin.

Ilya didn’t miss a beat.

“I think Marlow loves you the most,” he said.

That pulled a small, reluctant smile out of Shane. He finally looked up at Ilya. “Oh, really?”

“Yes. He spent the entire plane ride here asking me about you. Very annoying. He wanted to know *everything*. Like he had a crush on you.”

He knew exactly what Ilya was doing, trying to say something ridiculous to get him out of his head. He saw right through it, but it was working.

Shane huffed softly. “And what did you tell him?”

“I told him he cannot steal my boyfriend.”

That did it. Shane let out a real laugh this time, already feeling lighter.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Ilya squeezed the back of his neck once.

“We are good,” Ilya said. “We are okay.”

And Shane truly believed it.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. Conversation drifted into easier territory. There were small laughs, a few lingering looks, moments where everything still felt a little surreal, but good. By the time they found themselves at the door, it all felt settled.

Yuna and David gathered their things and were getting ready to leave. Shoes slipped on, coats adjusted, small movements that felt heavier tonight. They lingered, of course they did.

Yuna pulled Shane into a tight hug first, holding onto him a few seconds longer than usual, and Shane melted into it, his arms wrapping around her instinctively.

“I’m so proud of you,” she murmured into his shoulder. “And I love you”.

Shane swallowed, blinking hard. “I love you too,” he whispered back.

David followed with his own, his hug was just as firm. He squeezed Shane’s shoulder when they pulled apart. “We're always proud of you, Shane.”

Then David turned to Ilya and extended his hand.

“It was great meeting you, Ilya,” he said. “And thank you again for the vodka. But I doubt it’ll last very long, so you’ll need to visit us in Ottawa soon and bring me another bottle.”

Ilya smiled. “Of course, I will visit as soon as I can,” he said.

Then Yuna stepped forward. Ilya looked a little unsure at first, not quite knowing what to expect, but then she pulled him into a hug just as warm and tight as the one she’d given Shane.

Shane’s heart wobbled at the sight of his mother hugging the man he loves.

“I can see how good you two are for each other, how happy you make each other,” Yuna said softly. “And that’s all I’ve ever wanted for Shane.”

Ilya nodded but didn’t respond right away.

“And thank you for trusting us,” she continued. “Shane telling us about your relationship… that’s your secret too. That means a lot to us.”

“I do trust you,” Ilya said, hesitating before continuing, as though he were working up the courage to say something he wasn’t used to putting into words.

“And… I also want to thank you,” he said, more carefully now. “You and David. For letting me come out to you. I didn’t get the chance to come out to my mother, and it was never an option with my father. So… this means a lot to me.”

Yuna’s expression softened completely, and tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, Ilya,” she said, and pulled him back into another hug, tighter this time. “It means a lot to us too.” She just held him there and Shane watched as Ilya melted into the hug. “Thank you for trusting us,” she added, her voice so warm and motherly.

When Yuna pulled back, David stepped in again, resting a hand briefly on Ilya’s shoulder.

“We’ll be at the game tomorrow,” he said. “Just know we’ll be cheering for both you and Shane.”

Yuna nodded her head, agreeing with what her husband was saying.

“Yuna will probably be wearing blue,” David added, “but I’ll wear black for you.”

“Dad, the Raiders are wearing white tomorrow.” Shane said, unable to help himself.

“Okay,” he said, nodding once. “Then white it is.”

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh. “Then maybe I score a hat-trick tomorrow,” he said with a playful glint in his eyes. “One goal for every Hollander.”

"Not happening, Rozanov." Shane said.

“We will see.”

As Shane stood there, between his parents and Ilya, the door still open, the night stretching out ahead of them, he felt something finally fall into place. Finally, it didn’t feel like two separate parts of his life, it felt like one.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all already know the drill. You notice a typo, you tell me!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

An Ilya POV chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya woke slowly, not to a sound, but to warmth. For a moment, he didn't move, he didn't open his eyes, he just existed there, feeling surrounded by something warm, steady, and real.

Then he felt it. *Shane.* He was half draped over him, his head resting on Ilya's chest, on top of his heart, like it belonged there. Like it had always belonged there.

Ilya opened his eyes.

Sunlight spilled across the bed in thin, golden streaks, catching in Shane's hair, tracing over the freckles scattered across his nose and cheeks. They looked brighter like this. Ilya could spend hours counting them one by one, and when he was done, he'd start his count again.

Ilya didn't move, he didn't dare to move. One arm was wrapped loosely around Shane's back, the other resting along his own stomach. He could feel Shane's slow breathing, the steady rise and fall of his chest, the weight of his body against him. Ilya thought, distantly, that he could stay like this forever. If it meant Shane stayed comfortable, if it meant Shane stayed here, he would not move again.

His gaze traced over Shane's face, the curve of his cheek, the faint crease between his brows even in sleep, the way his lips parted just slightly as he breathed. He tried to memorize it, every little detail, because this still didn't feel entirely real.

Last night felt like something out of a life Ilya had never thought he'd have. Sitting at a table, being welcomed, being seen. Not as Rozanov, or a rival, or a headline. Just Ilya. Shane's boyfriend. The thought still felt almost unreal, and yet there had been nothing uncertain about it. The way Shane's parents had looked at him, spoken to him, made space for him. It felt like if he wasn't already, he would be welcomed into Shane's family. And that was more warmth, more acceptance, and more family than Ilya had experienced in years. Maybe ever.

And now this, waking up with Shane in his arms.

Carefully, and slowly, Ilya tilted his head down and pressed a soft kiss to Shane's hair, then he pressed another that was just a second longer, before he breathed in. He nuzzled Shane's dark, glossy hair. It smelled like expensive shampoo. Ilya huffed quietly against him, taking in another breath.

“Are you sniffing me?”

Shane’s voice was rough with sleep, muffled slightly where his face was still pressed against Ilya’s chest.

“Yes,” he said, voice low and entirely unapologetic. “You smell so good.”

He leaned in again, exaggerated this time, drawing in another breath. Shane made a soft, sleepy sound. “Mmm.” He moved up closer, tucking himself deeper into the crook of Ilya’s neck like it was instinct, like it was exactly where he was meant to be.

Ilya’s hand moved automatically, fingers sliding into Shane’s hair, brushing through it gently.

For a few minutes, nothing existed outside of this bed. Then the sharp sound of an alarm shattered it. Shane groaned and pushed himself up abruptly, reaching over Ilya to fumble for his phone.

“We should get up,” he said, voice still thick with sleep. “You have to get back to your hotel.”

“No,” Ilya said immediately.

Before Shane even had time to process it, Ilya’s arm tightened around him, pulling him back down. Then Ilya shifted, rolling just enough to press Shane back into the mattress and settle on top of him. “Five more minutes,” Ilya insisted, already closing his eyes again.

Shane let out a breath that was somewhere between a laugh and a protest. “Ilya—”

Ilya leaned down, aiming for his mouth, but Shane pressed a hand to his chest stopping him just short. “Not before we brush our teeth.”

Ilya made a face. “…Mm. Fine.”

But before Shane could say anything else, Ilya dipped down anyway and stole a quick peck on Shane’s lips. Then he didn’t stop there. His lips moved across Shane’s cheek, his jaw, the corner of his mouth again, slower this time.

Shane’s breath hitched slightly beneath him. And Ilya felt it. He noticed everything.

He still couldn’t believe this was his reality, that he got to have Shane like this, touch him like this, kiss him without a second thought. He couldn’t believe that he didn’t have to hide how much he loved him.

“Tonight,” Shane said, his voice sounding a little uneven, “we play our first game against each other as boyfriends.”

“Mm,” Ilya hummed against his skin. “We will play very hard.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane huffed, annoyed and entertained at the same time. “I’m trying to be romantic.”

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at him, lips curved slightly. “And you were doing a really good job.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but there was a smile tugging at his mouth. “Your five minutes are up,” he said, pushing at Ilya’s shoulder.

Reluctantly, Ilya let himself be moved, rolling off just enough for Shane to slip out from under him. Ilya stayed where he was on the bed, watching Shane move. Shane stretched slightly as he stood, then dragged a hand through his hair, still half-asleep as he made his way toward the bathroom. Ilya’s gaze followed him, completely unhidden.

At the doorway, Shane paused and glanced back. “You gonna join me in the shower, or just keep staring?” he said, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

Ilya didn’t even pretend to hesitate, he was out of bed in a second, crossing the room.

They brushed their teeth side by side, bumping shoulders now and then and catching each other’s smiles in the mirror. The shower was the same, warm water, shared space, little touches, and quiet laughter. There was no rush, they just enjoyed being together, comfortable enough to let the morning go slowly.

By the time they stepped out and got dressed, they both felt lighter somehow.

Ilya moved to the kitchen, slipping into motion like he belonged there, like he had done this a hundred times before. He worked carefully, poaching eggs and slicing fruit. Behind him, Shane blended protein smoothies, the low hum of the machine filling the space, then moved on to coffee. They moved around each other without thinking, an easy rhythm that didn’t need to be learned. Neither of them could stop smiling.

Later, as they stood by the door, neither one of them wanted to reach for it. Time stretched thin, like if they moved too quickly, it would snap.

“You’ll come back here tonight after the game, right?” Shane asked.

“Of course,” Ilya said, like there was never another option.

“How are you feeling about being back on the ice tonight?”

Ilya’s mouth curved slightly. “Excited to humiliate Metros in their own home.”

Shane rolled his eyes immediately. “Fuck off, Rozanov. I’m serious.”

The smile faded just a little and Ilya looked away, the change was subtle but easy for Shane to pick up on. He took a few seconds to steady himself.

“I…” he started, his voice quieter now. “I feel a little…” He trailed off, unable to finish his thought.

“Nervous?” Shane offered gently.

Ilya shook his head. “Embarrassed.”

Shane frowned slightly. “Embarrassed? Ilya, why would you feel embarrassed?”

Ilya exhaled slowly, his gaze dropping to the floor.

“The last time I was in a locker room with my team… was when I got the call about my father.” He paused for a second, taking a breath in. “I looked weak in front of them,” he added. “I *was* weak in front of them.”

Shane stepped closer instinctively, though there was barely any space between them already. “Ilya,” he said firmly, “you were not weak. And you did not look weak.”

Ilya didn’t respond, his gaze still fixed somewhere below Shane’s shoulder, but Shane knew he was listening to every word. So, Shane kept going.

“You lost your father,” he said, softer now but no less certain. “No one expects you to hold it together. Most people don’t.”

“Most people don’t have breakdowns when their fathers die,” Ilya muttered, still not looking up.

“How do you know they don’t?” Shane asked. Then, more pointedly, he added, “Most people don’t get that phone call in front of their entire fucking team.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened.

“Ilya, you’re the strongest person I know,” Shane continued. “I’ve known you since we were seventeen, and you still manage to surprise me with how strong you are.”

Then, Shane grabbed his hands and began to draw circles with his thumbs.

“You moved across the world on your own, to a country where you didn’t even fully speak the language of when you were just a teenager. And, you’ve been taking care of your entire family since you were eighteen. And, you led your team to a Stanley Cup at twenty-three.”

His voice didn’t waver.

“And yesterday,” Shane added, a little lighter now, “you faced Yuna Hollander… and held your ground.”

Ilya let out a quiet breath that almost passed for a laugh. It caught him off guard, how easily Shane could do that, how he could pull him out of something heavy without dismissing it, make it feel survivable.

“Does any of that sound weak to you?” Shane asked.

That made Ilya finally look up, and their eyes met.

“You are Ilya *fucking* Rozanov. Don’t ever forget that.”

Ilya felt like the ground beneath him had tilted. He tried to search for something to say, something familiar he could fall back on. A joke, a sharp comment, anything to steady himself. But nothing came. All he could think about were Shane's words, the way he said them, the certainty in his voice, the warmth in his eyes.

So instead, Ilya leaned forward and kissed him, hard and hungry, like he needed Shane's lips to breathe. Shane let out a soft moan, his hands coming up instinctively, gripping onto him just as tightly.

When they finally pulled apart, Ilya didn't go far. He stayed close, forehead nearly brushing Shane's, breath still uneven.

"I love you, Shane."

"I love you too, Ilya."

They stayed like that for a minute longer, holding onto each other. Then, reluctantly, Ilya pulled back just enough to leave. "I'll see you after the game," he said.

Shane nodded, a soft, understanding smile on his face.

Ilya lingered, not wanting to let the moment end, then turned and walked out.

Ilya made it back to the hotel just in time to change for morning skate. The room was already occupied, Marlow stood by his bed, half-dressed, pulling a shirt over his head, with his gear spread out in an organized mess across the bed.

Ilya usually roomed with Connors on the road, but now, with what Marlow knows, this was easier. With Marlow, there were no questions he didn't want to answer. There was no need to lie or come up with something believable.

Marlow glanced over as Ilya stepped inside, taking him in with a quick, assessing look. "So how are the future in-laws?" he said, tugging at his sleeve. There was humor in his voice, but not entirely. There was something genuine behind his question.

Ilya paused for half a second, then gave him a look. "Yuna and David are good," he said simply.

Marlow's mouth twitched immediately, amusement flashing across his face. "Yuna and David," he repeated, clearly entertained by the use of first names.

Ilya ignored him, moving to grab his bag.

"And how's Shane?"

Ilya glanced up sharply. “Oh, he’s Shane to you now?” he said with one eyebrow lifting slightly.

“Yes,” Marlow said easily. “He’s my best friend’s boyfriend. So he’s Shane to me.”

Ilya looked at him longer than necessary, his mouth twitched a bit, then he looked away, reaching for his gear.

Marlow watched him, then when he hadn't received an answer from Ilya, he added, “Seriously, man. How is he?”

“He’s good,” Ilya said, and this time there was no hiding it. A small smile pulled at his mouth before he could stop it. “Really good. He came out to his parents, and he told them about us.”

Marlow turned toward him fully now. “And they’re okay with you? They were supportive, right?”

“Yes. They were surprised at first,” Ilya admitted. “But then they were supportive.”

Marlow let out a breath, nodding. “Good,” he said. “Good. I’m glad.” He turned back to his bag, his shoulders relaxing, like that answer had mattered more than he’d let on.

Ilya started getting ready as well, pulling on his base layers. After a moment, he spoke again.

“Shane told me you helped him,” he said, looking up at Marlow. “When he was nervous about talking to his team.” Ilya adjusted his sleeve, then added, “Thank you. For being there for him when I couldn’t be.”

Marlow huffed softly, shaking his head. “Roz, don’t mention it, I’m just glad I could help.” He hesitated briefly, then added, sounding a little embarrassed, “Honestly, I felt responsible for like half of the stress he was feeling. Pretty sure you guys didn’t plan on coming out to me and Svetlana that night.”

Ilya let out a quiet breath. “No, we didn’t. But it was good, I’m glad you know.”

Marlow looked at him then, something more serious in his expression. “Thank you for trusting me,” he said.

Ilya met his gaze, then nodded once, a faint smile returning before he looked back down at what he was doing.

The room fell quiet again as they went back to getting ready.

“So,” Marlow said after a few minutes of silence, trying a little too hard to sound casual, “how’s Svetlana?”

Ilya didn’t even look up. “No.”

“What?” Marlow asked innocently.

“I know that tone,” Ilya said flatly. “No.”

“I just asked how she’s doing,” Marlow protested, though there was already a hint of a grin creeping in.

“Sure you did.”

Marlow scoffed, shaking his head. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. “Can’t even ask about a friend anymore.”

Ilya finally glanced over at him, and gave him an unimpressed look.

Marlow grinned back innocently.

Ilya was crouched low on the ice, stretching, his stick resting loosely in his hands. His body moved through the motions automatically, muscle memory taking over, but his attention was elsewhere. He kept glancing toward the Metros’ family section.

It was still early, too early, really. Nearly forty five minutes before puck drop. The stands were only just beginning to fill, scattered with early arrivals and arena staff moving through the aisles. Still, Ilya glanced over. Again. And again.

Then, after a few minutes, Yuna and David appeared.

Ilya stilled, just for a second, something in his chest tightening before he could even place it. His eyes locked onto them immediately, caught on the unfamiliar comfort of seeing familiar faces in a place that had never been that for him.

David was dressed simply in a white sweater and black pants. To anyone else, it would’ve looked neutral and unremarkable, but Ilya knew. David was wearing the Boston colors. And he was wearing them just for him. Just like he promised.

His throat went a little dry.

Beside David, Yuna wore a dark blue top, Montreal colors, but she had told him she would be cheering for him too. And that meant just as much to him.

As they reached their seats, both of them looked down toward the ice. Towards Ilya.

Yuna gave him a small, warm smile. David followed with a subtle nod, letting him know they were there for him as much as they were there for Shane.

Suddenly, Ilya felt it hit him all at once. He had never had this before. In all his years in the NHL, he’d never had a parent sit in the stands just for him. Svetlana had been the only person to come to his games for him, and even then, only when she wasn’t busy.

And now, there were two more. Two people sitting in the stands, watching him, supporting him. Absurdly, it was twice as many people as he was used to, and somehow, it felt like everything.

For a fleeting second, he thought maybe he should feel something sharper like jealousy, resentment, or something bitter at what he'd never had, but the feelings didn't come. Instead, he just felt happy. Happy that Shane had grown up with this, with people like them. Happy that Shane had chosen to share it with him, that he had been let into something so sacred, and so meaningful.

Ilya let a small smile slip onto his face before he could stop it. Then he turned his head quickly, dropping his gaze back to the ice. He couldn't let anyone see that, not his teammates, not the media, not anyone who might start asking questions about why Ilya Rozanov was smiling at his rival's parents like that.

Also, so that no one could see how his eyes had gone suspiciously bright.

He bent forward again, stretching deeper this time, focusing on the pull in his muscles, the scrape of his skates against the ice, anything to steady himself. Though it didn't work very well.

A shadow fell into his peripheral vision. Ilya didn't need to look up to know who it was. Shane had skated up slower than usual, more careful, like he was trying not to draw attention.

Of course Shane noticed. He always noticed. Ilya could hide from the world, from coaches, teammates, reporters, but never from Shane.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked quietly, voice low enough that it wouldn't carry.

Ilya kept his head down, adjusting his stance like nothing was out of place. "Fine," he said quickly. It wasn't convincing, not even a little, but Shane thankfully didn't call him out on it.

"We're still on for tonight?" Shane asked, eyes forward, like they were just two players talking about nothing.

"Of course," Ilya said.

"You can use the front door. Code is 1919. Just let yourself in."

Ilya's lips twitched slightly. "Front door? I thought you prefer the backdoor."

"Fuck you."

Ilya let out a quiet breath of a laugh.

"Later."

Chapter End Notes

Y'all know what's coming next chapter...

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all for the love! I hope you're enjoying reading this fic as much as I am enjoying writing it :)
>
> Also, I saw someone had made a whole tiktok video talking about my fic, which like, what??? That's insane!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya Rozanov had never been happier to be on the ice than he was at that moment.

Yuna and David were somewhere up in the stands watching him, cheering for him alongside Shane, and Shane himself was only a few inches away across the face-off circle, looking over at him with that beautiful smile that somehow still managed to knock the air out of Ilya's lungs every single time.

For the first time in his life, Ilya felt like he was surrounded by people who loved him. Not just Shane, but all of the Hollanders. It was warm and comforting, and a little scary too. He'd spent so long afraid of losing the people he cared about that having something this good almost felt too good to be true.

Then the puck dropped, and Shane moved.

Ilya loved the way Shane moved on the ice. There was something so mesmerizing about it, every stride calculated, every shift of weight controlled, and yet it never looked forced. It looked easy and natural, like the game belonged to him.

Shane had won the face-off clean and took off immediately, accelerating up the ice with the puck steady on his stick. Ilya followed without thinking, just like he had done countless of times, keeping pace just behind him, trying to catch up to him, watching the way he carved through open space. Shane glanced back over his shoulder for a split second, and even in the middle of the rush, he smiled at Ilya. A smile that could melt the coldest of hearts.

That was when Ilya saw Marlow, just at the edge of his vision, skating hard to cut across the lane. Ilya recognized the setup instantly. They had practiced this exact play dozens of times. Marlow wasn't going in for a heavy hit, just a clean intercept to slow Shane down and break the momentum. It was controlled. It was routine. It was supposed to be safe. But that's not how it went.

Maybe it was the angle, maybe it was the timing, or maybe, it was just the fact that Shane had been looking back at Ilya instead of forward.

Ilya's heart stuttered in his chest, a sudden, sinking dread hitting him so fast it almost knocked the breath out of him.

The collision happened fast. One second Shane was sprinting down the ice, still in control, and the next there was the sharp sound of impact, skates clipping, bodies colliding in a way that didn't look quite right. The puck slid loose, spinning away across the ice, but Ilya barely registered it.

Because Shane went down hard. And he wasn't getting up.

It felt like Ilya's entire world stopped moving. His heart seized so violently in his chest that he wasn't even sure he was actually breathing. Everything around him blurred into meaningless noise. The crowd, the game, the whistle, none of it mattered anymore.

All that mattered was Shane. *His Shane.* And the fact that he wasn't moving.

Ilya started moving toward him slowly at first, like his body had forgotten how to function properly. His eyes stayed locked on Shane the entire time, desperately searching for any sign of movement. A twitch. A breath. Anything.

Somewhere behind him, players were shoving each other. A fight was breaking out between the teams, with voices shouting over one another as gloves hit the ice. Ilya barely noticed. The world had narrowed down to one horrifying image. Shane lying motionless against the ice.

By the time Ilya reached him, the medics were already rushing out onto the ice. He stopped just beside them, unable to go any closer, yet unable to step away. He felt frozen in place, suddenly losing control over his own body. Helpless. Completely fucking helpless.

"Shane?"

Ilya wasn't even sure if he had actually said it out loud or if the name had only existed somewhere inside his head, trapped there alongside the panic threatening to choke him.

The medics carefully rolled Shane onto his back. His eyes fluttered open for a brief second, and the beautiful brown eyes Ilya could usually lose himself in looked distant now. And full of pain. The sight of it tore through Ilya so violently it felt physical, like something inside of him was being ripped apart.

One of the medics kept talking to Shane, telling him to stay awake, to keep looking at them, while another stabilized his neck. Shane's breathing sounded wrong, shallow and uneven, and every strained breath made panic crawl higher up Ilya's throat.

Ilya wasn't sure how long he stood there watching them work on Shane. Time no longer made sense. Seconds stretched unbearably long as everything around him dissolved into noise he couldn't process. All he could see was Shane.

Shane was hurt. Shane was scared. Shane was lying on the ice while strangers held his head still and tried to keep him conscious.

The medics strapped Shane carefully onto the board before lifting him onto the gurney. Ilya watched every movement, horrified, unable to tear his eyes away. The tightening straps across Shane's chest, the way his head was secured in place, the medic walking beside him with one hand near Shane's shoulder the entire time.

Ilya wanted to run after him. He wanted to push past the medics and stand beside Shane and take his hand. He wanted to tell him it was going to be okay, even if he wasn't sure it was true. He wanted to stay close enough to hear him breathe, to make sure Shane knew he wasn't alone.

Every instinct in Ilya's body screamed at him to go with Shane. But he didn't, because he knew that's not what Shane would want. He would hate cameras catching Ilya at his side looking terrified. He would hate the speculation that would follow. He would hate what it would expose.

So Ilya stayed where he was. Forced to watch the person he loved more than anything and everything in the world disappear down the tunnel while pretending he was only watching his rival leave the ice injured.

Then suddenly, he remembered. Yuna and David. They were here and had seen it happen. They had watched their son hit the ice and not get back up. Ilya's head snapped toward the Metros' family section, but their seats were empty now.

For one terrifying second, his mind spiraled somewhere dark before logic finally caught up to him. They went after Shane. Shane's parents would be with him. Yuna would talk to him in that calm steady voice of hers, David would hold his hand. Shane wouldn't be alone, and that thought kept Ilya from completely falling apart right there on the ice.

Ilya wasn't even sure how he ended up back at the Raiders' bench. One moment he had been staring down the tunnel after Shane, then the next he was sitting there among his teammates while the referees sorted through penalties and prepared to resume the game.

Resume the game. The thought felt absurd.

What the fuck was he still doing here? His boyfriend had just been taken off the ice strapped to a fucking board, barely conscious, and Ilya was still sitting on the bench with his gloves on waiting for the puck to drop again.

Every instinct inside him screamed to leave, to rip the jersey off his body, and run straight to the hospital. Shane is more important than this game. More important than hockey. More important than anything.

And yet here he was. Still on the ice. Still expected to play.

Marlow was sitting beside him, saying something to him, maybe apologizing, maybe asking if he was okay, maybe trying to ground him, but Ilya couldn't hear a single word. All he

could hear was the sound of Shane hitting the ice. Over, and over, and over again.

Ilya wasn't sure how he made it through the rest of the game. He wasn't sure how the game ended. If they had won, if he had even played well, or played at all. Everything after Shane went down felt blurred, like he had spent the rest of the period trapped underwater while everyone else kept moving normally around him.

When the final whistle finally blew, Ilya was moving before he even fully registered it. He rushed off the ice and toward the locker room, barely aware of the people around him.

The locker room was strangely quiet. Maybe the Raiders had lost. Maybe no one felt right celebrating after what happened to Shane. Or maybe they were talking normally and Ilya simply couldn't hear any of it through the noise in his own head.

His teammates might have been speaking to him, but their voices never fully reached him. He caught fragments here and there, his own name, 'Hollander,' 'not moving,' but none of it stayed in his head long enough to process.

Panic was beginning to crawl up his spine now. It felt too close to that night in Boston, too close to the feeling that had overtaken him after the phone call about his father. That terrifying numbness where his mind shut down completely and the world around him stopped feeling real.

He remembered Shane in his locker room, steadying him, his hands warm at the back of his head, his voice cutting through the noise in a way nothing else could. The way he always seemed to know exactly how to pull Ilya back when he was slipping away from himself.

Ilya fought against that panicked feeling with everything he had. Because Shane was alive. Shane was alive, and Ilya was going to see him soon. He held onto that thought desperately, not letting his mind spiral.

He showered quickly, barely remembering doing it, then got onto the team bus and rode back to the hotel in complete silence, staring blankly out the window the entire drive. The second the bus stopped, he was off it immediately, moving faster than everyone else toward the elevators and up to his room.

He changed his clothes as quickly as he could. He pulled on black pants and a dark hoodie to hide his blond curls in and avoid attention. His hands trembled as he put on his sweatshirt. He was just reaching for the door to step out when it opened. Marlow walked into the room.

Sharing with Marlow had seemed like a smart idea earlier, easier than lying to Connors about where he disappeared to, but right now Ilya couldn't remember why he had ever thought it was a good idea.

"Roz," Marlow started immediately as the door closed behind him, his voice strained. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hit him."

Ilya stayed silent, staring down at the floor.

“I swear I thought he saw me coming.”

Still, Ilya said nothing.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Marlow said again, more desperate this time. “Please, man. It was a clean hit.”

Ilya finally looked up then. Marlow looked genuinely wrecked, guilt written all over his face, his composure hanging by a thread as tears threatened to fall. But Ilya could not stand to be in the same room with him right now, not when every time he looked at Marlow all he could see was Shane hitting the ice.

“Not now,” Ilya said. He didn’t raise his voice, he didn’t even look angry, but still, he couldn’t bring himself to look Marlow fully in the eye.

There was nothing left in him for conversation. There was no space for anything that wasn’t Shane.

Ilya pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, grabbed his jacket, and left without another word.

When Ilya walked up to the front desk of the hospital, his heart pounding so hard he felt it in his ears.

Shane was here somewhere in this building.

He approached the woman behind the desk, trying to force himself to sound calm. “Hello,” he said carefully. “I am here to see Shane Hollander.”

The woman typed something into her computer, then looked back up at him apologetically. “I’m sorry, sir. No one is allowed to visit him right now except his emergency contacts.”

“I understand.” Ilya nodded once, trying not to let the panic show on his face. “Can you maybe tell me if he is okay?”

“Again, I am sorry, but we cannot disclose that kind of information,” she said.

The answer made his stomach twist painfully. He needed to get to Shane. He needed to know if he was okay.

“His emergency contacts are Yuna and David Hollander, yes?” Ilya said quickly. “Maybe you can give me their phone numbers?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she repeated gently, “we’re not allowed to disclose personal information of emergency contacts either..”

Ilya closed his eyes briefly in frustration. How had he forgotten to ask for Yuna and David's numbers? Why hadn't he asked Shane to send them? Why had he been stupid enough to assume there would be time to do that later?

"Okay," he said after a few seconds of weighing his options, voice strained now. "Then maybe you could call them? I just need to talk to them. Please."

"That's not possible," she said. "You can check the visitor waiting area. If they aren't there, then there's nothing else I can do. Visiting hours begin at nine tomorrow morning."

Ilya nodded slowly. "Thank you." He walked away before the hospital employee could see how close he was to completely losing control.

He checked the waiting area first. Yuna and David were not there, but there were several people in Metros' team merch who could have been team staff or fans, along with a few people who looked like media personnel, waiting for any news about Shane's condition.

Ilya immediately stepped back. He could not risk sitting there, not looking the way he did.

He wandered the halls for a while after that without really knowing where he was going. The cafeteria. The elevators. Different corridors. Every option felt wrong, either too exposed, or too far away from Shane. Going back to Shane's apartment would have been safer, but Ilya couldn't leave. Shane was here and Ilya was not leaving him.

Eventually, he found a stairwell tucked away near the end of a hallway. It was quiet, empty, and seemed to have been mostly forgotten by everyone else in the hospital. He climbed a few flights up before finally sitting down heavily on the steps, leaning his head against the wall.

Nine tomorrow morning, that's when he would be able to see Shane. It was nine p.m. now. Which meant he still had twelve hours until visiting hours. Twelve hours until he could see his boyfriend.

He checked his phone, hoping Yuna or David had somehow found a way to contact him.

Nothing.

How would Yuna and David feel if they saw him here in the hospital? Would they be happy to see him? Would they be upset with him for being so selfish that he couldn't stay away? Or maybe they'd be upset he didn't try harder to get to Shane. Maybe they'd change their mind about him, think he was not worthy of their son anymore.

His thoughts were cut by his phone vibrating. It was a text message from Svetlana, asking if there were any updates on how Shane was doing. He also saw a message from Marlow that he did not bother to open. He quickly texted both of them the same thing: *Unless you have Yuna or David Hollander's numbers, do not contact me right now.*

Then he tried Shane's phone again. He had lost count of how many times he had tried to call. His phone was still off. Shane must have turned it off before the game.

Ilya swallowed the lump in his throat and lowered the phone slowly into his lap. For a moment he just sat there, staring at the dark screen as if it might suddenly give him an answer if he looked long enough.

He should be doing something. Anything. He should be calling someone who could tell him what was happening, demanding updates, forcing his way into information. But every option he could think of collided with the same problem; there was no clean way to ask without exposing what he wasn't supposed to feel so openly.

He wasn't Shane's family. He wasn't even supposed to care like this in front of the world. To everyone else, Shane was a rival, and Ilya was meant to be indifferent at best, satisfied at worst.

But none of that matched what was burning through him. So he stayed still, trapped between what the world expected of him and what every fiber of his body was screaming at him to do.

He picked his phone back up and scrolled through social media searching desperately for updates, hoping some news article revealed something about Shane's condition, but every post was just another replay of Shane hitting the ice. Different angles, slow-motion clips, analysts speculating on the severity of Shane's injuries. The sight of Shane lying motionless on the ice made Ilya feel physically sick. He shut the app immediately and tossed the phone beside him on the step, volume turned all the way up.

Then his hand found the small cross hanging beneath his sweatshirt. His mother's cross. Ilya wrapped his fingers around it tightly and began to pray.

He wasn't even sure who he was praying to, or if anyone was listening at all, but he felt helpless. And this was the only thing he could do.

His Shane, his beautiful Shane, got hurt and was lying on the ice while Ilya hovered over him unable to even hold his hand. He had failed him, and maybe this, sitting alone in a stairwell, unable to get to the person he loved most in the world, was a fair punishment for that failure.

The hours passed painfully slowly. As the night wore on, the hospital grew quieter, though Ilya wasn't sure if it was actually getting quieter or if his mind had drifted too far away to pay attention to the sounds around him.

But then he heard it.

"Rozanov."

He thought he had imagined it. The voice sounded distant, as though someone were speaking from the far end of a tunnel. Ilya frowned faintly.

"Ilya Rozanov… need Rozanov's number…"

The words were muffled and hard to make out. They didn't sound like they were being directed at him. They barely sounded real at all. He let his eyes fall shut again. But then a

shadow stopped in front of him, and a soft hand touched his shoulder.

“Ilya?”

His eyes snapped open. For a moment, Ilya genuinely thought he might be dreaming, because Yuna Hollander was standing in front of him.

“Y– Yuna?” he asked carefully, almost afraid saying her name too loud or too quick would make her disappear.

She nodded immediately. "Yes, honey. It's me."

Once he realized Yuna Hollander was really standing in front of him, relief crashed into him so hard it nearly made him dizzy. Ilya stood up too fast. “Shane,” he said quickly. “How is he?”

“He’s got a concussion and a fractured collarbone—”

“But he is okay?” Ilya interrupted, voice breaking slightly.

“Yes. Oh, yes. Shane is okay.” Yuna said immediately.

Ilya let out a shaky breath.“Thank God,” he whispered, gripping the cross again as his knees suddenly felt weak beneath him. His breathing had turned uneven without him even noticing.

Yuna’s face softened as she looked at him. “Ilya… honey, how long have you been here?”

“I don’t know, I came right after the game.”

“You’ve been sitting here for six hours?” Yuna asked with a horrified look.

Had it really only been six hours? Ilya felt like he had been waiting for days. He nodded at Yuna’s question.

“And why are you sitting here… in the stairwell?”

“This is the closest I could get to Shane,” he said simply. “Hospital would not let me see him because I’m not family. And I could not sit in waiting room because maybe reporters or Metro players would see me. Is not safe there and I did not know where else to go. So I sit here and wait.”

Yuna’s expression broke a little at that.

“Oh, Ilya, I’m so sorry. We should have exchanged numbers yesterday. I realized too late that I didn’t have yours.”

She spoke quickly after that, explaining how strict the hospital had been because Shane was high-profile, how they couldn’t add Ilya to the contact list without Shane’s consent, and how she had been trying to contact his agent for hours to get his phone number.

Ilya barely processed half the words. All that mattered was one thing.

“Yuna, can I please see Shane?”

“Of course you can,” she said immediately.

Ilya’s shoulders dropped. He hadn’t even realized how tense he’d been until then. He took a deep breath, and for the first time in hours, breathing didn’t feel like work.

“The doctor is with him right now,” Yuna added, “but she told us it would only be another thirty minutes, and then we can see him.”

Thirty minutes. That suddenly felt survivable.

“Okay,” Ilya said quietly. “I will wait here.” Then, automatically, he sat back down on the stairs to wait.

Yuna blinked at him. “Ilya, no. You can’t wait in the stairwell.”

Ilya’s stomach dropped instantly. He wasn’t sure what Yuna meant. Did she think someone could find him hiding out here? Was she expecting him to wait outside of the hospital? That *would* be safer, but that would be too far away from Shane, and right now he just couldn’t do that, not when this is the closest he’s gotten to him all night.

“Yuna, please,” he said quickly, panic slipping into his voice before he could stop it. “I can stay here. No one will see me. I promise.”

Yuna looked startled for a second before her face softened again.

“Oh, no, sweetheart,” she said gently. “I just meant you can come wait with us.”

Ilya stared at her. He was so afraid that she would ask him to leave that he didn’t completely register what she had said.

“It’ll just be you, me, and David,” she continued. “In a private waiting area. No reporters or players allowed. Just family.”

Family.

The word hit him so hard he almost couldn’t breathe.

Yuna held out her hand toward him, and Ilya took it.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry for this chapter… I actually cried while writing it.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuna led Ilya out of the stairwell, still holding his hand as she guided him through the quiet hospital corridors. The fluorescent lights cast everything in a pale, washed out glow, nurses passed by them in an efficient motion, and distant voices echoed from behind closed doors that Ilya couldn't see past.

He held tightly onto Yuna's hand, almost afraid that if he loosened his grip even slightly, he would lose his footing entirely.

The feeling was strangely familiar. It reminded him of being very young, his mother guiding him through crowded streets in Moscow, her soft hand wrapped firmly around his so that he wouldn't drift away into the noise and movement around them. Back then, he never questioned the direction, he just followed, and trusted that she would lead him safely to wherever their final destination was.

And somehow, in this moment, Yuna's hand in his felt exactly the same.

He kept looking into every passing room as they walked. Half-open doors, narrow windows, and shadows of movement that might have been nothing at all. Each one stirred that same quiet, persistent hope that maybe Shane was somewhere just beyond his sight. That if he looked hard enough, he would catch a glimpse of him.

When they finally reached the private waiting area, Ilya followed Yuna inside without a word.

David was already there, sitting in one of the chairs with his elbows braced on his knees, head buried in his hands as if he had been holding himself in place through sheer effort alone. One leg bounced slightly, restless, betraying everything he was trying not to say out loud.

"Look who I found," Yuna said as they stepped into the room.

David's head snapped up immediately. The change in his expression was instant. Whatever tension had been carved into his face broke into relief the moment he saw Ilya standing in front of him.

"Ilya," he said with a rough voice. He stood up so quickly that his chair shifted back against the wall, and crossed the room in a few steps before pulling Ilya into a hug.

And that nearly broke him.

Ilya had been hugged before by coaches, teammates, and friends. After wins, after losses, after fights and celebrations, and nights that blurred into noise and alcohol. But never like

this. Never by a father. Not even his own.

“Son, we’ve been trying to reach you.”

The word son hit him harder than he expected. His throat tightened, struggling to get a word out.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, his voice small against David’s shoulder as he held on.

“No,” David said immediately, gentler now. “That’s on us.”

“We’re just glad you’re here, Ilya,” Yuna added, stepping closer as she reached up to smooth a hand through his curls.

And that was what finally shattered the last of Ilya’s composure.

He had been holding himself together through sheer force for hours. Running on adrenaline, on fear, on the refusal to let his mind go where it wanted to go, forcing himself not to spiral, not to break apart the way he had after the call about his father.

But standing there between the Hollanders, being held without expectation, without judgment, being cared for like he belonged with them, something inside of him finally gave out.

A sob broke out of him before he could stop it. And then another.

He buried his face deeper into David’s shoulder, arms wrapping around him as if that was the only thing keeping him upright. He wasn’t trying to hide it anymore, there was no point, really. He just cried. His shoulders shaking and breath breaking apart as every ounce of fear and exhaustion he had been holding back finally collapsed all at once.

David tightened his hold, the added pressure grounding him, with one large hand moving slowly across his back in circles that didn’t ask anything of him. Yuna stayed close, her hand never leaving his head, her presence constant and warm beside him. She murmured something low and soothing, words Ilya couldn’t fully process, but he didn’t need to.

“You’re okay. Shane’s okay.” David said quietly, over and over, like a rhythm meant to pull him back.

Ilya shook his head faintly against David’s shoulder, like he didn’t believe any of it yet, like his body was still stuck in that moment on the ice where everything had gone wrong.

But neither of them let go. They held him through it anyway, until the shaking slowly began to ease, until the air in his lungs stopped feeling like it was tearing on the way in, until the world stopped tilting beneath him.

They stayed like that for a while, until Ilya’s breathing finally began to slow. David loosened his grip carefully and guided him toward the chairs in the waiting area. Ilya followed automatically, his feet moving before his mind could fully catch up with what was happening around him.

David eased him down into one of the chairs before sitting beside him, while Yuna settled into the seat on his other side. She kept one hand in his hair, while David rested his hand on Ilya's knee, pressing just enough to be steadying without being restrictive.

A few minutes passed, the room quiet except for the uneven rhythm of Ilya's breathing as he tried to steady himself.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, staring down at his hands.

Yuna's hand paused mid-stroke. Both she and David turned toward him at once, confusion flickering across their faces.

"Honey, what are you sorry for?" Yuna asked carefully.

"I failed him. I didn't do anything to help him. My team hurt him, and I just stood there." His voice cracked apart on the last word. His hands curled tightly together in his lap, knuckles pale from the force of it. He took a shaky breath.

"I failed him," he repeated again, quieter this time, as if saying it once had not been enough to empty the guilt out of him.

The memory was still replaying behind his eyes in brutal flashes. Shane smiling over his shoulder, the hit, the sound of his body hitting the ice, Shane not moving, and Ilya doing absolutely fucking nothing.

"I should have stopped Marlow. I should have made it to him faster. I should have—" His breath caught abruptly.

"Ilya, you did everything right." Yuna said gently.

"No. No— he needed me. He needed me and I just froze." He swallowed hard, jaw tightening as he forced it out anyway. "It was like when I— when I found my mother."

He hadn't planned to say it. He didn't even realize the words were coming out until they already had.

Maybe it was the exhaustion from sitting awake for hours, terrified and helpless. Maybe it was the way the Hollanders had wrapped him in warmth and care so instinctively, without asking anything from him in return. Or maybe it was simply that Ilya no longer had the strength to keep certain things buried. Whatever it was, a part of him felt like he needed to say these words out loud. And once they were out there, there was no taking them back.

"She was not moving… and when I saw Shane—" His breath caught hard, cutting the sentence in half. "I was so scared."

"Oh, Ilya," Yuna said, her eyes filling with tears.

"I can't lose him." The words came out broken, raw in a way he almost never allowed himself to be. "I can't. I can't. I can't."

Yuna's expression crumpled. She reached for him, both hands cupping his face, forcing him gently back into the present, while David's grip tightened slightly on his knee.

"Ilya, honey," Yuna said, her voice firm now, "look at me."

It took everything in him to lift his head and meet her eyes.

"You are not going to lose him, do you hear me? Shane is okay. He's hurt, but he's okay."

Ilya nodded faintly, trying to force himself to believe her, trying to make his body accept what his mind still seemed too terrified to trust.

After that, nobody said much. Ilya stayed between them, still trying to process everything. Yuna's hand continued to move slowly through his hair, while David stayed steady beside him, close enough that Ilya could feel the warmth of him there.

Ilya was quiet for a while before finally looking up. "He is really okay?" He asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Yes, Ilya" Yuna said immediately. "He really is okay."

David nodded beside him. "He's got a concussion and a broken collarbone, but the doctor said he'll make a full recovery."

"He'll be out for eight to ten weeks," Yuna added. "So no playoffs this year… but next season he'll be back to kicking Boston's ass."

A weak smile pulled at Ilya's mouth automatically, he could tell that Yuna was trying to lighten the mood, though hockey felt impossibly far away right now, belonging to another life entirely.

"Did you talk to him?" Ilya asked.

"Yes, we saw him right after he got out of surgery," Yuna said.

David let out a small breath that almost sounded like a laugh. "He was very high on pain medication."

Despite everything, Ilya felt another tiny smile threatening at the corner of his mouth at the thought of Shane high on pain medication. He could picture it too easily, Shane all soft and sleepy, saying whatever came into his head without the chance to overthink it first.

Cute. Shane would be unbearably cute while high.

"Did he say anything?" he asked.

"He couldn't really form words," Yuna admitted. "But he kept trying to say your name."

Ilya's breath caught.

“He kept saying ‘Ilya’ over and over, even half asleep.” David added.

Yuna squeezed his hand gently. “He was exhausted, though, so he fell asleep pretty quickly after that. We stayed with him until the doctor came to check on him again.”

Ilya felt some of the weight he'd been carrying ease at that. The knowledge that Shane hadn’t been alone in the worst of it mattered more than he could properly put into words. But before Ilya could respond, there was a soft knock against the already open door.

All three of them looked up as the doctor stepped into the waiting room. Her eyes immediately landed on Ilya, surprise flickering across her face at the sight of an additional person sitting between Shane Hollander’s parents.

Had she recognized him? Was she trying to understand why the captain of the Raiders was sitting in a private waiting room being comforted by his rival’s parents? Or maybe she simply knew this was a high-profile patient and that technically no one except immediate family was supposed to be there.

The three of them stood up as she entered fully into the room.

“Doctor, this is Ilya, Shane’s boyfriend,” Yuna said, gesturing to Ilya with a warm smile.

The change in the doctor’s expression was immediate, everything softened at once.

“Oh this all makes sense now,” she said, understanding settling over her features. “Shane has been asking us to tell an ‘Ilya’ that he’s okay, over and over again.”

Ilya couldn't say anything. He was caught off guard. Shane had been trying to reach him to reassure him of his condition, even from a hospital bed.

“So, Ilya,” the doctor continued kindly, “I’m here to officially tell you that Shane is okay.”

A breath escaped him in something that sounded halfway between a laugh and relief.

“His vitals are stable, his scans look good, and there’s no sign of serious brain trauma beyond the concussion,” she explained. “He’s in some pain, which is expected as the anesthesia wears off, but we’re managing that and we’ll continue monitoring him closely through the night.”

Ilya listened to every single word like his life depended on it.

“But overall,” she said reassuringly, “everything looks very positive. If things continue this way, we’re expecting to discharge him sometime tomorrow evening.”

“Thank you,” Yuna said immediately.

“Thank you, doctor,” David added at the same time.

Ilya opened his mouth, but for a second nothing came out.

“Can I please see Shane now?” he finally managed to say quietly, almost afraid his request would be rejected.

“Yes, of course,” the doctor said with a soft smile.

“Room four-nineteen,” Yuna added quickly.

And with that information, Ilya was moving before anyone could say anything else. He was out of the waiting room almost immediately, his feet carrying him down the hospital hallway faster than his mind could keep up, his heartbeat loud in his ears as every part of him focused on one thing only.

Shane.

When he reached room four-nineteen, his hand paused only briefly on the handle before he pushed the door open.

The sight he was met with inside made his heart ache. Shane was lying in the hospital bed, hooked up to monitors and wires, his right arm secured carefully in a sling. The room was dim and quiet except for the soft beeping of machines keeping track of things Ilya didn’t want to think about too closely.

Shane looked small like this, vulnerable in a way Ilya had never seen before. And far too still. For one horrible second, the image of him lying still on the ice flashed violently through Ilya’s mind again.

Then Shane lifted his head at the sound of the door closing behind Ilya. His brows furrowed slightly in confusion at first, but as his eyes landed on his boyfriend, his whole face changed.

“Ilya,” Shane said immediately, dragging the word out like a song, smiling so widely it looked almost sleepy. “You’re here.”

The relief that crashed through Ilya at the sound of Shane’s voice was almost enough to bring him to his knees.

He crossed the room quickly and immediately reached for Shane’s uninjured hand that was already lifted toward him like Shane had also been waiting for this exact moment.

“I’m here, moya lyubov,” Ilya said softly, wrapping his fingers carefully around Shane’s hand.

Even now, he wasn’t fully sure where it was safe to touch him. The thought of accidentally hurting Shane more sent a sharp wave of panic through him. So instead, he leaned down carefully and pressed a kiss against Shane’s forehead.

Shane gave a satisfied sigh.

“Where were you? I missed you.” He mumbled, words slurred together slightly. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion and medication, struggling to stay fully open, but he was smiling at Ilya like nothing else in the world mattered.

Shane had been waiting for him. And Ilya hadn't been able to get to him fast enough.

"I missed you too, Shane," Ilya whispered. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get to you."

Shane blinked slowly at him, then gave a small, sleepy shrug. "It's alright," he mumbled dopily. "You're here now."

"I'm here, Shane," he whispered, brushing the back of his fingers gently across Shane's cheek, across the freckles that now had dark bruising blooming beneath them. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Mm."

Shane closed his eyes at the touch and leaned into it immediately, making a soft, content noise that sounded like music to Ilya's ears. He looked calmer.

Then Shane forced his eyes open again, though it clearly took effort. "I told them to tell you I'm okay. Did they tell you?"

"Yes, they did tell me." Ilya said softly. Even when he was drugged, injured, and scared, Shane had still been thinking about him. "Thank you for making sure I knew you are okay."

"Mmm," Shane hummed faintly. "Didn't want you to worry."

That nearly undid him.

Shane had been lying here hurt, confused, and in pain, and somehow he had still been worried about whether Ilya was scared. Ilya's eyes began to sting with tears.

"Why do you look sad?" Shane asked suddenly, blinking slowly up at him. His expression changed into concern. "Are you hurt? Did someone hurt you?"

"No, no," Ilya said quickly, smoothing a hand carefully through Shane's hair. "I'm not hurt. I promise."

Shane watched him, like he was trying very hard to make sure he was telling the truth.

"Mmm," he finally said, relaxing. "Good."

There was a knock at the door before it opened again.

Ilya flinched instinctively. Some frightened, exhausted part of his brain was still stuck in survival mode, still terrified someone was going to walk in and take Shane away from him again.

But then Yuna stepped into the room, and the fear inside Ilya eased almost instantly. Her eyes found Shane first, lying in the hospital bed, then shifted to Ilya standing beside him still holding Shane's hand like he physically could not make himself let go. A smile crossed her face at the scene in front of her.

“Mom,” Shane said, his face brightening despite the exhaustion pulling at him. “Look, Ilya’s here.”

Yuna’s smile grew wider. “I can see that, honey.”

She walked over to the other side of the bed and leaned down to press a gentle kiss onto Shane’s hair before brushing her fingers carefully over his forehead.

“How are you feeling?” she asked quietly.

“I’m okay,” Shane murmured. Then his sleepy eyes drifted right back to Ilya. “Better now that my boyfriend is here.”

The look he gave Ilya was soft and warm and so completely full of love that it erased every terrifying moment Ilya had experienced the last few hours.

Yuna noticed it too. Ilya could tell by the way her eyes softened.

Without a word, she pulled a chair closer to the bed and nudged it lightly toward Ilya where he was standing. “Come sit,” she instructed.

Ilya obeyed, and sat down beside Shane’s bed, close enough that he still didn’t have to let go of Shane’s hand even for a second.

The moment he sat in the chair, Shane shifted slightly toward him on instinct, like his body was searching for him.

Ilya noticed Shane’s expression tighten, the subtle pull of pain across his forehead impossible to miss.

“Do you feel pain?” Ilya asked immediately, brushing his thumb lightly between Shane’s brows like he could smooth it away himself.

“Just a little.”

Ilya’s jaw clenched before he could stop it. “I’m going to kill Marlow.”

“Don’t do that,” Shane mumbled.

Ilya huffed softly but didn’t argue. He just kept staring at Shane like he was trying to memorize every tiny movement, every blink, every breath, just to reassure himself that Shane was really here, alive, awake, and talking to him.

Then suddenly Shane’s grip loosened and his hand slipped limply from Ilya’s.

“Shane?” Ilya’s voice cracked as his fingers tightened desperately around Shane’s hand. Shane’s eyelids were no longer blinking slowly, they were completely shut. Ilya’s heart stopped beating. “Shane,” he pleaded again, already half-rising from the chair.

“He’s okay, Ilya.” Yuna was already beside him, one hand on his shoulder, the other pressing soothingly against his back. “He’s just sleeping. The doctor said it’s normal for him to fall asleep so suddenly right after his surgery. He’s just tired and needs rest.”

Ilya stared at Shane’s sleeping face, chest heaving unevenly as he tried to force himself to breathe again. And that’s when he saw the slow rise and fall of Shane’s chest and the steady rhythm of the heart monitor beside the bed. And with that, it felt like Ilya’s own heart finally started beating again.

Once the panic began to fade, embarrassment quickly took over.

“Sorry,” he whispered quietly to Yuna, ashamed by how completely he had unraveled.

“You don’t need to apologize, honey,” she said.

Ilya lowered his head again and pressed a kiss against Shane’s hand, still holding onto it tightly. Then he rested his forehead there, and closed his eyes.

Every few seconds, his fingers drifted toward Shane’s wrist, feeling carefully for his pulse. He could hear the machines monitoring Shane’s heartbeat beside the bed, but somehow that still was not enough. Ilya needed to feel it himself. He needed the reassurance of Shane’s presence beneath his fingertips.

Yuna sat quietly in one of the chairs on the other side of the bed, giving him space while still staying close.

After a while of sitting in silence, there was another knock at the door.

This time Ilya didn’t flinch, he didn’t even bother to look up. Because now Yuna was here, and Ilya had a feeling that if anyone tried to come in and take Shane away from him again, they would first have to get through Yuna Hollander. And that was no easy task.

Then the door opened and he heard a familiar comforting voice. “How’s he doing?” David said quietly as he stepped into the room. Ilya did not have to lift his head up to feel the instant warmth that David’s presence brought with him.

“He’s doing alright,” Yuna answered. “Very tired, but happy to have Ilya here with him.”

David’s gaze shifted toward him immediately. “And you, Ilya?” he asked gently. “How are you doing, son?”

The question caught Ilya off guard. He’d expected David’s attention to be completely on Shane now that he was here, but somehow, David was still thinking about him too.

Ilya slowly lifted his head to look at him. “I’m okay,” he whispered, managing a small smile.

David seemed satisfied enough with that answer. He smiled back before resting a reassuring hand briefly on Ilya’s shoulder.

“I brought food from the hospital cafeteria. Cheese and smoked turkey sandwiches.” David said.

Yuna immediately perked up at that. “Ilya, honey, would you like one?”

“Thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

Yuna gave him a look that reminded him painfully of the kind mothers gave when they already knew they were not accepting no for an answer.

“Okay. Then maybe you should try to get some sleep.”

Ilya shook his head. “No. I will wait until Shane wakes up.”

“Ilya,” Yuna said, her tone turning firmer now, “you cannot keep going like this. You’ll make yourself sick, and Shane would want you to take care of yourself.”

He lowered his eyes slightly like he had been scolded.

“So,” Yuna continued, crossing her arms, “either you eat something or you sleep. But you are not allowed to do neither.”

The sternness in her voice should have intimidated him, but it didn’t. Ilya had not had someone mother him like this in over a decade. He had not had someone fuss over him with this kind of care and concern since his own mother died. A small smile finally pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Fine,” he murmured quietly. “I will eat.”

David quietly unwrapped one of the sandwiches before handing it to Ilya with the napkin still wrapped carefully around the bottom half. He had clearly noticed that Ilya refused to let go of Shane’s hand even for a second. This way, one hand could keep holding onto Shane while the other held the sandwich.

Ilya took a bite, and only then realized just how hungry he actually was.

Under any other circumstances, on any other day, he probably would have thought it was the driest, blandest sandwich he had ever eaten in his life. But sitting here beside Shane’s hospital bed surrounded by the Hollanders, surrounded by family, with the terror that had consumed him for hours finally beginning to loosen its grip around his throat, Ilya could have sworn it was the best thing he had eaten since stepping foot in North America.

It was probably not the sandwich at all.

Maybe it was the feeling of being cared for, of belonging somewhere, of sitting beside the person he loved the most in the world, while that person’s parents made space for him there too, like it was natural for him to be included.

For so much of Ilya’s life, love had felt conditional, something that could disappear the second he failed, or disappointed someone, or became too much to carry.

But the Hollanders had found him half broken in a hospital stairwell, and pulled him closer. And sitting there now, Shane asleep beside him while Yuna and David fussed over him like he mattered too, Ilya realized he did not feel like an outsider anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I have proofread this like five times already, but my mind sometimes likes to gloss over typos I made because it thinks I'm perfect and can make no mistakes.

So please, if you notice any typos, let your girl know so that I can fix them!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Sorry I haven't updated this in a while, I've been enjoying reading fics more than writing them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya woke to the feeling of a warm hand moving slowly through his hair. The touch of gentle fingers slipping through his curls, scratching lightly against his scalp, soothing away the tension he forgot he was still carrying.

He felt safe and loved. He felt at home. There was only one person alive who could make him feel like that with a single touch.

Ilya opened his eyes slowly and lifted his head from where it had been resting in Shane's lap. The first thing he saw was a pair of piercing brown eyes watching him with obvious affection. A smile so bright and warm that it sent a helpless flutter through Ilya.

He did not even remember falling asleep. The last thing he could recall was Yuna and David hovering over him, trying to comfort him, feeding him, taking care of him like he was their own. Being surrounded by that kind of care, with that sense of family and safety, he must have drifted off without realizing it.

Last night, he had watched Shane get carried off the ice strapped to a board. He had sat alone in a hospital stairwell, convinced the world was ending. And now Shane was here. Awake, smiling at him, and running his fingers through his hair.

"I was going to let you sleep longer," Shane said, his voice strained with the effort of speaking. "But I missed you so much." His smile widened slightly. "Sorry."

He did not sound sorry at all. His words were clearer now, more like himself, although there was still a fog from the medication.

"Shane," Ilya exhaled, almost laughing in relief. He stood carefully, still afraid of somehow hurting his boyfriend, and leaned forward pressing a gentle kiss to Shane's lips.

Shane immediately groaned. "Morning breath."

Ilya laughed and pulled back. "I see pain medication is not affecting you so much anymore."

Shane attempted to roll his eyes but only managed a slow blink.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed next to him, one leg on the floor and the other bent up on the mattress.

For a few seconds, they simply looked at each other. Ilya still could not seem to stop himself. Every time he blinked, some part of him expected someone to walk in and shake him awake, for everything to snap back into that worst moment on the ice. So he kept looking. Making sure Shane was really there, making sure he was breathing, making sure he was okay.

Ilya leaned in and rested his forehead against Shane's, like they normally did, but kept it barely there, just a light touch, careful not to press too much weight.

"You scared me," he said quietly. The words came out before he could stop them.

Shane's smile faded immediately. "I'm sorry."

"No." Ilya pulled back slightly so he could see his face more clearly. Shane's eyes had dropped, avoiding his gaze. He was apologizing for getting hurt. He was apologizing while he had been the one lying unconscious on the ice. Ilya cupped Shane's face gently. "Is not your fault."

Shane finally looked up at him.

"Is Marlow's fault," Ilya added.

"Ilya," Shane said in a warning tone.

"What? It is!"

Then, after a beat, almost as if thinking about what Ilya had just said, "Please don't hurt him."

"We will see."

"Ilya." Shane said it again, though a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Fine."

Ilya suddenly noticed the room was quiet, his eyes drifted around the space. There was no David trying to stay awake in a chair and no Yuna hovering protectively nearby. It was just him and Shane.

"Where are Yuna and David?" he asked.

Shane's face scrunched slightly as he tried to remember. "Mom's on the phone outside. And Dad went to my apartment to sleep for a bit."

Ilya nodded. He could imagine the exhaustion David and Yuna were running on if it was anything similar to his.

He continued to watch Shane carefully. There was a distant look in his eyes that suggested he was turning something over in his mind, searching for a memory that felt important.

“What are you thinking of, moya lyubov?”

Shane let out a soft, self-conscious laugh, as if he’d been caught out.

“You know, I had a whole date planned for us last night.” He confessed.

“A date, hm?”

“Would’ve been our first as boyfriends.” Shane said with a wide smile.

Ilya smiled. “And what did you plan for this date?”

“I was going to cook dinner for you,” Shane said excitedly. “And then we'd watch highlights from our game while we ate.”

“You wanted to watch the Metros lose again during our date?”

“You wish,” Shane muttered.

Ilya laughed softly.

“And then,” Shane continued, “I was going to ask you something.”

“What were you going to ask me?”

Shane looked down nervously before meeting his eyes again. “I was going to ask… will you come to my cottage this summer?” The words spilling out so quickly he barely seemed to have time to breathe.

“Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house. Spend the entire summer with me. We’ll have so much fun. Just you and me.” Shane was smiling, beaming as he looked at Ilya, waiting for his answer.

Ilya felt his heart skip a beat. He didn’t know it was possible to be this in love.

“Yes.” he said, like there could ever be another answer.

“Really?” Shane asked, almost surprised.

“Yes. Of course, Shane.” Ilya let out a small, disbelieving laugh. “Fuck, I'd go anywhere for you.”

The smile that spread across Shane’s face was bright enough to make Ilya forget that they were sitting in a hospital room.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Shane said. His accent was thicker than usual, the words slightly slurred by medication, but it was still the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever heard.

“Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu,” he whispered back.

Ilya brushed his thumb gently across Shane’s cheek, tracing over the freckles scattered there before sliding his hand into his hair. Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes drifting shut.

A minute later, the door opened and Yuna stepped back into the room with a phone in her hand.

“Oh, Ilya, you’re up. Good morning.” She offered him a warm smile, though it didn’t quite hide the exhaustion in her face.

“Good morning, Yuna.”

“How are you feeling, honey?” Yuna asked.

She stepped closer and gently brushed Ilya’s curls away from his forehead. Only then did he realize she was talking to him.

“I’m okay.”

“Who called?” Shane asked.

“Oh,” Yuna began, remembering why she had stepped out. “That was Ilya’s friend, Svetlana.”

Ilya blinked. “You talked to Svetlana? How did she get your number?”

“She and Marlow found it,” Yuna explained.

Both Shane and Ilya stared at her.

“Apparently,” she continued, “they contacted someone from the Raiders who knew someone from the Metros staff, who put them in contact with a Metros’ marketing manager who had my number.” She paused, exhaling slightly like she still couldn’t quite believe the chain of events herself.

Ilya rubbed a hand over his face, half exhausted, half disbelieving. He couldn’t believe the lengths Svetlana and Marlow must have gone to to reach Yuna.

“Honestly, she didn’t really go into the details, and I didn’t want to push because she seemed in a hurry to find out how Shane was doing. She also wanted to make sure David and I knew you were here at the hospital, and that you’d been trying to get to Shane.” Her expression softened. “I told her you’re here with us now, and that we’re taking care of you.”

Yuna’s words stayed with him. He knew she and David had taken care of him the night before, but hearing her actually put it into words made it feel surreal.

“She sounds like a very sweet girl,” Yuna added.

Ilya let out a startled snort before he could stop himself. Yuna and Shane both looked at him in confusion.

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “This is first time I hear someone describe Svetlana as sweet.”

“Well, she sounded worried.” Then she glanced between them. “You should call her later. She seemed really concerned about the both of you.”

“I will,” Ilya said.

“Oh, and she asked if Cliff Marlow could come visit Shane. I told her to tell him to come as soon as visiting hours begin. I hope that’s okay.”

Ilya looked at Shane carefully. “You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to.”

“I want to.”

Yuna nodded. “And Hayden called too. He and J.J. want to come by later today.”

Ilya frowned slightly, watching Shane in the current state he’s in. “Yuna, I do not think Shane is okay to see people right now. He is still very high. He might say something he doesn’t want to say.”

“I’m not high. I can control what I say.” Shane’s brows furrowed dramatically as he tried to look upset, but he only managed to look cute.

“Really?” Ilya asked, one eyebrow lifting. “So if we tell people you and me are friends, that is correct, yes?”

“Yes. Friends.” He said solemnly. Then his mouth twitched, and he broke into a quiet giggle added in a stage whisper, “Boyfriends.”

Ilya laughed under his breath, and looked at Shane with a fondness he couldn’t quite hide. He was unbearably cute.

Yuna pressed her lips together, clearly trying not to laugh as well. “You’re right,” she said to Ilya. “I’ll tell them to come around noon instead and give Shane a little more time to come down from the meds.”

“I’m not high,” Shane repeated, sounding no more convincing than before.

Two hours had passed before there was a knock at the door, followed by it opening slowly. Marlow stepped inside, looking like he wanted to take up as little space as possible. He avoided Ilya's eyes. He avoided everyone's eyes, really. His gaze drifted somewhere toward the floor, unable to settle anywhere for long.

His eyes were red-rimmed, like he had been crying. There was a bruise darkening the skin around one eye. Honestly, he looked almost as bad as Ilya felt.

"Marly," Shane said immediately when he spotted him, smiling and stretching the name out.

"Hollander— Shane— fuck, I'm sorry." The words came out in a rush. "I swear that hit wasn't intentional. I'm really, really sorry, man."

He lifted his head up for the first time since he had walked into the room and looked directly at Shane.

Shane's smile faded. His expression quickly changed from delight to concern. He seemed to properly notice Marlow's face now and the bruise around his right eye. He looked at Marlow. Then at Ilya. Then back at Marlow. Then back at Ilya again.

“I told you not to hit him.” Shane said, sounding more mildly annoyed than genuinely scolding, the medication taking most of the bite out of his words.

“That wasn’t from me sweetheart,” Ilya said defensively, then he added “I wish it was,” mumbling under his breath.

Shane’s concern faded but he still managed to give Ilya an unimpressed look.

"That's Pike's work right there," Marlow said, pointing at his eye.

Shane winced.

“Don't worry. I deserved it.”

“You didn't.” Shane said.

“Yes, I did, Shane. I injured you."

"Marly, we play hockey. Injuries happen. We all get our bell rung eventually, right? It wasn't your fault. Even my mom thinks so."

That did not sound like Yuna at all. Granted, Ilya had only properly gotten to know her over the past two days, but still, Shane must have misunderstood her in his state.

“Honey, I did not say that,” Yuna corrected gently. “I said it was a clean hit.”

Marlow looked toward her immediately, realizing he needed to apologize just as much to her as to Shane. “Mrs. Hollander, I’m so sorry I hurt your son.”

Yuna offered him a small smile, trying hard to be warm. Considering this was the man who had accidentally put her son in the hospital, Ilya thought she was doing an admirable job. “It clearly wasn’t intentional, Marlow,” she said.

The reassurance was meant to help, however, it did not.

"It wasn't." Marlow rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, then turned to face Shane again, "Fuck. I really thought you'd see me in time to avoid me. I shouldn't have blocked your way."

“Marly,” Shane said with as much sternness as his body could allow. “Ilya and I have never gone easy on each other on the ice. We wouldn’t expect you to either.” A small smile tugged at the corner of Shane's mouth. "Actually, I respect you more for not treating me differently just because we're friends now.”

Marlow’s shoulders relaxed a little, and he nodded. “I’m really glad you’re okay, Shane.”

“Were you scared for me?” Shane asked.

“Of course I was scared, man." Marlow answered so quickly that it almost sounded offended Shane would even ask. Then he glanced toward Ilya, who was looking at him with a hard to read look. “But I was also scared Roz was going to kill me.”

“Don’t worry, I told him not to,” Shane said genuinely, trying to reassure Marlow.

“I appreciate it, bro.” Marlow replied, a small smile breaking through.

Across the bed, Ilya met Marlow's eyes again. The small smile disappeared from Marlow’s face, straightening his posture slightly.

“Marly, can I talk to you outside?” Ilya asked.

“Uh, yeah… sure, Cap.” Marlow said looking uneasy, and began walking towards the door.

Ilya turned to Shane and lowered his voice. “I will be right back.” He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead before stepping away.

“Please don't hurt him,” Shane called after him just before the door swung shut.

The hallway fell quiet. Ilya and Marlow stood facing each other, neither of them saying anything at first. There was a lot to be said but neither of them knew how to put it into words. Finally, Marlow spoke.

“Um, look, Roz, I'm really sorry. You can hit me if you want. Actually, you *should* hit me. I deserve it. But I swear I didn't mean to injure Shane.”

His hands trembled at his sides, and his whole body seemed to vibrate with anxiety.

Ilya stared at him for a moment before stepping forward and placing a hand on his shoulder. Marlow flinched instinctively. The reaction lasted less than a second, then slowly, Marlow relaxed.

“I'm sorry, Marly,” Ilya said quietly.

“I— What?”

Ilya withdrew his hand and looked down the hallway making sure no one was listening in on their conversation before looking back to Marlow.

“I was scared for Shane,” he swallowed, trying to steady his voice, “and I made everything harder for you. And as your captain… I should have checked on you, I should have… I should have told you it was a clean hit.”

“Roz, no.” Marlow shook his head.

“I—”

“You’re a great captain, Roz, and I’ve never doubted your ability to lead this team or support any of us. Not once.”

Ilya looked away.

But Marlow’s voice remained steady. “But this wasn’t about you being captain, and you know it. So don't you dare fucking apologize.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Ilya’s mouth despite himself, and he gave a faint nod.

“It’s just…I’ve never had my friend hurt my boyfriend before, so I don’t really know how I’m supposed to act.” The laugh that slipped out of him was weak and awkward, more an attempt to lighten the mood than genuine amusement.

Catching on immediately to what Ilya was trying to do, Marlow arched a brow and played along. “You meant to say best friend, right?”

“No, Svetlana is my best friend.”

“Oh, okay.” Marlow nodded thoughtfully. “So then I’m your best friend… who’s a guy, right?”

“No, that would be Shane.”

Marlow gave him a flat, unimpressed stare, then shook his head with a laugh. “Asshole.”

Ilya's smile widened. “But if we are not including people I have fucked, then you are definitely my best friend.”

Marlow barked out a laugh. “Wow. That’s a really low bar.”

“Still counts.”

“Yeah,” Marlow said with a smile, shaking his head. “I’ll take it.”

Marlow pulled Ilya into a quick hug. It was brief and a little awkward, but there was something sincere about it, like he needed the hug more than he'd admit.

When they walked back into the room, Shane had drifted back to sleep, sunk into the pillows on the hospital bed.

Yuna was still there, sitting in the chair Ilya had occupied earlier, her posture slumped with exhaustion. She had drifted off to sleep too at some point, though Ilya wasn't sure she had actually allowed herself to rest, this might have been her body overruling her will. In sleep, she looked painfully young, so much like Shane.

Ilya stepped closer and gently touched her shoulder.

Yuna stirred and opened her eyes slowly, a soft smile forming when she saw him. "Oh, sorry honey. I must've drifted off."

"No, no, is okay," Ilya reassured her. "Yuna, would you like to go home for a little bit and rest?"

"It's alright. I'm okay staying here," she said, stifling a yawn.

"Yuna, you have not slept all night. You need some rest. Please."

She didn't respond right away, her gaze went towards Shane then back to Ilya.

Noticing her concern, Ilya added, "I will be here with Shane. He will not be alone."

"Oh, I know, honey, I just don't want you to be alone."

"Oh," Ilya said quietly, the word catching a little in his throat. He shook his head. "I will not be alone. Marly will stay with me until you come back."

Yuna looked over Ilya's shoulder to where Marlow was standing, already nodding.

"I'm not going anywhere," Marlow said.

Yuna hesitated before finally letting out a sigh. "Okay, I'll go home for a little bit."

"Good," Ilya said softly, relieved he wouldn't have to do any more convincing. "Marly, call a car for Yuna."

"On it.

He was already pulling out his phone before Yuna had a chance to argue. The struggle between refusing the offer and giving in to her exhaustion played clearly across her face. In

the end, exhaustion won.

“Thank you,” she said, then pushed herself out of her chair and gathered her purse.

“I told the nurses that no one is allowed to visit Shane without my permission or David’s or yours,” she said, turning toward Ilya. “And I texted Hayden to tell the Metros not to come by before noon, so nobody should bother you.” She was almost rambling, searching for reasons to stay a little longer. “And if the doctor comes by, or Shane wakes up asking for me or David, or if he just… misses us…” Her voice cracked. “Call us.”

Yuna moved back to Shane’s bedside and leaned down, pressing a kiss to his forehead. Her fingers brushed gently through his hair, sweeping it away from his eyes. Shane stirred slightly, comforted by his mother's touch even in sleep.

Ilya watched as Yuna discreetly wiped at her eyes. Then she turned back to him.

“And Ilya, sweetheart, if you need anything, you call me, or David, or both of us. You have our numbers now.”

“I will. Thank you.”

She leaned up, pulling his head down slightly to place a kiss on his forehead, just like she had done for Shane. He suddenly realized how deeply he had missed being comforted like this by a mother.

“Take care of our boy,” she said as she pulled away.

"Always." Ilya said.

Then she walked over to Marlow. He straightened immediately, like a soldier being inspected.

“Cliff,” she said gently, “you have to stop beating yourself up over this. No one is mad at you.”

Marlow exhaled, still tense, but he managed a nod.

“Actually, Shane is mad you ruined the date he planned for me and him after the game.”

Both Yuna and Marlow turned to give Ilya a look.

“What?” Ilya added, dead serious. “He told me.”

Marlow let out a disbelieving laugh under his breath, shaking his head. Yuna sighed, though there was warmth in it.

“Take care of yourself, Cliff,” she said.

Then she lingered just a moment longer, her eyes going back to Shane. And then, with one last look at her son, she turned and left the room.

Ilya and Marlow settled into their seats, each of them occupying a chair on either side of Shane's hospital bed.

Shane was still asleep. The beeps of the monitor were the only real sounds in the room. Ilya sat close enough that his knees almost touched the bed frame. His hand was intertwined with Shane's.

He kept watching Shane's face. Seeing him resting felt like the most beautiful thing in the world to Ilya. His boyfriend was breathing, safe, and close enough to touch.

Across from him, Marlow leaned back in his chair, scrolling on his phone, trying to look casual but failing to fully sit comfortably.

Neither of them spoke much, as to not disturb Shane, until a sharp knock at the door broke the quiet.

Ilya's hand jerked instinctively, pulling away from Shane's as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't. Shane stirred awake, his brow furrowing at the sound.

The door opened before anyone could fully react.

A nurse stepped into the room and paused when all three men turned toward her, clearly not thrilled by the interruption.

"Sorry to bother you," she said. "But there are teammates here to visit Shane." She then turned to Ilya, "Mrs. Hollander asked me to get your permission before anyone comes in."

Marlow straightened slightly and turned to Ilya. "I thought Yuna told Pike the Metros could visit in the afternoon. It's still ten in the morning."

"Is what we should expect when we trust Pike with simple task."

"They aren't Metros players. They're Raiders." The nurse clarified.

All three men paused.

Ilya had so many questions he wanted to ask, like *Why are they here?* and *What do they want?* and *Will they notice anything between him and Shane?* But he knew the nurse did not have the answers, so he settled for, "Where are they now?"

"In the waiting area on the first floor."

"Thank you," Ilya said, already standing. "I will handle them."

The nurse left, and the door clicked shut behind her.

“We should go talk to them. Tell them Shane isn’t seeing visitors yet, yes?” Ilya said.

“Definitely.” Marlow agreed.

Shane, however, did not. “No. I can't just turn them away, it’ll be unsportsmanlike.”

“Shane, sweetheart, you might say something in front of them you would not want to say.”

“I won’t,” Shane whined, voice still rough with sleep. “I’ll only say ‘hello’ and ‘thank you for coming’.”

Ilya was still not convinced.

Marlow looked between them. “Roz, we’ll stand next to him. If he says anything insane, we’ll speak over him. Or…” he glanced at Shane, then whispered so that only Ilya could hear “...You can just cover his mouth.”

“Fine.” Ilya sighed, “Shane, is that okay with you?”

“Hello,” Shane said dutifully. “Thank you for coming.” Then, as if he’d just delivered something brilliant, he let out a small, proud laugh at his own joke.

“Okay. I think we’re good.” Marlow said.

With that, Ilya and Marlow left the room together.

“Did you know they were coming?” Ilya asked, as they walked towards the elevator. He was buzzing with nerves.

“How the fuck would I have known?” Marlow replied.

“You did not tell anyone you were coming here?”

“I only told Coach,” Marlow said. “Ran into him when I was leaving the hotel.”

“Did he say something?”

Marlow hesitated. It wasn’t small, and Ilya had caught it immediately.

“What?” Ilya pressed.

Marlow exhaled through his nose. “He said I didn’t have to visit Hollander if I didn’t want to.”

Ilya stopped walking. The words didn’t fully register at first, like his brain refused to accept them as something real.

“I do not understand.”

Marlow’s jaw tightened. “He— he said it was a clean hit. And that I didn’t need to get involved in the… sportsmanship bullshit.”

Ilya could feel the rage boiling inside him. He knew exactly what his coach was like, how easily morals blurred when winning was the only thing that mattered. It was a culture he had been actively trying to change since becoming captain, trying to pull his team away from that edge one decision at a time.

But hearing it said so bluntly made something in him snap tight with anger. Especially when it was about Shane.

“Hey, Roz,” Marlow cut in, pulling him out of it. “You know I don't think like that. Most of the guys on the team don’t. So fuck him.”

Ilya nodded. He did not want to think about this for too long, but he couldn’t help wondering what they were walking into with their teammates. He knew they were not like their coach, but still, he wondered.

By the time they reached the waiting area, four of his teammates were already there. St. Simon, Connors, Carmichael, and Hammersmith. All of them had been in the locker room the night Shane had come looking for him after his panic attack. The same ones who had seen him at his most vulnerable state and had, in their own clumsy way, tried to be there for him.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Ilya said as he and Marlow stepped inside the room.

All four players looked up immediately, the familiarity of their captain’s voice snapping them to attention.

“What do you mean what are we doing here?” St. Simon said first. “We wanted to check on Hollander.”

“I tried calling you to tell you we were coming, but you didn’t answer,” Connors added.

“Why didn’t you call *me*?” Marlow asked.

“We didn’t think they’d let us in if you were with us,” Connors said simply.

Marlow let out a short, incredulous laugh. “Wow. Okay.” He wasn’t really offended. Everyone in the room knew they were right.

“Cap,” St. Simon asked, his tone softening, “did you get a chance to see Hollander? Is he okay?”

“I do not understand this,” Ilya said. “Why are you suddenly concerned for Shane?” He did not mean for the name to slip, but since it was already established that he and Shane were friends, he hoped his teammates would ignore it.

“Come on, Roz. You know none of us actually hate him, right?” Hammersmith said.

“And that hit looked brutal,” Connors added.

Ilya looked around at the four men standing in front of him. Connors looked tired. St. Simon's arms were crossed tightly over his chest. Hammersmith kept shifting his weight from foot to foot. Carmichael stood unusually quiet. None of them looked angry. None of them looked like they were there out of obligation. They looked worried, genuinely worried, for Shane.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Let’s go see him.”

“Wait, cap,” St. Simon said. “The nurse told us we need someone from Hollander's family to let us in.”

“Yes, that is me, so let's go.” Ilya replied. The words were out before he could stop them.

All four players stared at Ilya.

“Oh, so you're part of the Hollander family now?” Hammersmith asked, sounding more confused than suspicious.

Yes, Ilya thought, but didn't dare say it. He opened his mouth, suddenly not sure how to explain. Thankfully, Marlow jumped in.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hollander went home to rest. They've been up all night. And they asked Roz and me to stay with Hollander until they got back.”

The explanation seemed to satisfy them, and they began walking toward Shane’s room.

Chapter End Notes

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.
A match made in heaven.
Spurs in seven.

(edit: why are there so many Knicks fans here?!)

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

We're back to Shane's POV :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were parts of the previous night that felt blurred around the edges, moments lost beneath pain medication, exhaustion, and the fog that seemed to follow him everywhere whenever he tried too hard to remember. But for the most part, Shane did remember.

He remembered the collision. The sickening impact when he hit the ice. The way the pain had exploded through his body before he could even figure out what had happened. He remembered lying there, staring up at the arena lights while voices shouted around him.

He remembered searching for Ilya, not with his eyes, he couldn't even turn his head, but with every thought he had. He remembered trying to convince the doctors and paramedics to tell Ilya he was okay. The idea of Ilya worrying about him had hurt more than the broken bone.

He remembered waking up after surgery. The first thing he had seen was his mother's face. Relief had washed over her so completely that she started crying almost immediately. Then his father had appeared beside her, looking exhausted and terrified, and trying very hard not to show either.

He remembered Ilya appearing in his room sometime later that night, like an angel he had prayed for. The pure happiness he had felt just from seeing the man he loves. He remembered talking to Ilya in the middle of the night, hoping it wasn't a dream.

Then he had woken up that morning to find his boyfriend asleep beside him. The overwhelming relief of knowing Ilya was really there. His head resting carefully on Shane's lap as if he had finally allowed himself to stop worrying for a few hours.

He remembered threading his fingers through Ilya's hair and thinking that the ache in his shoulder, and the pounding in his head, all of it seemed to have disappeared just by having Ilya next to him.

He remembered Marlow showing up looking more shaken than Shane had ever seen him. The man who always seemed so sure of himself had looked like he was trying to fold into himself, weighed down by guilt. Shane had spent most of that conversation reassuring him that it wasn't his fault. Because it wasn't.

It had been a hockey play. An unfortunate one. It was nobody's fault.

Which was why the scene currently unfolding in front of him made absolutely no sense.

Four Raiders stood awkwardly at the foot of his hospital bed. It wasn't awkward in the way hockey players usually were, and not the casual discomfort of athletes trapped in a hospital room. No, they looked nervous. They kept exchanging quick glances, with silent negotiations over who would speak first. Shane couldn't stand the silence. It felt too uncomfortable in a room that already smelled like antiseptic and exhaustion, and was now cramped with four additional hockey players.

"Hello," he said, choosing to break the silence himself. "Thank you for coming."

Fuck. He had already used all five words he was supposed to say in a matter of seconds. He got a few awkward nods in response, but none of the four Raiders players actually spoke.

"Okay," Ilya began, standing beside the bed like he was prepared to physically remove anyone who got too close to Shane. "You all have two minutes. Say what you need to say to Hollander, then you leave and let him rest."

His tone was different from the soft or teasing one Shane was used to, it was steadier and stripped of anything unnecessary. It wasn't just authority, it was control that was shaped into something almost effortless, the kind of voice that didn't need to be raised to be obeyed.

Shane realized this was the first time he'd heard Ilya's captain voice up close. It was, without a doubt, the most attractive anyone had ever sounded. And it was deeply unfair that the first time he was hearing it, he was stuck in a hospital bed, surrounded by players from his rival team, completely unable to do anything about it.

"How are you doing, Hollander?" St. Simon asked, almost immediately, as if he had been waiting for permission to speak.

"Oh, you know," Shane said, exhaling lightly, "I've been better."

That earned a few uneasy looks from the group, a couple of glances were exchanged, like none of them were sure if they were allowed to laugh, or even breathe too loudly yet.

Connors stepped forward slightly, then hesitated mid motion, as if reconsidering his entire approach before speaking. "Well, we— ah—" he cleared his throat, glancing briefly at the others for backup. "We just wanted to come check on you after, you know… Marlow tried to kill you."

"It was a clean hit," Shane and Marlow said at the exact same time, almost like a reflex.

Shane blinked slowly, then turned his head slightly toward Marlow, who was sitting in the chair he had occupied earlier next to his bed.

"It was a clean hit, Marly," Shane repeated, a little slower this time, trying to make it clear, reassuring, even, that he wasn't upset. That Marlow didn't need to carry the guilt around anymore.

Marlow let out a breath through his nose, something between relief and disbelief. Then he turned back toward his teammates and gestured vaguely at Shane. "See?" he said, like that

should end the conversation entirely. He was clearly trying to get them to stop looking at him like he had personally ruined a man's life.

But Shane could still see the uneasiness in the players the way they shifted their weight from one leg to the other, and in the uncertain glances they kept exchanging, as though they were relieved he was awake, but still waiting to find out how bad things really were.

St. Simon cleared his throat. "We also never really got the chance to thank you for taking care of Roz back in Boston when we couldn't."

"I always take care of Ilya," Shane said matter-of-factly.

A few of the Raiders exchanged looks.

"Yeah," St. Simon said with a small smile. "We kind of figured that out. But still... we should've thanked you."

Shane's lips curled into a grin. "Don't worry. Ilya already thanked me."

Marlow let out an exaggerated cough that echoed through the room, shooting Shane a warning look. Shane blinked at him, confused, before remembering exactly what *Ilya's thanks* had involved. Unfortunately, Marlow's attempt to save the conversation came at the expense of Shane's head. The sharp sound sent a pulse of pain behind his eyes, and his brows furrowed instinctively.

"Does it hurt?" Carmichael asked, speaking for the first time since entering the room. He noticed Shane's discomfort and seemed almost afraid of the answer.

"No, not really," Shane replied.

"Is because you are high, moya lyubov," Ilya said.

Shane turned his head toward him. Ilya's eyes widened slightly the moment he realized what he had said. And to think Ilya had been worried Shane wouldn't be able to control what came out of his mouth. Turns out, they should have been just as worried about him.

"I'm not high," Shane said immediately, a little too insistently.

"How long will you be out for?" Hammersmith asked. Thankfully, he either hadn't noticed or hadn't understood Ilya's slip up.

"Eight to ten weeks."

Several of the Raiders visibly winced as the reality of just how severe the injury was took a more real shape.

"Why do you all look upset?" Shane asked, forcing a lightness into his words. "You know you don't have to face me in the playoffs now."

"That's not how we wanted to beat Montreal," Connors said quietly.

“You still can’t beat us even if I’m not playing.”

That earned a few scattered laughs around the room. Shane blinked, caught off guard by how easily they were laughing.

“Hollander,” Ilya said, picking up on his confusion, “your team is terrible without you.”

“That's not true.” Shane said defensively.

“Yes, it is,” Marlow added.

“Very true,” someone else agreed.

Shane looked from one face to the next. The annoying part was that they all seemed completely sincere.

“See, Hollander?” Ilya said, sounding far too pleased with himself. “Even Raiders know you are second best player in the league.”

“I think you mean *the* best player, Cap,” Marlow said.

Ilya shot him a look. “Absolutely not. I am best player in the league.” He pointed at Shane from where he stood beside the bed. “Tell them, Shane.”

Shane laughed, the movement pulling slightly at his shoulder. “I mean, sure,” he said. “Now that I’m out for the season.”

“See?” Ilya said, turning back to the others. “He agrees.”

“That’s not what I said.” Shane replied.

“Is exactly what you said.”

More laughter rippled through the room, and Shane found himself laughing too. It felt easy. Then a thought caught him off guard.

Why had it never been this easy with his own teammates?

Other than Hayden and J.J., conversations with the rest of the Metros always seemed to require effort. They respected him, he had never doubted that, but respect wasn't the same as comfort. As captain, they listened to him, followed him, and trusted him on the ice. Off the ice, though, there always seemed to be an invisible distance between them. No matter how hard Shane tried to close it, he always found himself second guessing every joke, every comment, every attempt to get closer, terrified of saying the wrong thing and somehow making the gap even wider.

But here right now, it was different. Maybe it was because Ilya was standing beside him, effortlessly pulling everyone into the same rhythm. Or maybe it was the pain medication and exhaustion making him not overthink what he was going to say. He was left wondering.

Ilya must have caught the way Shane's thoughts had wandered, because he cleared his throat and stepped in. “Okay. You ask how is Hollander. You can go now. Say goodbye.”

“Right, yeah,” Connors said quickly. “We should get going. Don’t want to miss our flight.”

“Get well soon, Hollander,” they said almost in unison.

“Thank you,” Shane replied, “See you next season.”

“Roz, Marly, you guys coming?” Carmichael asked, noticing neither of them had moved from Shane’s bedside.

“No, we’re taking a later flight,” Marlow said.

“I will stay in Montreal for a few more days,” Ilya said at the same time.

“Cap, you’re staying? What, did the Hollanders hire you as his nurse or something?” Hammersmith joked.

“I…” Ilya froze.

“He’s going to see his Montreal girl,” Marlow cut in smoothly before Ilya could say anything, flashing him a knowing look. “Right, Rozy?”

Girl? What girl?

Shane frowned. He searched his memory, trying to remember whether Ilya had ever mentioned seeing a girl in Montreal. He swallowed before looking up at his boyfriend. “You have a girl in Montreal?”

Ilya looked at Shane, his expression softening when he noticed Shane’s misunderstanding. “Yes. Jane.”

Oh. Right. Maybe he really *was* high.

“Oh,” he said quickly, a sheepish smile creeping onto his face. “Jane. Right. Yeah. You should go see her. I bet she misses you.”

A few of the Raiders looked between them in confusion.

“Hollander, you know his Montreal girl?” Connors asked.

“Of course.”

“You introduced Hollander to your girl before us?” Hammersmith asked, sounding genuinely offended.

“No, no,” Ilya corrected. “Hollander introduced my Jane to me.”

Well, that wasn't entirely untrue. Shane *had* been the one to introduce himself to Ilya.

“I still can’t believe you two are actually friends,” Hammersmith said, shaking his head. The others murmured in agreement. And just like that, the room started emptying.

The three men let out a collective breath of relief as the door closed behind the last Raiders player.

“You really couldn’t go two minutes without calling your boyfriend sweetheart?" Marlow began almost immediately.

“First of all, I did not say sweetheart. I said *my love*,” Ilya corrected. “Second…if the prettiest man in the world was looking at you with his big beautiful brown eyes, you would not be able to control what came out of your mouth either.”

Shane felt heat rise immediately into his face.

Marlow pinched the bridge of his nose. “Unbelievable.”

Ilya, meanwhile, looked entirely unashamed. His attention had already drifted back to Shane, his expression softening the way it always did whenever he looked at him.

Shane sank deeper into the bed. Marlow dropped back into his chair and returned to scrolling through his phone. And Ilya immediately reclaimed his place beside Shane.

He sat carefully on the edge of the mattress, like being separated from Shane for fifteen minutes had been a personal hardship. One hand found Shane’s almost instantly, their fingers intertwining without either of them needing to think about it.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asked quietly, either to avoid Marlow overhearing them, or because speaking any louder felt like too much for Shane’s concussion. Either way, Shane appreciated it.

“Mhm,” he replied with a nod.

Ilya's free hand found Shane's cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over his skin. Shane leaned into the touch at once, his eyes relaxing. Then Ilya leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. The kiss was gentle, yet surprisingly deep, sending a rush through Shane that made him feel as though he were floating in the air. When the kiss broke, neither of them pulled far away. Their gazes locked, and Shane could have spent hours memorizing every shade in Ilya's eyes. It felt as though they were the only two people in the world. That is, until they were interrupted.

“Hey, Roz” Marlow glanced up from his phone. “Svetlana has been texting me every fifteen minutes asking for updates. You should probably call her before she books a plane and comes here.”

Ilya slowly pulled away from the embrace, but the loss of warmth was so sudden Shane almost whined. Or he might have actually whined.

“Fuck,” Ilya said. “Yes. Yes, I should call her.” He squeezed Shane's hand once before standing. “I will be right back,” he whispered. Then he slipped out into the hallway.

As the door closed behind him, Shane and Marlow were left alone. Shane found something comforting in Marlow's presence.

He was grateful Ilya had a friend like him throughout his career, someone who could keep up with him, but also support him when he needed it. And Shane was glad he got to experience a version of that too. Moments between them felt easy in a way that was rare even with his own teammates. No tension. No pressure. No awkward—

"Can you have sex while in the sling?"

"What the fuck Marlow?"

Ilya and Marlow had finally succumbed to exhaustion. Marlow was slumped in the chair beside the bed, his head resting against one hand, elbow braced on the armrest. He looked as though he'd only intended to close his eyes for a moment before sleep claimed him. On the other side of the bed, Ilya was asleep with his head resting on Shane's lap. They had both fought off sleep for as long as they could.

Shane had spent nearly fifteen minutes trying to convince Ilya to lie beside him in the hospital bed, but Ilya had refused every suggestion, terrified of bumping his shoulder or hurting him somehow. In the end, he had settled for dragging his chair as close as physically possible until his knees touched the bed. He had insisted he wasn't tired. Five minutes later, he'd fallen asleep with his head on Shane's lap.

Shane smiled to himself. He wasn't tired anymore. He'd already slept through most of the morning, and every time he closed his eyes now, sleep refused to come. So instead, he simply rested there, listening to the quiet rhythm of two exhausted players breathing.

His free hand drifted into Ilya's curls almost absentmindedly. He combed his fingers through the soft blond strands in gentle strokes, smiling when Ilya unconsciously leaned into the touch even in his sleep.

Then, a soft knock sounded at the door. Shane quickly slipped his hand away from Ilya's hair. The door opened, and his father stepped inside.

David looked tired. The lines around his eyes seemed deeper than they had the day before, and there was a heaviness to the way he carried himself that Shane had never really noticed until now.

"Hey, kiddo," David said, offering him a tired smile.

Shane couldn't remember the last time his dad had called him that. Maybe when he was twelve. Hearing it now left him feeling like a kid again.

"Hey, Dad."

David’s eyes found the two sleeping figures surrounding Shane's hospital bed. His expression softened, the corners of his mouth lifting.

“Looks like you've got your own personal security detail.”

Shane smiled. “Yeah. But they're sleeping on the job.”

David chuckled under his breath and made his way over, taking careful steps so he wouldn't wake either of them. He slipped past Marlow’s chair, then stopped beside Shane’s bed. Shane lifted the hand that had been resting in Ilya's hair and held it out. David took it in both of his own hands, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“How are you feeling, Shane?” His voice was quiet, almost whispered, but Shane could still hear everything underneath it, the worry, the relief, and the lingering fear that hadn’t quite let go.

“I'm okay,” Shane said. “Feeling a lot more like myself.”

David let out a slow breath. “That's good to hear.”

After another reassuring squeeze, he let Shane's hand go. Almost immediately, Shane's hand drifted back to Ilya’s hair as though drawn there by instinct.

“Were you able to get some sleep?” Shane asked.

David gave a small shake of his head. “No. Not really. I couldn’t quiet my mind long enough. Kept feeling like I needed to be back here.”

Shane knew this was his fault. “I’m sorry.”

David looked at him. “No, Shane. Don’t apologize.” His voice was gentle. “I’m just glad you're okay. Your mom and I both are.”

Shane smiled faintly.

“Speaking of your mom... how did you manage to convince her to go home and get some rest?”

Shane looked down at the blond curls beneath his hand, unable to stop his smile from growing wider. “Oh, that was all Ilya.”

David followed his gaze. For a long moment, he just looked at the young man asleep beside his son. The smile on David’s face softened, before his expression slowly turned serious.

“How *is* Ilya?” he asked

“He’s okay. I finally got him to sleep.” Shane said proudly.

“Good.” David nodded. “That’s good. He deserves some rest after the night he had.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh... uh…” David hesitated.

“Dad,” Shane studied him carefully, “what did you mean?”

“I’m not sure whether I should tell you this right now.” David let out a slow breath, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

“Dad.”

David took a deep breath, and began. “Ah... after you were taken off the ice, your mom and I, we came straight to the hospital with you. But Ilya... he still had to finish the game.”

Shane's expression emptied.

“He came here as soon as it ended.” David glanced toward Ilya before continuing. “But the hospital, they wouldn't let him in. Only immediate family and emergency contacts. We tried to add his name, but because you were unconscious, and considered high profile, the hospital wouldn't allow it.”

Shane's grip tightened unconsciously in Ilya's hair.

“I even waited by the front entrance for a while, hoping I'd catch him when he arrived,” David continued. “But reporters and fans kept recognizing me, asking about you. Eventually I had to come back upstairs. We didn’t have Ilya's number. And he didn’t have ours. Your mom spent hours trying to find it. She even tried finding his agent’s number. But no luck there.”

“When your mom finally found him…” David swallowed. “He was sitting alone in one of the hospital stairwells. He had been there for nearly six hours, Shane.”

It felt as though all the air had been knocked from Shane's lungs.

“He said he wanted to be as close to you as possible, while keeping you both safe.” David's voice had gone quiet. “He was terrified, Shane. He hadn’t heard a single update about you. He didn’t know if you were awake... He didn’t know if you were going to be okay. The last thing he saw was you lying on the ice, not moving, and then they wheeled you away. He had to carry that image with him for hours.”

Shane's vision blurred. His breathing grew shallow, each inhale suddenly something he had to think about.

“He kept apologizing to us.” David's voice caught slightly. “He thought we'd be angry, that we’d think he didn’t do enough. He spent more than eight hours not knowing if you were going to be alright.”

Shane felt his heart splinter. He stared at Ilya. His boyfriend was still asleep, his features relaxed. Peaceful after everything he went through.

“This is all my fault,” he whispered, the words barely making it past the lump in his throat.

“Shane, this is not your fault.”

“Yes.” Shane swallowed hard. “Yes, it is.”

He couldn't stop picturing it now. Ilya sitting alone in that cold hospital stairwell for hours, with nothing but his own thoughts. Unable to reach Shane or his parents. Wondering how badly Shane was hurt. Left with nothing but the memory of Shane lying motionless on the ice and the fear that something terrible had happened after he was carried off of it.

“If I hadn’t been such a coward…” Shane's voice cracked. “If I had just told Hayden or J.J. or maybe even Jackie about me and Ilya…” His gaze dropped to Ilya, and his hand lifted instead to gently cup his cheek, thumb brushing just beneath his eye. “He could've reached out to them after the game. Or they could have approached *him*. They would've given him your number... or Mom's.” He let out a shaky breath. “Fuck.” Tears spilled over before he could stop them. “I did this to him.”

“Shane—”

“I'm sorry,” Shane whispered, turning as much as his injured shoulder allowed until he was leaning toward Ilya. “I'm so sorry, Ilya.”

He wished he could hold him properly. Tell him he never meant for any of this to happen. Instead, he stayed close, his hand lingering in Ilya’s hair, gently stroking through it as if it were the only thing keeping him steady.

Shane made a decision right then and there. The next time he saw Hayden or J.J., he was going to tell them. No more hiding, not if hiding meant Ilya had to go through something like this ever again.

“I shouldn't have told you this.” David sighed quietly.

“No.” Shane shook his head. He reached down and gently smoothed another curl away from Ilya's forehead. “It's okay.” His voice steadied with quiet resolve. “It's okay because I'm going to fix this.”

Shane decided they should wake Ilya and Marlow before the Metros arrived. It would be easier, and safer, if they could avoid the chance of running into them in the hospital.

David agreed. Though there was still sadness in the way he looked at Ilya that Shane didn’t miss, guilt lingering there. Shane knew his father regretted telling him about the stairwell, about the hours Ilya had spent alone. But Shane couldn’t bring himself to regret knowing. Not when it had already changed something in him.

He told his father to go get coffee for Ilya and Marlow first, insisting they would probably want some as soon as they woke up. It was an excuse, partly for space, mostly for time. He wasn't ready yet to disturb the stillness of the room. Especially not when Ilya was asleep against him, hand tangled in his hair, breathing slow and steady for the first time in hours. And not when Marlow was finally resting too, slumped in a chair like the weight of everything had temporarily let him go.

David hesitated before leaving, and the room went quiet again once the door closed behind him.

Shane leaned back into the pillows. Sleep was far from him, his mind too full, but he didn't feel uneasy. Ilya's weight on him felt grounding, even in unconsciousness. And Marlow's presence, oddly enough, only added to the strange sense of stability.

The quiet breathing and the steady beeping of machines seemed to pass by too quickly, no matter how badly he wished time would slow down. Then there was a knock at the door. That must be his dad returning with coffee. Shane didn't bother to move or open his eyes, content to stay as he was for a few more seconds.

Until the voice that followed wasn't his dad's.

"What the fuck?"

Chapter End Notes

Y'all know the rules by now. If you see a typo, tell me!

Also sorry for the cliffhanger, I couldn't help myself...

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What the fuck?”

Shane’s eyes flew open at the sound of a familiar voice.

Hayden stood frozen in the doorway, one hand still wrapped around the doorknob. Behind him, J.J. leaned around his shoulder, both of them staring at the scene in front of them with matching expressions of confusion.

The outburst startled Ilya and Marlow awake. Marlow jerked upright in his chair, blinking rapidly as he tried to orient himself. Beside Shane, Ilya shot up just as quickly, instinctively pulling his head off Shane’s lap, and taking half a step back, as though he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have.

Shane wasn’t sure whether Hayden or J.J. had noticed because they were too busy staring at the two Raiders players now standing beside Shane’s bed.

“What the fuck are *they* doing here?” J.J. demanded as they stepped into the room, the door clicking shut behind them.

Shane immediately winced as pain flared behind his eyes from the sharpness of J.J.’s voice, but before Shane could even react, Ilya had already moved.

Almost instinctively, he stepped in front of Shane’s bed, placing himself just enough between Shane and the Metro players to shield him. “Keep your voice down, Boiziau,” he said firmly. “You’re making Shane’s head hurt.”

“They’re visiting me,” Shane answered quickly before either of them could respond. “Just like you guys.” He hoped that would be enough. He hoped they could be civil about this, but the glares his teammates were shooting Ilya and Marlow were anything but.

Hayden’s eyes shifted slowly from Shane to Marlow. “Shane...” His voice was quieter than J.J.’s, but sharper. “This guy is the reason you’re in the hospital.” His gaze never left Marlow. “Why the *fuck* is he here?”

“It was a clean hit, Pike,” Marlow answered flatly, though his voice lacked its usual confidence.

“I don’t give a fuck what the refs called it.” Hayden took another step forward. “You’re the reason my best friend is lying in a hospital bed right now.”

Shane saw Marlow's shoulders tense. Just minutes ago, he'd been relaxed enough to fall asleep in an uncomfortable hospital chair. Now he seemed to fold into himself, the confidence that usually surrounded him weighed down by guilt he still couldn't seem to let go of.

"Marly," Shane said softly.

Marlow looked at him, and Shane held his gaze for a second, hoping he understood what he couldn't exactly say in front of everyone. *I don't blame you.* He hoped Marlow could read it in his expression.

"*Marly*?" J.J. repeated, looking between them. "Don't tell me you're friends with him now too, capitaine."

"I am," Shane said simply.

"You know," Hayden said, his eyes still fixed on Marlow, "players who don't have enough talent usually resort to hurting the ones who do."

"What do you know about talent, Pike?" Marlow shot back.

Ilya took a step forward and said in a low but threatening voice, "You don't talk to my players like that, Pike."

"What the fuck are you even doing here, Rozanov?" J.J. shot back.

But Hayden didn't acknowledge him at all. Instead, he kept staring at Marlow. "That bruise on your face is looking a little lonely, maybe I should give you one on the other side."

Before anyone could react, Hayden grabbed a fistful of Marlow's sweater. Marlow barely moved. He could have broken Hayden's grip without any effort, but instead, he simply stood there.

"*Hayden*!" Shane shouted.

J.J. reached them first. Ilya moved at the same time. The two of them grabbed their respective teammates just as Hayden tried to lunge again. The hospital room erupted into shouting.

The sudden noise sent another stab of pain through Shane's head. But before the fight could escalate any further, the door swung open.

"Hey! Hey!" David's voice cut cleanly through the room. "That's enough." Everyone froze just long enough for him to step between them. "Settle down, boys, before I call my wife over here. And we all know every single one of you is scared of her."

A few sheepish apologies followed, and then the players reluctantly separated. Ilya and Marlow took one side of Shane bed, while Hayden and J.J. took the other. David remained planted at the foot of the bed, positioning himself squarely between the two groups like a referee. Silence took over the room. The Metros players continued to glare at Ilya and Marlow, not giving much attention to their captain.

“Did you come here to stare at me and Marly,” Ilya asked dryly, “or are you planning to ask Hollander how he is?”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Hayden shot back automatically. Then he blinked, realizing Ilya was right. They hadn’t even asked about their friend. Hayden looked at Shane. “How are you feeling, Shane?”

“I was feeling much better until all of you started shouting.” His brows pinched together as the last wave of pain passed through him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shane saw Ilya instinctively lift a hand, as though he wanted to smooth the crease from Shane’s forehead, but the movement stopped halfway. Ilya had caught himself. His fingers curled back into his palm instead. Shane watched his boyfriend restrain himself, saw the sadness on his face, and felt his heart break a little.

Hayden didn’t seem to notice. He kept asking about the concussion, the surgery, the collarbone, how long Shane would be out. J.J., meanwhile, stayed unusually quiet, watching far more than he spoke.

When Shane admitted he will likely miss eight to ten weeks, both of them looked devastated. But they seemed to be more upset for Shane not being able to play rather than for their team losing its captain. It made him smile despite everything.

A moment of silence passed, and no one said much. Confusion still present on Hayden and J.J.’s faces as their eyes kept drifting toward Ilya and Marlow, trying to make sense of why two Raiders players were standing at Shane’s bedside like they belonged there.

Eventually, J.J. leaned in and asked. “Pourquoi ils sont là, capitaine?” *Why are they here, Captain?*

“Parce que je leur ai demandé de rester.” *Because I asked them to stay.*

J.J.’s brow furrowed. Then, lowering his voice even though none of the other players could understand him, he asked, “Pourquoi Rozanov avait la tête sur tes genoux?” *Why did Rozanov have his head in your lap?*

Shane felt his heartbeat quicken. This was it. The moment he’d promised himself would come. This was what he promised himself he would do. This was what he *wanted* to do, for him and for Ilya.

He turned to look at Ilya. His boyfriend looked back with quiet confusion, unable to understand the French words but clearly aware that something important was being asked. Shane wished, more than anything, that he knew enough Russian to explain, enough to communicate with Ilya without anyone else understanding them.

Instead, Shane met his gaze and quietly said, “Ya tebya lyublyu.” It wasn’t just a declaration, it was a question. *Would you be okay with me telling Hayden and J.J. about us?* He hoped Ilya would understand what he meant.

Ilya seemed to understand. His expression softened, and he gave a small nod before quietly replying, “Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu.”

“Was that Russian?” Hayden asked, but was left ignored.

“Dad… Marly... could you give us a minute?”

David nodded without asking questions. Marlow glanced toward Ilya first. When Ilya gave him a small nod of his own, he followed David out, gently closing the door behind them.

The room suddenly felt much smaller, in it were just Shane, his boyfriend, his two closest friends.

“What is going on, Shane?” Hayden asked.

Shane took a deep breath trying to steady himself. Even though he wanted this, and had decided that he was going to do it, that didn’t make it any less terrifying. He looked at Ilya one last time. There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation on his boyfriend’s face, only quiet encouragement. His mind flashed back to everything his father had told him. Ilya sitting alone in the hospital stairwell, unable to call anyone, unable to reach him. Terrified and alone, all because Shane had been too afraid to let the people closest to him know the truth. He was *not* about to let that happen again.

“I have to tell you something.” Shane let out a shaking breath and cleared his throat. “I’m gay,” he said hoarsely, and once the words were out, it was impossible to stop them. He kept holding Hayden’s and J.J.’s gaze. He was terrified, his pulse pounded in his ears, but he wasn’t ashamed. And whatever happened next, he needed his friends to know that.

“And I’m in love with Ilya Rozanov. He’s my boyfriend.”

Without looking away from Hayden and J.J., Shane reached his hand towards his boyfriend. Almost instantly, Ilya’s fingers slipped between his, squeezing gently before his thumb began tracing slow circles over Shane’s knuckles.

Hayden and J.J. could only stare, their mouths partly open. Shane watched as every emotion passed across their faces in real time. Confusion, disbelief, anger, concern. Their eyes bounced from him to Ilya, then back again, like they were trying to force the pieces into a picture that refused to make sense. Neither of them spoke for several long seconds.

Finally, J.J. found his voice. “What do you mean Rozanov is your boyfriend?”

“You do not know what boyfriend means, Boiziau?” Ilya asked sarcastically.

Hayden looked between them again. “This is a joke... right?”

“No,” Shane answered. “It’s not a joke, Hayden.”

“I don’t believe it,” Hayden whispered, almost to himself.

“I can suck his dick right now, maybe you believe it then.” Ilya said, tilting his head.

"*Ilya*." Shane said sternly. His cheeks burned so hot he thought they might actually catch fire.

Hayden let out a long, suffering groan, dragging a hand down his face. "Shane, I don't care that you're gay—"

"Wow," Ilya interrupted, "such a good friend, Pike."

Hayden shot him a look. "Wait, I didn't mean it like *that*. I mean... it's great that you're gay." He looked back at Shane. "Seriously, Shane. And it means a lot that you trusted us enough to tell us."

Shane could hear the sincerity in Hayden's voice.

Then Hayden pointed at Ilya. "But *this* guy? Really? I mean… were there no nice guys in Montreal?"

"Ilya is always nice when he's in Montreal." Shane said as he shrugged.

Hayden looked genuinely offended by that answer, while beside him J.J. remained unusually quiet, still trying to make sense of everything he'd just learned.

Shane turned to look at Ilya. His boyfriend was already looking back at him, the corners of his mouth lifted into that soft, impossibly fond smile that always made Shane feel like the only person in the room.

He lifted their joined hands to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss to Ilya's knuckles. It was such a small gesture, one he'd imagined countless times but had never allowed himself to make. Being able to do it openly, with his two best friends standing only a few feet away, felt strangely freeing.

"How long has this been going on?" J.J. asked, interrupting their moment.

"Since… uh…since before our rookie season," Shane answered.

Hayden's eyes widened. "What the fuck, Shane?"

Beside him, Ilya looked equally surprised, though for an entirely different reason.

"I thought you said Pike figured it out," he said, turning to Shane.

"How the fuck would I have figured it out?" Hayden asked, confused.

"I told you I sometimes saw Ilya when we were in Boston," Shane reminded him. "Then you asked me about Lily and I—"

"I thought that meant you made up Lily."

Shane frowned. "What?"

“I thought you made her up because we kept trying to set you up,” Hayden threw both hands into the air. “and were too embarrassed to admit there was no Boston Lily.” He looked at Ilya. “I did not think Rozanov *was* Lily.”

“That was genuinely your conclusion?” Shane asked.

Hayden gave an awkward shrug. “It made more sense than you secretly dating Rozanov.”

Ilya let out a quiet, triumphant laugh. “I told you Pike is not smarter than Marly,” he said, unable to hide the smug satisfaction in his voice.

Shane couldn’t help laughing too at the ridiculous conclusion his friend came to. Still smiling, he looked back at Hayden. “You never talked to Jackie about it?”

Hayden looked confused again. “No. Why? Does *she* know?”

Shane shook his head. “No. But I’m pretty sure she would’ve figured it out.”

Hayden let out a quiet sigh, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Yeah, probably.”

But Shane’s smile faded slightly as he looked at J.J.

J.J. hadn’t smiled once. He hadn’t reacted at all, really. He just stood there, staring somewhere between Shane and Ilya, his expression impossible to read.

A knot tightened in Shane’s stomach. Had he been wrong? He had always believed that, out of all his teammates, J.J. would be okay with Shane being gay. He would even be okay with Ilya. He’d never doubted that.

He had expected J.J. to be hurt that he’d kept his relationship a secret. But what he hadn’t expected was *this*.

Beside him, Ilya gave his hand a gentle squeeze, then his thumb continued tracing slow circles over the back of Shane’s hand like a silent reassurance that helped steady Shane just enough to keep breathing.

“But what about Rose Landry?” Hayden asked, still trying to make sense of everything, not really paying mind to Shane’s internal panic. “And what about the thousands of women Rozanov’s been with?”

“Ilya and I weren’t exclusive back then.” Shane said quietly.

Hayden’s eyebrows shot up.

Ilya gave a small shrug. “Hockey is not exactly welcoming to people like me and Shane,” he explained. “We had to spend years pretending what was between us was... nothing.”

Shane watched something change in J.J. The almost blank expression disappeared from his face, replaced instead by something that looked almost horrified. His eyes dropped to the

floor.

“J.J., are you—” Shane began, but was cut off.

“Je suis désolé,” he whispered. He looked up, but still avoided Shane’s eyes. “Je... je dois partir.” *I’m sorry. I need to go.*

“*J.J.?*”

“Je suis content que tu ailles bien, capitaine. Je suis désolé.” he said. *I’m glad you’re okay, captain. I’m sorry.*

Before anyone could stop him, he turned and hurried out of the room. The door swung shut behind him. Shane stared after it. His chest suddenly felt hollow, as though someone had reached inside him and pulled all the air from his lungs. *What the fuck just happened?*

“What the fuck just happened?” he whispered, the words escaping before he realized he’d spoken them aloud.

No one answered. Hayden was still staring at the door, just as stunned. Beside Shane, Ilya hadn’t taken his eyes off him.

“Shane...” he said quietly.

Shane turned toward the safe, familiar voice.

The concern in Ilya’s eyes nearly undid him. He’d never seen him look this worried. Was this how Ilya looked at him when he took a hit on the ice? Shane never wanted to be the reason for that expression on Ilya’s face, yet here he was, causing it all over again.

“What did J.J. say?” Ilya asked gently.

Shane swallowed. “I’m sorry.” His voice caught.

“What are you sorry for, moya lyubov?”

Shane gave a small shake of his head. His voice was barely audible. “That’s... that’s what J.J. said.”

Hayden’s expression changed first, confusion turning to disbelief. He slowly looked at Ilya, but Ilya was already looking back at him. They shared a horrified look.

“I’m going to kill him.” Ilya said flatly. He turned and headed for the door. Hayden immediately fell into step beside him. “You can’t stop me, Pike.”

“I’m not going to stop you, I’m going to help you.”

“Ilya.” Shane’s voice cracked just enough to make them both stop.

Ilya looked back immediately. The single word was enough to make his expression soften. He glanced toward Hayden before speaking. “You tell Boiziau,” he said quietly, though there was steel beneath every word, “if he does anything to hurt my Shane, he will have to deal with me.”

Hayden gave a single nod, then slipped out into the hallway.

The second the door closed behind him, Ilya crossed the room. He slid an arm carefully around Shane, avoiding his injured shoulder with the same practiced precision he’d shown all day, and pulled him gently against his chest.

The moment Shane felt Ilya’s embrace, whatever resolve he had been clinging to dissolved, and his whole body trembled.

“I'm— I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “I’m so sorry, Ilya.”

Ilya tightened his hold.

“I thought I could trust J.J. I never— I never thought he’d react like this.” Shane swallowed hard. “I know you’re angry he knows—”

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him.

“Sweetheart,” he said softly, brushing his thumb beneath Shane’s eye, “I am not angry J.J. knows. I am angry that he scared you.”

“What if he tells people?”

“He won’t.”

The certainty in Ilya’s voice made Shane look up. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I trust you, and I trust your judgment. You choose to tell him about us for a reason.”

Shane knew Ilya trusted him, truly and completely, but hearing it said out loud with such certainty still took his breath away.

Ilya brushed a loose strand of hair away from Shane’s forehead. “And I think J.J. is being a little stupid right now.”

Despite everything, Shane let out a weak, watery laugh.

“Maybe...” Ilya continued, “he is hurt that you didn’t tell him before. You told Marly that was something you worried about, yes? That J.J. would be upset you kept this from him.”

That was probably it, it had to be. He knew J.J. better than almost anyone. His friend could be impulsive, immature at times, and occasionally so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he would forget how they affected everyone else. But he wasn’t cruel, he wasn’t hateful, and he certainly wasn’t a bigot.

Maybe he had simply needed to get away from the room before his emotions got the better of him.

“We have nothing to worry about, okay, moy lyubimyy?”

Shane didn’t know how Ilya managed to do it. Moments ago, it had felt like the walls were closing in around him. Now, just being held by him, hearing the absolute certainty in his voice, eased some of the panic Shane was feeling. It didn’t disappear entirely, but it was enough that Shane could breathe again.

Shane closed his eyes and gave a small nod, letting himself believe Ilya because somehow he always managed to make impossible things feel manageable.

A soft knock sounded at the door a moment later, and when it opened Hayden stepped back inside alone. The look on his face told Shane everything before he even spoke.

Hayden explained that he had checked the hallway outside the room, searched the elevators, gone through the waiting area downstairs, and even walked out to the parking lot, but J.J. was nowhere to be found. It was as if he had simply disappeared.

The news left him heartbroken. J.J. was one of his best friends, someone he had trusted for years, and watching him walk away without understanding why, felt like losing something he hadn’t realized could be taken from him. Questions kept trying to force their way into his mind, wondering what J.J. was thinking, whether he was angry, disgusted, disappointed, or if Shane had somehow destroyed their friendship in the space of a few minutes.

But every time those thoughts threatened to spiral, they ran into the certainty of Ilya’s embrace.

His boyfriend still hadn’t let go of him, his arms wrapped securely around him, holding him with the same unwavering steadiness he always seemed to have whenever Shane needed it most, and somehow the warmth of his body, the familiar rhythm of his breathing, and the gentle patterns his hand continued tracing on Shane’s back made the fear seem smaller than it had earlier.

And Shane now realized he would never have to face those fears alone.

Chapter End Notes

I would kindly like to remind everyone that I still hate Hayden Pike, and he’s only a decent character in this fic because Shane deserves better people in his corner.

alsooo, I think it's obvious I do not know French, so let's ignore any French translations that don't make sense please and thank you

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After everything that had happened with Hayden and J.J., Shane felt completely drained.

The adrenaline that had carried him through the conversation had finally worn off, leaving behind nothing but exhaustion. His head ached, his body felt heavy, and his emotions seemed to have caught up with him all at once. The thought of entertaining another group of visitors felt impossible.

More than anything, he just wanted Ilya beside him.

And Shane knew Ilya well enough to know there was no chance he would willingly leave the hospital and wait at Shane's apartment while the Metros visited. Even if Shane asked him to, Ilya would spend the entire time worrying, counting the minutes until could be by Shane's side again.

So they settled on a different plan.

Hayden sent a message to the rest of the team, letting them know Shane wasn't up for visitors that day. Instead, they agreed to come by the following afternoon after Shane had been discharged, before the team left for their road trip. The decision lifted a weight from Shane's shoulders. It meant he could spend the rest of the day exactly where he wanted to be, surrounded only by the people who made the hospital room feel less like a hospital.

A little while later Yuna returned not looking any more rested than she did before she left, but she looked more put together. She was carrying an overnight bag. Inside were comfortable clothes for Shane to change into before he was discharged that evening, along with a neatly folded change of clothes for Ilya. The gesture caught Ilya completely off guard. For a second, he simply stared at the extra bundle of clothes before looking up at Yuna, as though trying to make sure she really meant them for him. When she smiled and told him they were, his own smile slowly spread across his face, warm and almost boyish as he thanked her.

It still surprised Ilya when people thought of him, when they anticipated his needs, when they took care of him without expecting anything in return.

As he watched the exchange, Shane silently promised himself that one day those gestures would stop surprising Ilya. That he and his parents would love Ilya so consistently, so naturally, that accepting kindness would eventually become ordinary.

Later, after Hayden had left to get back to his toddlers and his very pregnant wife, and Marlow had headed to the airport to catch his flight back to Boston, Shane, Ilya, Yuna, and David sat waiting for the doctor to sign off on Shane's discharge.

As they waited, Shane told his parents that he'd finally come out to both Hayden and J.J. He left out almost everything else. He couldn't bring himself to tell them about the way J.J. had apologized before walking out or how frightened it had made him feel. He couldn't tell them how embarrassed he had felt.

By the evening, just as the doctor had promised, Shane was finally discharged from the hospital.

The drive home was harder than he'd expected. Even on smooth stretches of road, every bump and turn sent a sharp ache through his collarbone, forcing him to grit his teeth and breathe through it. Sitting upright for the journey was exhausting, and by the time they were halfway home, all Shane wanted was for it to be over.

Ilya never let go of him.

One arm stayed wrapped securely around Shane for the entire ride, keeping him steady, while his other hand drifted slowly through Shane's hair, smoothing it back from his forehead in gentle, repetitive strokes. Every so often, he would lean close enough that only Shane could hear him, murmuring quiet reassurances against his temple. 'I have you.', 'I love you.', 'You're okay.'

Then came the Russian words Shane still didn't understand, spoken so softly they almost blended into the rhythm of Ilya's breathing. He had no idea what they meant, but somehow felt exactly the same as the words he did recognize. Whatever Ilya was saying, it wrapped itself around Shane like a blanket, making the pain feel just a little farther away.

By the time they finally walked into Shane's apartment, everyone looked exhausted. The emotional weight of the last two days seemed to catch all of them the moment the front door closed.

While David and Yuna disappeared down the hall toward the guest bedroom, though not before Yuna reminded Shane for what felt like the fifth time that evening to take his medication on schedule, Shane and Ilya quietly made their way upstairs.

The moment the bedroom door clicked shut behind them, Shane closed the distance between them. He wrapped his good arm around Ilya's neck and pulled him into a deep, messy, and desperate kiss, with days worth of fear and relief poured into it.

"Fuck..." Shane breathed against his lips between kisses. "I missed you."

A quiet laugh escaped Ilya. "Sweetheart," he murmured, smiling against Shane's mouth, "I have not left your side. You have had me every second."

"Not like this," Shane whispered, chasing another kiss.

He rested his forehead against Ilya's for a moment before kissing him again, slower this time, simply because he could. His good hand drifted over Ilya's body, wanting to feel every inch of him.

Ilya eventually pulled back just enough to rest their foreheads together.

“Shane,” he said gently, brushing his thumb across Shane’s cheek, “We can’t. Your shoulder. And your concussion.”

“I know.” Shane sighed. “I just need to be close to you.”

And really, how was Ilya ever supposed to deny his boyfriend something like that?

His expression softened and the smile that’s reserved only for Shane spread across his lips, before he leaned in to steal another slow kiss, letting Shane have those extra moments he’d been craving. They stayed like that for another minute, exchanging lazy kisses until Ilya reluctantly drew back.

Shane let out a quiet, disappointed whine at the loss.

“Come.” Ilya said and guided Shane to the bathroom.

Helping each other shower had already begun to feel strangely natural.

Ilya carefully worked the sling from around Shane’s neck before easing him out of his clothes with practiced hands, moving slowly around the injured shoulder and checking Shane’s face after every movement to make sure he wasn’t causing pain.

The warm water washed away the lingering scent of antiseptic and hospital disinfectant.

Standing behind him, Ilya gently worked shampoo through Shane’s hair, his fingertips massaging slow circles against his scalp that made Shane’s eyes flutter closed almost immediately. Every careful touch seemed designed to soothe rather than simply clean.

There was something profoundly intimate about allowing someone to care for you like this, about trusting another person with your vulnerability without feeling embarrassed by it.

Once Shane’s hair was rinsed, Ilya reached for the body wash, methodically washing away two days’ worth of dried sweat, adhesive residue, and the lingering smell of the hospital with the same quiet concentration he seemed to bring to everything involving Shane.

By the time they stepped out of the shower, Shane felt lighter.

Ilya wrapped him in a towel before carefully drying him off, paying special attention around the sling and the fresh incision near his collarbone before helping him into a loose T-shirt, his own, and a pair of soft pajama bottoms.

Back in the bedroom, Ilya recreated the same nest of pillows the nurses had built at the hospital, carefully arranging them on his usual side of the bed, then helped Shane settle into

them without putting pressure on his shoulder. Only once he was certain Shane was comfortable did he climb in beside him.

Ilya propped several pillows against the headboard on Shane's side before stretching out against them, turning onto his side until their faces were level.

His hand found Shane's hair almost immediately. Slowly, absentmindedly, he combed his fingers through the soft strands, and with every gentle pass. Shane felt another layer of tension leave his body.

Still, it wasn't enough. Ilya still felt too far away. Shane wanted to wrap himself around him, he wanted Ilya to bury himself against his chest, to feel the weight of him that somehow quieted every anxious thought racing through his mind.

"Ilya, I need you closer."

Ilya didn't hesitate. He moved carefully, until their legs tangled together beneath the blankets and his chest rested lightly against Shane's uninjured shoulder. One arm slipped around Shane's waist while the other continued its slow journey through his hair, his touch feather-light around every place that still ached.

"Better?" he asked softly.

"Mm," he murmured. "Better."

When Shane opened his eyes, Ilya was already awake.

He was lying exactly where Shane had fallen asleep with him, their legs still intertwined, one arm still draped around Shane's waist. He wasn't doing anything except watching him with an expression so soft, but also filled with worry. The moment he realized Shane was awake, a smile spread across his face.

"Good morning, moya lyubov." His voice was quiet and rough with sleep... or perhaps with the lack of it.

"Good morning," Shane mumbled back, a sleepy smile spreading across his face.

Ilya's fingers immediately found their way into his hair, stroking gently through the strands before brushing them back from his forehead.

Shane studied him for a moment. There were faint shadows beneath Ilya's eyes. "Did you sleep at all?"

Ilya shook his head. "I was too mesmerized by how pretty you are to close my eyes."

“Ilya.”

His boyfriend smiled sheepishly, knowing perfectly well Shane wasn’t going to let him get away with that answer.

“I had to make sure you were okay,” he admitted at last, his voice barely above a whisper.

Shane frowned. ”But... you were able to sleep at the hospital.”

“There were doctors there,” Ilya replied simply. “Nurses. Machines. Your parents were there. Marly was there. Someone was always with us. If anything happened—” Ilya choked up, unable to continue.

“But my parents are just downstairs.”

Ilya shook his head again. “Too far.”

Something inside Shane twisted painfully. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to Shane’s forehead. “No more sorries.” He rested his forehead against Shane’s for a moment before asking quietly, “How are you feeling, moya lyubov?”

“Better.” Shane smiled faintly. “A lot less pain in my shoulder.”

“What about up here?” Ilya asked, gently brushing his fingertips against Shane’s temple.

“Just a little headache. Nothing too bad.”

“Good.” He paused. “But, I also mean—”

Shane’s smile faded. “I know what you meant.” His eyes drifted toward the ceiling. “I just... I really don’t want to think about it right now. I don’t want to think about *him*.” After a moment, he met Ilya's eyes again. “He doesn't get to steal my time with you by taking up space in my head.”

Ilya didn’t ask him to explain, he simply nodded. “Okay, sweetheart.” His thumb brushed across Shane’s cheek. “We do not have to talk about it.”

The silence that followed was comfortable, with only the sound of their breathing filling the space. But eventually, Shane asked the question he’d been trying not to think about since the night before.

“When do you have to go back to Boston?”

Ilya’s hand stilled in his hair. “Tomorrow morning.”

Shane couldn’t hide the disappointment that crossed his face.

“I hate this,” Ilya confessed so quietly Shane almost missed it. His voice cracked. “I don’t want to leave you, Shane.” He closed his eyes for a brief second before opening them again. “I can’t leave you.”

Shane’s vision blurred almost instantly. “I hate it too,” he whispered.

There was nothing else to say.

Shane reached for him with his good arm, and Ilya met him halfway, wrapping him in a careful embrace that avoided every bruise and injury but somehow still managed to make Shane feel completely held. They stayed like that, neither of them trying to fix the impossible situation they had found themselves in, simply clinging to each other as though holding on tightly enough might somehow delay tomorrow morning.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee reached them before they even made it downstairs. Shane followed Ilya into the kitchen, one hand rubbing the last traces of sleep from his eyes while the other kept his sling tucked close against his body. His shoulder still protested with every step, but compared to yesterday, the pain had dulled into something manageable.

Yuna looked up from the kitchen table the moment they appeared. “There are my boys,” she said with a warm smile, setting her coffee mug down. “Come. Sit.”

At the stove, David glanced over his shoulder, a spatula in one hand. “Morning, boys. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” Ilya answered immediately. He then crossed the kitchen and slipped in beside David.

Shane smiled to himself before making his way to the table. The moment he sat down, Yuna was there, tucking another pillow behind his back before he could protest.

“Mom, I don't need an extra pillow. I’m comfortable.”

“You’ll be more comfortable like this.”

Shane sighed dramatically but didn't argue further.

Across the kitchen, David and Ilya moved around each other with surprising ease, quietly carrying on a conversation as they finished preparing breakfast. One plated the scrambled eggs while the other sliced fruit, then together they carried everything over to the table: fluffy scrambled eggs, fresh fruit, buttered toast, hot coffee, and a small mountain of medication waiting patiently beside Shane's plate.

Breakfast passed slowly, filled with easy conversation that had nothing to do with hockey, hospitals, or concussions. It was exactly what Shane needed. When they finished eating, Ilya

immediately stood to help clear the table, but Yuna refused to let him. No matter how many times he insisted he could help, she gently ushered him away from the sink. There was no arguing with her, and after one amused look from David, Ilya surrendered with a small smile while Yuna and David cleaned the kitchen together. Not long afterward, David left for Ottawa, promising to be back in a couple of days to help Yuna drive Shane up there. Once the front door closed behind him, the apartment fell into a peaceful silence.

Shane and Ilya didn't stay at the kitchen table for long. They wandered into the living room, where Yuna had transformed one end of the couch into a comfortable place for Shane to recover, pillows stacked carefully against the armrest so he could recline without putting pressure on his shoulder. He lowered himself onto them with a quiet sigh before reaching for Ilya's hand and gently tugging him closer.

Without needing any further encouragement, Ilya climbed onto the couch and carefully stretched out beside him, resting his head across Shane's thighs while making sure not to jostle his injured shoulder.

He slipped his fingers into Ilya's hair, gently combing through the soft strands.

“Sleep for a bit,” he murmured. “Mom’s here. She won’t let anything happen to me. I promise.”

For a moment, Ilya simply looked up at him, as though convincing himself it was safe to let go. Eventually, he relented. His eyelids grew heavier with every slow pass of Shane’s fingers through his hair, the exhaustion he'd been fighting for days finally catching up to him. Before long, his breathing evened out, his face softened, and he drifted into a deep, peaceful sleep.

After some time, both Shane and Ilya were jolted awake by a knock at the door. Ilya stirred first, immediately pushing himself upright and reaching for his phone to check the time while Shane took a little longer to orient himself, blinking away the haze of sleep as he slowly sat up on the couch. The Metros weren’t supposed to come by for another two hours. So who could possibly be at the door?

Yuna looked up from the book she'd been quietly reading across the room before setting it aside and getting to her feet. “Stay put. I’ll go see who it is.”

As she disappeared into the entryway, Shane exchanged a glance with Ilya.

“Is probably just Amazon,” Ilya said, attempting to sound reassuring. It might have worked if Shane hadn’t heard the uncertainty beneath his words.

A minute later Yuna returned, but she wasn’t alone. J.J. stood awkwardly behind her, his hands tucked into his jacket. He offered Yuna an apologetic smile as she excused herself, quietly leaving the living room to give them privacy.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here, Boiziau?” Ilya asked as soon as Yuna left the room. His voice was low enough that Yuna wouldn’t hear from the guest room, but there was no mistaking the warning underneath it.

J.J. didn’t even look at him, his eyes stayed fixed on Shane. “I just...” He swallowed. “I need to talk to Shane. Please.”

Ilya looked to Shane.

This was what Shane had been desperately wanting ever since J.J. had walked out of the hospital room. Answers. He needed to know why he had run, what had been going through his mind, whether he was angry, hurt, or if everything Shane thought he knew about one of his closest friends had been wrong.

After a brief hesitation, Shane gave Ilya a small nod.

Ilya leaned down and kissed Shane’s forehead and whispered, “Tell me and I kick him out,” before he reluctantly headed into the kitchen, shooting J.J. a threatening look as he passed. In the kitchen he still had a full view of the living room, not completely leaving Shane alone, while also giving Shane and J.J. the space to talk. And Shane could see Ilya, too. He needed his presence there, even if it was from a few meters away.

J.J. remained standing, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He looked impossibly nervous. Ever since the hospital, Shane had imagined this conversation playing out a dozen different ways. He had prepared himself for anger, disappointment, questions, maybe even accusations. What he hadn't prepared himself for was what J.J. said next.

“Do you know I’ve never told any of my ex-girlfriends ‘I love you’ in English?” J.J. asked in French.

“...What?”

“I always said it in French.” J.J. rubbed a hand over his face. “The words… in English, they feel... shallow to me. They don’t carry the same weight.”

Shane frowned, more confused than before. “I— J.J. I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I know, I'm getting to it.” J.J. nodded. He took a shaky breath. “Just because words in English sometimes don’t hold any weight for me, doesn’t mean they don’t mean something to the person hearing them.”

The moment he said it, Shane felt something inside him begin to click into place.

“Sometimes I hear someone say something in the locker room and I repeat it without really taking the time to think about what the word means.” J.J.’s eyes never left the floor.

“I’ve spent almost the last twenty-four hours going over every word that’s ever come out of my mouth,” he continued. “I’m not trying to excuse what I’ve said in the locker room or on the ice, I swear I’m not. I know what I said was wrong, and I know it doesn’t matter that I

didn’t mean it the way it sounded. I’m just trying to tell you I finally heard myself. And that I’m sorry, Shane.” His voice cracked. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

Relief washed over Shane so suddenly it almost made him dizzy. He had been right. J.J. hadn’t run out of the hospital room because he couldn’t accept Shane or Ilya. He had run because, for the first time, he had been forced to confront himself, and he hadn’t liked what he saw.

Shane had always known J.J.’s heart. He had never believed there was hatred behind the words, only thoughtlessness, the kind that became so common in hockey locker rooms that people stopped questioning it. But intent didn’t erase impact, and if they were finally having this conversation, Shane needed his best friend to understand what those words had cost him.

“J.J.,” Shane began, his voice catching as tears stung his eyes. “I know you’re not homophobic. And I know you didn’t mean to be hateful.”

J.J. shook his head immediately. “No. Never.”

“But when I was still trying to convince myself I wasn’t gay,” he said quietly, “every time I heard those words in the locker room, they reminded me exactly why I was so scared to admit the truth. They only made me hold on harder to the lie I kept telling myself.”

The color drained from J.J.'s face.

“I spent years hoping I was wrong about myself, because hockey...” Shane paused, steadying his voice before continuing, “...because hockey doesn't exactly make people like me feel welcome.”

His gaze drifted toward Ilya in the kitchen. Though he couldn't understand the words, the concern on his face made it clear he understood Shane's emotions. Shane then turned back to face J.J.

“I’ve been sleeping with Ilya since I was nineteen,” he admitted with a small, disbelieving laugh. “And I still only admitted to myself at the beginning of *this* year that I was *actually* gay.”

J.J. stared at him, eyes wide with shock.

“And even after I accepted myself, even after I told Ilya I love him, it still hurt every time I heard those words.” He smiled sadly. “Especially when they came from you.”

The words landed like a punch.

“And then it hurt even more when those same words were aimed at the man I love.” Shane let out a shaky breath. “I couldn’t even defend him without outing us.”

J.J. crossed the room and lowered himself onto the coffee table in front of Shane. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and squeezed his eyes shut as though trying to steady himself. “Fuck, I think I’m gonna be sick.” he whispered. He pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead, taking a slow, shaky breath before finally looking back up. His eyes were glossy.

“I’m sorry, Shane. I’m sorry I made it harder for you to accept yourself. I’m sorry I ever made you think I wouldn’t be okay with you being gay. I’m sorry I helped make hockey feel like a place where you couldn’t be yourself.” The plea in J.J.'s voice was unmistakable. “I’m so fucking sorry, Shane. And I promise you I will be better.”

Shane had known this was who J.J. was. Beneath all the stupid jokes, the careless words, and the bravado, he had always been someone who owned his mistakes once he understood them.

Shane swallowed around the lump in his throat before letting out a shaky breath. “I forgive you, J.J.”

J.J. let out a breath that sounded like he’d been holding it ever since he’d run out of the hospital room. “Thank you,” he whispered, his eyes glistening. “Thank you, Shane.”

He stepped forward and carefully sat beside Shane on the couch before leaning over to pull him into an awkward one-sided hug, mindful of the sling and the freshly repaired collarbone that prevented either of them from embracing properly. It was clumsy and lopsided, but it felt familiar, and that made it perfect.

When J.J. pulled away, Shane realized the knot that had been sitting in his chest since the hospital had finally begun to loosen. But one question still lingered.

“Can I ask you something?”

J.J. nodded immediately. “Anything.”

“Why did you run out of the hospital room?” Shane asked quietly. “Why didn’t you just... talk to me?”

J.J.’s shoulders sagged. Shame washed over his face again. “I was so ashamed of myself.” He admitted. “I literally ran to the bathroom and started puking because of how disgusted with myself I felt.”

Shane swallowed hard. “Do you know” he began softly, “I never doubted you’d accept me being gay?”

J.J.'s head snapped up. And Shane smiled faintly.

“I even thought you’d be quicker to accept me being with Ilya than Hayden would be.”

That earned the first genuine smile J.J. had managed since walking through the door. He glanced toward the kitchen, where Ilya was pretending to busy himself while very obviously keeping one eye on the living room, watching Shane closely for any sign of discomfort since he couldn't understand a word of the French conversation.

“I mean, I had my doubts. And I still think he’s an asshole. But he’s just...” He searched for the right words. “He’s so different with you.”

Shane couldn’t help smiling. “Not different,” he said, shaking his head. “But with me,” His eyes drifted toward Ilya, “he gets to completely be himself. He knows he’s safe to let his

guard down.”

J.J. followed his gaze, watching Ilya for a long moment before looking back at Shane. A small smile spread across his face.

“I have to admit, I'm impressed you managed to snag Rozanov. I mean, I'm not into guys, but *that* is one good looking man. Didn't know you had game like that, Captain.”

Shane laughed and shoved J.J.'s shoulder.

J.J. chuckled quietly, then in a more serious tone he said, “I can’t wait to get to know your boyfriend properly.” He reached over and gave Shane's thigh a reassuring squeeze, his hand lingering there for just a moment longer than Ilya deemed acceptable.

“That’s enough touching, Boiziau,” Ilya called from the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

I rewatched Heated Rivalry and was reminded of just how hot J.J. was, and I believe that no one that hot should be mean, so J.J. is now nice and soft.

Also, I was rereading The Long Game and was reminded that J.J.’s objections to Shane and Ilya were because he thought Ilya was straight and believed Shane's crush was unrequited, he didn't want to see Shane get hurt. If Shane had told him about his relationship, I think J.J. would've been a lot kinder to Ilya than Hayden ever was.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> Apologies that chapter updates are so far apart. There's a reason my name is winter_ninja not summer_ninja.
>
> Also if you notice a typo, please let me know! I promise you won't hurt my feelings if you point it out :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane's living room had always felt spacious, but now, with twenty professional hockey players crammed into it, it suddenly felt a size too small.

The room filled quickly with the familiar sounds of teammates greeting him one after another, chairs scraping across the hardwood floor as they searched for somewhere to sit, while some of the younger players gave up entirely and sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor.

Yuna welcomed each of them inside, making sure every player heard the same instructions before they ventured any farther into the apartment: keep your voices down, don't jostle Shane, and absolutely no touching his shoulder. Only once she was satisfied everyone understood did she excuse herself upstairs.

Shane watched her disappear toward his bedroom and felt a little more at ease.

He had insisted that she stay upstairs with Ilya while the team visited. The last thing he wanted was for his boyfriend to spend the afternoon hidden away by himself like some shameful secret. Besides, Shane was hoping his mother might accomplish something he hadn't been able to.

Ever since they'd left the hospital, Ilya had barely slept. Every time Shane woke up, Ilya was already awake. Every time Shane closed his eyes, he could feel Ilya watching over him, as though he was afraid that if he looked away for a second too long, Shane might disappear again. It made Shane feel unimaginably loved, but it also shattered his heart. He hated knowing his boyfriend was running himself into the ground because the thought of something happening to him again was simply too terrifying to let himself rest.

Maybe, Shane thought, his mother could convince him to sleep.

With that worry temporarily handed over to the person he trusted with the job the most, Shane sat back against the mountain of pillows on the couch and looked around at his

teammates filling his living room.

In two hours, they'd all be heading to the airport for what would likely be the final road trip of the season. Without Shane in the lineup, nobody seemed particularly convinced Montreal was going to make the playoffs.

Once everyone had offered some variation of "Get well soon," the room quieted.

Wilson was the first to ask the question everyone had clearly been waiting to hear. "So, how bad is it, Cap?"

"Fractured collarbone. I'll be out for eight to ten weeks."

Several players visibly winced while others simply looked down at the floor. No one seemed quite willing to do the math out loud.

"Didn't know you could break so easily, Hollander," Comeau muttered with a joking grin, though there was something ugly lurking beneath it. "Well... there goes our chance at a three-peat, boys."

Shane had only recently realized that Comeau never addressed him as Captain, only Hollander. It definitely felt intentional.

"Why? Do you guys not plan on reaching the Finals without me?" Shane asked, looking at them with practiced innocence while carefully hiding the cockiness he'd apparently recently earned after Ilya and half a dozen of the Raiders roster drilled into his head just how good he really was compared to his team.

"Captain, it's gonna take a miracle just to make the playoffs without you," Mitka answered.

"Man, I swear the next time we play Boston, I'm gonna fuck up Marlow," Wilson added angrily.

"No, you're not," Shane said firmly. "No one is going to touch Marlow. Do you all fucking hear me? It was a clean hit. He played the game right, and you are not going to punish him for that."

His eyes drifted from one player to the next.

"He's already apologized to me, and he even apologized to my parents, which was completely unnecessary. Besides, the bruise Hayden left on his face was punishment enough."

"Wait, you saw him? He visited you in the hospital?" Wilson asked.

Every head immediately snapped toward him.

"Yeah, he did. A couple of the other Raiders players stopped by too before they headed back to Boston."

"Don't tell me you've made even more friends on the Raiders, Hollander," Drapeau said sarcastically.

"I did," Shane replied without hesitation. "They've got a good group of men over there."

"Including Rozanov?" Drapeau asked, annoyed.

"Of course."

"I don't know how you do it, Hollander. I could never trust that Russian cocksucker," Comeau said, the word rolling off his tongue too easily.

Shane felt sick to his stomach. He hated how unfair it was that he couldn't stand up to anyone who disrespected his boyfriend, forced instead to bite his tongue every single time.

"Did you come here to check on Shane, or just throw slurs around?" J.J. asked sharply from his spot beside Shane. "Look where you're sitting. You're in your captain's home. We don't use that kind of language here."

Shane could see just how hard his friend was trying to be better, and he was glad to see that when J.J. had promised there would be a change in his behavior, it hadn't just been talk.

"Don't be a fucking pussy, J.J.," Wilson said.

"Fuck off, J.J. I was just saying I don't understand how he can trust Rozanov," Comeau replied defensively.

"You've never questioned Shane's judgment before. Don't start now," Hayden said before Shane had the chance to respond.

"We've never questioned his judgment when it came to hockey," Comeau shot back.

"Hockey also includes hockey players," Shane replied simply.

"Whatever," Comeau muttered, then added, "What the fuck was up with Rozanov, anyway?"

"What do you mean?" Shane asked.

"Oh, Cap, you didn't see it," Wilson began. "When you went down, he got so weird. Like he just fucking froze. The ref had to push him back to the bench."

How could this group of grown men lack this much empathy? Shane wondered. He took a slow breath, trying to steady his voice before the anger found its way into it.

"He *just* buried his father. And then, a week later, he watched his friend, someone he's known since he was seventeen, get wheeled off the ice in a neck brace." Shane let his gaze travel around the room before adding, "Sounds to me like a very normal reaction, don't you think?"

A few players mumbled a few things, while others lowered their heads, looking rather ashamed.

The conversation drifted back to hockey after that, Shane sharing strategy and insights about the teams they would be facing over the next few days. Normally, this was something he would have done during the team meeting, but since he wouldn't be able to travel with the team, he took the opportunity he had to continue leading them.

The team was in the middle of discussing strategy when Drapeau interrupted.

"Fuck, I'm thirsty. You got anything to drink around here?" he asked, looking around the room before adding, "I wonder where Mrs. Hollander went."

Shane could feel his blood begin to boil. He knew exactly what Drapeau meant, and it had nothing to do with wondering where his mother had gone. The assumption that she'd be the one fetching drinks for a room full of grown men was downright disrespectful.

"Drapeau, I didn't know you also got injured," Shane said, trying to remain calm.

"Huh? Me? No, I'm not injured," Drapeau replied, clearly confused.

"Oh, okay, good. Then I guess you can just get up and grab your own drink," Shane said innocently, fighting back the smirk that was desperately trying to spread across his face. He pointed toward the open-concept kitchen behind Drapeau. "Kitchen's right behind you. You won't miss it."

There were a few quiet chuckles spread around the room.

Drapeau looked offended. He cursed under his breath before getting to his feet to grab himself a drink.

"Oh, can you get me a cup of water since you're already going there?" J.J. asked casually, though Shane knew exactly what he was doing. "Merci, Drap," he added before Drapeau had the chance to protest.

Later, as the team got ready to leave, Shane could see just how defeated they all looked. The reality of finishing the season without their captain had fully sink in.

"Alright, everyone, listen up."

The room fell silent.

"I know we're all feeling disheartened after the game against Boston, but let me remind you," he looked around the room, making eye contact with each player. "We are the team that brought the Stanley Cup back to Montreal after sixteen years. Then, when people said it was just luck or a fluke, we went out the next year and won it again."

He didn't need to raise his voice to have everyone's undivided attention.

"This team was never built around one player. It was built on twenty-three men showing up, not giving up, and working hard every single fucking day. So you're going to finish this regular season the same way we've played every one before it. And I expect each and every single one of you to remember who the fuck we are and earn us a playoff spot."

The room answered with cheers, and the energy became noticeably lighter. His teammates looked like themselves again, ready to take on the rest of the season.

As soon as the door shut behind the last of their teammates, Hayden and J.J. let out a collective breath. Shane was relieved to have them gone too, but there was only one thing on his mind.

"J.J., can you go get Ilya?"

J.J. had barely been gone thirty seconds when Shane heard hurried footsteps racing down the stairs.

"Woah, slow down, Rozanov. He's not going anywhere."

"Shut up, Pike," Ilya shot back as he brushed past Hayden without slowing down.

As Shane laid eyes on his boyfriend, every ounce of stress melted away. The ache in his head dulled and suddenly all he could feel was how impossibly full his heart was. His teammates hadn't been in the house for more than thirty minutes, yet those thirty minutes had felt like torture without Ilya beside him. *Fuck*... if half an hour already felt unbearable, how the hell was he supposed to survive till the end of the season with hundreds of miles between them?

Shane’s vision began to blur.

The smile that had been resting so naturally on Ilya's face disappeared the instant he noticed the tears gathering in Shane's eyes.

"Moya lyubov, what is wrong?" Ilya asked, concern immediately creeping into his voice as he reached Shane and lowered himself onto the edge of the couch beside Shane's legs.

He reached up to cup Shane's cheek, his thumb brushing gently over the freckles scattered across his skin.

Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering shut as he savored the familiar warmth of Ilya's hand.

"Shane?" Ilya asked again when no answer came.

"Kiss me," Shane whispered.

Without another word, Ilya leaned in and kissed him. His hand remained cradling Shane's cheek while Shane's own drifted into Ilya's hair, his fingers threading gently through the soft curls at the nape of his neck. It was a slow, careful kiss, his lips barely lingering before pulling back just enough to search Shane's face, only to lean in again for another impossibly soft kiss.

The fear of the months ahead, the distance waiting for them, the ache in his shoulder, the pounding in his head, everything faded into the background until all he could feel was Ilya's warmth, the familiar scent of him, and the strong hand still holding his face as though letting go wasn't an option.

When they finally pulled apart, the worry hadn't left Ilya's expression. "Are you in pain?" he asked quietly. "Do you need your medication? Are you hungry? Are you tired? Is something wro—"

"Nothing's wrong, Ilya," Shane said with a small, watery smile. "I just missed you."

Shane could tell Ilya knew there was more to it than that, but he didn't press, not with Hayden and J.J. still sitting only a few feet away.

Ilya carefully lifted Shane's legs just enough to slide himself farther onto the couch before gently settling them back across his lap. One hand immediately found its way into Shane's hair, his fingers combing through the soft strands in slow, soothing strokes, while his other rested lightly against Shane's leg, his thumb absentmindedly tracing lazy circles over the fabric of his sweatpants.

Ilya's touch was so comforting that it seemed to wrap itself around Shane, quieting every anxious thought until all he could focus on was the warmth of his boyfriend's hand.

A few minutes later, Yuna appeared in the living room. Shane looked at her, silently asking the only question he been thinking about. She shook her head. She hadn't been able to get Ilya to sleep either.

They all sat around the living room talking for another few minutes. It was something Shane had never allowed himself to dream about. Having the most important people in his life all in the same room, openly talking to one another, nothing hidden, no lies to keep track of. He had never let himself imagine a moment like this because, for the longest time, he hadn't believed it could ever exist.

After Hayden and J.J. left, the house felt calm, but beneath it all was the reminder of the clock steadily counting down. Every minute that passed was one minute closer to Ilya boarding a plane back to Boston.

Shane refused to let that thought poison the little time they still had together. There would be plenty of time to miss Ilya after he was gone. For now, he was determined to make the most of every second they had left.

By lunchtime, Ilya had insisted on cooking for Shane and Yuna, but neither of them would let him anywhere near the kitchen. Instead, they ordered takeout and ate together around the dining table.

Conversation naturally drifted toward the upcoming playoffs and Boston's chances of winning the Cup. Yuna even offered Ilya a few observations she'd made about his team over the course of the season, pointing out habits and tendencies she'd noticed from watching so many of their games.

"Yuna, you will be cheering for Boston in the playoffs, yes?" Ilya asked jokingly.

"Absolutely not," Yuna answered, sounding almost offended by the suggestion. "But... I *will* be cheering for their captain. I happen to like him a lot."

A shy smile spread across Ilya's face, one Shane didn't get to see nearly often enough, and it warmed his heart all the same.

After lunch, Shane returned to the couch while Ilya went to fetch his medication. Shane swallowed the pills with a sip of water, and before long, he could feel drowsiness creeping over him. He tried to fight it. He wanted to be awake for every second he had left with Ilya, unwilling to waste even an hour asleep when they had so little time together, but his recovering body eventually caught up with him.

Ilya noticed immediately. Of course he did.

"Sleep, moya lyubov," he said softly as he took the glass from Shane's hand and set it down on the coffee table. He sat on the edge of the couch beside him and gently began running his fingers through Shane's hair.

"I want to sleep with you." Shane said.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Ilya's mouth.

"Not what I meant, asshole," Shane said, already sounding half-asleep. "Just lay on top of me already."

Ilya’s smirk softened then he carefully climbed onto the couch before settling most of his weight against Shane. He rested his head on Shane's stomach, the rest of his body draped over Shane's legs, one arm loosely wrapped around his thighs while making sure not to trap him in place.

Ilya's weight against him was everything Shane needed. It grounded him in a way nothing else could, quieting the thoughts that had been racing through his mind all day until it felt as though nothing else existed beyond the two of them.

Shane's good hand found its way into Ilya's hair, his fingers slowly combing through the soft curls before drifting lower to the collar of his T-shirt. His fingertips slipped just beneath the fabric, gently tracing the warm skin at the back of Ilya's neck, needing the reassurance that he was really here. The touch drew an almost imperceptible shiver from Ilya before he melted further into Shane, a quiet sigh escaping him as finally began to relax his body. His breathing gradually evened out, and before long, soft snores rose from where his face was tucked against Shane's stomach.

Within minutes, Shane felt himself drifting toward sleep as well, lulled by the steady rhythm of Ilya's breathing, and the comforting weight of the man he loved.

A couple of hours later, they both woke up. Ilya looked much more relaxed, the stress lines that had been visible on his face over the past few days now barely seen.

Later that afternoon, Shane called his dad. He sounded as though being away from his family during this time hurt him just as much as it hurt Shane. His father had never been the overbearing type, never the kind to hover, but Shane could hear all the questions he was choosing not to ask. Did you sleep? Are you eating? Did you take your medication? Instead, he asked how Yuna and Ilya were doing.

Just as Shane was saying goodbye and handing the phone back to his mother, Ilya walked back into the living room, ending a phone call of his own.

"Was that your coach?" Shane asked.

"Ah, no. Was my trainer," Ilya replied. "He was asking why I did not show up for lifting session today."

Only then did Shane realize that Ilya hadn't done any of his training in two days.

"You know I have a home gym, right?" Shane said.

"Yes, I know. Is okay. I will make up for it when I am back in Boston."

"Ilya, the playoffs are coming up. There's no room for missing workouts. You need to be on top of your game."

"I am already best player in the league, I can skip one workout and still be the best." Ilya replied with complete confidence.

God, Shane loved how stubborn his boyfriend could be. Unfortunately for Ilya, he'd forgotten that Shane could be just as stubborn. He rolled his eyes before pushing himself to his feet with Ilya's help.

"Where are you going?" Ilya asked, one hand hovering close by in case Shane lost his balance.

"I'm tired of sitting here." Shane nodded toward the kitchen. "Grab a chair and follow me."

"Where to?"

"Just follow me, Rozanov."

"Mmm... bossy," Ilya teased with a smirk.

"Shut up. You like it."

"I fucking love it."

Shane led the way toward the home gym, moving at a pace his recovering body could manage, while Ilya followed close behind, dragging a chair across the floor.

"Shane..." Ilya said as they reached the room.

"What?" Shane glanced back before putting on an exaggerated Russian accent. "I want to watch."

A short laugh escaped Ilya before he shook his head, finally relenting to Shane's persistence.

"Fine. I will work out," he conceded as he helped Shane lower himself carefully into the chair. "But if you get tired of sitting here, you will tell me, yes?"

Shane nodded, struggling to hide the victorious smile spreading across his face.

Ilya disappeared for less than two minutes before returning in one of Shane's workout shirts, a pair of gym shorts, and running shoes he'd borrowed from Shane's closet. In one hand, he carried a book, which he placed in Shane's lap.

"So you don't get bored," Ilya explained.

Shane almost laughed. Getting bored was probably the last thing on his mind. He had a front-row seat to what was, without question, the most attractive performance he would ever witness.

Ilya started with a few minutes on the stationary bike, his legs moving in an easy rhythm as he gradually warmed up. Once he was satisfied, he moved over to the bench press, loading the bar with practiced efficiency before lying back on the bench and beginning his first set.

Shane hadn't opened the book once. His eyes never left his boyfriend. He watched the muscles in Ilya's arms tighten and flex with every controlled lift, the veins along his forearms becoming more pronounced as he gripped the bar, the steady rise and fall of his chest as each set left him breathing a little heavier, and the slow trail of sweat that slipped down the side of Ilya's neck before disappearing beneath the collar of his shirt.

God, he wanted to walk over and lick the bead of sweat from Ilya's neck.

"How is your book?" Ilya asked between sets.

It took Shane a second to remember that Ilya had handed him one in the first place. "Huh? Oh... um, it's nice."

Ilya raised an eyebrow and walked over, stopping close enough that Shane had to tilt his head back to look at him. Leaning down with a knowing smile, he asked, "What is it about?"

Shane looked down at the unopened book resting in his lap, stared at it, then lifted his gaze to meet Ilya's eyes.

"No fucking clue."

A laugh escaped Ilya before he shook his head, gave Shane a kiss, then returned to his workout.

Unfortunately for Shane, all good things had to come to an end, and before long, Ilya had finished his last set.

As they made their way out of the home gym together, Ilya turned toward Shane with a small grin. "I will go shower now. Do you want me to bring chair upstairs so you can also watch?"

Shane actually considered it for a second, just long enough for Ilya's smile to widen. He could feel his cheeks start to burn. Finally, he huffed out an exasperated breath. "No, asshole, go shower on your own."

Once satisfied that Shane was safely under his mother's watch, Ilya made his way upstairs.

The rest of the day passed in the blink of an eye, and before either of them realized it, they were getting ready for bed.

As the evening wore on, Ilya had gradually grown quieter. He smiled when Shane and Yuna spoke to him and joined in every conversation, but something about him seemed more distant, as though his mind was already halfway to tomorrow. By the time they were curled up together in bed, Ilya resting with his head on Shane's stomach while Shane played with his hair, Shane couldn't ignore it any longer.

"Is everything okay?"

Ilya slowly lifted his head and gave a small shake of his head.

Shane's heart sank the moment he saw the tears beginning to gather in his boyfriend's eyes.

"Hey, Ilya," he whispered, his hand immediately finding Ilya's cheek. "What is it? Talk to me."

"I don't… I don't know how I'm supposed to leave tomorrow."

"Ilya—"

"I know now what it is like to have you all the time, and I don't know how to go back." His voice cracked as he spoke. "I want to wake up and fall asleep with you. I want to work out together. I want to spend time with your parents."

A tear finally escaped, sliding down his cheek.

"I want us to cook together... eat meals together, even if it is bird food. I will eat it, I swear." He let out a shaky laugh that only made him sound sadder. "I don't want to be away from you."

It was strangely comforting to know he wasn't the only one struggling with this.

But that comfort came with its own kind of pain, because it meant Ilya was carrying the same ache Shane had been trying so hard to hide, and the thought of his boyfriend hurting like this broke his heart even more.

Shane wrapped his good arm around Ilya and held him a little tighter, his fingers combing through his curls until Ilya's breathing gradually slowed and evened out. Only once he was certain Ilya had finally drifted off to sleep did Shane allow his own eyes to close.

They woke up early the next morning, neither of them having slept nearly enough. While Ilya quietly packed the last few things into his carry-on upstairs, Shane made his way to the kitchen to help his mom prepare breakfast for everyone.

A few minutes later, Ilya carried his luggage downstairs and joined them at the table and began eating his breakfast.

"Ilya," Shane said, glancing at his mom before looking back at his boyfriend. "Mom and I were talking, and... well... in about two weeks, I should be cleared to travel."

Ilya's brows knit together as he listened.

"So... I was thinking... I could come to Boston." Shane smiled nervously. "And spend the rest of the season with you."

"Of course, we'd have to find you a physical therapist in Boston, as well as a doctor to continue your follow-up appointments, but that's all manageable." Yuna added.

Ilya didn't say anything. His eyes drifted slowly between Shane and Yuna, his expression unreadable. The silence stretched just a little too long.

Fuck. What if Ilya wanted to focus on the playoffs? What if he didn't want Shane disrupting his routine? What if living together during the most important stretch of the season would only be a distraction?

"Um... of course, I don't *have* to come," Shane said quickly. "If you'd rather I didn't bother you during the play—"

Ilya was already shaking his head.

"No, Shane." His voice came out almost breathless. "No... this is... this is everything I want."

He was out of his chair before Shane could say another word. Leaning down, he pressed a quick kiss to Shane's lips before resting their foreheads together.

"Is this what you want?" he whispered.

"Yes," Shane answered, unable to hide the smile spreading across his face. "More than anything."

"Thank you, Shane." Ilya kissed him again, then another quick kiss to his cheek, his forehead, the corner of his mouth, peppering his face with grateful affection. "Thank you," he whispered again.

Then he straightened, turned to Yuna and pulled her into a gentle hug.

"Thank you," he whispered to her too. "I promise I will take care of him."

Yuna smiled as she wrapped her arms tightly around him.

"I have no doubt about it."

Chapter End Notes

I've seen so many people say that Shane isn't that great of a captain or that Ilya is the better captain, and I honestly don't know where that belief comes from.

When I read Heated Rivalry and The Long Game, the way Shane was written: pure talent, the best in the league, autistic, I immediately pictured his leadership style as being similar to Leo Messi's.

He leads through consistency, composure, and by setting the standard. That's always been how I've imagined Shane.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> There is a small tiny bit of spice in this chapter, but calling it smut would be an insult to fan fiction, so I'm not gonna do that.
>
> And it's definitely not spicy enough to change the rating of this fic, so please, whatever your expectations are, lower them.

The day Shane was finally cleared for travel, he was at the airport that very night.

His luggage had been packed for days, sitting ready and waiting for his doctor to finally give him the go ahead. He had followed every instruction, taken every medication exactly as prescribed, and done everything he could to make sure there would be nothing standing between him and getting to Ilya once he was allowed to travel.

It had been two weeks since he had last seen him, two weeks since he watched him leave his apartment in Montreal and return to Boston alone.

They had talked every day since then. Whenever Ilya wasn't at a game, practice, or traveling with the team, he was on the phone with Shane. Sometimes for hours at a time, and even when they didn't have much to say, neither of them seemed willing to be the one to end the call. Shane could hear the worry in Ilya's voice, the sadness he tried to hide behind jokes and ordinary conversation, and every time he heard it, Shane wished he could reach through the phone and take it all away. He hated knowing that Ilya was carrying the same loneliness he was, especially when there was nothing he could do about it from hundreds of miles away.

But now, finally, he was on his way to him.

By the time Shane landed in Boston, all he wanted was to get to Ilya as quickly as possible. He had barely turned his phone back on reaching for it to tell Ilya he landed and then to order an Uber, when a message from Ilya was already waiting for him.

Your second favorite Russian is waiting for you in airport parking.

Ilya had arranged for Svetlana to pick him up, and despite his insistence that he didn't want to bother her, Ilya had assured him that she was the one who had offered.

So, a short while later Shane found himself walking through the airport parking lot, his suitcase rolling behind him as he made his way towards the car Ilya had described.

He noticed her first. Svetlana was leaning against her car looking around the parking lot, and the moment she spotted him, a smile grew on her face. She pushed herself away from the car and walked quickly towards him, greeting him with a warm, tight hug, though she was careful enough not to put any pressure on his injured shoulder.

It was the first time she'd seen him in person since the injury, and the sight of the sling seemed to make the reality of it sink in. When she pulled back, her eyes immediately went to his arm and her expression turned sympathetic.

"Oh, Shane," she said sadly.

"I'm okay," Shane assured her, offering her a small smile back.

Svetlana had called him after he'd been discharged from the hospital to check on him, but there was something different about seeing her now, standing in front of him with that same concern he'd heard in Ilya's voice every day since he had returned to Boston.

The drive to Ilya's house felt painfully long, though not because of Shane's injury, or even because of Svetlana's company. He genuinely enjoyed spending time with her, and they talked throughout the drive, but Shane could barely focus on the conversation when every passing minute felt like another minute standing between him and Ilya.

As they finally made it through the gate, Shane spotted him.

Ilya was already waiting outside of his front door, his eyes fixed on the approaching car. Shane could see the way his eyes lit up the closer they got, until Ilya couldn't seem to wait another second. He hurried down the driveway toward them and reached the car before it had even fully stopped, pulling open the passenger side door.

Shane practically jumped out before Svetlana even had a chance to put the car fully into park.

He pushed himself into Ilya's arms not bothering to even catch his balance, his good arm wrapping around his boyfriend as Ilya immediately pulled him close.

Two weeks. Two weeks of phone calls and video chats, of hearing Ilya's voice through a screen instead of beside him, of falling asleep and waking up without him. And now he was here.

Ilya's arms tightened around him, and Shane barely registered the movement before Ilya's lips found his, finally giving them both the reunion they'd been waiting for.

They kissed, and for a while. The warmth of Ilya's body against his, the reassuring feel of his arms around him, the softness of his lips, the sweet taste of his tongue, and the familiar smell of his cologne; it was everything Shane had been missing.

The longer they stayed wrapped around each other, the lighter Shane began to feel, until he eventually had to pull back, his head swimming slightly.

"Hi," Shane whispered, a smile spreading so wide across his face that his cheeks already hurt.

“Hi,” Ilya whispered back, smiling just as widely.

They just stared at each other, neither of them seeming willing to break the little bubble they had created.

“If you’re going to do that all night, can you at least take your boyfriend’s suitcase out of my car so I can go home?” Svetlana finally interrupted.

Shane laughed, and Ilya reluctantly pulled away from him.

He opened the trunk and pulled Shane’s suitcase out, then they both turned back to Svetlana to thank her. Svetlana smiled warmly before driving off. Ilya then reached for Shane’s good hand, and led him toward the house. After placing Shane’s suitcase by the door, he closed and locked it behind them. When he turned around, Shane was already watching him with a fond smile.

Finally, they were home together.

He walked toward him, returning the smile before leaning in to kiss him again. It was soft and slow, neither of them feeling any need to rush now that they were finally alone together.

When they pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane’s. “I can’t believe you’re really here,” he whispered.

“Me neither,” Shane whispered back.

Ilya pulled away just enough to take a proper look at him, his eyes moving over Shane’s face and then traveling down his body.

“You are okay? Anything hurt?”

“I’m okay, Ilya. Nothing hurts, I promise.” Shane reassured him.

“What did the doctor say?”

“She said the fracture is healing well, and that I’m right where I’m supposed to be in my recovery. And that I still have to take it easy and keep wearing the sling, but I’m allowed to start doing some light activity like walking and physical therapy as long as I don’t overdo it.”

“Mm. Good,” Ilya said, seemingly satisfied with the answer.

“Doctor didn’t *just* clear me for walking and therapy,” Shane added nervously, biting his bottom lip.

"Oh, really?" Ilya’s eyes narrowed, as though he was beginning to understand exactly what Shane was getting at.

Shane nodded, his cheeks already turning bright red.

“Hm.” Ilya began, with a mischievous smile appearing on his face. “But you had a very busy day today. Maybe you should rest. Maybe sleep early—”

“Ilya, I swear to god, if you don’t touch me right now—”

Shane didn’t have to finish his threat, because Ilya was already kissing him again. He guided them toward the couch, making sure Shane was comfortable before carefully helping him lie down.

He loved the way Ilya could manhandle him when he wanted to and throw him around like he weighed nothing, but apparently he loved this just as much. The way Ilya was so careful with him now, guiding him with a gentleness that made it painfully obvious how terrified he still was of hurting him.

Ilya checked his shoulder one more time to make sure it was properly supported then climbed on top of him.

He kept most of his weight off of Shane, bracing himself so that he wouldn’t put any pressure on his body, but he stayed close enough that Shane could feel every bit of his warmth.

Then Ilya’s mouth was on his again. This time, the kiss was deep and hungry, but there was still something impossibly sweet about it that made Shane feel as though he was floating. Ilya kissed him like he was trying to make up for every moment they’d spent separated.

As much as Shane loved seeing how their relationship had evolved beyond the physical side, he had missed this part more than he wanted to admit out loud. They didn’t need sex to communicate anymore. They had learned how to say I love you in a hundred different ways, through quiet conversations, lingering touches, shared meals, stupid jokes, and simply being there for each other. They had learned that they could be vulnerable with one another without needing anything physical to follow after.

But God, Shane had missed this too.

“I missed you so fucking much,” Ilya whispered against his lips, clearly feeling the same way Shane did, then kissed him along his jaw and down his neck.

He moved his hips against Shane’s just slightly, but it was enough for him to feel Ilya’s erection against his.

Shane’s fingers slipped into Ilya’s hair, holding him closer. He couldn’t help the quiet sounds that escaped him as Ilya started to trail kisses down his body, before sliding down Shane’s pants and boxers and taking him into his mouth.

“Fuck,” Shane moaned.

It was warm, deep, wet, and so fucking hot. Shane felt completely surrounded by him, the warmth of his mouth, the familiar weight of his presence, and beneath all of it was something deeper than desire. He felt so loved, so safe, so *wanted*.

When Shane instinctively tried to arch closer, Ilya immediately caught his hips and held him still, not wanting Shane to move his body in a way that could end up hurting his shoulder further.

As much as Shane wanted to draw it out, it was impossible to prolong. And before long, he was spilling into his boyfriend's mouth, and Ilya swallowed every bit of it like his life depended on it.

When he pulled off, Ilya stayed close, pressing a few lingering kisses against Shane's thighs and hips before helping him straighten his clothes.

"Come here," Shane said.

And Ilya gladly obliged, crawling back up Shane's body until he could lean down and kiss him again.

Shane slid his free hand down and reached for Ilya, but the awkward angle, combined with having to use his left hand, made the movement clumsy. He huffed in frustration, trying again.

"Shane, is okay. I just want to take care of you tonight." Ilya said, noticing Shane struggling.

"Ilya, please. I need this."

"Okay, sweetheart. Anything you need."

Ilya slid his own pants and boxers down, giving Shane an easier access, but Shane quickly realized the position wasn't working. He let out an irritated breath.

"What can I do?" Ilya asked.

"Help me up."

Ilya moved out of the way and helped Shane to his feet. Then Shane guided him back onto the couch to sit before lowering himself to his knees in front of him.

At the first touch of familiarity, Shane nearly cried with relief.

He felt completely overwhelmed by it all; by the closeness, by the familiar taste, by the intoxicating scent, by the sounds Ilya was making above him, some in English and others in Russian, enough that Shane couldn't always tell which language he was speaking. He was so lost in the euphoric feeling of finally having his boyfriend within reach again that he barely even registered Ilya telling him he was close.

And before Shane knew it, Ilya was spilling down his throat.

Ilya pulled him back up onto the couch, carefully helping him straddle his lap before leaning in to kiss him.

"Fuck, you're perfect," Ilya whispered against his lips then kissed him again.

After they got up, Ilya managed to put together a quick dinner for them, though with their adrenaline being high as it was, neither of them was particularly hungry. They sat side by side at the table, their legs tangled together beneath it, not willing to let more than a few inches of space exist between them.

After dinner, they headed upstairs. Ilya carried Shane's suitcase up for him and set about unpacking it, with Shane's supervision of course. It didn't take long before everything was unpacked to Shane's satisfaction, his clothes now occupying a space in Ilya's closet that had clearly been waiting for him.

Once the suitcase was finally empty, Ilya turned toward him. "Come. I will help you shower."

After weeks in the sling, Shane was now perfectly capable of showering on his own now, but he had absolutely no intention of telling his boyfriend that.

Ilya guided him into the shower, taking his time helping Shane out of his clothes, removing each piece with gentleness, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's skin with every layer he removed.

Under the warm water, Ilya shampooed Shane's hair, massaging the shampoo gently into his scalp before carefully rinsing it away. He washed Shane's body with the same patience, making sure to avoid putting any unnecessary pressure on his injured shoulder, treating him with a tenderness that made Shane's heart flutter.

By the time they finally climbed into bed, Shane felt completely relaxed, his body warm and heavy with exhaustion. Ilya curled up beside him, resting his head against Shane's stomach, and Shane wrapped his arm around him, his fingers gently running over Ilya's back as he listened to the rhythm of his breathing.

It was the best sleep Shane had gotten since his injury. His body felt completely at ease lying beside Ilya, and when he woke the next morning, he found himself almost reluctant to move, content to stay exactly where he was.

They started their day rather lazily, but neither of them complained about it, taking their time brushing their teeth and getting dressed and eventually making their way downstairs, where Ilya insisted on making them breakfast and refused to let Shane help with anything more demanding than sitting at the kitchen counter and keeping him company.

Once they were done with breakfast, Ilya cleaned up their plates while Shane watched him, and then the two of them made their way to the couch, where they spent the rest of the morning cuddled up, talking, and occasionally sharing lazy kisses.

By midday however, Ilya had to leave for practice. The Raiders had won the first round of the playoffs in a clean sweep and were already preparing for the second round, while Montreal had also managed to make the playoffs thanks to the effort Shane had put in throughout the regular season games, only to be eliminated in the first round without him there to captain them through it.

Shane meanwhile had his own appointment to attend while Ilya was at practice, seeing a physician his doctor in Montreal had referred him to so that he could continue his recovery in

Boston.

For the next five days, they settled into a comfortable routine of living together, Ilya going to practice while Shane went to his doctor's and physical therapy appointments, with Shane deliberately scheduling his sessions for the same time as Ilya's practice so that they could spend as much of their time together as possible when they were both home.

When they weren't at their respective commitments, they spent their time doing all the little things Shane had once convinced himself they would never get to have together, cooking together, or rather Ilya cooking while Shane watched from the kitchen because Ilya still refused to let him lift a finger, watching game tape together, competing over the most ridiculous things just because neither of them could resist turning everything into a competition, and simply existing beside each other in all the ordinary ways that couples did without ever thinking twice about it.

It was strangely easy, the way their lives seemed to fit together so well.

But before they knew it, the second round of the playoffs was underway. And unfortunately, the first two games were away games, which meant Ilya had to leave for the road.

As Ilya was packing his suitcase getting ready to leave, Shane noticed that he seemed to be waiting for something, glancing out the window then toward the door every so often as though expecting someone to arrive. Shane wanted to ask him about it, but decided it might just be Ilya being nervous to leave Shane all alone for the next few days. He hoped that Ilya would open up to him about it when he was ready. But then, the doorbell rang.

"Who is that?" Shane looked at Ilya in confusion, but he was already walking toward the door.

When he opened it, Svetlana was standing there with a large bag in her hands. Ilya stepped aside to let her in.

"Oh. Hi Svetlana. What's going on?" Shane asked, looking between the two of them.

"Svetlana will stay here while I am away."

"What?"

"You said he was okay with this." Svetlana said, looking at Ilya angrily, maybe even a bit embarrassed.

Ilya opened his mouth to say something, but then gave up trying to explain.

"I'm sorry, Svetlana, could you excuse us for just a minute please?" Shane said, already reaching for Ilya and pulling him farther into the house.

"Why did you ask Svetlana to come over and babysit me?" Shane said, his voice managing to be both quiet and deeply offended.

“Is not babysitting, moya lyubov. It is…” Ilya paused, searching for the right word. “... hanging out.”

“Hanging out?”

Ilya nodded.

“You forcing Svetlana to stay with me is not hanging out, Ilya. Also, I’m pretty sure she would much rather be doing a lot more fun things than being cooped up here with me for days."

“Ah, yes, because staying in luxury house with opportunity to pick Shane Hollander’s beautiful genius hockey brain is torture for Svetlana, I am sure.”

Shane gave Ilya an unimpressed look, then opened his mouth, but Ilya was already looking at him with an expression that made the argument disappear from his mind almost immediately.

“Please, Shane,” Ilya said, his voice softer now. “I don’t want you home alone. Let her stay with you. Please.”

Shane watched as tears began to form in Ilya’s eyes, and his heart immediately sank. He was never going to be able to say no to that man for the rest of their lives, was he?

“Okay,” Shane finally said, placing a comforting hand on Ilya’s cheek. “Svetlana can stay.”

Ilya’s entire expression melted with relief.

“But only if she wants to and not because you’re making her do it.” Shane added.

“You think anyone can make Svetlana Vetrova do something she does not want?”

“I guess not.”

Svetlana staying over turned out to be much better than Shane had expected it to be. For one thing, she was a lot less overbearing than Ilya, never hovering over him or trying to take over every little thing Shane wanted to do. She seemed perfectly content to let him decide what he was capable of while still being there if he needed anything.

Shane also enjoyed spending time with her. She was the closest thing Ilya had to family, and Shane wanted to learn as much as he could about Ilya. Svetlana told him stories about her and Ilya’s childhood, about how they had met and how their friendship had blossomed over the years, and what it had been like growing up in Moscow, giving Shane a much clearer picture of the sweet, mischievous, and occasionally menacing little boy Ilya had once been.

She also began teaching him some Russian words, patiently correcting his pronunciation whenever he got them wrong— unlike Ilya who only praised him for just trying— and helping him with the very few words he already knew but clearly wasn't saying quite right. He even practiced some words he wanted to surprise Ilya with the next time he saw him.

Svetlana insisted on driving him to and from his physical therapy appointments, and whenever she had the time she would join him on his walks afterward.

They even went out for meals together, with Svetlana showing him around Boston and introducing Shane to places Ilya frequented, letting him imagine how his boyfriend would usually spend his days. It felt good to do something other than stay inside the house and go to physical therapy, even if they were careful to stick to quieter areas that weren't overcrowded.

It wouldn't exactly be strange for Shane to be seen in Boston; after all, the city was known for its sports teams, and it made sense that some of the best trainers and injury recovery specialists would be there, especially during the playoffs, but Shane still preferred to maintain his privacy, and being the captain of the Raiders' biggest rival meant there was no reason for him to parade himself around the city while the postseason was underway.

And while having Svetlana stay with Shane was supposed to ease some of Ilya's anxiety about being away from him, Ilya still managed to call and text Shane every chance he got, checking in whenever he had a few minutes to spare.

Except now Shane wasn't only hearing the worry in his voice, he could hear the guilt too.

"Ilya, I promise I'm fine," Shane said during one of their calls. "You don't have to worry about me, okay? Just focus on your game tonight."

"I can focus on game and still be worried about my sexy and injured boyfriend."

"Ilya," Shane said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head, though he couldn't stop the smile from creeping onto his face.

"I will win game today for you just to prove I can do both."

"You better."

Shane could hear the smile in Ilya's voice, but he could also hear the guilt that was underneath it, and Shane wished he knew how to make him understand that he didn't need to feel that way for being exactly where he needed to be.

Once the game started, Shane and Svetlana gathered around Ilya's massive T.V. screen to watch.

Svetlana was the perfect person to watch a hockey game with. Her knowledge of the sport and her ability to read the game were genuinely impressive. The only person Shane could think of who could match her was his own mother.

Shane was still getting used to the feeling of being able to freely cheer for his boyfriend in front of other people. The first time had been while he was with his parents during the first

round of the playoffs. Every time he celebrated something Ilya did, he found himself glancing at his parents to gauge their reaction, even though they were focused on the game and barely seemed to notice what Shane was even doing. He kept having to remind himself that he wasn't doing anything wrong and didn't need to hide himself.

And now, watching the game with Svetlana, he didn't have to hide his excitement whenever Ilya won a face-off, didn't have to pretend he wasn't bothered when someone checked him a little too hard, and when Ilya scored, Shane didn't have to swallow down the overwhelming rush of pride that filled him or worry about anyone noticing exactly how happy it made him. He could just watch. And Ilya was so mesmerizing to watch.

The Raiders ended up winning the first game, just as Ilya had promised Shane, but lost the second one. That meant Ilya would be coming home carrying both a win and a loss, and Shane knew him well enough to know that he'd probably be harder on himself over the loss than anyone else on the team, just as Shane would have been on himself if he were in Ilya's situation.

So when Ilya finally stepped through the front door, Shane was already waiting for him.

Ilya's eyes softened the second he saw him, and he crossed the room quickly gathering Shane into his arms before kissing him and pulling him into a tight hug.

"I missed you, sweetheart," Ilya murmured against Shane's ear.

"Ya tozhe po tebe skuchal, Ilya," *I missed you too, Ilya.* Shane replied, pronouncing his boyfriend's name with perfect Russian pronunciation, just as he had practiced over the last few days.

Ilya froze completely at the sound of the familiar words.

Then his arms loosened just enough for him to pull back and look at Shane properly, though he still kept their bodies pressed together. His eyes lit up with a mixture of surprise, excitement, and something so openly loving.

"Say that again."

"Ya po tebe skuchal."

Ilya shook his head, his eyes fixed on Shane's face. "No. My name. Say my name again."

"Ilya," Shane said again, making sure to pronounce it exactly the way Svetlana had taught him.

"Fuck."

Ilya was on his lips again, kissing him with excitement that was impossible to contain.

"So you learn Russian in a week, hm? With no accent?" Ilya asked when they finally pulled apart, sounding both impressed and genuinely touched.

Shane laughed softly. “Well, Svetlana really helped.”

“Mm. What else did she teach you?"

“Oh, I’m not telling you,” Shane said, giving Ilya a smug look. “I’ll use what I learned when I see fit.”

Ilya gave an exaggerated groan, dropping his forehead against Shane’s. “You are killing me, Hollander.”

Shane laughed again, and Ilya kissed him once more.

The next two games were home games, and with Ilya back in Boston, Svetlana returned to her own place instead of staying with Shane. Which was why he was startled when the doorbell rang just minutes before the puck dropped for game three.

“Hey, hey, sorry I’m late, my meeting ran long,” Svetlana said as she stepped inside, slipping off her shoes, then giving Shane a kiss on the cheek before making her way farther into the house. “The game didn’t start yet, did it?” She spotted the television, where the players were still out on the ice warming up. “Oh, good. Not yet.”

“Uh…” Shane followed her into the living room, still looking confused. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching the game?" Svetlana said, giving him a look like the answer should have been obvious.

“No, I mean, why aren’t you at TD Garden?”

“Why would I be?”

“Um… to watch the game?”

“I want to watch it from here.”

Shane stared at her, still visibly confused. “You’re telling me you would rather watch the game through a screen than watching it live in person?”

“Yes.”

“Svetlana, just because *I* can’t go to the game doesn’t mean *you* can’t either. You can still make it by the end of the first period, if you leave now.”

Svetlana pulled her legs up onto the couch, settling more comfortably into her seat making it clear to Shane she had no intention of going anywhere. “I want to watch the game with my

friend. My friend is here, so I'm here." She patted the space beside her. "Sit down, Hollander."

Shane couldn't help but smile as he obeyed.

For a while, he managed to focus on the game, watching Ilya with the same fascination he always did. But despite having Svetlana beside him, and despite knowing she genuinely wanted to be there, Shane couldn't completely shake the uneasy feeling sitting in the back of his mind.

Maybe it was because he felt guilty that Svetlana was now stuck here with him instead of being at the game. Or maybe it was the feeling of sadness that he himself couldn't just go and watch Ilya play in person.

Shane must have been quiet for longer than he'd realized, because eventually he heard Svetlana beside him.

"Shane?"

"Huh?"

"Are you okay?"

Shane nodded, though the answer wasn't entirely convincing even to himself. Svetlana, not satisfied with the answer either, waited for him to continue.

"I… ah…" His eyes remained on the T.V., unable to reach Svetlana's. "I was just wondering if I'll ever get the chance to support Ilya… openly."

Svetlana didn't say anything, allowing him to continue.

"I mean the only time I ever get to watch him play in person is from the opposite side of the ice, and obviously I'm not usually in a celebratory mood when he scores on us." A small laugh escaped him, but it faded almost immediately.

"But right now, I just want to support him. I want to cheer for him. I want… I want everyone to know how proud I am of him. And I want them to know how loved Ilya is." His eyes remained fixed on the T.V., watching his boyfriend move across the ice. "But unfortunately, I'm forced to do it from miles away where no one will ever know."

Svetlana gave him a sad look.

"And now I'm also forcing *you* to stay here with me, and no one is there for him."

"Shane, I want to be here." Svetlana said, barely giving Shane the chance to finish his sentence before she began reassuring him. "And if you think Ilya would rather have me at the game and leaving you all alone than be here with you, then you don't know him at all."

Shane nodded, trying to push away the overpowering feeling of guilt and sadness that has taken over him.

After a moment, Svetlana seemed to think of something. “Hey, I have an idea. Why don’t we attend game four together?”

“Svetlana you know I can’t. It would get people talking if the Metros captain just showed up to a Raiders game.”

“But I’ll be there with you, no one would think it’s weird.”

Shane appreciated what Svetlana was offering, but it just wasn’t possible. He shook his head.

“People know you’re Ilya’s friend. If I show up with you, they’ll either think I’m trying to fuck with him, or they’ll think he and I are a lot closer than people think, and I just— I just can’t.”

Svetlana nodded sympathetically, and neither of them brought it up again for the rest of the night, both knowing there wasn’t anything they could do about it for now.

“Did you watch?”

Ilya’s voice reached Shane before he’d even fully closed the front door behind him, and Shane was already getting up from the couch as Ilya stepped inside.

“Of course I watched. You were fucking amazing.”

Shane wrapped his arm around Ilya barely giving him a chance to put his things down, and Ilya immediately pulled him closer, burying his face against Shane’s neck.

I wish I was there to see it. Shane wanted to say it, but he knew Ilya would hear everything he didn’t say, just as Shane could hear the words Ilya wasn’t saying either. *I wish you were there.* But neither of them said it.

“That hat trick was beautiful,” Shane said instead, pulling back just enough to look at him.

A grin spread across Ilya’s face. “Did it turn you on?”

“Fuck off, Rozanov.” Shane rolled his eyes, but his cheeks were already burning, and Ilya’s grin only grew wider.

Svetlana showed up to watch game four with Shane at Ilya’s place, and then a couple days later she showed up again with an overnight bag, ready to stay with Shane while Ilya was on

the road.

By game six, the Raiders were up 3–2, and tonight's home game could determine whether they made it to the Eastern Conference Finals. Ilya really didn't want to take his team to game seven. He wanted to win in front of their home crowd, but more than that, he didn't want to keep leaving Shane behind every time they had to go on the road.

Ilya had just left for his game when Shane's phone rang, it was Hayden calling.

Shane hadn't really had the chance to talk to him since the Metros were eliminated from the playoffs. Hayden had been busy taking care of his kids and a very pregnant Jackie who was due any day now, so it was nice to finally catch up.

"Boston?"

"Yes."

"And Yuna just... let you?"

"I'm a fully grown adult, Hayden." Shane said, trying to sound annoyed, but Hayden's question was valid. "But yeah, she did. Honestly I was kind of surprised when she agreed to let me come here on my own."

Hayden laughed, then added, "I bet Rozanov is really fucking happy to have you around."

"Yeah, he is." Shane smiled. "And I'm really happy too."

"Are you going to the game tonight?" Hayden asked.

"No, of course not."

"What? Why not?"

"Hayd, come on, man. I can't just show up to a Raiders game." Shane then went on to explain to Hayden the same thing he had told Svetlana only a few days earlier.

"That really sucks, man. I'm sorry."

"It's alright." *It really wasn't.*

The game was brutal, with both teams fighting hard for the win. Neither side was willing to give an inch, and by the end of regulation, the game was still tied. Overtime was no less intense, but the Raiders finally found their opening. Ilya scored the game winning goal in the final minute, sending the Raiders to the Eastern Conference Finals. Ilya ended up skipping most of the team celebration afterward. It wasn't much of a celebration anyway, with everyone already focused on the next round and what they needed to do to make it to the Finals. Still, Ilya only wanted to celebrate with one person.

"So glad you don't follow the 'no sex during playoffs' rule," Shane said as Ilya helped him out of his shirt.

“Even if I did, I would break it for you sweetheart.”

Ilya crowded into Shane’s space, his mouth dragging over the warm skin of his neck in rough kisses. Shane tried to hold back the grin tugging at his mouth, until his phone suddenly started ringing from somewhere nearby, brutally cutting through the moment.

“Don't answer it,” Ilya murmured, making no attempt to stop what he was doing.

“Wait, let me at least turn it off.” Shane reached for his phone and read the name on the screen. “It’s J.J.”

“Then definitely don't answer it.”

“It’ll just be a minute.” Shane said.

Ilya let out an annoyed groan.

“Don’t be a baby.” Shane said. He then answered the call, still trying to catch his breath. *“Hey, J.J., what’s up?”*

“Capitaine, how are you? How’s recovery going?” J.J. asked in his usual upbeat tone.

“Oh, um... it’s good. I’m good.”

“That’s great! Hayden told me you’re in Boston. You found a physical therapist there yet?”

“Um…yeah, I did.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was wondering, do you think your therapist can take on another client? My shoulder is hurting me again and I might need to look into getting some physical therapy.”

Is this really what J.J. wanted to talk to him about right now? Physical therapy? At eleven P.M. at night?

“You mean the shoulder you injured three years ago?” Shane asked.

“Yes.”

“The one you told me was completely healed?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“J.J., I don’t under—”

“Oh, and while I’m in Boston, maybe we can go attend a hockey game? You think you can get us some tickets to the Raiders games?”

Shane finally caught on to why J.J. was suggesting he comes to Boston.

“J.J., I already told Hayden—”

“Yes, yes, I know you told Hayden you can’t go alone or with Rozanov’s friend, but what if I go with you, then it wouldn’t be as suspicious, right?”

“I don’t know, J.J.”

“Look, we are both in Boston for physical therapy, and we just happen to have some free time to attend the games. No one will think twice about it.”

Shane looked over at Ilya, who was watching him with a confused expression, clearly trying to follow the conversation despite Shane speaking entirely in French.

“Um… J.J. is suggesting he comes to Boston,” Shane explained to Ilya, “that way he and I can go together to the Raiders games and then it wouldn’t look suspicious.”

Shane watched as Ilya’s eyes immediately lit up at the idea.

“You will watch my game?” Ilya asked, looking hopeful.

Shane nodded, and before he could say anything else Ilya reached over and took the phone from his hand.

“I will buy you ticket right now, Boiziau.”

J.J. let out a laugh on the other end. “I guess Rozanov is on board. What about you, Capitaine?”

“You are okay with this?” Ilya asked Shane.

“Yes.” Shane nodded eagerly with a smile. “Alright J.J. let’s do it,” he said into the phone.

He hung up and looked at Ilya, still smiling like he couldn’t quite believe what had just happened. Shane couldn’t believe it himself. He was actually going to get to watch his boyfriend play hockey in person.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this fic took so long to update, life has just been kicking my ass lately. But I hope this 9K word chapter will make up for it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

J.J. arrived in Boston three days later, just one day before the first game of the Eastern Conference Finals. The Boston Raiders were facing the New York Admirals, and the first two games of the series were home games for the Raiders. And for the first time since Shane had come to Boston, *for the first time ever*, he was actually going to get the chance to watch Ilya play in person.

J.J. had insisted he could stay at a nearby hotel so he wouldn't bother Shane and Ilya, but Ilya had immediately shut that idea down, insisting that it would be better for J.J. to stay at the house so that whenever Ilya was on the road, Shane wouldn't have to be alone.

“J.J. Hey.” Shane said as he opened the front door and let J.J. in.

“Capitaine!” J.J. placed his hand on Shane’s shoulder, careful to avoid the injured one. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good.”

“You look good.”

And he really did. He looked much better than the last time J.J. had seen him. The bruising on his face had completely faded, he was standing on his own now without looking like every movement required an effort, and there was a healthy color back in his face that hadn't been there when J.J. had visited him in Montreal. He looked like himself again. Well, with the exception of the sling that was still there, a constant reminder that he wasn't completely recovered yet. But compared to the man J.J. had seen who was fresh out of surgery and high on pain killers only a few weeks ago, Shane looked almost like a different person.

They made their way inside the house, J.J. following Shane toward the kitchen where Ilya was.

“Boiziau, why are you in my house?” Ilya asked when he spotted them.

J.J. looked at him incredulously. “What? Rozanov, you were the one who insisted I stay here.”

“Hmm. I do not remember that.”

“Ignore him,” Shane said, waving Ilya off with his good hand and an annoyed look that wasn't really fooling anyone. Then his tone turned a bit more serious. “J.J., Ilya and I… we are both really glad you're here.”

“Yes, we are glad Montreal got elimnated from playoffs because your team could not win one game without Shane so now you have free time to be here.” Ilya added unhelpfully.

J.J. laughed, more amused than offended by what Ilya had said.

“I know this is probably not how you would’ve preferred to start your summer,” Shane continued, “so we really appreciate you taking the time to—”

“Shane.” J.J.’s voice softened, stopping him before he could finish. “I’m happy to be here. Really. You’re not taking my summer from me or whatever. I want to be here.”

Shane smiled and nodded. “Okay.”

There was a moment of silence before Ilya clapped his hands together. “Hungry, Boiziau? I made lunch.”

They gathered around the kitchen table. Ilya had prepared a pasta dish with salad on the side. Shane noticed the brief flicker of surprise on J.J.’s face when he saw him eating the pasta that definitely didn’t fit into his restrictive diet, but thankfully did not comment on it, which Shane appreciated.

After lunch, Shane showed J.J. to his room, which was the guest room furthest from Ilya's bedroom for obvious reasons. When they returned to the living room, Ilya was getting ready to leave for practice, his gym bag sitting on the kitchen counter while he made sure he had everything he needed.

“You’re going to practice?” Shane asked as they walked back into the kitchen.

“Yes, moya lyubov.” Ilya carefully pulled Shane into his chest before lifting his head and turning toward J.J. “Ah, Boiziau, practice is what teams that are still in the playoffs go to,” Ilya explained sarcastically.

“Fuck off, Rozanov.”

Shane lifted his good hand to Ilya's head and brought it back down to his shoulder, and Ilya instinctively buried his face in Shane's neck.

“You will be okay?” Ilya whispered.

Shane nodded against his shoulder.

When they pulled apart, Ilya walked over to J.J. and handed him the keys to one of his cars. “Boiziau, you will use my car to take Shane to physical therapy and you can use for yourself while you are here in Boston.”

J.J., surprised, took the keys and nodded. “Thanks, Rozanov.”

“I have also sent you the number of Shane’s doctor and my friend Svetlana. If anything happens you will call me. And if you cannot reach me, you will call Svetlana. You understand this, yes?”

“Yeah, of course.” J.J. said.

“Nothing’s gonna happen, Ilya.” Shane tried to reassure his boyfriend.

“Boiziau,” Ilya continued in a tone that was a mixture of seriousness and pleading. “I am trusting you with the most precious person in the world. If he gets hurt under your watch, I will end you—”

“Jesus, Ilya. Can you reel it back, please?” Shane said.

“Rozanov, I promise you, I will take care of him.” J.J. said. “It has been my job for years to protect Shane. I will not stop now.”

Ilya gave a satisfied hum, then walked back over to Shane and gave him a quick kiss then grabbed his bag and walked out the door.

“It's kind of hot how protective he is of you,” J.J. said as soon as the front door closed.

“Jesus Christ, J.J.”

Soon after, they both changed into their gym clothes and got ready to head to the private gym where Shane did his physical therapy.

As they stepped into Ilya's garage, J.J. immediately stopped in his tracks. “Holy shit, is that a 718 Cayman?”

Shane looked over at the obnoxious orange car J.J. was staring at, then back at him. “Oh, um… I think Ilya said it was a Porsche?”

J.J. chuckled but didn't bother explaining what he found so funny, instead he continued to look around at Ilya’s collection of cars. “You think Rozanov would let me drive it?”

“You're gonna have to ask him,” J.J. looked hopeful for a moment. “But no. He won't let you.” Shane added.

They got into the car Ilya had given J.J. the keys to and made their way to the gym. Once they arrived, Shane introduced J.J. to his physical therapist. Since J.J. didn’t actually need any physical therapy himself, he opted to do a workout of his own in the gym while Shane went through his routine with his trainer.

By the time they made it back home, Ilya was already there, unpacking their takeout dinner and dividing everything onto plates. J.J. ate quickly, clearly worn out after the long day, then pushed his chair back from the table and excused himself before disappearing upstairs to his room. Ilya quickly cleaned up the kitchen while Shane waited for him, and once everything

was put away, the two of them made their way to Ilya's bedroom. They were wrapped around each other in bed, Ilya tucked comfortably against Shane's chest, when the house finally grew quiet.

Except Shane couldn't fall asleep. His body was tired, but his mind was wide awake, filled with excitement and anticipation. Tomorrow, he was finally going to watch Ilya play hockey in person. Tomorrow, he would get to see Ilya step onto the ice, hear the crowd react to him, watch him skate and play and score without a television screen between them. And Shane couldn't wait. But eventually, his body won over his brain, though it took a long time to do so. When Shane woke up the next morning, his eyes were still heavy with sleep, but the rest of him was already wide awake and ready for what's to come later that day.

He made his way downstairs and found Ilya already well into making breakfast. Shane walked over to him and wrapped an arm around his waist, resting his chin against his shoulder.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You were having trouble falling asleep last night," Ilya said. "I thought you could sleep for another hour." Shane hummed and pressed a soft kiss to the back of Ilya's neck. Ilya turned around in Shane's hold to face him. "You are okay?" he asked quietly.

Shane nodded, but didn't offer any words.

"Are you nervous for today?" Ilya asked.

"Yes," Shane admitted. "But I'm also excited." He quickly added.

"I am very excited too," Ilya said. "I can't wait for you to watch me play."

Ilya leaned in and kissed Shane deeply, and Shane leaned into it, allowing himself to let go of every worry for a moment.

"Now," Ilya said when they pulled apart, "tell me what is making you feel nervous."

"I…," Shane hesitated. "I don't know. I guess I'm just nervous that someone will take one look at me at the game, see the way I watch you play, and somehow figure out that I'm in love with you." He let out a breath that was closer to a laugh. "It's silly, I know."

"No, is not silly, Shane. What you will do today for us is very brave. *You* are very brave. But also remember, you don't have to do this if you don't want to. I want you to be there, yes, but I don't want to add stress to you—"

"No, no, Ilya. This is what I want. I want to watch you play. I want to watch my favorite hockey player play."

"Ah, so I am your favorite hockey player?" Ilya said with a smirk.

"Of course you are." Shane said, like there could ever possibly be another answer.

“So, you admit I am the best.”

“I said favorite, Rozanov. Not best.”

Shane reluctantly let go of Ilya, allowing him to finish preparing breakfast. Once J.J. joined them, they all gathered around the table to eat.

“So, Bioziau, you are excited to watch a real hockey team play tonight?” Ilya asked.

J.J. gave Ilya an unimpressed look before answering. “Do you ever take a break from chirping?”

“Ah, no. I need to do warm up for my chirps before the game tonight. And, you are a very easy target. So…”

Walking into TD Garden was one of the most exciting and terrifying experiences Shane had ever had. Thankfully, his and J.J.'s seats were in a box dedicated to the family and friends of the players, which meant he didn't have to walk among the fans to get to it, so the chances of being recognized were much lower. It also didn't hurt that Shane was wearing a cap to try to hide himself, although the sling around his arm and J.J.'s six-foot-six frame were making it considerably harder to blend in.

The players were already out on the ice warming up, and Shane couldn't take his eyes off Ilya. He watched him stretch and warm up with the rest of the team, watched the way he moved around the ice, his leadership seeming to seep into every movement. Some of the worry Shane had been carrying with him started to fade as he watched Ilya, looking strong and completely at home on the ice.

“I’m here!”

Shane turned at the sound of Svetlana’s voice as she walked into the seating section, immediately drawing the attention of everyone around her. She took the seat on the other side of Shane, the one J.J. wasn't occupying. Svetlana leaned in to give Shane her signature kiss on the cheek, but pulled back at the last second. They weren't supposed to make it obvious that they already knew each other. Instead, she held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Svetlana.”

Shane smiled shyly and shook it. “Hi, Svetlana. I’m Shane.”

She gave him a wink before pulling her hand away.

“Oh, Svetlana, this is my friend J.J.,” Shane introduced them. They leaned across Shane to shake hands before settling into their seats on either side of him.

Shane's eyes immediately drifted back toward the ice, finding Ilya again as he continued warming up. He felt so giddy. Not only was he going to watch his boyfriend play in person,

but he was about to witness some really good hockey being played. The Raiders and the Admirals meeting in the Conference Finals was one hell of a matchup, and Shane was already completely absorbed in the game before it had even started. He was so distracted watching the ice that he barely paid attention when J.J. leaned toward him and whispered, “Capitaine… Svetlana est célibataire?” *Captain... is Svetlana single?*

“Um... Je ne sais pas. Je vais lui demander.” *I don’t know. I’ll ask her.* Shane answered without taking his eyes off of Ilya, then turned his head towards Svetlana. “Hey, Sv—”

“Non, ne lui demande pas ça,” *No, don’t ask her that.* J.J. quickly stopped him.

“But you just asked—”

“Ah, Capitaine,” J.J. said disappointedly and just shook his head.

Shane frowned at him, but he didn't have the attention to spare to ask about what he had just missed. Because before he knew it, the game had started, and it was immediately everything Shane had hoped it would be and more.

Watching Ilya play was almost impossible to put into words. He was so captivating to watch, the way he moved across the ice so powerfully, every movement calculated. Shane couldn't take his eyes off him, watching the way he carried himself, the way he seemed to know exactly where he needed to be before the play even developed. And Shane couldn't stop smiling. This was *his* boyfriend. The man he loved was out there on the ice, playing the game they both loved, and Shane was actually here to witness it.

Ilya scored early in the first period making it 1-0 for Boston as the goal siren blared and the fans erupted in cheers. Shane shot halfway out of his seat before remembering himself, his good hand already coming up to clap before he caught sight of the sling and stopped himself. He laughed under his breath, shaking his head. Of all the times to be reminded that he was injured… Still, he couldn't stop grinning as the fans continued to cheer around him, his eyes immediately finding Ilya again on the ice.

By the end of the first period, the Raiders were still up by one. The players headed into the locker rooms, so unfortunately, Shane was forced to look at something other than Ilya. His eyes wandered around the box, taking in the people sitting around them, parents of players, friends, partners, most of them proudly wearing the jerseys of their husbands and boyfriends. A small spark of jealousy bloomed through Shane. His imagination ran a little too far with the thought of what it would be like to wear Ilya’s name on his back, but then reality brought him back. Because that would also mean he would be wearing a Boston Raiders jersey. Shane immediately decided he wasn't *that* jealous.

His eyes drifted back toward the ice and then up to the jumbotron as it panned across the fans in the stands, the camera moving from one section to another. Then, suddenly, it landed on him. There he was, displayed on the giant screen above the ice, with a graphic underneath his face spelling out his name and *‘Captain of the Montreal Metros’* written beneath leaving no room for anyone to doubt who they were currently looking at.

“Fuck,” Shane muttered under his breath.

He felt his heart rate hitch as the camera stayed on him, suddenly very aware that his face was being displayed across the entire arena. Would they suspect why Shane was here? Would they know he was here for Ilya? His mind kept running with questions he did not have the answers for. But then, a round of boos from the crowd pulled Shane back just enough to breathe. This was the Boston crowd he knew, and that familiarity made him relax just a bit.

He gave the camera a small nod of acknowledgement, trying not to look any more uncomfortable than he already felt, before the jumbotron moved on and the camera returned to the game which was about to restart. The first player it landed on was Ilya. He was already looking up at the screen, his eyes fixed on the jumbotron where Shane had just been, and Shane could see the smile Ilya was trying to suppress.

Shane had to stop himself from smiling too. If he'd had any doubt that Ilya didn't for sure know that he was here at the game, he certainly didn't anymore.

"Why didn't they point the camera at me? I also play for the Metros. And I'm sitting right next to you!" J.J. sounded offended.

The game carried on both beautifully and brutally, neither team willing to surrender the puck for even a split second. One thing was for sure though, Ilya was putting on a show tonight. A show that was intended to grab the attention of one particular person, and Shane was more than happy to give him that attention. The game ended with the Raiders winning 3-1, Ilya scoring two goals and assisting on the third, while Scott Hunter managed to score New York's only goal of the night.

As the players began heading off the ice, Ilya turned toward the crowd, his gaze settling in the direction of the box where Shane was sitting, and their eyes met. Shane felt his heart skip a beat.

The texts started coming in much later than Shane had expected, especially considering the pictures had already started making their way across social media during the game. Shane and J.J. were already back at Ilya's house waiting for him when the Metros team group chat began filling up with images of Shane and J.J. at the Raiders game, along with messages from his teammates asking why the hell they were there.

'What the fuck?'

'Is this real?'

'You guys are in Boston?'

'Why the fuck are you two at a Raiders game?'

The most recent message caught Shane's attention.

'You there to cheer for your boyfriend, Hollander?' Comeau had texted.

Shane didn't know where he found the courage to type out those three characters and actually hit send. Maybe it was his adrenaline that was still high from going to the game, or it was watching Ilya play on the ice with such confidence, whatever it was, it got him to reply to Comeau with a simple *'Yes.'*

He knew his teammates wouldn't believe him, and maybe that's why he did it, but it just felt liberating to say it out loud once. The messages that followed reminded him exactly how easily he and Ilya's relationship had been able to go unnoticed for so long, because every single one of his teammates treated his answer as a joke.

"I can't believe you just sent that," J.J. said, chuckling as he sat across from Shane in the living room, looking down at his phone.

Shane looked up at him and chuckled a little himself. "Like any of those guys would have actually believed me."

"You know, if you ever want to tell them about your relationship with Rozanov, you might have to send them a video of you two making out or something. Otherwise, I doubt they would believe it" J.J. said.

Shane laughed it off, but it did get him thinking. *Would he ever trust his team with his relationship with Ilya?*

J.J. ended up explaining to their teammates why they were at the game, the rehearsed version, obviously. Shane decided he didn't want to hear what his teammates thought of it, so he muted the group chat and asked J.J. to let him know if anything was sent that needed his attention.

By the time Ilya returned home, Shane was waiting for him by the door.

"Pozdravlyayu—" *Congratulations.* That was all Shane managed to say before Ilya grabbed his face with both hands and began kissing him hungrily, almost desperately.

"You watched my game," Ilya said. It wasn't a question.

"I did. You were *fucking* amazing."

"You were sitting in *my* seats."

"I was," Shane said with a warm smile.

"I never had all seats reserved for my family full before," Ilya admitted shyly.

Shane's smile softened at the quiet vulnerability in his voice. "I loved being there. Being there for you."

"Mm, maybe you can retire and just follow me around all season long."

Shane rolled his eyes. “You fucking wish, Rozanov. I still got more Stanley Cups to win.”

Ilya laughed and kissed Shane again, just as desperately as before. Shane helped him out of his jacket, pulling it from his shoulders as they continued kissing. Ilya broke the kiss just long enough to glance toward the hallway. “J.J. is in his room?” he asked, already leaning in for another kiss.

“No, he went out to give us some space.”

Ilya slipped his hands beneath Shane's thighs and hauled him up, and Shane immediately wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and his good arm around his neck, barely breaking their kiss.

“Shoulder is okay?” Ilya asked against his lips.

Shane nodded. Satisfied, Ilya carried him all the way to bed.

Shane stared at the jerseys hanging on Ilya’s side of the closet for a few minutes. Obviously, he wasn't going to wear one, but he couldn't stop his mind from wandering. Seeing the family and partners of the players wearing their jerseys during game one had made Shane feel a little jealous, and maybe even a bit sad. Would he ever get to wear Ilya's name and jersey so proudly in front of anyone?

Just as he was about to wrap up his pity party and step away from the closet, a thought popped into his head. He definitely couldn't wear Ilya's jersey to the game tonight, but maybe he could wear something that belonged to Ilya.

He grabbed one of Ilya's tshirts, a plain black loose-fitting one. To anyone else it would just look like a black tshirt. Only Shane would know where it came from. Well, Ilya would too, once he saw him wearing it. He quickly changed out of the tshirt he was wearing and put Ilya’s on before making his way downstairs.

J.J. watched him as they made their way out to the car, studying him for a moment before speaking. “Is that Rozanov's tshirt?”

Shane's eyes widened. *Was it that obvious?*

“Relax, Capitaine.” J.J. said, noticing Shane’s face. “No one else would be able to tell. It's just that you usually don't wear designer.”

“How can you tell it's designer?” Shane asked, looking down at the plain tshirt he was wearing.

“Some of us spend our NHL money on things other than just real estate.”

Shane laughed, but then glanced down again at the tshirt, suddenly studying it with a little more suspicion. Would anyone else be able to tell that it wasn't his? Maybe it would be safer if he just changed.

“Shane,” J.J. said, “I was only able to recognize that it wasn’t yours because I know what you usually wear, and I also know you have a boyfriend with a closet full of designer clothes. I promise you, no one is going to think you’re wearing Rozanov’s tshirt.”

J.J. had a point. There were so many pieces of context someone would need to put together before they could even begin to suspect that Shane was wearing Ilya’s clothes. Shane stepped into the car feeling much more confident about his choice of attire now.

Though, walking into TD Garden for game two was a lot more stressful than it had been for game one. Since the press was now aware that there was a possibility that Shane Hollander might be attending the game, a group of reporters were waiting for him and J.J. at the entrance. The moment they spotted them stepping out of the car, the reporters swarmed around them, although most of their attention was focused on Shane. J.J. quickly moved to Shane's right side, positioning himself between Shane and the reporters to protect his injured shoulder from any accidental contact.

The reporters' questions overlapped, making it difficult to hear a single complete question, but the gist of it was clear; *Why are you in Boston?*

“Hollander, this is the second Conference Final game you are attending. Is this a way for the Metros to psych out the Boston team?” one reporter asked.

J.J. snorted, and Shane laughed as he shook his head. “No. J.J. and I are in Boston for physical therapy, and we just happen to have some free time and figured since we’re already here, we might as well watch a game or two.”

They continued walking toward the entrance as Shane answered, J.J. staying close beside him while the reporters followed, calling out their questions.

“I find that surprising,” the reporter replied.

“You find it surprising that hockey players like to watch hockey?” Shane asked sarcastically.

The reporters laughed at that, and Shane was grateful for the distraction, but the questions kept coming as they made their way farther inside.

“Hollander, you were spotted in the Raiders’ family box during the first game. Any reason in particular for that?” another reporter asked.

“We decided at the very last minute to attend the games, and as you know this series is already sold out, so we just asked some of the Raiders guys if they had any extra tickets, and a couple of them offered us their seats.”

Another question immediately followed. “Shane, is it true that Rozanov and Marlow visited you in the hospital following your injury?” another reporter asked.

Shane's steps almost faltered for the briefest moment at the mention of Ilya's name, but J.J.'s hand on his back kept him steady and he quickly kept moving.

"Yes, they did." He could feel himself getting more tense with every question, his mind racing ahead to what they might ask next.

"Does that mean you forgive Marlow for the injury?"

"There's nothing to forgive, just as I had told Marlow when he came to the hospital. It was a clean hit."

"So does that mean the rivalry is starting to cool down?"

"No," J.J. said flatly.

"Absolutely not," Shane said with a smirk at the exact same time.

The reporters continued firing questions at them as they finally reached the entrance. When the doors closed behind them, cutting off the noise of the reporters outside and giving them a much needed moment of peace. Shane and J.J. both let out a sigh of relief. They quickly made their way to their seats, where Svetlana was already waiting for them. Shane settled into the same seat he had occupied during game one, still a little tense after the encounter with the reporters, but the moment the puck dropped, his attention shifted completely to Ilya.

The game was intense from the start. The Raiders had the advantage of playing on home ice, and the Boston crowd made sure everyone knew just how badly they wanted their team to win. Every hit was met with a roar, every scoring chance had the entire arena on its feet, and neither team seemed willing to give the other an inch.

Shane found himself completely absorbed in the game, cheering and groaning along with the rest of the crowd as the two teams battled back and forth. He and Svetlana kept sharing their thoughts on the game, analyzing plays and pointing out things they noticed. Shane loved having someone who was genuinely excited to listen to him overanalyze hockey and was just as eager to offer her own analysis in return.

In the end, Boston managed to hold on, winning 2–1, with Ilya scoring both of Boston's goals. As they began clearing out of their seats and making their way back to the parking lot, Shane felt a faint ache spreading behind his eyes. He hoped it would pass, but the pressure only seemed to grow, spreading across his forehead and into his temples.

He had experienced a headache twice since arriving in Boston, something his doctor had warned him might happen during his recovery, but both had been mild and short-lived. This felt different. With every step, the throbbing became more noticeable, and the noise of the crowd around him suddenly seemed much louder than it had a few minutes ago. He tried to ignore it and keep walking, but the pain was quickly becoming impossible to push aside.

Maybe he'd been so nervous during the first game and his adrenaline was so high that his body had somehow forgotten to properly react to the bright lights and screaming fans. Tonight though, he was feeling all of it.

By the time he and J.J. reached Ilya's house, Shane's head was pounding. One moment, J.J. was slowly guiding him out of the car and into the house. The next, Shane was waking up to the sight of his boyfriend hovering over him, worry written all over his face.

"Shane, are you okay?" Ilya asked quietly.

Shane nodded, slowly beginning to register where exactly he was. He was lying on the couch in Ilya's living room, the lights turned down low, the TV off, and every other source of noise in the house seemingly silenced. Ilya was sitting beside him on the couch, while J.J. stood behind it.

"Boiziau, what the fuck happened?" Ilya asked J.J.

"I don't know, man" J.J. answered defensively. "He seemed fine when we we at the game, but then on our way here he just—"

"Nothing happened, Ilya. My head just hurts," Shane interrupted quietly, each word taking more effort than it should have.

Ilya's thumb moved to Shane's forehead, gently smoothing out the lines between his eyebrows as if he could erase the pain himself. Somehow, it worked. Shane's head immediately felt a little lighter beneath Ilya's touch.

"Do you need doctor?" Ilya asked.

"No. Just need you."

"I'm right here, sweetheart." Ilya's hand moved up to caress Shane's head, his fingers gently massaging his scalp and easing some of the pressure that had settled there. He leaned down and kissed Shane's forehead, and Shane hummed quietly, letting himself sink into the comfort of Ilya's touch.

Ilya never left his side. J.J., meanwhile, disappeared for a few minutes before returning with Shane's medication, a glass of water, and a plate of cut-up fruit.

"Shane, I will give you medicine." Ilya said.

Shane nodded, and Ilya carefully helped him sit up before giving him a pill, followed by the glass of water. Shane swallowed it.

"Do you want to eat—" Shane was already scrunching up his face in disgust at the thought of eating anything. "Okay, okay, you don't have to eat anything. But I need you to finish this water. Can you do that for me?"

Shane nodded again, and Ilya helped him hold the glass until he had finished it. He placed the empty glass back on the coffee table.

And before Shane knew it, Ilya had wrapped himself around him, or maybe Shane was the one clinging to Ilya, because suddenly he was being carried toward the bedroom. Ilya gently settled him on the edge of the bed and slowly began undressing him. He took off Shane's

pants first and set them aside before reaching for the hem of the tshirt he was wearing. His hands slipped beneath the fabric, but he paused before pulling it up.

“You are wearing my shirt,” Ilya said quietly, sounding almost disbelieving.

“Mhm.”

“You wear my shirt to the game?”

“Wore it for you,” Shane mumbled.

Ilya kissed the top of Shane’s head before helping him out of the shirt, but Shane immediately shook his head.

“No,” Shane whined. “I want to keep your tshirt on.”

“Shane, sweetheart, you can have my entire closet. I will just take this one off and give you a clean one to sleep in, yes?”

Shane nodded in agreement, and Ilya gently eased him out of the tshirt, returning a moment later with another one of his shirts. He helped Shane into it then guided him toward the bed and pulled Shane against his chest, settling him comfortably, resting his arm that was in a sling against his stomach. Ilya kept massaging Shane’s head, his fingers moving gently through his hair, and Shane quickly drifted to sleep.

He woke up some time later, though he wasn’t sure how much time had passed. It had been enough, at least, for the pain in his head to almost completely disappear. He was still lying in the same position he’d fallen asleep in, his head resting on Ilya’s chest.

The room was almost completely dark, with the only light coming from the street light outside, casting a faint glow through the window. Ilya was still underneath him, but something about him felt different. His breathing wasn’t the slow, steady rhythm Shane was used to when he was asleep, and he wasn’t snoring either. He was perfectly still. Ilya was definitely awake.

“Ilya?” Shane whispered, his voice was rough with exhaustion.

“Shane,” Ilya said quietly, worry seeping through every word. “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

Shane raised his head to look at him. Even in the almost complete darkness, he could see the unease still lingering in Ilya’s eyes. “I’m okay.”

“Does your head still hurt?”

“No, not really. I’m feeling much better now.”

Ilya let out a relieved breath, then brought his hand to Shane’s head and gently caressed his hair. Shane lowered his head back onto Ilya’s chest and simply enjoyed his boyfriend’s touch.

“How long was I asleep for?” Shane asked.

“Just a few hours, you should try to sleep more.”

The game had ended pretty late, which meant it was probably well past midnight by now, and Ilya was still awake. And Shane was *not* about to let his boyfriend go through another sleepless night because he was too worried for Shane to even close his eyes.

“Since I’m feeling better now, how about you also sleep for a bit?”

Ilya was silent for a moment as though he was considering it. “You scared me,” he said finally, barely above a whisper.

Shane’s heart ached. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“No, I am just happy you are okay,” Ilya said softly, and tightened his hold on Shane, while Shane placed kisses onto Ilya’s chest.

“Now that you know I’m okay, will you please go to sleep?” Shane tried again.

“Mm... maybe.”

“I will feel better once I know you’re also resting. Do you want me to feel better?”

“Of course I do, sweetheart.”

“Great, then go to sleep, Ilya.”

Ilya let out a sigh in defeat. “Yes, sir.”

It was a few hours later when Shane woke up again, sunlight flooding the room through the windows. They had definitely slept longer than usual, but both of them deserved the extra rest. Shane slowly unwrapped himself from Ilya, earning a sleepy groan from him at the loss of contact, before slipping out of bed and making his way downstairs to start the coffee.

J.J. was already awake, sitting at the kitchen table and eating his breakfast. He quickly looked up when he saw Shane walk in.

“Shane, how are you doing? Are you okay?” He asked in a quiet voice, almost afraid of hurting his friend.

“I’m fine, J.J. It was just a headache. Nothing hurts anymore.”

“Good.” J.J. let out a breath, looking relieved. “Is— Is Rozanov okay?”

“Yeah, he’s okay. He was just a bit scared.”

“He wasn’t the only one.” J.J. hesitated before continuing. “Shane, I'm sorry I didn't do enough to help.”

“What? What are you talking about? J.J. you brought me home. You brought me my medication. There was nothing else that needed to be done. We just had to wait and let the headache pass.”

J.J. nodded, looking a lot more relaxed at Shane’s answer. A couple of minutes passed as Shane went to grab from the coffee J.J. had already prepared for him and Ilya, while J.J. continued eating his breakfast. Then fast footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs.

“Dobroye utro,” *Good morning.* Shane said, the moment his eyes landed on Ilya. He looked like he had quickly rolled out of bed, his hair disheveled and sleep still lingering in his eyes. But his face immediately lit up at the sight of his boyfriend and the sound of the familiar words.

“Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy,” Ilya replied, making his way over and wrapping his arms around Shane before kissing his temple. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.”

Ilya immediately began peppering kisses all over Shane’s face and head, kissing every part of him that had been hurting just hours before, as if he needed to make sure the pain was truly gone.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t celebrate your win yesterday,” Shane said.

“Is okay. We can celebrate now,” Ilya’s voice dipped into a seductive tone, leaning in to kiss Shane, but they were interrupted by the sound of J.J. clearing his throat.

“Oh, Boiziau, you are here.” Ilya turned to face J.J.

“Yes, I'm here, Rozanov,” J.J. responded with an annoyed look that had no real heat behind it. “Go kiss your boyfriend somewhere else while I make you guys breakfast.”

Shane blushed at being caught. “Oh, um... J.J., you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” J.J. insisted. “Is scrambled eggs okay?”

“Um, yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, J.J.,” Shane said.

“Thank you, Boiziau,” Ilya added.

The two of them eventually settled onto the couch, tangled up together while they waited for breakfast, and once J.J. had finished preparing it, they ate together then spent the rest of the day simply enjoying each other's company for as long as they could before Ilya had to leave that night for the two game road trip to New York.

“Who’s blowing up your phone?” Shane asked. He couldn’t help himself. Svetlana’s phone had been going off with a new message about once a minute from the moment she walked through the door.

She had arrived at Ilya’s house that afternoon, before game three, wanting to spend the day with Shane, maybe go have lunch in the city and then come back to watch the game. She and J.J. were busy trying to figure out which restaurant they wanted to go when Shane noticed the nonstop stream of messages lighting up her phone.

“Who do you think?” Svetlana said. Shane looked at her, confused. “It’s your boyfriend. He wants to know that you’re okay.”

“What?” J.J., who was standing beside Svetlana, looked just as confused. “I just texted him like thirty minutes ago.”

“J.J., *you’re* also texting Ilya?”

“He asked me to keep him updated while he’s in New York,” J.J. explained, “and apparently that means sending him exactly what you’re doing at the top of every hour.”

“What update did you send him thirty minutes ago? I’ve literally just been sitting here reading all day.”

“Yes, that’s why I sent him…” J.J. looked down at his phone and read aloud, “...‘*Shane is still reading*’.”

To be fair, Shane probably should have expected it. Ilya hadn’t been nearly as overly concerned while he was away as Shane had expected him to be, especially after the night Shane had gotten that headache. If anything, Ilya seemed to have regressed a little in that regard, and apparently deciding that instead of constantly checking in on Shane himself, he could simply rely on J.J. and Svetlana to keep an eye on him.

“Why are you asking Svetlana and J.J. for updates on me?” Shane asked when he called Ilya.

“I just want to know you’re okay, sweetheart,” Ilya said apologetically, as though he had been caught doing something wrong. “You really scared me that night after the game.”

“No, I know that. I just meant, why are you not asking me directly?”

There was a brief pause on the other end. “I— I didn’t want to be too much,” Ilya admitted, sounding a little embarrassed.

In their attempts not to pester each other, they had somehow managed to accomplish the exact opposite. Shane didn’t want to distract Ilya while he was in New York, and Ilya didn’t want to bother Shane with his constant need to know that he was okay.

“Ilya, you can never be too much. And I’m sorry I wasn’t updating you myself. I just... didn’t want to distract you while you were in New York.”

Ilya chuckled softly. “We are both being stupid.”

“Yeah, maybe a little.”

The Raiders lost the first game, and Shane knew his boyfriend well enough to know that, no matter how worried he was or how much was happening off the ice, Ilya wouldn’t let any of it affect his performance. Still, Shane made it his mission to keep Ilya’s mind at ease, making sure he updated him himself and that Ilya always knew exactly what he was doing and that he was doing fine.

The Raiders ended up losing game four as well, leaving the series tied at two games apiece as they headed back to Boston. Game five was an intense one, but the Raiders managed to secure the victory in overtime.

Just as Shane, J.J., and Svetlana were getting up from their seats and preparing to leave, a member of the Raiders’ personnel approached them and introduced himself, explaining that some of the Raiders players wanted to know if Shane would be willing to meet with them.

Shane froze. He knew this wasn’t Ilya’s doing. Ilya would never put him on the spot like that, so who could have suggested it? It probably wasn’t Marlow either, Ilya would have shut that idea down immediately. Because it was a *very* risky idea.

Shane had just watched his boyfriend play some of the best hockey he had ever witnessed, and now he was being given the chance to see him, except he wouldn’t be able to touch him. He would have to hide how excited he was, which sounded almost impossible in that moment. But at the same time, he really wanted to see Ilya now rather than having to wait until they were back home.

“Shane?” Svetlana asked quietly.

They were all waiting for him to make the decision.

“Yeah, of course. Let’s do it,” he said, though there wasn’t much confidence in his voice.

They were guided to the family lounge, where they waited for a few minutes alongside the families and partners of the Raiders players. Slowly, some of the players began making their way in to join their loved ones, until the door opened again and another group came through, including St. Simon, Connors, Hammersmith, and Carmichael, the same Raiders players who visited him in the hospital after his injury. Shane expected them to head toward their families, but instead, they stopped right in front of him.

“Hollander!” Hammersmith said loudly, the rest of the guys following behind him.

“Hey, guys,” Shane said.

“It’s good to see you walking on your own, man,” St. Simon said, his eyes glancing over at Shane.

“Thanks, St. Simon,” Shane replied.

They said an awkward hello to J.J. then took turns introducing themselves to Svetlana.

“Sorry to pull you in here but we just wanted to see how you’re doing,” St. Simon said. “Roz and Marly said you’re doing better, but we just wanted to see for ourselves.”

“I *am* doing a lot better. Thanks guys. Oh, and thank you for visiting me in the hospital. I don’t remember if I properly thanked you all. I was a bit high, if you didn’t notice.”

The Raiders players chuckled. “Oh, we noticed,” Connors said, making Shane laugh. “But don’t worry, you don’t have to thank us.”

“How’s recovery going?” Carmichael asked.

“Recovery is good. I’ve got a pretty good therapist here in Boston who’s been helping me a lot. And I should be out of the sling in another week or two.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why you’re in Boston. And I thought you were just here to cheer for us,” Connors joked.

In a way, he was. “You fucking wish,” Shane said instead, and they all laughed.

Eventually, the players said their goodbyes and found their families, but Shane did not leave. He relaxed a little, talking with J.J. and Svetlana while they waited. Then the door opened again, and Ilya and Marlow walked in, they were the last of the Raiders players to enter, as both of them had media obligations after the game.

Ilya walked into the room without paying much attention to who was there, as though he didn’t expect anyone to be waiting for him. Shane’s heart broke at the sight of him. How many times had Ilya walked into this same Raiders family lounge after a game, expecting to find it empty? How many times had he been hurt or exhausted and had no one there waiting for him? Shane hated the thought of it.

Marlow saw them first. He nudged Ilya, subtly directing his attention toward Shane. When his eyes landed on Shane, he stopped in his tracks, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth before he picked up his pace and walked over to him, Marlow following a step behind. He stopped right in front of Shane, and for a moment, neither of them knew what to do next or what to even say. There were too many people around them, too many eyes on them, too many ears listening. Everything they did was going to be watched and dissected, and they both knew it.

“Con— Congratulations,” Shane said.

“Thank you,” Ilya replied.

“You boys keep playing like that and the cup will be yours again,” Svetlana said, leaning in to touch Ilya’s arm. It shouldn’t have sent a pang of jealousy through Shane, but it did. Or maybe jealousy wasn’t quite the right word. It was more like sadness. Shane had watched every player enter the room and immediately run into the arms of their loved ones, and it sucked that he and Ilya couldn’t do the same.

Marlow seemed to catch on to what was going through Shane's head because the next second, he had an arm around Shane and was pulling him into a hug.

"Wha—" Shane started.

"Marly, what the *fuck* are you doing?" Ilya asked quietly.

Marlow pulled back just enough to look at Ilya. "I'm hugging our friend. Don't worry, you can have your turn after me."

When Marlow finally let him go, Ilya hesitated for a moment. He looked at Shane as though he was asking for permission. Shane gave him a subtle nod and Ilya stepped forward and pulled Shane into a hug. It was quick, and they both tried to make it look as casual as possible, as if they hadn't spent the last couple of weeks practically attached to each other's skin. But it was still so fucking worth it. When Ilya took a step back, Shane was already craving more.

"You are okay? Anything is hurting?" Ilya asked quietly

"I'm okay. Nothing hurts."

A moment passed where no one seemed to know exactly what to say or do next. Shane wanted to tell Ilya he loved him. He wanted to tell him how proud he was, how good it felt to watch him crush the Admirals, how hot he looked in his game day suit, and how badly he wanted to pull him back into his arms and kiss him. Instead, he just stood there, and pretended they were nothing more than rivals. Rivals who hugged each other apparently.

"Hey Roz, do *we* also need to hug?" J.J. asked.

"Don't even think about it, Bioziau." Ilya said flatly.

J.J. and Marlow chuckled, and even Shane laughed quietly, grateful for the interjection. Eventually, after the rest of the players had started to make their way out of the lounge, Shane, J.J., and Svetlana said their goodbyes and headed out. Ilya had to stay behind with the team for a little while longer, but once he was done with everything at the arena, he drove home. By the time he slipped quietly into the bedroom, Shane was too busy pacing around the room to notice him walk in.

"Shane? Everything is okay?" Ilya asked quietly, careful to startle Shane.

Shane looked up to find Ilya standing in front of him.

"Was the hug too much?"

"Wha—"

"Do you think people thought there was something going on between us? I mean, it probably looked just friendly, but still. No one has ever seen us properly interact off the ice, so, like, that might have been a lot—"

“Shane. Breathe for me, sweetheart.”

Shane stopped pacing and looked at him. Ilya took a slow, exaggerated breath, and Shane mimicked him, drawing in a deep breath then slowly letting it out.

“Very good. Now, do you remember what Yuna said? About us telling people we are friends?”

Shane nodded.

“We start with our teammates, then the rest of the league, then we can tell fans. Tonight, we showed my team and their families that we are friends. That is it. This is part of the plan, yes?”

“The plan. Right.” Shane visibly relaxed.

And with that, Ilya relaxed too, letting out a breath and a small smile. Once he was sure Shane was no longer panicking, Ilya looked at him with a hopeful expression. “Can I have my real hug, please?” he asked, sounding like a puppy waiting for a treat.

“Just a hug?”

“What else are you offering?” Ilya asked, his tone turning suggestive.

“Anything. Everything.”

Ilya pulled Shane in and kissed him deeply before wrapping his arms around him. Shane immediately buried his face in Ilya’s neck and breathed him in, catching the familiar scent of his body wash and aftershave. That quick hug at the arena had barely been enough for Shane to register his boyfriend’s scent, and now that they were finally alone, he didn’t want to let him go.

“I wanted to do this tonight… in family lounge,” Ilya said. “I wanted to put my arms around you and hug you.” He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Shane’s lips. “I wanted to kiss you. I wanted to just hold you.” He was quiet for a moment before adding, a little unsure, “Maybe one day we will be able to do this… Be with each other in front of people.”

Shane tightened his arm around him. He wasn’t sure when that day would come. Shane loved Ilya so much that some days, it physically hurt to keep it all inside. He wished he could love Ilya openly without having to worry about his teammates, the league, the fans, and *fucking* Russia. Maybe one day. Maybe after they were both retired.

But right now, Shane and Ilya were both in their prime. They were both superstars, and they both had a lot of hockey left in them. Shane had every intention of playing for at least another decade, maybe even longer, and he expected Ilya to do the same. Which meant another decade of hiding, probably.

Ilya was back on the road to New York the next day. The Raiders ultimately lost game six, sending the series to a decisive game seven. Ilya returned to Boston the next day, but there

wasn’t much time to recover before the biggest game of the series. By the time game seven arrived, the entire city of Boston seemed to be holding its breath.

Shane went to the game with J.J. and Svetlana, just as he had for the last three home games, but this time, there were even more reporters waiting outside the entrance than before. As soon as he stepped out of the car, they swarmed him, questions coming from every direction.

“Hollander, who do you think is going to make it to the Finals?” A reporter asked.

“Do you think the Raiders can close this series out?” Another asked.

“Shane, are you rooting for Boston?”

He kept walking, ignoring every question as J.J. stayed close beside him. He didn’t trust himself to answer anything about Ilya or the Raiders right then.

Shane had never been nervous to play a game, not even one as important as this. He had played in plenty of critical games throughout his career, games where everything came down to the next goal, the next shift, the next mistake. But being the one sitting in the stands, completely unable to do anything about the score, was far more stressful than he had ever imagined. All he could do was watch.

The game started at a frantic pace, both teams playing like they knew there was no tomorrow. Shane barely sat back in his seat, constantly leaning forward whenever Ilya was on the ice, his eyes following him from one end of the rink to the other.

By the start of the third period, the score was tied 2–2. Neither team had been able to pull away, and every time one of them scored, the other answered. Shane had lost track of how many times he had held his breath without even realizing it.

Then the puck found Ilya. Shane watched him take it into the offensive zone, his movements so familiar that Shane could almost predict what he was going to do before he did it. Ilya cut between the Admirals’ defenders, looking for an opening, but before he could make a play, Matti Jalo, the Admirals’ defenseman, came in hard and slammed into him along the boards. Ilya immediately brought a hand to his ribs. He tried to stay upright, but his legs gave out beneath him, and he dropped down onto his knees. And Shane felt his heart stop.

Chapter End Notes

I still don’t know any French or Russian, so please feel free to correct anything I got wrong. You can correct the English too, I promise you won’t hurt my feelings :)

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Please let me know if you notice any typos. I've reread this over three times, but I have a feeling that something slipped through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The logical part of Shane's brain knew Ilya was okay. He had seen hits like that countless times throughout his career. He'd even taken hits like that himself. He knew what they looked like, knew how much they hurt, and knew that if Ilya had actually broken a rib, he probably wouldn't have been able to get back up and skate off the ice at all. But none of that seemed to matter.

The part of Shane's brain that knew hockey wasn't the part in control right now. All he could see was Ilya getting hit, and Ilya down on his knees. Shane could almost feel the impact in his own ribs.

Marlow and Carmichael helped Ilya back to his feet, and he took a couple of seconds to steady himself before skating towards the bench. The team doctor checked him over quickly, but within seconds, Ilya was back on the ice.

"How the fuck is he back on the ice?" J.J. asked.

"It's gonna take more than bruised ribs to get Ilya off the ice," Svetlana said.

The team doctor and trainer could both be visibly seen not being happy with Ilya's decision to go back on to the ice, but there was nothing that was going to keep him off. Shane could see the change in Ilya's play almost instantly. His body was weaker, his breathing was shallower, but he had no intention of slowing down. Unfortunately, Ilya was writing checks his body couldn't cash.

Shane held his breath as he watched him play. Every time Ilya twisted his body, Shane could see a flicker of pain cross his face. Every time an opposing player got too close, Shane found himself tensing, terrified that Ilya would take another hit and end up even more hurt. He couldn't stop watching. And he couldn't stop worrying.

"He's okay, Shane." Svetlana whispered, leaning toward him from her seat beside him.

Shane nodded, more to convince himself than anything else. Maybe once he wasn't so worried, he'd be able to appreciate that Svetlana was right there beside him, trying to reassure

him, reminding him that he wasn't alone in this. But right now, he could barely focus on anything but Ilya.

The Raiders ended up losing the game by one. Shane watched as Ilya and the rest of the team skated around the ice, waving to their fans. He could see the pain and disappointment on Ilya's face, and it wasn't just from the injury. This was the game that was supposed to send them to the Finals. Ilya could barely lift his arm high enough to wave, with Marlow keeping an arm around his waist to help hold him up.

"Shane, what should we do?" J.J. asked. "Should we go home and wait for him there?"

The fans had already started clearing out of the stands, but Shane remained frozen in place. He didn't know what to do. Ilya would need to be checked by the team doctor and trainers. They might even send him to the hospital for further evaluation. He definitely wasn't in any condition to drive himself home. What was Shane supposed to do at that moment? Just leave Ilya behind? What was Ilya doing right now? Was he alone?

Shane pulled out his phone to text him, but there was already a message from Marlow waiting.

'Your boy is getting checked by the team doctor. He asked me to tell you he's okay. Doesn't look like any broken bones. I'll bring him home to you when he's done.'

Shane relaxed a little at that, mostly because he knew Ilya wasn't going to be alone. He thanked Marlow and left with J.J. and Svetlana, though the guilt followed him all the way home. He hated leaving Ilya behind when he knew he was hurt, but there was nothing else he could do.

His leg bounced nonstop in the car on the ride to Ilya's house, the movement seeming louder than the engine, but he couldn't get his body to stop. Once they got home, Shane stood by the door, glancing out the window every time he heard a car pass, only to find the driveway empty. J.J. and Svetlana's attempts to get him to relax went completely ignored.

Shane hated not being able to be there for Ilya. He had only been waiting for barely an hour, he had Marlow keeping him updated, and he was surrounded by people who were doing their best to reassure him. And yet he still felt like he was drowning. He couldn't even imagine what Ilya must have gone through when he got injured. Ilya had been left waiting alone for hours, not knowing what was happening, with no one there to update him or comfort him. He'd had to deal with all of that fear and uncertainty on his own.

Ilya should never have had to go through that. And Shane shouldn't have to go through this now.

Eventually, after what felt like hours, Shane heard a car pull into the driveway. He immediately recognized Ilya's car. Shane opened the door and hurried outside. Marlow was behind the wheel, and Ilya was sitting in the passenger seat, one hand pressed against his ribs as he tried to steady himself. His face was scrunched up in pain. Shane rushed to the passenger side and opened the door for him. Their eyes met, and Ilya's expression immediately changed. The pain on his face was replaced by concern.

“Shane, sweetheart, are you okay? Does your head hurt?”

“Are you seriously asking about *me* right now? I’m fine, Ilya. Are *you*?”

“Ah, is nothing.” Ilya winced as he shifted in his seat. “Can you believe stupid doctor almost did not let me finish the fucking game?”

Shane reached out and helped him out of the car, immediately putting his arm around his waist to steady him. Ilya hissed and groaned with almost every movement.

“Are you good?” Shane asked once Ilya had managed to get his balance.

“No, I’m not good, Shane.” Ilya looked at him with a miserable expression. “We lost to fucking New York. My ribs are killing me. And my boyfriend still hasn’t kissed me.”

Despite everything, Shane couldn't help but smile. He leaned in and kissed him gently, careful not to put any pressure. Ilya immediately deepened the kiss, seemingly forgetting about the pain for a moment.

“Better?” Shane asked when they finally pulled apart.

“Mhm. Much.”

“You guys are just the cutest.” Marlow said. “I missed you two.”

Shane had almost forgotten he was there.

“Shut up, Marly,” Ilya muttered.

They made their way inside, Ilya moving at a painfully slow pace, but at least he was able to walk on his own. Svetlana rushed over to him as soon as they entered, making sure Ilya was okay, with J.J. following close behind, looking almost as concerned.

They all sat down and had dinner together. Ilya and Marlow weren't particularly hungry after their team’s loss, and both ate about half of what they normally would have, though Shane couldn't help but think that even half was probably more than the average person would eat.

After dinner, Marlow went home, Svetlana and J.J. each took a guest room, while Shane helped Ilya upstairs and into bed. He helped him undress, and when he carefully pulled Ilya's shirt over his head, Ilya groaned and sucked in a sharp breath.

“Sorry,” Shane said. He could almost feel the pain himself.

He helped Ilya settle onto the bed, propping him up against the pile of pillows Shane had arranged for him before placing an ice pack against his ribs.

“I’m going to shower. Stay here and don't even think about moving that ice pack,” Shane said.

“Yes, captain.”

Once he showered and put on a pair of Ilya's shorts and tshirt, Shane climbed into bed beside Ilya. He finally had a chance to check his phone and found several messages from his parents, along with a few missed calls. They must have seen what happened and wanted to make sure Ilya was okay.

Shane quickly messaged his mom to reassure them, but Yuna wanted to talk to Ilya herself. Shane couldn't hear what his mother was saying on the other end of the call, but it was obvious Yuna had gone straight into her usual overprotective motherly mode. And Ilya was enjoying every second of it. He looked genuinely happy to have someone fussing over him.

"Yes, Yuna, I am okay. I am resting now." He tried to hide his smile. "Team doctor thinks there is no broken bone, but I will go to hospital tomorrow to get X-ray and check breathing and everything else."

Yuna said something that Shane couldn't hear, but he didn't need to, because Ilya repeated it himself.

"You and David want to come to Boston? Why?" Ilya asked, sounding confused. "No, no, Yuna, you do not have to do that. I am serious. Is just a bruise." He reached over and took Shane's hand. "And Shane is here taking care of me. We are taking care of each other."

Eventually, they said their goodbyes, with Yuna checking on Shane as well before they ended the call. Ilya lowered the phone and looked at Shane with a small, almost shy smile.

"I really like your parents."

Shane's heart flipped. "I'm glad you do, because I'm pretty sure they love you."

"They do?"

"Of course they do. How could they not? You're so easy to love, Ilya."

Ilya's smile widened, his cheeks turning pink. He leaned toward Shane, clearly going in for a kiss, but the movement tugged at his injured ribs. He stopped with a sharp groan. "*Fucking Jalo*," he muttered through gritted teeth.

"Fuck, Ilya. What the fuck were you trying to do?"

"I wanted a kiss."

"Just stay still and let me do it." Shane smiled and leaned over to kiss him gently. Once they settled back down, they couldn't cuddle the way they normally did, but they lay as close together as they could. Shane rested his hand in Ilya's curls, gently running his fingers through them. Shane finally felt his body start to relax, but he still couldn't shake the feeling of guilt that was gnawing at him.

"Ilya… I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you after the game," Shane said quietly. "And I'm sorry I can't go to the hospital with you tomorrow."

"Shane, is okay—"

“No, it’s not okay. I hate this, Ilya.”

“Hate what?” Ilya asked nervously.

“I hate pretending it didn’t feel like I was dying when I saw you get hurt, and that I had to sit there and wait for someone else to tell me how you were doing. I hate having to hide my feelings about you. I hate that I have to pretend you’re not the most important person in the world to me.” His voice cracked. “And I hate that you had to go through the same thing when *I* got injured.”

Ilya reached over and wiped away a tear from Shane’s cheek. Shane hadn’t even realized he was crying.

“I hate it too,” Ilya said softly. “But Shane, listen to me. This is not forever, yes? After next year, it will be different. I will be in Ottawa, and we will be very close to each other. It will not be as difficult.”

“Not close enough,” Shane muttered.

“We will make it work. You and me, we always do the opposite of what they tell us. They tell us we should not kiss boys, and I go kiss the prettiest boy alive. They tell us we are rivals, and we say no we are lovers—”

“Ugh, gross, Ilya. Don’t say lovers.”

Ilya laughed softly, then continued. “They tell us it is impossible to be together, that it will be difficult. We make it easy. We make it work.”

The certainty in Ilya’s voice made Shane believe it really was possible.

“I love you so fucking much, Ilya.”

“I love you too, Shane.”

For a moment, Shane just took in Ilya’s words and let them bring him comfort. Then he remembered that Ilya was the one who had just been injured. He was the one who had just lost in the Eastern Conference Finals.

“Fuck. Ilya, I should be the one comforting you right now.” Shane hesitated. “Are you— Are you upset about losing?”

Ilya snorted. “What do you think?”

“Sorry.”

“Mm… tell me something that will make me feel better.”

Shane thought for a moment before he said, “Well, now that both of our seasons are over, we can finally go to the cottage.”

Shane watched the smile spread on his boyfriend's face. “Mm, that does make me feel better. Let’s go to the cottage.”

Ilya went to the hospital with Svetlana the following morning to get his ribs checked properly, and thankfully, everything came back clear. No broken bones, just bruising that would take some time to heal. Over the next few days, Shane and Ilya took turns taking care of each other, each trying to stop the other from lifting a finger. It was nearly impossible, and naturally, it turned into a competition over who could do more for the other.

Ilya still had a few things to wrap up with the team, including his exit interview, but he continued recovering at home in between. By the time he’d finished all his obligations, he was feeling significantly better. In the meantime, Shane had kept up with his own physical therapy and recovery routine.

Once Ilya had finally wrapped everything up with the Raiders, they decided it was time to head to Ottawa. The plan was to drive to Montreal first with J.J., splitting the drive between him and Ilya so neither of them would have to do the whole journey alone. It was also the safest way to avoid being spotted traveling together, and traveling separately wasn’t an option. They would drop off J.J. in Montreal and spend a day resting in Shane’s apartment before continuing on to Shane’s cottage in Ottawa, where they could finally have some time to themselves without worrying about anyone watching them.

The drive itself wasn’t too bad. Sure, it was long and a little hard on Shane and Ilya’s still-recovering bodies, but it was definitely better than dealing with the stress of possibly being spotted together at the airport.

When they arrived in Montreal that evening, they dropped J.J. off at his place first and thanked him again for coming to Boston before heading to Shane’s apartment. They found the front door unlocked. Shane frowned as he pushed it open, with Ilya right behind him. They hadn’t expected anyone to be there, but the moment they stepped inside, they found Yuna sitting on the couch, working on her laptop.

“Mom?” Shane asked, staring at her in surprise.

Yuna looked up, just as surprised to see them. “Oh, you’re here!” She got up, walked over, and hugged both Shane and Ilya at the same time. “How are you? Shane, honey, how’s your shoulder? Ilya, sweetheart, what about you? What did the doctor say about your ribs?” she asked, barely giving them time to answer before moving on to the next question.

“Mom, I updated you this morning before we left Boston.”

“Yeah, I know, but we wanted to see you ourselves. And we figured we could help drive you to your cottage.”

“Is Dad here too?” Shane asked.

“Yeah, he’s just in the kitchen.”

“Shane, Ilya!” David called as they rounded the corner into the kitchen. He was wearing an apron and putting a pan into the oven. After closing the oven door, he took off his oven mitts, washed his hands, and came over to hug each of them, asking pretty much the same questions Yuna had just asked.

“Dad, you didn’t have to cook anything for us.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Besides, you boys must be tired from the drive.” He gestured toward the stairs. “Go freshen up. Food will be ready soon.”

Shane could definitely eat, but he didn’t have the heart to tell his dad that they’d stopped at half a dozen fast-food places on the way to Montreal and that Ilya had eaten something at every single one of them.

Not that it seemed to matter. After they showered and came back downstairs, they sat at the dining table, where Ilya proceeded to shovel forkful after forkful of chicken Parmesan into his mouth as though he’d been starved for days.

“David, this is very good,” Ilya said before taking another large bite.

“I’m glad you like it, son. Shane told me it’s your favorite.”

“You… did this for me?” Ilya asked, sounding almost unsure.

“Of course.” David said.

“Is perfect. Thank you.” Ilya smiled shyly, a blush spreading across his cheeks, before continuing to eat.

They spent the rest of dinner telling Yuna and David about their time together in Boston. Shane and Ilya had done a pretty good job of keeping them updated while they were there, but Yuna and David listened to everything as though they were hearing it for the first time. Once they finished eating, David shooed them out of the kitchen before either of them could help clean up. Shane and Ilya were both exhausted, and once they finally got into bed, they fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning, they packed up their things, locked up the apartment, and headed to Shane's cottage. For the first time in what felt like forever, they had time to simply relax, to just be together. This was what they’d both been longing for.

It felt surreal having Ilya there, in Shane’s cottage, in the place that felt most like home to him. He’d dreamed of this, of having Ilya in his favorite place on earth, in the one place where he felt completely safe. It was somewhere he’d always wanted to share with him, and now he wanted it to be more than just his own. He wanted it to be theirs. He wanted Ilya to feel safe there, too, to have a place where he could let his guard down, breathe, and just be himself.

They spent their days enjoying the simple pleasure of doing nothing together. They cooked, played video games, sat on the dock in the mornings and by the bonfire at night, talked, and sometimes sat in comfortable silence. They curled up together whenever they could, or sat across from each other, perfectly content just to be in the same room. It was a glimpse of the future they might one day have, and Shane found himself wishing they could stay like this forever.

Every night, they had dinner with Yuna and David, sometimes at Shane's cottage, sometimes at his parents' place. Shane had thought he and Ilya might prefer to keep to themselves, but he'd always loved spending time with his parents. And Ilya seemed to love it just as much. He loved being surrounded by family. Shane watched Ilya settle into his family so naturally, as though a space had always been waiting for him.

"I'm still in a sling, but I think I can lose the thing in a few days," Shane said, talking to Rose on the phone. He was standing in the backyard of his parents' cottage, where he and Ilya were staying to watch the Finals with them. Rose had been pretty busy with work lately, so they'd barely had a chance to talk beyond her quick check-in after his injury.

"How's jerking off?" She asked.

"Oh, I'm not really doing any of that."

"Are you insane? I mean, I know it's hard to do with your left hand, but come on—"

"No, no, Rose. I just meant... my boyfriend is staying with me over the summer, so I don't really need to be doing any… jerking off."

Rose made a squeaking sound so loud that Shane had to pull the phone away from his ear. "Boyfriend? Shane Hollander, are you serious? Who is this guy? When did this happen? Tell me everything!"

"Well… it kind of happened about two months ago, but we've been hooking up since rookie season."

"Was he the guy you told me about when I asked if you'd ever been with another guy?"

"Um… yeah, it's him," Shane said. "It's always been him," he added.

"Shane, I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you, Rose. Truly. I— I don't know if I would've gotten here as quickly as I did if it weren't for you."

"I think you would have. But I'm glad I got to be part of your journey."

“Me too.”

“So, did you leave your boyfriend at your cottage to watch the game with your parents?”

“No, he’s here with me at my parents’ cottage.”

There was a brief silence.

“Um, Shane, do you mean to tell me you not only came out to your parents but you also introduced them to your boyfriend?”

“Oh, did I forget to tell you that?” Shane said with a mischievous laugh, feigning ignorance.

“Yes, you forgot to tell me that! Your parents… they were good about it, right?”

“Yeah, they’re the best. I was so fucking terrified, Rose, but Il— my boyfriend, he was there with me, and it just felt right to do it then. And I’m so glad I did.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you, Shane. Now will you introduce me to your boyfriend?”

“Um…” Shane hesitated.

“Wait, is he not out? Never mind, you don’t have to tell me anything.”

“Well, he’s not out, but he doesn’t mind if I tell you. I actually *really* want to tell you about him, but I’m waiting until we’re face-to-face because I need to see your reaction when you find out who it is.”

“What does that mean? Do I know him? Is he famous? Shane, please give me a hint. We won’t see each other for months. Please tell me something about him. Anything.”

“Well…” Shane thought for a moment. “He’s hot, Rose. He’s so fucking hot.”

“Well, I knew *that*. No way a guy could land *the* Shane Hollander if he wasn’t hot himself. Come on, give me something else.”

Shane thought about his answer for a moment. “He’s also a hockey player.”

“Are you serious? Shane—”

“I have to go now. Bye, Rose.”

“This isn’t over, Hollander. I want a name!”

Shane laughed to himself as he hung up, still grinning as he headed back inside to watch the third period of the Finals.

“I can’t believe New York is finally going to win the Cup,” Ilya said.

Shane couldn’t believe it either. Scott fucking Hunter was about forty seconds away from becoming a Stanley Cup champion.

“I told you, it’s his year,” Yuna said.

“I hate Hunter,” Ilya muttered.

The final seconds of the final game of the final series of the playoffs ticked away. Then the buzzer sounded, and the ice erupted with men in red jerseys, celebrating the biggest win of their careers.

“If me and Shane were not injured, he would not have won the cup.” Shane could hear the sting of envy in Ilya’s voice, and when he glanced at him, he could see it on his face, too. Ilya had lost his chance at the Cup just over a week ago. Shane knew how much it still hurt.

His attention drifted back to the television, where the Stanley Cup was being handed to a beaming Scott Hunter. Players were hugging their teammates, kissing their wives, and scooping up their children. It would be nice, Shane thought, to kiss someone after winning the Cup. *To kiss Ilya after winning the Cup.*

“Okay, enough of this.” Ilya reached for the remote, ready to turn off the television, when...

Holy shit.

Holy. Shit.

Scott fucking Hunter was kissing a man. Not, like, one of his teammates on the cheek in an “I love you, bro” kind of way. Scott Hunter was kissing a man wearing street clothes full on the fucking mouth. It looked like tongues were involved.

“Holy shit,” Ilya breathed.

“What the fuck? Is that his boyfriend?” Shane asked.

Neither of them looked away from the screen. They just stared at Scott Hunter and his probable boyfriend. Or maybe Scott Hunter and some random cute guy he’d pulled out of the crowd. Shane couldn’t quite process what he was seeing. How could this possibly be real? But there was Scott Hunter, smiling at the mystery man like he was the only person in the world who mattered. He cupped the man’s face in both hands and leaned in to kiss him again.

Then the cameras cut away, and Shane turned to look at Ilya, who was already staring at him.

“Did he really just do that?” Shane asked. “I didn’t know that was… an option.”

“We are not alone, Shane.” Ilya whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to those who wanted Ilya to win the Cup and for Shane and Ilya to have their Scott and Kip moment. For me, Scott Hunter coming out is so important to both Shane and Ilya's storyline, as well as to the stories of so many real-life athletes, that I simply hate it when people say the third episode was unnecessary or that Scott's speech at the beginning of the sixth episode was too long.

Yes, I do tend to skip the third episode on my rewatches, and yes, Scott's book was so unbelievably boring, but his story is so relevant to queer athletes, both those who are out and those who dream of one day doing what he did. And that includes Shane and Ilya.

And to say that his storyline was 'taking up too much space' and should have been removed from the show is actually insane.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

the weather has been getting colder, so y'all know what that means:

it's winter_ninja season babyyy

Shane had never done hard drugs in his life, but the feeling that washed over him after watching Scott Hunter kiss his boyfriend on live television, in front of the entire world, was probably the closest he'd ever get to being high. It was like a sudden rush of energy, something bright and electric spreading through his body, filling him with a kind of hope he hadn't even realized he was missing.

He and Ilya both knew something had changed. Not just within the league, but within themselves, too.

Neither of them had ever really considered the possibility of being out and still playing professional hockey. Somehow, the idea had never even crossed their minds, especially not Shane's. He had always assumed that the best he and Ilya could hope for was to wait until they'd both retired before they could be together openly. That was just how things were. Or at least, it was what Shane had always believed.

But Scott Hunter had just won the Stanley Cup and then kissed a man in front of millions of people, like there was nothing unusual about it. Like he had every right to be happy, to celebrate his victory with the person he loved, and to let the whole world see it. And suddenly, Shane could imagine a different future. One where he and Ilya didn't have to hide forever. One where he would kiss Ilya after winning the Cup. One where they could have that, too.

Things had been changing between them ever since the night they'd finally confessed their love for each other. Maybe even before that. Every time they had to say goodbye, every day they spent apart, seemed to get a little harder than the last. They'd spent years convincing themselves that distance was something they could handle, that they could keep putting their lives on hold until the timing was right.

But now, with Ilya still playing with the Raiders next season and Shane staying with the Metros, the thought of going through another year like this felt almost unbearable. And even when Ilya will eventually move to Ottawa a year from now, it still wouldn't be enough. They'd still be living separate lives, stealing whatever time they could get together and wishing for more.

They couldn’t keep doing things the way they had been. They needed a new plan.

When the Admirals won the Cup, Shane’s phone was bombarded with messages from his friends. Hayden, J.J., and even Marlow had all reached out to make sure he’d seen it, as if he hadn’t been glued to the television when it happened.

The Metros’ team group chat naturally blew up. J.J. had warned Shane not to look at it, but he’d already made that mistake. He needed to know what his teammates thought about Hunter coming out. He needed to know how the men he spent most of his time with would react if he ever decided to do the same.

What he found made his stomach turn. A handful of players were throwing around slurs, while others chimed in to say how glad they were that they didn’t have to worry about any of that stuff in their locker room. Only Hayden and J.J. had bothered to tell them to knock it off.

Shane stared at the messages for a long time before finally typing out a response of his own. He’d always been too afraid to call out his teammates for their homophobic behavior, terrified they might start to suspect he wasn’t straight. Even the thought of someone making a joke about it, of one of them throwing out an accusation just to get a reaction, had been enough to scare him. But he wasn’t afraid anymore. He reminded the team that they were expected to show respect for every player in the league, regardless of who they were or who they loved. He made it clear that language like that wouldn’t be tolerated in his locker room, not from anyone. He sent the message, and the slurs stopped almost immediately, but it did little to settle the unease he was feeling.

“What did your team say about Scott Hunter coming out?” Shane asked Ilya. They were on the couch, each one of them on their own phone, Shane’s back resting on Ilya’s chest. It had been a few days since Hunter kissed his boyfriend on the ice.

“Mm, nothing. Me and Marly did not give them the chance to say anything. We told the team that if they had anything bad to say about Hunter, they should keep it to themselves.”

“That’s good.”

“Why? Did your team say something?”

“No, not really. Just… the usual slurs.” Shane tried to make it sound like nothing. He was thankful Ilya couldn't see his eyes at that moment.

“Fucking assholes. Did I ever tell you I hate your team?”

“Yeah… I can’t really defend them right now.”

He went back to scrolling through his phone, but the truth was, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Would the Metros ever accept him? Even if he somehow found the courage to tell

them he was gay, would they still respect him? Maybe he'd have to win them another Cup or two before they could look past it. And even if they did eventually accept him, would they ever accept him with Ilya?

Deep down, Shane already knew the answer. They wouldn't. Not really. Not the way he needed them to, and not in the way he deserved.

Every play he made would be questioned. Every bad pass would be picked apart. Every mistake would become another reason to doubt him, and everything he'd achieved with the team would suddenly be up for debate. No matter how many Cups he won or how many records he broke, he'd always have something to prove. And he knew that, sooner or later, someone would find a way to make it about who he was off the ice, too.

This was the team he'd always imagined retiring with. The team he'd dreamed of spending his entire career with, of one day having his jersey raised to the rafters. He'd built so much of his life around that future, and he'd spent years trying to make the Metros a better team, not just on the ice but off it, too.

But slowly, they'd been showing him exactly who they were. The culture ran too deep, from the top of the organization all the way down to the general manager and coaching staff. Shane was the captain, but there was only so much he could change when the people in charge seemed perfectly content to let things stay the way they were.

One thing was for certain, though, if Shane stayed with his team, he and Ilya would have to hide their relationship until they retired. And that wasn't something he was willing to do. Not anymore.

Holy shit. Shane was *actually* considering leaving the Montreal Metros.

These thoughts had been weighing on Shane for days. He'd grown quieter without really meaning to, and Ilya had started to notice.

"Shane, is everything okay?" Ilya laced his fingers with Shane's as they sat on the dock, drying off after their swim in the lake.

"Huh? Yeah, everything's fine."

Shane was finally out of the sling, and Ilya had almost completely recovered from his own injury, and they were finally able to enjoy the water.

"Are you sure? Sometimes… I feel like you are very far away, even while you're sitting in my lap."

Shane chuckled, but there was no humor behind it. He hated that Ilya had noticed, hated that he was making him worry. "I promise everything is okay. I've just been… thinking."

Ilya studied him for a moment. "Okay. You will tell me what you are thinking when you are ready, yes?"

Shane leaned in and gave Ilya a soft, reassuring kiss. "I will."

A few days later, Shane finally started asking Ilya questions, hoping to get a better idea of what their next step should be. They were sitting by the bonfire, the flames crackling softly in front of them. The sun had set not long ago, leaving a faint orange glow along the water as the sky slowly darkened. A few stars were beginning to appear overhead, and the fire was the only real source of light around them.

When Shane had first suggested lighting a fire on their first night at the cottage, Ilya had called it boring. But over the past few days, it had slowly become one of Ilya's favorite things to do. Just sitting there together, watching the flames, enjoying the quiet without feeling the need to fill it with conversation.

Ilya was lying with his head in Shane's lap, and Shane gently ran his fingers through his curls.

"Would you ever feel safe coming out to your team?" Shane asked.

Ilya was quiet for a couple of seconds, thinking it over. "Mm… probably no."

"Really? But your team, they seem pretty cool. How come?"

"Team has some good guys, yes, like you know, St. Simon and Connors and those guys. But not everyone is. And the organization is very old-fashioned. Even if the team accepts, I don't know if the organization would."

"But, I mean, if the team was okay with it, would that make you consider staying in Boston?"

Ilya sat up so quickly that Shane's hand slipped from his hair.

"Why? You don't want me to come to Ottawa? You don't want me to be close to you?"

"No, no, Ilya. That's not what I meant." Shane reached for Ilya's cheek to reassure him. "Of course I want you close to me. You have no idea how much I want that. I just wanted to know what your team was like. And I don't know… I just don't want you to regret signing with Ottawa if the Raiders can be a safe place for you. If it can be good for you to stay."

"Shane, Ottawa is a good team for me, it will bring me closer to you. Also, it is a place where we can really be together. Your parents live here. I can apply for Canadian citizenship. We can buy house together, we can build a future together, a family even."

Shane's heart lurched. "I want that too, Ilya. So fucking much."

Ilya settled back down, resting his head in Shane's lap again. Shane resumed running his fingers through his curls, letting the silence stretch between them. After a while, Ilya spoke again.

“I like being here with you in Ottawa. And being close to Yuna and David. It’s been so long since I had a family.”

Shane’s fingers slowed. “Have you talked to your family in Russia at all?”

“No. Is just my brother there now. And he sucks.”

“I’m sorry about your family. Even if they suck, you must miss them.”

“My mother didn’t suck. She was great.”

Shane glanced down at him. “How did she die?”

“By accident.”

“An accident?” Shane asked quietly. His hand moved to Ilya’s arm, squeezing gently through the sleeve of his hoodie.

“Yes,” Ilya said, with a tight, humorless smile. “She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills.”

“Ilya, I’m so sorry.” Shane said softly. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.” Ilya swallowed. “I found her.” His voice broke on the last word. “I don’t want you to think she was weak, she wasn’t. She was… amazing. But she was so sad. And my father was so hard on her and...”

A tear slipped down Ilya’s cheek. Shane didn’t wipe it away. He wanted Ilya to know he didn’t have to hide any of this from him, that he could cry as much as he needed to and Shane would still be right there.

He wrapped one arm tightly around Ilya’s shoulders, keeping the other hand in his hair, gently massaging his scalp. He wished he could take the pain away. Every bad memory, every lonely moment, every terrible thing Ilya had lived through. Shane wanted to take it all and replace it with something better, give him all the happy memories he’d been denied.

“You’re so strong,” Shane murmured in Ilya’s ear. He kissed his temple. “You’re incredible. I love you, Ilya.”

Ilya reached up and held on to the hand resting on his shoulder. For a while, neither of them said anything. The fire crackled, and the night settled around them. Shane kept his arms around Ilya, holding him close for as long as he needed.

Shane laid alone in bed, reading his book, waiting for Ilya to come home. Ilya was flying back from Las Vegas, where he had attended the NHL Awards. Both of them had been up for

the MVP award, but there was no doubt Scott Hunter was going to win it, he'd had a phenomenal season. Ilya had wanted to skip the ceremony altogether, wanting to stay with Shane in Ottawa, but it wouldn't have looked professional as many would assume he did not attend just because he didn't think he was going to win.

Shane watched the ceremony from his cottage. He wished he could have been at there to see it in person, but it seemed like an unnecessary burden on his freshly healed body to fly all the way to Las Vegas. Still, he would have liked to be there with Ilya, even if they had to pretend they were nothing more than rivals. He would also have liked to hear Scott Hunter's speech at the NHL Awards. Shane had watched that speech a few times. He would have liked to have shaken Hunter's hand.

He had sent Hunter an email afterward. It had taken him an embarrassingly long time to write. He'd gone through several drafts, deleting anything that felt too personal, too revealing, or too much like he was asking Hunter to understand something Shane wasn't ready to say out loud. In the end, he'd settled on a short message acknowledging Hunter's bravery and thanking him for what he'd done. He had chosen his words carefully, because he didn't have Hunter's courage. Not yet, anyway.

The front door opened, the sound carried through the house, and a few seconds later, Ilya appeared in their bedroom.

"Hello, moya lyubov." He walked over to the bed and started to sit down beside Shane's legs.

"Hey. No outside clothes on the bed."

"I barely stepped foot in this house and you already want me naked? Did you miss me that much?"

Before Shane could respond, Ilya pulled off his tshirt and pants, leaving them in a heap on the floor.

"Fuck off." Shane said, with no bite to it, he was already distracted by the sight of his boyfriend in front of him.

Ilya grinned, climbed onto the bed, and settled himself on top of Shane. Then he kissed him aggressively, making up for every hour they had spent apart.

"I missed you," he murmured against Shane's mouth.

Shane missed him too. "You've only been gone three days." He said instead.

"Too long. I need you now." Ilya said and continued to kiss Shane.

"Wait," Shane said, trying to catch his breath. "I was going to tell you something."

"What?" Ilya asked, grinding his hips against Shane's and trailing kisses down his neck.

"Fuck, I don't know. I think my brain just stopped working." Whatever Shane was going to say could wait.

Ilya chuckled and kissed him again.

Shane woke up early the next morning, at his usual time. Ilya was still asleep beside him, his face half-buried in the pillow, looking entirely too peaceful for someone Shane desperately needed to talk to. Shane nudged his shoulder. It was much earlier than Ilya usually woke up, but he couldn't wait any longer. He'd spent half the last three days thinking about it, and now that the idea had taken shape in his head, he needed to know what Ilya thought.

"Huh? Shane, what is happening?" Ilya mumbled, blinking at him.

"What if we played on the same team?" Shane blurted out, unable to wait for Ilya to fully wake up before asking.

Ilya stared at him, his eyebrows furrowing in disbelief. "Am I still dreaming?"

"I'm serious, Ilya. I'm a free agent in two years. I could technically request a trade next year, but that could get really messy, and there could be consequences, especially with the fans. They could think I'm betraying them, or label me as a traitor—"

"Shane, sweetheart. This is too many English words so early in the morning." Ilya rubbed a hand over his face. "What are you saying?"

"What if I also signed with the Centaurs?"

Ilya finally seemed to have woken up. He looked like he genuinely couldn't believe what he was hearing, but Shane continued. "We'd be on the same team. The rivalry would be over. No one would be pitting us against each other anymore. And we could tell people we... developed a friendship. We could even start a charity together, something we both care about. Something that would give us a reason to work together and be seen together all year round."

He'd been thinking about this plan since the moment he saw Scott Hunter kiss his boyfriend after winning the Cup. The idea had seemed impossible at first, but the more he considered it, the more it made sense.

"And then, when we feel that it is safe enough and we are both ready, we could announce that our friendship had turned into... something more. No one would have to question our integrity or go digging through all those years of rivalry trying to figure out if we ever let each other win."

Ilya was still watching him with wide eyes.

"I want to play on the same team as you." Shane's voice softened. "I want us to live in the same city, in the same house. I want us to get married one day and raise kids together. Maybe even get a dog." He laughed nervously, though there was nothing funny about how badly he wanted all of it. "I want a life with you. If— if you want that, too."

Ilya's expression crumpled into something so full of hope and love that Shane felt his heart squeeze.

"I want. I want, Shane. Fuck, I want it so much."

Ilya leaned over him, practically sprawled across his body, and kissed him. Then he started whispering against Shane's lips, "Ya tebya lyublyu." He seemed unable to decide whether to keep kissing Shane or keep telling him he loved him, so he did both, over and over.

"Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu," Shane whispered back.

Ilya let out a shaky breath and settled on top of him, resting his head against Shane's chest. Shane wrapped his arms around him, holding him close, still trying to process the fact that they were actually talking about this. Not some distant future when they'd retired and no longer had anything to lose. A real future. One they might be able to start building in just two years.

"We will win so many Cups together," Ilya said.

Shane laughed, pressing a kiss to his hair. "We'd be fucking unstoppable."

Ilya chuckled against his chest. They fell quiet after that, neither of them seeming to have anything else to say. Shane stared at Ilya, one hand moving absently through his curls, the other resting against his back. His heart was racing. Ilya could probably hear it, or at least feel it beneath his cheek.

But Shane wasn't nervous. He wasn't scared of what might happen if they took this chance. He was excited, almost giddy, with the possibility of everything that lay ahead of them. A future where he didn't have to say goodbye to Ilya after every visit. Where they could come home to each other every night, wake up beside each other every morning, win Stanley Cups together, and build a life together without constantly having to think about who might be watching. A future where he could love Ilya openly.

After a while, Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at Shane. "You would really leave Metros for me?" he asked quietly.

"I would do anything for you, Ilya."

Chapter 25: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Remember when this fic was supposed to be 4 chapters only?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One year later - July 2018 - Lanaudière

The season was finally over.

The Raiders had been knocked out in the second round of the playoffs, while the Metros had made it all the way to the Eastern Conference Finals before their season also came to an end. It had been a long few months, and by the time July rolled around, Shane and Ilya were more than ready for a break.

They had invited their friends to the cottage for a few days, giving everyone a chance to relax before heading off on their separate summer plans. They'd spent their time swimming, drinking, and arguing over whether the Raiders or the Metros had had the better season. Jackie and Hayden had made the most of the rare opportunity to unwind without her kids around, while Jackie, Rose, and Svetlana had quickly become so close Shane would have thought they had known each other for years.

For Shane, having everyone together like this felt a little surreal. A little over a year ago, the future he and Ilya wanted had seemed so far out of reach. They'd spent so much time worrying about what they stood to lose that it had been difficult to imagine what they might gain. Now, sitting around the cottage with the people who mattered most to them, Shane could finally appreciate how much had changed, and how much he had changed. They still had a path ahead of them, but they were so close to getting everything they wanted.

It was nice being able to be themselves around their friends. After a season of barely getting to see each other, this felt like the perfect way to close that chapter of their lives. They had the people who'd helped them get here, the people they considered family, all gathered in one place.

Now, on their last evening together, everyone was gathered around the dinner table, full from the meal Shane and Ilya had prepared themselves.

"Thank you for a few nights away from the kids," Jackie said, lifting her glass toward them. "Seriously. I love my children, but I also love sleeping past seven in the morning."

“We’re really glad you’re here,” Shane said with a smile. He glanced around the table. “All of you.”

Then his eyes settled on Ilya, sitting beside him. They’d agreed to tell everyone tonight, and Shane felt a rush of excitement at the thought of finally sharing their plans. He’d imagined this moment more times than he could count, and now it was actually happening. Soon, Ilya would be moving to Ottawa. They’d be able to see each other more often, they would begin to build their life together, and take another step toward the future they’d been dreaming about.

He reached beneath the table and took Ilya's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Ilya took that as a cue to start. He cleared his throat, grabbing everyone’s attention, then said, “Me and Shane have something we want to share with you.”

“Is one of you pregnant?” Marlow said with a smirk.

“How the fuck would that even be possible?” Hayden asked.

“Well, Pike—”

Jackie cleared her throat, getting them both to quiet down.

Shane turned back towards Ilya, their fingers still intertwined, and gave him an encouraging nod to continue.

“I have decided… that I will not re-sign with the Raiders next season,” Ilya announced.

Marlow blinked. “What?”

“Please tell me you're not signing with Montreal,” Hayden said, looking between them.

Ilya shook his head. “Is not Montreal. I’m signing with Ottawa. To be closer to Shane.”

“Oh my god.” Rose said, half whispering.

“Ottawa? Are you insane?” Hayden said.

“Holy shit,” J.J. exclaimed.

“No!” Marlow half rose from his seat, turning first to Shane. “Shane, buddy, I’m so happy you get to have your boyfriend living closer to you. Truly happy for you.” He sounded almost entirely sincere. Then he turned to Ilya. “Roz, what the fuck, man? Are you seriously going to leave me alone in Boston?”

“You will not be alone, Marly. And you know when I leave, that means the C will be yours, yes?”

“Oh.” Marlow paused. That was clearly something he hadn’t considered. He settled back into his chair. “Well, hope you have fun in Ottawa, man.”

“This is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard. Moving teams to be closer to each other? Oh, you guys are just—” Rose trailed off, apparently unable to find the right words. She leaned into Shane, who was sitting next to her, and wrapped a hand around his arm and rested her head on his shoulder for a moment.

“Hands to yourself, Landry.” Ilya said.

Shane laughed softly, his happiness only growing as he looked around the table. On Ilya’s other side, Svetlana gave them both a sad smile. She was losing her closest friend to another city, and she had every right to be upset.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said. “I should have told you earlier.”

Svetlana shook her head. “I’m not sad you’re leaving Boston. Okay, maybe just a little bit. But I’m also so happy for you. This is so great for you two. You deserve to be happy. Both of you.”

Ilya leaned over and hugged her. Shane reached across to hold her hand, and she squeezed it right back.

“You know you can always visit us in Ottawa,” Shane added.

“Thank you,” Svetlana nodded. “I love you both, so much.”

“We love you, too.” Shane said and squeezed her hand gently.

“How will this work exactly?” J.J. interrupted. Everyone looked at him. “I mean, you will still be almost two hours apart, and during the season, you will barely get to see each other. Isn’t it going to be like really hard?” he asked sympathetically, though the harsh reality was still there in his words.

“J.J.,” Jackie warned gently. It was obviously something they’d all been thinking about, but no one had wanted to be the one to point it out.

“You’re right, it will be hard,” Ilya admitted. “But Shane came up with a plan for us.”

“Um, we’re launching a charity together,” Shane explained. “It’ll be called the Irina Foundation. We’re going to start a hockey school and donate the money to organizations focused on mental health and suicide prevention. It’ll give us a reason to spend time together in public, too.”

“The Irina Foundation?” Svetlana asked softly, her eyes filling with tears.

“Yes,” Ilya nodded, giving her a sad smile. “Was Shane’s idea.”

“And you already know my mom got us those joint partnerships earlier this year. Well, she's got a few more lined up for next year,” Shane continued. “We’ll be required to spend time together. Try to milk the rivalry for everything it’s worth.”

His mother had been more than happy to help them make the plan work, especially when they told her they wanted to play on the same team and that it would mean they would both be taking a slight pay cut. She'd immediately started figuring out ways to make up for the money they'd lose with their new contracts. Between the foundation and their joint appearances, they'd have plenty of opportunities to be seen together without anyone questioning why.

"And the only two hours apart is just for one year," Shane continued. "Because at the end of next season… I'll be a free agent—"

"No!" Hayden interrupted.

But Shane kept going, unable to contain his excitement. "—and I'm also going to sign with the Centaurs."

For a couple of seconds, the entire table fell silent. Everyone stared at him and Ilya, their mouths hanging open as the news sank in.

"So you're *really* serious about him," Hayden said to Shane, pointing at Ilya.

"Obviously." Shane gave him an unimpressed look.

"Oh, this is just perfect," Jackie said, pushing back her chair and getting up to hug Shane and Ilya.

The other women quickly followed, surrounding them with hugs and congratulations. The men, meanwhile, were quieter, apparently already mourning the loss of their captains. Shane couldn't blame them, he too was going to miss his teammates.

"My kids are going to miss having their favorite uncle around all the time," Jackie said as she hugged him, "and so are Hayden and I."

"I'm going to miss you guys too," he said. Over the past eight years, he'd become an honorary member of the Pike family. He'd been there for the kids as they grew up, and they'd become part of his life in a way he'd never expected.

Standing beside him, Svetlana was speaking to Ilya in Russian. Shane couldn't follow most of it, but he understood the last sentence.

"Ona by ochen' gordilas' toboy, Ilya." *She would have been so proud of you, Ilya.*

Ilya's expression softened. He lowered his eyes, and Svetlana reached for his hand, squeezing it gently. Shane rested a hand on Ilya's shoulder, a quiet reminder that he was there.

"Well, boys," Marlow said rather loudly, shaking his head. "We're fucked. With those two on the same team, there's no chance for any other team to win."

"I feel bad for the goalies who'll have to face both of them on the same night," Hayden added.

“Capitaine,” J.J. said, turning to Shane, “you think you can get us one more Cup before you leave?”

“Hey, the Cup is ours next year,” Marlow insisted.

The table erupted into another round of arguments, but the noise gradually faded into the background for Shane. Ilya wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and Shane slipped his own around Ilya’s waist. They sat together, watching their friends continue arguing about hockey.

Ilya leaned closer and whispered, “I love you,” into Shane’s ear. Shane smiled and tightened his arm around Ilya.

There was still a long way to go, but they were no longer just dreaming about a future together. They were building one.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who stuck around till the end. Halfway through writing this fic, I found out that another author had copied the first couple of chapters my fic, and that left me feeling so disheartened and unmotivated, and I really struggled to finish writing after that, but I’m glad I stuck it out because I really love this story. Hell, I loved it so much that I ended up writing 20 more chapters than I had originally intended.

Thank you for making it this far 🧿♥

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!