

love in exile has nowhere to go

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love in exile has nowhere to go

by [justhockey](#)

Summary

“We’ve made a trade,” Coach announces. “For Shane Hollander.”

It’s like the ground drops out from beneath Ilya, and his heart falls from his chest. It tumbles past rock bottom, down to the cavern that shattered open inside of him on that night five years ago. The night when Ilya walked away from Hollander for the last time.

He can’t breathe.

(Or: Shane doesn’t get hurt, they break up, and they don’t talk for five long years. Until Shane is traded to Ottawa.)

Notes

Title from *Rein Me In* by Sam Fender and Olivia Dean.

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

“Whatever it was, Barrett did it,” Ilya says, as he steps inside Wiebe’s office and lets the door fall closed behind him.

Coach laughs, a low, easy chuckle, as he shakes his head and gestures to the chair in front of his desk. Ilya glances at it like he’s scared it might grow teeth and bite him, but he takes a seat anyway. He gets the feeling he doesn’t have much of a choice.

He swallows thickly, his throat tight and raw, like he’s breathing through broken glass.

Everyone knows being called into the coach’s office isn’t a good thing, especially the day before the trade deadline. Ilya’s been captain of the Centaurs for four years now, and last year they made it all the way to the conference finals. They’re getting there, slowly but surely, but maybe management has decided it’s *too* slow.

“Look, Ilya, I wanted to tell you this personally,” Wiebe begins, and Ilya instinctively closes his eyes, as if that could protect him from the blow he’s about to be dealt.

“Where am I going?” He asks through gritted teeth.

He loves Ottawa. It’s more of a home to him than Boston or Moscow ever were, and his teammates...they’re family to him. People he genuinely likes, and enjoys spending time with; people who care about Ilya, not just Rozanov.

Without even knowing what was wrong with him during his first season in Ottawa, they still rallied around Ilya and pulled him out of the trenches. They didn’t ask too many questions, or push for answers that Ilya simply couldn’t give them, they just silently stood by his side through it all.

He’ll miss them more than he can bear to think about.

“What? No, fuck - Ilya. God, you’re not being *traded*,” Wiebe says frantically.

Ilya’s eyes shoot open. “I’m not?”

“Of course you’re not. You’re our captain. You mean everything to this team, and to this city. We love you here.”

Ilya sighs, a long, shuddering thing, that allows his jaw to unclench and his muscles to relax. “Oh,” he says. “Well - what, then?”

It’s Wiebe’s turn to sigh now. He rests his elbows on his desk, clasps his hands together, and leans forward. Ilya kind of feels like he’s back in school, getting disciplined by the principal for defending Svetlana, or interrupting a teacher, or *something*. Whatever Coach is about to say, Ilya is certain that he isn’t going to like it. But as long as he’s not being traded, Ilya will simply learn to live with it.

God knows, he’s survived tougher things than whatever Wiebe can throw at him.

“We’ve made a trade,” Coach announces. “For Shane Hollander.”

It’s like the ground drops out from beneath Ilya, and his heart falls from his chest. It tumbles past rock bottom, down to the cavern that shattered open inside of him on that night five years ago. The night when Ilya walked away from Hollander for the last time.

He can’t breathe.

His hands clench into fists on his knees, and his vision goes blurry, and he tries to suck in a breath but it feels like broken glass all over again. Feels like the shards of his heart are tearing his lungs to shreds.

“I know you two have history,” Wiebe begins, and Ilya would laugh if he could remember how to. “But you’re a good guy, and a great captain, and I know you understand how big of a deal this is for us.”

Of course it’s a big deal. He’s *Shane fucking Hollander*: greatest player the league has ever seen. He’d help bring the cup to Ottawa, would give the guys - and the city - something tangible to believe in again. Everything Ilya has spent the last four years trying to do, Hollander would make happen in one.

Ilya just isn’t sure if he can be here to watch it happen; he isn’t sure if he could survive it.

“How?” He asks, voice like sandpaper as he chokes out the word.

Wiebe winces. Ottawa must have given up a hell of a lot to get Hollander; he’s the most valuable player in the league. Ilya wonders which of his friends he’ll have to say goodbye to, so his biggest regret can join his team.

“Well,” Coach begins, “I’m not sure if someone in Montreal’s front office was having a medical emergency when they agreed to this, or if there’s something going on behind the scenes, but...”

“What did we give up?”

“Sammy, our second round draft pick, and the rights to a couple of prospects.”

Ilya’s jaw legitimately drops.

Montreal traded *the* Shane Hollander for a half-decent rookie, and thoughts and prayers. What the fuck happened? Hollander wanted to play for the Voyageurs for his entire career - wanted to retire there, and have his jersey raised into the rafters, and then probably coach, or commentate, or fucking scout there.

None of it makes sense.

“I know,” Wiebe says, chuckling in disbelief. “It’s insane. They’re making a huge fucking mistake, but - you ever hear the saying *don’t look a gift horse in the mouth*?”

“Right,” Ilya says, even though he has no fucking idea what that’s supposed to mean.

“Look, Ilya. I know this whole...*rivalry* thing you guys had going on has died down a lot now, right? So - so I’m counting on you to be the captain I know you are.”

Ilya nods his head in understanding.

Their rivalry hadn’t so much *died down*, but rather completely imploded. After that night - after they called it quits - all the fire that their competitiveness had been built on simply burned out. They couldn’t look at each other during face-offs, couldn’t chirp each other during a puck battle, could barely even stand the contact of a hit against the boards. The league got bored of the narrative pretty quickly, after that.

The only thing that’s left of *Hollander-and-Rozanov* is the aching in Ilya’s chest.

“Of course. It’s not a problem,” Ilya lies.

Wiebe smiles, his shoulders drooping like he’d been holding himself tense for hours. “Great. That’s fantastic. So you can be the one to tell the team then, yeah? The trade hasn’t broken yet but we won’t have long.”

Ilya nods almost robotically. “Yes. Sure.”

“Perfect. Thank you, Ilya. Seriously.”

Wiebe is an amazing coach. He’s patient and understanding, knows when to push and when to take a step back for a minute. He’s even got an open-door policy, so he’s always available for the guys to talk to. He cares about the person as much as he cares about the player. Ilya, and the entire team, would run through a brick wall for him.

So Ilya is gonna try his goddamn fucking best, but he’s scared his coach is about to become another person that he disappoints.

The second he’s out of the coach’s office and into the empty hallway, Ilya slumps back against the wall. His legs can barely hold him up as he bends down, rests his hands on his knees, and just tries to catch his breath. He feels like he’s done bag skates - like he’s just had the workout of his life. His body is in fight or flight, but he can’t do either.

Instead, Ilya does what he’s spent a lifetime perfecting: he sucks it the fuck up and pretends that nothing in the world can get to him.

It’s the only way he knows how to survive.

Sammy doesn’t answer the phone when Ilya calls - probably already on his way to Montreal - so Ilya leaves a voicemail telling him how much the team is going to miss him. He doesn’t even have to exaggerate either, because the kid is funny, and easygoing, with sharp hands and a solid backhand. He was a great guy to have, in the locker room *and* on the ice. He’s no Shane Hollander, but Ilya doesn’t want to die at the thought of him, so. It’s definitely a loss in Ilya’s books.

The locker room is subdued when Ilya walks into it. They obviously know Sammy is gone, but they’re still waiting to find out what they got in return. They don’t have practice today, so

everyone has showed up just for this: to see if the gain was worth the price they paid for it.

Ilya isn't prepared for their reactions - isn't sure if he can't stomach watching *his team* lose their minds over Hollander. Over the one person on the entire fucking planet who can rattle Ilya without doing anything except existing. But he's the captain, and they're counting on him, and he refuses to let them down before Hollander even gets here.

This is his team. Hollander won't change that.

"So, I know we're all gutted to lose Sammy," Ilya begins, instantly gaining the attention of the room. "He was a great guy and we'll definitely miss him, but hopefully Montreal will treat him well."

There's murmurs of agreement, but it's Bood who finally chips in with the question everyone is dying to ask: "Who did we trade him for?"

Figuring it's like ripping off a bandaid - better to do it quickly - Ilya sucks in a breath.

"Shane Hollander," he says. It's the first time Ilya has spoken his name out loud in longer than he can remember.

The room instantly explodes.

There's cheering, and delighted laughter, and curious questions. They're all confused at how and *why* - because who the fuck would have Shane Hollander and then let him go, right? - but, more than anything, they're excited. The possibility hums in the atmosphere, hope crackling against their skin like it's something they can almost taste.

Everyone knows what a big fucking deal this is.

Ilya sticks around to answer the basics for them - though he doesn't really know that much, he'd been too blindsided to even ask - and then he dips out while everyone is still joyously celebrating. He just can't bear it.

To them, it's just about the best thing that could ever happen to the Centaurs. To Ilya, it feels like his entire life is about to implode.

When he signed with Ottawa as a free agent, he wasn't exactly sure what he was playing at. He told himself he needed a change, told himself that he couldn't stay in the city where every fucking corner held reminders of Hollander - the city where he had fallen in love for the first time, even if half of their meetings had been in Montreal, anyway.

Why he moved to the guy's fucking hometown, though, Ilya has no idea.

(Maybe, deep down, there was a part of him that had hoped to bump into Hollander. Or maybe the signing would have been so shocking that he would have got in touch with Ilya to ask him what the fuck he was doing. Or maybe, for a while, Ilya just didn't care about a single thing; where he played hockey was the least of his worries when it felt like his chest was cracking open.)

Ilya sits in his car, drumming his thumbs against the steering wheel, for what feels like hours.

He wants to get drunk. Or scream. Or cry. Or go back into Wiebe's office and beg for a trade to literally anywhere other than here. Instead, he pulls out his phone and opens up a contact that he hasn't used in years.

He should have already blocked it, probably. Or at least deleted it, and the years long text thread that goes with it. He can't even count the number of times his finger has hovered over the *block* button, but he's never been able to take the final leap. Ilya had ended whatever was going on between them years ago, and he'd walked away even as Hollander had pleaded for him not to, but blocking his number - deleting the evidence that they ever existed at all - was a step too far.

It had always seemed too final.

He clicks on *Jane*, and - with shaking hands - types: *Welcome to the Centaurs. Looking forward to working with you.*

Professional. Captainly. The kind of message he'd send to any new addition to the team.

Ilya half expects the message to bounce back - for Hollander to have blocked *him*. But the message goes through, and he watches with baited breath as *delivered* turns to *read*.

And then...

Jane: *See you at practice.*

He vents to Svetlana about it when he gets home. She doesn't know about what Ilya had with Hollander, of course, but she's a bigger hockey fan than even Ilya is - knows more about it, too - so it's not like she hasn't heard him whining about Hollander before. It used to be a staple topic in their conversations...*before*.

"This is huge, babe," she says, her voice tinny through the speakerphone.

"That is not how I would describe it," Ilya grumbles in response.

He's not sure that he expected her to agree with him, necessarily, because her only fault in the entire world is that she's always been a fan of Hollander's hockey. But he needed to talk about it with *someone*, so. He should have known she would be excited about it.

"Stop being a bitch, Ilya," she chastises him. "You're gonna win the cup with him."

"You're supposed to be on my side, you know?" Ilya complains.

He hears her sigh through the phone, and gets an abrupt wave of longing for his best friend. He still sees her when the Cens play in Boston, and they call or facetime whenever they can, but sometimes he misses her so much that he can hardly stand it.

She's been his best friend since they were just kids who had no idea how the world could ruin them. She's stood by him through everything, never once faltered or wavered in her support of him. He thinks little pieces of their souls live inside of each other.

Ilya wishes she were here now. He wishes he could tell her the truth.

"I'm always on your side, Ilyusha."

"I know, Sveta," he replies, soft like he always is for her.

"You're gonna be a real fucking problem when you play Boston now, huh?" She groans, just to break the somber mood.

And Ilya laughs, and Svetlana laughs, and for a while things don't feel quite so terrible.

Ilya hasn't seen Hollander off the ice since that night in Montreal, not long after his dad had died. He'd used the front door code Hollander had text him, slipped inside the apartment, and then proceeded to end the closest thing to a real relationship that Ilya has ever had. That was five years ago, now.

When he sees Hollander again, he's standing in the stall next to Ilya's, grinning as he chats with Hayes, and Bood, and Haas.

Ilya wants to throw up.

He looks...effervescent. Unreal. Like a figment of Ilya's most perfect dream. Not a single thing about him has changed, except for a few more lines by the corners of his eyes. He still has that sweet smile, and impressively thick body, and those fucking freckles that make Ilya's heart ache with longing.

The thing is, Ilya didn't end it because he wanted to. He didn't end it because he was bored of Shane, or because he didn't want anything serious, or because he didn't want *him* anymore.

Ilya ended it because he loved Shane so much that he didn't know what to do with it.

Clandestine hookups, and brief texts, and meeting only when it was convenient...that was fine in the beginning. At least, that's what Ilya had told himself. But he'd simply reached the point where he couldn't do things halfway with him anymore. He couldn't pretend that four - maybe five or six, including pre-season games and the ASG - times a year was enough for him.

Ilya wanted everything with Shane - a relationship, a home, a dog, a *life* - but he knew they could have never been anything more than what they were. Not really. Not unless they were both willing to risk absolutely everything to make it work.

And Ilya would have never asked that of Shane - would never have asked for more than he was capable of giving.

When Hunter came out it changed things a little - Ilya had sat for hours, thinking about calling Shane - but it didn't change things enough. Certainly not for their situation. Until Troy, no other player had come out and then stayed in the league; they'd retired, or gone to play in Europe, or quietly faded into obscurity. It's still not easy, and Ilya and Shane's history would have made it all but impossible.

Ilya hurts everyone he ever touches, and he refused to be the person who ruined Shane's life. So he ruined his own by walking away.

He's missed Shane every moment since. So much that it makes him breathless.

And now he's standing in Ilya's locker room, next to Ilya's stall, laughing with Ilya's teammates like he belongs there. Like he fits. Like this isn't fucking impossible for him, too.

"Yo, Cap! Look who's here!" Choui calls out, and Ilya watches as Hollander's head snaps in his direction.

His eyes widen, and he sucks in a breath, and the whole room fades away. There's just big brown eyes, and a constellation of freckles, and a tugging in his chest - like something is pulling him towards Hollander even now, after all these years.

Ilya wants to follow it. Ilya *can't* follow it.

"Good to have you here, Hollander," Ilya says, his voice tight and strained. It's not what he wants to say, not even close. But he lost the right to say those things when he walked away.

Hollander's jaw clenches. "Yeah. Good to be here."

"Brrrr," Hayes says, rubbing his arms and pretending to shiver. "Is it just me, or is it a bit frosty in here?"

Troy snorts out a laugh. "I think the arctic is warmer."

"Alright, alright," Bood says, clapping his hands to break up the teasing. "We're all grown-ups here. We're all gonna get along just fine. Aren't we, Cap?"

"Of course we are, Zane. No problems here."

Shane bristles, taking the comment as an attack that it certainly wasn't intended to be. "Well there are no problems here, either."

"Good. Then let's get to work."

It doesn't take them long to change into their pads and skates. The locker room is filled with quiet chatter that follows them out onto the ice, but Ilya doesn't participate in it. He barely even looks up from the ground, just in case he meets Hollander's eyes again.

He can't take the risk of feeling so unsteady out here, in the place where he's never had to question anything.

That's the worst part of all this, perhaps. Hockey has always been a constant for Ilya - the one thing he has always been certain of. He's been the best on every team he's ever played for, he's confident and self-assured, and has never had to doubt himself. He's never had to question if he belongs. But now it feels like the entire world has been tilted on its axis. The ice no longer feels like solid ground, but like it's melting beneath his blades.

He doesn't know how to share the space that feels like home, with the *man* who had once felt like home, too.

Maybe it wouldn't be so unbearable if he and Hollander were bad together. But, after trying Hollander out centering the second line for a while, Wiebe bumps him up to first and puts Ilya on his wing. *Just to try*, all the coaching staff insist, but the second Ilya and Hollander touch the ice together he can practically feel the excitement in the air.

They're electric.

Because they're faster than anyone else in the league, playing together means they finally have someone who can keep up with them. And, like all those years ago in Tampa, every pass connects. Tape to tape. Ilya doesn't have to look to know where to send the puck, and Hollander doesn't have to wait to see where Ilya's going to be, because they just know. They can sense it.

It's like a magic show, the way they read each other's minds.

It makes Ilya feel nauseous. They're not supposed to be this good together now; they're not supposed to *work*. He'd spent the last five years trying to convince himself that walking away was the right choice, and now...this. And he knows that their connection on the ice isn't the same as having one off it, but - but it's impossible not to feel that tugging in his chest.

That connection that tethers them together - the one Ilya thought had been severed long ago - it's still burning hot, and bright, and *strong*.

"Fucking hell, Captain," Luca pants breathlessly, as he drapes himself over Ilya's shoulder. "The fuck was that?"

"Hockey," Ilya deadpans. "You should try it sometime."

Luca snorts, right in Ilya's ear, and says: "Fuck off, you know what I mean. That was unreal."

Ilya's eyes search for Hollander, except - is it really searching if Ilya knows exactly where he is? If he can feel him?

He's standing with Wyatt and Bobby - their assistant coach - over by the benches, but his eyes are fixed on Ilya and Luca. The second he realises Ilya has clocked him, he looks away, cheeks flushed and jaw set.

"The kid's right, Rozy," Bood says.

"Not a kid," Luca interjects, but Bood merely waves him off and continues to talk over him.

“You two are gonna be unstoppable out there.”

Ilya’s attention doesn’t shift away from Hollander, and when he glances over at Ilya again, there’s something hot and fiery in his eyes. Ilya can see it from all the way over here. Hollander’s gaze flashes to Luca for a moment - cataloguing the way he’s draped himself over Ilya and not let go - then he looks away again, turning so his back is to them.

“Yeah. Unstoppable.”

Unfortunately, Bood was right. They *are* unstoppable.

There’s so much noise about the trade - speculation about why, and how, and *why*. Insiders don’t know how the teams managed to keep it from leaking for so long, journalists ask too many invasive questions, and fans online are either absolutely ecstatic (Ottawa) or absolutely furious (Montreal). The one thing everyone can seem to agree on is that something huge must have happened for the Voyageurs to toss Shane aside for almost nothing in return.

But - through the chatter and the questions and the rumours - the Cens start playing some really fucking good hockey.

The locker room might be tense, like a rubber band pulled taut and ready to snap, but on the ice...on the ice they are pure poetry. They win their first three games with Hollander by almost embarrassing margins, and whether they’re on a line together or just on the powerplay, Ilya and Hollander have combined for a total of six goals already.

They’re so good they’re making other teams worry. Which is great news, honestly, because if people knew what the team was currently like *off* the ice...well. There’d be more than just rumours about the trade.

Ilya is abrupt and distant because he doesn’t know how else to be - doesn’t know how to exist in Hollander’s space without fucking reaching for him. He opens his mouth to say, “Nice shot,” and instead tells him his backhand needs work. Or Ilya thinks about crashing into Hollander’s arms after they combine for a beauty of a goal, only to nod his head and skate away instead.

And Hollander is petty and sharp, always with a snappy response at any perceived slight from Ilya, even when there isn’t one - Ilya’s, “Clean entry,” is met with, “Yeah, well I know how to skate.” And every time he joins in with the team as they tease Ilya, his comments hold a little too much vitriol to be a joke.

He’s always tense, too. Like he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Sometimes Ilya catches him glancing around the locker room like he’s assessing the team. Like he’s waiting for them to say something they shouldn’t. He wants to know what that’s all about - wants to ask - but he knows it’s a bad idea. Beyond the necessary hockey talk, Hollander has barely even glanced in his direction.

It's for the best, Ilya tells himself, even though it makes him feel like his skin is stretched too tight over his bones.

Everyone is exhausted after their red-eye to Vegas, and with a West Coast road trip looming ahead of them, they all just want to stumble into their hotel rooms and crash. However, Ilya is cursed enough that things are never as simple as that for him.

Wiebe hands him his room key and says, "Roz, you're with Hollander for the rest of the season."

The floor tilts slightly beneath him, and Ilya almost stumbles.

"What?"

"Why?" Hollander jumps in, his brow furrowed and his jaw clenched in a way that makes him look more like a pissed off kitten than anything actually threatening.

"Because I said so."

"Coach..." Ilya groans.

"Boys, listen--"

"You two fucking idiots are so bitchy it feels like I'm at one of Milo's PTA meetings," Bood interrupts.

Ilya fixes him with a glare that makes the rookies tremble, but Bood has known him long enough by now that he simply grins and pops his gum in Ilya's face. Fuck. His team aren't scared enough of him.

Luca sidles up beside Ilya with a smirk on his baby face. He rests his arm on Ilya's shoulder and tauntingly pats his cheek as he says, "Come on Cap, you're supposed to be a role model."

Ilya grabs Luca's wrist to pull it away from his face. "Haas, I swear to fucking god--"

"You love me, Rozy," he replies, and fuck him for being right. "Now put on your big boy pants and room with Hollzy."

Hollander is glaring at both of them, but the pissed off kitten look has shifted into something vaguely homicidal. Everyone else who hasn't already disappeared into their own rooms, however, is watching with absolute glee. Fuck them all. Ilya's gonna make Coach torture them at tomorrow's practice. Especially Hayes and Dykstra, who aren't even *trying* to conceal the joyous expressions on their faces.

His team love to see him miserable, apparently.

"Fine," Ilya huffs, snatching the keycard out of Wiebe's outstretched hand.

As he's stalking away, not bothering to check if Hollander is following him (he is, Ilya can feel him), he hears someone shout: "Don't kill each other."

Ilya flips the bird over his shoulder, and it must reach its intended audience because there's a muffled guffaw behind his back as he walks away. Just a week ago Ilya almost had a panic attack over the thought of leaving this team behind; now, he kind of wishes Wiebe had announced *his* trade, instead of Hollander's.

His team are evil. He wouldn't change them for the world.

Hollander follows him into the elevator, and they make the journey up to the fourth floor in complete silence. There's a crackle of tension between them, like both of them want to say something but neither of them know how to. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking on Ilya's part - maybe Hollander has succeeded in doing what Ilya has failed to do: stop caring.

He has his own keycard, but Hollander trails behind Ilya until they reach room 4101, and when the light turns green they both make their way inside.

"Do you want the bed next to the window?" Ilya asks, and Hollander freezes. Fuck.

He isn't supposed to have remembered that - isn't supposed to still know that Hollander prefers to sleep next to the window, not the door. He wasn't supposed to have kept all those little pieces of information that he'd picked up on over the years. But Ilya simply never learned how to put them down.

He never learned how to let go.

"Please," Hollander says.

Ilya nods, dumping his duffel on the bed closest to the door as Hollander moves past him to the other one.

The air in the room feels thick enough to chew on.

The last time they were in a hotel room together was Tampa, circa 2017. Hollander had come out to him, and they had both agreed that they were more than they ever planned to be, and then Ilya had cried while Hollander held him in his arms and kept him from shattering into pieces.

Their relationship started in hotel rooms just like this one. It grew into something dangerous, something more, something bigger than it was ever supposed to be. And now they're back in another hotel room, closer than they've been in years, yet a million miles apart from each other. It makes Ilya feel like he is suffocating. Every movement, every breath, every tiny sound that Hollander makes feels like a knife to Ilya's chest.

"Are you going to shower?" Hollander asks, his voice breaking the awkward silence.

Ilya shakes his head. "No. I'm going to crash. I'll shower in the morning."

Hollander doesn't reply.

"Are *you* going to shower?"

“Yeah. Problem?”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “Is your hotel room, too, Hollander.”

So Hollander showers, and Ilya changes into a ratty pair of sweats that he likes to sleep in, and he tries desperately hard not to think about what Hollander looks like right now. Wet, and naked, and so...touchable. So perfect.

Because fuck, he really is perfect. Still the most beautiful person that Ilya has ever seen in his life - huge brown eyes, long lashes, those devastating freckles; thick thighs, broad shoulders, big, strong hands. And when he walks out of the bathroom with his hair still damp and glasses perched on the end of his nose, Ilya has to bite his lip to keep himself from saying something completely life-ruining.

It was easier to pretend when he only had to see Hollander in the locker room and on the ice - easier when they were surrounded by other people to fill the silences. But now, with Hollander so agonisingly close to him, it's almost impossible for Ilya to keep up the charade.

Ilya never stopped wanting him, or loving him, or missing him.

Hollander clears his throat like he's about to say something, but it takes five minutes of him rustling through his duffel and organising his belongings - and Ilya silently losing his mind - before he finally speaks.

“So. You and Haas seem close.”

Ilya hums in agreement. “Yes. He was my rookie.”

Hollander nods as he climbs into his bed, and Ilya thinks it's the end of the conversation but: “He's not a rookie anymore, though.”

“No. He still looks like a baby, but he's not a rookie. He is one of my best friends.”

And he really is. Somewhere along the way, once Luca had stopped calling Ilya *Mr Rozanov*, they became close. After Troy came out publicly, Luca did too - though just to the guys - and Ilya felt it was only right to fold Luca into their little club. He's still just a kid to Ilya, and he wants to protect him for as long as possible.

No one else on the team knows about Ilya - or, he hasn't *told* them, at any rate. Not because he's hiding, but because it doesn't really matter without Hollander in the picture. There won't be another man for Ilya; he can't even stomach the thought of it.

He, Troy, and Luca do make quite the trio, though. (Even if Luca practically combusts every time Hollander so much as glances in his direction. *Just hero worship*, he insists. *Definitely not a crush*).

It's nice to have friends other than Svetlana. He'd had Marly back in Boston, but there was always something that Ilya was hiding from him. With Luca and Troy, the only secret Ilya has kept is the one that's lying in the bed next to him.

“That’s...nice.”

“Yes. He’s a great player, and even better person.”

Hollander huffs, and Ilya turns his head to watch him. He looks...something. Kind of mad, kind of sad, probably just a lot tired. Ilya wants to ask him if he’s okay.

He wants to ask Hollander if he misses Ilya, if he still loves him, if maybe things could be different for them now. He wants to, but he won’t; Ilya might be delusional, but he isn’t stupid. His love is destructive, and desperate, and selfish. Hollander is free from him, now, and Ilya won’t trap him in his web again. He’ll find a way to let him go.

“Hollander-“ Ilya tries, but he’s immediately silenced.

“Night,” Hollander interrupts.

“Good night.”

Despite the fact that Ilya has hardly gotten a wink of sleep all week, the Centaurs have absolutely dominated their West Coast road trip.

They’d won comfortably in Vegas and Anaheim, eked out a overtime victory in LA - thanks to Ilya and Hollander - and then they’d just absolutely slaughtered San Jose, the reigning cup champions, on their own ice.

Ilya and Hollander play almost perfect hockey together. It’s like they don’t know how to miss each other. Like there’s a compass inside Ilya always pointing him to true North - to Hollander. It makes hockey more fun than it’s been in a long time, and it definitely makes everyone talk about them. From commentators, to journalists, to fans on twitter; everyone is talking about their chemistry.

It’s...a lot.

Ilya is exhausted down to his very bones; it turns out that sleeping just a few feet away from someone you love and cannot have, makes for a pretty rough night’s sleep. So, while they’re spending the night in San Jose instead of getting a flight straight back home, Ilya just wants to try and get some shut eye.

Most of the guys are going out to celebrate - and as the captain, maybe Ilya should join them - but he really does not want to. Troy and Luca and Bood had tried to convince him, but Ilya wasn’t having any of it. It’s not like it’s unusual for him, anyway. He mostly left his partying days back in Boston, except for a few rare nights out.

It simply doesn’t do it for him anymore.

He’s flopping down on his bed - the one by the door - in a t-shirt with the collar torn, and a pair of basketball shorts, when Hollander walks out of the bathroom.

He falters, like he's surprised to see Ilya, before continuing towards his bed by the window. Ilya watches him - watches the creamy expanse of his back, and the freckles along the top of his shoulders, and the way his muscles flex as he tugs a t-shirt on over his head.

Hollander is a work of art.

Ilya shouldn't be watching like this, he doesn't have the right to anymore, but he can't seem to look away. Not until Hollander turns back around to face him.

"Are you, uh, not going out? Tonight?" Hollander asks, eyes focused on the wall above Ilya's head.

"Not tonight," Ilya says. "I am very tired."

"You haven't gone out all week, either," Hollander points out as he climbs beneath the sheets.

Ilya shrugs. "It's not my, uh, cup of tea."

Hollander snorts. "Really?" He asks, voice too soft for Ilya to handle.

"I don't really party anymore. Or drink very much."

Hollander looks surprised at the information, like it's a total shock that Ilya could have changed in all the years since they last really knew each other.

Ilya doesn't blame Hollander, though. His reputation has always preceded him, and he did very little to convince Hollander that he was anything more than the party-boy everyone believed him to be. In fact, right as Ilya allowed Hollander to see past that persona, Ilya had ran away and proved it.

"Wow, well. I guess it gets pretty old after a while, huh?"

Ilya hums in acknowledgment. "Yes. It's not fun for me anymore."

For a moment, Hollander doesn't respond. Ilya thinks maybe that's it - maybe that is all the conversation he will get from him. But then he hears the rustle of sheets, and when he looks over he sees that Hollander has turned on his side and is watching Ilya.

He smiles, something soft and sweet and so achingly familiar. And, in total shock, Ilya smiles back.

"What *is* fun for you, now?" Hollander asks.

The *now* doesn't go unnoticed - the unspoken *I don't know you anymore* that lingers in the few feet of space between them. But the fact that Hollander asked the question at all, well...it kind of sounds like maybe he wants to.

"I like jigsaw puzzles," Ilya confesses, grinning almost shyly as Hollander starts to laugh.

"No way. You're joking?"

“Unfortunately not.”

“My dad likes jigsaw puzzles,” Hollander says, but Ilya hears *my dad reads the New Yorker* instead.

Ilya clears his throat. “Yes, well. I am very boring now, Hollander.”

Hollander sucks in a breath, his eyes glazing over, and Ilya knows in an instant why. *Boring*. He’d called Hollander that hundreds of times over the years, always in that quiet, fond way, that only Hollander seemed to bring out of him. *Boring* like steady, and familiar, and safe.

Boring, like the kind of person you settle down and build a life with.

“Boring, huh?”

“Mhm. Yes, very,” Ilya agrees. “My dog is not boring, though. She is perfect.”

“Oh, you have a dog? I didn’t know.”

“Any. She is very sweet.” The best girl in the world, honestly. She’s the light of Ilya’s life. He hates leaving her for road trips, but he knows she gets spoiled rotten when she stays with the Drovers.

“Do you have a picture?” Hollander asks.

Ilya lights up at the question, scrambling for his phone to pull up his favourite picture of her. He feels like Bood and Cassie showing off Milo, or Boyle and his twins, or Dykstra and Caitlin with little Susie. A proud dog dad, Troy and Harris always call him. He wears the title with pride.

He stretches across the gap between their beds to show Hollander, and when he reaches for the phone to take a closer look, their fingers brush together. There’s a shock of heat, a flicker of familiarity. It reminds Ilya so much of that moment at the hotel gym in Toronto, back on the night they got drafted - the night that everything changed for them.

Hollander looks at Ilya, then the picture on the screen, and he smiles.

“She’s cute.”

“She looks like her papa,” Ilya jokes, just to lighten the mood.

It works, and Hollander laughs, pressing Ilya’s phone back into his hand as he shakes his head in disbelief.

His laughter is beautiful, and contagious, and Ilya can’t help but join in.

It feels so good to laugh with him like this; they haven’t done it in so long. They hadn’t gotten many chances to do it before, either, really. They were both so in denial for so long. And then, right as the momentum shifted towards acknowledging that what they had was real, Ilya walked away.

But it's nice, to relax with Hollander like this. To not be either completely ignoring each other, or at each other's throats, like they have been for the past two weeks.

Ilya's not sure what makes him say it - whether it's the high from the win, or from Hollander's attention - but Ilya turns to him and says, "I'm glad you're here."

Hollander's eyes are wide, and his smile is sweet, as he says, "Yeah. Me too."

They fall into silence after that. Alarms get set for their flight tomorrow morning, and the lamps get switched off, and both of them get settled in their beds. It's not awkward, though, like it has been for the last few nights. The silence isn't uncomfortable or strained, but peaceful. Settled.

"Goodnight, Ilya."

He can hardly breath when he replies, "Goodnight, Shane."

They're not quite friends, not really - not in the way that Troy, and Wyatt, and Luca, and Bood are. But in the weeks that follow they inch towards something near to that. It's probably the closest to ordinary that their relationship has ever been, between the rivalry and the secrets and the love they were too scared to name.

Their almost-friendship feels almost-normal, and they settle into a cordial rhythm that the team definitely appreciates.

And Ilya does, too.

Shane smiles at him now, easy and carefree, like it's something that he wants Ilya to have instead of it being something that he needs to earn. Their shoulders bump together at practices, and they laugh during scrimmages, and while the team watches them with disbelieving eyes, Ilya only ever watches Shane.

And sometimes...sometimes he thinks that Shane is watching back.

"Fuck me, you guys are too good," Bood pants as he skids to a stop.

Ilya glances at Shane and grins, holding out a fist for him to bump. "Hell yeah, we are."

"You fuckers are just too slow," Shane taunts, earning a glove to the face from Troy.

Even during practice drills with their own team, they're leagues ahead of everyone else. And it's not arrogance - though Ilya has never been accused of being short of that - it's just the truth. They've always occupied the top spot together. They play smart during games, never going too fast for their team to keep up with them, but they get to let loose a little here.

And my god, is it fun.

When he plays hockey with Shane, it feels like it used to again. It feels like something he does because he loves it, instead of just because he's good at it.

"Can't lie, Hollzy, I'm really glad Montreal threw you away for, like, ten bucks," Hayes says, making the other guys laugh.

Ilya notices the way Shane tenses, though. It's not obvious to anyone else, and it doesn't last long at all - barely even a full second - but Ilya sees it anyway. He thinks he would *see* Shane even if he were blind.

Ilya still hasn't asked why Shane ended up here - why, like Hayes said, the Voyageurs basically threw him away. He wants to know, of course. Wants to give Shane the space to talk about it if he needs to. But he shuts down any and all reporters' questions about the trade, and tenses whenever the guys bring it up. So Ilya figures it's best to wait him out...see if he decides to talk about it when he's ready.

"Montreal are fucking losers," Ilya scoffs, and it earns a smile from Shane. A real one, even though it's only small.

Troy is about to say something in response when Luca comes in hot, using Ilya's body to stop himself. He stumbles under the impact, but manages to correct himself before they both go crashing to the ground. The weight of Luca is solid against his back as he folds his arms around Ilya's chest, and rests his chin on Ilya's shoulder.

"Beauty of a goal, Roz," he pants into Ilya's ear. "Your pass was gorgeous, too, Hollzy."

"Thanks, kid. Maybe one day you will be half as good as me," Ilya jokes, and Luca squeezes him so tightly that he groans.

"Yeah, thanks," Shane says, perhaps a little abruptly for him - which is still exceedingly polite for most other people. "Hey, uh. You wanna work on our drop-pass, Cap?"

Shane's jaw is clenched, and he's tapping his index finger against his thumb like he does when he's feeling antsy.

It's subtle, probably enough for no one else to notice, but there's not a single thing that Ilya misses when it comes to Shane. Not the way he tenses when the music in the locker room is too loud, or the way he squints when there are strobe lights in away arenas (Ilya had them banned from the Tire Centre after Shane's first game with the Cens), or the way that his eyes sometimes go glassy when too many people are talking all at once.

He's looking at Ilya with a sense of urgency, and Ilya knows - beyond any doubt - that there's not a single thing he could ever deny Shane.

"Sounds good," Ilya replies to Shane. Then, as he's shrugging Luca off him, "Get off me, you oaf."

He follows Shane to the other end of the ice - ignoring the glances that Troy and Luca are exchanging between each other - and they practice their drop-pass until their wrists are

aching.

And until Shane is smiling again.

For once, the plane is blissfully quiet.

As the season winds down and everyone gets more tired - and as the flights and road trips feel increasingly lengthy - idle chatter and poker games give way to headphones, and movies, and sleep above all else.

It's late, they're somewhere above central Canada, and the cabin is almost completely silent except for a few, hushed conversations.

As has become routine in the past couple of weeks, Shane is sitting in the seat beside Ilya. Next to the window, of course. (Choui had given Ilya shit for that, because - no matter who sits beside Ilya - he never lets them have the window seat). Shane is watching tape from their game against Vancouver earlier this afternoon, replaying every tiny detail over and over again, like he might catch something new on the seventeenth re-watch.

Ilya pokes his arm and Shane startles, quickly pausing the video and pulling one side of his headphones away from his ear.

"You okay?" He asks, a little too loud for the quiet cabin. He winces, then whispers, "Sorry."

"You'll give yourself a headache if you keep watching that."

"I just wanna see if--"

"Your zone entry was perfect, Hollander," Ilya insists. He'd been watching the tape out of the corner of his eye, after all. "I can't sleep and I'm bored. Distract me."

Shane scoffs at the demand, rolling his eyes like Ilya is a petulant child he has to deal with. But he doesn't refuse, though. Instead he takes off his headphones and puts them into his carry-on along with the iPad, so. Ilya's taking it as a victory.

He turns slightly in his seat so he's half-facing Ilya, and fixes him with an exasperated smile.

Shane is tired too, just like the rest of them, but he carries it so well. Like water off a duck's back, or however the stupid saying goes. He looks sleepy, but not exhausted, and with his sleeves pulled down over his hands and his glasses perched on his nose, he looks so cute that Ilya wants to squeeze him. Or bite him.

"Any new pictures of Anya?" Shane asks, because he knows she's the way to Ilya's heart.

Of *course* there are new pictures of Anya. There are new pictures of her roughly every fourteen minutes. Ilya unlocks his phone to show them to Shane, and it could be an accident, but...the way Shane places his fingers over Ilya's as they both hold the phone feels very much intentional.

Ilya doesn't dare pull away. Not as Shane leans closer, and coos over Ilya's dog, and pushes his glasses up his nose when they start to slide down. He *does* think about kissing his cheek, though. Just to see what would happen.

"She's so precious," Shane says, when Ilya has finally ran out of new photos.

"You should come meet her some time." It's a friendly offer, nothing more, but they can both hear the weight behind it. Can both recognise that it's a hand held out, palm open and waiting.

"Yeah?" Shane asks, and Ilya doesn't think he's imagining the hope in his voice.

Ilya nods. "Yeah. She loves attention. And treats. And belly rubs."

Shane snorts, bumping their shoulders together as he says, "Kind of like her dad then, huh?"

He's just teasing, being sweet and funny and playful, but it's true, too. A truth that Shane only knows because he knows Ilya - the real him, that so few people get to see. And even though it's been five years since he saw Ilya like that - clingy after sex, silently demanding affection without ever being brave enough to ask for it - it doesn't mean Ilya has changed.

"How is it being closer to your parents?" Ilya asks. "They live in Ottawa, yes?"

Shane smiles, his whole face lighting up as he nods. "Yeah. It's great, honestly. We're super close, so it's nice to get to see them more often."

"Do they know? About you?" Ilya lowers his whisper until it's almost inaudible.

Shane flinches, taken aback either by the question itself, or the fact that Ilya asked it.

They haven't talked about anything serious since this probably-a-real-friendship started. It's always light, always easy - simple conversations about things that don't cut too deep, or reveal too much. This is so much more than that. And maybe Ilya shouldn't have asked, but he wanted to. He wants to know Shane again, even if he can never have him back in the way he wants him. Even if he will never be worthy of that.

"They know," Shane admits.

"And they were...okay?"

He nods his head. "Yeah. Yeah, they were great, actually. Really supportive."

Ilya sighs in relief. "Good. I'm so happy for you, Shane."

They smile at each other, simple and honest, just two friends who know entirely too much about each other to be *just* anything. Their shoulders bump together again, and so do their knees, and Ilya's chest feels fizzy, like champagne bubbles.

"So..." Shane says. "Are you, uh, going back to Russia this summer?"

Ilya almost laughs, but manages to hold it in for the sake of their sleeping teammates. It ends up being more of a choked cough instead, and Shane raises his eyebrows questioningly.

“No. No, I - I do not go back there anymore. Not since my father died.”

That week in Moscow for the funeral had been hell. Surrounded by people’s false grief, and his brother’s unceasing demands for *more, more, more*, Ilya had felt like he was suffocating.

The only bright spot had been Shane.

Through phone calls and facetimes, and desperate confessions whispered in Russian, Shane had held Ilya together without ever even realising. And while Ilya had already known he was in love with Shane by that point, the way he’d asked him to talk about his feelings in Russian...well. That had confirmed it. It had also confirmed that Ilya would never be good enough for Shane - not with the life he had come from, or the blood that ran through his veins.

“It isn’t home for me anymore,” Ilya explains, with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Shane nods like he understands. “And Ottawa - is that home for you now?”

Ilya wants to say *the only place that has ever felt like home to me is by your side*, but he couldn’t possibly. It would be insane, ridiculous, far too much for either of them to handle.

So he smiles, and nods, and says, “Yes. Ottawa is home,” because it’s true, even if it’s not the whole truth.

At some point during their hushed whispering, they manage to fall asleep. When Ilya wakes a short while later, Shane is still sleeping soundly - his head on Ilya’s shoulder, and his finger hooked loosely into the open sleeve of Ilya’s hoodie. Shane’s knuckle rests against Ilya’s pulse.

Ilya doesn’t move. He barely even breathes. And he needs the bathroom, but he refuses to shift even a millimetre.

He doesn’t want to wake Shane up - wants to keep him as close as possible for as *long* as possible, because he doubts he’ll ever get the pleasure of a moment like this again. And perhaps it isn’t fair, basking in this when Shane isn’t even aware, but Ilya has never pretended to be a better person than he is. His dad and brother always called him selfish; maybe they were right.

So he rests his head back on top of Shane’s, and he holds still.

The arena is alive with the sound of the goal horn, the blast of music, and the roar of 19,000 screaming fans.

Before Ilya can even process what just happened, there’s a body crashing into him. With open arms and an ecstatic smile, Shane launches himself at Ilya, and all Ilya can do is brace for the

impact. They slam against the boards, and while there are fans banging on the plexiglass and teammates joining in with their celebration, for a moment all Ilya can see - all he can *feel* - is Shane.

He'd known from the moment the puck left his tape that they were going to score. Shane was in the perfect spot, just outside the goalie's crease, to tip it in over his blocker. And with that goal - just milliseconds before the buzzer sounded - they clinched themselves a spot in the playoffs.

"Fucking beauty, Captain," Shane yells down his ear.

"All you, baby," Ilya responds, the endearment slipping out before he can even think to stop it.

But Shane just grins, and leans forward to bump their helmets together. Then Bood, and Dillon, and the rest of the team are hollering as well, and it's all so loud that Ilya just lets himself get lost in it. He lets himself appreciate the moment, because they've fucking earned it.

Ilya apparently isn't allowed to say no to a night out when he assisted on the buzzer-beater that clinched their playoff spot. So - an hour or so after they managed to escape from the conference room filled with ravenous reporters - he finds himself in a bar in downtown Ottawa. It's about as chill a venue as the guys could have picked, with low lighting and quiet music, and a crowd of patrons that mostly leave them alone.

He's sitting at the end of the booth, with Hayes across from him and Luca to his right. Their tables are the loudest in the room - too overflowing with excitement to turn it down - and the city is so excited for them that they don't even seem to care. Ilya is having fun.

Or, he *would* be.

But Shane is leaning against the bar as he orders their second round of drinks, looking ethereal in the moody lighting. And there's a guy next to him who looks far more interested in taking Shane home than asking about the game winning goal. Shane nods his head, responds when the guy says something, but Ilya can't see his face to know what he is thinking - to know if this is something that he wants.

Ilya has no right to feel any type of way about it, of course. It's not his place. It never *was* his place to police who Shane interacts with, not even when they were, well, *whatever* they were.

And yet.

Ilya is almost seething with jealousy. It's an ugly, bitter thing, coiling in the pits of his stomach and climbing up his ribcage like a ladder. It's got its teeth and claws buried into Ilya's flesh, shredding his skin the longer that he sits here watching them.

There are conversations happening all around Ilya, but he doesn't hear a word of them; he can't focus on anything except. Not until Luca draws him into the conversation with a swift elbow to his kidney.

“What do you think, Cap?” He asks.

Ilya frowns as he drags his eyes away from Shane. “About what?”

“About Montreal!” Troy fills the gaps in for him. “Are they making it to the playoffs this year?”

Ilya still doesn’t know why they got rid of Shane - or even if he *wanted* the trade - but he knows they made a huge fucking mistake. And, whether it was Shane’s choice or not, Ilya knows that the Voyageurs were obviously the problem. It’s hard to miss the quiet rumblings about *locker room culture* and *divisive work environments*.

He scoffs and waves his hand dismissively, as if the mere mention of them is beneath him. “Without Hollander? Not a chance.”

“They’re on, like, a five game losing streak,” Dillon says gleefully.

“The fucking Canucks beat them last night. 4-1,” Dykstra interjects, also unable to contain his joy at their misery.

It feels good, seeing the Voyageurs suffer without Shane. Anyone with eyes could see he was the heart, soul, and talent of the team. And while both sides have remained tight-lipped about the reasons for the trade, Theriault and a few of the players have made vague comments about getting their focus back, and improving the ‘vibe’ in the locker room.

They didn’t have to say it outright for everyone to realise they were glad to be rid of Shane, which makes it even sweeter to know how terrible they are without him.

Just as Ilya is about to glance back over to the bar and check on Shane, a body slides into the booth beside him. Warm, and solid, and familiar, as the weight of it leans into Ilya’s side like that’s exactly where it belongs.

“Hey,” Shane says, soft just for Ilya, as he slides a tray of drinks onto the table.

“Took you a while,” Ilya remarks, trying to be aloof but he can’t keep a fucking grin from stretching across his face.

“It was the bartender’s first day and they kept getting it wrong.”

“How much did you tip?” Ilya asks, because he knows Shane better than they both dare to acknowledge.

With a bashful smile, Shane admits: “\$50.”

Ilya shakes his head as he laughs. “Of course,” he says. Then, quieter - so no one else can hear - “That guy seemed interested.”

He watches Shane’s reaction closely, noting the way his brows furrow in confusion as he looks back towards the bar like he’s trying to figure out who Ilya’s talking about. Good.

“Who?”

“Blue shirt, glasses.”

“*Oh*. No, I don’t think he was-“

“He was hitting on you, Hollander,” Ilya informs him.

And it’s impossibly endearing that Shane had absolutely zero clue. Even more so when his cheeks begin to flush the faintest shade of pink, but he doesn’t look away from Ilya’s eyes.

“Well. I wasn’t interested in him, so...”

“So you came back here,” Ilya fills in for him.

“Yeah.”

For a moment they’re caught up in each other, unable to look away. But then someone asks Shane a question, and someone else accidentally steps on Ilya’s foot beneath the table, and they get drawn back into the world around them.

But Ilya can’t stop noticing Shane.

He clocks the way he keeps twitching, moving his neck like something is bothering him. And when Ilya notices the tag of his shirt sticking out of his collar and scratching against Shane’s neck, he carefully tucks it back in without saying a word. Shane gives him a grateful smile. Ilya also notices the heat of Shane’s thigh against his own, and the way he leans into Ilya as the night goes on, and the way his hand rests on Ilya’s knee every time that he laughs.

Later - when they’re filtering out of the bar half-drunk, waiting around in an empty parking lot for their rides to arrive - Shane’s hand wraps around Ilya’s wrist.

“I’m glad I’m here,” Shane says, “in Ottawa. With you.”

“So am I, Shane.”

“Can I-“ he starts to ask, but then stops himself. He groans, and instead of finishing the question Shane simply steps forward and wraps his arms around Ilya.

For a moment, Ilya freezes.

Shane hasn’t held him like this - off the ice, without hockey pads between them - in five years. It seems almost impossible, now, that this is even happening. But Ilya can feel Shane’s fingers digging into his back, and his heart beating frantically against Ilya’s chest, and there’s nothing else for him to do but hug him back.

God, Ilya loves him. Wildly, desperately, hungrily. It’s a bone deep kind of thing; his body remembers Shane’s, and he wraps around him like they’ve never even been apart.

He feels Shane's breath on his skin as he burrows his face into his neck, and it sends a shiver rippling down his spine. His arms tighten, and Shane sighs softly as he melts against him, trusting that Ilya will hold him up.

Trusting *Ilya*, even after everything.

"Thank you," Shane whispers.

"For what?"

"For making me feel like I belong here."

"You do belong here," Ilya tells him.

"And for being my friend."

"I am," Ilya promises, even though it feels dishonest because of how desperately he wants Shane.

"I miss you," Shane murmurs, so quiet that Ilya almost misses it.

His heart clenches beneath his ribs.

"*Shane...*"

But before he can say anything there's the sound of tires on gravel, and the flash of headlights cutting through the darkness.

They reluctantly pull apart, Shane's eyes still locked on Ilya's and his hands lingering on his waist. When he finally glances at the approaching car, he sighs and steps fully away from Ilya.

"My ride is here."

"Yeah," Ilya says. "Let me know when you get home?"

Shane nods, smiling sweetly. "Okay."

Just as Shane's uber disappears around the corner, Ilya's pulls into the parking lot. He doesn't live too far from the bar - he's sober enough that he could have walked home - but he'd ordered his own ride and hung around because he'd wanted more time with Shane. Whatever stolen time he could get.

The ride home is quick, and by the time Ilya gets inside there are texts waiting on his phone.

Shane: Home safe.

Shane: Thank you, Ilya.

Shane: Goodnight.

Ilya: Goodnight, Shane.

He doesn't say *I miss you too*, but it hums in his veins like a living, breathing thing.

The day of their last game of the regular season - the day they're supposed to play Montreal for the first time since the trade - Shane doesn't show up for optional practice.

If it was literally anyone else on the roster, Ilya wouldn't have even questioned the absence. But this is *Shane* they're talking about - Shane *Hollander* - and he's never missed a practice a day in his life. Optional, or otherwise. So it puts Ilya on edge, because there's no way Shane wouldn't be here unless he *couldn't* be here.

He grinds through practice like he always does, but his mind elsewhere. So instead of staying on the ice and running some extra drills once it's over, he heads straight back to the locker room and pulls out his phone.

Ilya: Where are you?

Ilya: You missed practice.

Ilya: Are you sick?

Ilya: Shane???

He puts it down when he goes to shower, but there's still no response by the time he makes it back. Something feels off.

"Where's Hollzy?" Luca asks.

"No idea," Hayes says. "It's not like him to miss an optional."

"Probably just psyching himself up to play Montreal tonight?" Bood suggests.

Ilya doesn't involve himself in the speculation; he doesn't have time. He dresses quickly and quietly, then with a hasty *goodbye* thrown over his shoulder, he all but sprints to the parking lot.

Shane used to roll his eyes at his obnoxious sports cars, but it gets Ilya to his house quicker than Shane's jeep ever could have.

He hasn't been to Shane's place before. Not this one, anyway. He didn't want to worry about finding a permanent home during the season - and he *definitely* didn't want to live with his parents - so he'd signed a short-term lease on an house in Kanata.

It's nice, Ilya notes as he slows to a stop in front of it. Red brick, with large white windows, a manicured lawn, and three steps up to the front door. Ilya scrambles up each of them, and then begins ringing the bell incessantly. When no one answers - even though Shane's jeep is parked in the driveway - Ilya starts to knock on the door.

"Shane?" He calls out, trying not to disturb any neighbours. "Shane, open the door. It's me."

Ilya is met with nothing but silence. He pulls out his phone, calls Shane's number, and holds it up to his ear; he hasn't called this number since the last time he was in Russia. There's no

answer, but Ilya can hear his phone ringing from inside the house.

Just as the panic starts to set in - as Ilya thinks about calling Wiebe, or Pike, or the fucking *police* - a lock disengages and the front door swings open.

Shane looks, well...he doesn't look like Shane at all.

His skin is pale and clammy, his eyes look sunken in, and it's impossible for Ilya to miss the way his chest is rising and falling too rapidly, like he's struggling to catch his breath.

"Shane? What's wrong? What happened?" Ilya asks as he crowds him back into the house. "Are you sick? Do you have a fever?"

"I'm fine, Ilya," he grumbles. "Why are you here?"

"You missed practice," Ilya explains like the answer should be obvious. "And you are *not* fine." He tries to reach for Shane's face, but his hands get batted away.

"It was optional," Shane argues.

"And you still never miss it," Ilya retorts. "What's wrong, sweetheart? If you're sick, I can--"

"I'm not sick, Ilya," Shane says, sounding tired and weary.

Ilya assesses him: the sallowness, dull eyes, heaving chest, and...oh. Okay. So, not sick then. Ilya has seen something similar to this before - a Shane who is nervous, who is stressed about something, who is working himself into a frenzy. But it was never this bad, this *physical*.

Shane is having a panic attack. It's blindingly obvious, now that Ilya realises.

"Okay. Okay, come on. Come sit down."

Ilya doesn't know where he's going, but he manages to guide Shane through the house and find the kitchen on the first try. He deposits Shane at the table, pushing down on his shoulders until he takes a seat, and then he rushes over to the sink. Ilya opens a few drawers before he finds the one that holds the kitchen towels, then he grabs the first one on the pile and runs it under cold water.

Once the towel is soaked he rings it out, and carries it over to the refrigerator.

"Ilya, what are you doing?" Shane mutters half-heartedly, like he hasn't even got the strength to argue.

"Taking care of you," Ilya answers. It's all he has ever wanted to do.

He holds the damp towel beneath the ice dispenser and fills it up, then twists the towel together to make a homemade ice pack, and makes his way back over to Shane. He hasn't moved, except to rest his elbows on his knees and hunch over as he fights for every breath.

"I'm fine," he lies.

“Hollander, you are having panic attack,” Ilya explains, then - without giving him a chance to refute it - he places the towel on the back of Shane’s neck.

It startles him, the cold against his clammy skin enough to make him jump.

“What the *fuck*?” He gasps, and a shudder rolls through him as he straightens up.

“It’ll help,” Ilya promises.

And he’s not wrong.

As the cold seeps into Shane’s skin, it helps to regulate him. His heart rate begins to slow, and his breaths come easier, and the faint trembling throughout his entire body starts to fade.

Ilya keeps the ice pressed to the back of Shane’s neck with one hand, and with the other he combs Shane’s sweat-slick hair off his face. Ilya keeps running his fingers through it, conscious of the way it seems to be soothing him. When Shane lists forward he presses his head against Ilya’s stomach - breathing slow and deep, like he’s using Ilya’s familiar scent to ground him.

Ilya stands there silently for a while, giving Shane all the time and space he needs for the panic to ease and his nerves to settle.

As Shane calms down, it’s Ilya’s turn to worry. What’s wrong with him? What triggered it? Has this been happening the whole time and Ilya didn’t know? He feels sick at the thought of Shane suffering alone. Feels comforted by the fact that he showed up, so at least Shane wasn’t by himself this time.

It’s been maybe ten minutes when Shane finally mumbles a soft, “Thank you,” against Ilya’s stomach.

“It’s okay,” Ilya says as he takes a step back. “Do you want me to take the ice off now?”

Shane nods his head slowly, so Ilya quickly dumps the towel and melting ice in the sink, then takes a seat in the chair beside Shane.

He already looks better. Drained, perhaps, but his eyes aren’t so dull anymore and he’s got some colour back to his skin. When he clocks that Ilya is assessing him, a pale blush covers his cheeks and the bridge of his nose; it makes him look like Shane again.

“I’m sorry.”

Ilya frowns. “You don’t have to apologise for having panic attack, Shane.”

“No, I know. But you shouldn’t have had to-“

“I wanted to,” Ilya interrupts him, before he can start to worry.

“Well, thanks again.”

He looks everywhere but at Ilya. The groove in the table that he keeps scratching his fingernail over, the clock on the wall above the doorframe, the French doors that open onto a patio. But when Ilya reaches out a hand to cover Shane's, their eyes finally meet.

"Talk to me," Ilya pleads.

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters, Shane. Something is bothering you - tell me so I can fix it."

Ilya would. He'd do anything right now, to wipe that dejected look off Shane's face. He'd do anything at all to make him feel better. There's an urgent, almost desperate need to fix whatever is wrong for him. To make all of this just go away.

Shane chuckles, his hand twitching beneath Ilya's as he says, "You can't fix it."

Ilya has his suspicions. He's been trying to be mindful - trying to respect Shane's boundaries - but it feels like the time for that is past, now.

"Is it because of Montreal game tonight?"

Shane flinches. That's enough of an answer.

In an instant, Ilya feels incandescent with rage. He *knew* they'd fucked up - knew that whatever went on behind the scenes, Shane wasn't at fault. But to see him like this - someone who is usually so confident and unflinching - fucked up over facing the team he gave over a decade of his life to?

Ilya wants to draw blood. He wants to make them pay for this.

"Please, Shane. Tell me what happened."

Shane sucks in a break, finds Ilya's eyes again, then says, "I came out to them."

He doesn't have to ask how it went, because the answer is obvious. Ilya nods in understanding, chewing at the inside of his mouth so he doesn't open it and tell Shane exactly what he thinks of his so-called friends.

"And they weren't very happy."

"Did they hurt you?" Ilya demands.

"No, no. Not physically," Shane assures him.

It's a small consolation, and it does nothing to alleviate the anger that's bubbling inside of Ilya, like a volcano that's ready to erupt.

"But, well. They basically froze me out. Other than Hayden and JJ - who are totally fine with it, by the way - they just stopped talking to me and started talking *about* me. Slurs, mostly," he laughs bitterly. "They wouldn't listen to me. Would barely even pass to me."

Ilya wants to kill them all. Except for Pike and Boiziau, who - Ilya reluctantly admits to himself - can't be too bad.

"They're assholes, Shane. Awful, horrible people, who never deserved your friendship or your talent."

"I just - I gave them three cups and over ten years of my life, and...and who I might *love* is apparently enough of a reason to make them hate me. It's not fair."

"No. It's not," Ilya agrees. "Did you want to leave, or..."

Shane huffs out a breath, running his free hand over his face and through his hair. "A little of both? I wasn't happy, obviously. I'm a free agent at the end of the season, so I was thinking about signing somewhere else. They made the final decision, though."

So they really did just toss him away. God, it makes Ilya sick. Shane gave his blood, and sweat, and fucking *heart* to that team, and they just threw it back in his face like it was worthless.

As if having Shane Hollander's loyalty and devotion is anything less than fucking *priceless*. A miracle that none of them are worthy of.

He doesn't know what to say - doesn't know how he could possibly make this better for him. Shy of offering to injure them all in tonight's game, Ilya doubts there's anything that could take away this kind of pain. It's a betrayal, one that cuts deep when it comes from people who are supposed to be like family to you.

"They're probably going to target me tonight, just so you know."

Ilya immediately shakes his head. "No. Absolutely not. We won't let that happen."

"Ilya, if - if the guys go after them, they might say something about me. They might *out me*," he explains, the fear more than apparent in the way that his voice shakes. "I can't have another team turn on me like that. Not this one, not *ours*."

The way Shane says *ours* - his and Ilya's - like it means something, like it matters, makes Ilya feel a little dizzy. He wants to latch onto it, wants to reach out and shake Shane in the hopes that more words just like that will fall out of him.

But - maybe, if he's lucky - there'll be time for that later. Not now, though. Not when Shane is scared.

"If they say something indoctrinating-"

Shane is smiling fondly when he interrupts to say, "I think you mean incriminating."

Ilya scoffs and waves his hand. "Whatever. If they say something *incriminating*, well. It's not fair for them to out you, but the team would not care."

"You don't know that."

“Shane. Troy Barrett is gay. So is Luca. You know this,” Ilya gently reminds him.

He watches as the realisation dawns on Shane’s face. His mouth drops open in a perfect *O* shape, and a blush starts crawling its way up his throat. If the moment wasn’t so intense, Ilya might think that he looked beautiful all flustered like this.

“Oh. Yeah. I mean, I knew that, obviously. I just - with everything going on, I guess I kind of just forgot?”

Ilya laughs, and then Shane laughs too, and suddenly it feels like the whole house is sighing in relief. The problem isn’t solved - not yet, at least - but maybe for Shane it doesn’t seem so scary anymore. It doesn’t seem so impossible now that he knows he won’t be facing it alone.

Feeling brave and emboldened - and empowered by the way he got Shane to laugh - Ilya takes hold of his hand and tangles their fingers together. He draws them in close, pulling them up to his face so he can press a kiss onto the back of Shane’s knuckles.

Something crackles in the space between them; Ilya can come almost taste it on his tongue.

The sigh that Shane lets out is audible, and Ilya can’t help but smile at the sound of it.

“I’ve got you, Shane,” Ilya promises. “We *all* do.”

“Okay.”

And Ilya is many things, but he is not a liar.

The game is brutal right from the puck drop.

It’s scrappy, and dirty, and a lot like a playoff game, even though Montreal were eliminated from contention a week ago.

Maybe that’s one of the reasons they’re so angry; maybe it’s rattled them, seeing Shane succeed with the Centaurs after the Voyageurs shunned him and acted like they were better off without him. Maybe it makes them mad, seeing the guys defend Shane with everything they’ve got, while Montreal tried to act like he was the problem.

Clearly, they’re not expecting the fight that the Cens bring to them.

Bood flattens Stedlund forty-seven seconds into the game. Dykstra hits Gagnon so hard Ilya feels his *own* teeth rattle from the force of it. The second any of the Voyageurs get even close to Shane, there’s a Centaur there to run interference. And it’s not because Shane can’t handle himself, but it’s because he’s a part of their team...a part of their *family*.

Ilya didn’t say anything unusual in his pregame speech, beyond, “Let’s show Montreal what they’re missing,” because he didn’t have to.

They’ve got Shane’s back, no questions asked. They protect their own.

So it's not a surprise when Shane nets his first goal in the dying seconds of the first period. Or when he gets his next halfway through the second. It's when his third hits the back of the net, and hats rain down onto the ice, that the Voyageurs *really* start to get pissed off.

The hits get dirtier, and the slashes and hooks and trips get sneakier. Neither team are spending enough time in the box - there's so much going on that the refs are missing half of it. Ilya fucking thrives in games like these. They remind him of his early days in Boston.

Shane is crouched over the face-off dot, Ilya on his wing, when Comeau decides to open his mouth.

"How are your knees?" He mumbles through the mouth guard he's chewing on.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Shane asks.

"Surprised they're not sore from all the dicks you've been sucking."

Ilya watches Shane tense - watches a cruel smirk light up Comeau's ugly fucking face - and Ilya wants to shut him the fuck up. He wants to hurt him for hurting Shane. His hands twitch, desperate to drop his gloves, but he clenches his jaw and holds steady.

Only when Shane has cleanly won the draw, does Ilya shuck his gloves onto the ice and swing for Comeau.

He doesn't say anything at first; his fists do enough talking for him as they reign down on Comeau, who can't bring his arms up fast enough to block them. He tugs on Ilya's jersey instead - tries to grapple with him, to get him down on the ice, but it doesn't work.

However angry Comeau is, Ilya is angrier; however motivated he is, Ilya is even more so.

"Why the fuck are you fighting his battles, Rozanov?" He spits, saliva and blood spraying onto Ilya's jersey. "Hollander is a fucking fa-"

The word doesn't get to leave his mouth. A few of his teeth do, though.

And then Comeau is down on the ice, and there are hands on Ilya, dragging him away from the heap of bloodied flesh on the ice.

He's forced down the tunnel for the last ten minutes of the game, as the words *game misconduct* echo around the arena. The last thing he sees is Shane's face, watching as Ilya leaves.

His whole body is trembling as he showers, and he gets a sick sense of satisfaction watching the blood swirl with the water and disappear down the drain. Ilya doesn't like to hurt people - he wouldn't consider himself a particularly violent player - but there are a few things he just doesn't play about: his mama, Svetlana, and Shane.

It doesn't matter that things are long since over between them. Doesn't matter that he will probably never get the chance to fully make things right with Shane. There are lines he

simply won't allow to be crossed, and the second Gilbert Comeau opened his mouth to speak bad about Shane - the second he tried to say that filthy fucking word - Ilya saw red.

He won't apologise for that. He knows the guys have got the game in the bag, and he doesn't doubt that any one of them would have done the same if they're heard it, too.

Some things are just worth more than hockey, and this is one of them.

He's already dressed and sitting in his stall by the time the buzzer sounds, and the guys start filing into the locker room. They're whooping and cheering, loud and obnoxious, and so pumped that it makes Ilya smile.

"Look at Rocky Balboa over here," Bood addresses him as he walks into the locker room.

"There he is!" Wyatt hollers. "The man of the hour!"

"Hollander is the one with the hat trick," Ilya reminds them, not wanting to steal even an ounce of Shane's thunder.

It's Shane who walks through the door next, with a half-smile on his lips and Choui patting his head like a fucking dog. Shane bats him off as he seeks Ilya out, and his half-smile turns into a full one when he spots him sitting in his stall.

"You just had to go and show me up, didn't you, Rozanov?" Shane teases.

"What can I say, Hollander? We both know I'm the best player in the league."

The room devolves into an argument as they all try to settle the debate - whether is Shane or Ilya or Crosby, or that rookie from San Jose who's tearing up the league right now. Ilya doesn't care about all of that, though. Not when Shane comes to sit in his stall beside Ilya, and he fixes him with his undivided attention.

That's always been a heady thing for Ilya - something he would go feral for, and always, *always* want more of. Shane's attention makes him feel dizzy, makes him feel important and worthy, and like someone who could maybe deserve good things.

"You mad at me?" He asks, nervously. Because while he won't apologise for what he did - and while he doesn't care what anyone else has to say - he *does* care about Shane's opinion. He always has done.

But Shane shakes his head and smiles softly. "No. I'm not," he says. "Thank you, Ilya."

Ilya didn't realise just how worried he was until all of it seeps out of him. He nods his head. "You don't have to thank me."

Wiebe finds him not long after, just as Ilya expected. He follows him to his office - exempt from doing media tonight, for obvious reasons - and winces as the door shuts loudly behind them.

Coach gestures to the chair in front of his desk, and Ilya gets an uncanny sense of déjà vu. The last time this happened Wiebe was telling him that Shane was coming to Ottawa, and Ilya had genuinely considered asking for a trade just to avoid him. Now, he couldn't bear the thought of being away from him again. Not when he's only just got him back.

He takes a seat. Wiebe rests his elbows on the desk and clasps his hands together.

"Rozanov..."

"He deserved it."

The words clearly take him by surprise. Ilya has had a handful of fights since being in Ottawa, but that's not really his style of play. Certainly not ones *that* violent.

Surely, *surely* if Ilya is saying he deserved it, Wiebe will believe him. It's not like he has a track record for this kind of thing.

"Tell me what happened."

Ilya bites his lip. "He said some...unsavoury things. About Hollander."

Wiebe's nose wrinkles in disgust. "About his sexuality?"

Shocked, Ilya leans forward to ask, "You know?"

Coach sighs loudly, leaning back in his chair and looking up to the ceiling for a moment. It looks like he's trying to compose himself, like whatever he's about to say either pisses him off, or is going to piss Ilya off. Or both.

"Montreal's GM told us when the trade was being discussed."

"You're joking? He fucking *outed* him? Coach, that's total fucking-"

"I know, I know," Wiebe tries to placate him. "We made sure they knew that, too. It doesn't change our opinion of him, obviously. I suspected this game would be rough."

Ilya scoffs. "They targeted him from the moment the puck dropped."

"They tried to," Wiebe corrects. "You didn't let them."

"Yeah, well. We're a team."

Wiebe stares at Ilya for a little too long. His eyes look like they're searching for something, and - whatever it is - they clearly find it. He leans forward again, palms flat on his desk, and nods his head like he's made a decision.

"I don't think they'll suspend you. Comeau dropped the gloves, too - it wasn't like you blindsided him," Coach says.

Comeau had been gunning for a fight all game, he'd just been hoping it would be with Shane. He wasn't ready for Ilya to be the one to take a swing at him.

"If they try to seek a suspension, well. I'll keep Shane's name out of it, but I'll be sure to mention the homophobic language," Coach continues. "Crowell won't want the bad press."

It's bullshit that their league's president is so slimy and terrible that he'd waive a (unfair) suspension, rather than address the problems with hockey culture. Any other time and Ilya would be furious. But their regular season is done and the playoffs start in less than two weeks. He can't afford a suspension.

"Thanks, Coach."

"Thanks for being a good captain," he says. "Now go home and get some rest. We've got a playoff series to win."

Ilya has barely had time to kick off his shoes and greet Anya when there's a knock at his front door.

He groans audibly. He's tired, and his body aches, and he probably should have let the team doctor look at his knuckles because they're definitely starting to ache. Not broken, he knows, but he perhaps should have iced them before he left the arena. All he wants to do is snuggle his dog, then curl up in bed and sleep for the next ten hours. He does *not* want to deal with anymore people tonight.

But then there's another knock, and another, and Ilya decides that his father has probably put a curse on him from down below.

He stands from where he had crouched to rub Anya's tummy - his knees cracking ominously as he does so - and shuffles back over to the front door. He plasters on what he hopes is something close to a smile, and swings the door open.

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't Shane. But he's standing in the entrance to Ilya's house with a sheepish grin on his face, looking like he's half expecting Ilya to turn him away.

"Hi."

"Hello," Ilya greets him. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

Shane bites his bottom lip, and Ilya wants to reach out and pull it from between his teeth. Wants to suck it into his mouth to soothe the sting. He forces himself to look away from Shane's mouth before he gets caught out, and instead steps back to Shane can slip inside the house.

"I just - I wanted to check on you. Properly, y'know, after the fight. Heard Wiebe pulled you into his office."

"Everything is fine, don't worry," Ilya says, waving his hand dismissively.

But Shane gasps, his eyes falling on the dark, blueish-purple that is staining his swollen knuckles like a watercolour painting. He reaches for Ilya's hand, cradling it carefully as he assesses the damage. He turns it from side to side, slow, methodical, like a doctor examining him.

But Shane's touch - no matter how clinical - will always set Ilya on fire.

His skin tingles, and his chest aches, and - not for the first time - Ilya misses him so desperately that it feels like a physical wound inside his chest. A cavern that cracked open five years ago, and has only grown wider every day since.

"I'm okay," Ilya says. "I promise."

Shane frowns at him. "You need to ice this."

Ilya sighs, but he leads the way into the kitchen anyway. He'd do anything to keep Shane here a little longer, even play up an injury - something he's never once done in his life. If anything, Ilya is used to doing the opposite. He's used to downplaying his hurt, dismissing it, pretending that it isn't there. If he doesn't acknowledge the pain, then no one can use it against him.

But this is Shane, who has never once tried to hurt Ilya, not even when he deserved it. Not even when Ilya was walking away from him, leaving the tattered ruins of what they could have been on the floor at their feet.

Ilya pulls an ice pack from the freezer and rests it on his knuckles. He raises his brows at Shane, a silent *happy now?* that Shane answers with a firm nod of his head.

"This feels like *déjà vu*," Ilya comments. It had been less than twelve hours ago when they were at Shane's place, icing his neck.

He snorts out a quiet laugh. "We make quite the pair, huh?"

God, he wishes.

Before Ilya can say anything embarrassing like *yes, please, I'm begging you*, a familiar jingle sounds by the kitchen door as Anya makes her way into the room.

She's never been a much of a barker - not even with total strangers - so Shane's presence in her home doesn't phase her in the slightest. Instead, she trots on up to where he's leaning back against the counter, and sniffs his leg rather enthusiastically.

"Oh, hello," Shane coos, his voice pitched high like he's talking to a baby. "I've heard so much about you, Miss Anya."

He leans down slowly, extending his hand towards her so she can sniff it. And when she gives a friendly little lick to the back of his hand, he starts to stroke her head. Both Ilya and Shane have joked about her being just like her dad, but when she lies down and freely reveals her soft underbelly to Shane, the similarities have never been so apparent.

Anya is most definitely her father's daughter; impossibly in love with Shane Hollander from the moment they first met.

"She's so sweet," Shane says, looking up at Ilya from where he's crouched on the ground.

"She is. Harris' family found her dumped on their property, and I couldn't say no to her."

"How long have you had her?"

"Around two years, now."

"Is it hard, looking after her when you're away a lot?" Shane asks.

Ilya shrugs his shoulders. "Not really. The Drover's have her when I'm on road trips, so she is never alone for too long. Plus," Ilya says, "she is good for me."

Shane looks at him questioningly, as he prods, "Yeah?"

Ilya's not sure if this is the kind of thing he should be telling Shane. It's too honest, too raw, too *much*, for this tentative connection that they have managed to rebuild from the ruins of what they used to be. They're so much more now, than they ever were then, but - somehow - they're *less*, too.

Ilya doesn't want to drop this too-big thing on Shane, and send him running for the hills. But he also doesn't want to lie to him, either.

Maybe - maybe if they had found a way to be honest with each other from the beginning, their lives would look very different right now.

He draws in a breath, averts his eyes because he can't look at Shane while saying this, then confesses: "My head is, uh, not great. Sometimes. Anya helps. So do the pills...and therapy."

There's a silent pause, and it feels like the whole room falls still. Ilya watches and waits for some kind of reaction from Shane, for some kind of clue on how he is supposed to proceed, but Shane doesn't give him much. His face is eerily blank as he stands back and leans against the counter again.

When he offers Ilya his eyes, though, there's so much emotion in them that it makes Ilya feel like he's been punched in the gut.

Shane has always been a master of the almost-crying look: red eyes, tears welling but not falling, and that glassy, devastated sheen. That's how he's looking at Ilya now, and it makes him want to run and hide. Makes him feel too seen, too *known*.

"I didn't know," he says softly.

Ilya smiles and shrugs again. "You weren't supposed to. No one is, really."

"Ilya..." Shane sighs, so desperately sad that his bottom lip quivers.

“My mother - she was like me. Depressed,” Ilya explains. “She killed herself when I was twelve.”

“God, Ilya. I’m so sorry. That’s - fuck.”

“Yes. It was the worst thing I’ve ever - well,” he trails off, unable to talk about her anymore for fear of breaking down completely. “When things started to get really bad for me, I went to Wiebe and asked for help.”

It had been so humiliating, showing up at his Coach’s office with tear stains on his cheeks, trembling hands, and a heart so heavy that Ilya could barely hold himself up.

They’d sat in that room in complete silence for almost forty-five minutes before Ilya said a single word. Wiebe hadn’t pressed him to talk, hadn’t asked him any questions, he’d simply waited until Ilya found his voice. And then, he listened.

Ilya thinks that probably saved his life - Wiebe’s patience, his understanding, his unflinching resolve in the face of Ilya’s mess. He didn’t shy away from the hard parts, didn’t try to minimise or brush aside what Ilya was going through. He listened, then they talked, and then they came up with a game plan.

Appointments and assessments followed; doctors, and psychiatrists, and Galina, his new therapist.

It was all new for Ilya, who had been raised by his father not to show even a glimmer of weakness. Sometimes he felt like an idiot, sitting in Galina’s office and crying about things that happened so long ago, or things that never *would* happen - things that Ilya couldn’t change. But it worked, and the medication helped, and Ilya started to get better day by day.

Sometimes he even wishes he’d gotten help sooner. Maybe, if he had done, he never would have walked away from Shane.

“I’m mostly okay now,” he assures Shane. “I have some bad days, still. But - not as bad as before.”

“Ilya...” Shane sighs his name like a prayer.

He braces, like he’s waiting for Shane to laugh at him, or belittle him, or *something*.

He’s not really sure why - he knows Shane would never do something so cruel - but being vulnerable like this never gets any easier. It feels like flaying open his skin, prying apart his ribcage, exposing his beating heart and hoping it doesn’t scare people away.

Hoping it doesn’t scare *Shane* away.

“You’re so brave,” he says, his voice and eyes filled with so much awe that it floors Ilya.

He swallows thickly, trying to tamp down the emotion that’s crawling up his throat. “Yes, maybe. But you are, too.”

Shane rolls his eyes fondly, looking away like he can't stand to hold the eye contact for a moment longer.

And his smile is so bashful and sweet that Ilya kind of wants to cry about it.

He's just so fucking lovely - so kind, and patient, and compassionate - that Ilya almost can't bear it. He feels like there's no room inside of his body for all the love that he feels for Shane; he fills every open space. Ilya is going to explode with the pressure of trying to keep it all inside.

He's spent twelve years pretending not to love him; he's not sure how much longer he can keep it up.

Shane clears his throat. "Let me check that hand."

"It's fine. Not broken."

"Let me check, Ilya," Shane insists, stepping forward and reaching out for him.

Reluctantly, Ilya removes the ice pack and holds out his hand for Shane to check. He's impossibly gentle as his fingers flutter over Ilya's swollen knuckles.

"These bruises are nasty."

"They'll heal," Ilya says. "I'll be as good as new for playoffs."

"I'm so grateful for this, team, y'know?" Shane says. "And the way you all had my back tonight..." he shakes his head, almost in disbelief.

And Ilya hates that - that the Cens treating Shane like family comes as such a shock to him. He deserved so much better than what he got in Montreal.

"It's what we do for each other," Ilya says with a shrug.

"And what you did... Ilya, I appreciate it. I really, *really* do. But you didn't have to do that for me."

Ilya almost wants to laugh. Shane thinks a few bruised knuckles is too much? Ilya would kill for him and no one would ever find the body. He'd nuke his entire career for Shane, if he asked him to. There's not a single thing Ilya can think of that he wouldn't do for Shane. No bridges he wouldn't cross, no lengths he wouldn't go to, just to see him smiling.

Shane doesn't have to forgive Ilya for what he did. In fact, Ilya would never ask him to; it's not like he deserves it. But Ilya will - quietly and secretly - spend the rest of his life trying to make up for walking out on Shane five years ago.

"Of course I did, Shane."

"No, Ilya, you really didn't. It was reckless. You could have gotten hurt, you could *still* get suspended."

“They don’t get to talk about you like that. None of them.”

“I’m not worth all of that, Ilya.”

“Of course you are!”

“*Why?*”

“Because I love you!”

The words slip out of his mouth before he can think to hold them back, and suddenly the room is plunged into an agonising silence.

It feels like the whole world is holding its breath.

Ilya doesn’t know how to trust a good thing.

Ever since he was a child he’s been so used to having the rug pulled out from beneath his feet, that he learned to be wary of anything halfway decent.

When he was eight, his mama bought him a dog: Kira was only a puppy, but her paws were huge and her legs were gangly, and Ilya loved her so much. He played with her all the time, and took her for walks in the snow, and always remembered to feed her - he even let her sleep in his bed sometimes, if he could sneak her into his room without being caught.

One day, Ilya came home from school and Kira was gone. His father had gotten rid of her.

It was the first time Ilya ever felt his heart break.

When his mama left him behind in a haunted house, twelve-year-old Ilya had thought that maybe the grief would kill him, and then he could join her. He had hoped for it, even. Prayed to a god that he didn’t believe in to bring his mama back, or let Ilya go with her. He’d never felt pain like it before, and he still hasn’t since.

It was hockey that saved his life. Hockey, and his sweet Svetlana.

But when he got good at hockey, he wasn’t allowed to see Svetlana as often because training took up all of his time. And when he got *really* good at hockey, it became just another thing for his father to control. His two favourite things no longer felt like they were his anymore.

So, Ilya knows not to trust a good thing; he knows it means that you rarely get to keep it.

Shane isn’t just a good thing, he’s the very *best* thing.

Back then, Ilya knew he would have found a way to ruin it no matter what. Even if he hadn’t ended it that night in Montreal, even if they had tried to make something work between them, Ilya would have managed to screw it up eventually.

It had seemed the less painful option for them both, to end it before they got too involved.

He would have been too much, or not enough. At some point he would have pushed Shane away, or ran - self-sabotaging because he doesn't know how to be worthy of someone like Shane. He doesn't know how to trust that he could deserve someone like that.

Ilya prefers the chaos because he's used to it: when you're born into a house on fire, the flames just feel like home.

But Shane is all the warmth, without ever getting burned. He's not a house up in flames, but a home with a crackling fire, and a pile of blankets, and a soft place to land when the world is too much.

Ilya loves him. He can't keep hiding that.

"Because I love you," he repeats, softer this time. Intentional. Not just spoken in the heat of the moment, but a declaration. A promise.

"What?" Shane's mouths the word, but no sound comes out.

"I love you, Shane. I think...I think I always have."

Shane physically recoils. It's like his whole face collapses as he shrinks in on himself, pulling away from Ilya almost instantly.

"No. No you can't - you don't get to - you *left*, Ilya. You left me." His voice fractures, and drags Ilya's heart along with it.

"I know. I know, and I am *so* sorry." It's not enough; it won't ever be enough.

"You broke my fucking heart!"

He's angry, and he's hurt, and Ilya deserves every bit of Shane's frustration but he can't pretend that it doesn't sting anyway.

Ilya isn't used to Shane's anger. Not really, not like this. He saw a glimmer of it once, in a bathroom in Las Vegas, but even when Ilya ended it - even when he gave Shane every reason to lose his mind - he wasn't mad, he was just hurt. This is so different from that. This is something that Ilya doesn't know how to navigate.

"You don't get to do this," Shane says. "You don't get to leave me, and ghost me for five fucking years, then - then become my *friend*, and suddenly - what? Tell me that you - you--"

"Love you?"

"Don't say that," Shane whispers.

He closes his eyes tightly, shakes his head like he's trying to clear it. Ilya feels sick. He never wanted this - never wanted to bring all of this up again if it was only going to hurt Shane more.

But the *I love you* just slipped out, and he couldn't have taken it back if he wanted to. It was already too late.

"I was scared, Shane."

"We were both *scared*, Ilya! But *I* didn't walk away. *I* didn't just fucking bail on everything that we..."

Shane's voice catches and he swallows thickly around the words, averting his eyes like that might hide his pain.

The pain that Ilya caused him.

It feels like everything is unravelling - all of Ilya's feelings, and his shame, and his regrets are all coming unspooled faster than he can even begin to explain himself. Not justify, because there *is* no justification, but Shane at least deserves to understand why.

"Do you remember when I went back to Moscow for my father's funeral, and you told me to talk to you in Russian?" Shane nods. "I told you then that I loved you."

"What?"

"I'm not... I'm not good for people, Shane. I am too much, too messy."

"Ilya, don't say that," Shane insists, still defending him even now.

"I felt like I would go insane, only having a small part of you. And even if - even if I could have had *more*, I would have just ruined it. Ruined *you*."

Shane lets out a quiet whimper, and he clumsily steps forward like he's reaching for Ilya - like he wants to be closer. He doesn't touch him, but the distance between them has halved, and Ilya aches with the need to reach out and hold him.

"You've never seen yourself clearly, have you?"

Ilya laughs. "I know who I am."

"No. *I* know who you are," Shane insists. "You are good, and you're kind, and you're so selfless, Ilya. This version of you that exists inside your head... it isn't real. It isn't *you*."

In his second season with the Centaurs, Ilya remembers sitting down with Coach Wiebe and Bood, and trying to give him the captaincy.

Ilya was convinced he was failing, convinced that he was doing a terrible job, and that Bood - or literally anyone else - would have been better suited to the role. He was supposed to be making the Centaurs better, and Ilya was absolutely convinced that he was doing the opposite.

Bood and Coach spent fifteen minutes listing all of Ilya's accomplishments. Not his Stanley Cup, or his Hart trophy, or any of his record-breaking stats.

No, they reminded him of the days where he stayed behind for hours with Troy when he first arrived from Toronto; the way Ilya took Luca under his wing when he was just a rookie; the charities the team works with because of Ilya; the morale he's brought to the locker room and to the city.

Galina once told Ilya that sometimes he looks in the mirror and sees his mother, and sometimes he looks in the mirror and sees his father, but that he struggles to ever see just himself. Just Ilya. Exactly as he is.

"I thought if I had you, and then lost you, that it would kill me."

"You wouldn't have lost me, Ilya. I-"

"I would have. I would have fucked up because *I* was fucked up. Because I was convinced I could never deserve you," Ilya confesses. "And I still think that you're too good for me, Hollander."

Shane scoffs, and rolls his head. He opens his mouth like he's getting ready to argue, but Ilya doesn't give him the chance.

"I'm trying, now. I'm doing better," Ilya promises. "I wouldn't leave you again."

For a second, they both just look at each other.

It feels like they've cracked themselves open and laid themselves bare for each other. It's terrifying and exhilarating, all at the same time. But Shane is looking at him with such tenderness, and *god*, Ilya wants to believe that he can deserve that.

He wants to be the person that Shane sees when he looks at him.

"You know - you know I loved you, too. Right?" Shane whispers.

And no, Ilya hadn't. He'd hoped - dreamed of it, even - once upon a time. But he hadn't *known* it. He wishes he had done.

"Loved?" Ilya asks. "Past tense?"

Shane's eyes flood with tears even though he's smiling, and - so impossibly softly - he says:

"Love, Ilya. I *love* you. Past tense, present tense, future tense."

A desperate sound tears out of Ilya, and it feels like his chest is collapsing but in a good way. The best way. Like he is being shaped and remade by Shane's love for him. Like it is fixing parts of him that have been broken for so long.

He can't help himself any longer. He strides towards Shane, closing the distance between them faster than either of them can blink.

"Wait, wait," Shane pleads, and Ilya halts. "Shouldn't we - I mean shouldn't we wait until after playoffs? This is...it's a lot to figure out right now."

Ilya wants to say *if you don't let me kiss you then I will die*, but instead he takes a large step back so he's slightly less tempted to touch.

It doesn't work, but surely the thought counts.

He gets where Shane is coming from. The team has a real shot of going all the way this year, and Ilya doesn't want to be the one to screw that up. He's never had a real relationship before, but he knows they're messy and complicated and take a lot of work. He's willing, of course. Excited for it, even. But if Shane wants to wait...

"Is that what you want?" Ilya asks.

Shane is quiet for a moment, hesitating. Then: "No."

Before Ilya can even register his response, Shane is throwing his arms around Ilya's neck and kissing him.

It feels like coming home.

Ilya has missed Shane's mouth, and tongue, and taste. He's missed Shane's desperate little whimpers when Ilya nips at his bottom lip, and the way he tries to burrow beneath Ilya's skin, and the way he can feel Shane's heart pounding frantically against his own chest.

Time warps and melts around them; seconds pass, or maybe hours. Nothing else matters but this, *them*. The feel of Shane's body - strong and powerful and *real* - back in Ilya's arms, exactly where he has always belonged.

They're feral for each other, grasping and groping, desperate to touch and kiss everywhere. Ilya holds Shane's hips, then his neck, then he cradles his face. Shane tugs Ilya's hair, and grips his shoulders, and pushes his hands beneath Ilya's shirt.

"Ilya, please," Shane murmurs into his mouth. "Need you."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. *Please*."

They stumble upstairs together, bumping into walls and tables, leaving a trail of clothes behind them.

Ilya can't quite believe this is happening. As they tumble back onto the bed, he finds himself pausing for a minute just to look at Shane. To take in the way he's spread out beneath Ilya, with kiss-swollen lips, and messy hair, and a ravenous glint in his eyes.

This is all Ilya has wanted for the past five years, and he plans to do it right. He plans to take his time.

He kisses Shane again, then moves across to his jaw, and down his throat, until he's sucking a hickey into the hollow of Shane's collarbone. Shane whimpers beautifully, his body arching up into the kiss like he can't get enough of it. His fingers tangle in Ilya's hair and he tugs him

back up to kiss him. Ilya feeds his tongue into Shane's mouth, and he sucks on it as he wraps his legs around Ilya's waist.

"Ilya, baby. I need you."

Ilya groans, a low rumble from deep inside his chest. "Shane, if we do this..."

"What?"

"It isn't just sex. Isn't just one time. I love you. I *want* you."

He won't do casual again. They never did, really, not even when they tried to convince themselves that's what it was. But he especially can't do it this time. He won't go back to that - to stolen moments only when it's convenient.

He wants Shane for good, for always.

"I'm yours, baby," Shane promises. "I love you."

It's everything Ilya has ever wanted to hear.

Afterwards, when they're both boneless and sated - their bodies still trembling with aftershocks - Ilya collapses onto his stomach. He's half on the bed and half draped over Shane, like a sweaty weighted blanket.

He rests his chin on Shane's shoulder, and looks up at him like he's holding the entire universe in his arms.

Ilya stretches up a little to press a kiss to the underside of Shane's jaw, and Shane leans into the touch like a kitten seeking out affection. He brushes the tips of his fingers up and down the length of Ilya's spine, and Ilya trembles at the gentleness of it all.

He squeezes his eyes closed, counts to three, and then opens them again, just to check that all of this is real.

"I missed you," Shane says, voice hoarse from all the crying out he just did.

Ilya laughs, and Shane swats at the arm that Ilya has draped over his stomach. "Fuck off, you pervert. I don't mean *that*-"

"But you *did* miss that, yes?"

"I missed *you*, you asshole. All of you," Shane insists.

"We've been friends for weeks."

"Yeah, but. It wasn't the same, was it? We both knew there was something we were holding back."

Ilya quietly hums in agreement. He kisses Shane's shoulder, and then he looks at the indentation on his chest from where Ilya's crucifix had been pressing against him. It's such a gorgeous sight that he has to touch it - run his fingers over it as Shane shivers at the sensation.

"I missed you, too," Ilya confesses, and the words are heavy on his tongue but he feels so much lighter after he says them.

Ilya spent five years missing Shane. He's spent the entire time he's *known* Shane, missing him in one way or another. It feels good to finally say it out loud.

They lie there for a while, basking in each other's company and finally allowing themselves to just enjoy it.

Before, they didn't have time like this. They had stolen hours, between games and practices and flights. There was always a time limit, always a definitive end. Tonight, for the first time, they don't have to rush; there's nowhere they need to hurry off to, no one who is expecting their return.

They get to just exist with each other, time stretching endlessly out ahead of them.

"I was jealous when I first got here," Shane whispers the confession into the quiet of the room. It surprises Ilya.

"Jealous? Why?"

Shane's entire face scrunches up as he groans, and he turns his head away like he's trying to hide from Ilya. But that simply will not do.

Ilya props himself up on Shane's chest and takes hold of his chin, turning him back to face Ilya and whatever admission he was about to make.

"No, no. You *have* to tell me now," Ilya eagerly insists.

Shane's cheeks flush the most delicious shade of pink as he mumbles under his breath, "I was jealous of you and Luca."

Ilya frowns. "Me and Luca? Why?"

"Well you seemed so close, and I just--"

"Oh my god," Ilya gasps, realisation suddenly dawning on him. "*Luca?* My son, Luca Haas? Shane he is a child. He is practically still in diapers!"

"Okay, well *that's* an exaggeration."

"He is five minutes old! And you thought...you thought--"

"Look, I never said it was rational," Shane huffs. "I just - I saw you being so close, and he was always touching you, and I just..." he trails off like he doesn't know how to finish the

sentence.

Ilya feels a proud grin spreading across his face, one that instantly makes Shane roll his eyes and groan again.

“Oh, I see. You did not want another man touching me, even when you first got here and wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Well, yes. Obviously,” Shane grumbles, like he’s pissed off about his own reaction.

“You could not *stand* the idea that-“

“-Ilya, if you’re going to be smug about it-“

“*Of course* I am smug about it, sweetheart,” Ilya croons. “Best, most handsome hockey player in the world is jealous over *me*. That is definitely something to be smug about, Shane Hollander.”

Shane tries to look put-out, but there’s a soft smile teasing the corners of his mouth upwards, and his eyes are bright and glassy, like he’s holding back tears. His cheeks are still that divine shade of pink, and it makes the constellation of freckles stand out even more.

Ilya loves him so much that it hurts.

“I am jealous, too, you know?” Ilya remarks. “Remember that guy at the bar?”

Shane laughs. “No?”

“Well, I do.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Mhm. And I’m very possessive.”

“Is that right?” Shane asks, a wild glint in his eyes as if he very much likes the sound of that.

“I won’t ever let you go, now that I have you,” Ilya promises.

His love is intense, almost desperate, from years of having no one but Svetlana to give it to. He has so much of it inside him - so much that it overflows - and no one has ever wanted it from him before now.

And now that he’s finally allowed to show it to Shane, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to stop.

But Shane seems just as needy, just as frantic, as Ilya feels. He seems to want this the same, impossible, almost unbearable amount.

“Good,” Shane sighs, pulling Ilya down to him to bump their foreheads together. “You better fucking not.”

There's no world in which Ilya ever walks away from Shane again. No possible scenario or situation that could ever happen, that would make Ilya let go of Shane now that he has him.

Deep down, there was a part of Ilya that knew right from the moment they met - in a parking lot in Regina, Saskatchewan - that he was going to love Shane forever. It had been impossible all those years ago. Completely unimaginable, even. But Ilya's soul had recognised Shane's, and in that moment a connection was formed that couldn't ever be severed.

For Ilya, there was only ever going to be Shane.

"I love you, Ilya," Shane murmurs. "And you don't have to *earn it*, okay? That's not how it works. I love you just because. Because I couldn't imagine knowing you and *not* loving you."

His voice is thick, and there are tears rolling down Ilya's cheeks when he whispers, "I love you, too."

They don't talk anymore that night.

They save the big conversations for the morning after, where - over a Shane-approved breakfast - they decide to keep this for themselves, just for a little longer.

And while sneaking around isn't exactly ideal, it is somewhat familiar for them. Only, the stakes don't feel as high this time. None of this feels quite so terrifying. Because, if their team *does* find out, well. Besides it being a bit of a surprise for everyone, Ilya knows that none of them will have a problem with it.

They *will* be exceptionally nosy, though.

So they're only keeping their relationship quiet for now, just while they're battling through the playoffs. They don't want it to become some kind of distraction.

But, once the playoffs are over - and they have finally secured the Cup - they're going to tell people. The team, of course, and Hayden, and Svetlana. Then Ilya is going to meet Shane's parents, too, and this will slowly stop feeling like one big secret they have to keep.

Shane's plans are very, *very* thorough, and Ilya is merely happy to go along with whatever his boyfriend wants.

Unfortunately, things don't always go to plan, no matter *how* thorough they are.

They're on Shane's couch, hair still dripping from the shower they took together earlier - the shower where Shane had dropped to his knees and taken Ilya apart with his tongue. Shane is lying on top of Ilya, their bare chests pressed together, as they watch a documentary on marine life.

"Did you know that an octopus has three hearts?" Shane says, his breath fanning across Ilya's skin and making him shiver.

“I didn’t know that,” Ilya tells him.

Shane hums, happy to have bestowed some of his wisdom upon Ilya. Then he insistently nudges Ilya’s hand with his head, reminding Ilya to keep running his fingers through Shane’s hair. He’s like a giant, clingy baby sometimes, wanting all of Ilya’s attention and affection and love.

And, well, Ilya is more than happy to give it to him.

He tilts his chin down and presses a loud, exaggerated kiss to the top of Shane’s head. Ilya can’t get enough of loving on his boyfriend.

“You’re so smart,” Ilya tells him, and admires the way a blush starts to creep over his cheekbones.

“I like animals,” Shane says, trying to deflect the compliment.

“I know, sweetheart.”

Ilya recently learned that - as a kid - Shane much preferred animals to people because, *“Animals don’t ask stupid questions.”* Shane is also obsessed with Anya, to the point where she now has a bowl, and bed, and a dozen toys all scattered through Shane’s house. He wants to get a cat, too, but he’s worried that maybe they won’t get along when they live together.

Ilya had wanted to bite Shane when he said that, just because of the wave of overwhelming love that crashed into him.

Shane thinking about their future makes Ilya impossibly hard and unbearably emotional.

“Shane.”

“Hm?” He looks up at Ilya, all wide eyes and breathtaking freckles, and a half-smile that he always seems to wear when they’re alone together.

Ilya tucks his finger under Shane’s chin and tilts his head up. He leans down and brushes their noses together until Shane giggles, then Ilya swoops in and steals a kiss from his lips. Shane purrs like a cat, and his fingers dig into Ilya’s chest like claws as he scrambles to get impossibly closer.

They’re so caught up in each other that they don’t hear the click of the door as it opens. But they do hear the thud of something hitting the floor.

When Shane’s parents walk in on them, Ilya doesn’t know what to expect. Maybe tears, or raised voices, or perhaps even a raised fist - that’s what would have happened if it was *his* dad who walked in on them.

“Oh my god,” Yuna Hollander gasps.

“Oh my *god*,” her husband, David, repeats.

“*Oh my god*,” Shane silently mouths, burrowing his face into Ilya’s shoulder like that will somehow make his parents disappear from his living room.

“Hello. I am Ilya Rozanov,” he greets them, waving awkwardly from the couch.

And while he certainly hadn’t wanted their first ever meeting to begin like *this* - half naked, with their son lay on top of him - Ilya is determined to make the most of it.

He helps Shane climb off him, and then jumps off the couch to stand at his side.

Yuna and David keep looking between Ilya and their son, like the answers will suddenly appear in front of them if only they search hard enough.

“Uh, hi, Mom. Dad.”

“Hey, son,” David greets him. “Sorry to just stop in like this.”

Ilya almost laughs; he doesn’t know how else to respond.

The situation is all so surreal, and while Ilya and Shane have talked about this in depth - talked about Ilya meeting his parents - it wasn’t supposed to go like this. They already know Shane is gay, of course, but the Ilya of it all is absolutely a shock to the system.

“What is...this?” Yuna asks, pointing her finger between the two of them. “What’s going on?”

Ilya feels Shane’s arm brush against his, feels the way it rises and falls as he draws in a breath. And then Shane - his brave, wonderful Shane - proudly takes hold of Ilya’s hand.

“This is Ilya,” Shane says. “My boyfriend.”

“*Boyfriend?*” Yuna and David parrot simultaneously.

“Boyfriend,” Ilya confirms, with a grin that he simply can’t control.

He *loves* being Shane’s boyfriend, and he especially loves getting to say it out loud.

“I think we need a drink,” David suggests, and everyone else resolutely agrees.

After cups of coffee that quickly get replaced with Vodka - Russian, the good kind that Ilya bought for Shane - the Hollander’s patiently listen to their decade-long history. They nod, and smile, and cry a little, too. And afterwards, when they’re leaving, Yuna and David hug their son goodbye.

And then they hug Ilya, too.

Shane tells Hayden after that, because he hates keeping secrets from him and because he’s been worried sick about Shane since he first came out to the guys in Montreal.

His response is...well.

He's Shane's best friend, so the, "*Are you sure, Shane? Like. Really, really sure?*" that Ilya hears through the facetime call gets a free pass - just this once - because Hayden's just looking out for Shane. But after the tenth, "*Rozanov? Really?*" Shane tells him to shut the fuck up and call him back when Hayden can be happy for them.

He gets another facetime request less than three minutes later.

Ilya tells Svetlana, too, finally, because she holds a tiny piece of his soul inside of her and he can't keep the secret any longer. Especially when she calls him and says he 'sounds too happy'. She's thrilled for him, of course. Says she had her suspicions about Jane's identity all along, but never wanted to press Ilya.

She also threatens to hide Shane's body where no one will ever find it if he hurts Ilya. So, naturally, Shane kind of adores her.

Little by little, it feels like their world is expanding.

The more people that know about them, the more real that it seems. And it starts to become something that Ilya can really trust - something that he finally believes he will be allowed to keep. Not a secret confined to hotel rooms, or furtive late-night meetings, but a real relationship. Something that is built to last.

After that they do well at keeping it quiet, honestly.

Between their growing number of playoff wins, and flights, and excited hookups in their shared hotel rooms - or Ilya's or Shane's houses - it feels like they have everything under control. It feels like everything is going well for them, finally, after so long feeling like they were being punished for finding each other. For loving each other.

They sweep Buffalo in the first round, and then take the second in six against Tampa. Then, before they know it, they're heading to Pittsburgh for the conference finals.

It's after their third win that they get caught out. Again.

They're in Pittsburgh after coming back from behind to win game three, and put them up 2-1 in the series. And while they don't want to go *out-out* when they're flying back to Ottawa in the morning, they *do* want to take some time to enjoy the victory.

So they're having a couple of drinks at the hotel bar before they go to bed. Luca and Troy are playing a game of pool in the back corner, Bood, Wyatt, and Dykstra are propped up at the bar, and the rest of the guys are scattered around in groups of two or three.

Ilya has been nursing the same beer for an hour. He's completely oblivious to whatever Dillon is rambling on about, because he can feel the heat of Shane's thigh pressing against his own.

His boyfriend knows exactly what he's doing.

Shane shifts every so often to increase the pressure against Ilya's leg, and he licks his lips after every sip of ginger ale in a way that is completely obscene. He also keeps tipping his head back each time he laughs, exposing the fading bruise Ilya left above his collarbone after their first win of the series.

Ilya is so hard he can't see straight.

When Shane laughs, bumping his shoulder against Ilya's and resting a hand on his thigh, Ilya almost comes in his pants.

"Bathroom," he mumbles, before jumping up and scurrying away.

It takes less than a minute for the door to swing open, and Shane to step in behind him. Their gaze meets in the mirror, and there's a devious expression on Shane's face that Ilya has come to long for and dread in equal measure.

"Nice goal tonight, Captain," Shane says nonchalantly.

"Nice pass."

Shane shrugs his shoulders, and as Ilya turns around to face him, his eyes drop down to the bulge in Ilya's trousers. The sly grin that spreads across his face is absolutely devastating for Ilya's heart, which begins to beat so frantically it's a wonder it doesn't jump straight out of his chest.

God, he loves Shane. He loves him, and he likes him, and he *wants* him, all the fucking time. It feels like this eagerness for him will never end, and he prays to fucking god that it doesn't.

Ilya wants to always be this excited about their love.

"Looks like you've got a bit of a problem there," Shane remarks, trying and failing to sound cool because he's grinning too wide.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "And it's all your fault, sweetheart."

"*My* fault? I didn't even touch you."

Ilya fixes him with a glare. "You know what you were doing."

Shane giggles then, sickeningly sweet. "Maybe," he sings.

They're delirious with excitement, and hope, and *want*. It's as if all of their dreams are coming true at the same time, and - best of all - they're getting to do it side by side.

And they both know they shouldn't - both know that it's a terrible idea - but when Shane steps forward and hooks a finger in Ilya's belt loop, there's nothing he can do but grab his face and kiss him. Slow, and filthy, and packed with all the things he's had to refrain from

saying all evening. Shane whimpers when their hips rock together, and Ilya swallows it down hungrily.

He's about ten seconds from shoving Shane into a stall and dropping to his knees when the bathroom door swings open behind them.

They freeze. The room goes eerily silent. And then Ilya opens his eyes, looks over Shane's shoulder, and sees...

"I fucking knew it!" Luca hisses. "I called it! Didn't I, Troy? Didn't I tell you?"

"Oh, thank god," Shane mutters, his head dropping forward to rest on Ilya's shoulder as he tries to catch his breath.

"Uh, you guys know this is a public bathroom, right? Like, anyone could walk in?"

Ilya musters up the most deadpan expression he can find given the situation, and fixes it on Troy. "Wow, thank you Barrett. What an astute observation."

Shane snorts out a giggle against Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya draws in a huge breath of relief.

Not just that it's Luca and Troy who caught them, but that Shane is laughing about it instead of panicking.

"Alright, Jesus," Troy replies. "I just thought you might have needed the reminder."

Shane finally turns around then, but he doesn't pull away from Ilya. Instead he presses back against his chest, and melts into him when Ilya curls a possessive arm around his waist.

The grin on Luca's face is nothing short of alarming as he glances between Ilya, Shane, and Troy, over and over again, like he's desperately trying to capture this moment. Like he can't quite believe his eyes. Troy is smiling too, but his is a little less maniacal - he just looks happy for them, honestly. Ilya especially.

"Sorry you guys had to find out like that," Shane apologizes.

"I'm not!" Luca says. "I just watched sixteen-year-old me's fantasy come to life."

Ilya chokes out a laugh. "You fantasised about me and-"

"Baby," Shane interrupts, "I think it's best we don't ask him to elaborate on that one."

Ilya shuts his mouth in an instant, and Troy shoots him a look. The kind of look that says *oh brother, you're whipped*. Which isn't wrong, but it *is* extremely hypocritical, given that Troy would Irish dance at center ice if Harris asked him to. He flips him the bird in a silent reply, but Shane catches him out of the corner of his eye and swats Ilya's hand away.

And it feels...so fucking normal. So fucking *good*.

Two of their teammates found out, and the world didn't end. No one is mad. Everything is still exactly the same as it was, except now their world has grown just a tiny bit bigger.

That, and Ilya now knows what a sixteen-year-old Luca used to fantasise about. Which - there's such a thing as knowing *too much* about your teammates, actually.

"We're happy for you," Troy says, seriously.

"You are?" Shane asks, surprised at Troy's sincerity.

Luca nods. "Yeah, man, of course we are. We could see this coming from a mile away. Troy, Harris, and I were betting on-"

His voice gets muffled by Troy's hand slapping over his mouth. Troy grins nervously at both of them, while Ilya and Shane stare back, eyebrows raised in question.

"Well. We better get going. Early flight, and all."

"Troy."

"We'll keep our mouths shut. Promise!"

"Troy Barrett-"

Before Ilya can finish, Troy backs out of the bathroom with Luca in tow. The door falls closed behind them, and leaves Shane and Ilya in a weighted silence.

And they both burst out laughing.

It's the deep, loud, belly-laughter that shakes your whole body and makes your lungs ache. Every time they start to pull themselves together they catch each other's eyes, and just start laughing all over again. Ilya is grabbing the sink for balance, and Shane is grabbing Ilya, and it all just feels so cathartic.

It's not even that funny - not really. But it's like a tiny piece of the weight on their shoulders has just been lifted. And it's nice to just let themselves feel joyous. Feel giddy. Feel excited about hockey, and their team, and their love, and their life together.

Being in love is so much fun.

"Well, that went well," Shane comments when they've finally caught their breath.

"Could have been worse," Ilya agrees. "If Hayes had caught us he never would have been able to keep his mouth shut."

He loves the guy, honestly, but he's never met a stranger and he refuses to learn what the word *secret* means. Or *whisper*.

"Come on," Shane mumbles around a yawn. "Let's go to bed."

He leans in and presses a sweet, chaste kiss to Ilya's lips. Then he walks out of the bathroom, and Ilya follows him like a well-trained dog on a leash.

Pittsburgh takes it all the way to seven games, but Ottawa win it in overtime. Bood, to Rozanov, to Hollander. A perfect goal.

That momentum follows them all the way to the Stanley Cup finals.

They win game one, drop two and three, but then come back to take games four and five. The Cup is in the building for game six against San Jose; they're the reigning champions, but Ottawa could win it all tonight.

They could finally bring the cup home.

As they line up in the tunnel before stepping out onto the ice, Ilya shuffles in beside Shane. He leans forward and taps their helmets together.

"We've got this."

"We've got it, baby," Shane affirms. He sounds confident, certain, like there is absolutely no doubt in his mind.

They believe in this team and their guys, and - above all else - they believe in each other. It's that belief, that unrivalled determination, that carries them through sixty minutes of hockey.

And, as the dying seconds tick away on the clock and the final buzzer sounds, Ilya tosses his gloves in to the air and fucking screams.

They did it. They won.

Shane is the first to reach him, crashing into Ilya with all the force of a goddamn meteor. He barely gets a second to look at Shane - at the glee on his face and the tears in his eyes - before they're being swarmed by the rest of the team.

There's screaming and cheering and crying, hands and bodies everywhere, but it's Shane's tear-streaked face burrowed in Ilya's neck that keeps him grounded.

This...this is what it has all been about.

The gruelling schedule, and the aches and pains, and losses and triumphs - all of that is worth it for the absolute elation that fills Ilya's body. This is exactly what he did it for.

With his team and boyfriend by his side, it's the sweetest victory Ilya has ever known. It's the one that matters the most.

Slowly the guys start to peel off the huddle, grabbing each other for hugs, and helmet taps, and slobbering kisses on cheeks. Ilya doesn't move away, though - he keeps his arms wrapped tightly around Shane until he makes the first move and pulls back.

“We did it,” he whispers in awe. “We actually fucking did it, Ilya.”

“Damn right we did, sweetheart. Never fucking doubted it.”

He knows there are eyes on them. Yuna and David are in the audience with Svetlana and Hayden. There are hundreds of cameras trained on them right now, commentators are probably remarking on their rivalry-turned-friendship, and social media is probably blowing up.

But nothing matters except for Shane.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Ilya promises.

Then Shane is moving back in towards him, and saying: “I’m going to kiss you now. Is that okay?”

All Ilya can do is nod.

And Shane kisses him.

In front of hundreds of thousands of people all across the world, Shane kisses Ilya.

It’s a statement, and a vow, and an *I love you*, all rolled into one. And they’re both smiling so much that it’s hardly even a kiss at all, but it’s so perfect that Ilya thinks this must be what heaven feels like.

Nothing in the world could ever be better than this moment.

The arena falls silent for the briefest of moments, before the cheering becomes a deafening roar. Between the crowd and their teammates - who shake them, and jump on them, and holler things like, “Finally!” and, “It’s about time!” - Ilya feels so surrounded by love that he can’t stop the tears from streaming down his face.

But through everything, the noise and the cameras and the celebrations, the world narrows down to one, perfect point: Shane.

“I’m gonna marry you,” Ilya tells him, and Shane tips his head back and laughs.

“Yeah, I’ll marry you too, baby.”

Ilya kisses his boyfriend, and he hugs his friends, and he looks around and thinks: *this is a good life*.

He would do it all over again for this exact moment right here.

End Notes

guys, this fic fought me allll the way & i ended up honestly kind of hating it. but i didn't want to waste 22k words, so you can have it if you want it :) love u

also, just a reminder to not my post my fic without credit please!

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