

A Lesson in Puck Handling

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A Lesson in Puck Handling

by [heroically](#).

Summary

Shane Hollander had almost made it to morning skate on time.

Then something ran out in front of his car.

Or, the one where Shane finds an injured kitten and takes it to the closest vet, Dr. Ilya Rozanov.

Chapter 1: Loose Puck

Chapter Notes

Starting writing this because the bestie is an enabler and I enjoy making them laugh —next thing I knew I had three chapters written and had barely scratched the surface. Gonna aim for weekly updates, but also I'm playing fast and loose and just having fun writing so if I'm not exact on that, forgive me.

Minor content notes for this chapter: animal injury (but the kitten is okay!) and a brief joking reference of self-harm/suicidal language (dark humor).

The E rating is for the (inevitable) later chapters

Enjoy <3

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

He had almost made it to morning skate on time.

Then something ran out in front of his car.

“Oh fuck!”

Shane slammed on his brakes, knuckles white where he gripped the wheel, the seatbelt digging into his chest. Horns blared behind him but they were only secondary to the pounding in his ears. Holy shit. Holy *shit*.

“Holy shit,” he said, willing his fingers to release just enough as the cacophony of horns died down to just a single impatient one. “Yeah, yeah, I hear you,” he muttered, giving his rear view mirror a glare before he pulled his car over, ignoring the dirty looks the drivers gave as they passed.

He rested his head against the steering wheel, counting as he took four deep breaths. His heart kicked too fast, out of rhythm. He had never been in an accident before, didn't even *speed* for fuck's sake, couldn't believe that he'd almost lost his record because of

His spine snapped straight and he looked to the side. There, in the bushes that lined the sidewalk, were two shining eyes, staring at him.

“Shit.”

He could have just kept going. He could go to skate, gear up and run drills and go over strategy again for their game against Toronto tonight. He was captain, it was his duty and responsibility to be there even if it was optional—*especially* when it was optional.

Shane watched as the eyes watched back. Whatever it was didn’t move.

Fuck.

He was going to be late.

The eyes belonged to something small, black, and fluffy. Shane got out of the car and immediately crouched down, elbows resting on his knees and his sunglasses pushed on top of his head, but even from five feet away, he couldn’t tell exactly what he was looking at.

“Hey, little guy,” he said, holding out a hand in its direction. “Or girl. You okay?”

Still crouched, Shane awkwardly shuffled closer until the... thing sniffed his fingers. The animal didn’t move beyond that, and for the first time since it happened, the thought solidified into something real, one that he couldn’t ignore: he might have hit it.

His stomach dropped.

He was going to be *so* late.

Shane fired off a text to Theriault and Hayden letting them know he wouldn’t be there, sending them before he could think better of it, and took another deep breath.

“Don’t bite me,” he told it, reaching and scooping the ball of fluff off the ground. It was practically weightless and even smaller than he had originally thought. Shane cradled it to his chest while it squirmed, and then, it looked up at him and made the tiniest, angriest little meow that he had ever heard.

A kitten.

It was so warm and soft, its heart beating rapidly against his palm, and Shane was struck with just how fragile of a creature it was—until it dug its sharp claws into his hand.

“Fucking ow,” he said, trying to simultaneously get the kitten to let go of his hand and keep his own grip firm. “I’m just trying to help you.”

By the time he got back into his car, little pinpricks of blood dotted his skin, but at least the kitten stopped wriggling. Instead, Shane felt tremors move through its little body as he slowly set it down on his lap. “Now what?” he asked it.

The kitten meowed.

Shane pulled out his phone. There were multiple texts from Hayden, starting with *are you okay* to just a string of question marks. *I’m fine*, he sent back and snapped a picture. *It ran out in front of my car, figuring out what to do now.*

He opened Maps and searched for the nearest vet. *Happy Tails Animal Clinic* was less than a mile away. They would know what to do next, right?

The moment he put his car in drive, however, the kitten started screaming again—loud, high-pitched meows that didn’t stop until Shane finally parked in front of the small gray building decorated with colorful paw prints. “At least we know your lungs work,” he muttered, plucking the kitten’s claws from his track pants before gathering it once more to his chest. Its trembling was worse than before.

A bell jingled overhead when Shane pulled open the second door at the entrance, and a blonde woman’s head popped up from behind the reception desk. “Can I help you?”

“I found this kitten,” Shane said. “I might have hit it with my car. I don’t think I did but it’s pretty small.”

Her eyes went to the kitten, long enough that the corners of his lips turned down in confusion. The seconds ticked by, but the receptionist’s face remained blank.

“Do you have an appointment?” she finally asked.

Shane shook his head. “No. Should I have called first?”

“Have you ever been here before?”

“No. It just happened. You were the closest vet and I thought... I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do, but this seemed like the best option?”

“It is,” she said, setting down a clipboard and pen on the counter in front of him. “You will just need to fill this out and we’ll squeeze you in, okay?”

Shane glanced around the empty lobby, but decided against pointing that out. He simply nodded and lifted the pen, filling out the top of the paperwork with his information, quick and efficient until—

Pet's Name

“Uh,” he said, clearing his throat. “What if it doesn’t have a name?”

The receptionist smiled at him, the type of smile that Shane was never sure if it was real or fake. “Then you give it one.”

He nodded again but his hand didn’t move. How was he supposed to give a name when he didn’t know anything about it? What if he gave it a boy’s name and it was a girl?

“It doesn’t have to be its forever name,” the receptionist’s voice broke through his thoughts. “Just something for medical records. It can be anything.”

Shane looked up at her, then to the kitten, then to the page. His phone buzzed in his pocket again, probably Theriault this time, reminding him that leadership is an active noun.

Puck, he wrote.

The rest of the page was easier, even if Shane didn’t have a clue how old this kitten was, its sex, or if it had any previous medical treatment or owner or what exactly a microchip had to do with anything. They’d fill in any necessary information as they got it, anyway. They were the animal experts, after all.

“You can have a seat, someone will come get you soon.”

Shane sat on one end of the long wooden bench that lined the side of the lobby beneath a row of windows, the kitten still clutched firmly in his arm. There was a rack of pamphlets to one side, a small messy stack of magazines on an end table next to the bench, and rudimentary artwork of cats and dogs hung in the spaces between the large windows.

He had never been inside a veterinarian clinic before—had never even owned a pet before since between the practices, camps, and road trips there had never been time for a dog when he was a kid, and even less now that he was in his tenth year with the Voyageurs—but it seemed waiting areas were universally kind of tacky and bare.

Shane reached over and straightened the magazines without thinking, aligning the edges as best he could with one hand.

The kitten still trembled, its eyes wide, but it hadn't so much as made a peep since they'd arrived and Shane began to worry. "Hey," he said softly, stroking a finger over the fluffy fur of its forehead. "Gonna make sure you're safe and taken care of, okay? And then—"

Then what? Then Shane would go home, get a small yoga session in to work out any tightness that crept into his back and shoulders, and just go about his day until it was time to go to the rink? That is what he should do, he knew. That was the plan and the plan was important to stick to.

"Puck?"

Lifting his head, Shane saw the same receptionist standing in a doorway to the right of the desk. *Someone*. "You can come in here," she said, gesturing into the room.

She closed the door behind him. This room felt like a miniature copy of the lobby, the same pamphlets in a smaller rack, the same sort of brightly colored artwork on the walls. "So you found a kitten?"

"Yeah, it ran across the road in front of my car," he repeated and felt a little like he'd somehow walked into the Twilight Zone. "I don't know if it's hurt or not. I don't really know anything about it."

"I'll get a temp and weight first and then Dr. Rozanov will be in to check them out," she explained. "You can set them down on the table."

Shane did as asked and the kitten just sort of... melted into a shaking puffy clump of fur. "Is that normal?"

The woman ran her hand over the kitten's back. "Sometimes," she said. Shane waited for her to elaborate but instead she opened a drawer from under the table. "You gonna be good?"

"Uh, yes?" His brain filed through as many scenarios as it could as to why the question was even asked when the woman held up a thermometer and looked at him blankly.

"Not you."

"Oh."

Shane didn't even have a moment to consider how she was going to manage to get a kitten to cooperate with a thermometer in its mouth before she popped the tip of it up its butt.

"Temp is slightly elevated," she said, not even bothering to look up at him before she picked the kitten up and placed it on what Shane assumed was a scale. The kitten looked comically small in comparison. "And just over two pounds."

"Is that good?"

She moved the kitten off the scale and it returned to what Shane could only think of as a puddle. "Dr. Rozanov will be right in."

"That—" The woman left through a second door on the other side of the room, not even stopping or looking over her shoulder while his word hung in the air. "—isn't what I asked."

This was officially the weirdest place Shane had ever been to, even more so than the dentist he had seen once as a kid and begged never to go back to. At least that office only had scary clown figurines lining shelves next to dentures and a hygienist who laughed like a hyena.

The kitten puddle barely made a peep, the ends of its fur sticking out and vibrating with each wave of tremors. "Don't be scared," Shane said. "I'm sure the vet will be nicer."

The vet, as it turned out, was unfairly tall and broad with strong jaw and stronger looking arms, his sleeves rolled to the elbow like he was about to fix an engine instead of a kitten.

Shane blinked and swallowed hard.

Then the man opened his mouth.

"So, Mr. Hollander," Dr. Rozanov said, his Russian accent thick as he stepped into the room. His gaze flicked over Shane once before settling like he'd already decided something. "You almost killed kitten."

Shane sputtered. Scratch that about being nicer.

"No!" he said automatically. "It ran out in front of my car."

Dr. Rozanov stopped and stood across the table from him, stroking a finger over its head.

“So you are saying it is kitten’s fault.”

“No—”

“Kitten is suicidal, that is your answer?”

“No! It was an accident. I mean, I don’t know if I actually hit it.”

The vet finally looked up at him. Their eyes locked and Shane’s stomach did a weird flip. He felt pinned in place even as his hands curled into fists at his sides, ready to throw down gloves he wasn’t wearing, on ice he wasn’t on.

He had stupidly nice eyes.

The kitten meowed, tiny and indignant between them.

“You are very defensive for innocent man,” the vet finally said, watching him, *fucking assessing* him, before turning his attention back to the kitten.

“And you’re kind of an asshole,” Shane said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Mm,” Dr. Rozanov said. “Yes.” He ran his hands over its back, its black fur disappearing beneath large palms before he took its tiny face and inspected its eyes and mouth.

“The, uh, nurse said it was just over two pounds?”

“Vet tech,” Dr. Rozanov corrected.

“What?”

“Svetlana is vet tech, not nurse. Is different.”

“Okay,” Shane said, drawing out the syllables slightly. “Is two pounds good? She didn’t say.”

His fingers tapped over the kitten’s body. “Yes, is good weight for age,” he said, lifting up the kitten’s tail and peeking at its back end. “Congratulations, it’s a boy.”

“You can tell that with just a quick look?”

“I know testicles when I see them.”

Shane choked on air.

Dr. Rozanov lips quirked to one side. “Even tiny ones,” he added, “though not my usual expertise.” Dr. Rozanov met his gaze and held it too long.

Shane shifted on his feet. “What is your usual—”

“Dogs,” he said with a shrug, returning to inspect the kitten’s ears.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane muttered.

That stupid smirk on Dr. Rozanov’s face grew wider. “No, just dogs. Most of my clients are dogs, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane clenched his jaw, refusing to give any hint that he found any of this as amusing as Dr. Rozanov seemed to. “Should I take him somewhere else?”

“What?” Dr. Rozanov looked genuinely offended. “Of course not, you nearly kill kitten, you think I will let you finish the job?”

“I didn’t!”

“Look,” Dr. Rozanov said, more serious now, as he lifted the kitten onto its legs where it promptly melted back into a blob. “Cannot stand. Something is wrong with its right hind leg.”

“I didn’t—it ran just fine—oh god, is it broken? Is that why it was yelling at me in the car? But I’ve been holding it!”

“Him.”

“What?”

“Holding *him*. Honestly Mr. Hollander,” Dr. Rozanov said, a hint of something like amusement pulling at his mouth, “what sort of cat dad are you if you keep calling him ‘it’?”

“I’m not!” The words came out too quickly and left his mouth gaping for too long until he remembered to close it. “I just found it—him. Someone else owns him.”

“Mm, no. This is likely stray. No owner except you.”

“I’m not the owner!” Shane ran a hand through his hair, glancing down at the kitten, its ears slightly flattened.

Dr. Rozanov placed his palms on the table and straightened his spine. He was too tall. “You filled out paperwork, that is your name, yes? Shane Hollander?”

Shane dragged a hand over his face. “Yes, but—”

“That makes you owner.”

“That’s not—wait, you’re fucking with me again, aren’t you?”

Dr. Rozanov shrugged, pulling the stethoscope free from around his neck and putting it in his ears. “No. Kitten needs x-rays and owner permission to do so.”

“Is he okay?”

“Don’t know,” he said, holding the chestpiece to the kitten’s ribs, “that is why we need x-rays.”

“But I can’t have a kitten.”

After repositioning the chestpiece a few times, Dr. Rozanov removed the stethoscope altogether and looked back at Shane. “I will explain. *You* are current owner. *You* give permission, I do my job, then you find new owner for kitten. Is simple.”

“Can’t you just take him?”

“Did the sign change and no one told me? It still says ‘Animal Clinic,’ yes? Not shelter?”

“Then I’ll take him to a shelter.”

“You cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Panleuk outbreak.”

Shane’s head spun. “Pan-what?”

“Panleukopenia. Is very bad virus, deadly to many kittens. If you take him there, he may die.”

“*What—*”

“I don’t know what is so hard to understand, do you give permission?”

Shane exhaled, shoulders sinking. “Yeah. Yes. Okay. Whatever he needs.”

“Good. We will be back.”

Dr. Rozanov picked up the kitten and left through the same door the woman—Svetlana—did. Alone, Shane braced his palms on the table and hung his head. What the fuck was he doing? He was just trying to do the right thing, how was it that he ended up in Montreal’s weirdest vet clinic with a fucking—*asshole*—of a man telling him that he now owned a kitten.

There was still six hours before he absolutely needed to be at the rink. Shane ran through the checklist in his head—if he was home within the hour he would be able to slide back into his game day routine like nothing ever happened. No kitten, no Russian vets, just back to the same rituals for every home game. It would be fine. Everything would be fine.

Shane slid his phone out of his pocket. 5 texts, 2 missed calls, each one checking in and asking too many questions. Fuck. Was it so unusual that Shane missed morning skate?

Yes. Yes it was.

He ignored the notifications and pulled up Google instead. *What do kittens need*. Food, litter and box, scratching post, toys.

Food was an easy one, or so he thought. He’d get the highest quality food and be done with it. When he searched what brand that was, he was presented with a nearly endless list of options, different flavors and proteins, some wet and others dry, ranging from recognizable things like chicken and tuna, to things like rabbit and ...*papaya*? What the fuck.

He opened a new tab for the next thing on the list, *best litter for kittens*. At least this was a little more straightforward. A shallow box, nonclumping litter. Shane wasn’t exactly sure what the difference was between clumping and nonclumping, but Google was the expert now.

This was ridiculous. He couldn’t have a kitten. It didn’t fit anywhere—into his schedule, his apartment, his life. They were going on a road trip in three days and Shane didn’t know much, but he was pretty sure that kittens couldn’t be left alone for a week.

But what else was he supposed to do? The pan-whatever it was didn't sound like a viable option, and the thought of leaving the kitten to the odds of survival was shittier than trying to figure out what brand of food to get.

Maybe he could get his parents to watch it, just for the road trip, until he figured something better out.

"No more merry wandering in the night now," Dr. Rozanov announced as the door swung open, Shane's head snapping up as the man rubbed his stubble against the kitten's forehead. "Indoors only."

Shane's brows knit together. "What?"

"Puck," Dr. Rozanov said, as if it meant something obvious to Shane. "Like Shakespeare? Is clever name."

Right. The kitten. "No, it's uh. Like hockey."

He blinked at Shane. "I take it back, is boring name."

"It's not boring, I'm a hockey player."

"Yes, I know who you are," he said, placing Puck back down on the table. It wasn't unusual for Shane to be recognized, especially in Montreal, but something in the way Dr. Rozanov said it made his chest tighten. "That is why it is boring name. And bad news, his leg is broken."

Shane frowned at the kitten. "Does he need a cast or something?"

"No, kittens like him won't heal properly in a cast, he is too small and will grow rapidly. The break is complicated, he will need amputation."

Shane blinked. The word didn't sit right, stuck somewhere behind his ribs and wrong in a way he couldn't argue why. "What? That sounds extreme, it's just a broken leg."

"Are you vet now?"

"No, I just—"

"Good. Then I will continue being vet." When Shane didn't answer, he continued, "The good news is that he is big enough now. I will take his leg and, since he will be under anesthesia, his balls today."

“So soon?”

Dr. Rozanov raised a brow. “You want him to stay in pain?”

“No, of course not,” Shane said immediately. And then, in a voice so small he hardly recognized it as his own: “He’s in pain?”

“Of course he’s in pain, he has broken leg. You think broken leg is nothing?”

Shane’s fingers dug into the edge of the table. He thought of the car, of the brakes, of the blur. He should have seen it sooner, should have driven slower.

Should have done better.

His eyes darted between Dr. Rozanov and the kitten, who stared up at him with wide eyes, too small and too still. “I only meant—he doesn’t look it?”

“Cats hide pain,” Dr. Rozanov said, scratching under the kitten’s chin, averting his attention. It looked like he enjoyed it, leaning into the vet’s fingers. “Like humans, only better.”

This time, when Shane swallowed around the lump in his throat, it hurt.

There must have been something too obvious in his expression, because Dr. Rozanov paused and waited until Shane met his eyes before he said, “You did not do this.”

Shane’s brows knit together. “What?”

“The leg,” Dr. Rozanov said, the irritating needling turning into something softer. “It was broken before today, the injury is not new.”

It wasn’t the comfort it should have been. “How can you know that?”

“Is my job to know.” Dr. Rozanov shrugged with the sort of nonchalance that Shane could never. “So I will do surgery today, take pain away with the leg and the balls. Do not worry, he will adapt quickly.”

The kitten blinked at him, slow and sleepy, and Shane nodded. “How long will it take?”

“Surgery is quick. All goes well, he will be ready to go home this evening.”

“But I have a game tonight, I can’t—”

Dr. Rozanov waved a hand. “We can keep him overnight, but is not cheap.” He paused and looked at Shane for a second longer than necessary. “You can afford it though.”

The tiny black kitten on the table closed his eyes.

“Whatever he needs,” he said, softer this time.

They won the game 2-1, but any thought of celebration Shane felt dissipated when he replayed in his head how he’d missed an easy goal in the first period. He’d been on a breakaway, Toronto’s goalie had fallen for his feint, but the puck hit the post. The ringing echo sounded—briefly, stupidly—like a meow.

He should have been able to shut it out.

It was stupid. Everyone took bad shots, he had just consoled their rookie about the exact same thing weeks ago when they played Vancouver, but Shane couldn’t shake the feeling that it was his own fault.

He’d been distracted, half his attention still back in that clinic. His mind replayed the kitten’s tremor, the word amputation looping in the background while his body moved on instinct, worried about an animal he didn’t really know—

And thinking about hazel eyes he definitely didn’t want to. That part was worse.

One bad shot was just one bad shot. There would be more, he told himself as he toweled off his hair. And his team needed him to focus on the future, to be ready for the upcoming weeks on the road.

“You coming tonight? Drapeau’s hosting, his wife’s making a roast.” Hayden sat tying his shoes with a hopeful look on his face, his tone light and unassuming. “I can only stay for a short while—Jackie has a hair appointment in the morning so I got to be on my A-game. We can carpool.”

Shane gave him a tight smile even though it should have been the easy out—or in, he supposed. “I think I’ll pass,” he said, buttoning up his shirt and reaching for his phone on his stall’s shelf.

One missed call and three texts from an unknown number. He brows knit together, the corner of his lips turning down.

Hayden must have seen the look on his face. “What’s going on?”

Unknown: Surgery was a success

Unknown: At least one of us had good puck handling tonight

Unknown: Rozanov: 1 Hollander: 0

Shane stared at the screen.

The fucking nerve of this guy—

He grumbled under his breath. “Fucking asshole.”

“You okay?”

“It’s nothing,” Shane said, pocketing his phone and turning to Hayden. “The surgery went well, I guess.”

“Your kitten?”

“It’s—he’s not my kitten,” Shane muttered as Hayden stood and slipped on his coat.

Grabbing his bag from the bench, Hayden raised a brow. “Isn’t that good news then?”

“Yeah,” he said, a small smile playing across his face, “of course it is.”

“Then who’s an asshole?”

Shane’s cheeks flushed—with anger, he figured. “Oh. Just the vet. Some Russian prick.” Some Russian prick who apparently watched the game, but Shane wasn’t about to tell Hayden that. “Tell the guys I’ll catch them next time?”

Hayden clapped a hand on Shane’s shoulder. “Sure.” He turned to walk out of the locker room, catching Shane’s eye before reaching the door. “Remember it’s not about the goals you miss—”

“It’s about the shots you take,” Shane finished for him, picking up his bag to follow Hayden out. “Yeah, I know. Thanks.”

They parted ways at the exit, Shane offering a wave and a smile before heading to his car. This was the easy part now, his post-game routine well-honed to the point where there was barely any thought involved. His food was already prepped and waiting and he had already queued up the playlist for his restorative yoga routine before the game. Then he’d watch a couple episodes of *The Office* to wind down, and sleep. He could turn off his mind for the next two hours and let his body take control.

Except.

Shane looked down at his phone. Dr. Rozanov’s texts were still waiting.

Add New Contact

Asshole, he typed, a smug smile on his face. Then deleted it.

Veterinarian

Shane deleted that, too.

It hit him then that he didn’t even get the man’s first name. He could just look it up, fill out the contact info properly, have it sit neatly amongst the alphabetized names, filed away into its proper spot like everything else.

Shane typed *Rozanov* and hit done before he could think better of it.

Shane: I had an assist in the third period

He set his phone face down in the center console. He was not going to let this consume him, some cocky veterinarian who didn’t even know him, probably didn’t even know hockey or how playing on a team meant that victories were shared and assists were just as important—if not more so!—than actual goals. Just because he could perform surgery didn’t make him better than him, Shane was the best player in the league despite maybe one off day because of a *stupid*—

His phone buzzed.

Rozanov: I know. I still win

Shane threw it into the passenger seat and drove home.

His apartment was exactly as he'd left it that morning—clean, quiet, everything in its place. He dropped his bag by the door, toed off his shoes, and went through the motions: wash hands, change, and plate the food he'd prepped the night before. The chicken, rice, and vegetables were all measured, portioned, and precise.

At the island, fork in hand, he took a bite.

Chewed. Swallowed. Took another.

It tasted the same as it always did. It should have been fine, should have been good, even. It was exactly what his body needed after a game, perfectly balanced by his nutritionist.

Shane stared down at the plate.

Something was off.

He took another bite anyway, forcing himself to keep pace, to finish what he started because that's what he always did, no deviations, no excuses—

The fork paused halfway to his mouth.

“Shit.” The word slipped out, quiet in the empty apartment.

He set the fork down slowly, a familiar tightness creeping into his chest, different from the adrenaline of a game, sharper, harder to pin down.

He didn't ask. He'd left the rink without even asking.

Shane pushed his plate away, appetite gone in an instant as he reached for his phone. The messages were still open.

Rozanov: I know. I still win

His thumb hovered over the screen.

This was unnecessary. The surgery had gone fine, the kitten was fine, he didn't need to fuss or worry about an animal he wasn't going to keep anyway. This was all temporary and if Dr. Rozanov had anything he needed to know, he'd tell him.

Shane set the phone down on the counter. He could leave it.

He didn't leave it.

Shane: He's really okay?

The reply came faster than it should have.

Rozanov: You are very needy for man who does not own kitten

Shane inhaled sharply through his nose.

Shane: I'm not keeping him, but I'm not heartless either

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Rozanov: He is awake

Rozanov: Very loud

Rozanov: So yes, he is fine

Shane's shoulders loosened before he could stop it. He stared at the screen, waiting for more, but nothing came.

Shane: So what happens next?

Rozanov: You pick him up in the morning

Shane: I'll have to go to the store first

Dragging a hand over his face, Shane reached for his notebook—the one he kept for game prep, schedules, anything that needed to be organized and contained. He flipped to a clean page, pen already moving.

Tomorrow – Pet Store

Food – high quality

Litter (non-clumping)

Box (shallow)

Carrier

Toys

Scratching post

His mind swirled with logistics, his eyes scanning over his apartment like it would give him the answers to questions he didn't even know how to ask. Shane pressed the tip of the pen to the paper.

Pick up Puck

The ink bled slightly where he held it too long.

His jaw tightened. This didn't fit. None of it did. Not with the road trip in three days, not with practice, not with—

Shane underlined the list.

Rozanov: We will be waiting

Rozanov: Try not to hit anything else on the way here

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

I am not a vet but I am heavily involved in local cat rescue. Puck is based off two of my past foster kittens (one for looks and general demeanor, the other for amputee reasons) and lots of this is grounded in personal experience. The hardest part is writing in the perspective of someone who doesn't have any of the knowledge I do.

That being said, I am unfamiliar with many small details in regards to hockey. I have done a fair amount of research while writing this, but if there are some glaring errors, please let me know!

Cat Facts for this chapter:

Amputation may seem like an extreme, but because kittens are extremely adaptable and the risk of infection and complications is high, it is often the best solution for fractures.

Panleukopenia is a very serious and deadly virus to cats, kittens especially. Also known as feline distemper, it is important to keep your cats up to date with vaccines to prevent them from contracting it. Kittens are most vulnerable to it and require multiple boosters from a young age to fully protect them. It can run rampant in shelter environments even with the best of precautions and PPE use, and some will either close intake or advise against the public bringing in stray animals for a period time during outbreaks if possible. Panleuk is often a rescuer's worst nightmare (it's definitely mine!).

Cats are experts at hiding their pain, likely due to instinct—keeping quiet even in times of pain and stress is a way to not attract predators in their vulnerable state. Kittens often “shut down” in pain and in fear, like Puck does once inside the clinic.

Chapter 2: Learning the Angle

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, welcome back! Your comments and kudos on the first chapter were all so lovely and appreciated. This chapter is dedicated to two of my oldest friends who, after I showed them a snippet of the first chapter, held out their hands and said more please <3

There are more Cat Facts at the end of this chapter (I won't be stopped) but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that if you live in the northern hemisphere and experience cold winters, kitten season (when kittens are born in these climates, roughly March to November but hahahaha ask a rescuer if that feels true anymore) is probably already in full swing and local rescues and shelters need your help! Volunteer, donate, adopt, follow them on social media and share their posts, whatever you can—it all makes a difference!

No content warnings for this chapter. Enjoy!

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

“I didn't know which size to get.”

Shane stood in the same small exam room he'd been in last time, the muffled sounds of a dog barking coming from the lobby. The waiting room had been a surprise that morning, with four dogs and half as many people, all watching him like they knew he didn't belong, like it was obvious he had no idea what he was doing. He held two hard-sided pet carriers—one small and blue, the other larger and gray—with a zippered mesh bag slung over his shoulder.

“The woman at the store said this would be fine,” he continued, holding up the smaller one, “but that he might grow out of it too quickly so the medium one was better.”

Rozanov pressed his knuckles to his mouth, not quite hiding the curve of a smile, like he was trying—and failing—not to enjoy this. His eyes flicked between the carriers and Shane before nodding at his shoulder. “And that one?”

“It was recommended by—a friend.”

He was not about to say that it was actually Sharon from some cat forum website that still looked like it belonged in 2005. Shane didn't even know that forums still existed

until last night.

“He will not outgrow it tomorrow,” Rozanov said.

Shane pressed his lips together. “I know. I saved the receipt.”

Rozanov stared at him for what felt like an eternity, Shane resisting the urge to fidget by tightening his grip on the carriers. “Of course you did,” the vet said. “Should I go over care instructions or did you google that, too?”

Shane frowned. “I didn’t google *everything*,” he muttered.

The stare only intensified, Rozanov tilting his head slightly to the side. Shane wanted to punch him.

Or leave. Or—

“Okay, fine. Yes. I looked up some stuff. What’s wrong with being prepared?”

“Like Boy Scout,” Rozanov teased, turning his attention to the piece of paper in front of him. “Okay. Cone must stay on at all times no matter how much he begs to get out,” he read quickly as his finger trailed over the words. “No running, jumping, playing for ten days. You have small room for him, yes?”

“Yes. My bathroom, it’s the smallest room I have.”

“You have tub?”

“No.”

“Good,” Rozanov said, and then without waiting: “Okay, give pain medication twice a day for ten days, monitor stitches for signs of infection. Any questions?”

Shane blinked. “Medication? Like a pill?”

“You value your fingers? Need them for not scoring goals?”

“Hey—”

“Is liquid,” Rozanov continued. “Use a syringe. I will show you since Google did not. Stay here, I will get Puck.”

Once he left, Shane felt like he could breathe again, which didn't even make sense. He set the carriers on the floor and picked up the paper left on the table. The instructions were simple, almost familiar after one too many web searches, but at the top of the page, Shane zeroed in under the clinic name.

Dr. Ilya Rozanov, DVM

Ilya. It felt like an itch in his brain that he couldn't reach, his eyes lingering on the name for too long. Shane shook his head. He must have seen it when he had searched for the clinic and simply didn't register it before.

He heard the tiny cries of the kitten growing louder before the door even opened again.

Puck screamed, his mouth gaping with each meow, a small pink hole in the black void of his face. He screamed like it was the only thing he was allowed to do, cradled close to Rozanov's chest, the aforementioned cone somehow bigger than the rest of him, swallowing what little shape he had.

"Yes, yes," Rozanov said to the kitten as he set him down on the exam table, "we know you have very big thoughts and feelings about everything."

Puck voiced his opinion on that, too.

"Is he—" Shane started, his hands moving toward Puck on their own volition before he pulled them back.

He looked smaller.

"I mean, he's not in pain right now, right?"

"No," Rozanov assured with a small huff of a laugh. "He is angry. Terrible haircut and cone, is very unfashionable," he said, checking to see that the tie was secure. Rozanov's gaze trailed up Shane's body. "You would understand."

Shane flushed. With anger again, he told himself. Nothing else.

Puck pawed at the cone. The fluff had been shaved away on his rump, the line of stitches visible on his hip. It was better this way, Shane reminded himself. It wasn't his fault.

And yet, the creep of guilt came anyway.

"Next dose is tonight," said Rozanov, tugging a small plastic bag from the pocket of his scrubs and holding it open so Shane could see inside. "Is already measured out in

syringes for you. Here—“ He produced another empty syringe from the same pocket.

His hands were steady when he held Puck's head, firm but careful, like he'd done it a thousand times. “You stick it in through side of mouth, behind canines. Make sure you are angling it toward side of tongue or else he will taste it too much, and then press. Okay?”

He had gone through the motions quickly, but Shane watched his fingers gently guide Puck into position, the way he leaned forward enough that the neckline of his scrubs gaped, how his curls dangled over his forehead.

“Okay.”

Rozanov gave him another one of those annoying assessing looks. “Show me,” he said, holding out the syringe.

Their fingers brushed as Shane took it. Something fluttered in his stomach, something warm and annoying and wrong—and annoyingly right.

He pulled out the plunger nearly all the way before pressing it back in to get a feel for it, finding barely any resistance. Shane reset the plunger and turned his attention to Puck.

Puck stood up, lifting his tail, the tip curled like a question mark. He took a stumbling step toward him, Shane reaching out automatically to steady him.

“He is okay,” Rozanov said before Shane could even ask. “Is the medication, not the leg.”

Shane nodded and rubbed his thumb over the kitten's forehead, twisting his wrist awkwardly to try to mimic what he'd seen, but Puck only squirmed backward.

He tried again, and Puck knocked the syringe out of his hand with the cone.

“Like this,” Rozanov said, coming around to his side of the table as Shane grabbed the syringe. He picked Puck up and turned him around. “Easier if he faces same direction as you, he cannot back away. Then one hand goes here—“ He moved one of Shane's hands to Puck's face, fingers under the kitten's chin. “—And keep your elbow tucked in so he cannot escape out the side. Then the medicine. You can do it, just commit to it.”

His brain stalled, but his heart didn't get the memo. That was the only explanation as to why his body froze but his pulse kicked into overdrive. He heard the words but couldn't

seem to follow the directions, to move his hands—

And then, low in his ear: “Hollander.”

Shane jerked and cleared his throat. “Right, yeah, makes sense.” Rozanov stepped back but it was barely enough, and Shane refused to look at him. He leaned over Puck, kept his elbows tucked to bracket the small body, and managed to get the syringe into his mouth on his first try.

“Easy,” Shane said, dropping the syringe and taking a giant step away like that proved something, and not because he needed distance before he did something more stupid.

When he looked up, Rozanov was looking back.

“See?” he said. “You learn.”

Puck let out another offended, scratchy meow. The cone wobbled with the effort, and Shane reached out to steady it. “Do you always use last names with clients?” he asked.

“Only the memorable ones.”

“Right. You probably don’t get many kittens with broken legs.”

“Mm, is not that. More that most people would not have stopped to help.”

That couldn’t have been right, Shane did what he assumed anyone would have done in that situation. Not that any of the other cars did, his mind supplied, but he was sure they would have, if he hadn’t. He didn’t want to think about what would have happened to Puck if he’d left.

“I’ll have to figure something out for next week,” Shane said, more to himself than anything. “We leave for a road trip in a couple days. I can probably have my parents take him—just until he’s healed up.”

Rozanov didn’t respond right away—instead just watching him again, that same assessing look, like he was lining something up in his head and deciding whether or not to say it.

“No,” Rozanov said finally.

Shane blinked. “No?”

“I will do it,” he said, like it was obvious. “Is easier.”

Shane let out a short, disbelieving breath. “You’ll—what? No. That’s—no, I can’t just leave him with you.”

Rozanov shrugged one shoulder. “Why not?”

“Because you’re—” Shane stopped himself. “You’re his vet.”

“Yes,” he said. “Which means I already know what I am doing.”

“That’s not the point,” Shane said, reaching down to pick up the smallest carrier and set it next to Puck. “I don’t even know you.”

Rozanov’s mouth twitched. “You know enough.”

His eyes snapped back to him and he shot, “I know that you’re kind of an asshole.”

“And yet, still the most knowledgeable.”

Shane exhaled sharply through his nose, dragging a hand back through his hair. “My parents will be fine,” he said. “It’s not a big deal.”

Rozanov’s gaze flicked down to Puck, then back up to Shane.

“He is post-surgery,” he said, more measured now, more professional and somehow softer. “He will need monitoring. Medication on time. Consistency.”

Puck let out another loud, complaining sound, shifting where he sat.

Rozanov reached out, adjusting the cone with practiced ease, slipping his fingers under it to smooth down Puck’s fluff. “He is already used to me,” he added, quieter. “Less stress.”

He hesitated. It would be easier, and logistically, it made sense. No need to drive two hours with a meowing kitten, no explaining instructions, no worrying about whether his parents were doing it right, but—

“I will send updates,” Rozanov continued, like he could see the exact point Shane was stuck on, even if that wasn’t the problem at all. “Photos, if you need.”

Shane huffed out a breath. “I don’t need photos.”

“Of course not,” Rozanov said, not sounding convinced at all.

He narrowed his eyes at him, as if that would help him figure out exactly why he was even considering this, when everything about Rozanov was the exact opposite of a good idea. He should say no.

He didn't.

"Just for the road trip," Shane said finally, the words coming out slower than he meant them to. "And then I'll take him back, just until he's better."

Rozanov nodded once, like the decision had already been made minutes ago. "Of course."

Shane frowned. "And I'm paying you."

A brow lifted. "Obviously."

"Right." He smoothed his hand down Puck's back, his butt rising when he got to his tail. "Okay. Fine. We'll—figure out details later."

"Mm," Rozanov said.

"So we're done here, right?"

"Yes. Svetlana will check you out. Here, let me help you."

Rozanov opened the carrier door and placed his hand on top of it while Shane guided Puck inside. If the cone amplified his meows before, it was nothing compared to the reverberation that the plastic shell caused. Shane grabbed the carriers while Rozanov grabbed the door.

The lobby was fuller now, two more small dogs with pointed ears barking at him and too many eyes glaring at him. "Are they all your patients?" Shane asked in a low voice.

"Of course, I am the only vet who works here."

Shane took a step into the lobby, looking over his shoulder. "Maybe you should have scheduled some of them yesterday."

Rozanov shook his head. "We were closed yesterday," he said with a wink, like that explained everything. "See you later, Hollander."

The door shut, the dogs barked, and Shane's mouth gaped.

Rose: omg SHANE

Rose: I want to smush my face into his face this isn't fair

He'd sent her a picture of Puck without thinking twice, with the caption *temporary houseguest*. When they'd broke up, it had been awkward yet inevitable, Rose looking like she wanted to say something different when she said she felt like maybe he'd rather be kissing someone else. It had been nearly three years and every time he thought about that night, he felt like he'd missed something, that there *wasn't* anyone else. In the end, he told himself it didn't matter, ignoring it in favor of practices and team building, and refused to acknowledge that maybe—

He and Rose were friends and it was the best thing that came out of losing his girlfriend. She was always the one he went to when he needed someone to hype him up, pull him out of his head, give him something else to focus on.

And right now, he needed that.

Shane set his phone down for a second and looked around the bathroom again, dragging in a breath as he got to work finishing the setup he'd been thinking about for longer than he'd care to admit.

The litter box slotted neatly into the corner. The food and water bowls went side by side, lined up evenly against the glass shower door. The cardboard scratcher the woman at the store had recommended fit behind the door almost perfectly.

He nudged it a few centimeters to the left anyway, then stepped back to look at the space as a whole.

Good. That should be enough.

Puck let out a small sound from inside the carrier, and Shane crouched down to let him out, his thoughts already starting to drift back.

What the fuck did he mean they were closed yesterday?

He shook his head and glanced down at his phone again.

Shane: Is that a good thing?

Rose: shut up he is so cute, I LOVE this for you

Shane huffed a quiet breath through his nose, something easing in his chest despite everything. She wasn't wrong—Puck was cute. Small, loud, and completely unaware of the chaos he was causing just by existing.

He didn't tell her he wasn't keeping him.

He'd tell her later.

For now, he set his phone face down and looked back at the room he'd just organized, like control over this small space might make everything else feel less uncertain.

The more he thought about it, the less the clinic situation made sense.

The door hadn't been locked, both Svetlana and Rozanov had been there, wearing their scrubs, uniforms, whatever they were called. And he was almost sure it had said open on the Maps app when he checked.

But the lobby was silent yesterday, and the phone never rang.

Shane picked his phone back up and, almost without thinking, opened the clinic's website again. The hours were still listed as open yesterday.

That didn't make sense. But then again, neither did Rozanov. It was probably nothing, probably something simple, like maybe animal clinics just... did that. Maybe he was grasping for straws that didn't exist, especially when he could just *ask* Rozanov instead of dwelling.

Puck let out a small, impatient sound from where he was wobbling on the floor, dragging Shane's attention back.

"Yeah," Shane muttered, glancing down. "Me too, buddy."

Not that Puck seemed especially concerned with any of it. He wobbled a few uncertain steps, paused, then settled himself again on the tile like he was testing the space and deciding it was acceptable.

Shane stayed where he was for a moment longer than necessary, watching him, like if he looked away something might happen.

Nothing did.

After a few seconds, he exhaled and pushed himself up to stand. His hand settled on the doorknob before he turned to look back at Puck.

He moved to the sink cabinet and grabbed a hand towel, folding it in half and carefully laying it down on the floor. Puck gave a tiny protest of a meow as he picked him up to place him on top of it.

Shane tried his best not to check on him too much after that, the instructions clear about Puck needing rest and every time he even approached the door, the meows from within grew excited. If he checked once every hour—okay, half hour—it was purely because he was making sure the cone was still on and Puck hadn't gotten into any trouble while unattended, that's all.

Mostly.

Three days off from games was rare, and when he had initially seen it on the schedule this year, he hated it just as much as he always did—not because it threw him off his game, he was too good of a player for that, but because it left him time alone and that, he'd learned, was worse. His teammates always cheered and planned time with their families or golf outings, but Shane didn't play.

But now he had Puck—if only for a while, if only for these three days and then he'd be gone for a week. And then... then Puck would be out of the cone and ready to go.

He didn't think about the *where* aspect.

The hours ticked by, Shane trying to stick to his schedule. He knew he should check in on the team's group chat, confirm the flight schedule with management and make sure the

car service to the airport was booked (even though the confirmation email was sitting in his inbox like it had been since he set things up last week), but when he opened his messages, Rozanov's name drew his attention.

He texted Rose instead.

Shane: His name is Puck

Rose: I can't wait to meet him!!!

He also didn't tell her that he sat with Puck for almost an hour before he realized what time it was, or that he wouldn't go on his run because he worried that Puck would be lonely, or that he met someone.

Because he didn't. Not like that.

By early evening, Puck had mostly settled.

Not completely—there were still intermittent, scratchy little complaints, like he was filing formal grievances with the universe—but the frantic edge from earlier dulled into something quieter and much more manageable.

Shane told himself that was a good sign.

He cracked open the door anyway, just wide enough to stick his head in and saw Puck attempt a slow, awkward turn on the towel. The cone bumped softly against the floor with each movement, uncoordinated and clumsy in a way that made something in Shane's chest tighten.

"You're fine," he said, because that was the logical conclusion. "This is fine."

Puck blinked at him.

Shane nodded once, like that settled it, and pulled the door closed, forcing himself to walk away.

The yoga mat was already laid out in the living room, arranged in a way that it hadn't been in years. The walls of his home gym had been soundproofed years ago after some neighbors complained, though, and this seemed like the safer option. Just in case. Shane stepped onto it, rolling his shoulders once before moving into the first stretch, closing his eyes and focusing on his breathing, clearing his mind—

A muffled meow cut through the apartment.

Shane held the position and counted to three. He peeked an eye open.

“He’s fine,” he said out loud, like that would make it more true. “He’s just adjusting.”

Another meow, louder this time.

Shane stared at the wall.

“...Fuck.”

He stepped off the mat and padded back to the bathroom. This time, he stopped outside the door and leaned his ear close. There was a faint shuffle, the soft scrape of plastic against tile, and finally, silence.

See? He was fine.

Shane went back to the mat.

The downward dog always stretched his back in the right places. He held, breathed in for four, out for—

A sharp, indignant yell cut through the quiet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” He lasted maybe five more seconds this time before standing up and stepping off the mat again.

He pushed the door open a few inches and peered inside. Puck hadn't moved much, still laying on the towel, still small, and still watching, like it couldn't have possibly been him who was disrupting the peace.

Shane exhaled slowly. “You’re okay,” he told him. “You’re literally okay.”

Puck blinked.

Shane stood there a second longer than necessary, then closed the door and returned to the living room.

There clearly wasn’t any relaxation to be had, so he sat down on the mat and grabbed his phone. Messages still waited—team chat, reminders, things he should be answering—but his thumb hovered, then moved somewhere else.

Rozanov.

Shane’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t need to know. He didn’t need to be thinking about him—that was even more useless than the yoga mat he should move back into its spot. Maybe he’d watch something on TV instead, find something brainless or absorbing and then he definitely wouldn’t be thinking about him.

The phone screen was bright in his hand. He exited out of the messages and opened the browser.

Ilya Rozanov vet Montreal

The results loaded quickly.

The same *Happy Tails* website from before, reviews, and a picture of Rozanov with a smile that caused the corners of his eyes to crinkle and once again those stupid curls falling into his face like he—

Shane stopped scrolling. That wasn’t even close to relevant.

From down the hall, a soft thump echoed, followed by a frustrated little noise. Shane was moving before he could think about it.

He pushed the door open wider this time. “Hey—”

Puck had managed to get himself under the towel, the terry cloth catching on the edges of the cone, so that when he shook his head back and forth the towel whipped along with it, but not off.

“Okay, no,” Shane said immediately, bending down to disentangle the towel, sliding a hand under Puck’s chest to steady him while he uncovered his face. “You can’t do that.”

Puck meowed, quieter now but no less offended.

“Yeah, I know,” Shane muttered, readjusting the towel and setting him back in the center. “Everything is terrible. Your life is ruined. I get it.”

The cone knocked lightly against his wrist.

Shane hesitated, then let his fingers rest there, just enough to keep it from wobbling. Then, because apparently that wasn’t enough, he adjusted the edge of the cone by a fraction of an inch like he had seen Rozanov do that morning.

He stayed there, long enough to notice the rise and fall of Puck’s sides, quick but steady; long enough to adjust the towel again even though it didn’t need adjusting; long enough that leaving started to feel—

Unnecessary.

Shane cleared his throat and pushed himself to his feet. “I have stuff to do,” he said, like that required justification. “So just—stay there.”

Puck did not respond.

Shane pulled the door closed again.

This was getting ridiculous.

He had things to do.

He had a schedule.

He had—

Puck.

Puck did not like the medicine, that much became immediately, aggressively clear.

“Okay,” Shane said, crouched on the bathroom floor, one knee already going numb against the tile. “Just like earlier, okay? We’re just—just going to—”

Puck twisted in his grip, the cone bumping awkwardly into Shane’s wrist as he tried to angle the syringe the way he had done so easily in the clinic.

“Hold still,” he muttered.

Puck did not hold still.

Shane adjusted his grip, fingers tightening just slightly around the tiny jaw. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, more defensive than reassuring. “This is literally to help you.”

Puck opened his mouth and Shane took the opportunity, pressing the plunger. It didn’t matter that Puck immediately jerked his head to the side, knocking the syringe clean from his hand, it skittering across the floor, or that he wiggled from Shane’s grasp and ran behind the toilet—a goal was a goal, even if it wasn’t on the ice. “See? We got this.”

If Shane felt just as proud of himself as he did during a game, well, frankly he deserved it. Hollander: 1.

“Come out, little dude. It’s all done.”

When Puck didn’t emerge, Shane crawled over to the toilet, reached around to get his hand around his torso and—

“Oh shit—”

Puck was foaming at the mouth.

Thick strings of saliva gathered at the edges of his mouth, white and frothy, and dripping down onto the cone.

Shane froze, holding Puck aloft.

“...No.”

Puck smacked his tongue against his teeth, making a face like he’d just licked battery acid, foam bubbling with each offended, furious noise.

“No, no, no—” Shane set the syringe down blindly, grabbing for a towel instead. “Hey—hey—what is that? What is that?”

The foam kept coming.

“Oh my god.”

Shane wiped at Puck’s mouth, which somehow made it worse, the kitten shaking his head, spreading saliva everywhere. The cone caught most of it, but not all.

Not the splatter that landed on his cheek.

“This is not—this was not in the instructions,” Shane said, heart kicking up hard in his chest, tossing the spit covered towel up into the sink. “You’re fine. You’re *fine*. This is fine.”

Puck made a noise that strongly suggested it was not.

Shane grabbed his phone with his newly free hand, nearly dropping it in the process. His thumb swiped across the screen, and it opened on the page of his last search.

Great. Even his phone was mocking him now.

Kitten foaming at mouth, he typed anyway.

The results loaded instantly.

Poisoning

Toxic ingestion

Seizures

Neurological symptoms

“What the fuck,” Shane breathed.

He backed out, typing again.

Cat drooling after medication normal?

Bitter taste

Hypersalivation

Rarely something serious

Temporary

Temporary. That sounded better, there was no need to panic or think that anything else was wrong. It's not like he was rabid or anything—

Then Puck gagged and shook his head. The splatter landed in his hair this time.

Shane panicked.

“Okay,” he said, setting Puck down and already hitting the call button before he could think better of it. “Okay, we’re just going to—yeah. No. I’m calling.”

The line rang once, twice.

“Hello?”

“I think he’s dying,” he blurted. In front of him, Puck smacked his lips and yowled.

“...Mr. Hollander.”

“He’s foaming,” Shane said quickly, words tripping over each other. “Like actually foaming, there’s—there’s so much saliva, I did the thing with the medicine, but he moved and now it’s everywhere and what if he’s got fucking *rabies*—”

“Is he breathing?”

“Yes, obviously he’s breathing—he’s screaming—”

“Good,” Rozanov said, far too calm. “Then he is not dying.”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Did you angle the syringe properly?”

“I—yes—I think so—no—” Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. “I said he moved, but that was after.”

“Mm,” Rozanov hummed. “And now he is drooling.”

“He is foaming,” Shane snapped. “This is *not* normal.”

“It is normal,” Rozanov said. “Medication tastes bad. Very bitter. Cats respond dramatically.”

Puck punctuated that with another offended gag.

Shane looked down at him, at the mess of saliva clinging to the cone, the tiny furious face.

“This is dramatic?”

“Yes.”

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it, and Puck did the same, only wider and with more tongue.

“You’re sure.”

“I am sure.”

A few seconds went by where Shane stared at Puck, watching a string of drool drip from the cone and slowly stretch to the floor.

And then, a muffled sound came from his phone.

Shane narrowed his eyes. “Are you—”

The muffled sound turned into a tiny snort.

“Are you laughing?”

“No.”

“You are laughing.”

“I am not—” another break, a sharp exhale that definitely wasn’t contained this time, “I am being very professional right now.”

“You’re laughing,” Shane said, incredulous. “My kitten is, he’s *foaming at the mouth* ___”

“Because you gave him medicine incorrectly,” Rozanov cut in, voice strained now, something like amusement bleeding through despite him. “And now he is very mad about it.”

“This is not funny,” Shane said, even as he fell onto his ass and hung his head between his bent knees.

On the other end, Rozanov let out an unmistakable string of laughter, not even trying to hide it anymore. “He will be fine,” he said, composure snapping back into place, though not entirely. “Next time, slower. And angle properly.”

Puck made a smaller sound now, less frantic, though his expression remained deeply betrayed.

Shane wiped at his cheek and his fingers came away wet. “He hates me.”

“He will recover,” Rozanov said dryly.

Tension began bleeding out of his shoulders in slow increments, Shane huffing out a small breath along with it. “Maybe he will, but I won’t. You could have warned me.”

“I did,” Rozanov replied. “Not my fault if you did not listen.”

“That’s not—” Shane stopped, because that was... not entirely inaccurate. “You could have been more explicit.”

“I will make note for next time,” he said.

Shane rolled his eyes, not that Rozanov would see it. His hands were still shaking, even if that felt stupid now. Even if, despite everything, for some reason he didn’t feel stupid at all.

“He’s really okay?” Shane asked, softer.

“Yes.”

Shane took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Rozanov was quiet for a moment, Shane only hearing faint movement in the background. His heart rate slowed in increments.

“Hollander?”

“Yeah?”

“Try not to poison him again.”

The line clicked dead before Shane could respond.

Shane stared at his phone for a second, like it might light up again, then let out a sharp breath that almost bordered on a laugh when it didn't.

"Unbelievable," he muttered.

He let his body fall backward onto the cool tile floor, the phone clattering as it fell out of his hand, his eyes falling shut.

The first light press of a paw came soon after, followed by more as Puck climbed up onto his chest. And then, a deep rumbling sound that vibrated all the way through to his skin.

Puck purred and settled down, wedging himself under Shane's chin.

Shane smiled. "We're gonna be okay."

Chapter End Notes

Cat Facts:

Hard-sided carriers are more secure, but for docile cats who don't freak out or try to claw or brute force their way out, a soft-sided one is okay. Always make sure that doors are firmly closed on any carrier, because where there is a cat, there is a way.

Shout out to oldschool cat forums for still being there to this day, especially when I fostered a cat I (lovingly) nicknamed Miss Pooperson and had to figure out how to give this cat the most foul tasting medicine on the market. Long story short, I did far too much math and painstakingly scooped powder into tiny gelatin capsules to turn it into pills. It worked, but my sanity barely survived.

Speaking of, some cats take meds like champs or with a reasonable amount of protest, while others act like you are not only poisoning them but every single one of their ancestors and absolutely will foam at the mouth. It's a surprise every time.

Chapter 3: Defensive Breakdown

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, thanks for being here <3

Shoutout to everyone in the trenches right now in animal rescue, this one is especially for you.

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

Shane did not sleep well.

That was generous, actually. He slept like shit.

It came in fragments, shallow stretches that started and ended with the sense that something was wrong, even if his half-awake mind could never fully settle on what.

Aside from the kitten in his bathroom, of course.

At some point around 3 a.m., he had gotten up to check on Puck.

At 4:12, he had done it again.

At 5:03, he had stood outside the bathroom door for a full thirty seconds, hand holding the door knob, before turning around and going back to his bed. Twice, Puck had been curled up in a ball, a fluffy croissant with a cone, and Shane told himself he didn't need to see it a third time. Puck needed rest, not more of his hovering.

Besides, Shane needed rest, too.

It was a mistake.

At 7:00, his alarm went off.

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, one arm draped over his eyes, the other resting across his stomach.

Puck's meow echoed louder than should have been possible.

Shane turned his head slightly toward the bathroom door, finding that it was still closed, at least, and groaned. "Yeah, yeah. I'm up."

He pushed himself out of bed and immediately regretted it. Everything felt impossibly heavy, his arms and his legs cinderblocks of flesh, and his head kept trying to tip to one side if he didn't keep focus. Not even a rough game left him like this, foggy and slow and just... so tired.

Still, he forced his body to comply and his mind to boot up. He made his way to the bathroom, already mentally running through the morning: feed Puck, give medication, eat breakfast, and try to pretend this was normal.

He opened the door.

And stopped.

“No.”

He stepped one foot inside.

“No. No no no no.”

Puck sat in the middle of the bathroom floor, cone tilted slightly to one side, looking entirely unbothered by the state of his surroundings.

Shane did not look at Puck first.

He looked at the floor. Then he closed his eyes. Then he opened them again, as if that would change anything.

It did not.

Food was scattered across the floor, reaching every corner. A small pile lay congealed in a puddle of water, the kibble soggy and bloated and mush, the water seeping outward in the grout lines. Both bowls were completely overturned and definitely not where he had left them.

Litter dotted the floor, small specks of gray intermixed among the brown kibble and the brown—

“Okay,” Shane said slowly, very carefully. “Okay. This is—this is fine.”

He took another very careful step in, closing the door behind him, and his nose caught up to his eyes.

It was not fine. There was poop. Poop everywhere.

His white bathroom looked like a shitty Jackson Pollock. Literally. It was splattered up the walls, shaped like paw prints on the floor, a fucking *trail* of it smeared on the shower door, a brushstroke of brown backlit through the glass.

“What the absolute fuck,” he said, more to himself than to Puck, his voice flattening as his brain attempted to process and reject the information simultaneously. He had survived slams, collisions, concussions—and yet he was being bested by a three-legged kitten with gastrointestinal issues.

Puck meowed and wobbled closer, his tail up and curved, the fluff of it suspiciously clumped together.

Shane pointed at him. “Don’t.”

Puck did not appear concerned and knocked the cone against his ankle.

Shane flattened himself against the door, as if that would save him from the smear, but it was too late. It was on the rim of the cone, too. Something inside him died as he looked down at his bare skin that was no longer so.

He clamped his hand over his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut, as though none of this existed if he couldn’t see it. “This is not,” he said, gesturing blindly, “what was supposed to happen.”

Puck purred and pawed at his shin.

Shane exhaled sharply through his nose.

“Okay. Okay. We can fix this.”

He straightened his shoulders and dropped his hands to his hips. He could do this, it wasn’t any worse than some of the things he’d smelled in the locker rooms, it was just a little mess and it was contained. It just needed a list.

Gloves—no, he didn’t have gloves. He’d just wash his hands a few hundred times, and hop in the shower after. Paper towels, cleaning supplies, and a garbage bag—he had plenty in the kitchen. This was manageable. This was—

He looked at the floor again.

“...Fucking gross,” he amended.

Puck yelled at him and moved toward where his food bowl had been, immediately stepping into the mess.

Shane froze.

Puck paused, lifting his paw in what Shane assumed was an attempt to shake it off, but *someone* forgot he was missing a leg and fell over instead, directly into the puddle.

“Thanks, buddy,” Shane said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Super helpful.”

Puck, his fur now damp and scraggly, meowed again, then turned in a small circle, cone bumping lightly against the shower door.

Shane watched him for a second, then looked back at the floor. “Okay,” he said, more firmly this time. “We are establishing zones. This is the offensive zone.” He pointed to the mess. “And you—” He pointed at Puck “—are on defense. You stay there.”

Puck tilted his head to the side.

Shane nodded once, as if that settled it.

“Good. Yes. Cooperation.”

He slipped out of the room and ran to the kitchen, immediately starting to open cabinets, pulling out paper towels, garbage bags, disinfectant—moving with purpose now, because if he stopped to think about it too much, he was going to lose momentum.

“This is fine,” he muttered again. “This is exactly why there are protocols.”

He paused. “Not that there are protocols for this specifically,” he added quickly. “But general protocols. For cleaning, maintenance.” He tucked the paper towels under his arm. “Hygiene.”

From the bathroom, Puck let out a whiny, needy noise.

Shane glanced over his shoulder and booked it back, making a detour to his bedroom for his phone, just in case.

Puck was definitely not where he had left him. “Hey,” Shane said, pointing again, this time with the spray bottle in hand. “Offside!”

Shane held his gaze for a moment, and Puck sat down.

“Good enough.”

Before he could talk himself out of it, he took a quick photo of the mess and sent it to Rozanov with a *um??*

Then, finally, he started cleaning.

He started with Puck, holding his paws under the faucet, then his tail, making sure to keep the stitches dry while also de-crustifying his fur. Getting the cone clean was a little trickier, only because any time a stray drop of water landed on his face, Puck shook his head like he was being waterboarded.

“Dont give me that look,” he told him, wiping down the rim with a paper towel. “You did this to yourself.”

Once Puck’s body was poop-free and looking a little like a drowned rat, the real work began.

It was not elegant, sopping up water and mush and feces, wet litter creating dark streaks he had to go over again and again. Still, it was methodical. The less he thought about what he was actually cleaning and the more he focused on efficiency, the better. If he had to stop every so often to threaten to move Puck to the penalty box, well, some things couldn’t be helped.

By the time he finished, the bathroom was once again recognizable as a bathroom, the bowls were returned to their rightful place, and the litterbox was scooped. He stood back, inspecting his work with narrowed eyes, then nodded to himself. Hollander: 2.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s better.”

Puck meowed behind him. He traced a finger over Puck’s damp fur, thinking how stubbornly alive he was—and a little proud of both of them.

His phone buzzed against his thigh.

Rozanov: That would be the intestinal worms

Shane: The WHAT
Shane: He has WORMS????

Rozanov: Not anymore. They are dead now.

Rozanov: Did you not read paperwork?

Nevermind. Shane was going to fucking lose it.

“‘Did you not read paperwork,’ of course I read the paperwork,” he muttered to himself, pouring a rare but very much needed cup of coffee while his hair air-dried. The medicine had gone smoother this time, at least in terms of saliva, but Puck still managed to swipe at his hand once, a fine red line of a scratch around the edge of his palm.

He held the steaming mug to his lips as he rifled through the sheets of paper on the island. “I have done nothing but read the paperwork,” he said, flipping the pages. Aftercare instructions, aftercare instructions, take home medication details, itemized list of services...

Shane stopped. There, nestled between anesthesia and a rabies vaccine, was *Dewormer - Pyrantel Pamoate*.

His jaw clenched. “Doesn’t say anything about fucking—worm shit diarrhea!”

It wasn’t enough that Shane had spent entirely too many hours looking up kitten care, that he compiled a list of the highest rated kitten foods, or that he prepped for a kitten that he wasn’t even going to—

For the first time in his life, he had no idea what he was doing. At all.

The first few sips of coffee, however, were a godsend. After that fucking disaster of a wake-up call, he needed to get back on track, and even if it was just a placebo, he felt his body settling, his mind recentering.

It was time to get to work.

A clatter came from the bathroom. Shane took a deep breath and set his mug down.

Almost time.

Once again, Shane opened the door to find the food bowl overturned. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

Puck wobbled over and yelled up at him.

“Nope. We are not doing this again,” he said, retreating back into the kitchen and heading straight for his gear bag that sat by the front door.

He was going to fix this.

The first thing he did was scoop as much kibble as possible back into the bowl. Then he laid down strip after strip of hockey tape over the bowl’s rim and onto the floor until when he wiggled the bowl, it didn’t move. He did the same to the water dish for good measure.

“There.” Shane stood, and Puck yelled at him again. He reached down to scoop the kitten up and hold him against his shoulder. “I have things to do today so you got to be good, okay buddy?”

The cone knocked against his neck, Puck’s purrs loud and incessant in his ear. It should have been annoying, or too much, but Shane smiled and stroked a hand over his fur.

“I’ll be back later,” he said to Puck, setting him down and giving his chin a small scratch. He tested the tape, nudging each bowl one more time for good measure, and slipped out the door.

“You ready? Toothbrush, deodorant all packed?”

“Mom, I’ve been doing this for ten years,” Shane said into the phone, dropping a bag of almonds into his basket. “You don’t have to remind me every time.”

“I know, but at this point it’s tradition. Remember that time you forgot your mouthguard and—“

“I was *seventeen*—“

“Just let me pretend that you still need me.”

Shane heard the smile in her voice and felt one of his own growing. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll come for dinner when we get back, okay?”

“Just let us know,” she said. Shane heard shuffling in the background. “Dad says hi and good luck! We love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

He was still smiling as he headed to check out. Shane loved his parents, even when his mom couldn’t resist trying to mother him, or maybe because she couldn’t resist. She still emailed him dates for photoshoots and meeting reminders despite the fact that those were synced to his phone calendar, and recipes to try that he rarely did. But she was always in his corner—both of them were—and when everyone else was busy or unavailable, Shane knew he could always call her, too.

It had been enough, he told himself. He had hockey and his teammates and his parents. It was more than enough.

Rozanov: Did you survive?

Shane rolled his eyes and didn’t bother answering, pulling out of the parking lot.

The rest of his errands were easy. As he was pulling back into his driveway, Theriault called him with updated flight information—they were taking off an hour earlier now—and he spent a few minutes relaying the information in the group chat, watching and waiting from the driver’s seat as his teammates read the message.

A separate notification popped up instead.

Rozanov: Hollander.

Shane unloaded his bags and grabbed the container of cat treats he'd impulsively put into his basket.

Shane: I'm fine. We're fine.

The treats rattled as he moved, and when Puck's eager meows started up behind the closed door, Shane found himself excited.

"I got you something," he said as he plopped himself onto the floor. The bowls remained upright, the tape holding exactly as intended, and if there was a little litter scattered near the box, that was still a clear improvement.

Puck climbed onto his lap and meowed some more as Shane opened the container.

"Here." He shook a couple into his hand.

It was a little awkward, Puck seemingly struggling to maneuver the cone so he could reach the treats, but the crunch that eventually came sounded like success.

The rest of the day didn't demand much from him which was, he reminded himself, exactly the point.

Between checking messages, packing his suitcase, and going through the motions of obligations he didn't need to think too hard about, Shane drifted in and out of the same small loop—desk, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom—each pass ending with a quick check on Puck, each check confirming the same thing: bowls in place, poop scooped, kitten present.

And more importantly, clean.

By the fourth time he caught himself doing it, he stopped pretending it was just cleanliness that brought him inside.

He adjusted small things when he needed to, refilling the water dish and rearranging the towel, running his hand over Puck in greeting and goodbye, but he was unfairly soft and only once did Shane give in to the urge to do exactly as Rose said and brush his cheek against it. And if he closed his eyes and just listened to Puck's rumbling purrs for a little longer than necessary, well. Shane figured he earned the moment of peace.

Even administering the pain medication felt easier now. Puck still didn't like it, but Shane kept his grip firm, his aim true, and they got through it with minimal fuss.

Or maybe just minimal mess.

Back on the floor, Shane waited for Puck to stop being sulky and join him, patting his lap. "Well come on, I know you want to."

All Shane saw next was a blur of black accompanied by the quick rhythmic scratching of claws on tile.

Puck zoomed from one side of the bathroom to the other, colliding into the litter box and fucking *parkouring* off it. He fell over once, a soft thud sounding as his tiny body hit the floor, before he got up and arched his back, staring at Shane.

"What," Shane said, his jaw dropping, "the *fuck*."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, as Puck charged him then, launching his body onto Shane's legs but not stopping—he hooked his claws into his shirt, hoisting himself up like a furry grappling hook one needleprick at a time, until he came to a stop on Shane's shoulder.

"Ow, you little—you're supposed to be calm, this is *not* calm!"

In response, Puck dug his claws into his skin.

"No—hey, watch it!" The rim of the cone bashed against his skull and Shane tried to tilt his head away while blindly reaching for the tiny terrorist. "How can you even—you only have *three legs*, this shouldn't even be possible—ah!"

Those were *teeth* on his earlobe.

"Not cool, dude," he gritted his teeth. Puck's claws dragged against his skin as Shane pulled him off, not that Puck seemed to notice—he hopped away the moment his paws touched the ground.

Shane was reaching for his phone as Puck jumped into the litter box.

Shane: He's possessed.

Rozanov: Explain

Shane: He just climbed me like a tree and bit my ear.

Rozanov: And?

Shane: What do you mean and? He BIT me.

Rozanov: He is bored. Trying to make you less boring

Shane: The instructions said no playing.

Rozanov: Seems he found a way

Shane: How do I get him to stop?

Rozanov: You don't. Keep eye on stitches and do not worry so much

Rozanov: Means he likes you. Is comfortable. Happy

Shane stilled, his eyes lingering on the screen. There was probably blood congealing under his shirt and Puck left a trail of wet paw prints across the room, turning gray wherever they mixed with litter, but...

He lifted his head and looked at the kitten. Puck batted a stray piece of kibble along the edge of the toilet until it disappeared behind it.

Shane smiled, leaning his head back against the door.

Rozanov: Bring the gremlin to the clinic before opening tomorrow morning. Around 8

Rozanov: Only one carrier this time

“I know, you hate the carrier, the whole building knows you hate your carrier,” Shane told Puck as he opened the door to the underground garage. He thought maybe the mesh one would have been better, maybe Puck was just morally opposed to more plastic, but the echoing high-pitched kitten screams seemed to indicate otherwise.

It had taken him too long that morning to get going. Not that they would be late, Shane made sure of that, but more that when it came time to get Puck in his carrier he had been purring on Shane’s lap for twenty minutes because he just... didn’t want to disturb him. There had been no time for coffee, no shower, and only a quick rinse of mouthwash before they were out the door. It was fine, Shane just wouldn’t talk.

He’d packed up the medication and cat food, and went back and forth between untaping the bowls and packing those, too. Shane left them behind, stupidly hoping that Rozanov would suffer the same disasters.

Before they left, Shane picked up the towel from the floor, unzipped the carrier just enough, and shoved it inside. Cats liked familiar scents, that was all. He’d already decided against bringing one of his tshirts, that would have been ridiculous.

He’d thought about it, though.

“Remember what I told you,” he said, placing Puck in the passenger seat. “Shit *all* over his place, okay? I don’t want to hear that you’ve been a perfect angel when he deserves retribution.”

Puck screamed but it was hard to tell if it was in agreement. Shane decided to assume so.

The drive felt shorter than it should have, even with Puck’s running commentary. He kept one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the carrier, fingers curled loosely around the handle as if that did anything at all. Maybe he should have buckled him in.

“Relax,” he muttered. “You’re fine.”

Puck apparently did not agree and let out a string of yowls that Shane was certain the car behind him heard, even with all the windows rolled up.

Shane huffed out a breath that might have been a laugh any other day. “Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

At a red light, he glanced over. Puck was pressed up against the mesh, his head a vaguely circle shaped void in a ring of white, two thin yellow circles for eyes amongst

the black. Shane pressed his hand against the mesh, even if he couldn't run his finger over the bridge of his nose like he wanted to.

A car honked behind him, the light turning green. "Sorry," he said with a wave to his rearview mirror, and pulled forward.

When they arrived, Shane parked in front, just like the first time, and leaned back into his seat. The clinic looked exactly the same and here he was, again, with the unknown looming ahead. It didn't matter that it was planned this time, that they had to go in, it still felt... annoying. Obnoxious, even, that he had to do this in the first place.

Maybe... maybe Puck could fit into his luggage. Pets flew all the time, right? And he'd set up the hotel bathrooms just like he did at home, and then he'd know that Puck was safe and he wouldn't have to ask—*wait* for Rozanov to send updates.

Shane dragged a hand over his face. He really shouldn't have skipped his coffee.

"Here we go."

It took a little finagling, the carrier in one hand and the bag of supplies in the other, locking his car by pressing the button with his chin, but Shane got them to the door and pulled.

It was locked.

Puck was quiet now, right when Shane could have used the decibels, and he pulled again, harder this time, the door rattling in its frame.

Setting the bag of supplies on the ground, he peered through the glass, holding his hand above his eyes to shield the light and see inside. At first he couldn't see anything—no patients, no Svetlana, no lights on in the lobby. He knocked on the glass.

Rozanov appeared and came toward the door, holding one hand up as if checking the time while the other—

"Are you eating a fucking Danish?" Shane said the moment the door opened, picking up the bag and practically pushing his way inside.

Rozanov shrugged. "You are early, I am hungry."

"I'm not early. It's—" Shane glanced around for a clock which didn't seem to exist. He was about to grab his phone when Rozanov interrupted him.

“7:58. Like I said, early.”

“You said around 8.”

“Which means after 8,” Rozanov said, making a gesture with his hand as if to reinforce his argument.

“No it doesn’t.”

“Pretty sure it does. Come.” Rozanov took another bite of his Danish, leaving a trail of crumbs as he walked.

“That’s not sanitary,” Shane commented in a manner that was completely dignified and not at all like his day was already going from bad to worse.

“My patients will clean it up.”

Shane opened his mouth to speak, but Puck beat him to it.

“Oh good, he is still alive,” Rozanov said, leading them not into the exam room that Shane expected, but through a door labeled ‘Employees Only.’

The space was large and impossibly bright compared to the darkened lobby, with multiple stainless steel tables and a row of cages that lined the back wall, ranging from smaller sizes that still would have been plenty enough room for Puck to large ones that Shane could have fit inside. There were cabinets upon cabinets, multiple sinks, and the whole room smelled of disinfectant.

Rozanov stopped at one of the tables and turned toward Shane. Same stupid hair, same stupid eyes, and still looking at Shane like he had him all figured out.

Shane felt like he was being hunted.

“His food and meds,” Shane said, lifting the bag briefly before setting it down on the floor. “And Puck.” He held onto the carrier.

Rozanov nodded, but didn’t look away. “Everything go okay?”

Shane shot him a look. “Fine.”

If his voice was curt, Shane figured that Rozanov deserved that, too.

“So we get back on the twelfth,” Shane continued. “It will be late, but I can come get him if that’s all right. Otherwise, I’m off the next day.”

Rozanov hummed—Shane assumed it was his assent—and took another bite, finishing it off. There was a bit of custard filling stuck to the corner of his mouth, right next to dark stubble. If Shane stared, it was only because it was distracting, and if his cheeks grew hot when he watched Rozanov’s tongue dart out to lick at it...

The lips curled.

“Hollander,” Rozanov said, Shane’s eyes snapping up. “Are you going to give me Puck?”

“Right.”

Their hands brushed again when Shane passed the carrier over.

“I will send pictures.” Rozanov’s voice was too soft, and he stood too close or maybe Shane did this time, and *he* was the one being weird now.

Puck pawed at the mesh and Shane reached for him without thinking. Rozanov watched him for a beat too long, like he was waiting for something Shane hadn’t said and decided, for the first time, not to push.

Shane jerked his arm back.

“Okay,” Shane finally said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “So—yeah. I should go. I’ll text you when I’ve landed. Back here, that is.” He took a step back. It shouldn’t have been painful.

“Do you want to say goodbye?” Rozanov asked, leaning against the table where he’d set down Puck, fingers pinching the front zipper.

“What? No. I’m—it’s fine. I’m just gonna...”

Rozanov didn’t stop him. “Drive safe,” he said instead.

Shane nodded once, already moving toward the door. “Yeah. You too.”

That didn’t make any sense. He opened his mouth, then shut it again before anything came out.

And then, he left, through the lobby and out the front door.

The air was colder than it had been when he'd arrived, his car still right in front. For a second, he considered going back inside. Just to—what, exactly? Tell Rozanov Puck likes his shoulderblades rubbed? Check to make sure that he brought the right food?

Promise them he'd be back?

He exhaled sharply and shook his head. "Don't be stupid," he muttered, climbing into his car and starting the engine. "This is fine."

When he pulled away from the curb, Shane didn't look back, but when he reached over to the passenger seat, his hand still landed where the carrier had been.

Chapter End Notes

Cat Facts:

All cats have or have had worms or other parasites. Yes, even yours did. No, this is not up for debate. Luckily most are easily treated and that is done before adoption (if adopting through a shelter or rescue). Sometimes their poop isn't too bad through it all, and sometimes you wake up to the apocalyptic. Ask me how I know (or don't, unless you really want some gross stories).

(I could have also made this so much worse, but I have had enough protozoa experience in my life, I don't want it in my fic!)

The pain medication given to Puck is one commonly given to kittens, especially after spay/neuter surgery. Fun fact, it generally makes them go fucking BANANAS (more so than usual which is saying something because kittens are chaos gremlins on the regular) which is obviously just super great when the discharge paperwork says to keep them from rigorous activity. In rescue, we refer to them as bup gremlins. iykyk.

Chapter 4: Deflection

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for coming back to the Puck Hollander Show, you all are proving that the Venn diagram of cat lovers and Hollanov fans is just a circle <3

Minor content warning for casual homophobic language (in a locker room setting)

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

“Oh *shit*, get it Hollzy!”

Shane looked over his shoulder at J.J., shirt still tangled in his arms and eyebrows scrunched together because, what?

“Enjoyed those days off, eh?” J.J. continued, raising his own brows suggestively as he pulled down the hem of his Under Armour. “Come on, mon gars, tell us about her! Who is she?”

That only made the confusion worse. “What?”

“She went at you like a fucking wolverine,” J.J. said with a pointed look to Shane’s back. “Guess she didn’t want you having fun on the road, marking her territory like that.” Then, as if it would somehow make everything clearer, he winked.

Shane contorted his body, twisting his neck until he could see just the edge of one red line.

Oh.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. He reached behind him, brushing his fingers over the raised scratches, places where Puck’s claw had dug deeper and the scab thicker. “It’s not like that.”

“Shane has a kitten,” Hayden cut in from the bench next to Shane.

“That’s not—”

“A *sex* kitten.” J.J. fucking winked, again.

“A *real* kitten,” Hayden corrected. “Like an actual cat.”

“Wait, really?”

From his other side, Rowe snorted. “That’s kinda gay, Cap.”

Laughter broke out from some of the others, but Shane clenched his teeth, just once, and kept folding his shirt. He knew he should have said something—it had been two years since Scott Hunter came out and the league publicly promised change and inclusion, two years since Shane sat on his parents’ couch while something weird tried to shift into place in his brain before he shut it down.

Shane opened his mouth, ready to tell Rowe to knock it off, to give the weird feeling an outlet.

But Hayden got there first.

“Come on, really Rowe? Like you weren’t showing us all pictures of your guinea pig last week.”

“That’s different, we got Pierre for my son. Teaching him responsibility and all that.”

“Then why were you pointing out its whiskers and practically cooing over it?” Hayden asked with just the edge of a bite. He met Shane’s gaze and rolled his eyes.

Rowe grumbled. “We would’ve gotten a dog if Maddie wasn’t allergic. Cats are—” He waved a hand “—you know, for girls.”

The feeling shifted into irritation, and that was easier. Shane momentarily dropped his arms, his grip tight on his shirt, whipping it against the bench. “Jesus fucking Christ, Rowe.”

“I don’t know,” J.J. chimed in, “I had a cat as a kid, he was pretty cool. When did you get him, Shane?”

Shane hastily re-folded his shirt and tucked it into his bag. “I just found him. I’m not—he had a broken leg, I couldn’t just leave him there.”

“Because you’re a good guy,” Hayden said, standing and clapping his hand on Shane’s shoulder. When he winced, Hayden jerked back. “Shit, sorry!”

“It’s okay. I forgot that was there, too,” Shane said with a tight smile.

The chatter didn't die down as they got ready for the game, adjusting pads and taping sticks, but Shane stopped paying attention. He'd spent the entire flight purposefully not thinking about Puck, about Rozanov, about Puck in Rozanov's care, about Rozanov doing something ridiculous like... like *bonding* with Puck, and his not thinking about any of it had gone perfectly well, until now.

It was a terrible lie, but Shane did *not* think about that either.

"You know," Hayden said, drawing Shane's attention. "The twins have been asking for a cat for a while now. I keep telling them that they have to stop losing their stuffed animals before we bring a real one in, but maybe Rowe had a point—about responsibility."

A knot twisted in his stomach, sudden and uncomfortable, Shane keeping his eyes on lacing up his skates as he said, "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." He could hear the lightness in Hayden's tone. "And I mean, if it needs a home..."

"He," Shane said automatically. "Puck's a boy."

"Right, so maybe I could talk to Jackie and—well, it'd be an option, right?"

"Oh." The thought of Puck with Ruby and Jade should have been sweet, but it wasn't. "Yeah. Maybe." They would love him, the three of them could run the Pike house into the ground with their antics, and it would be... wrong. Shane cleared his throat. "He's, um. He's got to heal first before anything."

"For sure. How long does recovery for something like that take?"

"I don't know. Months, probably."

This time, the lie rolled off his tongue like it was natural, like he would lie a thousand times, again and again. Shane waited for guilt that never came.

"Makes sense," Hayden said with a nod.

Shane didn't check his phone right away.

Post-game always came with noise—voices overlapping in the locker room, the sharp hiss of the showers turning on one by one, and the dull hum of reporters something down the hall. They were likely waiting for him to come out and say something, and he'd get to it, the same way he always did. At this point, Shane just rotated through platitudes and basic answers, giving them a smile and a thanks at the end, and hardly had to think about it at all. Tonight he planned to go with some variation of teamwork making the dream work and how they loved playing in Minnesota because it was just as good as being at home.

He didn't rock the boat.

His gear sat heavy on his shoulders, damp and clinging, the adrenaline still buzzing under his skin with nowhere to go. Hayden and J.J. both grinned at him every time they caught his eye and Shane grinned back, trying to catch and ride that same high that came with a win.

When his phone buzzed again, a frisson of hope threaded itself into the rush and Shane's smile grew as he pulled it off the shelf of his stall.

Rozanov: You scored goal this time, you are improving

Rozanov: Even though your backhand is weak

Shane stared at the screen for a second, then scoffed under his breath. Of course.

He dropped onto the bench, thumbs already moving.

Shane: Wow

The reply came too fast, like he was ready and waiting, but Shane supposed he must have been.

Rozanov: Yes wow that they pay you so much but do not make you fix this

A laugh escaped through his nose and he dragged a hand over his sweaty hair. He needed to get moving, he was sure that they would be calling for him any minute now and he was still fully geared up.

And yet, he didn't put the phone down.

Shane: Are you always like this?

Rozanov: Correct? Yes. Always

Shane: You could just say congrats on the win like a normal person

Rozanov: Why would I do this

Shane leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, something pulling at the corner of his mouth despite himself.

Shane: To be nice?

Rozanov: But then you would be boring. More fun when you are angry

To his right, someone laughed, loud and sharp, but it felt distant, like it was happening in another room. His thumb hovered over the screen while he swiped his other hand across his forehead.

Shane: I'm not angry

The reply came slower this time, or maybe it just felt that way.

Rozanov: OK angry is too strong but I don't know better word in English

Shane: Irritated? Frustrated? Bothered?

Rozanov: Bothered yes

Shane's jaw tightened.

Shane: It's fun to bother me?

He didn't overthink that one, didn't give himself the chance. The answer came too quickly for that, too.

Rozanov: Very

Shane stared at it and for some unknown reason, he laughed. An actual laugh. "Yeah, I got that," he said, shaking his head as he stood.

Shane: How's Puck?

Rozanov: Good. Energetic and healing well

Setting his phone on the shelf of his stall, Shane peeled off his jersey and dropped it to the floor in a heap, and got to work on his shoulder and elbow pads. It was easy and routine, which for the first time, did absolutely nothing to distract him from his thoughts. By the time he was unlacing his skates, he wasn't sure if he was more concerned about their next game, Puck, or the fact that apparently Rozanov was watching every game and couldn't resist letting Shane know. Fucking bleacher coach.

So when his phone buzzed again, he might have reached for it a little too quickly, already prepped for whatever snarky comment was going to show up.

But instead, there was a photo.

Puck was curled up in the corner of a cage, the stupid cone tipped sideways, both front paws curled under. The towel Shane had shoved into the carrier was bunched beneath him, like he'd dragged it there himself, and his eyes were closed, finally still.

He stared at it and something in Shane's chest pulled tight, sharp and unexpected.

"Shane, you're up," Marcel, their PR manager, called from across the room.

"Yeah," he answered automatically.

He looked at the photo one more time, thumb hovering.

Then he saved it, quickly locking his phone and shoving it into his bag.

The next photo came in the morning.

Shane was brushing his teeth when his screen lit up on the vanity. The flight from Minneapolis into Nashville was short enough, but once they were in the air the seconds seemed to drag. He had tried to nap, to watch something mindless on the in-flight TV, but all Shane could think about was how much he wanted to get this trip over with and be home.

Toothbrush dangling from his mouth, he opened the message.

Puck was at the clinic, sitting on a round rainbow-colored bed that was somehow fluffier than he was. The photo was taken from behind the reception desk, the bed set on the floor, and someone was sitting in the chair in front of it—probably Svetlana, or maybe a different vet tech he hadn't met yet.

Shane zoomed in on Puck's face, the same two yellow eyes in a sea of black, and maybe it was only wishful thinking that there was a mischievous glint in them.

"He's not going to stay there," Shane said to himself, mumbling around the toothbrush. He typed the same words and sent it before going back to his task.

Teeth clean and face washed, he picked up his phone and carried it with him to the hotel bed.

Rozanov: He is in jail, do not worry

Before Shane could ask, Rozanov sent another photo from a few feet away, showing tall baby gates secured on both sides, spanning from the desk to the wall behind it.

Shane: What crimes did he commit?

The next text came with yet another photo, Rozanov holding something orange that looked like it had at one point been in one piece, but currently had loose threads and white stuffing falling out of it.

Rozanov: He murdered Mr. Carrot

Shane laughed, and for a moment wished that Rozanov could have heard it.

Shane: It was self-defense. I'm filing an appeal

Rozanov: You are lawyer now?

Shane: Yes, release my client from his unlawful imprisonment

The pause that followed was long enough that Shane noticed.

Rozanov: Or what?

Shane: Ask Mr. Carrot.

He deleted the winking emoji before sending, didn't even know why he added it in the first place.

Rozanov: Are you threatening me, Hollander?

Shane: Wouldn't dream of it.

Shane smirked at his phone and crossed his legs at the ankle where they spread over the sheets, letting his body sink back into the pillows. The sun was shining already but the weather was shit, and he had declined Hayden's invite to go exploring today when they were disembarking last night, that he'd meet up with them for dinner but planned to keep things simple during the day.

Then he scrolled back up to look at the photo of Puck again. Maybe he should get him a bed like that.

Rozanov: Too bad. I would have liked to see you try

Shane: I think I could take you

Rozanov: Please

Shane read it.

Then his body stilled. He had to have meant that sarcastically, Rozanov was always being a shit like that—maybe not always, he conceded, remembering the way he looked at him when Shane left Rozanov and Puck that morning—but it was reasonable and the most likely intent behind it.

It's not like he could have meant it any other way. He wasn't even considering that Rozanov meant it any other way.

Except.

No. Shane shook his head to himself as if that would seal the deal.

The image of the alternative popped into his head anyway, of Rozanov saying it with sincerity, with—

Shane: Don't you have patients you need to see? Get back to work

Rozanov: OK

They lost and Rozanov didn't text—which should have been fine, it wasn't like Shane was waiting for his text, even if he texted every game day since they'd met, always had something to say, waiting for him when he got off the ice.

“Since when did Nashville have a brick wall for a goalie,” Hayden grumbled as he chucked his gloves onto the bench.

“Since they signed Fitzgerald,” Shane replied, checking his phone for the second time since they came back to the locker room.

Hayden laughed, a little incredulous, a lot frustrated. “It was a rhetorical question.”

“It’s one game,” Shane said with a shrug. “And they only scored one goal on us.”

“Stop being so rational and let me complain,” Hayden said, but the heat behind his words was already bleeding out.

“By all means, then.”

Hayden started talking and Shane didn’t intend to stop listening, was nodding and making the appropriate sounds of agreement. It wasn’t until Shane had reached for his phone by the fourth time and Hayden tapped his arm with the back of his hand that he realized that he’d missed nearly all of what he’d been saying.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, are you expecting something? I thought your mom finally stopped calling you after losses two seasons ago.”

“She did,” he said. “I just—it’s nothing. Thought I heard it vibrating, is all.”

“You’re not concussed or anything, right? It didn’t look like Ellis hit you very hard but maybe you should get checked out.”

“I’m good,” Shane said with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Probably just hearing the AC kick on or something.”

Shane undressed and suited up for the tunnel walk and his phone remained silent, not a single notification popping up on his screen.

They arrived at the airport. Nothing.

Their plane landed. Still nothing.

By the time Shane got to his hotel room, he threw his bag onto the floor with a little too much force, and gave in.

Shane: No comments tonight?

Shane: Nothing about how the puck is supposed to go in the net, not in the catcher

Shane: Or maybe you want to critique my slapshot this time

Rozanov: Well now I do not need to

Shane: Funny

Rozanov: You seem stressed

Shane: We lost

Rozanov: I know. I watched

Shane: Seems to be the trend

Rozanov: I have watched for many years

“Of course you have,” Shane muttered. The three dots appeared and stayed on screen, long enough for Shane to brace himself. When the video popped up, his brows furrowed. Shane sat up straight and hit play.

Puck sat on the console in front of the television, the bright light muted as it filtered through his cone. He raised a paw and tapped at something on the screen and when Shane looked closer, he recognized it as Hayden. Shane knew what was coming next and frowned.

He watched himself as he took a shot, watched it be saved by Fitzgerald. The broadcast cut to a closeup of his face and Shane didn’t need to see it, the frustration splashed across his face, because he lived it, but then he heard Rozanov’s voice.

“Is that your dad?” he said to Puck while he pawed at Shane’s face on the television. “Is okay, he will make next one.” Puck meowed and the video ended. When he closed it, he saw another message below it.

Rozanov: He watched too

Rozanov's voice echoed in his head, the word *dad* catching like a snag. He wasn't, not really, even if he still hoped that one day he would be, but Shane thought of Puck, of the way he climbed onto his lap so easily, how soothing it was to hear him purr, and his tiny face and his tiny body, so fragile yet so full of life.

Shane: I hope you showed him the last game, too

Rozanov: No he slept through that one. Better this way, keep his expectations low

Shane: Gee thanks

Rozanov: You are welcome

"That was sarcasm." Shane set his phone down on the nightstand, but even as he reached for the remote, he couldn't help but notice that things didn't feel all that bad after all, loss or not.

"How's New York?"

"Cold," Shane answered, standing at the window of his hotel room. The street below was busy as always and even the best soundproofing couldn't keep the faint shriek of a siren from leaking through. "Grey. Loud."

"You say that every time," Rose said with affection in her voice.

"Because it's true." He could picture her rolling her eyes at him and he smiled.

"You have today off though, right? You could go out!"

"Rose."

"Shane."

“We have a game tomorrow,” he reminded her, stepping away from the window.

“You could still go out!” she said. “Go to a museum or, I don’t know, find a sports bar or something. Doesn’t Scott Hunter always go to that one pub?”

The room was nice, they were always nice he supposed, not that Shane really knew how to decorate. What he did know, however, was how to pick through the snack selection at the minibar, and plucked almonds from the line up. “I’m not going to a bar with *Scott Hunter*,” he said. “How do you even know that?”

“I like to read *People*.”

“Why is *People* writing about Scott Hunter?”

“*People* knows what the people want.” Shane wasn’t even sure what that meant but Rose kept talking. “Hey, how’s your kitten? You haven’t sent me any more photos so now we are in a fight, Hollander.”

“You didn’t say you wanted more,” Shane said, a little too defensive, carefully tearing open the package of nuts.

“Of course I want more, he’s so fluffy and cute! Are your parents watching him?”

“Uh, no.” He crunched down on an almond. “He’s actually staying with the vet right now.”

“Why, is he sick?”

“No, he’s just recovering from the amputation still. It was easier.”

“Whoa, whoa, what—Shane!” She said his name so abruptly, so admonishing, that he winced and paused mid-chew. “You didn’t tell me this!”

“He had a broken leg? And then had it amputated,” he explained. Shane remembered how Rozanov had been so nonchalant about it, even as Shane was teetering on the edge of panic, so he kept talking, adding quickly, “It’s not a big deal, actually, kittens are pretty adaptable.”

“Oh my *god*, poor Puck!”

“He’s good, I promise. The vet’s been sending me updates.” Among other things, he thought. The fact that Rozanov was an avid fan wasn’t surprising, not in Montreal, but

Shane never thought that finding a kitten would result in opening up a direct line to criticism.

“Are you keeping him?”

“I mean, I don’t know if I need to find a new vet. He’s...” Infuriating. Smug. “...got good reviews.”

“No,” she said with something like intrigue in her voice. “Puck.”

“Oh,” Shane said as dumbly as he felt, twirling another almond in his fingers. “Right. Um, I’m not sure.”

Rose was silent for a moment, and then she said, “You’re keeping him.” Like it was already settled. Shane didn’t feel the need to argue. “That’s nice of your vet to keep you informed.”

His hand stopped half-way to his mouth. “He’s not my—he’s not nice.”

“He’s nice enough to watch your kitten.”

“He’s a vet, it’s literally his job to take care of animals. But he’s all, ‘oh Hollander,’” Shane did his best to imitate Rozanov’s accent, “‘you are boring and stupid and bad at hockey.’ I’m literally one of the best players in the league! He just... he looks at me like he knows something I don’t and it’s fucking annoying.”

There was another pause, and Shane almost pulled the phone away from his face to check that the call was still connected when Rose spoke again.

“What was *that*?”

“I said he’s annoying.”

“No,” she said with a breathy laugh. “The deep voice, the accent.”

Shane looked down at his feet, toes tapping against the carpet. “He’s Russian.”

“He sounds hot. Is he single?”

“He’s an asshole,” he said with bite.

“Not exactly a no.”

“He’s not—you’re missing the point, he’s not some nice guy, is all.”

“Uh huh,” Rose said like she didn’t believe a word of it, but she didn’t give him time to correct her, again. “Crap, I gotta run, they’re calling for me on set, love you, talk soon, bye!”

The line went dead before Shane could even say goodbye. One day they’d be in the same city again, could meet up for lunch and not have to worry about trying to catch up in ten minute increments, but Shane didn’t know when that would be.

But if Rose was just going to tease him about something that really didn’t warrant it, then Shane wasn’t exactly looking forward to it happening in person.

Because there was nothing to tease about, Rozanov *was* an asshole and it didn’t matter if he was attractive.

Like yes, Shane could admit that, objectively speaking, Rozanov wasn’t ugly. And that maybe there was something appealing about his voice. But Rose always latched onto the weirdest things at the wrong times, like when she acted like it was a triumph that Shane agreed that her friend Miles was a good dancer.

He didn’t even like Rozanov. And it wasn’t like—he dated *women*. If the thought of otherwise ever crossed his mind, it was when he was a teenager and young and horny, not anything else.

Shane groaned and flopped onto the bed face first, the almonds scattering across the floor.

Rozanov: Do not lose to Scott Hunter tonight, he is dinosaur

Shane: He’s 31

Rozanov: I said what I said. Good luck, score goal for Puck

The arena was loud, the crowd electric, and although they formed a sea of red, Shane could spot pockets of blue seated among them. Even on the road, even in a city where Admirals fans were plentiful, some still showed up for him and his team, and he absolutely loved it.

At center ice, Shane nodded at Scott Hunter.

“Gonna be a lot of broken hearts here when we beat you,” Shane said.

Scott chuckled. “Not likely.”

Shane won the face-off.

The game went by in a blur but everything just clicked for his line. Whenever Shane looked for Hayden or Berkes, they were already there, ready for the pass. In the third period, when by all means they should have been slowing down, the three of them moved in sync in a way that made him feel unstoppable, and Shane scored a textbook perfect goal, bar down on Eric Bennett.

They won 5-3 and this time, he didn’t have to try to chase the high.

It only dipped momentarily when Shane found Scott Hunter waiting in the hallway outside their locker room holding a clipboard.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I won’t take up too much of your time,” Hunter said with one of his genuine smiles, slightly bashful but not what Shane would have expected considering their loss. “I’m trying to collect signatures of each team’s captain in support of themed jerseys for Pride Night this season. Maybe if we band together, the league and the owners will give us something more this year.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, caught off guard. He took the clipboard when handed, scanning the list—only two signatures were on it, Ottawa’s captain right under Hunter’s own. “Got a long way to go, huh?”

“You’re only the third person I’ve asked so far. I’m honestly not expecting every captain, but I’m hoping the list will grow if others see certain names—like yours.”

It was a compliment and he knew it—but even still, even with showing support for something good, something that would make the league better, Shane hesitated.

Just for a second.

Long enough for something quiet to press at the back of his mind: Rowe, earlier, and the laughter. The way it had slid past like it was nothing, how Shane had *said* nothing.

He shifted his weight, thumb dragging once along the edge of the clipboard. It would be easy to hand it back, say he'd think about it, make a joke, keep everything exactly where it was, but—

Hunter was still watching him, open, hopeful in a way that made it hard to look away.

“Sure, man,” Shane said, a little too quickly. He took the pen before he could think about it any harder and signed. It felt like stepping into something he couldn't easily step back out of, and he was only slightly confused as to why it didn't feel entirely wrong.

He handed the clipboard back. “It's a good idea,” Shane said. “It's the least I can do.”

“Thanks, Hollander. Great goal, by the way. I mean, fuck you, obviously, but it was great.”

Shane laughed and waved as Scott Hunter disappeared down the hallway.

The car service was waiting to take them back to their hotel, even if a few of his younger teammates clearly had no intention of turning in for the night. They tried to hide it, rookies always thinking they were slick like that, but Shane had been doing this job for years.

“If you are hungover in the morning, I will personally make sure you're doing laps until you puke at morning skate,” he called to them across the parking lot. “And you better be up and ready when I knock on your doors tomorrow.”

They called reassurances to him, Joey Hart even going as far as crossing his heart with an index finger, and if Shane wasn't in such a good mood, maybe he would have pushed harder. Instead, he climbed into the seat next to Hayden and buckled up.

“You're getting soft,” Hayden said.

“Nah,” Shane dismissed with a grin, “I was serious about the consequences, and they know it.”

In the front seat, J.J. turned up the music.

Hayden leaned over. “What did Hunter want, by the way?” he said to Shane, as J.J. began singing along to some pop song. “I saw you talking to him.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s trying to get support to pitch jerseys for Pride Night.”

“Really? What for? We have the tape, not like you can miss it.”

Shane’s smile faltered a little. He had signed his name and it had felt... It was the right thing to do. It hadn’t occurred to him that not everyone would have followed the same instinct.

“Just thought it was a good idea,” he said, hiding his growing discomfort. “Can’t hurt, right?”

“Totally,” Hayden replied with a smile. “And hey, Hunter can’t be the only one in the league, right?”

Shane’s stomach twisted, the car taking too sharp of a turn. “Totally.”

The rest of the drive was filled with laughter as eventually J.J. dragged Hayden into his impromptu karaoke session and at one point, was leaning his head out the window to serenade random pedestrians. Not that Shane blamed him, wins like tonight’s made everyone a little goofy, and even he found himself bobbing his head along to the beat.

When they parted ways from the hotel elevator, it was to fist-bumps and back slaps, which made the whiplash that happened when Shane’s phone started ringing, Rozanov’s name on the caller ID, worse.

Shane could think of only one reason that he’d actually call.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” The door slammed behind him, pushed a little too hard, but when Rozanov’s name came up on the caller ID as he reached his hotel room, his pulse spiked.

“Everything is fine, why are you panicking”

“You called me and I thought—”

“I cannot call you?”

“No, you can, it’s just—“

“Hold on. Someone else wants to talk to you.”

“What?”

There was silence for a few moments followed by a little static as if Rozanov was fumbling with the phone. And then, fainter than before, Shane heard:

“Oh now you are quiet? You would not shut up for twenty minutes but now that I call him for you, you do not talk.”

His shoulders finally loosened, a smile already on his face without noticing. The shuffling continued and Rozanov made a soft grunt, but then loud and clear as if directly next to the microphone, Puck meowed.

He laughed, feeling weightless, the type of weightless he didn't even realize was possible because he had never felt the load to begin with.

“Yes, see? I do this for you, you do not make me look like an idiot,” Rozanov said, voice still quieter than it had been before.

Puck meowed again. And again.

“Hi Buddy,” Shane said softly. He didn't feel weird or awkward like he would have expected to, talking to a cat over the phone, but it helped that now that Puck had started meowing, he didn't seem to feel the need to stop. “I hope you have accomplished your mission.”

“What mission?”

Shane scoffed. “Did you put me on speakerphone?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Rozanov said, louder again like he had moved closer to the phone. “Did you want some privacy to talk with your kitten?”

“It's fine,” Shane replied, plopping onto the edge of the bed and reaching to untie his shoes. “I just wasn't expecting it.”

“He does not like that you are ignoring him.”

As if on cue, Puck made a trilling sound which escalated into whine.

“What am I supposed to say?” he asked, shrugging off his suit coat, letting it pool behind him. He’d hang it up later.

“He’s a cat, you can say whatever you want, there are no rules,” Rozanov said in that irritating way he always did when Shane asked a perfectly reasonable question. “Now what was the mission?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I want to know.”

“Too bad.”

“Tell me.”

Shane hesitated, but even as he did, he knew he was going to comply anyway. “He was supposed to shit all over your house.”

Rozanov barked a laugh. “You think I have not had poop all over my house before? I have two dogs.”

“Oh,” he said and immediately felt dumb. “I didn’t know that.”

“You never asked.”

Pushing himself back on the bed, he stacked the pillows into a suitable support and leaned against them, stretching his legs out. “What are their names?”

“Anya and Maksim, they are mutts and they are perfect.”

“Have they met Puck?”

“They have, they are not sure what to make of him, he keeps trying to attack their tails but he is not very good at it yet.”

“Didn’t seem to have any problem attacking my ear.” His hand moved idly to where Puck had bit him and, for some reason, smiled.

“Kittens do that to their mothers,” Rozanov said. “Then mother pretends their kitten is mighty hunter, encourage their instincts.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not a cat and it hurt,” Shane grumbled but even he knew there was no heat behind it.

There were some more shuffling sounds and then Shane heard purring, like Rozanov was cradling Puck to his chest. “Mother cats also turn around and smack their kittens when it is too much.”

“I’m not going to smack him.”

“I know,” Rozanov said, punctuating his sentence with something that sounded like... well, a smooch.

“Are you kissing my cat?” he asked without thinking.

“Yes.” Shane heard the sound again. “But like I told you,” Rozanov continued while his brain tried to catch up, “he likes you. Trusts you. He just needs to learn manners.”

“How do I teach him that without smacking him?”

“I am working on solution for this,” Rozanov said cryptically, “but it is not ready yet. And in the meantime, Anya and Maksim will help.”

“Thanks, I think,” Shane said. “And um, thanks for calling.”

“You are coming back tomorrow, yes?”

“Yeah, but we’re getting in late, around midnight. Is that too late?”

“That is no problem, I will text you address and you can pick him up from here.”

“You sure?”

“Yes Hollander, I am sure. It is Saturday and only midnight. I will not turn into pumpkin.”

“Okay. I’ll text you when I land, just in case. Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Shane stayed there for a second after the line went dead, phone still pressed to his ear. The room was quiet again, too quiet after the steady thread of Rozanov’s voice and Puck’s commentary.

His suit jacket was still bunched beneath him, one sleeve half-crumpled under his hip, and when he finally shifted, it slid to the floor in a soft whisper of fabric. Shane scrubbed a hand over his face, then pushed himself up to hang it properly, lingering on the hanger a beat longer than necessary before he let go.

The adrenaline rush had faded and his body was calm in a way that felt good, and everything else about his post-game routine felt easier because of it.

Because of a whiny meow and a deep—just a purr.

And not because he had just spent however many minutes talking to Rozanov, even if he didn't congratulate him on his win.

Shane was just climbing into bed when his screen lit up on the nightstand, a smile blooming immediately. The preview showed something round and black, familiar and welcome.

When he opened it, his smile grew. There was Puck, curled up in a tight little knot of black fur, cone tilted just slightly to one side like it had finally given up on enforcing dignity, face toward the camera. He looked so peaceful that Shane wished that it was his chest he was sleeping on instead of Rozanov's.

Then his brain caught up with his eyes.

Rozanov's *bare* chest.

His ears were burning and he froze as the heat crept down the back of his neck, which was stupid—*objectively* stupid. He'd seen hundreds of shirtless men in his life, between locker rooms, training rooms, ice baths—half the league walked around without a shirt like it was part of the uniform. That was, *this* was, completely normal.

It was not different.

He looked at the photo again and zoomed in before he could stop himself. The line of muscle, the dip at the collarbone, Puck curled in between two fucking perfectly chiseled pecs—

And immediately zoomed back out like he'd been burned.

“What the fuck are you doing,” he said aloud to the empty room. It was just a photo of a kitten.

Shane was already looking at it again.

His thumb hovered over the screen, right over the save icon, for too long.

“Jesus Christ, what are you doing,” he muttered, and dropped the phone flat against his chest. Shane dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, like that would help.

It didn’t, because now it was there, behind his eyes, Puck, soft and small and safe, and Rozanov—

Shane grabbed the phone and shoved it face down into the mattress beside him.

He stared up at the ceiling, jaw tight.

It didn’t mean anything.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, exhaling sharply.

It *wasn’t* different.

Chapter End Notes

Despite a probably unreasonable amount of research, I am by no means an expert on hockey roadies. I’ve done my best to use actual past NHL schedules as a guide here, but I probably messed up at least one thing.

The first pride jerseys the NHL wore were worn by Vancouver in March of 2019 (and this story is taking place in November 2019), but given the events of the books (only mentioning the tape in *Role Model* and also Vancouver being Dallas Kent Central) I decided to just work under the assumption that nothing similar happened in this universe. I’d like to think that Scott was out there championing it before it was even a possibility.

Shane’s “textbook perfect goal” on Eric Bennett happened in *Common Goal*, but I expanded upon it because I can.

And now the reason you all stay for end notes,

Cat Facts:

Kittens do in fact practice their hunting skills on their mothers and yes, momcats will absolutely let them know when she's had enough of their shit. That's one of the first ways they learn manners (aka learning how hard and when it is appropriate to bite) but if you knew that, then you know what's eventually gonna happen here.

Also, always thoroughly clean and treat your cat scratches! Aside from the fact that they use their paws to bury their poop and therefore can get it in their claws, cat scratch disease (also known as cat scratch fever) is a real thing that you will need antibiotics for. You may not even know you have it until your lymph nodes are swollen and you're sitting in urgent care when they ask if you've been scratched by a cat lately—but you are a kitten foster, primarily undersocialized kittens for that matter, and you ALWAYS have scratches so why would it be your lymph nodes by your ear/neck if your hands are scratched up—and then you'll have a war flashback to when one of your undersocialized kittens used your head as a springboard to flee, digging their shitkicker right into your scalp, and everything will make so much sense. Nothing a z-pak can't take care of, though.

Thank you all for the comments and kudos, it's been a joy so far <3

Chapter 5: Icing

Chapter Notes

Hello friends and welcome back!

There are uhhh a lot more of you following this now and that's so lovely and flattering in ways that I'm not exactly sure how to properly express (without being weird and generally I'm totally cool being weird but I'm trying to rein in it), so thank you for reading, for sharing your own cat stories and cat facts, for making this an outlet for me while I and my rescue friends deal with what has already been one hell of a kitten season (only 7 to 10 more months to go before it all starts over again... imagine Ross from Friends going "I'm fine" and that's all of us right now)

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

The first thing Shane noticed when he woke up was that he was warm.

It was the kind of warm that was almost too much, even if the sheets had slipped down in the night and tangled around his waist, a fine layer of sweat coating his chest. His heart was hammering beneath it, his breath came unevenly and his body felt incredible even if there was one part of him that was unmistakably sticky—

His eyes snapped open.

Absolutely not.

He did not just fucking have a—

About—

He was out of bed and in the bathroom faster than his legs felt capable of, but he needed to confirm that he did not just seriously have a *wet dream* about *Rozanov*.

The images came back the moment he made eye contact with himself in the mirror—snapshots of stubble, lips that were too close carrying breath that was too hot, and the broad span of Rozanov's hands over his sides and up around his abs until they landed on his chest and squeezed.

Shane yanked the sink faucet, turning the cold water on blast, and dunked his head under it. Maybe if he drowned right now, he'd never have to look himself—look Rozanov—in

the face ever again.

It was dark still and he had no clue what time it was, but it didn't matter. There was no fucking way he was going to back to sleep—he was never going to sleep ever again—and he would stand here with water dripping down his nose for hours if that's what it took to get through this. Shane shifted, angling his head to the side, and froze when the cooled, crackling mess in his boxer briefs made itself known.

Abso-fucking-lutely not.

He turned off the sink and reached for the shower, trailing water across the floor. In any other scenario he would have grabbed a towel but this was an emergency and there wasn't time—he couldn't stay like *this*.

Shucking off his underwear, Shane stepped into the spray of near-scalding hot water and this was a better idea: he wouldn't drown, he'd just melt the skin from his bones and no one would ever have to know that he was—cursed—by a photo.

Because that was the reason, obviously. The only explanation was that he'd looked at the photo right before he went to sleep, his thumb slipped and he zoomed in and that was definitely an accident, and yes, he looked but there wasn't anything wrong with looking, and then some fucking wires got crossed in his brain while he slept, his subconscious playing a prank on him—

Except it hadn't felt like a prank.

It had felt real.

And if it was real—

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his palms against them. No. No, he wasn't doing that. It didn't matter what it felt like, it wasn't real, it didn't mean anything, it was just because Rozanov was some sort of gym-rat veterinarian with muscles like that and maybe he could give Shane workout tips and *not* because there was anything there to begin with—

“Fuck,” he muttered, louder this time and it echoed off the tile, mocking him. Maybe if he bashed his head against them hard enough, he could smack the dream right out of his head, let it wash down the drain with the shreds of his dignity.

The water scorched and steam hung in the air like it, too, had paid for front row seats to his shame. Now he was really losing it, thinking that the room was watching him.

Watching him like Rozanov's eyes, intense and darkened, while he gripped Shane's hip, the heat of him at his back, a hand dragging up his side, the press of—

“No. This is stupid.” He dragged his hands over his face. “You’re being stupid.”

One dream. That’s all. He was still Shane Hollander, he would still go through his day and play a fucking great game of hockey, and they would win both of the back-to-backs because they were good, because *Shane* was good, and that’s what he was supposed to do.

And then they’d go home and he would still be him. Nothing would change because it couldn’t.

It was just one dream.

His fingers were beyond wrinkly by the time he turned off the shower and dried off, and the hotel room was slightly brighter than it had been before, early morning light peeking through the gap in the curtains.

If there was anything else that could fix this, could shake this feeling out of his head, it was normalcy, and Shane was well-acquainted with normalcy because he was normal. He dressed, he brushed his teeth, he turned on the news and let the morning anchors become the soundtrack as he organized and repacked his suitcase. He folded a shirt and set it inside, then took it out and refolded it, tighter, like that would fix everything. When the rumpled sheets caught his eye for the third time, he made the bed even if it would be stripped by housekeeping later. He just... It was better to be tidy, in the mornings. Especially on game days. Not because of anything else.

He did not look at his phone.

There was absolutely no reason to, morning skate wasn’t until ten and he was giving the rookies until at least 8:30 before he followed through on his promise. The clock on the nightstand said he still had time, anyway. If he hurried, he could probably go down to the hotel gym and get a quick spin on the bike, jumpstart the day with a good sweat, not like the sweat he woke up to—

“Stop it.” He pulled on socks. “You’re not going there.”

Shoes were next, tying laces and pulling on the tongue, followed by slipping his hotel keycard into his pocket. All that was left was a way for anyone to contact him, if needed. For team emergencies, nothing else.

It vibrated the moment he picked it up.

Shane chuckled it across the room.

“Fuck.” Scrambling over to where it hit the wall with a thud, Shane reached for it.

“Don’t be broken,” he said to it. When he flipped it over, it was still vibrating, and he exhaled a little too loudly before tapping the screen and holding it to his ear.

“Hi Mom.”

“Good morning,” she said, entirely too cheerful, entirely too distant. “I was just calling to congratulate you, that was an incredible game, and to make sure you got my email?”

“Yeah.” Shane sat down on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes for a split second until he remembered he was keeping them open. “Thanks. I haven’t, uh, haven’t really looked this week, is it urgent?”

“Oh.” There was surprise in her voice and Shane’s brows knit together. He was usually better than this, less distracted, but if he stopped to think about the reason, even if he tried to tell her about Puck—and only Puck, it would be too much. “That’s okay, it’s not urgent. Reebok is just sending a renewal contract in the coming weeks and I’m thinking that we should alter some of the terms this time. You can read it and let me know what you think.”

“I can do that,” he said, looking down at the shoe brand in question on his feet.

“Great! Okay, I’ll let you go, I know you have things to do. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. Bye.”

He collapsed backward onto the bed. That was why he had to stay focused, he reminded himself, to honor his commitments—to his team to keep winning, to the companies that he partnered with to keep delivering what they expected. He played by the rules, kept out of trouble, and this was the payoff. It was worth it.

It had to be.

Wasn’t it?

He’d delete the photo from his messages later. That would fix this.

Morning skate was shit.

Shane had rounded up the rookies who looked bright and cheerful and maybe just a little too smug about it. It was optional that morning, management allowing rest since they had just played, it was the last game of the trip, but Shane needed to feel the ice to get his bearings. Besides, it was the principle of the matter, and it was his job to make sure that those who wanted it, those who needed it to keep their head in the game, were supported by their captain.

Even if his own head felt like a minefield.

Everything else was normal and relaxed, the team meeting was brief and the ice was smooth and as familiar as it was going to ever get, until Theriault waved Shane over from the side of the rink and crossed his arms.

“What’s this I hear about you signing Hunter’s petition,” he said as soon as Shane stopped.

Shane stiffened. “Who told you that?”

Theriault ignored him, the corners of his lips pulling down and creases appearing between his eyebrows. “Hunter tried to pull that shit first with the owners during playoffs. Thought he’d given up.”

“It’s just a signature,” Shane shrugged, looking down at the ice as if it had the answer as to why he was allowing himself to feel any shame about this. “There’s nothing in the rules that says he can’t ask.”

“It’s a waste of time.”

Behind him on the ice, Shane heard distant laughter, and he clenched his fists. “Am I in trouble, sir?”

“Of course not.” It didn’t sound convincing. “If the Admirals want to let Hunter go on his fool’s errand, that’s their business. But it’s not something that this organization supports.”

“It’s just jerseys.”

“Look, I don’t give a rat’s ass if Scott Hunter is gay or whatever,” Theriault scoffed. “But there is no reason to be so... loud about it. This is hockey, not ice dancing. Make sure you think things through next time, Hollander. You are Captain, don’t make me rethink that.”

Shane’s stomach plummeted.

As he skated away, his jaw locked, it wasn’t anger that fueled him, but fear—fear of being seen in a way that he had worked too hard to prevent.

Fear, and the memory of a pair of hazel eyes that didn’t belong. Not here.

His name echoed in his head deeper, accented, and too close.

Why did Hunter have to ask him, why did he say yes? The doubt crept in, firmer this time, the disappointment and disgust on Theriault’s face overtaking everything else in his brain to the point where Shane wanted to apologize to him just to get it to stop.

And that was worse. Worse, because he’d signed it for a reason, the same way he’d done other things that were supposed to be right and never quite felt it—even if, when he’d held that pen, he hardly gave it a second thought until it was already done.

He cut himself off before he thought about why.

When they left the ice, their time up, Shane was so fucking keyed up he shouldn’t have been anywhere near the ice. It was supposed to be relaxing in the way that all his workouts were, in that the rhythms were routine and left him grounded and ready, but instead his hands were shaking and everything felt off to the point where even going for a run wouldn’t likely touch it.

He had two text notifications when he got to the locker room, only fumbling his phone momentarily when he saw the name.

“You’re being stupid again,” he muttered to himself. With a deep breath, he opened the messages.

The photo was blurry and a little dark, but Shane knew that shape, that fluff. Puck was coneless.

Rozanov: He is free

Above it, the one from last night was visible, lingering in his periphery as he fixed his gaze on the words, resolute that he would rather go through a thousand uncomfortable talks with his coach than look up. He tapped the screen to reply, if only so he wouldn't have to see it anymore.

Shane: Already?

Rozanov: Incision is healing well

Rozanov: And I am tired of being hit in face with cone all night

The cursor blinked ten times before he started typing.

Shane: He sleeps with you?

Rozanov: He would not stop yelling and the walls are thin

Rozanov: Easier this way

And that... that was information that he really did not need, the image of the photo already back in his head, and something uncomfortably close to jealousy twisted in his stomach.

Then came the intrusive thought: Jealous of who?

His fingers hovered over the screen longer than necessary. That didn't make sense. There was nothing to be jealous of. There was nothing there, period.

Which made it official, he was losing his mind. All that was left was to just make it through this day by any means necessary, pick up Puck, and then never see, talk to, or think about Dr. Ilya Rozanov ever again.

Shane was sitting on the bench with his head between his knees when Hart walked in.

“You okay, Cap?”

“Fine.” He threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled. “Just having a nervous breakdown, nothing to worry about.”

“Uh.”

“I’m fine, really,” he said a little too quickly. “Just don’t ever get a pet, Hartzy. You think it’s simple and then suddenly you’re attached and stuck with the least professional vet—” He cut himself off. “He—it’s not worth it.”

Hart blinked. “You’re—what?”

And that was just the kicker, wasn’t it? No one knew what was happening, no one *could* know, and now he was confusing rookies sitting like he was bracing for a crash or about to faint. Shane sighed. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“Okay,” Hart said slowly. “I’m just gonna... go.”

He waved a hand in Hart’s general direction and waited for his sanity to return.

When the final buzzer sounded and the Voyageurs lost by one goal, at least Shane could skate off the ice knowing that it wasn’t his fault. Because he may have been going through a crisis, but he was a goddamn professional and there was no way he was going to let it affect his performance.

Mostly.

There may have been one moment where a Brooklyn defenseman slammed him into the boards and yelled something to his teammate, and it wasn’t the force of the hit that had Shane momentarily stunned, but the Russian accent near his head.

For half a second, his brain filled in the wrong face, the wrong voice, the wrong heat at his back, and he hesitated—just enough to miss the puck clearing past his stick.

He snapped back a beat too late and chased it down like nothing had happened, clinging to the hope that no one else noticed.

And in the end, it probably didn't make a difference, and he ignored any part of him that tried to convince him otherwise. That part wasn't correct, and besides, he already planned to watch the game highlights to prove it.

Everything else about his post-game routine should have felt easier, but all it did was remind him of how the day started. He took one step into the shower and nearly turned right back around, the reporter who interviewed him had curls in the just the wrong shade of brown, and when J.J. came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder, Shane nearly jumped straight out of his skin.

He just needed to focus on the plan and get the fuck home and away from whatever hex had been cast on this road trip.

“Hurry up, boys,” the equipment manager called. “There’s a nasty storm front moving in back home and if you don’t get your asses out of here in the next five minutes, we aren’t making it back tonight.”

There was no way Shane was spending one more second on this trip than he had to, so he slung his bag over his shoulder and started barking orders.

“You heard the man,” he said, reaching down to scoop Hayden’s bag off the bench and hand it to him. “I’ll wave from the plane while we leave you behind if I have to.”

“Shane, relax,” Hayden said to him, voice low enough it wouldn’t be overheard. “We’ve done this a million times.”

“I’m not getting stuck here.”

Hayden shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind an extra night in a hotel. The kids don’t really let us sleep and at least one of them climbs in with us. I’m tired of getting hit in the face by a stray limb.”

Shane recoiled, the sucker punch of the words hitting like the harsh scrape of stubble he didn’t have—like black paws tucked under a chin.

“Right?” Hayden continued as they filed out, seemingly unaware that Shane’s stomach flipped, the press of something warm where it shouldn’t be, his tongue growing heavy. “Multiple times a night I’m awoken by tiny fists—or worse, feet. I think Arthur might grow up to be a goalie.”

“Good luck with that,” Shane said, hoping it sounded casual.

“I can’t even be surprised, man. Not a normal one in the bunch,” he said, but the wide, proud smile on his face was unmistakable. Shane bumped his shoulder into his and couldn’t help but smile back.

At least Hayden was still the same.

The mood on the bus was calm, only a few subdued conversations while most opted to pop in ear buds and zone out, and while losing obviously didn’t have the same adrenaline rush, the truth was that it was exhausting being on the road and Shane didn’t blame anyone for trying to catch as much peace as they could. Winning would have been the greatest reward, but sleeping in his own was a decent consolation prize.

And he’d have Puck, too.

He just needed to rip the proverbial bandaid off first.

He refreshed the flight status on his phone’s browser no less than three times during the ride, and once he confirmed that everything was still proceeding as scheduled, texted Rozanov asking for his address.

The reply came quickly, and so did more.

Rozanov: You do not have to get Puck tonight

Rozanov: Weather will be bad, I will keep him longer

Rozanov: No charge

Shane: It’s fine, I’m picking him up

Rozanov: Hollander

Shane: Rozanov

Rozanov: I do not mind

Shane: Well I do.

A solid minute and a half passed before Rozanov responded. Not that Shane was counting.

Rozanov: OK. Send me ETA when you leave

Then he opened the weather app and swiped to Montreal.

Winter Storm Warning stared him in the face. Shane tapped on it and scanned the alert, eyes catching on “freezing rain turning to snow,” “significantly reduced visibility,” and “treacherous travel conditions,” starting about an hour and a half after they landed. If he rushed, he could still theoretically make it. The car service was usually quick and he was often the first drop-off when rode with any of the others, and then he’d zip over—traffic would be practically nonexistent at this hour—grab Puck and be home before the storm hit.

He’d delete the photo, the texts, the number.

And then all this stupidity would be over.

It would be fine. Perfect, even.

It was not fine, nor perfect, and driving to Rozanov’s might have been the stupidest thing Shane had ever done.

Cold rain was falling when their plane landed, everyone herded like cattle quickly into waiting cars, and thirty minutes later when he got out of the car, he was greeted by ice

pelting his face. He should have gone inside, rescheduled for another day, and stayed home, but the thought of having to go to sleep with the looming anticipation of when that day would be was worse than driving 20 under the speed limit in this shit.

So he texted Rozanov and left, white knuckling it across the city, leaning forward in his seat with the radio off as if that would suddenly make his eyes work better and his reflexes faster. Shane slid through the fourth stoplight, foot pumping the brake, his Jeep doing its best to find traction and failing, and briefly considered turning back.

Shane could get him in the morning. He'd wake up early and get him first thing, and it wouldn't be snowing and he could do one more night.

Puck could stay another night, asleep on Rozanov's bed.

He didn't turn back.

"The first fucking time I wait to put on snow tires," he grumbled to himself once his heart stopped living in his throat. It was lucky that there were no other cars out, he thought, even if he knew damned well that luck wasn't the reason. Because only idiots tried to drive through this.

And Shane, currently, was King Idiot.

He could control a forecheck, a toe drag, a snap shot, but not this—not the weather or the timing of their plane, the storm.

Not the way his own brain kept misfiring.

The ice turned to snow by the time he turned onto the residential street lined with small houses, fishtailing as he went around the corner—or what he assumed were all small houses, not that he could see much of them up ahead, snow blowing in thick sheets and obscuring the view. His phone told him his destination was ahead, on the left, and he coasted the rest of the way there, foot gently pressing the brake pedal as he finally came to a stop.

He parked in front of a house with its lights on through the front windows, and collapsed backward against the seat. The thought of doing that a second time curdled his stomach, but he reminded himself that this was better than waiting even if he no longer felt so convinced.

Shane squinted out into the night through a whitewash of snow, trying to check the numbers on the house with the text he'd gotten and being unable to see them. Then a

familiar man walked into view in the window. His stomach flipped.

With a deep breath, he dashed from his Jeep to the front door, holding his arm up to shield his face from the storm. He let it fall back to his side as the door opened and more light spilled out.

His heart was already racing from the drive, but now it kicked into overdrive at the sight of Rozanov in sweats and a tshirt, still unfairly tall even with slumped shoulders, looking far too relaxed for the amount of stress that Shane felt.

Shane opened his mouth—forgot what he was going to say—and snapped it closed again.

Because the shape of Rozanov's lips was the same as what haunted him from his dream, the way he looked at him with those stupid eyes he couldn't get out of his head...

His brain filled in the rest before he could stop it—heat, breath, the press of—

Shane shut that thought down.

"You did not die," Rozanov greeted him, stepping to the side to let Shane in and closing the door behind him.

And the dream blissfully, momentarily disappeared.

"I'm Canadian," he said, looking to the side, looking anywhere else to give himself a fighting chance at calming down and keeping it away, and landing on a beige couch. "I've driven through worse." It was probably the truth, though he was working on flexing the feeling back into his fingers.

"That is not the brag you think it is," Rozanov said. "Shoes off."

It was warm inside, and quiet, except for the echo of the wind against the windows. Three lamps illuminated the living room, the walls were sage, and everything looked homey and the space lived in, and he absolutely should not be in it.

For a second, Shane just stood there, dripping on the floor, not moving, then he shook his head. "I'm not staying. Where is Puck?"

Rozanov didn't move. His eyes lingered on Shane a second too long. "So it is no longer kitten who has death wish."

"It's not that bad." It was. "I'll be fine." He hoped.

A muffled bark came from the back of the house, followed by a series of higher-pitched ones, and Shane turned toward the sound, catching Rozanov in the corner of his eye, arms crossed. He waited for a complaining meow that didn't come.

"Good job, you woke the beasts," Rozanov said. "Now, shoes off."

"I told you," Shane snapped. "I'm not staying, so if you could just get Puck, I'd rather get going because the storm gets bad."

"It *is* bad."

"It's not," he lied, and if he sounded petulant, he didn't care. He was not going to submit himself to a night of... of *torture*, no matter what it cost, even if that meant inching along the roads one snail-like mile at a time.

"You keep saying this. It does not make it true." Rozanov gestured toward the front window. "You cannot even see neighbors across street."

"I'll drive slow."

"Right off the road. With Puck in passenger seat."

Shane clenched his teeth and swallowed. "Just get my cat."

"No. Not like this."

"It's not up to you."

"Yes, it is," Rozanov said. "Against my oath as veterinarian if I let you leave with him. That is the opposite of preventing animal suffering."

"Fine. Then I'll go."

There was a moment that Rozanov just stared at him, until he came to some unknown conclusion and said, "Okay." He gestured to the door. "I made no such oaths for humans."

Shane narrowed his eyes and took two steps out the door before he slipped on ice and landed flat on his ass.

Behind him, Rozanov clicked his tongue. "And you are hockey player."

“Don’t,” Shane warned, gingerly getting back to his feet and walking—sliding—down the front walk.

“Hollander.”

“What?” he called over his shoulder.

“Are you always this stubborn?” Rozanov asked, but it sounded less like a question than a judgement. “Or only tonight?”

“Always.”

Rozanov laughed, delighted in a way that appeared to surprise them both. “You cannot drive in this. Get inside before you end your career, okay? I want to win another cup this year.”

Shane slid to a stop. He couldn’t even see the end of the street, his car was already completely coated in a layer of white, and as he watched the snow swirl around him, he came to the conclusion that out of every mistake he’d ever made, the word that came out of his mouth next was undoubtedly the biggest—worse than driving through a blizzard, than choosing his clinic.

And he said it anyway.

“Okay.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rozanov shake his head, and his smile turned lopsided. “Good.”

Correction: Emperor Idiot.

Chapter End Notes

It should (hopefully) go without saying, but don’t be Shane and actively choose to drive in icy/blizzard-y weather conditions, okay? Even if you’re “used” to it, even if you’ve done it before, even if you spent almost an entire winter Tokyo drifting around corners and learning to stop your car against snow banks because you were too broke to get new tires so nothing could ever be as dangerous as that (yes this was me in my younger and stupider days), don’t do it.

Thank you all again for the love you've given this, it warms my little gremlin heart
<3

Cat Facts:

Ten days is usually the minimum for recovery post-amputation with two weeks being more standard (and to allow time to schedule an appointment to remove stitches). Cones are absolutely the bane of everyone's existence but incisions can easily get infected if a cat is not wearing one (because cat mouths are gross and carry all the bacteria). Thankfully there are many options, such as standard issued e-collars from a vet, soft pillow-like ones in cute designs (better for teen or adult cats as they are sometimes too clunky for smaller kittens), and the kitten rescuer favorite, a good ol' sturdy paper plate with a hole in the middle and trimmed down to size.

Still keep an eye on any incision even if they are wearing a cone (including and especially spay incisions). Any sign that something isn't right is worth calling the vet—things like redness, swelling, any sort of shininess (meaning the incision is wet because of something) can indicate infection and it's always better to be safe than septic.

Chapter 6: Net-Front Presence

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday friends! Thank you all for being here, for the love and the comments and making this small corner of the fandom something I look forward to adding to every week. <3

Without further ado, let's get snowed in.

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

Shane stood in Rozanov's living room telling himself he could do this.

His suit coat hung on the rack by the door, damp from where the snow had melted into it, his shoes neatly tucked on the mat below it, even though what he wanted to do was to turn around, walk back into the snow, and drive off—ice be damned.

At least Rozanov would be sleeping for most of the time he was stuck here and maybe exhaustion would just override Shane's executive functions and he'd pass out at some point, too. Hopefully his subconscious would take pity on him and let it be dreamless, and then it would be over. In the morning the streets would be plowed and salted, and he would get the fuck out of here. He could get through one night without anything blowing up in his face, without blowing—

Shane tilted his head back and groaned. "Fucking *stop* already."

He should have stayed outside and let the elements take him.

A clickety-clacking came from down the hall. He realized too late that the noise was coming closer, until two dogs crowded him, sniffing his socks and jumping up his legs.

"Uh," he said, holding his hands up helplessly but out of the way of the smaller brown dog's reach, its tongue darting to lick Shane's pants.

"Anya, Maksim," Rozanov's voice sounded from further in the house. "Be nice. Hollander is our guest."

The larger of the two dogs, fluffy and tricolored, turned its head, floppy ears perked, before trotting back down the hall. The licker, however, did not seem to care and continued its crimes against wool.

Shane attempted to redirect the dog's attention, gently pushing him off his shins. "You gotta—this suit was not cheap, so can you please—"

When Rozanov reappeared, Shane was bent over and walking in circles around the coffee table in front of the small couch, hands out in front to try to fend off a weird little dog with an underbite.

"Maksim." Rozanov's voice was sterner now, deeper, and the dog snapped to attention.

So did Shane.

The other dog, Anya he assumed, trailed behind him, looking up at Rozanov like he hung the moon, unaware he was anything but deranged or agitating or—terrifying. Not that Shane was scared. That would be... something else.

But in his arm was Puck.

And Shane couldn't even try to deny the way his heart clenched at the sight of him being held there, coneless, fur ruffled like he'd been asleep—and bigger. It had only been a week, and he'd grown.

"Sit," Rozanov said.

Shane sat.

So did Maksim.

He realized too late that Rozanov wasn't talking to him and froze, eyes wide.

Rozanov raised a brow. "Good boys."

Shane's face went hot, his body awkward as he got back to his feet, blood rushing where it definitely did not belong. "Funny," he said, not that it was funny at all, the way his stomach flipped anyway.

"You want tea?"

Shane stared at him, which was a dumb idea since that only made the flipping worse.

"It's one in the morning."

"Okay, chamomile then. And here," Rozanov said, taking three steps to cross the space, holding Puck out to him. "He missed you."

Puck mewed softly at the transfer. Shane cradled him to his chest, his fingers threading into the fluff at his neck and scratching lightly. He'd forgotten how soft he was, how small he still was even if he had grown—how warm and comforting his body was, now that he was back.

"I only had him for three days," Shane said, unsure who he was trying to convince.

"I was not talking to you. Tea, yes or no?"

Shane looked down at Puck again.

Then back up.

"Uh, sure."

Rozanov nodded once and disappeared through another doorway into the kitchen, flipping on a light that illuminated the edge of a fridge with Anya and Maksim at his heels, and Shane sat down again, slowly.

Puck stood on his lap and stretched, arching his back and making all the tufts of his fur spike.

"Hi buddy," he said softly, stroking a hand from his head to the tip of his tail. The stitches were gone and only a bumpy curved line remained. His hair was still shorn but more like a downy fuzz under his thumb. "Did you miss me?"

In response, Puck reached up, hooked his claws into his shirt, and pulled himself up until his head collided with Shane's chin. The moment it did, loud rumbling purrs flooded his ears. Shane wrapped his arms under his leg and lifted him closer.

"Yeah," he said quietly as Puck placed his front paws on either side of his neck, fully rubbing his face against the underside of his jaw. "I missed you too."

He leaned back and closed his eyes, just listening, letting the constant purrs overtake any thought in his head except for one: the reckless drive, getting stuck here—it was worth it.

"Okay," came Rozanov's voice, but when Shane opened his eyes, it was Maksim who was suddenly three inches from his face.

"What the—" Shane jerked back just as Maksim's tongue made a repeat appearance, catching on the side of Puck's face.

“Maksim, down,” Rozanov said, holding two mugs in his hand and using his foot to nudge the dog off the couch. Maksim trotted over to where Anya was lying on a dog bed and plopped half on top of her. “Do not mind him. He does not understand personal space.”

Shane took the proffered mug and used his free hand to pluck Puck from his shirt and set him more firmly on his lap. “Seems to be the trend.”

As if to reinforce the point, Rozanov sat down—only he was at the other end of the couch, and even with a cushion’s worth of emptiness between them, it was too close. Shane pushed himself against the armrest.

“How is your head?” Rozanov asked.

Shane’s brows pinched together, wondering if he missed something as he carefully took a drink. “I didn’t hit my head. Just my ass.”

“No, from game,” Rozanov said, bringing his mug to his mouth. Unless you want me to ask about your ass.”

“No—no, that is not—not necessary,” Shane said, squirming in his seat to the point where Puck lifted his head and meowed, and absolutely not noticing the way Rozanov’s bottom lip rested against the ceramic. “Um. I still didn’t hit my head, though.”

“You didn’t.”

It didn’t sound like a question, but Shane answered anyway. “No? I mean, yes, I got hit by Vasechkin but I’m fine.”

“Then it is even more stupid you came here.” Rozanov tilted his head toward the window. “Through that.”

“Can we just—not talk about that?”

“Why, because you are stupid?”

“Because I *know* that, okay?” he said a little too loud, a little too honest, the tea in his cup sloshing near the rim. It was the one thing he could admit, the only thing.

“Fine,” Rozanov shrugged, taking another sip. “You played like shit.”

“I did *not*—”

“You let Brooklyn win two face-offs, that is unacceptable.”

“Well, I don’t see you out there playing, so maybe back off,” he bit out. And this was why his body was wrong, because Rozanov did nothing but irritate him, poke at him for the one thing that Shane was good at, the one thing in his life that he relied on.

In his lap, Puck rolled over and stretched his arms.

“No, you don’t,” Rozanov conceded, bringing one foot up to rest on his knee. Shane averted his eyes back to his lap. “In another life, yes. You would be crying after every game.”

Shane scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“Is true. I was better than you.”

“What? You played?”

Rozanov hummed in assent. “In Russia.”

It hit him sideways, unexpected and uneven, though some things started making sense—like the chirps and the... muscles. He cleared his throat. “Why did you stop?”

Rozanov shrugged. “I got hurt. No more hockey.”

Shane didn’t respond right away, this time the whole room feeling like it shifted half a step to the left. “When was that?”

“When I was seventeen. Before World Juniors.”

“Wait.” Shane’s mind raced, putting together pieces he didn’t even realize he was holding onto until— “*Wait*. I remember you!”

“You cannot remember me, I did not go.”

“You’re Ilya Rozanov!” Shane practically shouted, turning his body toward him, bringing his knee up on the couch. Puck slid into the gap between his legs and startled awake. “Oh shit, sorry bud,” he said to him, petting him until he settled back down.

When he looked back up, Rozanov was looking at him like he had a screw loose. “This is not news.”

“No, I know, it’s just—they talked about you. In interviews,” he said, remembering how he’d been excited, nervous, the biggest tournament he had played, the first time he knew for a fact what his future would be. “They mentioned how disappointing it was that Ilya Rozanov wasn’t there, that you were supposed to lead Russia to the finals. Said you would have given us a run for our money.”

This time Rozanov scoffed. “Of course you watched interviews.”

“Yeah, I did,” Shane said, a smirk growing on his face, feeling like the ground was finally evening out. “Knowing who you’re up against is important.”

“And yet I was still better than you.”

Shane huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “No way. I was the number one draft pick.”

“You would have been number two.”

“You’re very sure for a man who never got back on the ice.”

“I had no choice.”

“You mean you were too scared.”

“No. You cannot play hockey with a...” He trailed off, brows furrowed. “Fuck, is too late for complicated English words. This,” he said, pointing to his Achilles tendon. “Popped.”

Shane stopped smirking and his hand stilled on Puck’s back. “Oh shit.”

“Yeah ‘oh shit.’”

Seventeen echoed in his head. Shane would never forget being that young, not when that was his first chance to prove he was worth anything.

And Shane knew that things happened—players got injured all the time from bad hits, overworked joints, and freak accidents. Concussions and broken bones were considered normal, almost expected. Shane’s shoulder had been dislocated more than once.

But to be knocked out so early, so permanently... Without hockey, Shane wasn’t sure he knew who he was.

When he looked at Rozanov now, it felt... different. Dangerous.

He turned his head before he wouldn't have been able to, but not fast enough to feel like a decision. Puck was now standing and stretching, yawning so wide that his ears flattened against his head. "So you, what, went to school and became a vet instead?"

Rozanov took a slow sip, his Adam's apple bobbing where Shane's gaze had drifted back. "Something like that."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Is fine. Old news now. And I get to help animals, which is good. Like Puck."

Rozanov held out his free hand, Puck crossing the divide and rubbing his cheek against his fingers. They were long and strong, and Shane imagined them gripping a hockey stick, his body leaning forward to face him at center ice, and what it would be like to stare into those eyes in a place he could.

"Yeah."

Rozanov continued to pet Puck, the kitten climbing onto his lap. "Animals are good for soul," he said slowly, in a voice that Shane hadn't heard before. "You give them kindness, love—not because they earn it. Because they deserve it. They are innocent. Honest."

The way he spoke unsettled Shane. There was more and too much at the same time, like the idea that love could be so freely given without expectation was inherently wrong. Which was ridiculous because Shane loved—he loved his parents, he loved his friends, he loved hockey. And they loved him back. It was...

Puck laid down, readjusting his body until he was curled tightly against Rozanov's stomach. The familiar twist of jealousy flared again, but this time, with a sudden clarity that came too fast to stop, Shane knew it was for both, and his stomach plummeted.

He drained his cup, wincing as it burned a little down his throat, and set the empty mug down on the coffee table a little too carefully.

"I should—" he started, standing and gesturing vaguely toward the hallway, toward the door, toward anywhere that wasn't here. "We should sleep—I mean, I should sleep and you should sleep, not that—it's late."

Rozanov didn't move from where he was, one hand still resting absently on Puck's back, fingers brushing through his fur in slow, even strokes. He watched Shane, too intensely like he always did, and finally nodded.

“I will get you clothes.”

Shane froze. “You don’t—I’m good, I’ll sleep in this.”

“In your suit,” Rozanov said, staring him straight in the eyes.

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“Why? You are small, you will fit in my clothes.”

“That’s—that’s so not necessary,” he said quickly, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck. “Really. This suit is comfortable—what are you doing?”

Rozanov had stood, setting Puck back on the couch, and was heading down the hallway. “Getting you clothes,” he said over his shoulder. “Skipping rest of stupid boring argument this time.”

Shane frowned, wanting to argue anyway, but Puck meowed up at him, pawing at his pants and shutting that thought down.

“I *know*.” Shane scooped him up, impulsively kissed his head, and smiled.

Rozanov idly cleared his throat and Shane’s head snapped up so fast he nearly tweaked something in his neck.

“What?” Rozanov asked defensively, holding a pair of sweats and a tshirt in his hands. “You can kiss your cat, it’s okay.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t,” Shane ground out, though that wasn’t even the point—he would kiss his cat a thousand times if he wanted to—but did Rozanov have to say the perfect thing to get under his skin every fucking time?

“No. But your face is loud.”

“That’s not a thing,” Shane muttered, even as his shoulders tightened. He put Puck down and grabbed the clothes. “Bathroom?”

Rozanov pointed. “First door on left. Extra toothbrush in top drawer.”

The moment the door shut, Shane rested his forehead against it and sighed. He was so tired, muscles tight in odd places, not all from the game he played hours ago or even the spill on the front walk.

He wanted to tell himself that it was fine.

He just... couldn't.

The scratching came as soon as he finished unbuttoning his shirt, followed by a familiar needy meow and an unfamiliar loud thud.

"Are you—" Shane started to say, opening the door in the rush, but Puck just hopped happily inside and rubbed up against his legs, oblivious as always.

"Uh, excuse me," he said to him. "This is not a shared space."

Puck did not seem to understand, or care, and flopped onto his side at Shane's feet, the same impossibly loud thud sounding, and sunk his claws and teeth into his toes.

"Ow! No! Stop it—feet are not for biting—*shit*."

One well-placed chomp had Shane stumbling to the side, waving his arm that still clutched the borrowed clothes and lifting his foot up with Puck still attached to it, until finally gravity was stronger than the kitten's grip.

"What the fuck, dude? I just need to—no, don't you dare."

Puck dared.

He launched himself at Shane's foot again and it was only by a quick reflex that Shane dodged it, moving his leg out of the way and reaching down to pick him up. "Nope. You just earned yourself a minor penalty."

Puck wriggled and protested, loudly, as Shane reopened the door a crack, just long enough to shove him back outside.

"Little menace," he muttered, but when he caught himself in the mirror, he was smiling, and when the scratching started again, he laughed.

Changing out of his clothes then felt easier, folding each article and setting them atop the vanity in a stack, even the socks (after he checked for holes). Puck began meowing and Shane ignored him while he held Rozanov's shirt in front of him.

His heart kicked into high gear. It was plain heather blue, innocuous enough to look at, but felt like a grenade in his hands.

He shouldn't be holding it.

He *really* should have refused harder.

It smelled of laundry detergent and something else he couldn't place when he pulled it on over his head—something warmer, faint but there—and his hands stalled at the hem before he dropped it into place. The dream resurfaced, mixing the scent with the images, heady in a way that had Shane bracing himself against the vanity.

Not now, he scolded himself, squeezing his eyes shut and finding it did nothing to help.

Shane focused on the cold stone beneath his hands, on Puck's meows that filtered through the door, on forcing his body to behave and stop lingering, until he could look at himself and not want to run. Or something worse.

It shouldn't matter, it was just a shirt. It wasn't—him. It didn't count.

He finished dressing as fast as he could, trying not to think about it any more than he already was. At least the shirt was soft and not that small, either. The sweatpants, of course, were too long and bagged at his ankles but Shane rolled the top as much as he comfortably could to make it less obvious.

Not that he needed to, this was just for sleeping, but he wasn't going to give Rozanov the satisfaction of being correct or letting him know that—letting him know anything. It was bad enough he was in his home, spending the night, wearing his fucking clothes and thinking of things he wanted to forget—Shane needed something to cling on to, and if that was pettiness, so be it.

He opened the drawer and grabbed a toothbrush from the packaging, decidedly not looking at anything else while he completed the task.

Rozanov was leaning against the wall at the end of the hallway looking entirely too amused when Shane emerged.

“Foot okay?”

“Fuck off,” Shane shot back, trying his best to keep from mirroring the amusement. It was hard though, when Puck chose that moment to let out the longest meow he'd ever heard.

“You too,” he said, with absolutely zero bite to it, picking Puck up and holding him to his chest.

When he looked back up, Rozanov was staring at him again, and Shane was getting real sick and tired of being subject to whatever it was that he was looking for.

But he didn't look away, either.

Again, Shane thought of a different setting: one with brighter lights bouncing off center ice and Rozanov staring at him as they waited for the puck to drop.

It could have been different.

"I put blanket on couch for you," Rozanov said, finally breaking the silence and walking back to the living room.

Shane followed him, frowning at the ache he could already feel forming in his back—one that seemed to already start in his chest. "Uh, thanks."

"Unless you want to share bed."

"What?" He flushed from head to toe. "No. Absolutely not."

"Okay," Rozanov shrugged. He whistled and Anya and Maksim both woke up, heads popping up from a dead sleep like daisies. They stretched, Maksim kicking one leg out behind him, before trotting down the hall. "Goodnight, Hollander."

"Yeah. Night."

Shane turned off the lights, grabbed the blanket, and laid down, bringing Puck along with him. As he closed his eyes, Puck began licking his chin with his rough little tongue, and Shane hoped beyond hope that nothing would happen while he slept.

He wasn't sure he could handle it, if it did.

It was a miracle he got any sleep at all. Between his ankles hanging off the end, one cushion slowly sliding out from under him, and Puck stepping on his face and then

threatening to suffocate him when he plopped down on top of it, Shane assumed that he wouldn't have been physically capable of it, even if his mind wasn't also stuck in a loop about everything Rozanov had said.

He kept going back to the same point, the same rift in something that could have been—they could have been opponents, rivals, or they could have been teammates.

They could have been something that Shane kept locked away in the dark.

Or maybe—

He must have fallen asleep because his eyes flew open, startled awake, and he lay there staring up into darkness for ten seconds making sure that he wasn't dreaming.

He wasn't. And thank fuck he didn't.

Puck was sitting up, front paws digging in his throat. "Buddy, you gotta move," he said, voice scratchy, from sleep and his mildly compressed voice box.

Shane lifted him up and tried to resettle him, but instead Puck jumped down to the floor. He could hear the distinct cadence of him hopping on the wood grow fainter and fainter.

The wind blew, spattering the window with tiny snowflakes and rattling the glass, and he pulled the blanket up to his ears in an attempt to chase after the fleeting remnants of sleep.

It wouldn't come,

His mind drifted as he laid there, filtering through idle thoughts about his schedule, about the loss against the Scouts, before it—annoyingly, inevitably—turned back to Rozanov.

Everything moved so fast after World Juniors—from the win, to the draft, and Shane proudly accepting his Rookie of the Year award even if he was practically a shoe-in for it. But if Rozanov had played, would he still have scorched Shane's insides with his stupid stare?

What would have happened if, at seventeen, or even eighteen, Shane met his match on the ice?

Would he be different?

Somewhere else, Puck yelled four times in succession, every fleeting half-asleep thought disappearing in an instant as Shane popped up, wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, and followed the sound.

“Puck,” he hissed into the dark kitchen, “you’re gonna wake everyone up.”

He sat by the back door—or rather Shane assumed the small black smudge was Puck but could have been a shadow for all he could tell. “Puck,” he hissed again, quieter this time but no less imploringly. The answering meow sounded almost like a question.

“Yeah, I’m right here,” he whispered, adjusting the blanket so it was held together with only one hand. He stepped closer, moving to grab him, fingers under his soft belly, when something through the door’s window caught his eye: a too familiar shape in the snow.

Shane stood with Puck in his arm and watched. It would have been idiotic to go out while the storm raged as it did, so it couldn’t have been Rozanov, standing on the back porch.

His hand was on the doorknob before he could talk himself out of it.

“What the fuck are you doing,” he said, the door open just wide enough to stick his face through the gap.

Rozanov whirled around like he’d been caught.

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

His hair whipped in the wind, and there was something small between his fingers, a dull orange glow that pulsed once.

Shane’s eyes tracked it without meaning to—the flare, the way Rozanov’s lips pursed and cheeks hollowed.

Shane blinked hard. “Are you... Are you smoking?”

“No,” he said around an exhale of smoke, stubbing out the cigarette and dropping the butt into a snowdusted container at the edge of the porch.

“I literally saw you,” Shane retorted, frowning. “You shouldn’t do that, it’s bad for your health.”

Rozanov slid through the doorway before Shane shut it. The cold followed him in, brisk and clean and threaded with smoke. It hit the back of Shane’s throat—he wanted to hate

it.

“What are you, my doctor?” Rozanov said derisively. “I am doctor.”

“For animals.”

“Still doctor,” he said, toeing off his boots and shucking off his coat which hung behind the door.

“Still bad for you.” There was snow caught on his curls and his eyelashes, reflecting in the dim light of the kitchen. Shane waited for them to melt.

“Maybe I like things that are bad for me,” Rozanov said, his eyes catching Shane’s, that same unreadable look in them when they quickly flicked down to his mouth and back up.

Shane caught himself doing the same. Everything grew hot even as the air was still chilled, so he cleared his throat like that would fix it.

“Like smoking at ass o’clock in the morning during a blizzard?” he asked, because that was safer, because it had to be about cigarettes and not anything else. “Why are you even up?”

Rozanov shrugged and leaned against the counter. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“You should try meditating next time. Or yoga.”

Rozanov tilted his head back and huffed. “You are so boring,” he said, quieter now, like he wasn’t speaking entirely to him.

“Because I take care of my body?”

“Because you think that is all you are.”

Rozanov’s voice was faster, sharper, the words slicing like a blade, and it hit before Shane could brace for it, recoiling like he’d been stung. Puck mewed softly where he had been sleeping. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Rozanov continued watching him, his jaw clenched and something unreadable passing through his expression. Then he shook his head. “Nothing,” he sighed. “Forget it.”

Shane held his gaze anyway.

“Fine,” he said curtly.

They stood there in silence long enough that Shane knew he should have gone back to the couch, but hadn’t.

“What about you?” Rozanov finally asked. “Could not sleep?”

Shane looked down at the sleeping kitten curled up against his shoulder and smiled. “Puck didn’t think I should be able to breathe.”

“He is very demanding.”

“And not exactly subtle about it,” Shane said, gently running a finger over Puck’s forehead. “But I kind of like that about him.”

“What do you mean?”

Shane shrugged. “Makes it easier to know when he wants something. Obvious and all that.”

“And you like that.”

“Well, yeah. Who wouldn’t?”

Rozanov went quiet and Shane met his eyes again, unable to stop.

“People think cats are...” Rozanov waved a hand as if trying to pull a word from the air itself. “Distant. Not caring. Is more that they are smart, less willing to trust strangers.”

Shane’s brows furrowed. “I don’t know, he seemed to trust me pretty quick.”

“No, no,” Rozanov said. “Cats are smart but kittens are stupid. Cute, adorable idiots. But he was not wrong to trust you.”

“I don’t know if I should feel proud or insulted.”

A smirk formed on Rozanov’s face. “Maybe you are also idiot.”

Shane huffed. “And there we go. Definitely insulted.”

Puck twisted and yawned in his arm, whiskers tickling his neck. Rozanov reached out and brushed a finger over the kitten’s chin, the tip of it catching on Shane’s skin.

It was nothing, barely anything, but his breath hitched anyway.

He swallowed, hard. “I should, um—”

Rozanov was still watching him in that way that didn’t feel like watching. More like waiting for something to happen that already had. “Sleep?”

“Yeah,” Shane breathed.

“Okay.” Rozanov’s smirk relaxed into something softer as his hand dropped. “If he will let you.”

As he left the kitchen, Shane wondered the same thing, in a different way.

Rozanov was awake when Shane finally roused. The room was bright, he was alone, but the low timbre of Rozanov’s voice was unmistakable.

He was speaking in Russian in the kitchen, accompanied by the tapping of little feet and the sound of Puck’s yelling.

Shane rose to his feet and shuffled toward the kitchen doorway, just in time to see Rozanov scooping kibble into bowls—two on the floor, one on the counter. Maksim attacked his bowl like it was the first meal he’d ever had, Anya stopped every few bites to look at Maksim, and Puck ate up high with Rozanov stroking over his back.

He let the scene unfold in front of him longer than necessary.

The thought came unbidden and staticky, that this was what he’d missed—this domesticity, this quiet care of Rozanov moving through his mornings, how easily he opened his home, his routine, his life to accommodate Puck.

As if Puck already belonged.

As if he himself could—

Shane tried to stop the rest of that thought from forming, but it was too late, and too difficult.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Is that safe? For him to be up there?"

Rozanov didn't turn, didn't stop petting Puck. "No. Not yet," he said. "That is why I must watch. But Maksim will eat his food if I put it on floor."

"Right. He's kind of... a lot."

"He was surrendered when his owner died," Rozanov said, glancing down at where Maksim was licking his chops in front of an empty bowl and staring at Anya. "He was very anxious and did not react good to being alone, even for short amount of time. I had Anya, the very best good girl, so I took him, hoping she would help him."

The gentle tone took him by surprise. It had felt different last night in the way that darkness allowed for truth, but now the sun shone bright off the snow outside leaving no shadows to hide in. Shane shifted from foot to foot. "That was nice of you."

"I am very nice," Rozanov said.

Shane smiled despite himself. "Since when?"

"Since always."

Shane snorted.

"Puck thinks I am very nice."

"You also called him stupid last night."

"Do you hear him?" Rozanov said to Puck as he picked him up off the counter, scratching his cheeks. "Being attacked in my own home. Your dad is not good guest."

Shane tried to hold back, but his smile grew wider, his shoulders more relaxed. "Don't try to turn him against me," he said.

Puck stretched the moment his paws touched the floor, hopping over to rub against Shane's ankles.

"Traitor," Rozanov said to Puck. Then, he looked at Shane. "Coffee?"

Shane almost said yes, his mouth opening to form the word, until he thought better of it. “No, I should—we should get going.”

“You keep saying that.”

“What?”

“‘Should.’”

“I’m not—it’s just a way of talking,” Shane said defensively.

“If you want to go, say that. If you have to go, say that,” Rozanov said. “It makes no sense, this ‘should.’ Is it suggestion you make to yourself?”

“No, it’s... I don’t know. Being polite, I guess.”

“Polite?” Rozanov echoed. “To who?”

“Just—in general.”

Rozanov narrowed his eyes for a moment, before saying, “English makes no sense.”

Shane barked a laugh. “We could speak French.”

The face Rozanov pulled was enough to convey his distaste. “No. French is worse.”

“I don’t speak Russian, so you’ll just have to deal.”

Rozanov said something to him in Russian, grumbled but with a bite, and Shane smirked.

“Actually, that’s better,” he said. “You’re definitely nicer when I can’t understand.”

“I thought you were leaving.”

“Right. I should—I *am* going to change,” Shane said, hesitating for a moment, waiting for nothing but not being able to step away until Rozanov turned his attention to the dogs sitting by the back door.

His clothes were right where he’d left them in the bathroom. It was only when he was finishing up the last button on his shirt that he noticed the discomfort, unusual and unwelcome. This was his best fitting suit, just enough room in the shoulders, just enough give through the thighs, and by all measures it was never uncomfortable.

It just... wasn't soft.

Shane folded the borrowed clothes, slowly, methodically, smoothing a hand over top to flatten any wrinkles.

Puck's carrier had been moved to the living room while he was changing, the kitten himself circling it, sniffing and pawing at it with Maksim while Anya laid at her owner's feet.

Rozanov was leaning against the arm of the couch, arms crossed.

"Thank you," Shane said, buttoning his cuffs. "For watching him."

"I told you, I am nice."

"And I'm paying you."

Rozanov blinked. "That too."

Shane bent down and unzipped the carrier, using the opportunity to push Puck into it and close it before he knew what happened. His protesting meows started almost immediately.

"I know," Shane said. "You still hate this."

He slipped on his shoes next, followed by his coat, and grabbed the handle of the carrier. He was ready but everything felt awkward, each step weird. By the door, Shane could feel the cold pressing in from outside, pushing in through the cracks. He turned to face Rozanov. "Thanks again."

Rozanov didn't say a word, just unfolded his arms and pushed himself to a stand, walking toward him with deliberate steps. Shane expected him to stop, to wait and maybe close the door behind him, but he didn't.

Not until he was too close, less than an arm's length, and all Shane could do was press backwards against the door.

"What are you doing," Shane managed through the tightness of his throat. The carrier in his hand jostled as Puck moved around but he hardly noticed.

"Testing something," Ilya said quietly, leaning a fraction closer.

Shane's pulse hammered. "Testing what?"

Rozanov's gaze held him steady, the air between them thick to where Shane felt like he could barely breathe, but it didn't feel like suffocating. It felt... like a stillness he had never known, as if his thoughts had stopped asking permission to exist.

Shane waited, not knowing what he was waiting for.

His body wouldn't move—not out of fear but more like it wanted to stay, to just stand there close enough to feel the heat of him. The loud part of his brain that screamed at him to do something, to get out, however, wasn't as compelling as the smaller part that wanted—if he leaned forward—

Then Rozanov pulled back and stepped away.

A tremor shot down Shane's spine. It did not feel like relief. It felt—ridiculously—like disappointment.

“That you would not run,” Rozanov finally said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

That was enough to send a shock through his body and jumpstart his brain. He should have. He should have stepped away, laughed it off, left earlier—done *something*.

But he didn't.

“That's—” Shane started, then stopped, because there wasn't a response that fit inside anything he was willing to say out loud.

Rozanov was still watching him.

Shane forced air into his lungs, but it was restless and wrong.

The carrier shifted in his hand again as Puck let out a muffled, irritated sound, cracking the fragile moment.

Shane nodded once, short and meaningless.

“Okay,” he said.

With a shaky hand, he reached for the door. It opened too easily, the cold hitting him like a clean cut. On the stoop, it took him a second too long to remember how to breathe normally.

Without stillness.

He left.

Chapter End Notes

I know less about dogs than I do cats (but honestly I probably know more about cats than literally any other subject so that's not exactly saying much), but in this house we don't care about breeds for any animal so go ahead and dream up your favorite mix for Maksim (and Anya, for that matter, as her breed is also left unnamed and I want to believe intentionally so).

(Puck's breed, by the way, is obviously 100% raccoon, 30% tribble, and 10% soot sprite)

Cat Facts:

Kittens grow rapidly and reach full grown status around one year old. The average weight of a newborn kitten is approximately 100g, while the average weight of an adult is generally somewhere between 8-10 pounds.

So yeah, kittens do not stay kittens for long, and honestly? Good. A very basic and totally accurate guideline: 0-3 months, kitten. 4-12 months, velociraptor. 1+ years, adult.

Okay fine, yes, the 4-12 month is more commonly referred to as teenage or adolescence, and runs from kittenhood through early adulthood (and they are generally more like 1.5-2 before they begin to exit this stage), but I stand by the velociraptor nomenclature. It is... a chaotic time. During this time, you may also notice your once super cuddly kitten no longer wants anything to do with you aside from terrorizing your existence. This is also why I (lovingly) call all kittens traitors. (What do you mean I raised you from 5 weeks old, nursed you back to health through fleamageddon and tapewormpalooza, held you in my arms while you slept for months only for you to turncoat and then choose my spouse as your favorite human?? I'm not even this particular cat's second choice six years later.) If you adopt a pre-velociraptor kitten based on their personality at that time, I'm not saying you're wrong to do so (because you're not), but know that their personalities are still evolving and embrace each new phase of their lives.

So yeah. You think Puck has been a menace? He's only just begun.

And contrary to what Shane says, bathrooms are, in fact, a shared space. Better to accept your fate early on as a cat owner.

Chapter 7: Play Under Review

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday! Thanks for being here and welcome to Ilya's POV <3

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

“I think Shane Hollander just pulled up in front.”

“What?” Ilya set the box of syringes down harder than necessary and crossed to the front window, stopping just short of brushing against Svetlana. She was right. There, sitting in the driver’s seat of an ugly Jeep, was the face of a man Ilya recognized immediately.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, Svetlana holding the rag and spray bottle in her crossed arms, watching as Shane Hollander turned his attention to something in his lap, something small, dark, and fluffy.

He could have let him get out, get close enough to read the sign and leave, and stay another image through glass and nothing more. There were other clinics he could go to, an emergency vet no more than a 10 minute drive away, and that would be that.

Or—

“Unlock the door,” Ilya said abruptly, the words out of his mouth before he knew it. “And take down the sign.”

Svetlana raised an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious,” she said, even as she moved to do so, tugging on the bottom of the piece of paper taped to the glass and flipping the deadbolt. “I know you have this weird crush on him, but this is going too far, even for you.”

“I don’t have a crush,” Ilya shot back, taking one last look out the front window before making his way toward the back of the clinic. “I have never had a crush in my life.”

“Way to make a girl feel loved.”

“You know what I meant,” he said, gathering the boxes and bottles he had lined up on the reception desk in his arms. “Just act normal.”

Ilya slipped through the back door, and pressed his ear against it. The bell sounded, muffled through the door, and he pulled away, cracking it open just enough to get a glimpse before shutting it again.

The clinic was supposed to be closed for inventory and a deep clean, but it would have to wait because Shane Hollander was in the lobby.

Shane Hollander with his stupid freckles and his annoying hair and his perfect people-pleasing smile, constantly splashed across television screens and newspapers—even a ridiculous billboard. Every day he drove past Hollander's obnoxious handsome face staring at him from the side of the road.

He unloaded the supplies onto the metal table, dropping them with a clatter. This was ridiculous. He had no reason to care and it was definitely not a crush. Hollander was just a hockey player—a boring one at that, never fighting and always following all of the rules. It was irritating, every time Ilya would have knocked the teeth out of a player Hollander just ignored.

Just once, Ilya wanted to see him lose his cool in the rink.

And that was the problem, because worse than Hollander refusing to fight was knowing that—even still and more than anything—Ilya wanted to know what it would be like to play against him, play *with* him. He wanted to see if he would have matched Hollander in skill like he used to believe he could—before everything changed. Hollander moved on the ice like he belonged there, was made for it, like the ice gave under him instead of fighting back.

Ilya could still remember the sound of his blades cutting in on the ice, clean and predictable, the way the rink air burned in his lungs when he pushed hard enough, and how easy it was to slip away, outside of himself, if only for as long as it took to shoot a goal.

He wanted that again.

Watching hockey, watching *him*, wasn't enough.

Only it had to be.

Ilya was looking at the mess of boxes and plastic containers scattered across the table when Svetlana came through the door with a clipboard.

“He found a kitten,” she said. “It ran in front of his car, but the kitten was alert, respiratory appeared slightly elevated but not abnormal, and no obvious signs of trauma.”

“Take him into exam room one, get vitals,” Ilya responded.

Svetlana didn’t move.

“Anything else?” he prompted.

“Waiting for you to ask about him.”

Ilya folded his arms across his chest. “Why would I ask? I’m sure he is just as boring as he is on TV.”

“And yet you make me watch every game you can and spend the whole time talking about him,” she said.

“Complaining,” he corrected, “because he is terrible. Now go and do your job and stop bothering me.”

Svetlana rolled her eyes, setting the clipboard down on the table next to him. “This was not supposed to be my job today,” she said, in English this time, only ever using it around clients and to herself, and slipped out through the exam room door.

Ilya picked up the clipboard and scanned it, eyes catching on the neat, deliberate handwriting, the way Hollander wrote in all caps except for his signature, and how under “Reason for Visit” he wrote: not mine, just want to make sure it’s okay.

“Puck,” he muttered, and scoffed. Surely not. Even Shane Hollander couldn’t be that boring.

The baby gates were only slightly more unwieldy than he had expected, the metal clanging as he adjusted the width for the third time. Svetlana held it steady with one hand while he tightened the bar to secure it into place.

“We could have put him in a kennel,” she said from above, smiling at him like this was much funnier than it was. Puck tilted his head at him from her arm. “Where did you even find these?”

“Puck is not a patient today,” Ilya said, ignoring her question. He was not about to tell her that he spent too much money on them, not when it could easily be expensed and she would never have to know anyway. It wasn’t like they would never have use for them again, there could be a time when the kennels were full and they needed alternative solutions, and Ilya told himself liked to have options. “Besides, this way you can keep an eye on him, monitor his activity and make sure that he stays out of trouble.”

“So I’m a babysitter today, is that it?”

“Yes.” He pulled on the gate a few times, making sure it wouldn’t move. “Nicole will be in at noon, you can trade off with her once she’s here.”

Svetlana sat in the office chair and put Puck down on her lap, stroking over his back. “At least he’s cute.”

“Except for when he won’t stop meowing,” Ilya countered. “Or when he’s destroying toys.”

“I wasn’t talking about Puck.”

Ilya glared at her. “Sveta, no. I am not doing this again.”

“And I am not stopping until you admit why you are going way above and beyond for this man.”

“Because he’s very rich and paying for it.”

She reached out over the desk and pulled the particular ESPN magazine from the stack set aside to change out the ones in the lobby. “And because he has abs you’d want to lick chocolate off of.”

“Give me that.” Ilya tried to snatch it out of her hands, but she pulled it away too quickly, his fingers inches from the pages. It fell open to the right page when she laid it on the desk in front of her.

Svetlana ran a finger over the glossy image of Shane Hollander barefoot and half-bent at the waist, holding a hockey stick. Every muscle, every sinew was on display, only a single piece of black clothing that did nothing to distract from the sheer amount of bare

flesh. Ilya had spent too long tracing the line of his calf up, past his knee, over the defined quad and curve of his ass—among other things, not that Svetlana needed to know.

“Shame that he opted to wear underwear,” she mused, “but I have a good imagination.”

“You are terrible, you know that?”

“Yet I’m not the one who creased the spine of the Body Issue to this exact page,” she said, leaning back in the chair. Puck craned his neck to sniff the picture.

“I did no such thing,” Ilya said with a scoff. “How did that even get mixed into the pile, this is a reputable place.”

“I took it from your house.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I should have never convinced you to do this with me and left you in Boston with your cars.”

Puck placed a paw on the desk to leverage himself up, continuing his own investigation. Ilya briefly wondered if he recognized him.

“Someone had to bankroll this place,” she said smugly. “Besides, I was bored and you were fun.”

“You mean I *am* fun.”

“Sometimes, like when you get all flustered about Shane Hollander.”

“Maybe if he was not so uptight, there would be something to be flustered about,” he said. “Yes, he’s hot, but you can find abs like that anywhere. Even I have abs, he is not special.”

Svetlana raised a brow and glanced at his abdomen. “Not like him.”

Ilya grabbed the fluffy rainbow cat bed by his feet and only just resisted throwing it at her, tossing it instead onto the floor behind her. “You’re lucky you’re holding Puck,” he told her.

“Of course, because I’m so threatened by a glorified pillow.” She gave Puck a kiss and set him on the bed. Immediately, he began kneading the plush material, his movements awkward as he first tried to balance before settling in. His paws kept moving as his body melted.

The phone rang, giving Ilya the excuse to walk away and pretend like he'd won the exchange. He headed into the back and glanced at the clock. Not long left before opening and his schedule was packed enough that the day would fly by, hopefully without notice.

It had been six days since Hollander walked into his clinic—six days since Ilya could not seem to let him walk out of his life.

He told himself it was curiosity, wanting to know how much of the golden boy image was an act, how far Ilya could push before it would crack—and Hollander made it so easy to push. Every pinched face he made, the way he startled like a deer, how he took every single piece of bait so readily like he couldn't help himself, was like Christmas. Witnessing Mr. Perfect Hockey Player be bad at so many things was the cherry on top of it all.

And then Hollander dropped Puck off and his face had gone tight in that way people's did when they were already too attached that Ilya couldn't bring himself to tease him about it. Everything his mouth didn't say was written on his face anyway—too obvious to miss—and Ilya found it annoyingly endearing.

That morning Hollander had looked like someone who hadn't realized yet that some decisions don't go away just because you avoid them. Now Ilya couldn't avoid the fact that even though he'd been aware of him—on screens, interviews, billboards, magazines—for years, none of that compared to having access to him like this, having him too close, where it was harder not to look too long.

So Ilya looked. Often.

Puck's meows were echoing off the walls as he opened the door to the lobby.

He took out his phone and snapped two pictures of him, extending his arm closer for the second. Puck sat still just long enough to be in focus before he hopped out of the bed and ran straight for one of the gaps in the gate, his cone blocking him from escape.

"Nice try," he told Puck, sending the close-up photo to Hollander, and then the other, practically hearing Hollander's worry about safety or something else boring.

The reply came quickly and Ilya chuckled to himself, reaching into his pocket to pull out the remains of the orange toy he'd left in with Puck the night before. He held it and took another photo.

With each text, his grin came easier, automatic, even if certain words took him a second to parse out. And when the opportunity came, Ilya did not pass up the chance to push a little farther, just to see what would happen. Once again Hollander made it easy. Easier than he should have.

Please.

This time he wanted to see if Hollander would push back.

Then someone knocked on the glass of the front door, his head snapping to attention unsure how long he'd been standing there, and found Svetlana smirking at him.

“What?” he asked, walking to unlock the door.

Svetlana gave him a knowing look. “Chocolate.”

“And um, thanks for calling.”

Ilya smiled. Hollander's voice was soft and he didn't know what to make of it, but found he didn't mind, not when the house was quiet despite Puck's best efforts. He really needed to call Andrea at the SPCA back soon. “You are coming back tomorrow, yes?”

“Yeah, but we're getting in late, around midnight,” Hollander said. “Is that too late?”

“That is no problem,” he said, tucking a finger under the cone and scratching the fur around Puck's neck. “I will text you address and you can pick him up from here.”

“You sure?”

“Yes Hollander, I am sure.” Ilya bit back a laugh. “It is Saturday and only midnight. I will not turn into pumpkin.”

“Okay. I'll text you when I land, just in case. Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Ilya stared at his phone after, only flopping back onto the mattress when he realized that he was waiting for more that wasn't going to come.

Because it had been... nice. To talk to him.

Next to him, Maksim snuffled and whined in his sleep, while Anya lifted her head. She looked at him like she needed him to know that he was being dramatic before settling back down, head resting on Maksim's hips. Ilya wasn't entirely convinced he was.

He knew that Hollander was a risk—too close to a wound he did not want to reopen, too close to a world that he had locked away for good, too close to a line already crossed and paid for.

It should not matter that Hollander was attractive, that Ilya noticed the way he looked back.

Every time he pushed, it felt less and less like a choice—more like following through on something that had already started.

He knew exactly how badly that could end.

It didn't stop him from wanting to find out.

“Your dad is a problem,” he said, switching back to Russian. He scooped Puck off his lap and held him above his chest, paws stretching out toward his face. “Why did you have to pick him, huh? Couldn't have found another boring millionaire instead?”

Puck only purred and wiggled his body, back leg scrambling for purchase until Ilya set him on top of him. He spun in a circle, the cone knocking Ilya in the chin, and laid down.

“That is coming off tomorrow,” he muttered, rubbing where it had scraped. “And then, you'll go home.”

The truth of it stung a little too deep.

Ilya curled his fingers around his phone, opened the camera, and held it at arm's length. Puck was still purring, warm against his skin, and Ilya smiled again, taking a photo.

He didn't need to send it.

He did anyway.

Stupid Shane Hollander.

Stupid Shane Hollander and his stupid loud face and his stupid adorable kitten.

Ilya groaned, tilting his head back, unlit cigarette between his lips. He had said too much. He just wanted Hollander to know that he knew just as much about hockey, that that was one place where they were equals.

Could have been equals.

The realization that it wasn't to get the upper hand came later.

Now it was nearly four in the morning and he was standing in a blizzard wondering what the hell was he thinking.

It took three tries to get the lighter to work, squeezing it in his palm to warm it up and tucking his chin down while cupping around it to shield it from the wind. The first drag hit like a breath of fresh air, even though he nearly had to sit down from the rush of lightheadedness.

The last time he smoked had been weeks ago, when he'd quit for the fifth time. He'd quit again, he just needed something—to help him sleep, to focus on, to quiet his mind.

To remind him that even though he wasn't the Ilya Rozanov he was supposed to be, he was still him. Better, probably. Good enough.

His ankle didn't hurt anymore, the tendon healed to the point where he hardly noticed it anymore and his calf nearly equal in strength now, but by the time he could get back in skates, it was too late. For many reasons.

Ilya made a different choice, even if it wasn't much of a choice at all.

Even if there was nothing left for him, when he made it.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

The voice cut through the wind, but Ilya would have turned anyway, unable to stop himself once he knew he was there, the cigarette halfway back to his mouth.

Hollander’s face was shadowed but he could still read every line of his distaste.

Ilya took a drag.

“Are you... Are you smoking?”

“No,” Ilya said, just because he could. If Hollander was going to look like that, then Ilya was going to make it worse.

Hollander didn’t let it go—of course he didn’t. Something about how he shouldn’t, about his health, like Ilya hadn’t heard it all before.

Ilya rolled his eyes, pushing past Hollander through the open door. “What are you, my doctor? I am doctor.”

“For animals.”

“Still doctor,” he said.

“Still bad for you.”

And Ilya could have said nothing. Maybe he should have said nothing.

Instead:

“Maybe I like things that are bad for me.”

The words came out too easily, and something uncomfortable settled into his stomach, followed by a much more welcome sensation of heat, lower. That was the feeling he chased, the one that dragged his gaze to Hollander’s mouth.

It wasn’t even remotely surprising that Hollander looked back.

“Like smoking at ass o’clock in the morning during a blizzard?” His voice was flustered and perfect. “Why are you even up?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“You should try meditating next time,” Hollander said. “Or yoga.”

Of course he would say that, too. Take care of your body, do everything right. Be perfect. It rubbed against the same uncomfortable feeling he’d dismissed, the pressure light but noticeable, and Ilya exhaled sharply, barely a laugh. “You are so boring.”

Hollander’s frown deepened. “Because I take care of my body?”

Because bodies break, he almost said. Because it doesn’t matter how careful you are. Because it can be taken from you.

Because sometimes you are born broken, just like her.

“Because you think that is all you are.”

It came out sharper than he meant, too quick to take back—and cut backward at the same time.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Ilya wanted to tell him to figure it out, that he was wasting his life, that he could be so much more, that he himself could have been more, too—more than a pawn for his father, more than a mirror of his mother—

Instead he said, “Nothing. Forget it.”

Hollander stayed there a moment longer, like he was waiting for more.

Ilya didn’t give it to him.

The conversation shifted after that, softened and dragged somewhere safer: Puck. Always Puck. Something easy, something obvious.

He bit back the words that he could also be obvious. If Hollander wanted.

He talked about the kitten instead.

All the reasons that he should stop floated through his mind, one after the other and all jumbled up, until they disappeared into nothing.

He reached out, his fingers brushing under the kitten’s chin, and touched him.

Hollander stilled, his breath catching and eyes locked on his. Ilya wondered what would happen, if he flexed his finger, touched him again. Would Hollander allow it a second time—would he want it, lean into it, ask for it.

Would it erase the lingering, bitter taste of inadequacy at the back of his own throat if he did.

Only Hollander made his excuse, and Ilya went back to his room, the rumpled sheets and sleeping dogs waiting just as he'd left them.

He climbed into bed and was alone, again, in the dark. It felt wrong without the wind, without the distraction of the cigarette—without Hollander standing too close and saying things that were easier to push against than the quiet.

As he tried to sleep, all he could think about was how he wanted to know what else he could do, just because Hollander would let him.

Just to see how obvious he needed to be.

He could have let him just leave.

It would have been nothing to stand where he was, say something dismissive or maybe a jab at the circles under his eyes, let Hollander fumble his way out the door with his too careful thank yous and his too polite smiles, and close the door behind him. It would have been simple.

He could pretend that nothing changed overnight.

Instead, Ilya pushed himself off the couch.

Hollander was halfway turned toward the door, shoulders tight under the suit jacket like he was bracing for an impact that hadn't come yet. He moved like that a lot—like he expected something, even when nothing was happening. It only made Ilya want to make something happen more.

He crossed the space evenly until it dwindled, moving before he settled on a reason.

Up close, it was infinitely better, and worse. He had noticed before, obviously, maybe a little obsessively, but proximity made everything sharper: Hollander's eyelashes, straight and dense and obscuring his eyes when he looked down; his lips pressing into a line when he was thinking too hard and how, when he overcorrected a moment later, his mouth opened just a fraction; the muscles at his jaw tensing as he swallowed.

His freckles.

"What are you doing," Hollander asked, but he didn't move. He just stood there—waiting, again.

Ilya expected that. He didn't expect how much he liked it.

He tilted his head, studying him as he leaned forward, watching as Hollander's pupils widened. "Testing something."

"Testing what?"

Ilya considered not answering, considered pushing further instead, just to confirm what he needed to know.

That Hollander would not stop him.

And that he himself wasn't—

Ilya held his gaze and stayed where he was, close enough to feel the heat of him, long past the point where he should have stopped.

He could do it. He could close the distance entirely and find out, definitively.

Ilya stepped back, putting just enough space between them to breathe again.

"That you would not run," he said.

It came out heavier than he intended and he shoved his hands into his pockets before he could do something stupid, like reach for him again.

"Okay," Hollander said finally, the word clipped and useless.

And then he left. Just like that.

The door opened too easily, cold air slicing through the space between them, and then it was gone—him, the moment, all of it—like it had never been there at all.

Ilya didn't follow. He stood where he was, staring at the closed door longer than necessary, jaw tight.

Hollander hadn't deflected, hadn't laughed, hadn't pushed him away—just stood there and had taken it, like he would take anything Ilya gave him, good or bad. Like he wanted to.

Ilya's chest tightened with something dangerous.

Something like—

He exhaled sharply through his nose and dragged a hand through his hair, pacing once across the room before stopping himself. "Idiot."

He didn't bother figuring out who.

It had been three days.

Three days where Ilya had gone to work, smiled at his patients, laughed with his clients, and went through the motions of his life like nothing had changed even as the reminders piled up that something most definitely had.

It started with Maksim, who began to make laps through the house the first day, staring at corners and sticking his nose under the furniture while he whimpered. Ilya moved the couch once, thinking that a toy had been knocked under it, but when he uncovered an empty space, Ilya frowned. He could pretend that he didn't know, that it was just a flare of anxiety left over from his past circumstances, until he caught Maksim carrying around a small hand towel that did not belong to him.

Anya watched and trailed after Maksim, nudging him with her nose from time to time before walking back to their bed and looking over her shoulder as if waiting for him to

follow. When he didn't, she looked to Ilya almost helplessly.

Ilya reached for his phone without thinking, held it in his hand with the screen lit up in front of him before he understood why.

Nothing. His thumb hovered over the messages icon anyway.

He didn't open it.

Maksim kept looking the next day, checking spaces he'd already been and whining when there was nothing there. Ilya didn't try to tell him to stop.

And Ilya knew it would be okay, that Maksim would eventually accept that their houseguest was gone. He would forget and go back to bothering Anya.

Ilya checked his notifications every chance he got, between rowdy Pomeranians and calm elderly labradors, any time he walked past his office and could pop in for a second he didn't always have. Each time he looked at his phone and saw nothing, the loudness of it became harder and harder to ignore.

He could have texted him, had done so enough that it wouldn't be weird or unusual, but every time he even thought of opening up their messages, Ilya let the impulse pass like it was still a part of the game—like he hadn't already stopped playing it. Once, he tried to convince himself that maybe it was better if he didn't text him, if he never did again. Then the problem would go away.

But Ilya didn't want that either.

He wanted *him*—in texts that came too quickly, in conversations that lasted too long, in moments where he didn't walk away.

Ilya didn't know what was worse now: the wanting or the waiting.

Or that he was waiting at all.

Ilya had never been good at that either.

So when Svetlana asked if they were still going, still using the tickets her father gave her every season since Ilya convinced her to move here, it was the easiest answer in the world to say yes.

He wondered if Hollander was waiting, too.

Chapter End Notes

Shane's photo in ESPN's Body Issue is based on Martin St Louis's from the 2013 issue. In case you wanted to look that up. And then use your imagination. For funsies.

Cat Facts:

Today, let's talk about feral cats and TNR (Trap - Neuter - Return). I can't speak for every country but the US is (and has been) in an overpopulation crisis when it comes to cats and one that we cannot adopt our way out of. It had always been bad, but during 2020 veterinary and spay/neuter services were (understandably) shut down for months—the months where most kittens are born and the population basically exploded. Cats can get pregnant as young as 4 months old and the gestational period is about 9–10 weeks long, so without those services, shit went south FAST.

TNR is the ethical way to even begin to get a handle on it, but even with all hands on deck, it's kind of like bailing out the Titanic with a thimble at times. If you want to get involved in rescue, I highly recommend looking into TNR services in your area and seeing what you can do—whether that be volunteering with a local rescue or doing research and jumping straight in on your own. Trapping cats can be equally challenging and rewarding, but I know that with each one, that's another thimblefull and it's worth it. My area is fortunate to have multiple local rescues dedicated to TNR but even we are all drowning in kittens right now, and have to make hard calls daily when it comes to whether a cat goes to foster/shelter or gets released to their colony and caretaker. The reality is that there are just simply not enough homes for them all.

If it sounds bleak, it's because it kind of is, but hopefully not forever. Not if people keep helping, keep wanting better for community cats, and do whatever they can in whatever way they can.

Chapter 8: Interference

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday, friends! Thank you so much for being here, for leaving kudos, love, comments, and enjoying this ride with me. I know I said it already, but you all really do make posting this a highlight of my week <3

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

“Hollander, focus!”

Shane tightened his grip on his stick and pushed off hard, catching the ice in a clean line that immediately fell apart when the puck bounced off Hayden’s blade and skittered wide.

“Shit—sorry,” he muttered, circling back into position.

Another pass, cleaner this time and almost automatic, except his timing was off, again. The puck clipped the heel of his stick and spun away like it had somewhere better to be.

“Again,” Theriault called.

Shane exhaled through his nose, jaw locking.

This was not hard, this was not even thinking. This was muscle memory, repetition, structure. Something solid, something routine. Two weeks ago he had been able to do this practically with his eyes closed, and this should have been no different. He set up for the next pass.

And missed.

“Fucking—” He cut himself off before it became audible, resetting his stick harder than necessary.

From the side, J.J watched like he was trying not to make it obvious.

Shane forced his hands steady on the shaft of his stick.

This was not how it was supposed to be. Puck was home and settling in—hellbent on sniffing every corner, scratching every surface, attacking Shane’s ankles every time he

walked around a corner, but he was home. Things were supposed to go back to normal, a new normal where he had an absolute lunatic of a kitten, but normal nonetheless.

Because normal didn't look like overshooting a pass he could make blindfolded. Normal didn't look like his edges catching late, like his body arriving a fraction after his brain gave the order.

Normal didn't look like snow collecting on eyelashes, a mouth too close, a door clicking shut.

You would not run.

Shane was two seconds away from breaking the stick over his knee. Normal was supposed to be forgetting everything that happened and moving forward.

"Hey," Hayden called. "You good?"

"Yeah," Shane said immediately. "I'm good."

He tapped his blade to the ice, over and over, like it could reset something in his head, in his body.

The next puck came in, he brought his stick back, hit it cleanly, and made the pass.

"Better," Theriault said.

Shane nodded, eyes already forward. "Yes, coach."

He skated through it like that meant anything, knowing that it should have. He was captain and he earned that by being dependable, steady on the ice and off. He was not going to let that slip through his fingers because of something... something he should have been able to ignore.

Hockey was important. He just had to focus.

Shane kept his head down and worked through the rest of the drills, breathing the steps aloud: left, right, push, pull, arm straight, knees loose. If he was speaking, he wasn't thinking, and if he wasn't thinking, it would be enough.

Hayden skated up to his side as they left the ice. "Are you really good?" he asked, voice lower than normal, something cautious in his expression.

"I said I'm fine," Shane snapped.

Three heads turned toward them while Hayden's brows shot up.

Shane swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I'm just tired," he said, aiming for something even. He couldn't tell if it worked. "Um, Puck doesn't really understand that humans need to sleep at night." It wasn't a lie. Puck spent half his first night home stepping on his face or attacking his feet under the blankets, but Hayden didn't need to know what happened the night before that. No one did.

Hayden laughed, airy and almost too casual. "Welcome to my world."

"Yeah," Shane said, just to have something to say. "But I'm fine."

"You want to come for dinner tonight? Jackie said she found a new trout recipe she wants to try. That's something you still eat, right?"

Shane opened his mouth to say yes. It should have been easy, the obvious answer. Hayden's house was always a rush of noise—voices, footsteps, a television turned to loud, too bright cartoons and cheery music. It would be a distraction, just what he should need, but the thought of sitting there watching Hayden and Jackie and the kids somehow perfectly navigating their own chaos like a choreographed dance made Shane's skin crawl.

"I think I'm going to stay home," he said too quickly after too long, Hayden looking at him again like something was wrong. "Take a nap or something. Go to bed early."

"Sure."

"But thanks. I'm fine."

Hayden clapped him on the shoulder and Shane did his best not to flinch. "You already said that."

Shane ducked his head. "Right, yeah."

The locker room smelled the same—tape, metal, detergent, sweat that had been scrubbed into something almost clean—but it wasn't right. He changed out of his gear and showered as quick as he could, looking anywhere but at someone's face all the way through the routine of it.

He could feel their eyes on him as he slipped through the door without looking back.

Puck greeted him the moment he got home, letting out a string of wailing meows that Shane was beginning to learn meant that he required attention. He wondered if anyone who had ever called cats aloof had ever met one before, as Puck did not have a chill bone in his body.

“Okay, okay,” he said, dropping his bag by the door and toeing off his shoes as quickly as possible. “You don’t have to yell.”

Shane scooped him up in one fluid motion, the act becoming more like muscle memory with how often it was demanded of him. The moment Puck was held against his chest he started purring, deep and loud rumbles, a white noise so addictive that it blocked out the world almost instantly—like if he could hold Puck like this for the next forever, maybe he’d get through it.

That was the thought Shane clung to as he carried Puck with him, that because of Puck’s purrs everything else was unimportant.

Until he took one step into his living room and looked up.

Nothing could be worse than what he’d discovered in his bathroom the first morning, but it seemed like Puck wanted to try anyway.

The books that had been on his coffee table were on the floor now, as well as the remote control, the small decorative wood sculpture, and the ceramic coasters that had all once made the table their home. One of the coasters did not survive the impact, cracked into three parts with dust and shards in between.

Shane sighed. “Puck. What did you do.”

It was less of a question of Puck’s actions and more of a resignation that any semblance of control Shane believed he had laid shattered on the ground with the coasters. He did a sweep of the rest of the apartment, finding one of his shoes dragged out of the closet by a shoelace and the stack of luggage he had used to create an impromptu staircase to his bed knocked down in a heap.

“I was only gone for three hours,” he muttered. In response, Puck purred louder and bit his chin.

Shane jerked his head back and released Puck back to the floor. “Nope. Faces are not for biting. In fact, nothing is for biting—not my feet, not my ankles, not my hands, and definitely not my face.”

Puck whined again and tapped his leg with a paw.

In the time it took Shane to restore order, restacking books and centering the sculpture back where it belonged, sweeping up the remains of the ceramic, Puck took every opportunity to be as close as possible, attempting to climb onto his back while he bent over to pick up the pieces and attack the broom as he swept.

“You are not normal,” he said to Puck once he was finished, collapsed on his back on the couch while the kitten settled on his chest. “Did you do this to him, too?”

The words hung in the air and Shane stilled as flashes of thought fired through him—of Puck and the dogs, in a cozy corner in an office, on a bed of hard muscle.

A crooked smile.

Shane groaned and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to stop the images or to stop the pounding in his skull, the noise behind his eyes, the way his body wouldn't settle. It wasn't fair. This wasn't supposed to be his life. He was supposed to keep going, keep excelling, winning more cups and cementing the Voyageurs legacy with his name etched in it so that years later, when Shane was long retired, maybe old and grey, his name would mean something more, something forever.

He'd be one of the all-time greats, because he earned it, deserved it. Because he was the best player on the ice.

It was not supposed to be anything else.

He wasn't Scott Hunter—

Shane shifted his weight and pressed the toe of the blade into the ice before releasing the puck toward the net with a powerful flick of his wrist. It was a clean shot, as fast and slick as any other he'd taken, but instead of finding the gap the puck hit Boston's goalie square in the chest.

It was the fourth shot he'd taken, the fourth shot that didn't score.

"Yeah," a voice said nearby, almost conversational, like they were talking about the weather. "I used to hate playing you."

He turned his head slightly, Cliff Marlow gliding past him, not even fully looking over his shoulder.

"But this is easy." Marlow grinned and gave a small shrug.

Shane clamped his jaw and squared his shoulders before skating off the ice without a word.

Theriault caught his eye as he plopped down on the bench, his mouth a hard line that matched the ones etched between his brows. He didn't have to say anything for Shane to know his disappointment and frustration, it was the same he'd seen in practice the day before, and he could hear the cutting edge of his admonishment in his head without a word.

Focus. Do better.

Don't make me rethink that.

Someone handed him a water bottle and he drank without looking, the blood rushing in his ears as he watched the game unfold in front of him. He tried to catalogue it, refine it into strategy, play along in his mind like it was him out there, deciding what choices he'd make, but the second a play was over, it was gone.

He'd been staring without blinking at the ice, the blue of their logo at center burning into his retinas until he remembered to look away. The afterimage glowed orange, hot and dangerous, like a cigarette in the snow.

"Hollander!"

Shane blinked his eyes hard to erase the image and stood for the change. This was not the time.

Back on the ice, he moved through the neutral zone, head up, his grip steady and the next move clear. It should have been simple, all he had to do was chip off the boards, reset, and keep pushing forward. He could see Hayden ready for the pass, a move they'd practiced, practically perfected.

Instead, he tried to force it, and a stick he didn't see jabbed the puck loose.

For a half-second, everything slowed in the worst way. Shane saw it like he was underwater: the puck already gone in the other direction, two skaters exploding toward it before his body could catch up with his head.

The arena shifted tone instantly—crowd rising, benches leaning forward, shouts of anger and disbelief flooding his senses. Shane pivoted hard, pushing off to chase, but it was too late.

The siren sounded before he could do anything about it and he stopped skating, like the red light above the goal was an instruction, a warning, and a taunt.

His eyes drifted toward the stands, the groans louder than the cheers, like he wanted them to know he heard, that maybe they would forgive him this one time, this one game, because he'd do better—he'd be better again—when he saw him.

Which should have been impossible, Shane never focused on any face in the crowd before, not even his parents, but halfway up the lower bowl was Rozanov, watching him.

He looked away immediately and told himself not to look back.

He did anyway. Rozanov was still there.

Shane's fists shook, clenched around his stick so tight that it felt like it would crumble under the tension alone. He wanted to scream, to silence everything with a roar so loud that his insides would combust and his mind would finally stop pointing at the one thing he needed to forget.

The one person.

Marlow's laugh sounded right behind him. "Don't change a thing," he said, his voice now too amused and smug for someone Shane used to never pay attention to.

“Seriously.” He tapped his stick against Shane’s skate as they separated, light and almost lazy.

Shane glared all the way to center ice.

What happened next was a blur. The puck was dropped, Shane drove it down the ice, lined up the shot—and sent it careening behind the net. Shane dashed to the board battle, bodies colliding and sticks clashing, and in the midst, he lost sight of the puck.

Somehow Boston’s center broke free and emerged victorious.

Marlow slammed him against the boards. “That’s soft—keep it up.”

And it was nothing. Not really.

Nothing Shane hadn’t heard before, tough guys trying to assert their dominance or throw him off his game, and it never worked, not when Shane routinely left them in his wake, when he’d heard worse.

But this time it hooked under his skin, latching on to something already frayed and raw, unleashing a tidal wave of noise, of everything he had been holding back and pushing down—every fine, every normal, every denial he had tried to make true.

“What’d you say?”

Marlow blinked and the laugh that followed was a little thrown off, a little dismissive. Just enough. “What? I said keep—”

Shane shoved him before he could finish, gloves pushing hard against Marlow’s chest.

“Hey—” Marlow shoved back before closing in, looming over Shane. “Relax—”

He didn’t. His gloves were on the ice before he even registered his body was moving, and for a second—just a second—everything went quiet when he threw a punch. Not cleanly, not the kind of punch you’d see replayed on highlight reels, but enough to snap Marlow’s head to the side, the sting of it sending a jolt up Shane’s arm that rattled something loose in his chest.

It was the first punch he’d ever thrown.

The crowd roared, or maybe they gasped. Shane couldn’t tell the difference anymore.

Marlow recovered fast and then they were both in it, gloves off, helmets half-loose, grappling and swinging in tight, ugly motions. It wasn't about form or about winning. It was friction, release, everything Shane had been holding in finally forcing its way out through clenched fists and reckless force.

Someone shouted and more bodies closed in.

Marlow landed one square to Shane's ribs and it knocked the air from his lungs, but Shane barely felt it. He swung again, wild, caught fabric, shoulder, something—

Then arms were on him dragging him back.

“Enough! Enough!”

His skates scraped hard across the ice as they pulled him away, chest heaving, vision narrowed and unfocused all at once. Marlow was still saying something, laughing maybe, and Hayden was chest-to-chest with him, face contorted as he yelled, but it sounded distant now, like it was underwater again.

Shane looked away, didn't look at them again.

He didn't look at anyone.

Except—

No.

He forced his gaze down. Not the stands. Not him.

Not—

“Hollander!” Theriault's voice cut through everything as he was guided toward the box. “What the hell was that?”

Shane didn't answer.

Because he didn't have one. Because “I don't know” wasn't acceptable, not for him, not for the captain, not for the player who was supposed to be unshakable.

The penalty box door slammed shut behind him with a hollow echo.

He leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees, helmet still on, breath coming too fast. His knuckles throbbed, already swelling, but at least that was welcome—that was

something real, something physical.

Not like the rest, like the way his thoughts kept circling the same place, the same moment:

You would not run.

“Fucking get it together,” he muttered under his breath.

It didn’t work like it should have. It wasn’t really working at all. His eyes stung, watered, and he hoped whatever camera was on him, whatever commentary was being broadcast attributed it to pain, to shock—even to shame or humiliation would be acceptable, anything that was just far enough away from the truth.

So he could pretend that he’d just cracked from the exhaustion.

He could pretend he still knew exactly who he was.

“So whatever the hell is going on with you, you leave that at the door, you understand me?”

Theriahult had pulled him into his office as he was leaving. Shane had opened his mouth exactly once to defend himself, to spew one of the fabricated excuses he had created while he sat in the penalty box, but he quickly learned that he wasn’t going to be heard. Theriahult laid into him almost as soon as the door shut, about responsibility, about composure, about how captains didn’t get rattled by an idiot looking for a reaction, a position that he once again mentioned was not set in stone forever.

If it had been about the fighting, Shane would have listened but not absorbed it. Picking fights or even continuing them wasn’t the type of player he wanted to be, actively striving to be the guy who was better than it and pissing everyone else off in the meantime. But it wasn’t.

It was about how he missed every shot he took, and not because they were good ones stopped by a lucky goalie, but because they weren't. Shane didn't need Theriault's red face yelling at him to know. There was nothing he could say that Shane wasn't already thinking, wasn't already trying to handle.

The fight was just the whipped cream on top of a shit sundae.

The cherry was Ilya fucking Rozanov.

"Yes, sir. It won't happen again," he said.

"It better not. Get it out of your system *now* and come ready to play."

Shane spent too long under the hot water of the shower, standing there until he couldn't feel it anymore, and after he hardly noticed that he had dressed and packed up his bag.

He left with his tail between his legs. They took him off media duty and he had never been so fucking grateful to be able to just... leave. A few of his teammates gave tight smiles and wary glances, Hayden gave him a concerned look, while J.J. bumped his fist and said, "You should have told me he was bothering you. No one fucks with you, ouais?"

He nodded and made his way out behind him, slipping his phone out of his pocket out of reflex. The screen lit up, showing a missed call and a text from his mom, and nothing else.

Good. That was—

Good.

He responded quickly to his mom, telling her he was fine, that he didn't want to talk tonight and would call her tomorrow and put it on do not disturb.

"Boston hasn't made the playoffs in years," J.J. said, falling into stride with him as they walked down the corridor. "Going after you probably makes them think they have a chance."

"Yeah." Shane knew it sounded flat, absent, but J.J. carried on anyway.

"Don't sweat it. Some of the guys had a pool going, betting on when you'd get in a fight." J.J. smirked and nudged his shoulder against Shane's.

Shane nearly stopped in his tracks. "Seriously? And no one ever told me?"

J.J. shrugged. “Penalty for insider trading.”

“Wait, you bought in?”

“Of course I did, it was supposed to be easy money!” J.J. laughed, his grin wide, and for a moment the world felt just as simple. “You lost me a hundred bucks.”

Shane ducked his head. “Unbelievable. When did you bet?”

They moved through another set of double doors, pushing into the next corridor. “Never. Thought you’d retire first.”

“How is that easy money?”

“It is called a safe investment, mon ami.”

Shane exhaled, the trace of a laugh spilling out, but he didn’t feel it. Instead, another wave of discomfort rolled through him, one that had been momentarily kept at bay by an easy distraction.

But the reality was that his one small crack was a gaping wound, surrounded by the leeching disappointment of the fans, his team, his parents—everyone watching him like he’d already failed. And Shane didn’t know what to do with that, suddenly struck by the realization that everything he relied on, every system in place and control he’d manufactured, was crumbling faster than he could keep up.

He was patching holes when the foundation was buckling.

They were walking past another pair of doors when Shane stopped dead in his tracks.

That wasn’t—

His first thought was that he should have kept walking.

The second thought was that he wasn’t going to.

He took two steps backward and turned to the small windows set into the heavy security doors. Beyond was another hallway, stretching through the space, with another set of the same doors on the other side. Through those he saw Rozanov’s profile looking down at the ground.

And that was once again impossible because the place was huge with a million different exits and there was no way that this was still happening.

“You okay?”

Shane spun his head toward J.J., his bag slung over his shoulder and brows furrowed. “What?”

“Did you see something?” J.J. took a step toward him and Shane instinctively moved to block him.

“No. I mean—yes. Uh. Someone dropped something. A coat. Or something. Just gonna...” He pointed his thumb behind him. “You go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Yeah, okay.” J.J. clapped his hand on Shane’s arm once with another grin. “Always looking out for others.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, forcing a smile on his face. “Yeah.”

He was pushing through the first set of doors before he could talk himself out of it.

In his head, a new refrain: *Get it out of your system*. Shane didn’t even bother asking what “it” meant.

He passed single doors and another hallway leading to the right, but his eyes stayed on Rozanov. The last few steps he picked up the pace until he was pushing the crash bar and opening the door just fast enough to make Rozanov jump.

“What the fuck?”

“Get the fuck in here,” Shane hissed, eyes darting down one way before turning to the other and seeing Svetlana staring at him with a raised brow. A laugh echoed from further away. “Now.”

Rozanov looked between him and Svetlana, some sort of wordless conversation happening between them, and then he complied. Shane grabbed a fistful of his coat and pulled him toward the first door he saw, yanking it open while the security door clicked shut.

He grasped blindly until his fingers connected with a switch and light filled the room. It was some sort of maintenance closet, racks of cleaning products and stacks of cloths, mops and brooms hung on the wall and leaning in the corner, three wheeled yellow buckets lined up in a row, but it didn’t matter. This wouldn’t take long.

Shane let go and whirled on him, three feet of space between them all the room allowed. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Rozanov looked at him like he was an idiot, but there was something else there too, something more mischievous, pleased, and bold. "There was a game tonight, yes?" he said, gesturing with his hand. "I was watching it."

Shane groaned in frustration as his head began to pound. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"You shouldn't be here," he ground out. His fingers had curled into fists at his sides to keep them steady, to help him get through this. Tell Rozanov off, delete everything, and get it out.

"Again with the should," Rozanov said and for the first time Shane could tell that he finally wasn't the only one on edge. "Just say what you want."

What Shane wanted was irrelevant, not when he had a job to do. He brought his hands up and combed his fingers through his hair roughly, tugging on the ends. "You keep... you keep barging into my space and inserting yourself into my life." His teeth clenched. "Just stay out of it."

Rozanov barked a laugh.

"Fuck you," he snapped. "You think this is funny?"

"I am not *in* your life." Rozanov took a half a step closer. "You keep pulling me into it. *You* came to my clinic. *You* got yourself stranded at my house. *You* pulled me in here. So yes, I think it is funny."

"It's not," Shane said, jutting his chin. The pounding grew louder. "I'm fucking sick of it. Sick of you criticizing me after every game, judging my every move, sending me fucking photos and making me feel like I'm insane!" It spilled out, one word after another, and there was no way to stop them. They scraped against his throat until it felt raw.

"I can't play like this," Shane continued frantically. "I can't fucking stop thinking." He looked away. "And that can't happen."

His breath caught and he swallowed hard. "This can't happen."

Rozanov's eyes narrowed, his gaze flicking back and forth between Shane's. "This."

"Yes!" And that word was different, ripped out of him a little too desperate and uncomfortable. Not right. "Whatever fucking mind games you're playing, your stupid tests... you and me—" The words stalled out violently. "This can't happen."

There was a beat of silence before Rozanov scoffed. "You make it sound like I am making it happen. I am not—" He stopped, jaw flexing. "I am not messing with you."

It felt like a jolt of electricity, threatening and unstable. Shane clung to the only thing he could. "You're an asshole."

"Yes," Rozanov said, taking another half step toward him. "But I think you like it."

"I don't." He said it automatically and it was true, it was supposed to be true—

"Then tell me to stop." He was so tall, the cleft of his chin drawing Shane's eye, the line of his jaw right there, his breath warm, mingling with his own. "Tell me to stop right now, and I will leave you alone. But I do not think you want me to stop."

Shane's lips parted, but he said nothing. Rozanov's eyes drifted toward them before snapping back up.

"And I do not want to stop."

He was too close now and Shane's head was so loud with the pounding, with the buzzing, with the heat of it all.

Shane was going to say stop. He was. He could have.

But what he said was, "This is a bad idea."

Rozanov's lips tilted to one side. "You are so focused on what you should do that you have forgotten about what you *can* do."

Shane swallowed, his gaze catching on that stupid smirk. "And what can I do?"

"Anything. Everything," Rozanov said, his voice low and quick, almost unsteady. "If you want."

"I—"

Want.

“Last chance,” he said, so low that Shane had to focus to hear it.

It should have sounded like a warning or a threat or a promise, but it didn’t. It sounded like permission.

His body tipped forward before he decided to move.

A growl tore free from Rozanov’s throat—or maybe his own, Shane couldn’t tell.

Because the space around them collapsed to nothing the second their lips met, the sudden heat of it, Rozanov’s palm against his jaw burning like a brand, the impact of it spreading faster than he could keep up with. Because Rozanov kissed him like he was made for it, the shape of his mouth fitting against Shane’s like it already knew how, making all the noise, all the endless friction in his head go silent at once. Perfectly, startlingly silent.

Because it was—*everything*.

Their noses clashed, and the edge of Rozanov’s stubble scraped against his upper lip as Shane tilted forward again. Rozanov’s hand spread across his cheek, thumb pressing in as he tilted Shane’s head, deepening the kiss.

And this time, he knew it was him that groaned, heard it reverberate up through his chest and into Rozanov’s mouth. Shane’s hands clutched at Rozanov’s coat, holding on like it was the only solid thing left. The pounding hadn’t disappeared. It was his heartbeat, ricocheting through his body like it desperately needed Shane to know, to see.

To stay.

When he thought about this later, when it replayed in his head, Shane wouldn’t be able to tell how long it lasted, only that, as he tasted Rozanov, it was somehow not long enough.

Rozanov pulled back, an inch or maybe two, and Shane lifted his chin to follow, to chase, their lips brushing when he murmured almost pleadingly against the shrinking space, “Fuck, Hollander.”

His name hit like shattering glass.

Shane jerked his head back, eyes wide and breath catching, as everything rushed in at once—the fluorescent lights, the stinging astringent scent, the buzzing in his head.

He must have seen something, because Rozanov tightened his grip on Shane's waist, the pads of his fingers pressing straight through his shirt, and Shane hadn't even known when his hands got there in the first place, when any of this—

“Wait,” Rozanov said, and now he was a few more inches away but still too close because Shane could see a ring of blazing gold around his wide pupils, no wider than a sliver, and that was new and he shouldn't be—

“Don't—” Rozanov started to say, before swallowing. “Come over.” The deep timbre of his voice was too much, and Shane looked down at his hands that didn't let go until he forced them to. “Come over.”

“I—” And fuck if his own voice didn't sound wrecked, pathetic, and foreign. “I got to go.”

In a rush, Shane pushed around Rozanov and out of his grasp, knocking their shoulders together while he fumbled for the handle and knocked open the door. He had to—

“Hollander,” Rozanov said again, curling his hand around Shane's elbow like a question mark, firm but not holding.

Shane looked over his shoulder and stopped when his eyes landed on Rozanov's swollen mouth and lingered. It was there in an instant, the thought of more, of feeling like if he didn't get it, he'd drown from the absence.

Rozanov opened his mouth like he was going to say something else but let it gape wordlessly. His gaze never wavered.

“An hour,” Shane said before he could talk himself out of it. “In an hour.”

He left before Rozanov could answer.

The hallway felt too narrow on the way out, but Shane kept walking anyway, fast enough that his shoulder clipped the doorframe when he shoved through the next set of security doors. The sting of it barely registered.

His mouth still burned.

By the time he reached the parking garage his pulse had settled just enough for his brain to start catching up, one particular thought slamming into place with nauseating clarity:

What the *fuck* was he thinking?

He stopped beside his car and gripped the handle without unlocking it.

That was so fucking stupid. This was Montreal, his city and his arena, his team and managers and coaches could still be there, the arena workers could still be there—and there he was, the captain of the fucking Voyageurs, making out with another man in a maintenance closet without a lock on the door.

Anyone could have opened it, and if he was found out...

Shane squeezed his eyes shut hard enough to see sparks.

He could still stop this.

He *should* stop this.

He got in the car.

Chapter End Notes

First off, big sorry to Cliff Marlow who probably left the game feeling a bit confused but maybe a little proud?? because sure, you chirped, but hockey players always do that, and Shane absolutely overreacted. Wrong place, wrong time buddy!

Also I spent uhhhhh so long. Just SO LONG watching instructional videos, game clips, and highlights, as well as reading articles and cross referencing even more hockey terms I've never heard of (and I've already compiled quite an extensive list to make the chapters titles) trying to write the hockey scenes, that I think my brain turned to soup because I caught myself googling "do face offs occur after every goal" and I mean, I don't know a LOT but I did know that so wtf brain?? Anyway. If I've made an egregious error or used the wrong term anywhere, please (gently) let me know. I am just a humble cat lady writing way out of my league.

In regards to the layout of the arena and the plausibility of multiple doors with any sort of glass windows, I have no clue if that's even in the realm of possibility, but this is one of those times I just decided to do what I want.

Cat Facts:

Spay and neuter your cats. SPAY and NEUTER your CATS. SPAY AND NEUTER YOUR CATS. That's it. That's the fact. Rescuers are tired, y'all.

Okay fine, let's talk about Bad Shit that can happen if you don't. First, for male cats, they will stink. They will stink so much that they stank. No one has a good time with an unneutered male cat. They also will likely spray in the home and then you'll have male cat stank AND urine stank. Also, testosterone makes them more likely to be aggressive, leading to fights with other cats, and they will do whatever they can to get OUT of the house to go sow their wild oats while also fighting whatever street cats are out there which could cause injuries, abscesses, and spread diseases. Oh, and their risk of testicular cancer increases because, you know, they still have balls. NEUTER YOUR CATS.

For female cats, the biggest risk is pyometra which is a uterine infection that will kill your cat. This is where the uterus fills with pus and if not treated with an emergency spay, the uterus could rupture leading to sepsis, organ failure, and death. Each heat cycle a cat goes through increases the risk and pyometra can happen at any age (though more common as the cat gets older). Not spaying your cat can also lead to cancers—uterine, ovarian, but most commonly and dangerously mammary tumors. Mammary tumors are usually malignant and often fatal. SPAY YOUR CATS.

If you cannot afford to get your cat spayed/neutered, look into low-cost services in your area. There may be a wait time or you may need to keep trying, but it is still better late than never.

So once again, in the immortal words of Bob Barker: Help control the pet population, have your pet spayed or neutered!

(Look, I'll spare you all the gruesome details but it has not been a great kitten season here—for whatever reason we are seeing a high amount of birth defects, medical special needs, and preemie kittens and it's hard.)

Chapter 9: Offside

Chapter Notes

Welcome back and happy Tuesday friends!

I've finally started organizing the somewhat nebulous plan I've had for this story into something concrete and I think it will end up being around 20 chapters. Probably. Maybe.

Anyway, this chapter marks the official rating jump to E

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

The first thing Shane did after shutting the door behind him and dropping his bag and keys was walk to the center of his living room where he promptly, calmly, laid down face-first on the floor and groaned.

It wasn't that he was a complete and total idiot who did idiot things and agreed to an idiot idea after an idiot kiss, because that? That he could have dealt with, tucking it away in a neat little box in his mind with a label of DO NOT OPEN EVER on it while he carried on with his existence knowing that his idiotness was contained.

Shane spent the drive home trying and failing to spin it in every direction until each increasingly ridiculous lie felt... well, ridiculous.

He tried to blame it on the fight, on his mistakes in the rink, on his failure making him reckless.

He tried to say it was a fluke, a leftover rush of misplaced adrenaline, a need for distraction.

He even tried to blame Puck.

None of it worked, none of it stuck, because Shane had kissed so many women—had dated and hooked up and gotten through it each time with the conclusion that maybe he was just not finding the right one yet—and it had never, *ever* felt like that.

By the time he had reached his front door he had typed and deleted six different texts to Rozanov, sending nothing but himself into a tailspin.

So the floor it was.

He banged his forehead against it knowing full well that nothing would knock this out of him.

And, after a second, he banged it again, just for good measure.

He didn't know how long he'd been there when Puck hopped onto his back, sat between his shoulder blades, and began licking his hair.

"No," Shane groaned into the wood. "Now is not the time, buddy."

As usual, Puck ignored him.

"I mean it, I just need five more—are you eating my hair?"

Another tug came. Shane carefully rolled to his side and dumped Puck off his back before pushing himself up to sit. He reached behind his head and felt the damp strands beneath his fingers and sighed.

Puck had the audacity to start purring when Shane glared at him.

"You are not—"

Shane stopped mid-motion, his arm still half suspended behind his head. With a renewed sense of urgency, he jumped to his feet and took quick, purposeful steps toward his gym, Puck following closely on his heels. He grabbed the shooting board from its slot next to the treadmill and lugged it back, careful not to knock it into Puck or his ankles as he propped it up on the console beneath the television. One more trip to the kitchen to grab the dry erase marker from the fridge and Shane was ready.

"Okay," he said, picking Puck up and setting him on the couch with a quick peck to his head. "You're going to be helpful for once."

Uncapping the marker, Shane drew a line down the middle of the board and labeled one side *PRO* and the other, *CON*.

"First one is easy," he said, writing the word *asshole* on the con side of the board. Shane took a step back, looked at it, his face suddenly growing hot before he quickly added *he's an* above it. He could already hear what Rozanov would say about this—something dismissive, something cutting—and it made him press the marker harder into the board. "He's rude, blunt, and sarcastic."

On the couch, Puck laid down, curling his front paws under him.

Next, he wrote *game performance* on the same side. “He’s messing with my head, and it’s fucking me up on the ice,” he said, pointing the marker at Puck. “I didn’t have this problem before he decided to... to...” The photo of Rozanov’s bare chest flashed through his mind. “To go rogue.”

Shane turned and stared at the words, swallowing hard. “Okay, fine, yes,” he answered to a question that Puck definitely didn’t ask. “That can go on the pro side, too. I’m aware that it’s been kind of a dry spell, you don’t have to rub it in.”

He began to pace. “But no one could ever know, not the team and definitely not management,” he muttered, hastily writing *reputation* as a sour feeling filled his stomach. “Could you imagine if any of them found out? I could lose my captaincy or worse—get traded.”

At that point, Puck yawned and blinked his eyes slowly.

“It’s a big deal! I don’t—I am happy here. Really.”

The silence that followed felt like doubt.

Shane groaned. “Fine,” he said again, too harshly, and started writing *happiness* under the pro side before swiping the heel of his hand over it to erase and write *fun, maybe* instead. “That goes in both columns. Staying in Montreal, staying with the Voyageurs, that’s actual fun. Hockey is fun, *winning* is fun.”

He turned back to Puck who was half-asleep now and snapped his fingers. “We’re not done, buddy. What else you got?”

That should have been the point that Shane realized that Puck was, again, just a kitten and couldn’t answer, but he didn’t.

“You’re right.” He wrote down *no control* on the con side. “He doesn’t fit.”

But they did.

“And he thinks I’ll just go along with whatever he says.”

But Shane couldn’t help it.

“And even if. Even if that was... even if, hypothetically, maybe possibly, I was curious, that doesn’t mean that I have to do anything about it.”

But he wanted to.

Shane was back on the floor before he knew it.

He slipped his phone out of his pocket and unlocked it. He convinced himself to tell Rozanov he couldn't make it, to buy himself more time to figure this out, to finish the list and study it. It was the polite thing to do so he wouldn't be waiting, and Shane had typed a single letter before he deleted it.

He tried again, getting as far as three letters this time before he gave up.

The list loomed above him, incomplete and unnecessary. Shane was always going to make the same choice, the one that slipped free in a closet, even if he wrote down a hundred reasons not to. But maybe... maybe he could have this. Maybe if he did get it out of his system, he wouldn't feel like this anymore and the list would be redundant.

He could have this. Just this once. That would be plenty.

Shane scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. It would be enough.

Pushing off the floor, he stood and went to grab his keys off the table by the door. *Enough was enough* repeated in his head on a loop. He had his hand on the doorknob when the intercom buzzer went off by his ear.

The keys fell from his hand and landed with a metallic clang. "Jesus Christ," he muttered, picking them back up with a shaky hand before leaning over to press the button to speak. "Yes?"

"Guest for you, sir," the tinny reply came. "Says you're expecting him."

Shane's face scrunched up. "I'm not. What's the name?"

"Rozanov? Ilya Rozanov."

What the fuck.

That was not the plan, Rozanov wasn't supposed to just... be here, the hour wasn't even up and he was about to leave and get it over with anyway. Shane stupidly held his keys in his hand like they had somehow done this.

"Sir?"

Shane stared at the intercom with his thumb hovering over the button.

He could still tell him to leave. He could change his mind.

“Uh, yeah,” he heard himself say. He cleared his throat to stop his voice from breaking. “Send him up.”

What the *fuck*.

And then it was a sprint, first to the bathroom to check his hair and take a swig of mouthwash while absolutely ignoring why exactly he reached for it in the first place. He spat and bent over the sink, wiping off his lips and making sure that he looked like he hadn’t just been arguing with a cat and writing a—

Shit. The list.

He ran to the living room next and nearly knocked the hockey board onto the floor when he reached for it, hauling it off the console and back to the gym. Then he chucked it in and yanked the door shut behind him.

When the knock came, Shane was still catching his breath. Each step made his pulse increase until it felt like his heart would rattle right out of his chest as he reached the front door.

This was not the plan. He opened it anyway.

“Hollander—”

And then slammed it when he saw Rozanov’s face.

Which was not the plan either, but his arms were too jittery and he was supposed to have an entire drive to think of what he was going to say, what he was going to do, and maybe even turn the car around once or twice before he just bit the bullet and carried on anyway. Rozanov was absolutely *not* supposed to be here.

He whipped the door back open.

“How the fuck do you know where I live?”

Rozanov was still standing there, one eyebrow raised like Shane was the crazy one in this scenario, when in reality *he* was the one who was insane, clearly.

“You gave it to me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did. On paperwork for Puck.”

“That sounds illegal.”

Rozanov shrugged but didn't deny it, fingers tapping at the seam of his jeans. “Are you going to let me in?”

Shane thought about slamming the door again, on principle this time, but stepped aside. “What are you even doing here?”

“Hollander, I could hear you panicking from two towns over,” Rozanov said, glancing briefly around before he turned to Shane. “Was faster this way.”

“I was not.”

“You start typing over and over and send nothing,” he said, stepping closer. “I can read between dots.”

“That doesn't mean—”

Shane's back hit the wall. He didn't even know he was shuffling backward until it happened, until Rozanov was in his space, looking down at him with half-lidded eyes, his lips wet where his tongue had swiped over them.

“Talk,” Shane said abruptly like the word itself was his last stand. “We should—talk.”

Rozanov's hands were on his waist, resting gingerly enough that the only thing he felt was the heat of them. “Talk. About what? The weather?”

“What? No—”

“Mm.” He leaned in, enough where Shane couldn't keep holding his gaze without wanting to do something about it, and for a second—just a second—Rozanov's grip tightened hard enough to wrinkle Shane's shirt before easing again. “About why you punched Cliff Marlow?”

“No,” Shane groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, both to keep himself in check and to avoid the topic entirely. He never wanted to think about that again, about losing his temper over practically nothing, even if that nothing was also so close now that Shane felt his warm breath on his face. “Fuck.”

“Yes,” Rozanov muttered, his hands firmly planted now, the pads of his fingertips pressing into Shane's skin, sending sparks down his spine. “Much better than talking.”

“Oh my god.”

He meant for it to come out exasperated, not breathy, not like his body had just been waiting for the right moment to take over. It took locking his elbows and clenching his fists to keep the rest in check. And that, that was new, the way his hands moved on their own volition, gravitating toward Rozanov like it was something he was easily allowed.

Maybe he was.

“Too soon,” Rozanov said, Shane opening his eyes just in time to see the smug smile tilting Rozanov’s mouth invitingly. “Have not even touched you yet.”

Shane bit his cheek but it did nothing to stop the heat growing in his belly, the flush on his skin that he knew was visible—a brand, a sign, an unwitting invitation. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” Rozanov kept smirking as he pulled back a fraction—not enough to keep their breath from mingling, nor creating any space that wasn’t filled with the smell of his cologne, woodsy and musky and achingly familiar. One hand slid up and around Shane’s abdomen, the pressure firm, causing every single synapse in his brain to track it. “You want to talk in circles again about things you should do when it doesn’t matter. Ending is same.”

His tongue grew heavy. “And what’s that.”

Rozanov fisted Shane’s shirt and tugged. “I’m going to make you come,” he said, like it wasn’t a question of if, only when.

Shane’s breath hitched and his head jerked back, knocking against the wall hard enough to shake the artwork hung on it. “Jesus, you can’t just say things like that—”

“Why not? You said you like obvious,” Rozanov said. “I am being obvious.”

“Because! Because.” Because it was impossible to ignore, easy to understand, and still too much to process when Rozanov wouldn’t stop touching him, when Shane didn’t want him to stop but was trying to figure out the plan. Because he was barely hanging on as it was, trying to remember the reason why this was a bad idea.

“Hollander. Stop thinking so much.”

Shane exhaled sharply, coming out almost as a laugh even as his mind slowed down anyway. “It’s—I haven’t—with a…”

“Man?”

And there it was.

Shane’s stomach flipped violently, a rush of adrenaline washing cold down his spine so fast it almost cut through the heat entirely. For one awful second he saw it from outside himself—what this was, what he was about to do, how easily everything in his life could splinter apart if this went wrong, if this got out.

But above it, through it, pushing it aside: what if it didn’t?

“Yeah,” Shane finally said, quieter this time.

Rozanov went still for half a heartbeat.

Then there was another tug, and Shane let himself be pulled, leaving only his upper back in contact with the wall behind him. “Man or woman, Is only sex. You can panic later if it will make you feel better.”

“Shut up.”

Rozanov tipped his head forward, a single curl brushing against Shane’s forehead. His voice was nothing but a rumble when he spoke, “Make me.”

Shane did.

It was less of a kiss and more like a collision, a pressure valve breaking off instead of being opened slowly. Shane wrapped his arms around Rozanov’s neck, holding on like it was the only thing standing in between him and the freefall that he was clearly taking, threading his fingers into hair that was so soft and just long enough to grab onto and feel like it meant something. Their noses clashed, and Shane felt the impact of it reverberating through his teeth, his skull, as he took his mouth the way he wanted.

Shane had completely lost his mind—lost it to the silence that only came when their mouths met, the scrape of stubble against his lips, his cheeks, his jaw, consumed with the ache for more.

The only stray thought that flashed once before it was gone again was the only one he needed: he could have this. He could have him.

Rozanov pushed back, pinning his hips with his hands and kissing him like he knew exactly what Shane needed, messy and wet and biting at his lip with just enough force to

make Shane groan.

He didn't even need to think about it to know that he was so hard, had never been this fucking hard in his life, unable to ignore it or deny it or call it anything other than what it was, because he was rolling his hips on purpose, knowing what it meant.

And when he met resistance, pressing against the solid plane of Rozanov's thigh braced between his legs, Shane gasped into his open mouth.

"Tell me what you want," Rozanov murmured against his lips, licking into the space like a question mark, or a promise. His hands were under his shirt, pulled free from where it had been tucked, and Shane felt his ab muscles twitch and contract as he trailed his fingers over them until he finally stopped, curled into the waistband of his pants. "Tell me."

He couldn't, his mouth was open but nothing else could possibly leave it, not when all he could do was keep pushing his hips forward, keep the friction steady, keep pulling Rozanov in for another kiss, but someone said, "You," and Shane could barely recognize the sound of his own voice, so wrecked and raw already.

Rozanov's hand was at his fly then, popping open the button and pulling down the zipper, knuckles dragging against his cock, and the second that hand lay flat against him through the fabric of his boxer briefs, Shane saw fucking *stars*.

And then Shane froze, eyes wide as everything aside from his racing heart stopped, Rozanov's face pulled back just far enough that he could see the exact moment they both realized what just happened.

"Did you—"

"Don't."

"You did."

"*Don't*."

Rozanov pressed his lips together so tight they disappeared entirely, gaze flicking down to where his hand had been. Shane noticed his shoulders trembling next, followed by shaky breaths forced out of his nose before he groaned for an entirely different reason.

"It's not fucking funny," he said, pushing at Rozanov's shoulders to get out, still trapped against the wall by his larger frame.

Heat crawled all the way up Shane's neck as something sharper twisted underneath the embarrassment. One kiss in a storage closet, ten minutes in his apartment, and Shane already felt unrecognizable to himself.

Rozanov was still looking at him like none of that was a problem.

"Is no big deal," Rozanov replied, swiping a hand over his mouth and chin. He was not even trying to hide his amusement, eyes lit up like a Christmas tree and Jesus fucking Christ did Shane have to come in his pants like a fucking teenager in front of the world's smuggest asshole?

"Hollander, relax." An unmistakable laugh slipped out as he spoke. "Is compliment."

Shane glared at him and stomped off to the bathroom.

As he stood with his hands braced on the vanity, all Shane could think about was how he was sick and tired of somehow always ending up back here, staring at himself in a mirror. This was stupid and he knew it, he should not be in the bathroom, looking down at his crotch like it was the enemy when, up until he ruined it, it had been one of the best moments of his entire life.

So Shane decided not to be stupid. Just once. Just this, and then it would stop meaning anything.

He shucked off his pants, his messy underwear and threw them in the corner by the shower door. He unbuttoned his shirt just enough to rip it over his head and toss it into the pile, hastily wiped his dick off with water from the sink and turned to the door. He'd walk out there buck naked and show Ilya Rozanov just how relaxed and not panicked he was.

His hand was on the doorknob when he sighed and turned back to pick up the clothes, open the linen closet to deposit them into the hamper, and pull out a pair of track pants and a shirt he had thrown in there this morning.

He gave them a cursory sniff and put them on anyway.

It was only when he was opening the door that the thought came that maybe Rozanov left. That he'd taken Shane's walk of shame as a cue to make an exit so he could laugh himself all the way back to where he wasn't destroying Shane's life by shattering every carefully controlled system, and instead destroying it in an entirely different, suddenly terrifying way.

If he walked a little faster back to the living room, Shane didn't need to think about why either.

The sight of Rozanov sitting on his couch sent a jolt of relief through him.

The fact that he had his jeans open and was currently stroking his cock sent a jolt of something else straight to his groin.

Shane stopped in his tracks. Even from across the room, even with the flaps of his pants bunched around the base, Shane could tell it was huge—long and thick, uncut and as stupidly perfect as the rest of him. Fucking asshole.

He must have been staring for too long, watching strong fingers glide up and down, slowing on the upstroke, squeezing on the down, because Rozanov's voice made him nearly jump when he said, "You going to help or, ah—" He hissed in a breath "—just watch? Or both."

Just once.

He crossed the room in an instant, planted one knee on the couch next to Rozanov and swung the other over his lap, hovering above it while he took Rozanov's face in his hands and kissed him in one smooth, charged motion.

Beneath him Rozanov moaned, deep and almost strained. It sent a wave of satisfaction through him, like he finally wasn't the only one affected, and it was fucking powerful. Shane wanted to hear it again and curled his fingers around Rozanov's cock to see if he could make it happen—if he could do to Rozanov what Rozanov had done to him.

Shane copied what he'd seen Rozanov do, grip firm and strokes steady, not thinking about how easy his hand moved, about anything except that sound and how he needed it, needed this.

Rozanov's breath hitched, quick and unsteady. "Fuck," he groaned, his head falling back and leaving Shane craning his neck forward after it. "Yeah—fuck, like that."

His eyes trailed down, over the line of Rozanov's throat, over his chest heaving beneath his shirt, and that wouldn't do, that wasn't right—and he was pushing up the hem, revealing abs that made his mouth water, until he finally looked down and saw Rozanov come with a rumbling, throaty sound, "Hollander."

If it hadn't been for the earlier *incident*, Shane would have been a fucking goner now, his eyes locked on where it spilled onto Rozanov's stomach, onto Shane's hand. It

should have been gross.

It wasn't.

It absolutely wasn't.

“Holy shit,” Shane said and then because it wasn't enough to explain how he was feeling, he said it again.

The thought that he could bring his hand to mouth, just to see, flashed and disappeared entirely when Rozanov hooked his hands under his ass and flipped him over onto the couch.

Shane gasped as his back hit the cushions, grasping the collar of Rozanov's shirt with his clean hand while the other he held off to the side.

“Fucking—Christ,” he managed to say, all his brainpower stuck on the fact that Rozanov did that like Shane weighed nothing, and it shouldn't have been so exhilarating, having no control over it, but his body practically sang in the aftermath.

“Still too soon,” Rozanov murmured, dipping his head down to kiss Shane's neck. “Or too late, but I think I can make you come one more time.”

And then he was moving, sliding down until his knees hit the floor, leaving a trail of hot kisses in his wake. His hand grabbed at Shane's chest and the other was at the waistband of his pants, pulling until his cock sprang free in front of his face and—

“Oh my god.” It came out before he could stop it, half whimpered as Rozanov licked a stripe and then took him in his mouth. He hummed in answer and Shane looked down to see Rozanov's cheeks hollow and his hand gripping the base and he looked so fucking good.

Shane wanted him so fucking much.

He pushed his hand into his curls to ground him, to stop him from jerking his hips because Rozanov clearly knew what he was doing. He knew that he was saying something, some string of curses or maybe promises, he didn't know, his mind was not functioning beyond the wet heat of Rozanov's mouth, the slick slide of his tongue up his shaft and into the slit.

“Oh, fuck, I—”

He had two hands in his hair and it could have been minutes or hours or days, he'd never know anyway, everything was reduced to what was absolutely the best blowjob of his life—and maybe later he'd laugh about how ridiculous that was since he wasn't some innocent virgin, but as Shane felt his body coil tighter, it didn't matter.

“Roz—I'm—”

Rozanov didn't pull off, only hummed again and that was enough, Shane was coming, eyes squeezed tight, the echo of his own ragged groan in his ears as Rozanov swallowed around him.

His breath came out in pants as one by one each muscle released, his hands fell to his sides, and his eyes blinked open and into focus.

Rozanov was propped up on one arm, thumb wiping over his lips, and looking so incredibly smug that Shane wanted to punch him. And then kiss him. And then punch him again.

He blinked again and saw a shadow over Rozanov's shoulder, a trick of the light or—

“Fuck!”

Shane scrambled to pull up his pants because that was Puck sitting on the armrest, staring at him.

“What?” Rozanov furrowed his brow before following his gaze.

“How long has he been sitting there?” Shane sat up fully then, sliding his leg out from under Rozanov's arm. His face was still flushed, could feel his ears burning, but it wasn't just from the afterglow. Puck merely lifted his paw to lick it before rubbing it over his head.

“He is cat,” Rozanov said, so nonchalantly, rising up off the floor and plopping onto the couch within arm's reach of Puck. “Cats do this.”

“They *watch*? No. No, that is... that's *weird*.”

Rozanov ran a hand over Puck's head and around under his chin. “What, you think he will judge performance?”

“Of course not.”

“Then who cares? He has no balls, does not even know what sex is.”

“That is—” Shane scoffed indignantly. “So uncalled for. Look, it’s just weird, okay?”

Rozanov chuckled, shaking his head slowly. “Fine. Next time bedroom instead of couch, with door shut.”

Shane stopped. “Next time?” It sounded already decided. It was only supposed to be—

There was more of that same low laughter, like Shane was missing something, and Rozanov shifted on the couch, scooting closer until he could lean over and kiss the underside of his jaw. “Yes. Next time.”

“I don’t—”

“No, no panicking yet. Wait until I leave, is only polite.”

With Rozanov so close, hot breath following each kiss that he left on his neck, Shane couldn’t remember why he couldn’t keep doing this, why it had to just be the one time in the first place. He couldn’t think of anything, except for...

“You can’t tell anyone,” he blurted.

Rozanov stilled, pulling back after a second. “Tell what? That you came twice in under thirty minutes?”

“No—yes, but no. I mean it. You can’t tell anyone about this. About me. Nobody can know.”

“Relax,” Rozanov said, leaning an arm on the back of the couch. “Is just fun, no need to be Mr. Serious about it. There is nothing to tell.”

“Rozanov.”

“I won’t tell, Hollander. Now,” he said, lifting the hem of his shirt, “are you going to be good host and get cloth so we can clean up?”

“Right.” Shane was halfway through rubbing his hand over his face when he remembered and pulled it away like it burned. “Oh fuck.”

“Yes, is in my hair too, no doubt.”

“Oh *fuck*. I’m—” He cut himself off. Sorry didn’t feel like the right word for when you put a come-streaked hand in someone’s curls without their permission.

“Hollander.”

“Yeah?”

“Cloth.”

Shane hastily got to his feet and ran back to the bathroom for a washcloth, running it under the sink and rinsing his own hand before bringing it back out with him.

Rozanov was standing with his coat back on and his jaw set strangely tight, holding Puck in his arms. Shane’s chest tightened.

“Here.”

“Bring him in to clinic next week,” Rozanov said while he scratched Puck’s cheek, ignoring the washcloth entirely.

“Why? He’s good now, isn’t he?”

“For vaccine. Routine,” he explained, lifting his gaze to meet Shane’s. “Nothing is wrong.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Rozanov pressed his face into the fluff at Puck’s neck before letting him down and taking the washcloth. “Thank you,” he said, barely using it more than a cursory swipe under his shirt. He put it back into Shane’s hand, still hovering awkwardly in the air.

“Yeah.”

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

Rozanov said it quickly, almost flat. It wasn’t what he expected him to say and the words landed wrong somewhere in his stomach.

“You’re leaving?” The question slipped out quieter than anything else he’d said all night, and far too revealing. Shane felt the regret hit a second later.

Wanting Rozanov there for sex was one thing. That was explainable, temporary, getting it out of his system.

Wanting him to stay after?

That was—ridiculous.

Rozanov hesitated, the crease between his brows appearing and disappearing so quickly that Shane wasn't sure that it was actually ever there. "Do you want me to stay?"

Shane shook his head. "No. Course not. It's fine. Goodnight."

Rozanov watched him for a moment, long enough for Shane to notice that he wasn't moving, wasn't talking. Then he closed the distance and pressed a single, lingering kiss to his lips.

Shane didn't know what to do with that now. He couldn't chase after another, not without giving everything away, so he forced a tight smile and waited.

With one last glance over his shoulder, Rozanov left. It was only after the click of the door latch catching that Shane let his arm fall to his side and let loose a long, slow exhale.

He waited for the panic to arrive, counted down the seconds until he was sure that he'd no longer be able to stand there, looking at a closed door.

The apartment stayed quiet, ordinary.

Shane stood there for another minute before laughing once under his breath and dragging a hand through his hair.

When Puck brushed up against his leg and meowed, Shane picked him up without a thought and ducked his head to rub against his fur. This time, when he got a whiff of the woodsy, musky scent that had lingered in Puck's fur for days, he knew the reason.

He kept Puck held high on his chest and tucked under his chin as he sat down on the couch and reached for the remote, then his phone.

The screen lit up at his touch. Two more texts from his mom, one from Hayden, one from his agent and:

Rozanov: See you next week

Rozanov: unless you cannot wait and want to come sooner

Rozanov: (and yes I meant that the way you wish I did)

Shane scoffed and then smiled, despite everything that told him he shouldn't have.

Chapter End Notes

“I could hear you panicking from two towns over” came from my bestie who diligently listens to my rambling when I come to a crossroad in a scene/chapter and present them options as to which way I should go.

Cat facts:

Just like the bathroom, cats will also watch your bedroom activities even when they don't occur in the bedroom. It's only weird the first time you accidentally kick one mid-deed? Maybe? Look, I am a grown married adult with a completely reasonable amount of cats, it just is what it is.

Chapter 10: After the Whistle

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday friends!

The good news, I am fine, so please don't worry. The bad news, no new chapter next week. This last week was incredibly stressful and complicated and I didn't write a single word (and had little brainspace to give this chapter the editing pass I usually do), so I'm taking some time to reset and give myself the chance to build up my 2-3 chapter buffer once more. We'll be back to our regularly scheduled updates June 9th.

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

“It’s really not that big a deal, Mom.”

“You’ve never done that, though.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, it was just a bad day, okay?” Shane ran a hand over his head before flexing his fingers in front of him, testing the soreness that had settled in overnight. He had put off calling as long as he could, knowing that she’d ask and want too many details when all he wanted was to forget about the fight. “I’m seriously fine, I’ve been hit harder. I’m sure Marlow has, too.”

There was a long pause before she sighed and said, “It was a terrible punch.”

He barked an incredulous laugh. “Mom.”

“What? You were taking wild swings and missing half the time, meanwhile Marlow barely had to try. It was like watching a Chihuahua taking on a Doberman.”

Shane scoffed. “I’m two hundred pounds.”

“Okay, a large Chihuahua.”

And then they were both laughing, Shane pressing his thumb and forefinger into his eyes as he listened to his mother’s increasing hysterics. Briefly he heard his dad’s voice in the background asking what was so funny and that only set her off more as she tried to explain.

He opened his mouth to correct her, to say that he was at least more like a little terrier, like Maksim, when he remembered that was a terrible idea—for many reasons, not the least of which was bringing up thoughts he definitely did not want to have while on the phone with his mother.

“You should see if you can get some boxing lessons in,” she said once the laughter subsided and his dad presumably walked away just as confused, “if you’re going to start taking wild swings out there.”

Shane huffed, but still smiled. “Gee, thanks.”

“Well! That’s why you leave it to your teammates. J.J. at least knows what he’s doing.”

“I will let him know ahead of time the next time I plan to drop my gloves.”

“I’m just saying, you don’t *need* to fight,” she said, and Shane was halfway through a long exhale when she continued, “I know, I know, it’s part of the game. I just worry. That’s part of *my* game. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, mom. I’m good.” It was supposed to be an easy lie, just to placate her. He *should* be feeling shitty, about how he played and their loss in general, not just losing his cool on Marlow—and definitely about what came after. *Especially* about what came after. He just... didn’t. Not that he was sure he felt good, either.

“Good—what was that?”

“Oh,” Shane said around a mouthful of kitten tail. Puck had hopped precariously along the back of the couch and was now rubbing his entire body against the side of Shane’s head, meowing when Shane didn’t acknowledge him. “I, uh—” he spat some hair out and pulled one long one off his tongue “—have a kitten.”

“A kitten.”

Puck meowed again, needier this time.

“Yeah.”

“Why do you have a kitten?”

“I found him? A few weeks ago,” he answered, reaching up to rub Puck’s back and try to gently nudge him away from where he was currently trying to shove his entire face into Shane’s mouth or something. “His name is Puck.”

“Shane,” she said, almost too gently. He immediately knew he wasn’t going to like whatever came next and braced himself. “Do you think that’s a good idea? With all the travel?”

It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought of it, hadn’t already gone through it, back when the plan was different.

Back before Rozanov changed the rules.

“I already managed one road trip,” he said. “I’ll make it work.”

She went quiet again, and Shane could see her pursed lips, her worried brows, the same way she looked when he had come home with a black eye his rookie season and had told her it was fine, just a stray elbow, no big deal. “If you’re sure.”

“I am. He’s... a lot.” He had Puck on his lap now, leaning in to where Shane was scratching his cheeks, purring loudly. “Keeping me up at night, very demanding for attention, probably going to destroy everything in this apartment. Just an absolute menace, but,” Shane breathed out a small laugh, “he’s my menace.”

“I didn’t even know you liked cats.”

“I don’t,” he said, before quickly adding, “I mean, I do. Now, I do. I didn’t really think about it at all before. He was running in the middle of the road with a broken leg.”

Shane took a deep breath and brushed a thumb over the scar on Puck’s hip. “He needed help. I couldn’t leave him.”

At the time, Shane hadn’t really thought of it as a decision—he saw something small and alone and maybe hurt, and his body moved before his brain could catch up. Now he knew that there wasn’t any other choice he would make.

“You know I will always encourage you to help,” she said after a moment, quieter than before and more warm. “I’m just surprised more than anything. Which, I guess just add it to the list for the day. Any other surprises you want to share while we’re at it?”

Shane swallowed.

I jerked off another man last night, his mind supplied, unhelpful and entirely unwelcome. And I think I liked it.

I think I—

“Nope,” he said. “That’s it.”

“Okay, good. Make sure you respond to those emails later, okay? And send me a picture of Puck. We’ll update the family frame.”

He rolled his eyes, but smiled, something small and sudden. “Mom.”

“Well if you’re keeping him! And we can help too, you know. Besides, it will give your father something to do now that he’s cut back his hours at work. Just let us know.”

“Okay,” he said. “I will.”

“Love you, sweetie.”

“Love you too.”

Shane let his phone fall by his side, used both hands to stroke over Puck’s fur, and sighed.

“That could have gone worse,” he said, moving his thumb back and forth over Puck’s forehead. “At least you’re officially family now.”

Puck looked at him like he always did, blinking slowly and, when Shane didn’t say anything else, meowing softly.

“Yeah,” he said, lifting Puck up to kiss his forehead three times in quick succession. “You already were.”

A notification banner lit up his phone a little while later.

SPORTSCENTER: MARLOW, HOLLANDER DROP GLOVES IN THIRD PERIOD SCRAP

The featured image caught Shane mid-swing, face twisted and shoulder overextended while Marlow looked almost bored.

Shane stared at it for a second before swiping it away with his thumb. He already knew what the commentary would be: captain loses composure, frustration boiling over, maybe someone even trying to give him the out by saying he was trying to spark the bench.

When he switched over to the group chat, everything was normal to the point that Shane almost wished that someone would have been upset about how he played or even shared the article themselves, maybe cracked a joke, instead of the way that everyone ignored it. Shane apologized anyway and got a few thumbs up in return along with one *don't worry about it*.

He opened Hayden's unanswered messages next.

Shane: Hey sorry for not getting back to you. I'm okay now. I got a good night's sleep.
Trying not to think about it too much

Hayden: Sure man. You know I get it. Dinner tonight? Maybe a beer or two?

Shane: Thanks but if I don't eat what I've got here, it's going to go bad

Hayden: Haha sure

Half a minute passed. And then:

Hayden: You know you can talk to me right?

Shane: Of course

Shane: Nothing to talk about though

Shane: Promise

Hayden: Cool

And Shane did know that. Of course he did. Hayden was his best friend and had been there for some of his worst moments, like when he held Shane's hand on the ice when he dislocated his shoulder, the minutes before being escorted off the ice feeling like hours, or when he had to somehow tell everyone that he wasn't dating Rose anymore, feeling like an idiot despite the fact that inwardly he was fine with it. There wasn't anyone else Shane could have talked to about yesterday—the way he couldn't control the puck, not anything else.

For a moment, Shane wished that the anything else was the kind of problem Hayden could help him solve. Or Rose. Or even Puck.

But that wasn't going to be mentioned to anyone, ever.

Because it *wasn't* anything.

He locked his phone and dropped it beside him before he could think about rereading the messages again, about the photo, about Rozanov.

Shane sighed. He needed to be reviewing game footage, not... whatever this was.

The tablet sat untouched on the coffee table, half-buried beneath a mess of things that somehow represented his entire life now: his notebook, unopened mail, a cat toy shaped like a fish, and Puck himself, sprawled across the stack.

He stared at it from the couch.

Eventually, he sighed and reached over Puck to grab it. "Move, freeloader."

Puck blinked at him slowly and stayed exactly where he was.

"Cool. Great teamwork."

The game unfolded in clipped sequences and sharp sounds: skates carving ice, sticks striking against the boards, whistles shrieking through the arena. Shane watched himself move through it all with growing discomfort.

He looked wrong, too tense and rigid, like someone trying to remember how to inhabit his own body.

He paused on a wide shot of himself gliding through the neutral zone and found his attention drifting past the ice, toward the faces behind the glass.

The fans would still love him, even after bad nights like this. So would his team, so would his parents—so would everyone. He'd show up, work harder than everyone else, be dependable, and not give them a reason to stop.

His throat tightened unexpectedly.

The footage resumed and he forced himself to focus on the plays developing onscreen, on the way he kept overhandling the puck, on the half-second hesitation before his passes, on making mental notes about what to fix in practice tomorrow as he watched Marlow collide into him against the boards. In the video, his shoulder hit the glass first and for one second he was pinned.

He blinked and it changed.

Rozanov pinning him against the wall. Rozanov's hands on his hips. Rozanov's mouth inches away from his own.

The silence Shane only found when they kissed.

He dropped the tablet onto the couch beside him. Puck lifted his head in annoyance.

“Sorry,” Shane muttered automatically.

The apartment felt too warm.

For years Shane had built his life around the only things that had ever made sense, things that were reliable and controlled. Safe.

And now one stupid fucking veterinarian with broad shoulders and an attitude problem had reached into the middle of it all and made Shane want more.

Puck climbed into his lap without invitation.

Shane gathered him automatically, pressing his face briefly into soft fur. “What the hell am I doing?”

Puck purred louder.

This was fine. Guys hooked up all the time. He'd seen it—hotel doors left open too late, guys acting normal at morning skate like nothing had happened the night before. No one made it complicated unless it became public.

Maybe this could be the same. Nothing had to change.

Shane scratched absently behind Puck's ears and stared at the game footage until the video ended and the screen turned black.

He had gone for a run to clear his head, to get out of his apartment and away from everything that reminded him of last night. He only made it a mile before he turned back for reasons that had nothing to do with the cold, wintery air.

Each footstep against the pavement sounded too much like the pounding of his heartbeat when he'd kissed Rozanov in the maintenance closet; the way he couldn't control his breath like he usually could caused flashes of memories, of panting into Rozanov's mouth by his front door; and when he stopped once to fix the awkward bunch in his sock, his fingers wrapped around the pole of a stop sign, the cold of the metal registered for exactly one second before his body supplied something warmer, something he had no business thinking about in public.

Worst of all was how his body was so eerily calm even if his mind raced, like it remembered how easy it had all been, once he gave himself permission, and wouldn't forget.

As he turned the last corner back to his street, his apartment building came into view like a fucking billboard for everything that he was supposed to be avoiding. His chest was still heaving. His face was warm despite the cold. He stood there longer than he needed to.

The door was barely shut behind him before his phone was back in his hand, pulling up his messages and opening the ones from last night.

Rozanov: unless you cannot wait and want to come sooner

Rozanov: (and yes I meant that the way you wish I did)

Shane: What makes you think I need your help with that?

Rozanov: True

Rozanov: I barely needed to touch you the first time

Shane: That was different. It's just been a while

Rozanov: Your poor neglected cock

Shane: It sees plenty of action, I've just been busy

Rozanov: Too busy to touch yourself? Sounds horrible

He had replied without even thinking last night, when he was still being stupid. Before he had fallen asleep, he'd told himself he wasn't going to text him anymore, that this was over, and there wasn't going to be a next time at all. That it was still just once.

His thumbs tapped the screen.

Shane: When next week?

Rozanov: Eager?

Shane rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt, but he couldn't tell if Rozanov was wrong.

Shane: For Puck's vaccine

Rozanov: Fine, be no fun

Rozanov: Tuesday

Rozanov: Also have plan for gremlin problem

He stared at the words until they blurred together, which did not help make them make sense, then looked to Puck trying and failing to shake a catnip mouse toy off the claw on one of his front paws, like he somehow had the answer. He bent down to help before heading into the kitchen and filling a glass with water.

Shane: What does that mean?

Rozanov: Do not worry

Shane: I wasn't but I am now

Rozanov: Not ready yet. You will see eventually

Shane: What gives you the impression that that is at all reassuring??

Rozanov: Is a surprise

Shane: That's even worse.

Rozanov: You are so boring

Shane: Because I don't like surprises?

Rozanov: Yes

Rozanov: And because we could be talking about other things, more important things

Shane: Like what?

Rozanov: Like next time

His pulse spiked, sending a shock straight to his groin, which should have been inconvenient or at the very least annoying, but wasn't.

Rozanov: Oh I am sorry were you not done panicking

Rozanov: I will wait

Shane wanted to tell him that he wasn't, just to prove him wrong, but it was the truth. He should have been panicking, had waited for it as he went through his routine before settling into bed last night, waited for it when he woke up the next morning expecting regret, waited for it when Puck still smelled faintly like Rozanov's cologne when he called his mom.

He waited and waited and waited for it.

Shane: Asshole

Rozanov: Yes better topic. Like yours

Shane: That's not what I meant

Rozanov: I know but still better

He deleted everything he typed three times, because he was not going to send *what are you thinking* or *I'm listening*, and certainly not *yes*. It didn't matter what he was thinking.

Shane: I'm going to stop replying now

Rozanov: Shame. Had not gotten to best part

Shane: And what's that?

The second the photo went through, he slammed the phone face down on the counter out of reflex. Then, after a breath, he picked it back up and let himself look again.

It was the kind of photo that should have felt laughable.

Rozanov was presumably at his clinic, wearing a white lab coat with the sleeves rolled up and navy scrubs, the fluorescent lighting making every shadow harsher. Only his torso was in the frame and one arm, flexed at the elbow. The line of muscle caught his eye, the dark hairs and the vein running along it, all pointing towards his strong wrist, the tendons on the back of his hand, and the outline of his cock that he gripped through his pants. Rozanov was half-hard and Shane almost hated that he knew that.

He definitely hated that Rozanov probably understood exactly what he was doing, what it would do to Shane.

But he did not hate the way his body felt warm or how his own cock was already half-hard by the time he shifted his weight.

Rozanov: See you Tuesday

Maybe just twice.

Shane chugged the water and set the glass down on the counter. It only rattled a little.

At the end of the day, Shane brushed his teeth longer than necessary, staring at himself in the mirror between motions. A small bruise bloomed along the underside of his jaw from where Marlow's fist had connected, mottled red with traces of purple, and tender

when he pressed his fingers into it now. He hadn't even noticed it at all when Rozanov slotted his hand against it. Hadn't felt any of it—not the bruise, not his knuckles—the moment Rozanov walked through the door.

He wondered, briefly and unwillingly, what Rozanov would say about it, if he saw. Would he look at it like one of his patients, tell Shane to ice it, or make a joke about getting a cone of his own? Would he brush his thumb against it, testing it, testing Shane?

Would he leave a mark of his own?

Shane's hand stilled on the toothbrush.

He should have shut it down right there, but it was too late. His mind was already moving.

He imagined Rozanov on his knees in front of him, here in the bathroom, the way the hard tiles would leave red indents on his skin, how he'd grip Shane's thighs hard enough to bruise.

He spat and the image changed, watching the toothpaste swirl down the drain. Him on his knees.

In front of Rozanov.

His cock twitched.

What would it feel like, to have Rozanov's hands on his head, in his hair, stroking over it while Shane had his mouth on him—what would it feel like if he gripped it, pulled it, if he thumbed the corner of his mouth, if he looked at Shane with that same intensity, or with something more, something hotter, something raw.

What would it feel like when he came.

Shane strode out of the bathroom and grabbed his phone off the nightstand.

It was research, he told himself as he opened the browser. There was nothing wrong with being curious, he thought as he typed in the website, he just wanted the visual, just to see, like rewatching game tapes.

The page loaded.

This was so fucking stupid, he concluded and set the phone down.

He turned his head toward Puck, asleep on the center of the bed, and that was the right idea—just going to sleep and not anything else.

Except Shane was carrying him out of the room and shutting the door on his protests, tiny indignant meows filtering through the wood. “Sorry, it’s too weird. I’ll let you back in later,” he called to him before he grabbed his phone again and laid down.

When he unlocked it, the screen opened immediately to still images from videos of naked flesh, open mouths, streaks of come across breasts and women’s faces—

He hastily opened the sidebar menu, just to cover the pictures, and scrubbed a hand over his face. Maybe this really *was* stupid.

Shane looked back to the screen anyway.

There, among the categories, was a single word. He held his thumb above it.

It didn’t mean anything, he reminded himself, and tapped it.

More thumbnails loaded, similar but different in the one way that shouldn’t have mattered, but did. The first video lasted five seconds before Shane backed out and muted the volume entirely. The second was worse. The third was so absurd he nearly threw the phone across the room.

Everything was so performative, when he just needed something else, something like the

Shane stopped scrolling. He grabbed his glasses from the nightstand, slotted them on his face, and pressed play.

The angle was better, the point of view shifted enough that Shane could pretend—*learn*, he corrected. He watched as the man on screen took another into his mouth, slowly, almost reverently, licking stripes and swallowing down.

He expected something to bother him about it, but nothing did. If anything, Shane couldn’t stop watching the way the man relaxed into the act like it was the most natural thing in the world. His own mouth fell open as he pressed the heel of his hand against his erection through his underwear without thinking.

The scene changed.

The man was on his front now, one leg bent up, eyes shut and mouth gaping as the other man worked a finger into him, then two. Something on the man's face changed, sudden and involuntary, like there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

Shane paused the video and stared at the screen for a long moment.

This was insane.

He'd already gotten what he wanted. He was not seriously considering—

He set the phone down, screen facing up, and he shimmied out of his underwear. It was just research.

The lube was at the back of the drawer but it only took a second to dig out, uncap, and squeeze some onto his finger. He readjusted onto his side and picked his phone back up with his clean hand while the other reached behind him.

The video resumed and with a certainty, the same kind he had in the rink, Shane pressed a finger inside himself.

His mind betrayed him instantly, supplying the image of Rozanov's hands instead of his own. Shane kept going.

He had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. Shane tried to follow along like this was just a coach showing him a new drill, except this wasn't hockey, no one was grading him, and he was, objectively, well past the point of taking notes.

This was ridiculous. *He* was ridiculous. The frame of his glasses was cutting into his nose, shifting to the side from the pressure of the pillow, when his finger hit something that made his whole body lock up and then go loose. His hips moved without permission and Shane hadn't realized he was going to say anything until the "oh fuck" was already out of his mouth.

He stopped thinking about the video, about any of it—and then there was just Rozanov's voice in his head: *I'm going to make you come.*

He didn't stop.

At some point he dropped his phone and shifted that arm down to wrap his hand around his cock, coming before he finished a third stroke.

He came back to himself in pieces, first with his body as he rolled onto his back, hands falling to his sides. His chest heaved, his fingers were slippery and gross, but it didn't matter. Not when everything else felt so good, like he finally got to enjoy the dream he had tried to forget.

For a second he just lay there, staring at the ceiling, waiting for his brain to catch up to what he'd just done.

The laughter echoed in his ears before he realized it was his own—breathless and delirious.

The panic still hadn't come.

Somewhere in the distance something fell and clattered against the floor, followed by one loud, triumphant meow.

Shane laughed again.

Chapter End Notes

In defense of Yuna Hollander, she was not trying to make any commentary on Shane's size, more his demeanor with the Chihuahua comparison. Personally I love them, but there is the stereotype that they can be a little... feral. Have I had my ankles gummed by an elderly, toothless one? Yes. Does that mean all Chihuahuas are doomed to Small Dog Syndrome? No.

Cat Facts:

It's only been a minor, teensy little thread I've been cognizant of when writing, but even though tripod cats (especially kittens) do adapt very well to their surroundings, the lack of limb does affect their mobility in some ways. When cats walk, their hind legs follow their front—meaning, where a front paw lands is where the back paw will also land. This is why when you see cat tracks, you generally only see “two” paw prints. So when a cat is missing a leg, the gait is altered and they end up hopping more than walking (hence why Puck almost always is written as doing so), and the remaining paw lands more centered to

account for the shift in their center of gravity. Their tail also becomes much more important for balance.

Jumping is also affected, especially when missing a back leg (like Puck). Without a second leg to exert force, they are generally unable to make tall vertical jumps that other cats would have no problem making. This is why Shane made a makeshift staircase for Puck to get onto his bed as he would not be able to simply jump up (and there was a deleted moment where Puck tried and failed. and ripped a hole in the bedspread in the process).

Anytime you have a cat with mobility differences, it's a good idea to utilize nonslip rugs and other floor mats on slick surfaces, such as hardwood and tile, to provide traction and help them walk and run confidently (Shane hasn't quite figured this out yet). Their claws are also very important to their stability and agility, so I personally would err on the side of caution and only trim conservatively—just enough to cut down on the ouch factor when they are using your body as a springboard or when they've miscalculated a jump onto your lap or when they are simply making biscuits on you.

Chapter 11: Breakaway

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday, friends! Thank you all for being lovely about my short break, it was sorely needed. Hopefully the only one I will need, but I'll let you know if that changes.

Without further ado, enjoy <3

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

His schedule didn't slow down just because Shane couldn't stop thinking about Rozanov.

They played two more games in four nights, practiced twice with regular workouts filling the gaps, and the bus ride to Ottawa and back was more like a blur than he wanted to admit, sprawled across two seats and leaving tufts of Puck fur behind when they finally pulled back into the parking lot in Montreal.

No one mentioned the fight anymore.

The media cycle had already moved on, replaced by some other outrage—something about Dallas Kent that Shane didn't quite catch, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that he had run his mouth off, again—and inside the locker room, the only lasting consequence seemed to be that J.J. had started shadowboxing whenever Shane walked past him.

Shane had told him to fuck off and scored twice the next night.

He had tried to pretend that it was just because he shook it off, got his head back in the game, and kept going—except his body hummed constantly now, restless in a way that had nothing to do with adrenaline or lack of sleep or hockey, and too much to do with what kept happening behind the closed door of his bedroom.

At least it translated perfectly onto the ice.

He had stayed later after morning skate, talked less during practice, and started scoring goals the way everyone always expected him to. Theriault had even stopped frowning at him like he was disappointed and went back to frowning simply because Shane wasn't sure he knew how to smile.

Everyone else treated him the same, and no one knew.

And through all of it sat Tuesday.

Waiting.

After the first game, Rozanov had texted him with his usual commentary—how he knew that Shane could play harder, had felt just how hard he could be. Shane then learned the hard way why he shouldn't read his texts until he was leaving.

When he was setting up his apartment for being away in Ottawa—tucking away every breakable object he could see until the place looked bare as the day he had moved in and adding extra bowls of food and water in the kitchen even if he was only going to be gone for twelve or so hours—Rozanov sent him a single word: 9

Shane had stared at it for too long, trying to figure out what it meant before he gave up and sent back, *9 what?*

Rozanov: Seconds it took you to come. Inches. Time to be at clinic.

Rozanov: You pick

“Asshole,” Shane had muttered under his breath for probably the hundredth time, but didn't even try to ignore the fact that he was smiling through it.

So on Monday evening, when he got off the bus, Shane was counting down hours regardless of how much he knew he shouldn't, how much it didn't matter. It was, after all, just a regular appointment for Puck, nothing more, and nothing was going to happen at the clinic.

Maybe if he told himself that enough times, he'd believe it.

Maybe his body would get the memo, too.

Hayden slipped into the SUV with him, their bags squished in the middle.

“So the twins' birthday party is in a few weeks, the day after we get back from Tampa,” he said once the car began moving. “I've been told that your presence is not optional.”

Shane shook his head slowly and smiled. “Only if there are no impromptu magic shows. Last time I was still finding glitter in my hair a month later.”

“No promises, man,” Hayden said with a laugh. “Ruby got into Jackie’s makeup the other day and she and Jade took turns giving Arthur makeovers. Was like walking in on a horror movie, poor kid just absolutely covered in blood red lipstick. Shit was like permanent marker, too, didn’t even budge with soap and water.”

“So Arthur’s just a forever nightmare baby now? Not sure you’re building a case to entice me here.”

“Nah, Jackie finally got home while Arthur was still in the bath and she just looked at him, pulled a bottle of baby oil out of a drawer, and doused him like it was nothing. Came right off. How was I supposed to know it would be that easy?”

Shane paused. “Google.”

Hayden reached over their bags and punched him in the arm. “You try googling while you’re knee deep in bubbles and the girls are all laughing at you.”

“Even Amber?”

“Even Amber! You ever been mocked by a two year old who can’t even pronounce lipstick?”

“Sorry, dude. That’s rough.”

“It’s never boring, that’s for sure. So you’ll be there? Maybe I can even convince you to come help set up?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, of course. Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Sweet,” he said, the car pulling to a stop in front of his house. Hayden grabbed the handle of his bag. “The kids miss you, I think. Jackie, too.”

“I was just over there last—” Shane started to say week, but that wasn’t right. “—month.”

“Yeah.” Hayden smiled, a little tightly, pulling the latch and opening the door. “Anyway. Glad to see you back to normal, is all.”

Shane forced a smile of his own. “Yeah,” he replied, a second too late.

The door shut and the car was moving again, streetlights passing and headlights shining through the window.

The last time Shane had been in this room, picking Puck up after his surgery, he didn't know what to expect. He remembered feeling like an idiot as Rozanov stood on the other side of the table and covered his laughter with his hand while Shane fumbled with the carriers. He had been nervous, out of his depth, about to embark on caring for a kitten he didn't know would become so important so quickly.

Now, three weeks later, he felt the same for an entirely different reason and the twitching in his fingers wouldn't stop. It didn't help that when he'd arrived, Svetlana had checked him in and Shane spent too long trying to figure out if she knew before he gave up.

She didn't, he told himself, even if she'd been there when Shane took Rozanov to the maintenance closet. She couldn't, because if she knew then this was already too dangerous and he'd have to end it. That might have been worse.

Puck pranced around the exam room without a thought in his head. At this point Shane was beginning to wonder if he had any thoughts in his head aside from food and pets *good*, destroy everything he could sink his claws into *better*. When he'd gotten home last night, the throw pillows were scattered on the floor, threads pulled and plucked from them that hadn't been like that before.

It was 9:04 and the door across the room remained shut. Not that Shane was surprised, because nothing Rozanov did ever made sense to begin with, so why should he also be on time? If anything, the extra minutes gave him time to take a breath and calm the fuck down. He told himself it was just a regular appointment one more time.

Even if Rozanov hadn't stopped flirting with him over text for six days.

Even if he wanted more.

At 9:09, there was a small knock on the door before it immediately opened, Rozanov bending down at the last second to thwart Puck's escape attempt.

"Ah, I do not think so," he said to Puck before placing him on the table. "There is nothing for you out there."

He didn't look any different than he had the first time he'd walked into this room, the same curls falling over his forehead, the same stubble on his jaw, the same stupidly nice eyes, but this time Shane let himself look. Let himself see.

"Good luck getting him to listen to you," he said, clearing his throat and hooking his thumbs into his pants pockets.

"Is true, cats are smarter than that." Rozanov ruffled the fur around Puck's neck with both hands. "They do not always follow commands like dogs. Or you."

Shane rolled his eyes but felt his cheeks heat up all the same. "Funny."

Rozanov grinned at him before turning his attention back to Puck. He ran his hands over his back and sides, inspected the scar line briefly, and ended his ministrations with a swoop up the tail. Shane tracked the movement. "Come here."

Shane did.

"See?" Rozanov said, glancing up at him. "Obedient."

He knew he flushed from head to toe then, and quickly pushed off the table, crossing his arms. "Fuck you."

"Here? Very bold of you, Hollander."

Shane glared at him. His ears still burned.

Rozanov leaned over the table until his head was next to Puck. "Your dad is no fun."

"I thought we were here for a vaccine, not for you to be... you," Shane said. He didn't want it to be true.

"Can be both. But fine. I will do vaccine so you stop looking like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you like it anyway."

“You’re annoying.”

“Weird way to say hot, but is okay. Now will you really come here?” When Shane didn’t move, Rozanov continued, “Sometimes poke startles them. Need you to make sure Puck does not run.”

When he stepped forward this time, Shane maintained eye contact with what he hoped was another glare. Rozanov’s answering smirk could have meant anything.

His hands hovered over Puck’s back, unsure of what he was supposed to be doing. “How do you want me?”

“Willing. Eager,” Rozanov answered in quick succession. “Tonight.”

Shane huffed like that helped anything at all. “How do you want me to hold Puck?”

“Like this.” Rozanov moved his hands until one arm was draped loosely around Puck, his little face tucked into Shane’s elbow. His other hand he moved onto Puck’s back. “Firm but not strangling. Like grip from last—”

“I get it, thank you.”

Rozanov looked at him for a second too long, then nodded to himself.

“What?”

“What what?” he said casually, half-disappearing behind the table for a second while he bent down, reappearing with two small vials and a syringe a moment later.

“You nodded.”

“You are blushing, I nod because I like it. Means I am doing something correct.”

Shane didn’t know what he expected him to say, but it wasn’t that. Some sort of judgment on him, maybe, or some conclusion about him that was probably wrong or possibly too correct—not that.

“And you are very pretty.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d been called pretty. It was only the first time he didn’t mind. Shane rolled his eyes as warmth crept up his neck.

Rozanov was doing something with the vials that Shane didn't exactly understand, transferring liquid from one into the syringe only to push it into the other and roll it around in his hands. The motion was smooth and practiced, and it did absolutely nothing to stop Shane from thinking about those hands on him, those fingers wrapping around him, about where else Rozanov might touch him.

"Yes," he blurted.

Rozanov looked up, eyes bright. "Of course you know you are pretty."

"No, not that," Shane said automatically, then stopped. He could almost see the line in front of him that a week ago he never would have crossed, and swallowed. "Yes to tonight."

"I did not ask," Rozanov said, one brow raised.

"Yes, you did."

"No, I did not." He drew the liquid into the syringe, seemingly for the last time, and capped it. "But if you insist."

"I take it back, then," Shane said.

"No, no, not allowed. No take backs."

"Not sure that's how it works."

"I am doctor, I am smarter than you, I know these things."

Shane laughed, loud but light. "Now I know that's not how it works."

"Move your—" Rozanov adjusted Shane's hands on Puck a couple centimeters to the side. "Like that."

He uncapped the syringe next, leaning over the table and resting his elbows on it. From this angle, Shane could count his eyelashes if he wanted to, could see where the bridge of his nose was slightly misshapen—broken at some point, probably. The scent that followed was the same, and Shane wanted to do something stupid about it.

"All done," Rozanov said, standing back up.

Shane blinked. He hadn't even seen him do anything. Puck didn't seem to notice either, more concerned about his limited freedom than a needle.

“That’s it?”

“One poke. One more in three to four weeks and he will be done for the year.”

Either Puck didn’t like that plan or he was tired of Shane holding him, because those were, once again, teeth in his flesh.

“Ah! Come on dude,” Shane huffed, pulling back his arm to inspect for damage. “Use your words.”

Puck stretched his body, lifting his tail straight in the air, and began to purr.

“He will not be contained,” Rozanov said almost proudly. Shane flicked his eyes to him only to find him already looking back. “Nor stopped. You could learn thing or two from him.”

His gaze shifted to Shane’s mouth. The buzzing came back in full force at the heat of it, the unashamed way Rozanov now drank him in, the professional exterior falling to the side. Shane swiped his tongue over his bottom lip before pressing his teeth briefly into it.

“Or maybe you already are.”

“That’s your worst line yet,” Shane said. It came out breathless.

“Not line,” he replied. “Dare.”

Maybe if Shane wasn’t the type to rise to a challenge, he would have dismissed it.

Maybe if he hadn’t been waiting for it, he would have resisted.

Instead, he grabbed two handfuls of Rozanov’s coat, pulled, and kissed him like he wanted to: hard enough to feel the sting of stubble against his skin, hungry enough to calm the ache.

Rozanov’s hand came to his waist, his jaw, and his body pressed forward against Shane’s, one continuous hard line from chest to thigh. The edge of his stethoscope brushed his knuckles, and Shane pulled back before he wouldn’t be able.

“Not here,” he said into the space between their lips, the only space he was capable of creating.

“No fun,” Rozanov grumbled, but he let go and took a step back all the same. “Come to mine, after eight?”

Shane wondered if he was doomed to always say yes to Ilya Rozanov.

He ignored the fact that it didn't scare him enough.

It was just after 8:30 when Shane pulled up in front of Rozanov's house. The lights were once again visible through the front window, but without the swirling snow to blur them out, so were the lights of his neighbors. Shane slid the sunglasses onto his face, pulled the strings of his hoodie, and took a deep breath before getting out of his car.

He knocked on the door and waited. And waited. And waited.

Each second felt like an hour and each hour felt like another pair of eyes, another busybody peeking through their curtains, whispering to their husband or wife about the weirdo standing on the vet's stoop. He could only hope that this was normal, that Rozanov had people over all the time, lots of men coming and going so that he wouldn't be noticed, wouldn't be seen.

Even if the thought made something curdle in his stomach.

Shane was about two seconds away from stomping back to his car when Rozanov finally opened the door and allowed him to push his way inside.

“I did not realize I invited unabomber over,” Rozanov said as he closed the door behind him.

“Don't tempt me, murder is looking pretty good right now.” He pushed his hood back and yanked the sunglasses off his face. “I was standing there like an idiot.”

“No one told you to wear sunglasses.”

Shane shot him a look that he hoped conveyed just how little patience he had left for his stupid little quips. “Sorry I have an interest in fucking *discretion*.”

Rozanov waved his hand, as if to brush the idea off completely. “Do you not have friends?”

“What?”

“Must be very sad for you, so lonely,” Rozanov tsk’ed his tongue twice. “Maybe every part of you is neglected.”

“I have friends,” Shane protested.

“And you go to their house?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“And no one assumes you are there to fuck?”

“Of course not.”

Rozanov shrugged. “Is no different. Anyone sees, you say we are friends.”

“We aren’t.”

“Exactly. Is lie, Hollander. That is point. Now take off your shoes,” he said, glancing briefly down towards Shane’s feet before turning and walking down the hallway toward the room at the end.

He did, then slipped off his coat and hung it on the same rack as last time.

Last time when everything in this house felt like a trap, waiting for him to make a wrong move, to slip up and acknowledge that he wanted the very thing that was now on offer, now looming over them unable to be ignored. If he stopped to think about it, retrace the steps that brought him here, he would have run as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

So Shane didn’t think about it at all, and followed Rozanov down the hall.

Anya and Maksim were being herded through the doorway when he approached and Shane had to sidestep Maksim’s overzealous tongue and tapping paws once he realized Shane was there. Anya lifted her head to look at him, then back to Rozanov, before she padded towards the living room.

“Get in here before he will not let you,” Rozanov said, curling his hand around Shane’s forearm and gently pulling him forward.

The second the door was shut, Rozanov crowded him against it.

“Fuck.” Teeth scraped across the side of his neck and Shane’s head fell backward with an echoing thump against the wood. His hands were already winding up Rozanov’s body, around the curve of his shoulders, into his hair.

“Is not what you want?” He felt the vibration of it before the sound reached his ears, warm breath ghosting over damp skin.

The thought that he’d been avoiding acknowledging all day screamed inside him, but Shane tugged on Rozanov’s hair and guided him to his mouth before it could do something else he couldn’t take back.

Time slowed, just enough for Shane to get lost in it. It didn’t matter, not when Rozanov wedged a thigh between Shane’s, not when he kissed Shane with an edge of desperation. He tasted like mint and something else underneath, something almost sweet. It only made Shane want more.

At the first touch of Rozanov’s hot palm on his bare skin, they separated long enough for Shane to rip his hoodie off over his head, his shirt gone with it. His chest was heaving, bare and exposed, when the pad of Rozanov’s calloused thumb met the skin of his lip. The breath Shane sucked in took him by surprise, his eyes suddenly open as the world narrowed to the sight of Rozanov’s hazel ones, half-lidded with blown pupils, flitting back and forth between his own.

Shane sucked the thumb into his mouth and the groan that came from Rozanov was almost feral.

Everything moved quicker then. Shane’s hands were scrambling, grasping at the hem of Rozanov’s thin shirt and pulling it up until it was freed and landed at their feet. A gold necklace glittered at Rozanov’s throat, drawing his gaze—a cross. He wanted to ask or to touch, see if it was as hot as the rest of him, when Rozanov pressed his palms flat against his pecs and dragged them down roughly, leaving a trail of reddened flesh in their wake.

Shane couldn’t look away from Rozanov’s chest if he tried. He’d seen it before, in a photo, but now it was inches away and Shane could see sparse hairs that circled his nipples, the moles that spattered across it like a map his eyes were meant to follow. It was so broad, so strong, so... masculine.

“I want—” He clamped his jaw then put his mouth to better use, licking over the hardened bud of a nipple.

Rozanov hissed, threading his fingers through Shane’s hair and spreading the other flat against the small of his back. He pulled and Shane followed, canting his hips forward to grind against Rozanov’s thigh.

“What?” Rozanov murmured huskily. “What do you want?”

He wasn’t going to answer, was going to sink his teeth into Rozanov’s pec and maybe slip his hands down the back of his pants for added leverage, and he did, his fingertips were gripping Rozanov’s ass and he panted against his chest and—

“Fucking—fuck me—”

The words ripped out of him, and for a second, Shane forgot how to breathe.

He wanted to hate himself for it and would have— he would have completely frozen too, gone stiff as a board at the fact that those words came from him, that he couldn’t contain them any longer—but Rozanov’s eyes widened, looking equally surprised and hazy. That more than anything was incentive to keep going, to keep the upper hand. Shane wasn’t going to lose to him, again.

“I want you to fuck me,” he said again, purposeful.

Rozanov stared at him, then said in the deepest timbre his voice had ever reached, “Yes.”

His heart kicked up a notch, thudding almost painfully behind his ribs, and Shane swallowed. “Then what are you waiting for?”

The rest of their clothes were pushed down and kicked off, and Rozanov had his entire body pressed flat against his as he kissed him, felt him, held him. The sensation of Rozanov’s cock rubbing against his own sent him reeling, gasping into Rozanov’s mouth and clutching onto his neck and shoulders like it could somehow stop him from thinking about just how badly he wanted this.

They were moving, shuffling feet and knocking knees until Shane fell onto the bed with a push to his sternum. He propped himself up on his elbows and his breath caught in his throat. Rozanov stood at the end of the bed, his own chest rising and falling faster than Shane had ever seen it before. Every inch of him was on display and Shane couldn’t

stop staring—didn't want to, even as it terrified him deep in his bones that this was happening. That he chose it.

That he wouldn't stop.

For one stupid second he thought about grabbing his clothes and walking out. He didn't.

Rozanov must have seen something on his face because he smiled, something small. Shane would have called it fond had it been on anyone else. "You are sure?"

He looked down at what definitely wasn't nine inches, but was still big enough to be intimidating and intoxicating at the same time.

"Yes," he shot back. "I asked for it, didn't I?"

Rozanov hummed and knelt on the bed, one on either side of Shane's own. "Is not beginner's dick," he said, glancing down. "But it will fit."

"Shut up."

"Bossy," Rozanov chuckled, but went anyway. He licked a stripe up Shane's torso, his neck, his jaw. Shane had just gotten his hands back in those curls when he spoke again, lifting his head to meet Shane's gaze, "We will go slow. You tell me to stop any time, I will, okay?"

Shane nodded, struck with an odd sense of tenderness that felt weird in his stomach. "Okay."

"Okay. Roll over."

Face down, Shane could only hear Rozanov moving around and pulling open a drawer as he waited. The duvet smelled like him—musky and woodsy and comforting in a way that it shouldn't have been but was. Nothing about this was supposed to be comforting at all.

"Fuck," he grumbled into the mattress, "how long does it take to get a condom and lube?"

The pop of a cap opening was the first response. Then Rozanov said, "Bossy, demanding... You sure you have not done this before?"

"I told you, no." Shane absolutely did not squirm nor rub his erection against the duvet. "I mean, after we—I... tried. Some things."

“What things?”

The only saving grace was that Rozanov couldn't see his face, the way he squeezed his eyes shut as he let the words come. “Um. My fingers. Mostly.”

“Still Boy Scout, then.”

“Just get on with it?”

“Okay.”

Rozanov pulled at his hips and adjusted his legs, Shane letting himself be guided onto his knees and keeping his face away, hidden, all the same. The mattress dipped under Rozanov's weight by his side, his breath ghosting over the back of his neck, and then the blunt tip of a finger was circling his hole and pressing inside.

“You still good?”

“Fucking hell, Roz,” he snapped over his shoulder. “It's a single finger. I'm fine.”

Rozanov breathed a laugh that Shane felt more than he heard, because he was fine, actually fine, actually kind of more than fine, while that single finger became two, became three.

While the stretch was still awkward and if Shane stopped to think about what was actually happening he might have died from embarrassment, the first time Rozanov's knuckle nudged his prostate, it was so much better than any of his own experimenting had been. Shane jerked his hips backward, groaning into his forearm as Rozanov rubbed it over and over while he spread his fingers.

“I'm ready,” Shane ground out through uneven pants when he couldn't take it anymore. His cock was leaking onto the bed under him, the wet fabric bunched up and barely rubbing the underside in a way that only made it worse.

Rozanov didn't withdraw.

“Seriously? What, do I have to beg?”

That finally did it, the slow removal of his fingers leaving Shane feeling empty and cold while his body overheated. “No,” Rozanov muttered from further away, the crinkle of a condom wrapper opening punctuating it. “Not this time.”

The familiar urge to punch him came back, and only dissipated a little when Shane felt him line himself up—because this was insane. Completely insane. Of all things that Shane should have been doing in this moment, at least hitting him would have been safe. Not the way he pushed backward into Rozanov and said, “Any fucking day now.”

That was enough. His body stretched to accommodate the size as Rozanov slowly pressed in, inch by inch. He held onto Shane’s hips firmly, hands broad and warm and strong, when he became fully seated inside him.

And he felt... so fucking good.

“Still okay?” Rozanov’s voice was still low and steady, and Shane wanted to hate how in control he still was, but he didn’t.

He let out a long breath. “Yeah.”

The first few thrusts were so slow that Shane wanted to yell in frustration, in hunger, but what came out was a gasped, “Oh fuck.”

Oh fuck, because he was smashing his face into a bed with his ass in the air. Oh fuck, because Rozanov was so deliberate that each thrust made his cock twitch and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Oh fuck, because he was so much more fucked than he could have anticipated.

Oh fuck, because he never, ever wanted to stop feeling like this.

Shane braced his arms out in front of him and pushed, arching his back as he met each of Rozanov’s movements with enough strength to give them resistance. It wasn’t enough. “I need you to—fuck—go faster,” he managed to say.

“Yeah. Whatever you want,” Rozanov groaned.

He began to fuck into him in earnest then, fast but not messy, harder but not reckless. He fucked him like he knew what he was doing and knew what Shane wanted even before Shane had the words for it. It was infuriating, exhilarating, and Shane was gasping out words he didn’t know, fingers clawed into the duvet when Rozanov placed a hand just above his shoulder blade and leaned onto it, the pressure perfect.

Shane came with a shout, muffled into the bed but loud enough to surprise even himself. It felt ripped from his lungs the same way his orgasm felt ripped from his bones, sudden and wild.

Rozanov's pace went frantic then, fingers digging into his back and his hip, and Shane took it, tried to stay still, to give him this. Right when it was almost too much, his body spent and hovering on the wrong side of sensitive, Rozanov growled his name, jerked his hips once, twice, and slumped forward to rest his forehead by his hand on Shane's spine.

For a moment, the only sound was their own labored breaths then Rozanov rolled over, making a small hissing sound as he pulled out, and flopped onto the bed beside him.

Shane turned his head, just enough to breathe cooler air. When he finally opened his eyes, Rozanov was watching him again.

"Good?"

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice rougher than he expected. "Good."

Not that *good* even began to cover it.

"I did not even have to touch your cock."

"Fuck you."

"Give me five minutes and I will see what I can do."

Shane huffed a laugh and shifted over, the stripe of his own come between them.

For one reckless second, he let himself stay there in the feeling—the warmth low in his body, the pleasing ache of exertion settling into his muscles, the strange, heavy calm still clinging to his skin—and when his brain tried to make something out of it, something about why it felt like that, something about what that meant, Shane cut it off before it could finish.

It was just sex.

That was all it was.

That was all it would be.

"Uh," he said after a moment. "Was it... also good? For you?"

Rozanov tugged off the condom and tied it, tossing it somewhere to the side that he couldn't see. "Yes," he said, turning back to Shane. "Very."

“Good.”

Rozanov got up, the bed shifting with his weight and then without it. “Be right back,” he said, reaching for the doorknob and slipping out before Shane could question it.

In the dim light and quiet, he sat up and, for the first time, looked at the room. The space was minimalist in decoration, with only a large black and white abstract painting above the bed and what looked like a framed diploma hanging above the dresser. A collection of animal figurines sat on top of the dresser itself, scrubs hung over the closet door and on one nightstand, a picture frame laid face down.

It was nothing like he had imagined.

Fuck. He was in Rozanov’s house, in his room, on his fucking bed after being—after asking—

What the fuck was he doing?

Shane held his head in his hands. Was he supposed to wait? Was leaving rude?

Was staying worse?

He had no idea. Nobody had ever given him a playbook for this.

He got up and fetched his clothes from the heap they’d left them in, shaking them out to release the wrinkles. He was sticky and gross with a new soreness setting in that made itself known when he was stepping back into his boxer briefs, but he didn’t stop.

When Rozanov returned with a washcloth in one hand and a glass of water in the other, Shane was adjusting the hem of his shirt.

“Drink,” Rozanov said, like it was an order instead of concern.

He was still naked. Shane only looked a little, maybe a lot. “Oh. I was gonna... head home.”

Rozanov shrugged. “Do what you want.” His features were oddly tight again and that only made his confusion worse.

“Um. I have an early practice and all. So.”

They stood there, the silence growing into some sort of stalemate that Shane didn’t know how to read.

Rozanov took a sip from the glass. “You leave in four days, yes?”

“Yeah. You officially stalking me now?”

“Maybe,” he said easily. “Or maybe your game schedule is public knowledge. Bring Puck over that morning.”

Shane blinked and scrunched his eyebrows. “What?”

“So I can watch him again.”

Rozanov said it like it was still obvious, just as it was the first time, and Shane knew it still made sense, even if last time it was for Puck’s best interest and not because it gave the excuse—

Shane shook his head, albeit weakly. “My parents can watch him.”

“No, that will not do.”

“Why not?”

“Because Maksim misses him.”

“Maksim,” Shane repeated dumbly.

Rozanov took another sip. “Mm, yes. He has been moping, carrying your little towel around. Do you want it back?”

“What? No, it’s just a towel—”

“Good because you cannot have it, it is Maksim’s now. So drop off Puck before you go. I won’t even charge you this time.”

Shane cleared his throat. “Fine, whatever.”

Rozanov took a step closer and stopped, eyes flitting between Shane’s, down to his mouth and back up again, like he was looking for something, or waiting for something. The thought filtered in that this was another test.

Then Rozanov stepped to the side, out of the way. “You can see yourself out?”

Shane nodded, swallowing once. “Yeah. Of course.”

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Night, Rozanov.” He reached for the doorknob, and as his hand curled around it, Rozanov’s own curled around his bicep.

When Shane looked over his shoulder at him, Rozanov’s brow was furrowed. A second went by, then two.

“Careful not to let the dogs out, yes?” he finally said, one side of his lips tilted in a smirk.

Shane huffed. “I think I can manage.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Rozanov’s hand fell away and the air felt too cold against his skin.

Puck was waiting at the door when Shane got home, meowing impatiently the second he stepped inside.

“Yeah, yeah,” Shane muttered, shrugging off his shoes.

He bent automatically to scoop him up, holding him against his chest and under his chin where his purrs could become the only thing he heard.

“You want to spend some more time with your dog friends in a few days then?”

Puck pawed at the collar of his shirt, but when Shane scratched his cheek, instead of leaning into it, Puck rubbed his face against the same spot.

Shane frowned and pulled the fabric away from his skin.

It smelled like Rozanov.

His chest tightened strangely.

Shane dropped his hand, staring down at the kitten tucked against him.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

He didn’t say *me too*. That would have been ridiculous.

Chapter End Notes

Shane’s reaction being called pretty is more or less a direct quote from *Heated Rivalry* (book, not show).

The “not a beginner’s dick” is a quote from *Common Goal*, and although in that book it is not in reference to Ilya’s, I just thought it was too perfect for this moment and said fuck it, let’s use it here for funsies. (When I first read that line, I went RACHEL NO and cackled. Some of my favorite parts of the books are the cringiest, most ridiculous ones and I don’t know what that says about me. Probably nothing new, honestly.)

And small story time: years ago, my Rescue Bestie was looking over an adoption application for her foster cat. She got to the question of “where will this cat be kept during the transition period?” And the answer was, inexplicably and unintentionally hilariously, “No special container.”

We now never miss an opportunity to joke about special containers and I really, really wanted to shoehorn it into this fic for my own amusement. I settled on the “he will not be contained” line in the end.

Cat facts:

The FVRCP vaccine is one of the core vaccines all cats and kittens should receive regardless of whether they are indoor only, outdoor, or a mix of both. Kittens get vaccinated on a schedule of every 3-6 weeks (generally speaking) until they are 16 weeks of age (though some veterinarian practices will extend that to 20 weeks). The vaccine protects cats against three serious feline viruses and I cannot understate how important it is to vaccinate as those viruses can cause severe

illness, suffering, and death—especially in kittens as they are more vulnerable due to a still-developing immune system.

In most veterinary settings, a vet tech will either administer the vaccine or assist with it rather than having the owner, so the scene here with Shane holding onto Puck is slightly unrealistic in that aspect. The most common FVRCP vaccine does come in two parts: a freeze-dried powder and a diluent. You draw the diluent into a syringe, inject it into the vial with the powder, mix well, then re-draw all of the reconstituted vaccine back into the syringe. The active ingredients in the vaccine are unstable and degrade quickly while in liquid form, so the vaccine should be administered as soon as possible after reconstitution.

Also some cats/kittens have 0 reaction to the vaccine being given, like they literally don't notice a needle being poked into their flesh, and others will SCREAM BLOODY MURDER and then give you the stankiest stink eye. Insert Mushu "Dishonor! Dishonor on you, dishonor on your cow" gif here. If you have a big dramatic baby for a cat, just know I see you.

Chapter 12: Hat Trick

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday and welcome back! I honestly can't say thank you enough for all the love, kudos, and comments I've received on this so far. It has been such a joy to see your thoughts, your reactions, your predictions, and sometimes I have to stop myself from just spoiling everything in my replies. Thank you all for being here, truly <3

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

The next game, Shane played better than he had in weeks, maybe even years.

Every pass connected exactly as intended, and he watched shot after shot find the gaps and hit the back of the net. The euphoria didn't let up as they went into overtime, Shane racing up and down the ice with the same energy he started with, his lungs burning with it as he broke away with the puck and shot it one more time. The final buzzer sounded as hats rained down on the ice. His teammates collided into his back and his front, their helmets clanging against his, grinning and shouting, like he was truly their leader.

Like Shane was unstoppable.

Afterward, the reporters tried to ask him what the difference-maker was tonight and he said something simple about good days and bad days, about how both were important and how yeah, the hat trick felt good, but they were a team and everyone had a part to play. Just enough to give them their sound byte and get him out of there, and not anywhere close to the truth.

That despite everything that told him he shouldn't, Shane never felt better.

He was thrumming with energy, too much to be contained by the locker room, the arena, because he had played the game of his life—and when he finally checked his phone, he saw Rozanov's name on the screen.

Rozanov: You are full of fun tricks

Shane: What do you mean?

Rozanov: Hat trick, hands-free trick. Don't know which I like more

Hayden punched his shoulder and Shane nearly jumped out of his skin. "Think you can do that about fifty to sixty more times?" he asked with a grin, packing up the rest of his gear.

"Didn't realize I was just supposed to carry you on my back all the way to the playoffs," he said, hoping his smile was natural as he pocketed his phone.

"A man can hope," Hayden laughed.

This was fine, Shane reminded himself. He was still the same guy.

He could still have this, he could take the team all the way to the playoffs, the finals, take home the cup and hold it above his head in victory.

He could meet up with Rozanov, get off, and tuck it back into the corner of his brain where he didn't have to think about it.

He could have whatever he wanted.

Shane was lacing up his skates for practice when Hayden plopped down on the bench next to him and laid the stick across his lap, looking so serious that for a second Shane wondered who had died.

"I know, okay?"

His heart kicked into overdrive and his hands pulled the laces so hard that they bit into the flesh of his palms before Shane froze altogether. The soreness had worn off quickly, but he still had been forcing his body to move naturally, actively not flinching when his teammates brushed up against him or when he bent over his stick, but did he miss something?

Did he leave his phone unlocked? He'd already changed the settings to not show a preview of the notifications anymore. Shane thought he kept it out of sight from prying eyes, backed up into his stall and holding it close to his chest.

Or was there just something on his face that said yes, he did get fucked by a man the other night, thank you for noticing?

Hayden was still looking at him, patient but with an edge of something that felt too close to mockery, which didn't make sense. This was Hayden, he was always the most open of his teammates, casually supportive in a way that Shane hadn't expected but had been drawn to, and he wouldn't—he couldn't—

He should say something dismissive or maybe explain or beg for forgiveness even if that made his stomach twist in odd directions, markedly different from the way it currently churned.

In the end, Shane swallowed, dropped the laces, and said, as smooth as he could manage, "What?"

Hayden pulled out a roll of tape from his pocket and shrugged. "I get it, you didn't want to tell me because you thought I'd get mad or something, or that it would change things," he said, sticking the end of the tape on the handle and beginning to wrap it around, "but man, I've known you for like, ten years. And you're really not great at hiding things."

"I don't—how—" Shane stopped but his hands didn't, shaking where they rested on his thighs. He was going to throw up.

"Look, it's okay. You got attached. There's nothing wrong with that." Hayden looked up at him and smiled. Anyone who gives you shit about it is an asshole."

Shane turned toward the direction of the bathroom and debated making a run for it, half-tied skates and all. He could trip on the way, smash his face against the floor—at least then he wouldn't be having this conversation.

At least then he wouldn't have to face it.

"It's nothing," Shane finally settled on saying. "I mean, there isn't anything to tell. Not that there would be anything wrong if there was, obviously, but—"

The next look Hayden gave him told Shane that he wasn't buying it, one brow half-raised. "Have you told your parents?"

“No,” Shane said quickly, a little too loud before he cleared his throat and tried again. “No, of course not, I haven’t—I’m not, it’s just... helps with stress. Nothing more.”

Rozanov’s smile flashed in his head. Shane squeezed his eyes shut and shook it out.

“Dude, you stare at your phone all the time,” Hayden said with a laugh. “You haven’t been over in weeks and keep blowing me off. It’s definitely more than that.”

Shane turned his head sharply. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“Well, Jackie already knows. She’s actually the one who figured it out.”

“What? How?”

“We were talking about the girls’ birthday. I thought it was a great idea, you know? I was going to give them a bowl and a collar as sort of like a pre-gift gift, but Jackie laughed and said I was an idiot. That you weren’t giving him up.”

Shane blinked. “Collar?”

“Yeah, don’t cats wear collars?”

The laughter burst out of him so abruptly that Shane almost fell over.

“Well excuse me for not being some sort of cat expert,” Hayden said with a roll of his eyes and an embarrassed smile on his face. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

“No, it’s not that. Just... relieved,” Shane said before quickly adding: “About Puck. That you know I’m keeping Puck.”

“Yeah, well, you could have just said something about it instead of getting weird. Not like you made any promises or anything. Anyway, there are shelters. After she called me an idiot, Jackie said we should just go to the SPCA. Want to go check it out with me after this? You can give me your expert opinion.”

“Yeah, sure, let’s do it.”

Hayden finished taping his stick and patted Shane on the back. “And stop looking so freaked, man,” he said, standing. “Your secret’s out, no harm no foul.”

More laughter escaped before he could stop it once the door swung shut behind Hayden. “Right,” he whispered to himself. “Nothing else.”

The shelter was strangely loud—not in the way the arena was on game day, with the echoes of cheers and whistles, the slice of skates and the tapping of sticks, but with muffled barks and the chirping of birds, and one particular cat who apparently had some very deep opinions it needed to share about its accommodations as it meowed and pawed at the kennel door.

The lobby was full of them, kennels of all sizes stacked in rows, in columns, metal cage doors latched shut with pieces of paper attached to them, lining every single wall aside from one. Glass windows looked into adjacent rooms where even more kennels and cages were staged and Shane suspected that behind the double doors at the end of a short hallway, there would be even more as the barking grew clearer as an employee walked through. Every single one was occupied with cats, rabbits, birds, and what was probably guinea pigs but was too far away to tell.

“Whoa,” Hayden muttered as they stepped into the lobby, his head swiveling. A few heads turned their way, some wearing red shirts with the SPCA logo on them and others not. “This is... a lot.”

Shane could only nod. Anywhere there wasn’t a kennel, there was a poster or a sign, all blasting his brain with information about adoption processes, volunteer opportunities, policy notices, and more than he couldn’t even begin to focus on. It was overwhelming, it was overstimulating...

It was almost where he had brought Puck.

His throat clenched.

Puck had settled so neatly into his apartment, into his life, that the thought of him being here instead, stuck in a cage in a loud lobby while he waited for someone to choose him made the corners of his eyes prickle.

“Bonjour, how can I—you’re Shane Hollander.”

The woman was looking at him with that wide-eyed look he'd seen a thousand times before. She was probably a little older than them, a bob of curly brown hair and a clipboard in her hand. Her nametag read Rachel. He blinked his eyes hard, put on his curated fan-service smile and nodded. "Uh, yeah, that's me—"

Hayden wedged his body until it was half in front of him and lifted a hand in a wave. "Hi, Hayden Pike," he said with a friendly smile of his own. The woman flitted her eyes between the two of them before it settled back on Shane.

"I'm a huge fan," Rachel said to him. "Are you looking to adopt?"

"He's not, but I am," Hayden interjected.

"Oh! I'm sorry," she said, flustered. Shane stifled a grin as she turned her attention to Hayden. "Right. Let me just get you checked in, get some information from you, and we can go from there." And then, almost as an afterthought: "I'm also a fan of yours, too. It's just not every day that a celebrity walks in. Not that you're not—because you are! Let's go over here, okay?"

Hayden shot him a look over his shoulder as he followed her toward one of the smaller side offices.

Shane stood in the doorway. "Do you mind if I just hang out here?"

Rachel had the sense to only look disappointed for a moment before she smiled and nodded. "Of course. Just ask if you need anything."

"Don't go falling in love or anything, we're not here for you," Hayden said as Rachel shut the door.

He shook his head, lips curling up, as he walked toward the longest row of kennels. Hayden didn't have to worry about that, he already had Puck and Puck was already more than enough kitten for him to handle. He'd woken up that morning first by Puck pouncing on his feet, biting them through both the duvet and the sheet, and then a second time by his rough little tongue scraping all over his face. Of all the ways Puck had acted as a living, breathing alarm clock, the sandpaper to the eyelid was the worst.

The cats he passed watched him: grey ones, orange ones, black and white ones that looked like they could have been dressed in their gameday suits, and, more often than not, brown tiger-striped ones. Some hunched at the back of the kennel, others rubbed their faces against the metal grate of the door, and many were curled up asleep on the small round pillows fitted in each one.

He came to a stop in front of one that was mostly white with a brown patch on the top of its head and another small spot near its nose. Albert, the sign on the kennel read, four years old, been at the shelter for one week, good with kids, dogs, and other cats. Albert laid there like a loaf near the front of the kennel, front paws curled under and eyes half-open, and looked like he was smiling, completely satisfied and pompous in a way that had Shane pulling out his phone and taking a picture. He sent it to Rozanov.

Shane: He looks like you

The cat in the next kennel had him stopping in his tracks. It was another brown tiger-striped one, laying down with its head resting on the kennel floor in front of it. Its eyes were gold with a ring of blue around the iris and brown around the outer edge and looked so... defeated. Shane read the sign, his eyes catching on some acronym, FIV, that he didn't quite understand, and then resting on the line that read, *I have been at the shelter since August 17th*.

That couldn't be right. For starters, it didn't make sense, not when so many of the other signs said one week, maybe two at most, and many for just a few days. Shane found himself stepping closer, lifting a hand to brush against the metal. The cat's gaze shifted to him, but didn't raise his head.

"And who does that one look like?"

"Holy shit!"

"Language, Hollander," Rozanov said behind him, dressed in maroon scrubs. "This is respectable place."

Shane's hand clutched at his chest, heart pounding from where he was fairly certain his soul left his body, because this made even less sense. He hadn't seen Rozanov since he'd left his place, the night that Shane got into his car and rested his forehead against his steering wheel for five deep breaths while he told himself to just drive home even though for some stupid reason he'd almost turned back more than once to go back inside.

And now he was standing there, again, far enough that Shane couldn't reach him if he tried.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Rozanov's eyes lit up. "Not at all, there are children right over there."

Shane glanced from side to side. A family on the far side of the lobby was talking with a worker, well out of earshot. "What are *you* doing here?" he hissed. "Wait. I was kidding before, but you really are stalking me, aren't you?"

"Mm, no." Rozanov laughed softly, waving a hand. "I volunteer here, help with surgeries," he said casually, gesturing to the short hallway Shane had seen when they walked in. "Then I saw your text."

"Oh. I just thought—" Shane cut himself off, unable to finish. What *had* he been thinking? "I just thought it was funny," he finished lamely.

"It was. Why are you here? Getting another cat?"

Shane shook his head. "Uh, not me. My friend Hayden is."

Rozanov narrowed his eyes for a split second. "Hayden."

"Yeah, Hayden Pike. He's on the team?"

"Ah, right," Rozanov mused. "The one who takes seventeen shots to score one goal."

"That's not true."

"Sixteen?"

Shane exhaled sharply through his nose. "Come on, he's my best friend."

"You can be best friends with mediocre hockey player, did I say you could not? And you think Bruno here is the one for Hayden Pike."

"What? No, I mean—I'm just looking. I'm not picking out his cat for him."

"You were looking at him for long time."

Shane hesitated. He opened his mouth to ask how long Rozanov had been watching, maybe something cutting about how creepy it was, even if part of him didn't think it was

at all, but what he said was, “How come he’s been here so long?”

Rozanov shrugged and stepped forward, Shane turning as he approached until they stood side by side facing the kennel. Underneath the scent of soap was one of sweat, musk, and that stupid fucking smell that had Shane remembering, wanting. He pushed it aside and forced himself not to lean closer.

“He probably was in foster home for a while. Maybe they could no longer do it, maybe no one wanted to meet him,” Rozanov said, tilting his head as he regarded the lump known as Bruno. “So he came back. More eyes to see him here, better chances at a home.”

“So he just... lives here? In the cage?”

“Yes. Until someone adopts him.”

Shane stilled. When Shane found Puck, it had seemed so complicated—that first visit to Rozanov’s clinic had left his head spinning with all the things he had to look up, the supplies that needed to be bought, and how he was supposed to manage it all when the season had just barely begun. There was no chance that Shane was going to adopt him, then. It was too much.

In the end, it was so easy. Natural.

His stomach churned again. It wasn’t right, none of this was right. There had to be another way, a better way for Bruno, for all of these animals stacked on top of each other, to get everything they deserved while they waited in this limbo.

“So that’s why he looks like that.”

Rozanov turned his gaze to him. “Looks like what?”

“Sad,” Shane said. Bruno tracked his movement as he bent forward slightly. “You can see it in his eyes.”

“Can you?”

“Yeah. Can’t you?”

Rozanov went quiet, and when Shane glanced back over his shoulder, he saw his brows twitch once toward each other. There was something in Rozanov’s own eyes then, but it was gone before Shane could settle on what.

Rozanov looked away first.

“Maybe.”

Shane pointed at the sign. “What’s FIV?”

“It stands for feline immunodeficiency virus.”

“So he’s sick?”

“Mm, yes and no. Maybe. Is complicated.” Rozanov held the backs of his fingers against the bars. Bruno slowly lifted his head and stretched his neck toward them, whiskers twitching rhythmically as he sniffed. “FIV positive means his immune system is compromised for life and he will be more likely to develop illnesses and infections, but does not mean he will always be sick. Sometimes he will be healthy and other times not. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.”

Rozanov hummed, pulling his hand back when Bruno laid his head back down. “People do not understand so easily. Or they fear a potential that has not happened and may never happen. So he is passed over for other cats.”

Shane scoffed. “That’s stupid, there’s no guarantee that any other cat will be healthy forever either.”

“No.”

“He should get a chance.”

"You think so?" Rozanov asked quietly.

The question felt strange somehow.

"Obviously," Shane said, reaching for the bars himself. The spot where Rozanov’s hand had rested was still warm.

Whiskers twitched once more, but Bruno didn’t move again. Maybe Shane only imagined that he wanted to.

"He will," Rozanov said at last. "When the right person comes along."

When he turned, Rozanov wasn't looking at him anymore, his lips a flat line and his body was still in a way that Shane hadn't seen before. The barking behind the double doors blurred into the background.

"I—"

"All right," Hayden's voice cut through. "Got a game plan. Going to bring Jackie and the twins here after the holidays, they have all the info on file so we can skip straight to meeting some cats."

Shane took one giant step to the side and willed his face to stay normal.

Hayden's gaze darted between him and Rozanov, still smiling. "Who's this?"

His brain rapidly filtered through answers: *No one. Just a guy. My vet—my cat's vet. A friend. My fuck—*

"Uh," Shane said.

Rozanov held out his hand. "Ilya Rozanov."

"He's a vet," Shane blurted.

"Oh cool," Hayden replied, grasping Rozanov's hand. "Nice to meet you. You work here then?"

"Sometimes."

Shane held his breath while the two stared at each other, Hayden's smile faltering and a challenge written all over Rozanov's face. This was it, he thought, this was actually the worst thing he'd experienced all day—not the painful wake up call, not the panic in the locker room, not even the way he kept circling back to thoughts of Rozanov pinning him down when he was running drills during practice.

"...Okay," Hayden said, breaking the silence. He tapped the back of his hand on Shane's arm. "You ready?"

"Yeah. Um."

"Goodbye, Mr. Hollander."

Shane gave an awkward salute.

On their way out, once the main doors were pushed open, Hayden cast one more glance over his shoulder before lowering his voice. “Do you know him?”

“No,” Shane said quickly. “He just recognized me.”

Hayden sighed. “Figures. Can’t take you anywhere, huh?”

His pocket buzzed once and then again a moment later. It took too much of his willpower to not grab his phone, knowing whose name he’d see—whose name he hoped he’d see—but he couldn’t. Not now, especially not since Rozanov had gone ahead and told Hayden his name. Shane was going to have to change the contact entirely.

They parted ways in the parking lot, Shane standing next to his car waving with one hand while the other reached into his pocket.

Rozanov: This one is you

The cat in the photo had its ears so flat they formed a horizontal line across its head and its pupils were as wide as saucers. Shane had never seen a cat look so freaked out.

Shane: Seriously?

Rozanov: You don’t see resemblance?

Shane: Fuck you

Rozanov: Later. Saturday?

He quickly sent a thumbs up and watched as the dots appeared and disappeared three separate times. When they didn't show up again, Shane set the phone down in the center console and tried not to feel disappointed.

As he drove home, Bruno's face popped into his head once before it switched to Rozanov's and made the rest of the drive easier, if not more physically uncomfortable.

On Saturday morning, Shane stood on Rozanov's front step with the carrier in his hand and only his hood up this time. He had rehearsed what he would say if anyone saw him on the drive over, the way he'd hold up Puck and talk about petsitting, how yes, he was Shane Hollander, and this was a completely normal thing that pet owners did and there was nothing weird about it. He wasn't here for anything else, hadn't been before, and wasn't wondering if anything would happen again once he got inside.

Maybe he should have brought the empty carrier the first time. Maybe he would the next.

In the end, one neighbor had been getting into their car when he arrived, but they didn't even look his way despite the fact that Puck was singing the song of his people the whole walk up.

When Rozanov let him in, Anya and Maksim greeted him first with excited tail wagging and tapping feet. "I was just here," Shane muttered as he attempted to close the door behind him and pet their heads without getting slobbered on. He failed on the second point and wiped his palm on his pants.

The curtains were drawn, plenty of light still filtering in through them, the television in the living room muted and playing TSN. The program cycled through highlights, and Shane caught a glimpse of his own game-winning shot.

Rozanov held his hand out. "Cute that you think it's about you. Give."

Shane handed over the carrier and immediately Anya and Maksim shifted over to Rozanov.

“Wow,” he scoffed. “I feel so special.”

“Whatever will you do when only millions of people give you attention every day and not millions plus two dogs,” Rozanov said.

“That’s not—there’s not *millions*.”

“Oh really?” The moment Rozanov set the carrier on the ground and opened the door, Puck managed to hop out even with Maksim trying to fit his whole head and shoulders into it at the same time. The tapping grew more excited and Puck practically threw his body at Anya’s legs, at Maksim’s face. “Because no one shut up about Shane Hollander being at the shelter for hours. Was all ‘he’s so handsome, he’s so talented,’” he said in an exaggerated tone.

Shane laughed. “You almost sound jealous. What, do you usually just waltz in and have everyone fawning over your stupid smile and sexy accent?”

For a second Rozanov looked at him like he’d said something wrong before he looked away. Puck was probably trying to wrestle with Maksim but ended up looking like they were performing some sort of summoning ritual—Puck lying on his back with his paws outstretched while Maksim circled him. When he looked back to Shane, his lips curled up on one side. “When do you leave?”

“I have an hour.”

They were kissing then, Shane sliding his hands over the sides of Rozanov’s jaw, fingertips in his hair, while Rozanov hauled his body closer with a strong grip on his sides. Shane didn’t know who moved first or who decided that they needed to be shuffling down the hall. At some point his jacket had been shoved off his shoulders along with Rozanov’s shirt, landing in with a crumple on the wood floors, his shoes toed off and left behind.

His hip collided into a small table, Rozanov’s back into the doorframe of the bathroom, until they made it into the bedroom and Shane pushed Rozanov onto the bed before crawling on top of him.

“I was not jealous,” Rozanov said as he lifted Shane’s shirt up and over his head, propping his body up enough to flick his tongue over Shane’s nipple.

“What? Fine,” he hissed, sucking a breath through his teeth as Rozanov gently bit down. Shane palmed Rozanov’s cock with one hand while the other threaded into his hair and held. “Whatever, just—fuck.”

Rozanov snaked an arm around Shane's back, his fingertips pressing into the spaces between his ribs. He muttered something against his skin but Shane didn't understand it—couldn't find the capacity to ask either, not when Rozanov's lips were moving, attaching themselves to Shane's neck.

“Can I fuck you again?” he whispered into the underside of Shane's jaw, breath ghosting against his ear.

Shane was nodding before he even finished speaking, flushing from head to toe. “Yeah,” he said and rolled off Rozanov's lap.

Halfway into Shane rolling over, once he'd kicked his pants and boxer briefs down and off his ankles, Rozanov stopped him with a hand on his hip. “No,” he said, pushing Shane back onto his back and dropping the condom and lube next to him. “I want to see your face this time.”

His voice was low and Shane didn't know if he was imagining it to be teasing or flirting, the way he was used to. If he wasn't, if Rozanov was actually sincere, he wasn't sure he knew what to do with that—so it had to have been. He rolled his eyes, just slightly, just in case.

“Sure, whatever. Tick tock, Rozanov.”

Rozanov laughed and lubed up his fingers. “They would wait for you.” He leant over Shane and kissed him, languid and dirty, nipping at his bottom lip while he reached between Shane's legs.

Everything was slower than Shane expected, including the seconds that ticked by. Rozanov worked him open and at some point it became less actual kissing and more their mouths sharing the same space, breath mingling and foreheads resting against each other. More, his body wanted as he arched and shifted and hooked a leg around Rozanov's waist. More, he thought as he pulled against Rozanov's shoulders.

Rozanov chuckled lightly and removed his fingers. “Okay,” he said, and only then did Shane realize that he had said the word out loud.

There was movement—the readjusting of bodies, Shane's legs being hitched higher and his hips tilted, and Rozanov rolling the condom on—and when Rozanov slowly pushed inside him, Shane exhaled long and even.

It was—stupidly, absurdly—better than last time for reasons Shane couldn't grasp onto. The pace was slower this time, almost irritatingly so, with steady thrusts that had him

squirming and squeezing, tugging on Rozanov's hair to bring him back to his mouth whenever he got too far away. There was no reason it should have been better, that his body was more relaxed even as Rozanov's necklace knocked against his chin, even as his breath was too hot mingling with his own. At some point he opened his eyes and saw Rozanov's already looking at him, half-lidded and full of heat, something flared within him that sent his heart into overdrive.

"Fuck," he muttered and squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he could.

"Can you come like this again? Just on my cock?" Rozanov groaned. "Can you—ah, fuck." His hips moved faster, faster, almost what Shane wanted, what he needed.

"Fucking make me," he ground out before he heard a string of Russian and felt Rozanov's teeth sink into his shoulder as he thrust once last time.

Shane let out some embarrassing sound then. He was so close, his cock leaking onto his stomach and begging to be touched. Halfway to reaching for it, Rozanov slapped his hand away.

"Fuck." Rozanov sounded equally satisfied and disappointed and wasted no time in wrapping his hand around Shane's cock.

If he let out another whine when Rozanov slid out of him at the same time he started to stroke, it was probably warranted. So was the fact that Shane was coming less than a minute later, their eyes locked.

Rozanov was still watching him when Shane finally caught his breath. "What?"

"Nothing. Stay here."

Shane furrowed his brow, but nodded. Not that he could move, his arms heavy and legs weak from the stretch. Rozanov disappeared into the hall and Shane let his eyes fall shut, just for a moment.

"Too bad about your fun trick," Rozanov said when he came back with a washcloth.

Shane laughed breathlessly. "Pretty sure that's not my fault. But don't be so hard on yourself, I'm sure your ego will recover."

Rozanov scoffed and finished wiping down Shane's stomach. His abs flexed involuntarily under the touch. "Like yours after you came in your pants?"

“Shut up.”

“What would they say if they knew Mr. Handsome and Talented also had hair trigger?”

“I’d still be more handsome and talented than you.”

Rozanov clapped a hand to his chest, resting it over his heart while he arranged his face into mock-outrage. “Tsk, and after I finish you off so graciously.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, wide enough that he could feel it in his cheeks.

They dressed, Rozanov tossing Shane his shirt so that it hit him in the face, Shane retaliating with a well-timed shoulder-check as they moved toward the door, laughing all the while. When Rozanov reached out and grabbed Shane’s bicep, the déjà vu was enough to make his stomach momentarily bottom out. Then Rozanov tugged.

Shane went, any lingering unease dissipating as he met Rozanov’s kiss with a hand on his jaw.

“How much time is left?” Rozanov asked when he finally let go.

“Shit.” He scrambled down the hall, the time somehow much later than he had expected. There was no way that was an hour, his watch had to have been wrong or something. He was supposed to have more time.

Shane shoved his feet into his shoes and took his coat from Rozanov’s hand. “Thanks,” he said, shrugging it on while he looked around for Puck to say goodbye. “Do you see —?”

He stopped. In the corner of the living room, Puck was curled up in the crevice between Anya and Maksim’s bodies on the dog bed, one paw draped over his eyes and his tail over Maksim’s head like a toupee.

The corners of his lips pulled upward and Shane made his way over, crouched down, and kissed Puck’s fur. The kitten made a questioning trill. “I’ll see you later, you little traitor.”

With one last kiss to his tiny forehead, he left Puck to his cuddle pile and met Rozanov at the front door. “I’ll let you know when I’m back.”

Rozanov nodded, running a hand over the back of his head. “I will send updates.”

“Yeah, of course.” Shane gave a smile and only just stopped himself from listing forward by grabbing onto the doorknob. “See you later.”

He only noticed how easy it had been to leave Puck there long after he'd driven away.

Chapter End Notes

The Montreal SPCA is a real place, however my depiction of it here definitely errs more on the creative license side than firmly rooted in reality. I have spent a fair amount of time in shelters in my own area, so I drew heavily from those experiences instead.

Cat Facts:

Okay so there are a LOT of things I want to say relating to the whole shelter scene here. (Disclaimer, I am speaking from the perspective of someone in the US and am not as familiar with shelters in other countries.)

First, let's talk about the notion of kill vs no kill shelters. I know the gut-reaction is that “no kill” shelters are “better” shelters. The truth is a LOT more nuanced. First, “no kill” does not mean that every animal that comes into their care leaves alive, it is based on a ratio—it means that at least 90% are not euthanized, so the name itself is a bit of a misnomer. Secondly, “kill” shelters are often municipal ones, ones that are not legally allowed to turn away any animal that shows up at their door. “No kill” shelters are generally private or are not legally bound the same way—they can turn away any animal they want, for whatever reason they want. If an animal shows up who is seriously ill or has extreme behavioral concerns, a “no kill” shelter can say “nope, no thanks” to keep their euthanasia statistics low—this can leave the people who are trying to do their best for the animal feeling defeated and guilty that their only option is the “kill” shelter. “Kill” shelters aren't euthanizing animals for funsies, and will take every measure to avoid it—like using temporary kennels and crates and fill every inch of space they are legally allowed to use while not violating safety codes, do adoption drives where fees are reduced or eliminated entirely, or partner with other local and independent rescues to move animals into foster homes, etc. The “kill” shelters are the ones people SHOULD be supporting because those are the ones that are taking care of animals

no one else will take and often see the absolute worst cases of illness, abuse, and animal suffering.

The goal, of course, is to have all shelters fall under that 90% euthanasia rate and some communities have absolutely been able to achieve this already, but for others, the work is ongoing and animal rescuers of all kinds are doing the best we can.

Okay, soapbox moment done. Next is FIV (feline immunodeficiency virus). Cats who are FIV+ can live long, healthy lives just like those without it, but their people should be on top of regular checkups, make sure they stay indoors, and give them a million forehead kisses (that last one is non-negotiable). Yes, their immune system is compromised and more susceptible to illness, but that doesn't mean they will automatically be sick all their lives. FIV+ cats can also live with FIV- cats as the virus is spread through deep bite wounds (which happens during highly aggressive territorial fights and usually only happens with outdoors cats who are not spayed or neutered) or from mother to kitten. While the stigma surrounding FIV has lessened in recent years, it isn't completely gone which leads to FIV+ cats waiting for forever homes longer than their FIV- peers.

Lastly!! Most people think that black cats are the “least adopted” but I firmly believe this has changed since that statistic first started making the rounds. At least in my experience (which I'm not an expert, but I do have nearly 10 years in cat rescue as well as 5 years in volunteering as the adoption coordinator for my rescue), brown tabbies are the actual least adopted as they are the most common—hence why Shane notices a large amount of brown tabbies in the shelter scene here. But honestly, my biggest wish is that people would stop focusing solely on how a cat looks when it comes to adopting as that is the least important aspect. Personality and finding a match for your home/lifestyle should be the priority.

Chapter 13: Gap Control

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, thanks for being here <3

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

Shane was wiping the come off his hand with a tissue when the thought came, speaking it aloud before he could stop himself.

“Do you ever wonder what it could have been like?”

On the other end, Rozanov’s breath had evened back out. He sounded sleepy when he hummed and asked, “What?”

“If you hadn’t been injured,” Shane said. He squeezed the phone against his cheek with his shoulder to finish wiping between his fingers, then tossed the tissue in the trash can under the desk. “If you still played.”

Rozanov exhaled sharply. “What, if I would be jerking off over phone in hotel room when my friends were out partying?”

Shane rolled his eyes and collapsed back onto the bed. “No, asshole. And besides, we are leaving in the morning. They would be better off if they stayed in, too.”

“Sounds boring.”

“I knew you would say that,” he said with a laugh. “It’s called being responsible.”

“Even more boring.”

Shane scoffed. “Tell me how boring it is when I win the cup this year.”

“I will while I am fucking you in front of it.”

“Closest you’ll ever get to it.”

Rozanov barked a laugh that sounded more incredulous than anything else. “Now who is asshole.”

“Shit, I didn’t mean—”

“Yes you did,” he said. “Is okay, Hollander, you are allowed to be more than just nice hockey player. Better that you are, too.”

The reading light above the bed was too bright now and he flipped the switch, swallowing once. “Oh yeah?”

“More fun. Your interviews are terrible. If only they knew you were a needy asshole with a needy—”

“Okay,” Shane interrupted. “I am not needy.”

“Oh, fuck me Rozanov, faster Rozanov, harder, more, more, more—”

“Shut *up*.”

“No, no, now this is fun,” Rozanov said. “I can see your angry eyebrows in my head.”

“Angry eyebrows?”

“Yes, your face gets all pinched and your eyebrows go pointy. Is my favorite face you make.”

He made a point to relax his face—not that Rozanov could see him, anyway, but there was no way he was letting him win. “Wow, tell me how you really feel, I guess.”

“Okay, second favorite face,” Rozanov conceded, his voice dripping with amusement. “First is when you come.”

And that should have been even less surprising, but Shane still flushed. “My favorite face of yours is anytime you aren’t talking.”

“You were the one who called me tonight.”

“Well, you were the one who sent me a dick pic,” Shane sputtered, sinking low into the mattress. His hand rested on his stomach, his mind conjuring up the picture in question unbidden, and his cock twitching in a valiant, but vain, effort. “I was in the locker room with my friends right there, so thanks for that, jerk.”

“You are welcome.”

Smug fucking asshole. Shane clenched his fist to stop himself. “You can’t do that.”

“Was reward, incentive to keep winning,” Rozanov said casually. “I gave warning. Not my fault you did not take it.”

“Can you at least pretend to care about not blowing up my life?”

“I can pretend to care about blowing you.”

Shane dragged a palm over his face like that would stop it from getting any more red. “I mean it.”

The exasperated sigh that followed was more dramatic than necessary. “Fine. I will not have any fun and will keep my dick to myself.”

“Was that so hard?”

“It was,” Rozanov mused. “That is why I sent picture.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Thank you.”

Shane scoffed. “That’s not a compliment.”

“It definitely is.”

There was a beat of silence then, long enough for Shane to stare up at the dark ceiling and maybe pretend he was back home. It was the last night of the road trip—three games in as many cities, nothing unusual—and even though everything had gone more or less as good as could have been expected with one loss and two wins, Shane strangely found it hard to focus on planning for the next practice, the next game. Thoughts of home—of Montreal—were stronger.

Maybe that was why he asked Rozanov another question instead of hanging up.

“What made you choose to be a veterinarian?”

“What does it matter?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said quickly. “I was just thinking about the shelter, earlier. About the animals there. I didn’t realize that was what it was like.”

“I liked animals,” Rozanov said after a moment. “I wanted to help them. No big secret.”

“Yeah.” Once again the thought of Puck sitting in a kennel popped into his head. Then Bruno. “I was thinking maybe I could help, too.”

“You would never pass vet school.”

Shane huffed. “No, you ass. Like I could, I don’t know, sponsor them or something. Maybe help get them upgrades to the building. Maybe do something with the team, like a PR campaign. Raise money or promote adoptions. I want to help.”

Rozanov went quiet and Shane wondered if he missed something. Maybe the SPCA didn’t need that sort of help, or maybe it was already being given and Shane was stupid for even bringing it up. He cleared his throat like that would clear the rest. “Is that a bad idea?”

“No. Not bad idea.”

“Yeah?”

Rozanov clicked his tongue. “What, you want gold star for being decent human?”

“No, I just... wanted your opinion. I guess.”

Another silent stretch followed before Rozanov said, “Why?”

Shane shrugged even if there was no one to see it. “You’re the animal expert here.”

“I will give you contact for SPCA director. She will help you more than me.”

“Thanks.”

“You done with questions now?”

“You never answered my first one.”

Rozanov sighed again. “Because it does not matter. Cannot change past.”

Shane waited. The what ifs had been circling his brain for weeks—at every puck drop, every post-game interview—and he wanted to know.

Wanted to know if Rozanov thought about it, too.

“I know, I just... been thinking, is all.”

“Dangerous for you.”

The way he said it made Shane sit up a little. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Rozanov said flatly. “Is joke.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole about everything, you know.”

“Yes I do.” His voice was quieter, and if Shane didn’t know any better he might have thought it sounded sad.

Shane frowned. “Fine. See you tomorrow.”

Rozanov hung up without another word. Shane was going to roll his eyes, was going to dump his phone onto the nightstand and go to sleep just like every other night, but instead he stared at the screen.

He didn’t sound sad, Shane told himself, and if he did, that wasn’t Shane’s problem. And if that felt wrong, if Shane *had* wanted to know why, that was just curiosity.

And if he wanted to fix whatever caused it, well. That was just... completely irrelevant.

Their flight had been delayed by an hour, then two, then six. By the time they’d finally boarded the plane, Shane never wanted to spend another fucking minute in Tampa and the mood amongst the team was so sour that all the grumbling and bitching had turned into a hard silence. Shane had wanted to call Rozanov in the terminal, maybe have a video call with Puck like he watched Hayden do with Jackie and the kids during the fourth hour, but had to settle for complaining over text. He’d huddled over his phone and tapped away whenever a new update got announced by the gate attendant and found himself smiling, despite everything else, when Rozanov responded right away.

What should have been a mid-afternoon arrival back in Montreal turned into one well after dark, which turned into Shane showing up at Rozanov’s door not even trying to

hide his so-called angry eyebrows.

Inevitably *that* had turned into a heated kiss by the door, a frantic and near-frustrating groping in the hall, and a frankly exhausting fuck in Rozanov's bed. When Shane had eventually retrieved his underwear and said that he needed to get going through a yawn, Rozanov had shrugged and said, "Or just stay."

A few more minutes couldn't hurt, he remembered thinking. Not after that shitshow of a travel day. It didn't hurt that the bed was warm, his body was tired, and the thought of moving more wasn't as appealing as it should have been.

Shane didn't even know he had fallen asleep until he woke up to one singular claw poking into his nose. Instinctively, he jerked back—into something else that was poking him.

In the five seconds it took his brain to catch up, Shane groaned, pushed Puck's paw away from his face, and snuggled deeper into the embrace. And then, when it did, Shane's eyes snapped open and met two yellow-green ones barely visible despite being mere inches from his face.

That was Rozanov's dick nudging against his ass through two layers of fabric, Rozanov's breath on the back of his neck, and Rozanov's arm draped over his bare waist with his own resting on top. Alarm bells were going off somewhere in his head—almost distantly, and not enough to pay full attention to. Probably because it was o'dark thirty in the morning and Shane wasn't awake and maybe he should be awake and pay attention to those alarms that were getting increasingly louder the more he lied there, staring at the void that was his cat because—

"Shane, shut up." Rozanov's voice was heavy and groggy behind him, quiet enough that the silence of the room didn't crack altogether.

Shane frowned. "I didn't say anything," he mumbled.

"You are thinking too loud and it is too early. Go back to sleep."

Shane huffed, reached out to pull a purring Puck close and tuck him under his chin, and did. As he fell asleep, something niggled at the back of his brain where the alarm had been, then disappeared entirely.

The sun had risen the next time he woke up, cool light diffusing through the blinds. Puck was still curled up sound asleep in the crook of his neck but no stray limbs—or appendages—were touching him. Something warm and heavy was trapping him when he

tried to move his legs, but when he craned his neck to see, it was only Maksim and Anya lying on either side of him at the foot of the bed. He couldn't remember the last time he woke up somewhere that wasn't his own bed or a hotel room.

Shane rolled carefully onto his back, rotating his body in small shifts instead of one fluid motion given the limited leg room, and saw Rozanov's sleeping body next to him.

It was the most relaxed Shane had ever seen him, curled on his side with his lips slightly parted and one hand resting on the pillow next to his face. There was no smirking, no intense watchful stares—just a man, peaceful. Shane's fingers itched to trace a path over his eyebrows, maybe over the slope of his nose.

He grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut for a second and shaking his head the smallest amount. That was not going to happen, that was just his brain misfiring in its sleep-addled state.

Even if he did feel otherwise rested.

When he opened his eyes again, Rozanov was awake.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. Um, what time is it?”

Rozanov sat up then, reaching over to the nightstand. Shane's eyes trailed up the expanse of bare flesh, from the base of Rozanov's spine to the nape of his neck, and on. The back of his head was a mess, curls sticking out in every direction with one in particular standing up like a question mark, the gold chain of his necklace an underline. Shane snorted.

“Little after nine—what?” Rozanov shot over his shoulder before turning back. “What is funny?”

“Nothing,” Shane said, grinning as he nodded toward his hair. “Just, you look like a poodle.”

Rozanov's jaw fell open. “I do not,” he said, running his palm flat over the sides of his head, each curl springing back askew after it.

Shane's laughter only grew as he pushed up to sit. “Except you totally do. Stop, you're making it worse.”

“At least I do not look like hedgehog.”

“Oh, yeah?” Shane scoffed. He was still grinning, though, as he quickly darted an arm out to ruffle Rozanov’s hair even more.

Rozanov gasped in mock-horror. “Who are you? You are not Shane Hollander, he is too nice and polite and would never do such thing to good host.”

Shane raised an eyebrow in challenge and did it again.

The challenge, it seemed, was accepted and Shane only had a moment to brace himself before Rozanov launched at him, knees bracketing Shane hips while they grappled. All three animals scurried off the bed, paws landing with thumps on the floor, and Shane barely registered the sound of them disappearing out the door before his senses were otherwise occupied with beating Rozanov. Hands grabbed wrists and arms twisted free, Shane knocked Rozanov’s fingers away from his head once but missed the next time where Rozanov was able to return the favor in mussing up his hair. Shane managed to roll them over with a foot hooked around Rozanov’s ankle.

“Give up,” Shane gasped between grunts and breathless laughter. He had Rozanov’s wrists pinned, his hips boxed in, and kept his own weight pressing down.

Rozanov looked up at him slightly awestruck. “How did you do that?”

“I’m a professional athlete, dick. It’s my job to be strong.”

In a last ditch effort, Rozanov bucked his hips once, then twice. The third time, Shane definitely knew the intention had changed and raised that eyebrow once more.

“What?” It could have passed for an innocent question if there wasn’t a glint in Rozanov’s eye and an unmissable cock pushing against his ass.

“Give up.”

The glint became a full on beam, Rozanov’s lips growing into a wide grin. He rolled his hips up again deliberately. “No.”

Shane sighed purposefully, dramatically, and leaned down to kiss him.

Which lasted about a half a second before he quickly pulled back. “Nope. Absolutely not,” he said, letting go of Rozanov’s wrists. “I got to brush my teeth.”

He was halfway off Rozanov's lap when a hand grabbed onto his own wrist.
"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously. That's gross."

Rozanov let go and gave a dramatic sigh of his own that ended with a huff of a laugh.
"You will leave me here like this while you brush your teeth?"

"No, you also need to. And I need to take a shower. So maybe," Shane said as he climbed off the bed, "we can kill two birds with one stone?"

Rozanov stretched as he stood. "You mean rabbits."

Shane stopped. "What?"

"What?"

"I'm saying we should shower together, asshole."

"I know," Rozanov said, looking at Shane like he was the one not making sense, brushing past him down the hall toward the bathroom. "But saying is two rabbits, not birds."

Shane laughed. "What? Who taught you English?"

"No one, I taught myself."

"Wait, really?"

"Yes. School did not teach me, nor did I care. Hockey was more important. Then I got hurt, needed to leave Russia, so I learned. Still learning."

"That's... impressive."

It was the truth. Not once had Shane even considered that Rozanov had learned English any differently than Shane had learned French, even if there were plenty of Russian players in the league who spoke much less English. Rozanov had just always seemed so... competent.

"Yes," Rozanov said, turning the knob for the shower. "I am very impressive. You did not know this?"

"No. I mean, I know you're not an idiot."

Rozanov laughed.

“I just mean... Why’d you come here, then? Why make it even harder by adding French?”

There was a long pause as Rozanov pulled open the drawer of the vanity and handed Shane a toothbrush from it. It looked the same as the last one he’d used, but then again, all the toothbrushes in the packaging were the same, right?

“When I finished vet school, I had many job offer—because I am *very* impressive—and I picked one.”

Rozanov shoved his own toothbrush in his mouth and Shane did the same. They stood side by side at the vanity, taking turns spitting into the sink, and only once did Shane catch Rozanov’s eye in the mirror. It only made his curiosity stronger.

“But Montreal?” Shane asked the second they’d both finished rinsing their mouths. “Most people speak French, not English.”

“My mother had postcard from Montreal,” Rozanov said tightly. “Looked nice. Thought why not.”

““Why not’?”

“Yes.”

Shane laughed. “You made a life-altering decision based on a *postcard*?”

“Oh my god, Hollander, not everyone plans every single step of life in too much detail, okay? Teeth are clean, water is hot, any other demands or can we get to fun part now?”

Rozanov’s lips were tilted in a smirk, one eyebrow raised suggestively as he pushed his boxers over his hips, but Shane couldn’t help but feel like something was wrong. The words had been a little too curt, the playful edge dulled.

Shane knew how many minutes it took to get to Rozanov’s house from his own and from the practice rink, the sound of the door opening and where to put his shoes. He knew which dog would steal food from the counter and pretended innocence afterward, knew that Puck would be an accomplice. He knew what Rozanov sounded like when he laughed, what he sounded like when he came.

But he didn't know his mother's name.

And not enough.

Still, when Rozanov held out his hand, Shane pushed his own underwear down and took it, letting himself be pulled into the tub. He closed the curtain behind him.

At first, it was easy enough because Shane focused on the places their bodies connected: their mouths in languid kisses, chests pressed together while arms held onto backs, hips rocking forward. When Rozanov moved his hands and the warmth evaporated for the third time, however, Shane pushed at his shoulder. “Move over, my back is freezing.”

“Move over where?”

They’d been huddled close out of necessity—the tub was not that wide and the spray was mostly blocked by Rozanov’s body. Shane had let himself be fooled into thinking it was fine, but was rethinking that assessment with each increasingly cold second.

“Just—here.” The spin was more awkward shuffling than anything else, Shane getting a face full of water halfway through until at least he was warm all over.

“Oh, so I get to be cold now?”

“Yes,” Shane said, punctuating it with one more quick kiss. “Hand me the shampoo.”

Rozanov turned enough to reach the bottle on the shelf, pumping it twice into his palm. He rubbed his hands together and then brought them to Shane’s head.

Shane gave him a flat look. “Really?”

“What? Is expensive. You would use too much.”

He lathered up Shane’s hair and that familiar scent was back, the one Shane thought was cologne. Rozanov’s fingertips massaged into his scalp, behind his ears, down over the nape of his neck, and maybe Shane could admit this wasn’t as bad as he’d thought it would be. Maybe it was nice.

Maybe.

If he groaned and let his head fall forward, eyes shut and shoulders slumped, that was because he was being cooperative. Helpful. And Rozanov had really, *really* nice hands.

“Rinse.”

Those hands tilted Shane's head back, thumbs under his cheekbones. One swiped across his cheek entirely where he assumed suds had landed and Shane felt the water drip down over his face in its wake.

Rozanov let go. "Okay."

Shane swiped up and over his face and hair once before he opened his eyes to see Rozanov lathering his own hair, rivulets cascading over his elbows.

Nice arms, too, his mind supplied.

They swapped spots again, sidestepping past each other.

"This is ridiculous," Shane said as he grabbed the bar of soap from the shelf.

"You were one who suggested it. Pass conditioner."

Shane did and then set it back into the shelf before running the bar over his arms. "I didn't realize you have the world's tiniest shower."

Rozanov rolled his eyes as he smoothed the conditioner over his head. "Sorry we cannot all be millionaires with penthouses."

"Yeah, well, remind me—" Shane stumbled, slipping on the curve on the bottom edge. Rozanov grabbed hold of his arms to steady him, then the soap from his hand.

"Give me that. One million people will want to murder me if you die."

"I thought you said I had millions of fans, plural," Shane teased.

Rozanov caught his eye for a split second before looking back at where he was sudsing Shane's chest. "I think I liked you better when you were panicking all the time."

Shane laughed. "No, you don't."

"No. I don't."

Something about the way Rozanov said it made Shane glance up. "What was that?"

"What?"

"You're being weird."

Rozanov watched him for a moment, eyes flicking back and forth between Shane's, brows pushed together until a crease formed between them. And then it was gone, his face relaxed. "No," he said, gliding his soapy hand down over Shane's abs, "I am being very patient with letting you do million things before I can finally do this."

He punctuated the last word with a stroke of Shane's cock.

Shane hissed a breath through his teeth. "Fuck—I'm—"

Rozanov's eyebrows shot sky high. "Already?"

"No, you fucking asshole," he ground out, batting Rozanov's hand away. "I'm fucking freezing over here and I'm not going to brain myself in your tiny shower by slipping and falling while we jerk each other off."

Rozanov snorted and leaned forward to press a kiss to his cheek. "Okay, Mr. Safety First."

With one last swap, Shane finished washing his body and rinsed and only had to shove Rozanov's hand away one more time when he reached to turn off the water.

Three pairs of eyes looked at him when Rozanov yanked the curtain back.

"What the fuck," Shane yelped and immediately turned his back.

"And you say I am weird. They have seen more than this before." Rozanov grabbed a towel from the rack and tossed it over Shane's head. "Yes, yes, I know," he said to the trio. "You need to go out."

Shane pulled the towel off his head to wrap around his waist in time to see Anya and Maksim disappear around the corner, and to see Puck take a running leap at the tub. He cleared the edge and landed inside with a wet thud.

"Why?"

Puck didn't answer and instead busied himself with licking the bottom of the tub.

"You're the weird one," Shane grumbled as he stepped out of the shower, scooping Puck with one hand and setting him back on the floor. How it could be anything other than reasonable to not want to be peeped at—even by animals—Shane didn't know. It didn't matter if they had seen anything before, and what did Rozanov mean by that anyway?

Shane stopped halfway out the door. What once had been a fleeting thought of paranoia grew into something more unusually uncomfortable: did Rozanov do this a lot? Did he have... guests? Did they cram into that stupid ridiculous shower with him and laugh instead of startle when Anya and Maksim barged in?

If he did, it didn't matter, Shane told himself. It was fine. Everything was fine.

What was slightly less fine was that the only clothes were the ones he'd worn yesterday, the ones he spent all day in an airport wearing, the ones that were currently scattered across rooms of Rozanov's house that dropped dust bunnies of fur when he picked them off the floor.

What was actually, completely *not* fine was when he dug out his phone from his pants pocket there was approximately two percent battery life and four texts from Hayden sent over the last forty-five minutes.

Hayden: You still coming to help set up? I'm drowning in purple streamers

Hayden: Don't tell me you actually slept in today lol

Hayden: Seriously where are you?

Hayden: ?????

"Shit."

Shane: I'm so sorry, I just woke up, be there asap

Then he was moving, tossing his phone onto the bed, rubbing the towel over his hair, and shaking out his clothes probably too vigorously, but he was late—and he was never

late.

Yesterday while they were waiting for the plane, Hayden had said something to him after he got off the phone with Jackie, but Shane had just assumed it was another story, something ridiculous the kids got into. He hadn't been listening. Instead, he had been on his phone.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit."

"Where is fire?" Rozanov leaned against the doorway, arms crossed and towel slung low over his hips.

"I fucking forgot—it's Hayden's twins birthday party today. I was supposed to be there a half hour ago and shit, I have to take Puck home, and my clothes fucking reek—" Shane gave his shirt a sniff anymore and groaned disdainfully at the smell of sweat and stale air. He had one arm in when Rozanov tugged at it.

"Just borrow some of mine."

"I can't wear your clothes," Shane hissed. "Pretty sure they will fucking notice that when the pants are dragging on the *fucking* ground."

Rozanov rolled his eyes and moved toward his dresser, pulling drawers open as he spoke. The little animal figurines rattled when he shoved one closed. "No, you wear them now, then change when you drop Puck off." He held out a bundle. "Problem solved."

One day Rozanov was not going to have good ideas, or make sense, or be the most annoying voice of reason and he was going to gloat. This time, however, Shane yanked the clothes out of his hand and grumbled, "Fine. That's—not the worst plan."

He dressed as fast as he could while Rozanov lazily pulled on a pair of sweats and picked Puck up when he came hopping in to see what the commotion was.

Shane sat on the bed and pulled on a sock. "Can you get him—"

"Yes."

"And grab my—"

"Yes."

"Okay."

Socks on and fully clothed, Shane pocketed his phone and met Rozanov at the front door where he was zipping Puck into the carrier.

“I’m sorry, I’d rather not go but if I don’t, those girls might actually be the ones to kill me.” Rozanov held out his coat and Shane took it. “And I’ve already almost died enough for one day.”

Rozanov handed him the carrier once Shane shoved his shoes on. “Is fine, Hollander.”

The last thing he should have been doing was hesitating by the door. He was already so late as it was, but Rozanov had crossed his arms again and the corner of his mouth twitched. They hadn’t even gotten to the actual good part of the morning.

“Okay,” Shane said after a moment. Then he stepped forward and closed the gap between them for one more fast kiss. It was better than nothing, at least. “I’m off.”

Rozanov smiled and shoved him out the door.

The party was pure chaos. He had apologized profusely and helped Hayden finish decorating in the ten minutes they had before a gaggle of six year olds descended onto the house and with them enough energy and excitement to power the whole fucking city. It was entirely too loud—especially when the screeching reached inhuman decibels once they’d opened the gift containing the collar and Jackie announced their plans to get a cat—and Shane had nearly tripped more than once over children darting across his path, but to top it all off, Ruby incited all out cake-slinging war when she smashed cake into Jade’s hair after blowing out the candles.

At the end, after the twins had been hosed off and sequestered themselves in the playroom with their loot, Hayden handed him a ginger ale where he had collapsed onto the suspiciously sticky couch. “Well. We survived.”

“Barely. Jackie upstairs?”

“Yeah, it’s nap time,” Hayden said. “For Arthur and Amber. And her.”

Shane took a sip and ran a hand over his head. “I’m skipping next year. I think I’d rather face their wrath than—” He pulled a stray bit of frosting out of his hair “—this.”

Hayden laughed. “No way, you’re in it now, dude. Uncle duties and all that. At least until you have kids of your own.”

“I don’t know, this might have been the fucking best birth control in existence.”

“Nah, you’ll get married and have babies just like the rest of us,” Hayden teased.

Shane chuckled because he was supposed to, because that was what he was supposed to want. Marriage. Kids.

And he did. Maybe. Someday.

A loud crash came from the playroom and Hayden let out a long-suffering sigh. “I swear to fuck if they already broke that dollhouse, I’m going to lose it,” he said as he pushed himself to a stand.

“Hate to break it to you, but you never had it.”

Hayden flipped him off and headed down the hall.

Once he was gone, Shane wiped his hand on his thigh and slipped his phone out of his pocket.

Shane: Everything hurts and I’m sticky

Rozanov: Without me?

Shane: From cake. There was a food fight.

Rozanov: ...without me??

Shane: Next time

Chapter End Notes

The Russian idiom for "kill two birds with one stone" is "kill two hares/rabbits with one shot." Idioms are fascinating parts of language and when I stumbled upon this one, I knew I needed to include it.

Also I will die on the hill that shower sex is only fun in your imagination or if you have a giant shower with multiple showerheads. Not to mention that water is the opposite of a lubricant and I too would rather not slip and fall and have to explain to the ER how I injured myself.

Cat facts:

A cat's tongue is all cute and spiky until it is attempting to flay the skin from your nose at ass o'clock in the morning for NO REASON BECAUSE THE OTHER HUMAN ALREADY FED YOU PLEASE STOP AND LET ME SLEEP (she said to one of her cats in particular).

There's this idea that your cat sees you (and other humans) as just big, dumb cats and that's sort of true but it's more that they treat other humans like they do other cats instead of having mostly distinct behaviors for humans (like dogs). Let's talk grooming in particular: cats are social creatures and community grooming is a way they establish their own relationships and hierarchy within their community. This is why you will see cats in your home getting to groom-wars where they lick each other and almost try to one-up each other in the process—kind of like a “no I love YOU more” but for cats. This behavior gets applied to humans and cats will groom their people in the same way. They also use their tiny top and bottom teeth (Corn Nibblers™) solely for grooming purposes and that's why some cats do the nibble-nibble-gnaw-licklicklick on your flesh. They are just helping you out and showing their love and also subtly trying to remind you that you don't necessarily own them, but rather you are a family.

Chapter 14: Losing Coverage

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, thanks for being here <3

Advance warning that next week's chapter will be posted Monday and the following week's will likely be delayed to Wednesday or Thursday as I'm leaving for vacation starting Tuesday and honestly don't want to worry about anything other than missing my cats while we are gone.

Minor content warning: this chapter contains discussion of euthanasia as part of veterinary medicine (in broad terms, not technical and not shown on page)

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

For nine years, Shane made the trip home to Ottawa for Christmas break, packing a single small duffel bag and showing up light and carefree. He'd listen to Christmas songs on the radio (even if the Little Drummer Boy made him want to veer off the road after the third time he'd heard it in two hours), grab a pack of Timbits on his way into town for his dad, and spend three days itching to get back to the rink. This year was... a little different.

First, the one duffel bag had turned into two with the second crammed full with Puck's food, treats, toys, and a cardboard scratcher; second, the only thing worse than hearing another fucking rendition of that stupid song was hearing Puck sing along with it; and third, Shane wasn't sure he was going to even be allowed to leave in a few days—not if he wanted to take Puck with him.

From the moment he let Puck out of the carrier, Shane ceased to exist. One brief hug was all he got from his parents before they were both on their knees cooing and awing, holding out their hands for Puck to smell. With each hop Puck took, the fawning intensified to the point that Shane could still hear it as he trudged toward his old room with two bags, a jug of litter in one hand and a new litter box in the other. He set up everything in the en suite and headed back with three catnip mice and a wand toy.

Not that he needed to, because in the five minutes he'd been gone, the living room turned into an explosion of cat toys.

“What the fuck?”

“What?” His mom raised her head from where she was dangling a fabric banana over Puck’s belly while his dad opened a package of large brightly colored springs.

Shane threw the mice, one at each of them.

It only got worse. After the extended play session, his dad carried Puck around to each room of the house in the weirdest guided tour that Shane had ever heard, David’s voice drifting through the house as doors were opened and closed.

“And this is my office. See that? I got that for 30 years of service—no, you can’t eat it.”

Shane plopped onto the couch. “Dad,” he yelled. “Just let him walk around and sniff things!”

Yuna smoothed a hand over his head as she passed behind him. “Let him have his fun. He used to have a cat, back when we met.”

“Really? How come no one told me?”

“She died before we even moved in together, but for a while there I was fairly certain I was the other woman in his life.”

“What happened to her?”

“Oh, nothing bad,” she said, coming to sit down next to him. “She was pretty old. Technically she was his roommate’s cat, but he always acted like a stepparent.” She laughed, light and easy, and Shane wanted to smile—even forced himself to do so—but all Shane could think of was the first video of Puck that Rozanov had ever sent where Puck watched him on TV, how easily Rozanov had referred to him as Puck’s dad.

Shane cleared his throat. “How come we never got one when I was a kid? Didn’t Dad want one of his own?”

“Well,” Yuna mused, “Dad was working long hours in those early years and I guess we just focused on you, instead. And driving you all over to practices, games, tournaments... who had the time?”

Shane briefly caught sight of his dad with Puck slung over his shoulder. “Well,” he said. “I’m making time now.”

The rest of the first day was spent on the couch watching Christmas movies and grazing on snacks. When Puck was finally released, he promptly disappeared to do his own

independent tour, hopping around corners with his nose in the air. Every so often a thump would sound from somewhere in the house and Shane would get up to investigate, sometimes catching Puck attempting to jump to places he had no business trying to reach and other times only catching a glimpse as he Scooby-Doo'd and went skittering around a corner.

The fourth time he had gotten up, it was because of the lack of thumping—Shane knew that quiet was always suspicious. When he found Puck in the bathroom with an entire roll of toilet paper strewn about the floor, he sighed and wadded it all up, carrying both Puck and the tattered Charmin remains back to the living room.

“So we should probably keep the doors shut,” he said.

David emerged from the kitchen with the box of Timbits. “Here, let me help you.”

Shane held out the toilet paper. David reached and took Puck from him instead.

“Gee, thanks.”

It came as no surprise that when Shane came back after shoving the toilet paper in the trash and closing every door aside from the one to his room, Puck was tucked under his dad's chin like a black fluffy ascot. He hovered behind the couch, pulled out his phone, and took a photo.

Shane: I think my dad loves Puck more than Maksim

He waited a half a minute watching for a reply. When none came, he exhaled sharply and reclaimed his spot next to his mom.

Just because Rozanov didn't respond right away didn't mean he was bothered by it. Rozanov was busy or maybe working and it was totally normal that he wasn't responding after thirty seconds. After all, it was Christmas Eve and most people were spending time with family anyway. It wasn't like Shane had been keeping a hand on his thigh in case he missed the vibration.

He certainly didn't jump up an hour later when it finally buzzed and muttered something about needing the bathroom. He just had to pee, was all.

And when it turned out to just be Hayden sending him a video of cats meowing Carol of the Bells, Shane definitely did not want to chuck his phone in the toilet.

Across the room, maybe.

By the time that his parents went to bed, there was still no reply.

At midnight, Shane lay in bed while Puck attacked his feet, set down his book for the fifth time, and sighed. His phone was back in his hand before he knew it.

Shane: Merry Christmas

He waited again. Then it started ringing.

“Hello?”

Rozanov’s voice rumbled in his ear. “Is not Christmas yet.”

Shane huffed, but smiled anyway. “You called me just to say that?”

“I call because is late, day was very long, and I do not want to write in English right now,” Rozanov said. Shane could picture the way his shoulders would lift slightly, how his head would tilt to the side in the perfect display of nonchalance while his eyes would never leave Shane’s face.

“Oh. That makes sense.” He shuffled so he was laying down fully and patted the bed next to him until Puck finally gave up on his assault to get pets instead. “But it’s after midnight, so it is Christmas.”

“Is it?”

Rozanov sounded genuinely surprised, and exhausted. “Yeah, maybe you should get some sleep.”

“No, not yet. Need time to... turn off brain first.”

“Did you work today?”

“Yes. Was not good day.”

Working on Christmas Eve sounded terrible to begin with, and thoughts of poop disasters and angry animals made it worse. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Rozanov hummed. “You don’t want to hear about it.”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

He heard Rozanov take a deep breath. “Sometimes... there is no good news to give. Over and over. Sometimes you do kindest thing and still do not feel good.”

Shane’s face screwed up a little. “Kindest thing?”

“For very sick animals.”

“Like... putting to sleep?”

“Yes. Is such strange way to say kill.”

“It’s not—you’re not—”

“No, I am. Is okay to say it,” Rozanov said. Shane wanted to say something else, find a way to make it different, when Rozanov continued, “Is still kind to the animal. The most important part. Does not make it less true that I kill them.”

Shane still didn’t know what to say, so he pressed his lips together and said, “I’m sorry.”

The laugh that came over the line contained no joy. “At least I am not broken.”

It hit like a check into the boards, the way he said it, and Shane swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Rozanov breathed. “Forget it.”

Shane couldn’t. “Come on. Tell me.”

When nothing came, he pulled the phone away from his ear to make sure the call was still connected.

Then, quietly: “I can still feel.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Mm.”

Shane cleared his throat. “Should I let you go?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

There was another long pause where Shane listened for his breathing, straining his ears to catch it across the line. After four, Rozanov said, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Shane said. “I can’t even imagine the shit you’ve seen. That’s... Brave.”

“Or foolish.”

“Strong.”

Rozanov said something in Russian then, a long string of words that Shane couldn’t have repeated if he tried.

“That wasn’t English,” he said, after.

“I know.”

“Care to translate?”

“Not really.”

The air became heavy and uncomfortable, but Shane didn’t know how to fix it, to fix this. His stomach turned like it already knew he couldn’t.

He cupped a hand around Puck’s midsection and pulled him closer, receiving a tiny peep in return before he settled back in and purred, curled up in Shane’s armpit. “So... are you doing anything tomorrow? To celebrate?”

“No, I am not... Christmas person.”

“Is your family back in Russia still?”

“Yes. No. Maybe.” Rozanov exhaled slowly. “I assume but do not know. Have not spoken to them since I left.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Do not be. My mother died when I was young. She was good. My father and brother... not so much.”

Shane opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

He tried again. “Is that why you left?”

“What is with so many questions?” Rozanov snapped. “You do not need to know.”

Shane bristled. “Fucking excuse me for trying to distract you.”

Rozanov’s voice got sharper, words clipped and rushed in a way Shane hadn’t heard before. “Oh good job, Shane,” he sneered. “First make me tell you I am murderer, then remind me of dead mother and shitty family while you live perfect little Christmas movie life. You should become therapist.”

“Fuck you, I was trying to help.”

“Why? What does it matter? So you can pity me?”

“No—”

“Hug your mama and think, ‘I am glad I am not him?’”

“What? No, that’s not—”

“Should I tell you that I can never go home, huh? That my father caught me fucking my coach’s son and I ran away before he could do something about it?”

“Shit.” Shane squeezed his eyes shut.

“*Fuck* your pity.”

“I didn’t know.” His voice came out smaller than intended. He was fucking this up and everything was wrong and there was no way to turn around and tell him that he didn’t mean it, didn’t mean to.

“Of course you did not know, you think worst thing is people finding out, but you will not be killed here, you can still play your precious hockey. You are scared of wrong thing.”

“I’m not—scared.”

Rozanov scoffed, but didn’t say anything else. Shane’s throat was tight and when he opened his eyes to the darkness of his childhood bedroom, the place that he had always been safest, he closed them again immediately.

A minute later, Rozanov spoke again. “Why are you still on phone?”

“You asked me to.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Fine, whatever. Maybe I want to.”

The truth of it bled out of him until he was pressing the phone so hard to his ear that it became almost unbearable. But he couldn’t hang up. The thought alone made his eyes sting, more so than the venom that laced Rozanov’s words.

“Stupid.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane muttered as he swallowed around the lump that lodged in his throat. “I’m sorry. About—all of it. You didn’t deserve it.”

Another minute passed. Shane lay as still as possible.

When it seemed like the silence and the dark would go on forever, his heart rate slowing and limbs growing heavy, three beeps sounded in his ear.

Shane didn’t hear from Rozanov at all the next day.

He opened his messages and stared at the blank text box in the morning, sitting on his bed for five minutes with his thumbs hovering but typing nothing. He could have sent

I'm sorry or are you okay? and for one brief moment even considered *I didn't hang up*, but he didn't.

Instead, he left his phone on the nightstand, opened the door, and followed Puck out.

Gifts were opened and Shane balked at the frankly absurd size of the cat tree his parents picked out for Puck. It was taller than him, had more platforms and hammocks and cubbies than he thought necessary for a single kitten, and the box it came in was unreasonably large.

“Where exactly am I supposed to put this thing?”

“By the windows in your living room,” his mom said without missing a beat while she chucked the torn wrapping paper into a bag. “Look, it’s got all these ramps so he can get up to the top.”

“I’m not sure if he needs to get all the way to the top. If he falls and breaks another leg, I’m sending you the bill.”

“He won’t,” his dad chimed in. Puck was in his arms, again, getting chin scratches, again. “He’s a very smart boy and knows not to do anything like that.”

Shane laughed incredulously. “I’m not sure we are talking about the same cat, just the other day he was crying in the kitchen and seemed shocked when I appeared around the corner. I’m pretty sure he got lost.”

David shrugged. “Maybe he was just trying to see if you would come find him. But it will be good for him. Cats need vertical space, you know.”

“Since when are you the expert?”

“I had a cat once.”

Shane gave him a skeptical look.

“Also when your mother told me about him and I did my research,” David conceded. “Besides, the people at the pet store were very helpful.”

His own foray into the pet store had seemed like a lifetime ago now, how he’d spent too much time reading cat forums and scrolling through Google results, making lists and doing everything he could do to prepare. He hadn’t looked anything else up since, not when he could just ask Rozanov.

He didn't ask enough, in the first few days, when learning how to take care of Puck felt more like a trial by fire than anything else.

He'd asked too many, last night.

Shane cleared his throat. "Yeah. And thank you guys, but also please never buy anything this big ever again, okay?"

Getting the box into the back of his Jeep was more of a struggle than it should have been with his dad half in the back seat shimmying the front to avoid hitting anything, his mom directing them from off to the side, and Shane holding the back end aloft while the two of them argued about the best way to pivot it in. He could only hope that he could find a dolly to help get this beast in the elevator at his apartment building.

From that point on, Christmas was fairly normal. His dad spent most of the time in the kitchen preparing a small turkey for dinner—Shane caught him giving Puck a taste during the carving—while he and his mom took turns finding something to watch on TV.

Any time he found himself itching to retreat to his room, just to see, Shane changed the channel. They didn't end up watching much of anything.

At some point a commercial came on, some montage of sad looking animals to even sadder music, and his dad's words echoed in his head. The cats at the SPCA didn't have space, vertical or otherwise.

Bruno popped into his head, sad eyes peering at him through the bars of the kennel.

And then, Rozanov standing next to him, giving a look of his own. Rozanov's eyes when he fucked Shane before the road trip. Rozanov's smile when they wrestled on his bed.

Rozanov's voice last night telling him he wasn't broken.

Rozanov.

Ilya Rozanov.

He wasn't checking his phone every hour the next day. He didn't turn the ringer on for the drive home and didn't fumble it going 110 on the highway back to Montreal when Puck meowed and it sounded like a chime. He didn't keep it face up within arms reach as he put together the monstrous cat tree, even when he had to take apart the bottom third of it because he made a mistake somewhere in the midst and had to redo it. He didn't clutch it in his hand when he plopped onto his couch and turned on TSN for World Juniors.

Shane made it less than a minute into the tail end of Russia vs Czechia before he turned it off and grabbed his running shoes.

His entire life trajectory cemented because of World Juniors, but all he could think of now was the way reporters said *Ilya Rozanov*, haunting every game.

Of what came after.

As he was leaving, he cast a glance at his phone, still on the couch cushion where he'd left him, and took a step back inside. The living room was a mess of cardboard and brown paper packaging. Shane shoved it all into the largest box and filled his arms with it to take down to the recycling room so he wouldn't be tempted to reach for anything else.

Because he wasn't looking.

He dropped off the box, waved to the doorman, and ran two miles to the sound of the city. When his lungs burned from the cold and his nose was frozen, he ran some more. He'd run forever if it meant he could stop thinking, stop hearing his voice in his head and stop seeing him behind every blink, stop wondering what it could have been like, in another life.

Stop wanting it to be that way, not for himself.

After another two miles, he came back through the door, waved once more, and stood in the entryway of his apartment, everything exactly where he'd left it.

Shane filled a glass of water and circled back to the couch, collapsing onto it with a groan.

Without the noise of the city, the noise of the television, the noise of packing paper and the clink of metal as he tightened bolts, all Shane could do was hear the weight of the silence propping up every single thought he didn't want to have.

It was quiet.

Shane sighed again.

It was... quiet.

“Puck,” he called and clicked his tongue. “You better not be fucking with my gear again.”

There was no answer.

“I mean it, buddy.” He pushed to a stand and headed for his bedroom, straight to the closet where Puck would wedge himself amongst the shoes and skates and go absolutely nuts on the laces. “I built you an entire fucking condo of your own, wouldn’t you rather play with that?”

Shane pushed aside the hanging clothes and moved the empty duffel bag off the floor, but Puck wasn’t there.

“Puck?”

He got onto his knees and peered under the bed. Then behind the nightstands. The dresser. He checked the bathroom, every cubby in the cat tree, and then the gym.

The pro/con list was still laying face up on the floor, stopping him in his tracks. For one stupid moment, he wanted to add *Puck* to it, like that would magically conjure him from the ether. He swiped his palm over all the words instead, erasing them, before he slotted it back against the wall and searched behind hand weights and kettlebells.

Like that would magically fix everything else, too.

The door to his trophy room was always kept shut, but he opened it anyway and stuck his head instead. “Puck. Seriously, if you got in here, we’re going to have words.”

It was empty.

By the time he made a second loop, looking in every corner of his gym, behind the curtains and in the pantry, under the blankets on his bed and the shelves of his closet, Shane’s hands were shaking. He pulled out everything in his closet, throwing clothes and shoes behind him, took off every cushion from his couch then flipped it over entirely and left it there, opened every single cabinet and drawer in the entire apartment,

and unrolled all of his yoga mats until there was a small heap of them in the middle of the floor.

But no Puck.

He swiped his phone off the floor and dialed before he started hyperventilating. It went to voicemail and Shane nearly threw up. He dialed again.

And again.

And again.

“What is—”

“Ilya, I can’t find Puck.” His own voice sounded ragged, forced out through vocal cords that didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to make it real.

“What?”

“I can’t find him, I looked everywhere and I can fucking—he’s not here and what the fuck do I do, he was just here and now he’s not and I can’t—I can’t—”

“Are you sure? He is probably hiding, cats are good at that.”

Shane gripped the front of his hair, pulling hard enough that it stung. “No, no—I looked, I *looked* and—he’s *not here*.”

“Do you want me to come help?”

“Yes. Yes—”

“Okay. Be there soon.”

The line went dead and Shane dropped his phone before pressing the heels of his hand into his eyes. They’d find him, they had to, because there was no alternative that was acceptable.

Shane called down to the front desk to let them know he was expecting someone, to send him up when he arrived, and ventured into the hallway. It wasn’t a long wait one, only two other doors for his neighbors that he’d never seen before, the elevator in the middle and stairwells on either end. How Puck would have snuck out behind him without him noticing, Shane didn’t know, but he looked anyway, pacing up and down the

hall and opening each stairwell door to call for Puck and wait, like the world's worst game of Marco fucking Polo.

Three laps later, he leaned against his front door, put his head in his hands, and slid to the floor.

His head throbbed. What if Puck was hurt, what if he was scared, what if he was taken

What if he was gone?

Shane was still on the floor, unable to move as the same questions circled through his mind over and over and over, when the elevator doors opened.

“Fuck.”

There were hands on his arms, warm and gentle, so familiar that even without the voice, Shane would have recognized them.

“Shane.” The hands moved to his cheeks, running over his temple and through his hair.
“Hey. Look at me, Shane.”

Shane let his hands fall down off his eyes, tilted his head, and looked. His eyes were wide and he was frowning, but for a moment every thought in Shane's head fell away.

“We cannot find him out here, yes? Come on.” Ilya took his hand and pulled him to a stand, then reached behind him to open the door.

The disaster zone that was once his living room greeted them, and Shane took a shaky breath. “I was looking,” he said.

“Okay.” Ilya took three steps in and peered around. “Okay, let's start again. Go from one side to other.”

Ilya shrugged off his coat and Shane followed him into his bedroom, stood with his arms hanging limp at his sides while he watched Ilya recheck every spot Shane had already torn apart. Pillows were tossed back onto the bed, clothes re-hung and shoes tucked back into the closet, drawers rethreaded back onto their tracks and closed back in. And Shane didn't move.

Ilya threw a glance over his shoulder at him as he rose from the ground. “No,” he said, moving closer until he could take Shane's face in his hands again. He brushed a hand

over his cheek then enveloped him completely in his arms. “You cannot panic right now. We will find him, okay? Shane. *Shane*.”

His eyes blurred. “What if he’s gone?”

“No,” Ilya stated and tightened his grip. Shane pressed his face into his shoulder and breathed in deeply. “I am here and we will find him. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Only when he forced his fingers to let go did Shane realize his hands had been fisted in Ilya's shirt.

Ilya’s lips tilted up to one side and clicked his tongue. “You lose one cat and suddenly forget how to breathe?”

His own lip twitched. “I can breathe just fine,” he scoffed, wiping at his eyes before he rolled them.

Ilya’s smile grew, then faltered when he stepped away and headed through the doorway. “You definitely would never pass vet school. One time cat went missing when he jumped straight through ceiling tile. Took two days to find him.”

The bathroom and living room were cleared next, the couch flipped back onto its legs, and the more Ilya drew his gaze, the more Shane could recognize the determination in his features and the smallest amount of fear behind them. It should have made his own worse, reflecting back to him and amplifying every terrible thought that made a nest in his head, but Shane found himself bolstered instead.

“When did you last see him?” Ilya asked after they had re-closed all the kitchen cabinets.

“Before I went for a run.”

“And you are sure he did not follow you out?”

“I don’t think so. I checked the hall,” Shane said, bracing his hands on the kitchen island. “I finished building the stupid fucking cat tree and went for a run. He was *here*.”

Ilya scrubbed a hand over his head. “Nothing else?”

“No. I just went for a run. I mean, I did—”

Shane froze.

“What? What is it?”

Without responding, Shane ran for the door and booked it into the hall. He pressed the elevator button but when it didn't immediately open, he ran for the stairs.

“Where are we going?” Ilya called after him, echoing in the concrete stairwell, feet thundering down the steps.

“I took boxes down to the recycling room. I don't—usually I just call maintenance and they pick it up but I needed—I took them down.”

At the bottom, Shane pulled the door open with enough force that he almost fell backward with it, Ilya bumping into his back and breathing heavily. One more door later, he stopped dead in his tracks when confused high-pitched meows filled his ears.

Because there, amongst the bins and cardboard, was a fluffy black kitten poking his head out of a box.

He fell to his knees in front of it. “You little fucker,” Shane said, picking Puck up and cradling him tightly to his chest. “What the fuck, man? You scared the shit out of me.”

Behind him, Ilya huffed a disbelieving laugh. “The merry wanderer of the night,” he muttered.

Shane stayed kneeling for a second too long, forehead pressed into Puck's fur, like moving would break something fragile in his chest. And then, carefully, he stood. His legs were weak, his face was wet, and Puck felt like absolutely nothing and a hundred pounds all at once. But he was here. Shane had him.

They took the elevator back up in silence, Shane's heart still pounding and the pressure in his head growing, until Puck began to squirm and meow as they approached his floor. The air was heavy, but Ilya stood close enough that their arms pressed against each other the entire way. Shane leaned into it.

Puck shot out of Shane's arms the second the apartment door clicked shut, tail held high as though nothing at all had happened. He stopped halfway across the living room to investigate the scattered remains of the mess, sniffing at the displaced books, video game cases, and papers that still littered the floor, then launched himself onto the bottom platform of the cat tree. His claws scrambled for purchase and then climbed into the hammock.

“Fucking asshole,” Shane whispered.

Puck answered with an indignant chirp.

Shane laughed before he could stop himself. It came out thin and shaky, more relief than amusement, and left him suddenly exhausted. The apartment still looked like it'd been hit by a tornado, but Puck was alive.

Ilya hovered in the entryway, his coat clutched in front of him. “I should go.”

“No,” Shane said quickly, a new spark of panic surging through him.

Ilya looked at the door. “Hollander—”

“No.” Shane shook his head. “Please. I know it’s stupid, but—stay, just for a little while.”

For a moment, Ilya didn’t answer.

His gaze drifted toward the apartment door again, then back to Puck, now sprawled upside down in the hammock at the bottom of the cat tree, grooming one paw like nothing catastrophic had occurred. His shoulders rose with a deep breath before falling again.

Then, slowly, he hung up his coat.

“Okay.”

The single word loosened something in Shane’s chest.

When the couch dipped as Ilya sat down next to him, Shane let his body fall against him. He hadn't realized how hard he'd been holding himself together until he didn't have to anymore.

He was so tired, all his limbs feeling like dead weight, but Ilya was warm and the arm wrapped around his shoulders was better than any blanket.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For coming. For...”

Ilya threaded his fingers into his hair. “Is okay. Puck is okay,” he said, his voice even. “You are okay.”

His body didn't seem to get the message, hands still trembling when he finally chanced a look at them, so Shane closed his eyes and rested his head against Ilya's collarbone. "We're okay."

The ministrations of Ilya's fingers stilled for one breath, two, then resumed in a gentle massage that calmed the rest of the buzzing under Shane's skin. He could fall asleep like this, he thought idly, with Ilya's heartbeat under his ear, his breath ghosting across the hair at his crown. He could stay here. Maybe forever.

Shane drifted off.

When he awoke, the apartment had gone dark except for the lights over the breakfast bar, a throw blanket had been pulled over him, and Puck's weight rested warm across his thighs.

For one blissfully empty second, Shane forgot why he was on the couch. Then, in the quiet, everything rushed back.

Puck.

The recycling room.

Ilya.

He turned automatically, but the space beside him was empty. The indentation in the cushion was still visible, slightly uneven where someone had shifted their weight before getting up, yet when Shane ran his hand over it, the fabric was cold.

He pushed himself upright. "Ilya?"

The word hit the room and died there. Nothing answered.

"Right," he muttered.

Puck stretched and hopped off his lap, climbing to the top of the cat tower to look out the window over Montreal, surveying a kingdom like he hadn't been the cause of the scariest moment of Shane's life.

The apartment should have felt normal again, even in its disarray, because Puck was safe where he belonged and Shane was supposed to be able to breathe again knowing he'd never have to go through that again, but—

Shane: Did you leave? Sorry I fell asleep

He waited for an answer and only set the phone down on the arm of the couch when he couldn't stand to see nothing happening anymore. Still, his eyes drifted back toward it, like it might do something if he gave it more time.

It didn't.

Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. Puck was fine. He was fine.

But all Shane could think about was Ilya—the fact that he had come, even though yesterday, *today*, had been... weird. Wrong.

That he'd stayed, when Shane asked.

And then the realization hit, without cushion or warning, that Shane expected him to still be there now—and he wasn't.

Ilya had left.

His throat tightened as he turned on a lamp and started picking up the rest of the mess, lining up books on the shelf and fluffing throw pillows, watching out of the corner of his eye for his phone to light up, waiting for Ilya to respond once again.

He hadn't apologized, or asked how Ilya was, or told him that he was right—Shane *was* scared. But not of Ilya.

Shane stopped and stared at the couch, at the spot they'd been.

“Fuck.”

Ilya.

Not Rozanov.

Chapter End Notes

Puck's Grand Recycling Adventure is based on a true story. Picture it: it's 10pm on a weekday, I'm in full couch gremlin mode, and an adopter calls me. She lives in a swanky building downtown and she's just a MESS because she has torn her apartment apart and can't find the kitten she adopted from me a week earlier. So I ask if she wants me to come help, she says yes, I book it across the city and chat with the doorman while he tries to reach said adopter to get approval to let me into the elevator bay, and as I'm waiting, she appears with the kitten. Still sobbing, she tells me the tale of how said kitten must have hid in the boxes she took to the recycling room earlier that evening, but all is well that ends well.

Ask any rescuer if they have experienced or know someone who has experienced a cat getting into the ceiling and the answer is yes.

Cat Facts:

Cats are expert hidiers and they are equally made of liquid as well as capable of incredible leaps. If you think a spot is probably too small or too high to get into, I would never rule them out if you cannot find your cat. I have found cats in vents, in the inner workings of a couch (so you can't see them unless you physically turn the couch over), in boxsprings, in closed drawers, in the ceiling, behind/under the stove/oven, in the lofted attic that is at least a 7 foot vertical jump to reach... you get the picture.

Many people assume that when they can't find their cat, it means their cat got out, and while that isn't necessarily a wrong line of thinking, it's equally possible that the cat has found the best hiding spot in the world in the home. First go through the home with a fine toothed comb, and if it does appear the cat has truly gotten out, try not to panic. Housecats will likely find a hiding spot near the home, so check in bushes, under wooden steps and porches and decks, under vehicles, etc. I do not recommend the classic "leave the litter box out so they can find their way back" as it could also attract other cats/animals and lead to some dangerous situations (fights, the spreading of disease, etc). Search at dawn and dusk if need be, use a flashlight to catch the reflection of their eyes, and don't give up. Post fliers in the neighborhood, post on local social media, get as many eyes looking as possible, and check in with local shelters daily. Local rescue groups may be able to assist or they may only be able to offer advice, but don't place the responsibility solely on others and keep looking.

Microchipped pets are much more likely to find their way home if taken in by a shelter, so if your pet isn't chipped, i strongly encourage you to get it done asap.

Microchips can often migrate in the body over time, so it's never a bad idea to ask your vet to scan them during an annual check up (or invest in a microchip scanner yourself! A basic one costs about \$40-50 in the US and I've used mine not just on my own cats, but also dogs and cats that have shown up in my yard/neighborhood).

On a separate, more personal note, my feelings on euthanasia is that it is almost always the greatest kindness you can give your beloved pet when the time comes and do your best to not let any guilt about it consume you. When cancer caused my soul cat to rapidly deteriorate, when I got the call that he would be lucky to survive two more weeks, I went through all the what ifs of how I could have prevented this or done better until it ate away at me. In those times, I always go back to Jean-Luc Picard in Star Trek: It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not weakness. That is life.

And of course I selfishly wanted each and every one of those days and wanted to wait to make the call and squeeze out every second left. But I didn't. Two days later, when he was having a good day—he had more energy, he came for a cuddle with me and groomed his feline “girlfriend,” he managed to jump onto the windowsill to watch the birds—I said goodbye. Even if we would have had more days, I owed it to him to make sure he left this world before his days were filled with pain. The most common thing I have heard from rescuers and veterinarians alike is that more people regret waiting too long rather than doing it too soon. I would agree. I do not regret not having those extra few days even if, years later, I still miss him every day. He was happy, he was loved, and it was ultimately my honor to be the last thing he saw on that final good day.

Chapter 15: Delayed Penalty

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, welcome back to Ilya's POV.

Content warnings for this chapter include mentions of suicide, mentions of animal death, and just overall angst.

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

Ilya's mother died when he was twelve and he did not cry.

His father told him it was an accident, but even then Ilya knew better. He knew that his father did not tell him this to soften his grief or to comfort a child, but to force the lie into his head so that when Ilya opened his mouth, it would come out instead of the truth. Ilya knew that the lie was not for him, or for his mother, but for the people whose importance was greater than his own, because he was nothing.

So Ilya became a liar and he did not cry.

When he pushed off too hard, pivoted to make a pass and heard the snap and felt the sharp stab in the back of his ankle, he did not cry then either. They carried him off the ice as he clenched his jaw so tight he thought his teeth might break, too. Then doctors took x-rays and ultrasounds, surgeons consulted with his father and his coach, a nurse discretely squeezed his hand, and Ilya watched as every part of him—every dream and every future—shattered, one piece at a time.

And when he could walk again, limping along and ignoring every zap of pain that shot up his leg when he stepped the wrong way, Ilya forgot how to care about any of it. He drank too much vodka, smoked enough cigarettes that he woke up with a sore throat every morning, and fucked his way through so many one night stands that he could not remember a single face.

Then there was Sasha.

Ilya didn't even like him, not really, but fucking him had been dangerous and reckless, enough that he could forget the pain, the loss, the grief, the tears he did not shed. That, more than anything, was addictive, and Ilya chased the high—would have kept chasing it, maybe—until his father barged through a door and it all came crashing down.

Not that there was anything left of him to break.

Sometimes he wondered if it would have been better if he hadn't run. Ilya did not want to die, but maybe it would have been easier.

That first year was anything but. He packed a bag as quick as he could, his father screaming through a door, pounding and pounding on it until Ilya was sure it would splinter, and left through the window. He was gone on the first flight. At every customs checkpoint, Ilya expected to be arrested, that his father would have his passport flagged and he'd be carted back to Russia in chains, but he made it through Berlin, London, and New York City and no one stopped him.

At some point, he stopped looking over his shoulder. At some point, he became the ghost instead.

He was half-drunk and half-ready to give up when he met Svetlana in Boston. She was an angel, more than he deserved. They would fuck and talk and talk and fuck and one night when the lights were low, she asked him when he was going to stop running and start doing something with his life. Ilya had scoffed—he was nineteen and his life was already over. There was nothing left.

The next morning, he watched a stray cat get hit by a car. That evening, he asked Svetlana for help with applying to university.

Ilya studied. And studied. And studied more. After he had his bachelor's degree, he moved to Prince Edward Island with his acceptance letter and did it all again.

He remembered how to feel when he witnessed his first euthanasia. The dog had a gnarled bleeding mass growing on his jaw and his prognosis was grave. On every measure of the scale given to determine quality of life, the dog scored abysmally low, but even as his professor talked about one last, great kindness and the dog's breathing stopped, Ilya's throat swelled. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that they could not save him, that they could not treat his cancer sooner, that they had to be the ones to perform the kindness even as it ripped a hole in his chest.

It wasn't fair that his mother died alone.

True kindness was only for animals, it seemed. The worst part was that it made sense: animals were innocents and people were not. There was no innocence left in his mother; his father had made sure of that.

The dog died and Ilya watched. He did not even think of turning away.

He thought it would get easier, the kindness. For every animal he helped save, there was another he could not, the scales permanently in a state of equilibrium that became his torment. He figured once the scales tipped too far toward that one side, it would be his sign that his work was over and so could he be. It didn't happen, and at some point he wished to put his hand down on the scale anyway and force it.

The school offered counseling and entire courses on how to handle the pressure of the job. Ilya studied and passed the tests and told the counselors what they wanted to hear and all the while waited for the suffering to outweigh the happiness.

It didn't. So he kept going.

His mother had a postcard, the only sentimental object she kept aside from her necklace, tucked away in a secret compartment of her jewelry box. Ilya found it when he was a child, when he had been looking for money to buy sweets and instead discovered the mail from a man named Misha, postmarked from even before his brother was born. He knew even then that his father could never see it—and how his mother had kept it from him was a secret Ilya would never know. When she died, he took it from the hiding spot and kept the secret some more.

Greetings from Montreal. Three lines of longing from a time when everything was under surveillance. A life his mother had not lived.

He moved to Montreal after graduation and pretended it was for her, a silent gift that he could walk a path she was barred from instead of the same one she went down. It was true, and it was false. He had convinced Svetlana to come with one night while he was fucking her on one last visit to Boston, whispering promises of an adventure, lies of prosperity. She said yes anyway.

All the while—through schools, clinicals, graduation, running, running, running—Ilya would turn on the television and Shane Hollander was there.

Shane Hollander was everywhere.

And then, slowly and all at once, Shane Hollander was everything.

The first time they kissed, in that stupid little closet, Ilya might have drunk from the well that was Shane Hollander until he drowned. Hollander clutched at his coat like a lifeline or maybe a lure at the end of a hook, but it didn't matter because Ilya had seen death over and over and over and if the last thing he saw before his own was Hollander's wide pupils, his lips plump from a bruising kiss, then it could have been worse.

He had said Hollander's name and Ilya saw the panic filtering through glassy eyes, saw the end flash before him before it was time, so he had to try, had to stop him from running or surely Ilya would crumble under the weight of his own want.

Hollander said "an hour" with Ilya's hand still hovering where it wanted to reach out and grab hold, and then he ran.

Ilya wasn't going to chase him, until he did.

Driving to his apartment, the address memorized weeks ago, might have been a mistake, but that had never stopped Ilya before and it wasn't going to stop him now. Svetlana had arched a brow and asked him what happened and he told her that it was nothing, Hollander only wanted to take his shitty playing out on someone. He hadn't looked too closely to see if she bought it.

And then, Hollander had let him in.

Only sex, he'd said. Ilya was good at that. He was good at the flirting, at the pushing, at jumping at every opportunity to get a little more, more, more. Hollander wanted to keep it secret? Ilya could do that too. He knew what could happen if the wrong person found out.

Even if this wasn't Russia, even if Shane wasn't him—but keeping it meant keeping this so Ilya would do it. He was good at keeping secrets.

Ilya hadn't known what it would be like to watch Hollander come from his touch, his mouth, but he'd imagined it: late at night alone in bed, early in the morning under the hot spray of the shower, every day as Hollander became real. It did not compare to the way it felt like his entire gravitational axis shifted, how dangerously good it was, like Ilya was king. Not broken.

When Hollander had gone back to the bathroom, Ilya sat on his couch for two seconds before reality began to set in. He knew what came next in this arrangement. Get out, Rozanov. This isn't anything more, more, more. Better to leave before being kicked out. He learned the hard way with that one, too.

What had been unexpected was the way Hollander had looked almost... disappointed. That couldn't have been right. He didn't want Ilya to stay, he barely knew what he wanted, his words saying one thing and his body another. It was annoying having to navigate another layer of language when one was bad enough.

Maybe he'd let Hollander figure himself out without him.

Only, it would be a shame to let the orgasms go to waste. It would be a shame not to see how much more he could get.

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Night, Rozanov.”

Hollander was running again, could not even stay so Ilya could help him clean up, rejecting a glass of water because he could not stand to be in the same room any longer. Ilya was not going to kiss him goodbye, again, to have him reject that, too.

Ilya painted on the smirk that was expected of him. “Careful not to let the dogs out, yes?”

Shane huffed. “I think I can manage.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Ilya let him finish running and the air remained cool long after the front door was shut.

He was going to end it.

He'd had his fun, got to fuck Hollander, and that was enough. Ilya didn't need anything more, he could get it from anyone, could go out and pick up a man or a woman and fuck the urge to keep doing this right out of him.

The fact that it was the best sex he'd ever had was inconsequential. Hollander's body was perfect, so responsive, that Ilya had to stop himself from coming too soon, and he looked so good in his bed, greedy and demanding, boneless and beautiful. For a moment, after, he had watched for a sign that Hollander was not going to panic and convinced himself it was there before he got up, but he had been wrong, deceived by the afterglow.

Ilya pulled on a pair of sweats and collapsed onto the still tangled covers, letting his arms spread over the spot where Hollander's face had been. It was still damp from his breath, his sweat.

“Fuck.”

He was never going to end this, because ending it would mean he would never see or touch or kiss or taste or fuck Hollander ever again and the thought of having mediocre sex with mediocre people made him want to punch a wall—maybe throw himself off a bridge, if that was all that was left for him otherwise. He didn't have to give up anything because this was nothing to begin with, and Ilya could be selfish with his nothing and dangerous with his nothing, and nothing would end because he didn't have anything more with Hollander to begin with.

Only sex.

Ilya reached over to his nightstand and propped back up the framed postcard and stared at the ceiling.

Once a month, Ilya closed the clinic early and drove across the river to the SPCA. Assisting with spay and neuter surgeries had started as a favor to a colleague and ended up being one afternoon where he could turn off the smile and do the work that needed to be done.

Slice slice, snip snip. Slice, clamp, snip snip snip, tie tie tie. Fifteen in an hour. Repeat.

On a good day, Ilya would work for two hours, think of nothing, and go home. He had not accounted for Hollander to creep around the edges: first in the corners of his mind, freckles and a soft smile close to his own, the slope of his shoulder and the feel of fingers tangled in his hair; then, standing twenty feet away in front of the lobby kennels.

There was more work to do, but when the buzz came, he finished the sutures, discarded his gloves, and checked his phone. He didn't know the cat but the kennel card was in plain view in the photo, and before he could do anything else, Ilya called "taking ten" to Andrea and pushed his way out of the operating room, striding down the hall toward double doors.

There Shane was, where he shouldn't be. Yesterday, as he laughed with clients and rubbed bellies of his patients, Ilya wondered if he dreamed Hollander up, existing only in the spaces he was allowed: his clinic, his house, on television. A figment of his own imagination, the remnants of a life never lived.

Yesterday, as he stood on his back porch and smoked his next last cigarette, he wondered if Hollander had dreamt him up instead, everything that he wasn't and would never be—for worse, not better.

Hollander was now standing still, gaze fixated on whatever cat was in front of him, and Ilya pulled the surgical cap off his head before his own feet were moving, taking him closer and closer.

He had also not accounted for a cat named Bruno to be the reason that Ilya could no longer consider this a good day.

Because Shane Hollander was so fucking sincere and stubborn and honest and he was not a liar, not like Ilya. He listened and looked and opened his stupid beautiful mouth and he did not lie with every breath, and he looked at Bruno and said, "He should get a chance."

And Ilya was really going to find that bridge this time, because he didn't know how to stop feeling more, more, more.

So after, once the two hockey players had left, he did the only thing he could do and went back to work.

Slice slice, snip snip, Shane Shane Shane.

“Fuck, I never—” Shane muttered against his lips “—want to see another fucking airport—” His fingers were in Ilya’s hair, kissing him with a ferocity that went straight to Ilya’s dick “—ever again.”

Six days. Only six single days had passed since Ilya had last seen him, last kissed him, fucked him—last pretended that it was nothing at all, and now Shane was here and he smelled like stale air and sweat and tasted like old peanuts and ginger ale, and he pushed Ilya so hard into the wall next to the coat rack that Ilya cracked his skull against the drywall and grinned.

It would never be enough.

Ilya’s hands were reaching, grabbing, tugging at the stupid layers of clothes that were stopping him from feeling Shane’s skin, the line of muscle down his sides, the dip between his abs and obliques, while they kissed. “Poor hockey star having to travel all over continent,” he said. “Such hard life.”

Shane growled with something like irritation and Ilya’s grin grew, a reflex that he could not stop if he tried. Every reaction was a gift, a reward, and Ilya would take them all, over and over again. Shane pressed his hips forward. “Yes, I am.”

Then it was Ilya’s turn to groan, because there were many things that he would never tire of, but Shane’s hard cock was near the top of the list. “Stealing my line,” he said as he slipped his hand under the elastic of Shane’s track pants, wrapped his hand around it, and pulled one slow stroke.

“Yes,” Shane said again, gasped this time and Ilya took that, too.

He leaned forward and turned them until he was blindly shuffling Shane backward, half stumbling over Shane's feet as he nipped at his bottom lip. When Shane wedged a hand between them, pushed the front of Ilya's sweats down and took hold of him, Ilya threw out a hand to brace against the hallway wall and stopping kissing him to look down.

Wrists knocked into each other, knuckles clashed and breath became a hot and heavy cloud between them, and Ilya would not stop, would never stop, no matter the danger, no matter how reckless he was treating his own heart.

It didn't work anymore anyway, he told himself, and it was put together wrong, nothing more than useless wreckage for over a decade. He could still have this, and survive.

"Fuck—this is—"

Whatever it was, Shane didn't finish, instead letting go and tearing Ilya's shirt up and off in one swift motion before doing the same with his own. He grabbed Ilya's hand and led him into the bedroom where he placed his palms on Ilya's chest and pushed.

The mattress bounced under his weight. "So impatient," Ilya said, biting the insides of his cheeks to stop his grin from growing even wider.

Shane huffed and kicked his pants off. "Eight hours in an airport, Rozanov." One arm pulled off one sock, then the other, with more force than necessary. Both were chucked onto the floor before he climbed onto the bed and straddled Ilya's waist. "So yeah, I'm a little fucking impatient."

There was some distant sound of Maksim's nails tapping on floor, the rhythmic thump of Puck's hop, the jangle of Anya's tags on her collar when she scratched an itch, but it fell away when Shane licked his palm and curled his fingers around Ilya's cock once more.

He was beautiful, even with dark circles under his eyes and eyebrows knitted together, and his hand was sure. In his eyes, Ilya saw a light that would never go out, not for someone like Shane Hollander, not for someone who—

"Drawer?"

Ilya blinked and nodded, lifted his hips and shoved his sweats off when Shane crawled off to reach the nightstand.

If watching Shane stroke his cock was alluring, watching him open himself up was something else altogether. Ilya let his eyes roam, propped on his side and watching

every twitch of his muscles, the way he squeezed his eyes shut, the jagged movements of his arm as he rushed and raced through it.

Shane Hollander rushing to get fucked. It sounded like a lie even as he knew it to be true, witnessed it in the way Shane's teeth bit into his bottom lip, the way his spine bowed and brought him closer, how he climbed back onto Ilya's lap and held his dick steady while he rolled a condom on.

How his eyes never left Ilya's as he sunk down onto it.

Take. Ilya grabbed onto Shane's hips, digging his fingers into flesh, muscle, bones. Take. He turned his head and bit at the tendon of Shane's wrist where his hand was planted on bed next to his head. Take. He thrust upward as Shane rocked down.

And when Shane slowed down, when the pinched look returned to his features, Ilya rolled them over and gave, gave, gave.

It was addictive, worse than any other craving, having Shane beneath him, folded in half and clutching at Ilya while he gasped and groaned and came. Shane was the next last cigarette he would never stub out.

After, Ilya let Shane's legs fall and eased himself out and panted into kisses that weren't kisses at all. He waited for the inevitable as he held out the damp cloth to him despite how much he wanted to take care of the mess, of Shane, himself.

It came when Shane slowly sat up and handed it back, rolled himself off the bed and began to pluck his clothes off the ground. "Okay, I'll just grab Puck and head out," he said.

No. Don't run, Ilya thought. Please, don't run.

Which was more dangerous and stupid and should never have been allowed to form in the first place, but Ilya gathered every lie and every truth and smothered them as he shrugged. "Or just stay."

Shane hardly looked at him and Ilya clenched his jaw. Then Shane nodded. "Okay."

Dangerous and stupid weren't strong enough words. There wasn't one for how he felt when Shane yawned again and slipped under the covers. There wasn't one when Ilya kissed Shane's shoulder and slipped in beside him. There wasn't one.

Not one that he'd deign to give power to by naming it.

Ilya was a liar and Shane could never know.

He watched Shane's breathing even out, his jaw relax, every part of him dip into slumber. It was so quick, so effortless that Ilya stared and watched and waited, wondered what it was like, to sleep so easily.

Wondered if it was because of him.

Another minute passed, then he opened his mouth and whispered in Russian, "The first time I saw you on TV, it was close up of the bench. You were laughing. Smiling. It was so bright."

Shane did not move.

"And I was not jealous, even though you were so happy, living your dream, while I was..." Ilya swallowed. "In that moment, I only wanted to see that smile again. In person. Turned my way.

"Even if... even if I would never deserve it."

Shane: Sorry I fell asleep

Three days had passed and Ilya opened the text, closed it, opened it, closed it. He did not respond. Once, on the first day, the three dots appeared and Ilya watched them blink and move, on and on for what seemed like forever until they, too, disappeared and left nothing behind.

Shane had called him and Ilya had gone, shoes on and keys in hand before he had even asked if he needed help, before Shane had said yes. He kept it together while Shane fell apart and he tore through Shane's belongings with a calm that he did not feel. Another lie.

How could he not, though, when Shane looked at him, eyes shining with tears and panic, with lost hope, like he would break.

How could he not, when one kitten was missing and it was everything that held them together, the only thing.

Except.

Except Shane called him. Except Shane asked him to stay.

Except Ilya couldn't.

Wouldn't.

He wouldn't because it wasn't fair. Shane didn't know him, didn't see the ugly innards and destruction and if he did, that would be the end and Ilya couldn't let him end it that way, he was too selfish to sacrifice himself to it.

So Ilya ran and called it a gift every time he opened his text messages and said nothing at all.

It was better this way, anyway. Shane would come back to himself and move on like nothing happened, move forward with his perfect life and Ilya would go back to his animals, his dogs, and watch Shane on tv and pretend he didn't know that he was real, after all.

Two days later when the Voyageurs next played, Ilya went out so he didn't have to try.

He dragged Svetlana to the Golden Mile but she was the one who led him toward some swanky club that pretended to be swankier with a velvet rope that meant nothing to a Svetlana Vetrova dressed to the nines.

Inside was dark and loud, the bass line pounding vibrations through the floor, the walls. Ilya followed her to the bar, pounded the shot of vodka, then the next, and tugged her into the dance floor.

They used to do this, before. Go out and drink shitty American vodka and dance until they either found someone to go home with or fell into bed together and fuck out their frustrations. There was a time when Ilya wondered if she loved him and he asked one drunken night as he locked the door behind him.

"Not like that," she had said. "Never like that."

And it hadn't stung because it was for the best, they could be with one another without being with one another, and Ilya could have Svetlana as a tether and Svetlana could have him as...

Well, whatever it was she saw in him all these years. A good lay, a fun accomplice, maybe.

Svetlana nodded over his shoulder as they danced, her arms up and resting on Ilya's arms. "Her?"

Ilya looked. "Blonde with too much chest and too little shirt?"

"Yeah, she's been glaring daggers at me."

He smirked and looked again, the blonde woman in question raising a brow but otherwise pretending to be disinterested. It was a game that never changed, just like hockey, and Ilya was good at it, too.

But not her.

"No," he said, and kept dancing.

"What about her?"

"Too much hair."

"Her?"

Ilya huffed and shot her an incredulous look. "Seriously? She cannot dance."

Svetlana rolled her eyes and turned in a circle and Ilya knew she was looking, hunting, and pressed her back to his front, lifted a hand to tilt his chin just... there. "Him?"

Ilya pushed her off. "No."

The song changed and Svetlana shrugged and she must have seen something that she liked instead and left him with a quick squeeze to his bicep. It was fine, it was always fine, it was what she did, looking for something that Ilya would never be able to give her.

As he danced, watched, brushed off hands from his waist, turned away from eyes with invitations written in them, he wondered if this was a waste of time but went to the bar

anyway, got another shot of shitty vodka and leaned against it despite the patrons that elbowed their way into his spot, got the attention of the bartender he no longer needed.

Svetlana was dancing with someone, there in the far corner of the floor, some man with a head of black hair, a simple dark tshirt and ill-fitting jeans and that, *that* was a waste, she was better than some boring man who didn't even try. He crossed the club, weaving through people, because he had to save her, then, help her find a suitable alternative before he went home alone and jerked off to thoughts of maybe the blonde woman's tits, or maybe the redhead's lips, imagined around his cock—something different, new, something that he could pretend was anything worth thinking of and definitely not—

“Shane?”

The word left his mouth and was swallowed by the beat, and Ilya's hand was on his shoulder and pulling, because it couldn't be, it fucking absolutely couldn't be and if it was, Ilya was going to do something stupid like—

“Do you mind?” The man sneered and jerked his arm forward, out of his grasp, and Svetlana gave him a questioning look, the same eyes hunting but for something else, something in Ilya.

“Sorry,” he said automatically. The stupid Canadian politeness was a cancer, and he should have pulled harder instead of letting go, but he wouldn't.

Not Shane.

Ilya fixed his gaze on Svetlana. “I'm leaving,” he said. And then: “You can find better.”

He left without another word, barging back through a crowd of sweaty revelry, through the pounding and the bile that rose up the back of his throat.

When the outside air hit his face, cold and stinging against his cheeks, he kept moving and moving, until he found a cab just down the block and slid into the backseat. Ilya gave his address and said nothing more, even as the driver attempted to engage him anyway, switching from English to French and back again before he gave up.

The car stopped and Ilya got out, just as the first firework exploded in the sky in the distance.

“Bonne année,” the cab driver called.

Happy fucking New Year, Ilya thought as the fireworks continued.

Happy New Year, Shane.

He raised a hand to his face and squeezed the bridge of his nose. His fingers came back wet.

“Can we fast forward through this part of it all?” Svetlana said between patients, arms folded across her chest, inspecting the nails on one of her hands.

Ilya kept his eyes on the computer screen, typing up the rest of his notes. “What, you think Mrs. Bouchard won’t be obsessively requesting Princess’s chart for the first time? If I don’t get this done, she will call all afternoon.”

“No, the moping.” Her voice was light, almost bored. “So he broke up with you, so what?”

His pinky slipped. Delete delete delete. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She scoffed. “Please. No one looks at their crotch and smiles at work, Ilya. You think I couldn’t tell when you were talking to him, holding your phone beneath the table?”

Ilya’s fingers stilled and he shot her a glare. “You know nothing, Sveta.”

“I have known you for ten years, Ilyushka, you think you are so good at hiding everything, but you are stained glass.”

“Stop.”

“He’s just a hockey player—”

“Stop.”

“—and his dick is not magical—”

“*Stop.*”

“—he is nothing—”

“He’s not nothing!”

Ilya looked up and Svetlana’s lips were curved into a small smile, impish and apologetic all at once.

“So you can be honest,” she said, pressing her hand to his cheek while she kissed the other, and headed back into the lobby.

Ilya stared at the door, long after it shut.

Chapter End Notes

Reminder that next week’s chapter will be delayed by a day or two (and I know, I *know* that this is probably the worst chapter to leave you all with for a few extra days, I’m sorry!).

Cat Facts:

Today’s cat facts are more about the people than the cats. Veterinarians have a disproportionately high suicide risk for many reasons, not limited to high debt-to-income ratios, long hours, conflicts with clients, and compassion fatigue. There isn’t as much data about this in regards to those in animal rescue, but from personal experience I would suspect still higher than average risk (but still less than veterinary professionals).

Burnout fucking sucks and the worst thing about it is that, no matter how many animals you help, how many you save, how many happy endings you get to be a part of, there are just as many sad ones. You can do everything right and the cat will still die. It will never be your fault but you’ll wonder if maybe you just tried harder, tried faster, learned more and helped more and did more, that you could save them, save all of them, and if you aren’t doing more and more and more, if you try to take a break or take care of yourself, then the guilt comes and it can be so

overwhelming as it is, but it's never just the guilt you place on yourself alone because the only way any (nonprofit) animal rescues get funding is through donations and that opens you up to the cruelty of the internet, of strangers who tell you that you aren't doing enough, that you're horrible for making a choice that wasn't a choice at all, that you've been ignoring their pleas and now another animal is hurt or dying and—

Then translate that over to veterinary professionals, who deal with this face-to-face, who see illness and injury and suffering and have to deliver bad news to owners and maintain composure and compassion for not just the animals, but the people. And it's not just the euthanasia aspect, even if that can and is a large part of their jobs, it's managing pain and emotions and stress over and over and over again.

So yeah. To my fellow rescuers, to the vets and vet techs and vet assistants, I see you. Put your own oxygen mask on first and take care of yourselves. <3

Edit 8/19/26: A commenter (and a vet!) mentioned Not One More Vet — <https://nomv.org/> — an organization dedicated to improving mental health care for veterinary professionals <3

8/23/26: Another commenter shared this Australian charity for vet mental health: <https://sophieslegacy.com/>

9/14/26: For vets in the UK: www.vetlife.org.uk

Chapter 16: Open Ice

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, and welcome back! My vacation was lovely but exhausting, so next week's chapter might be delayed a little as well. TBD but just in case.

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

“This is what heaven feels like.”

Shane laughed with a slow shake of his head and pulled out two cans of ginger ale from the fridge. “And here I thought you were coming to see me.”

In the living room, Rose Landry was sunk into the couch with Puck purring and making biscuits on her lap. Every so often, when she ran a hand over his head and spine, his half-fluffy hips would raise and he'd wobble before she steadied him.

“I am absolutely not sorry to inform you that I will only be coming to see Puck from now on,” she said, snapping her fingers on one hand while holding her phone in front of Puck with the other, thumb tapping the screen to take photos. “Pspspssps, look right here! Pspspspssps.”

Shane set her drink on the coffee table. “You are ridiculous.”

“I fail to see the problem with that.”

That morning Shane had tossed all the cat toys back into their basket, rearranged the throw pillows on the couch to hide plucked threads and bitten holes, and vacuumed and re-vacuumed until the sound of litter clattering around the roller and up the tube disappeared entirely. It had been nearly two weeks since he had torn the space apart looking for Puck, but the only evidence that it had ever happened at all came from a silence that grew louder and louder with each passing day, and one particular absence that spoke volumes.

When she texted the day before with a flight schedule—the way she usually did when she breezed into town a couple times a year, every year since they broke up—he almost let it all fall out of him right then and there. By the time he hit send on *Are you ever going to give me more than twelve hours notice?*, Shane had spent ten minutes typing and deleting from his couch, then another five while pacing in front of the television, and finally too many to count while lying on the floor. He had cycled through variations

of Hypothetically speaking, what does it mean when the dude you're fucking won't text you back and Random question, but if two guys are just having sex, that's normal right? and one very ill-advised and immediately erased *Help I want him and he won't respond fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck I'm fucked.*

The worst part wasn't even the conclusion he'd spent days circling—one that, when he finally let himself think it, had him laughing so hysterically at his sad fucking plate of perfectly portioned macronutrients that he dropped his fork with a clang and startled Puck from where he was begging at his feet for scraps.

Because what he wanted was a greasy cheeseburger and greasier fries and for Puck and Anya and Maksim to be staring at him, licking their chops, while Ilya admonished them and snuck food under the table anyway. And Shane would say he was enabling bad behavior and Ilya would smile and say that was what he did best. They wouldn't be talking about the animals anymore—they never only talked about the animals, not really, not for a long time even if he hadn't wanted to admit it.

No, the worst part was that once he thought it, he didn't want to stop, and the only person who might not completely hate him if they knew was currently giggling at the way Puck had flopped over and stretched his arms out over his head as she rubbed her thumbs into his armpits.

He would tell her. Or ask her. Or... something, *anything* to get this out of him before he drove himself even more crazy wondering how the fuck he ended up in this mess, how was he supposed to just keep carrying on like it didn't matter that Ilya ignored his first text, then his second, third, and then one incredibly stupid phone call that never should have happened in the first place.

The phone call that he made approximately ten minutes after midnight on New Year's Eve after he stupidly hoped for a post-game critique text or another dick pic or even just a simple happy new year and his phone remained silent and stationary through post-game interviews, showers, food, the same stupid jokes the guys always said when they played a game on December 31st—see you next year, ha ha fucking ha. The phone call he made because it had been five days of radio silence and Shane wanted to hear Ilya's voice call him boring or predictable or any of the other ridiculous things he thought about Shane, because he wanted Ilya to be thinking of him at all but especially at midnight, especially when Shane hadn't stopped thinking about *him*, and he called and it rang and rang and rang until it didn't, and the tinny far away recording sounded in his ear like a hockey stick snapping: *Hi, this is Ilya, I will never listen to your voicemail.*

The phone call he had ended without saying anything at all.

“Shane.”

He blinked. “Hm?”

Rose looked up at him with such kindness in her eyes, always so sincere and beautiful and everything he should have wanted, should have been happy with. “You going to sit anytime soon? You’ve been standing there for a while.”

“Oh. Right, sorry.” He sat down on the opposite side and brought the can to his lips—only it wasn’t open and nothing came out, so he smiled tightly and popped the top.

“You okay?”

And this was the moment, he just needed to stop being a fucking idiot for two seconds. He was going to tell her.

Shane swallowed and took a sip. “Yup. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t going to tell her.

Rose picked Puck up and snuggled him under her chin as she curled up into the arm of the couch. “Oh yeah, completely fine,” she said with a slow nod. “It’s not like anything out of the ordinary happened since the last time we talked—like, oh, I don’t know, whatever happened between you and Cliff Marlow?”

Shane winced. “You saw that, huh?”

“I saw the Google alert that came through after.”

“You have Google alerts for me?”

Rose laughed. “How else was I supposed to keep up with everything while we were dating?”

“That was—you’ve had Google alerts for me for *two years*?”

“You say that like it’s weird.”

“I mean, it is.”

“It’s not.”

“I’m being cyberstalked.”

She scoffed but the smile never left her face. “Can it be considered stalking if it’s automated? Besides, how else am I supposed to know how the season is going or if you’re seeing anybody. You know you’ve only sent me like three pictures of Puck this whole time? I’m out of the loop here.”

He shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. “I’m not big on texting.”

“Then why have you opened your messages three times in the last hour?”

Shane looked down at his phone, clutched in his hand, then threw it on the coffee table where it rattled before it came to a stop.

Rose raised a brow.

“What?”

“Like that wasn’t weird.”

“Okay, look. One, I’m *fine*. Two, Marlow was just being a dumbass, Puck had been keeping me up at night, and I had a bad day. And three, the season is going great, I think we have a real shot at the cup again this year.”

“You say that every year.”

“Believe it to achieve it.”

She chucked a pillow at him and grabbed the remote off the center cushion. “Gross, you sound like my brother—or worse, my *dad*.”

He laughed and positioned the pillow behind his back. Being with Rose was easy when they laughed and teased and nothing got examined too closely, and being her friend was easier still. Puck was snoozing in her arms, eyes closed and tail curled around his nose, and maybe he knew it, too, how special she was.

The screen flipped through menus as she held the remote aloft and hit buttons, and she kept her eyes on it when she asked, “And four?”

“What? There is no four.”

“Are you seeing anybody?”

The part of him that wished she hadn’t noticed he avoided that question cursed her, his jaw going tight. There she was again, opening the door that had always been open with

her, and Shane couldn't do it, couldn't step through.

"No," he said.

"Too bad," she hummed, and hit play.

He was *never* going to tell her.

In the morning, Shane stood by his door, keys in hand and her overnight bag on his shoulder, for nearly twenty minutes while Rose ran up and down the length of his apartment trailing a ribbon wand behind her while Puck hopped and slid and skittered around corners chasing it.

They had spent yesterday on his couch, ordering in while Rose cycled through a thousand different variations of reality TV shows. Shane had asked if she wanted to go out, hit up a restaurant or a bar, and she had balked, squeezing Puck a little closer.

"And make me leave my precious son?"

"He's not your son," Shane had said, with less humor than he'd intended.

Thankfully Rose had still laughed. "Stepson, then." She wedged her socked feet under his thighs, and started another episode. When she repositioned Puck on her chest, he gave a sleepy mew, yawned, and stretched before jumping off.

Good, he'd thought a little spitefully. She's not your stepmom.

He only felt bad about it for a short while, right up until she had turned on yet another episode of the Great British Bake Off instead of the Boston-New York game.

Now he was waiting for one of them to tire out so they could get going, but he merely switched her bag from one shoulder to the other as Rose started another lap with the wand toy.

Shane groaned. “Don’t you have a plane to catch? Your ride’s been downstairs for a while.”

“Yes,” she said as she ran past. “But I’m going to be in kittenless Budapest for six months.”

“Pretty sure they have kittens in Europe,” he called after her.

Rose came to an abrupt stop and scooped Puck just as he was about to slide into her legs. “But *he’s* not going to be a kitten the next time I see him.”

“It’s almost like kittens grow up into cats,” Shane said with a smirk despite the bittersweet twinge that flared behind his ribs. Puck had already grown so much in two months—legs ganglier, ears bigger and the fluff that sprouted from them a little longer—and as much as he wanted him to stay tiny, to remain the small void he had first encountered, watching him grow had also been an unexpected joy.

She kissed Puck’s head loudly. “That means you’ve actually got to send me photos, and videos, and tell me stories and—”

“Fine, yes,” Shane laughed. “Whatever will you get to get your ass in gear. I’ve got things to do aside from being your personal assistant.”

With one more loud smacking kiss, Rose set Puck back on the ground and finally, *finally* put on her coat. “You’ll let me know how it goes, right?”

Shane held the door and managed to slip out behind her with only one jailbreak attempt by Puck. “Yeah, of course.”

“I think it’s great, honestly. You’ve been... different, since you found him.”

The elevator doors opened and Shane averted his eyes. “Different?”

“Better,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the weird obsession you have with routine—it’s why you’re the person I go to when I just need a little stability. But I think your life needed a little chaos.”

She was talking about Puck. Shane *knew* she was talking about Puck.

In his coat pocket, he curled his fingers around his phone. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

Marcel's office was part shrine, part pageantry, and entirely an assault on the senses. The Voyageurs' logo was painted across the back wall while the others were garishly bold with thick stripes of blue, red, and white, gold plaques and crystal trophies lined the cabinets behind the giant glass-topped desk, and above the door, the words *Dig Deep, Push Harder*. Framed team photos with the Stanley Cup hung between blown up promo shots of the rink, of Montreal lit up in their team colors, and of Shane himself.

He sat in the chair in front of the desk and pretended that one in particular didn't exist.

"Look," Marcel sighed, lacing his fingers together. "It's noble, I'll give you that. But these sorts of things take time, planning, coordination. It's not like I can just snap my fingers and make it happen. We plan out all campaigns and partnerships for the year during the offseason."

Shane nodded tightly. "I know that."

"It's hard enough getting management approval for things during the season," Marcel continued, gesturing with one hand. "I've got about twenty different reporters up my ass at any given time trying to snag exclusive interviews—more when something... unexpected happens."

The pointed look he gave Shane made him clench his jaw. He knew they protected him, blacklisted certain questions in those days following the Boston game—following the fight. It didn't make the rejection sting any less.

"Maybe after the season is over, I will see what can be done, start drafting proposals, work it into the schedule for next winter."

Shane's leg bounced, heel not quite tapping the floor as it moved. "But they need help now," he said. "When I talked to Andrea—the director—she said that this was unprecedented, the shelter being so full this time of year, and it only gets worse in spring. I'm meeting with her this afternoon, there's really nothing I can offer her?"

Marcel leaned back in his chair and the leather creaked. "I'm sorry, there's nothing the Voyageurs can officially add right now. All Stars is coming up, we've got the Hockey

Fights Cancer initiative after that, then it's a couple isolated events and promos followed by playoffs. The schedule is set."

All around him was the evidence of why Shane should just nod, smile, and wait—every photo, every award, his own face prominently featured like he was the shining star of the Montreal Voyageurs. The first time he saw it, he'd been proud, like it was proof that his hard work, his dedication, his devotion to the team was reciprocated. Now it felt like a leash.

He turned his gaze back to Marcel. "What if I do it on my own?"

Marcel laughed as if the question itself was absurd. "Of course you can do it that way, as long as it doesn't interfere with league commitments and all actions fall within the codes of conduct and behavioral expectations outlined in your contract. We'll support you, albeit quietly," he said. "It's not a no forever, Shane. I'll run it by management, see if there's any wiggle room for now. If not, we'll stick with the plan for next season, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks." Shane stood and shook Marcel's hand and glanced at the words above the door as he made his way out. The image of cages and kennels stacked on top of each other when they shouldn't have been popped into his head, along with Andrea's voice patiently explaining to him that every shelter and rescue in the city was experiencing the same crisis, how this should have been a slow period for intake—how it wasn't, and what that meant.

Then it was Scott Hunter standing in the hallway with his clipboard, the short list of signatures, Theriault's warning.

Then Puck, hunkered in the bushes, surviving.

Dig deep. He'd always thought the words were about hockey. Push harder. He'd always thought *everything* was about hockey.

At last, Shane walked out to thoughts of Ilya, rebuilding a life from scratch.

Andrea met him at the back entrance with a handshake and a smile.

“Bonjour, welcome,” she said, “it is nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.”

She led him through the building, through rooms where there were even more stacked and occupied kennels, past doors where the barking grew more intense, and into a small room opposite two double doors with two small glass windows through which Shane caught a glimpse of bright lights and some sort of surgery being performed. He had counted no less than six employees, all of whom gave him a smile and a nod as they passed, but he lingered an extra second, looking for familiar curls.

Hoping for them.

This office was cramped. There were papers spread across a plain desk with chipped edges, a bulletin board filled with fliers and Polaroids of people holding mostly dogs and cats, and three cages evenly spaced against one wall containing a pair of guinea pigs scurrying around, three tiny kittens slowly waking up, and some sort of animal that looked like an absurdly large mouse that stared at him with its beady eyes from the very top of its three-tier cage.

“Please excuse the mess,” Andrea said, closing the door behind him.

Shane flashed a kind smile. “Oh, it’s fine. Sorry, I just—what is that?” He pointed toward the rodent.

“A chinchilla. Adorable, non? He’s moving onto the adoption floor tomorrow, once his hold is up.”

“Hold?”

“Stray hold. Technically he was found in an abandoned apartment—not exactly a stray—but it still falls within the stray guidelines so his owners have seven days to reclaim.”

“Oh.”

When she gestured to one of the chairs in front of a plain desk, he sat. Andrea sat next to him.

“Thank you,” Shane said. “So I talked to management and they are looking at what can be officially planned for next season.”

“That’s wonderful.” Her smile had grown, but fell slightly at whatever she must have seen on his face. “That’s not wonderful?”

“No—I mean, it is. I just didn’t realize it would take so long.”

“We will still need it next season, Mr. Hollander.”

Past her chair, the pile of three sleeping brown striped kittens turned into four, one at the bottom that had been completely hidden before the others started standing and stretching. The fourth was black. “I know. And the team might not be able to do anything now, but I can.”

“I see. Did you have something in mind?”

The black kitten rolled onto its side and stretched its arms over its head.

“Anything.” He glanced back at her. “Whatever you need. Whatever *they* need.”

Andrea followed his gaze and hummed. “A cat person, eh?”

Shane opened his mouth to say no out of reflex, because he wasn’t—or, he hadn’t been. But now? “I guess I am,” he said. “I have a cat, at least, if that counts.”

She stood and walked around to the other side of the desk. “There is something you might be interested in,” she said, pulling open a drawer and removing a Manila folder. “We started working on it last spring, but funds had to be reallocated for Moving Day, and then the panleukopenia outbreak in October... it became more of a dream than anything else.”

Andrea slid the proposal toward him.

"Additional space changes everything." Her voice softened, and Shane heard his dad, saw Puck scaling his new tower, sitting at the top. "The cats are calmer, healthier, and it gives us the ability to keep bonded pairs and litters together. They have somewhere to climb, somewhere to hide. Somewhere that feels a little more like home."

A tiny meow cut through the room and became a chorus as the others joined in. Shane only needed to see the first page of the cat condo mock-ups to say, immediately and unequivocally, “Yes.”

Thirty minutes later, after they went over the logistics, over pricing and planning, and Andrea had shown him another room right off the adoption floor where it would be built, she shook his hand again. “Truly, we cannot thank you enough, Mr. Hollander.”

“You don’t—please, call me Shane.”

She held the door open for him, the sounds of the shelter loud as ever. “Shane,” Andrea repeated. “Thank you for coming, for letting me show off all the good things we do here, for your support.”

“I wish I could do more.”

“We all do. But wishing we could do more is less important than actually doing what we can.” She gestured toward the other side of the lobby, where a woman was walking toward the exit with a carrier in her hand. “The people who make a difference are the ones who start somewhere, anywhere, instead of not at all.”

The woman turned and waved to another standing behind the main reception desk, smiling so wide that Shane felt one of his own forming.

Andrea was leading him back toward the employee-only doors when he stopped, his eyes traveling down the row of kennels.

“Do you mind if I just—there’s a cat I want to check on.”

She tilted her head, but nodded. “Which cat?”

“Bruno,” he said, side-stepping. “He has FIV.”

He had already taken two strides along the row when she said, “Oh yes! He was adopted last week.”

The sun had set by the time he dropped his keys into the bowl by the door. Shane heard Puck’s yelling the moment the elevator doors opened and the scratching began as he

unlocked the door.

“I know, I know,” he said, like he always did, after every practice and every game—every late night that kept him out past a completely arbitrary dinner time that he hadn’t even realized Puck had set.

So he filled his bowl.

Refreshed his water.

Scooped the litter box.

And then, when his hands were washed and the apartment was quiet aside from the crunching of kibble, Shane stood at the window and stared at his own reflection dotted by city lights.

He was happy for Bruno. Andrea told him he’d been adopted by a middle aged couple with no kids—they had opened their heart and home to him and that was all Shane could have wanted. He imagined Bruno exploring his new home, finding a window of his own, curling up on a couch he’d never have to leave. He imagined how Bruno’s eyes would light up when he realized what happened, if cats even had the capacity to understand. That he’d never have to spend another night in the shelter.

That he’d been chosen, even with his diagnosis.

He *was* happy.

Not just for Bruno.

Even without Marcel, without the Voyageurs, Shane was able to do something good, put into motion something that would have never crossed his mind to do a few months ago. Something that mattered.

There was time for more.

There was space for more, within him.

He checked his watch. The Ottawa-Toronto game was starting soon and he had work to do: watch, listen, take notes to bring to the coaches at practice, prep for their own game against Toronto in two days. He wondered if Ilya would be watching. If he had watched any of the games at all.

With a groan, he forced himself away from the glass and grabbed his dinner from the fridge. Stupid to even think that, when it didn't matter anymore anyway.

His dad had practically jumped when Shane asked him if he'd watch Puck, that first short trip in the new year. He'd arrived with an overnight bag, a six pack, and a bag of what he had assured Shane was catnip. Leaving that time hadn't felt like the worst until later.

Now another unremarkable dinner awaited.

He ate it in front of the game.

The first period came and went. Aucoin scored, or maybe Barrett. Shane frowned at the screen, rewound the play, and watched it again.

During the first intermission, he glanced down at his open notebook.

Toronto - Power play.

That was all he'd written.

"Good work," he muttered.

Puck, stretched across the back of the couch, reached out one paw and rested it against Shane's head.

By the second intermission, he had written more, making sure he actually watched Toronto: who was called and when, how Kent and Barrett moved, and how Nilsson was favoring his left side—not obviously, just enough that the Admirals were leading the game with two goals that made it through on Nilsson's right. He wrote *injury?* and underlined it once.

When Toronto swapped him for the backup goalie, the camera zoomed in on Nilsson's face, his weary smile as he sat down on the bench.

Everyone played hurt at some point. Shane had played with bruises the size of dinner plates, strains and sprains in his hips and knees that ached all the way to the ice bath, and once he had taken a hit that left his back sore for a week. Sometimes pushing through the pain was necessary.

And sometimes it was the end of a career. Of a path.

But not the end of everything else. Maybe just the beginning.

Puck purred behind his head. He imagined Bruno sitting on a lap while a hand stroked over his back. They got their second chances.

And Ilya.

Always Ilya.

Halfway through the last period, he blinked and somehow the game was in overtime.

Shane rubbed a hand over his face.

He finished the game because that's what he was supposed to do, filled in the rest of his notes from memory and instinct more than anything he'd actually seen, brushed his teeth, and turned off the lights.

Puck launched himself onto the bed before Shane had even pulled the blankets back and immediately sprawled across his pillow.

Shane gently scooped him over a few inches and got a tail thwap in the eye when he finally settled in.

Somehow he still fell asleep—

—for maybe an hour.

When he opened his eyes again, the apartment was silent and Puck had slid off the pillow into the crevice of his neck.

Gently, he rolled over and lifted his phone.

2:41.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the clock read 3:55.

Puck sighed dramatically from behind his head and Shane matched it, watching the minute change on the dim screen.

He swiped up and opened his contacts. Rose's flight should've landed by now.

She was probably exhausted. Probably already asleep. *He* should have been asleep.

Probably—

His thumb pressed call before he could talk himself out of it.

After three rings, Rose picked up. “Shane?”

“I’m seeing someone,” he blurted.

“Okay. Hold on.”

There was some rustling on the other end and Shane winced. “If it’s a bad time—”

“No. No, I just got to my hotel. I don’t know why I thought it would be warmer here, but it’s like I never left Montreal? Just let me—” More rustling filtered in, followed by a thump. “Okay.”

“Maybe I should call back later, you’re probably exhausted.”

“Absolutely not. It’s got to be like three in the morning or something there.”

Shane let out a thin laugh. “Four, actually.”

“So,” she said after a moment. “You’re seeing someone.”

“Is it technically seeing someone if you’re just having sex?”

Rose hummed. “Depends. Are there feelings involved or is this like strictly friends-with-benefits?”

“I don’t know if we were even friends to begin with,” he muttered.

“You’re going to have to give me a little more detail here, Shane. You called me now just to say you’re dating, or fucking, or *whatever*, when I was just there—”

“I know, I know.”

“—and you sound like shit, so either you’re nervous or heartbroken and I don’t know whether I need to wheedle it out of you or threaten to break some legs here.”

He knew the second she spoke the word that it was true, his chest tight and his eyes stinging. Everything that he’d been avoiding, all the thoughts locked away and feelings he shoved down, broke free.

“I think it’s over.” It came out more breath than anything else, whispered and almost broken.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He nodded, almost frantically, squeezing his eyes shut like that would somehow make this easier, but she couldn’t see him. Shane forced his mouth open. “Do you remember me talking about the vet?”

The alarm bells went off his head immediately. This was a mistake.

“The hot Russian one?”

“He’s not—okay, yes, fine. The hot Russian one,” he said. “He—we—”

He couldn’t do this.

“Shane,” Rose said, her voice so gentle and calm. “Is that who you were seeing?”

He could hang up. Tell her he was tired, that it wasn’t anything, sorry to bother her. He didn’t deserve her, this friendship that somehow lasted despite everything else, when he was too wrapped up in hockey, in his single-mindedness to be the best, to make it worth it, to make everyone proud. He couldn’t actually tell her the truth, not when it meant—

“Yes.”

“Hey, *hey*.” He hadn’t realized he was starting to hyperventilate until she was talking again. “Just breathe. It’s okay, Shane.”

“It’s not—”

“No, shut up. I love you, but shut up. It’s okay if you like men,” she said. “Really.”

The lump in his throat felt like a boulder, but the pitiful excuse for a laugh still managed to escape around it. “I know.”

“Do you?”

Shane could practically see Rose’s face in his head, her eyebrows knit together in fondness and her smile soft. “I’m working on it,” he said.

Rose let out a slow breath. “Have you told anyone else?”

“Absolutely not.”

She paused, but then her voice became tentative and almost guilty when she said, “Will you freak out if I tell you I had a feeling?”

That had him sitting up in an instant. “*What?* How? When?”

“Shane, I say this with all the love because I *do* love you,” she said and Shane’s pulse spiked again, “but our sex life was absolutely, utterly *terrible*.”

Silence fell for a couple seconds, and then she laughed and Shane couldn’t help but smile before he began to laugh with her. Puck meowed and hopped onto his lap like he, too, wanted in on the moment.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “This is the fucking worst.”

“Suck it up, Hollander, your ego can take it and the heart to heart ain’t over yet. Tell me about Hot Russian Vet.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes. It’s the rule.”

“What rule?”

“The one that says when your ex-boyfriend comes out to you after an eleven hour flight, you get to ask about their situationship.”

Shane blinked rapidly. “Situation-*what?*”

“Your not-so-friends-with-benefits.”

“Rose, please.”

“Shane, please.”

He let out a long exhale through his nose and scratched under Puck’s chin. “What do you want me to say? It was supposed to just be sex, and then, I don’t know, shit got messed up, and now he’s not answering my texts and that’s it.”

“How long has it been?”

“Two weeks.”

“And when was the last time you tried to contact him?”

“New Year’s.”

“Does he make you happy?”

Shane stilled, looking down at Puck even if he was nothing but a black hole in the dark. The answer was easy, sitting at the back of his throat. “He’s... fuck, he’s such an asshole and he irritates the shit out of me with his stupid smug remarks—just chirps, nonstop,” he said.

“But you like it.”

He let out a long groan and flopped backward onto his pillow. “I fucking do. And he listens. Cares—he cares *so* fucking deeply. I didn’t even see it at first, didn’t see a lot of things. And—” Another deep breath. “Yes. He makes me happy.”

“So try again,” Rose said. “Or give up, move on, find yourself a hot Scottish professor or something.”

“I don’t want to—give up,” Shane said. “It’s so stupid and doesn’t make any sense, but I can’t stop thinking about him all the *fucking* time. What if he never answers and I’m just stuck here waiting for him like an idiot.”

“Then you’re fucked.”

“No, I *was* fucked. Now I’m not.”

Rose gasped. “Shane!”

“Sorry, that was—”

“Perfect,” she finished for him. “Absolutely perfect. And I love that for you. But look, I just have one more question.”

“Well, that’s a lie.”

“One more question, *for now*. Is he worth it?”

This answer was just as easy, but this time it came out as such. “Yeah,” he said.

“So try. Again.”

“You say that like it’s easy.”

Rose laughed softly. “It’s never easy,” she said. “Sometimes you try and it works out, sometimes it doesn’t. When have you ever let something hard stop you?”

Chapter End Notes

First off, sorry to every reader who wanted Shane or Ilya or even Hayden to adopt Bruno. Instead, Bruno gets his happy ending with another family, to be loved and doted on.

Moving Day in Quebec occurs on July 1st when basically every renter’s lease ends. When I was researching the Montreal SPCA, I came across news about wanting to encourage adoptions before Moving Day as shelters and rescues see an influx of surrenders during the lead up to it due to “no pets allowed” housing clauses in various rentals.

Cat Facts:

Forgive me if this is all a little disjointed today but I am jet lagged af.

We are in the thick of kitten season right now and adoptions have slowed to a trickle. Every shelter and rescue in my city are full but more kittens are still coming in every single day. It’s... not great, friends. At this point in the season, we usually are able to still keep up with intake as adoptions are steady, but that is not happening this year and it’s honestly a little scary and a lot worrisome. If you can adopt right now, I’d encourage you to do so. If you’ve ever considered fostering, the need for fosters is very, very high. Feel free to ask me questions about fostering, but I’ll go ahead and address the most common one: how do you not get attached and keep them all?

Honestly? You do get attached. And then you say goodbye anyway—because goodbye is the goal. Goodbye means being able to help the next one. Goodbye means helping someone find their furry best friend. Goodbye is the *best part* even when it makes you cry because it means you get to meet and love the next

ones. My best advice is go into fostering knowing that you absolutely will not keep your first foster (or any of your first litter, if it's kittens), or your second, and that will set you up for success.

Anyway. For funsies Cat Fact: Because Talkeetna, Alaska is an unincorporated town, they don't have an officially elected mayor; however, in 1997, a very friendly orange cat named Stubbs became the honorary mayor for twenty years until he passed in 2017. His successor, a fluffy lilac point named Aurora, currently holds court in the general store. If you're lucky, she will be sitting on the railing upstairs ready for your attention. (Yes, [I met her](#). Yes, she is magical and friendly and very soft. And yes, we might have taken a detour to this town on our vacation solely to meet her. Sure, most people might go there for Denali, but who needs a mountain or majestic views when you've got Madame Mayor? I am who I am.)

Chapter 17: Breakout

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, thanks for being here <3

Officially updating the final chapter count to 20. My buffer has all but disappeared due to life~* so if any of the last three chapters are delayed by a couple days, don't panic!

Minor content warning: this chapter contains one instance of a homophobic slur

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

Shane woke up the morning of game day the same way he woke up most mornings: with Puck being obnoxious. First it had been pawing at his face, then pouncing on his legs, and finally sitting square on his chest and meowing every two seconds until Shane finally gave up on the idea of staying in bed for the last ten minutes before his alarm was set to go off.

The only saving grace was that he'd actually gotten some sleep this time. After he'd hung up with Rose two nights before, Shane had spent another hour staring up at his ceiling, blinking into the darkness, waiting. He had told her and nothing happened—she hadn't freaked out, Shane didn't die, and the world did not end. The truth was out and everything was... fine. *Actually* fine. And that, somehow, might have been worse—would have been worse, another time, another life ago.

He had finally dozed off around sunrise with the knowledge, with the hope, that he could do what needed to be done. That he could try.

That he could be brave.

Shane spent the rest of yesterday trying to figure out how the fuck he was supposed to do that. He went to practice and drafted three separate texts in his head while they ran drills. On the treadmill, he thought of the voicemail he would actually leave this time and maybe Ilya was a liar, that he would listen to it and call Shane back. Then, at the second stoplight, he almost took a left toward the clinic instead of going straight.

In the end, none of it was right.

At least on game days Shane could disappear into his routine. Unfortunately, part of that now meant waking up even earlier to feed Puck, and stopping every five minutes in his yoga flow to bat him away from biting his ankles or attempting to attack the drawstring of his shorts in a downward dog.

“How many times—” He unhooked Puck’s claw from where it had gotten caught on the string, “—do we have to do this?”

Judging by how Puck almost immediately leapt for another go at it less than a minute later, the answer was at least once more.

Ilya would encourage it. He would be sitting on the bench on the other side of the room doing something stupid like bicep curls, pretending to exercise just to be annoying while he pointed and pushed Puck back toward Shane whenever he had his head turned away. The stifled laughter would give him away, though, and Puck would tilt his head from side to side at both of them as Shane called Ilya an asshole and Ilya would call back, “you love it.” Shane would sigh but not deny it.

“Fucking hell.”

Shane rolled up the yoga mat, picked up Puck, and only slammed the door shut behind him a little.

“And this was how I found them the next morning.”

There was a small crowd huddled around Hayden that bled into the space in front of Shane’s stall. J.J. smiled, leaning over Hayden’s shoulder, while Hart and Tremblay seemed to be spending more time giving each other looks and communicating purely through eyebrows than taking in whatever was on Hayden’s phone.

Not that Shane didn’t have a guess.

“So what did Muffin do now?” he asked, sidestepping around Hart to set his bag down in front of his gear.

“Apparently Ruby and Jade have been fighting over whose bed he sleeps in, so they pushed their beds together and now he sleeps between them,” Tremblay explained.

“He’s like, the chilliest cat,” Hayden said, swiping rapidly over his phone screen to find a particular picture. “Look, they made this obstacle course with all the practice cones and he just sat there in the middle while they ran around and jumped over him.”

The Muffin Brigade started over a week ago, after the Pike’s followed through on the birthday promise and adopted the two year old grey cat. Shane had thought the excitement would have died down by now, but apparently Hayden was treating the addition of the new furry family member like he had with the birth of each of his actual children.

By now, most of the guys had learned to ignore it when Hayden pulled out his phone after practice or before games. Some apparently hadn’t learned that lesson, though others—namely J.J.—actively encouraged it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shane saw Hart trying to sneak away. “Hayden, you’re boring the rookies,” he said, holding back a smirk.

“What? No way! Everyone loves Muffin.” Hayden craned his neck to look over his shoulder. “You love Muffin, right?”

Hart and Tremblay nodded almost frantically.

“We love that *you* love Muffin, mon ami,” J.J. said with a laugh, clapping a hand on Hayden’s shoulder. “And he is cute, but he’s also just a cat.”

Hayden gasped. “You shut your mouth. Muffin is not just a cat, he’s a goddamn *legend*. You try finding a cat that is going to be cool living with four young kids. Like finding a needle in a haystack!”

From the other side of the locker room, Rowe snorted. “This is why guinea pigs are better.”

“Oh, fuck off about Pierre, dude,” Hayden called back.

Then it was just as it should have been, with laughter and jabs, and a probably too-intense debate about who had the best pet. Shane stayed out of it, even if Puck was clearly the winner. For a few minutes, it was easy to forget there was anything waiting for him outside the arena, that his phone sat tucked away on the shelf, stationary and silent.

That Shane hadn't yet figured out how, exactly, he was going to fix anything at all.

He was halfway through getting his shin pads on when the debate ended and Hayden grumbled under his breath beside him.

"Fucking ducklings. Who is supposed to compete with that?"

Shane shook his head and smiled, the sound of tiny peeps coming from Drapeau's phone as he passed it around. "Pretty sure baby animals always win."

"But they aren't even babies anymore, they were born last spring! Whole thing was rigged."

"You'll have to fight for Muffin's honor another day," Shane said solemnly.

"Damn right." Hayden reached behind the bench and grabbed his skates.

Still, everything else was normal.

None of them knew.

He pulled up his socks and somewhere off to his left, J.J.'s voice rang loud and clear above the din: "Disqualified! You can't just google cute animals, Olin, the fuck?"

And, for the first time, despite everything—or maybe because of it—Shane wasn't sure how much longer he wanted that to be true.

He was stretching near center ice, trying to catch a glimpse of Nilsson, of what he had seen on the broadcast two nights prior, when Dallas Kent skated up to the line.

Shane stiffened, but kept stretching, switching legs. It was never a good thing when someone like Kent looked like that, eyes hard and lip curled into a sneer.

There were players who chirped because they wanted a penalty, because they wanted attention, because it was part of the game—Kent chirped because he wanted to make

someone smaller.

“Heard you signed Hunter’s stupid petition,” he said, loud enough that Shane would hear, low enough that no one else would. “What a fucking joke.”

Shane cast a quick glance toward the bench where Theriault was huddled over a clipboard with McCann before meeting Kent’s eyes. “Yeah, I did. And?”

“Didn’t realize you were so up on his jock, Hollander.”

He stood and brushed his gloves off. “You sound jealous, Kent,” Shane said. “Don’t worry, though. Maybe in ten years, you’ll be half the player Hunter is.”

Anger flashed in Kent’s features and then it was gone, replaced by a sardonic smile. He opened his mouth then shut it once he noticed something over Shane’s shoulder.

J.J. nudged his arm with the back of his hand. “We got a problem, Cap?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Shane turned to Kent. “Right?”

Kent glared and skated back toward his bench.

“I thought the fucker finally learned to shut his mouth when Price retired,” J.J. said once he was out of earshot. “What did he say to you?”

Shane shook his head. From the bench, Theriault was now watching. “Nothing important. Come on.”

It was only when warm-ups finished and the ice was cleared that he realized that the only things buzzing in his veins were adrenaline, focus, the need to play this game and show Dallas fucking Kent—show Theriault—that they were wrong.

No fear, no guilt, no shame.

He was still Shane Hollander.

Maybe that had never been the part he needed to be afraid of.

Maybe that was why he hadn’t needed to be afraid in the first place.

In the locker room, he led the team through the last pre-game ritual—gathering them around, reminding them that this was their year, that Toronto hadn’t earned anything

except the pleasure of going home with nothing, and finally by calling, “Dig fucking deep!”

“Push fucking harder!” the team responded.

And then it was go time.

The noise of the crowd blurred into white noise as Shane bent over, lined up his stick, and waited. Across from him at center ice, Kent scoffed but said nothing.

The puck dropped.

Sticks clattered but he won the face-off, pushing off hard and skating the puck up the center lane. He didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know that Kent was right there.

The rest of the first period felt like someone had set a fire under the Guardians’ asses—fast and brutal.

Every inch of ice had to be earned and every puck battle ended with somebody cursing under their breath, a shoulder digging a little harder than it needed to, or a slash that the refs pretended not to see because it was still early.

Shane welcomed it, letting it push him further, skate faster, hit harder, to the point where there wasn’t room to think about anything else but the next move.

Twice, Kent lined up across from him. Twice, Shane won, sweeping the puck away cleanly. The second time, Kent's stick clipped the back of Shane's skate as they broke apart.

"Oops."

Shane didn't look back.

Halfway through the period, he scored after a fucking beautiful pass from Hayden, the puck sliding right between the defenseman’s legs. The arena erupted and Hayden had collided into him for a celebratory hug when Kent skated past, knocking Shane’s shoulder with his own.

The second period started worse.

Kent found him every shift they shared, pushing and shoving—not enough to earn a penalty, but enough that it started to feel a bit personal.

First it was a stick pressed into Shane's ribs after the whistle, then a glove catching his visor, a hit that lingered a beat too long.

"The fuck is your problem?" Shane snapped, shoving him away.

Kent snorted. "You're my problem, Hollander."

It would have rolled right off his shoulder if Dallas Kent weren't such an insufferable prick even on the days that he didn't try to pick a fight. The fact that he was doing it without Ryan Price to back him up, however, had Shane's eyes tracking him even from the bench.

Late in the second, Shane caught him behind the net in a clean hit. The puck came loose, the crowd roared, and for one satisfying second, Kent was flat on his ass.

Hayden collected the puck and broke the other way.

"Let's fucking go!" J.J. yelled as he joined the rush.

Shane smiled, then kept going.

Whistles blew and when he was off the ice, he squirted water into his mouth, listening as Theriault barked instructions, called names, and pointed at his notes. Shane nodded at the right times, only half listening.

When the third period started, they were tied 2-2.

His lungs burned and there was a familiar strain in his hips and legs—he didn't even have the time to watch Nilsson the way he wanted to, the game narrowing to shifts and whistles and the next play.

His body knew this better than his mind did: breathe, recover, repeat. Hockey had always been uncomplicated—there was always another puck to chase, another faceoff to win, another period to survive. And mostly, Shane liked it that way. He would have liked it a lot more against another team, against another center.

The arena was still loud and Shane flew up and down the ice, pivoting and pirouetting, trying to get a fucking second without that fucking prick trying to egg him on. The last time—the only time—anyone had gotten under his skin felt like a lifetime ago, when he'd dropped his gloves and fought Marlow because everything had gone to shit and he didn't know how to contain it.

Shane hadn't known then that containment was the problem.

Ten seconds into his shift, a whistle shrieked behind him and when he looked over his shoulder, Comeau was helping Hayden stand up. Nearby, the Guardians' left wing's mouth was a hard line as the ref pointed and began escorting him to the penalty box.

Kent knocked into his shoulder, hard.

"Seriously, what the fuck?" Shane said, locking eyes with him.

Kent scoffed. "Out of the way, fucking faggot."

The world didn't stop. The ice didn't crack open beneath him to swallow him whole. The arena was still alive with chanting, and the referee was making the call over the loudspeaker—tripping, two minutes—only suddenly Shane's eyes shot to the crowd, searching for someone who wasn't there.

It occurred to Shane, with almost embarrassing clarity, that he'd unknowingly spent years waiting for a catastrophe that looked exactly like this.

And yet it felt...

Smaller.

Unimportant.

Something in Shane snapped—quiet and almost serene, completely unlike when everything inside him was raw, his nerves frayed and untethered, and the only thing he could do was lash out. This time, however, instead of spitting in anger as he dropped his gloves, the first thing that came out when he opened his mouth was a laugh.

A referee skated up along with J.J. and a Guardian defenseman. At first, Kent had the decency to look almost scared before his expression turned into something almost sour.

"What's going on?" J.J. asked, chest puffed and brows furrowed.

Shane wasn't looking at him though, not for but a glance before he jutted his chin in Kent's direction. "Say that again."

"Fuck off."

"No, no," he said with another breathy laugh, the corners of his lips tugging into a smile. "You clearly have something to say and I'm sure everyone here would fucking love to

hear it, Kent. Go on. Say it.”

The ref stopped in between them, holding his arms up. “All right, men, that’s enough. Let’s get back to the game,” he said.

Shane started to move toward center ice, but kept his eyes on Kent. “Thanks, man. Really.”

The moment the words left him, he stood a little taller, his spine a little straighter, as he took his spot inside the red circle. To the side, Shane knew that Theriault was signaling, tapping the boards and swapping out players, but he only needed to glance once.

Hockey had always been the one thing that made sense. As Shane waited for the puck to drop, ready for the power play, he knew exactly what else he needed to do.

“That’s how you fucking do it!”

The slap echoed but Shane was ready for it. Sometimes it felt like J.J. was more like an overgrown puppy than anything else, his voice carrying through the locker room as they poured through the door. His hand was still on Shane’s shoulder and he used it to pull Shane in and press a loud, smacking kiss to the top of his head.

“Fuck off, man,” Shane laughed, giving a shove.

“You love it,” J.J. teased. “Besides, you taste like victory—like the cup.”

The final buzzer had sounded and there had been no doubt in Shane’s mind that they’d be showing his face all over the highlight reels, the replays, the debriefs—not when it took him less than five seconds to score on the power play, not when he had two more assists before the game was over. The C stitched on his chest would be in every shot as the camera followed him around the ice, zooming in on his smile when his teammates came in for the celebration. But Shane wouldn’t be looking at them, his gaze cast up and out through the plexiglass.

They’d show it all.

And nothing at all.

The Voyageurs had won and the Guardians would go back to Toronto feeling the sting of defeat, and in the end it was nothing, not really, because watching Dallas Kent skate off the ice with a scowl on his face was only one moment of victory that Shane held tight to his chest before it filtered away.

There would always be men like Kent out there.

And there would always be men like Scott Hunter.

Like Shane.

In the end, dealing with Kent was easy.

They called him for post-game interviews, he stood and answered their questions like he always did, the same thing over and over and over again—be humble, say the right thing, stand in the spotlight and pass it back to the team, stay golden. The entire time the tips of his fingers tingled, his feet itched to move. It used to be because he wanted to run away from the attention, wanted to get out of there, get back to the locker rooms and his post-game routine, keep his head in the game, in the job.

Shane still wanted to run, but the destination changed.

The mood was still jovial when he made it back, laughter ringing from all sides as he started unstrapping pads and removing his gear. Half the guys had already left—either to the showers or the gym, to grab food or to go out—but Shane didn't linger to find out. He showered and got dressed and slipped out through the locker room door without a word.

Footsteps thundered down the hall after him. “Dude! Wait up!”

He turned just as Hayden caught up, hiking his bag over his shoulder and falling into step beside him. “Hell of a game, right?”

Shane smiled, but didn't slow down. “Yeah, man. You good? Nothing hurt?”

“What, from Harrington?” Hayden scoffed. “Nah, I'm good. Might have a couple bruises, at most. Not the first time I've gotten a face full of ice, probably not the last, and anyway, totally worth it for the power play.”

They turned the corner and Shane laughed. “Way to take one for the team.”

“The least I could do, take those fuckers down a peg and all.” He shrugged, feigning humbleness. “What the fuck was going on with Kent, anyway? I mean, he’s always a dick, but this was kind of next-level.”

“He had a problem with me signing Hunter’s petition.”

Hayden balked. “Seriously?”

“And then,” Shane said, pursing his lips for just a second, “he called me a faggot.”

Hayden’s eyes widened before they narrowed. He scoffed incredulously. “The fuck? You’re shitting me. How the fuck does he get away with that?”

“You think Kent’s the only homophobic asshole in the league?”

“Well, no, but—shit. He’s lucky he didn’t say that to someone else.” One glance at Shane’s face and Hayden sputtered and began talking almost as fast as Shane’s feet. “Not that he should say it to anyone, but you know what I mean. Like, to Hunter.”

Shane came to an abrupt halt, but Hayden took two more steps before he noticed and turned around. Rose’s words echoed in his ears saying *it’s okay*.

And it was.

It would be again.

Shane held his gaze. “I’m gay, Hayden.”

Hayden’s mouth fell open, for just a second, before he shut it, teeth clicking. “Oh.”

He blinked twice.

“That’s... awesome.”

Shane raised a brow. “Awesome?”

“I mean! It’s great,” he said quickly, lips broadening into a smile that was equally dumbfounded and somehow still genuine. “Obviously it’s great, because it’s you.”

“Hayden.”

“Fuck, I mean I’m happy for you!” Hayden briefly held up his hand like he was going to high-five Shane before he glanced at it and dropped it back to his side. “Not that I *wish*

you were gay or that I'm like, glad it's not me, you know? Just that it's cool. You're cool. I'm cool."

Shane hadn't realized he'd been bracing himself until the tension left his shoulders all at once. Hayden wasn't looking at him differently.

Hayden was still just... Hayden.

He bit back a smile. "We're cool?"

Hayden nodded frantically. "Yes. That. We are so totally cool."

"Great," Shane said, patting Hayden's shoulder. "Now I got to go."

"What? Where?"

"There's something I have to do—something I should have done sooner. Talk later, okay?"

He was already backing up and turning, veering toward the left in the parking lot, when Hayden called after him.

"Shane!"

"Yeah?"

"Am I hot?"

"You're not my type!"

Their laughter echoed off the concrete as Shane pulled open the door to his Jeep.

"Then what is?"

Shane paused.

"Russian veterinarians," he said, and slid behind the wheel.

Snow was falling again, peppering the windshield and reflecting in his headlights. Still, the streets were clear and the tiny flakes hadn't even begun to stick. Maybe in the morning plows would make their rounds, salt would be scattered over the pavement, and the morning commute would go on without delay, but as Shane drove over the St. Lawrence River, there was nothing left to slow him down.

Not that the weather had before.

It was the third time that night he had driven on that bridge.

The first had been shortly after leaving the arena and the second ended with an "Oh fuck!" followed by a U-turn and a frantic trip home. He'd filled Puck's bowl to the brim, then dumped half of it back out, cursing himself for being hopeful, before he filled it up once more anyway, just in case.

If he could be brave, a little hope couldn't hurt.

He had changed out of his suit, squeezed Puck to his chest, and dashed out the door.

Every worst case scenario cycled through his head on the drive and he rehearsed a response for each one that always boiled down to the same things: *Sorry. My bad. I'll leave. Just forget it all and I will too.*

The last would be a lie he'd carry alone—and without regret.

By the time he pulled up in front of the house, Shane had barely gotten the chance to rehearse what he actually wanted to say, his heartbeat kicking up a notch as he put the Jeep in park. It didn't stop him from getting out, from hurrying up the front walk, from knocking.

The barking came first. Maksim's higher pitched yelps were layered over Anya's and there was the distinct sound of nails scratching against the door as Shane waited.

And waited.

The doubt crept in as seconds passed. Rose had made it sound so simple. *Try again.*

As if trying wasn't terrifying. As if trying didn't mean standing on someone else's porch with your whole life balanced on the other side of the door.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot, hands shoved into his pockets to keep him from doing something stupid like knocking again, when a deep timbre rumbled through the wood.

The door cracked open, just enough for a body to fill the gap, and Shane swallowed. The sight of him stole every carefully rehearsed word from Shane's mouth.

All he could think was *there you are*.

Ilya's hair was a mess, sweatpants slung low on his hips, the neck of his tshirt stretched loose and misshapen. It looked like he hadn't shaved in more than a few days. He looked tired.

But Ilya was there—finally there—in front of him.

It was enough.

“Hi,” Shane said.

Ilya blinked once, hard enough that the corners of his eyes creased. Behind him, Maksim's nose pushed through the crevice between his leg and the doorframe.

“Um, I was hoping we could talk?”

And then Ilya huffed a disbelieving laugh, rattled off a string of Russian, and lifted a glass Shane hadn't been able to see to his lips. “You are not here.”

“Do you... do you want me to go? If this is a bad time—I mean, if you...” Shane trailed off as Ilya disappeared back into the dark house, leaving the door ajar. Maksim wasted no time in seizing the opportunity to slip through and jump onto Shane's legs.

“Shit, no.” Hastily, he brushed snowflakes off his head and shoulders before stepping forward, hands in front to push Maksim back into the house. At least Maksim's tongue was small, even if the slobber said otherwise.

The only light was the glow from the television, two men in suits sitting behind a desk as scores cycled through the ticker at the bottom of the screen. It was muted, again.

“I just wanted to ask, to say that I—” Shane took a deep breath as he stepped further into the foyer, right behind Ilya. His lungs burned as he inhaled, not from the cold.

“—Are you *drunk*?”

Ilya stumbled into the back of the couch and started speaking again in Russian, pointing at Shane with his empty glass.

“I can’t understand you,” Shane tried to say, in between.

With a barked laugh, Ilya stopped. “Oh good,” he slurred. “Even dream mock me now.”

“This is not a dream.”

Ilya scoffed and stumbled around the couch to grab something off the coffee table.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Maksim still nosed insistently at his hand while Anya watched them both with anxious eyes, whining under her breath. Shane had imagined anger, silence, maybe even being thrown out.

He hadn't imagined this.

“Fuck.” Shane toed off his shoes. “You’re drunk, so let’s just—” He fumbled a little with the lamp on the end table by the couch, reaching up under the shade blindly, but managed to find the knob and turn it two clicks.

The lamp barely pushed back the shadows, but it was enough to catch the clear stream of vodka spilling into Ilya's glass.

Shane groaned and jumped over the back of the couch, grabbing it just before it reached Ilya’s lips. “I think you’ve had enough.”

The glass slipped easily enough from his grip, but Ilya lunged for it anyway. “Not your decision.”

“I’m making it anyway.” Shane blocked him with his back, his elbow.

Ilya plopped onto the couch. “Still not doctor,” he grumbled, the words blending together and the end trailing off into less of a syllable and more of a groan. There was a second where Shane thought he was going to get up again, but he didn’t.

“Doesn’t take a genius to know it’s time to cut you off,” Shane said, setting the glass on the coffee table next to the vodka bottle with a clink. Then he hit the power button on the remote. “Only someone with a working sense of smell.”

The only reply was silence and when Shane glanced over his shoulder, Ilya was slumped, chin against his chest and eyes shut.

“Hey, no—Ilya.” Shane bent over in front of him, grabbing his shoulders. “You gotta stay awake, okay? Gotta get to bed first.”

Ilya hummed, his head lolling to one side.

“Ilya.” He tapped his cheek once and let his hand rest on the second. Ilya’s beard was scratchy under his palm. “Ilya. Come on. Get up.”

“No, s’bad dream. Mean.”

“Up,” Shane said again, firmer this time. His hands curled around Ilya’s biceps, tugging until he finally gave in.

When Ilya stood, he swayed immediately, and Shane caught him beneath the arms to keep him steady. “That’s it,” he soothed, beginning the slow shuffle around the couch and down the hall. “You’re okay, I got you.” The click-clack of dog nails echoed behind them.

“You are warm,” Ilya muttered into the side of Shane’s head.

“And you’re fucking heavy.” Shane eased him onto the bed, lifting his legs up after him. “I’ll get you some water, some—”

A hand closed around his wrist. When Shane looked up, Ilya’s eyes were half-lidded and glassy but something in them cleared for a second. Something close to recognition. Closer to fear. “Shane.”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

He watched Ilya swallow, saw the creases at the corners of his eyes deepen, the furrow between his brows tighten for just a moment before smoothing away again as his eyelids drifted shut.

Shane let out a slow breath and freed his wrist. He gave Ilya’s hand a squeeze, laying it on his chest. Then he pulled the opposite corner of the comforter over to cover him and ran a hand over it once to smooth the wrinkles.

Behind him, Anya and Maksim watched.

“Come on,” he said, patting the mattress. “It’s bedtime for you, too.”

The kitchen came next, then the bathroom, where he rifled through the medicine cabinet before returning with the water and ibuprofen. He set them on the nightstand beside the framed picture that had always been tipped forward—a postcard.

His finger drifted across the skyline, lingering over the words. *Greetings from Montreal.*

Without regret, he reminded himself. If this was truly his last chance, he'd say it all.

Chapter End Notes

This concludes the last bit of actual hockey I have to write, but I am still not an expert or even a Sports Person despite the stupid amount of research that went into this. If anything reads unrealistic or inherently wrong, please gently let me know.

Muffin is named after the Bluey character, despite being a boy cat and also being absolutely nothing like the character. Ruby and Jade naturally chose chaos when naming him.

Cat Facts:

Today's cat fact is unrelated to the chapter, but rather is inspired by a conversation I had over the weekend.

For cats, the gene that determines their coat color is on the X chromosome and falls into one of two categories: Orange and Not Orange (which is, actually, just black). This means that male cats are, at a very basic level, orange or black, while females also get the secret third option of being both orange AND black (which is how you get tortoiseshells and calicos, also why it's a safe bet to assume any calico or tortie that you meet is female. Male tortoiseshells and calicos do exist, but it is extremely rare as it requires them to have two X chromosomes, whether by having XXY or some other form of chromosomal mosaicism or abnormality.)

The color can be diluted (to grey or buff), mutated (like chocolate and cinnamon coats), and represented with various coat patterns (tabbies and points) as well as paired with white.

All white cats have a gene that basically masks the original color gene, but they are still either orange or black, too. Determining whether your white cat is orange or black can be relatively simple or impossible with very little in between. Often all white kittens will have colored hairs on their head that gives away their “true” coloring, though those hairs will more or less disappear as they grow to adulthood. (This is how I know that with my two male white cats, one is black and the other is orange, which is what prompted this conversation in the first place.)

Sometimes their eye color will also allow for an educated guess based on probability (as certain eye colors are more likely for orange cats than black cats and vice versa), but if it’s a white cat with blue eyes and no stray colored hairs, your best guess is to flip a coin.

Does any of this matter in terms of cat care or how you should think about cats or anything at all? Absolutely not. I just think it’s neat!

Chapter 18: Faceoff

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, welcome back <3

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

“Don’t give me that look, you already had your breakfast.”

Shane bent over the stove and brought a forkful of scrambled eggs straight from the pan to his lips. Maksim whined for approximately the hundredth time and reached a new, almost head-splitting frequency that made Shane wince.

He wasn’t exactly sure if Maksim stopped or he had finally gone deaf, but when the quiet returned, Shane pointed his fork and said, “Nice try, but still no.”

It started with a simple search of *best hangover foods*.

Shane had woken up on the couch with Anya’s face six inches from his own, puffs of hot air blowing over his chin while Maksim wiggled his butt behind her, and if it hadn’t felt so familiar, he might have yelped or rolled off the couch entirely. Instead, he merely yawned and grumbled, “So this is where Puck got it from.”

It had been easy enough to follow her into the kitchen, let her and Maksim out the back door, and wait for them to do their business. No sound came from down the hall in the quiet, bright morning, so Shane had simply kept going. He knew how to handle a morning routine: feed the dogs like he had seen Ilya do it, chug a glass of water as they crunched their kibble, and push Maksim away from shoving his nose into Anya’s bowl after he demolished his own food. It was easier than acknowledging why he was still there in the first place.

Then, the google search.

There hadn’t been a whole lot in Ilya’s fridge and even less that fit both the list and his ability to cook it. He had pulled out the carton of eggs with one hand while the other tapped on a link to a recipe. How hard could making an omelette have been?

The first problem he encountered was the lack of fillings. Shane had found a single questionable tomato in the crisper and what might have once been a cucumber but had long since turned into some sort of goo in a plastic bag next to it, one very expired

unopened package of bacon sitting in the meat drawer, and absolutely not a shred of cheese.

It would be fine. Not every omelette needed fillings, he'd figured, and maybe the basics were best.

He had been halfway through cooking when things went a little sideways. The eggs stuck to the pan, the spatula was apparently some flimsy nonsense that couldn't slide under an edge to save its life and Shane only barely resisted chucking it in the trash, and Ilya's stove might have been possessed with the way that the low heat setting was anything but.

Fuck it. The list hadn't specified how to cook the eggs, so scrambled would probably still be fine.

Ilya probably wouldn't taste much of them anyway.

Shane took another bite, then opened up the cabinets in search of a plate. In the first, there were more mugs than any single person would ever need. He pulled out one that said Dog Mom, opened a new tab and typed *best tea for hangov*—

“What are you doing in my kitchen?”

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

The cabinet door slammed shut and Shane fumbled with his phone for a second while his heart rate shot through the roof.

Ilya stood in the doorway looking even more disheveled than he had the night before, dressed in the same clothes he'd put him to bed in, one side of his hair flattened to his skull while the curls on the other made a valiant effort to defy gravity. Shane would have made a joke about it any other morning, before. Now, the bags under Ilya's eyes combined with the flat line of his lips stopped him from considering it entirely.

“How long have you been standing there?” he asked, one hand now gripping his phone while his arms attempted to decide between crossing over his chest, hanging limp at his sides, or resting on his hips before ultimately landing on some amalgamation of the three. Shane cleared his throat and averted his eyes, as if that would save it. “Are you—is that a baseball bat?”

Ilya glanced down at the wooden handle in his hand and shrugged. He leaned it against a corner created by the countertop meeting the wall. “Someone breaks into my house, I

might break legs. Is only fair.”

“I didn’t break in, you let me in.”

“Mm, no I did not.” His tone was flat. It only made Shane’s heart beat faster, for worse reasons.

“Yes, you did,” Shane said. “Last night.”

Ilya’s eyes had been narrowing, the lines of his face deepened, until he blinked and his expression slipped and turned to surprise.

“Last night,” Ilya repeated. “That was…”

Dumb, Shane’s mind supplied. A mistake. He’d arrived unannounced and Ilya had been in no state to hear anything he had to say at all, and he had stayed over like a moron because he had stupidly thought that he needed to be there, just in case—in case Ilya needed anything, or the dogs, but also still filled with the hope that he was wanted, even as that hope seemed more and more ridiculous each time he opened his mouth since Ilya woke up, with Ilya standing six feet away from him and not moving and—

“...real?”

“I made eggs!” Shane all but shouted at the same time.

They were probably cold now—

“You made eggs?” Ilya’s voice was softer then, but it was just wishful thinking that it was colored by wonder, maybe even fondness, because—

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, for a second. *Enough.*

“Yes. Um.” He squared his shoulders. “I was looking for a plate.”

Ilya pointed to the cabinet on the other side of the sink. “Over there.”

“Thanks.” Out of the corner of his eye, Shane could still see Ilya watching him, unmoving, even as Maksim followed him the three steps to fetch the plate and back. He scooped a heaping portion on it and held it out. The distance still felt like a canyon.

Ilya didn’t move to take it. “What are you doing?”

“I told you. I made eggs.” He took a tiny step forward. “They’ve got some amino acid in them that helps with hangovers.”

“Russians do not get hangover,” Ilya scoffed, but reached out and took the plate. When Shane held out a fork, he took that, too.

Shane waited all of two bites before he couldn’t take it anymore, and opened his mouth.

“Why have you been avoiding me?”

The fork dropped to the plate. “Hollander.”

The look on Ilya’s face made Shane falter, step back until the counter dug into his hip. “I’ve been trying to figure it out for weeks now and I can’t—I don’t get it. I know things got weird on Christmas, but then you came when I needed help with Puck. I thought—”

“Hollander.”

“No. No, just—let me finish. I thought things were good,” Shane said, swallowing tightly. “That *we* were good.”

Ilya set his plate down on the counter and braced his palms on the edge with his back facing Shane. His knuckles were white. “Can we not do this now?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Besides asking too many question?” Ilya snapped over his shoulder.

Shane stiffened, then stood straighter. “Maybe if you wouldn’t dodge every question, I wouldn’t have to keep asking.”

Ilya huffed and turned, crossing his arms over his chest. “When? When have I done this? You ask about job, I tell you. You ask about injury and hockey, I tell you that, too,” he said, his voice angry and tired and worn thin. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Shane’s own fingers itched to reach forward to stop him, but Ilya kept talking. “I tell you about family, about past, and is never enough! What more do you want from me?”

“You!” Shane all but shouted before he clamped his jaw shut automatically. He hadn’t meant to say it, but unlike so many other words he had tried to stop and failed, this one he wouldn’t walk back. His shoulders fell an inch. “I want you.”

Ilya let out a breath and shook his head. “You do not want me.”

Shane squeezed his phone before dropping it on the counter behind him. “Why do you think I came here?”

“You do not know what you want.” Ilya cast his gaze to the side. “You do not know me.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane said, laughing in disbelief as a thousand catalogued moments flooded his brain. “I know you can’t help yourself and crack a joke at every available opportunity, but especially when you think I won’t care about the real answer. I know you will do everything you can to help animals, but that you’ll also drop everything to help me and pretend like it’s no big deal. You poke and prod and push, and shrug your shoulders and act like you don’t care, but I *know* you do. I know because *I* do.”

Ilya went quiet. Then, like it was ripped from its hiding spot, small and vulnerable: “Is not everything.”

“Then tell me the rest.”

“You say this now, but you would run. You have not seen worst parts.”

“Maybe I haven’t. But maybe let me decide what I can handle.”

“Maybe is not about you.”

“Then if you don’t want it, if you don’t want—me—then tell me.”

This time when Ilya didn’t respond right away, Shane kept his eyes trained on his face. He had spent too much time not looking, or stuck in the dark with his phone pressed so hard against his ear that it ached, waiting and listening for anything that would give Ilya away, and he wasn’t going to miss it. Not this time. Not ever again.

Ilya’s eyebrows twitched as the line of his mouth softened before it turned down at the corners. He fidgeted with the drawstring of his sweats and his eyes moved from the plate of eggs to the stove to the empty mug still sitting on the counter next to Shane. To Maksim and Anya who sat on the floor and watched like they, too, were holding their breaths.

Finally, Ilya met his eyes. “What do you mean, ‘it?’”

Shane’s shoulders slumped more. He ran a hand over his head, through his hair—it probably looked every bit of the hedgehog Ilya had once compared it to. “For fuck’s sake, Ilya,” he breathed. “I’m not asking for something easy, I just—want to try. I want this to be real. I want us to be *together*, for real. I’m done running.”

“Hollander—”

“*Shane*,” he interjected. “Please call me Shane.” It came out a little desperately but Shane couldn’t bring himself to care. Each syllable of his last name felt like another brick in the wall between them. “Or tell me to go. But only because you don’t feel the same, not because of some bullshit like you think you don’t deserve it or that you’re too much or whatever you think I’m afraid of. I’m not scared, Ilya.”

Ilya’s jaw clenched. “You were here last night.”

“Yeah, I was.”

“You stayed?”

“I slept on the couch.” Shane scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. “Look, I’m sorry if I intruded, I just thought...”

“Thought what?”

When he looked back up, Ilya was a step closer.

“Maybe you might have needed help,” Shane said.

Ilya ran his palm up his forehead, grasped a handful of hair, and tilted his head back. “Why do this, huh? You should not be here.”

“Well, I am here, so.”

“I know. Is problem.”

The word echoed in his skull, stinging the insides of his ears, making his vision blur.

Shane nodded curtly. “Okay.” His throat hurt. “Okay. That’s—thank you. I’m gonna—go, I guess.”

“Wait,” Ilya said abruptly, taking hold of Shane’s wrist to stop him as he headed for the doorway. His grip was immediate. “Listen. Is problem because you were not supposed to come back. You were supposed to—be okay. Forget. Even if... even if I would not.”

Shane glanced down at his hand, the warmth of his palm creeping up his arm until it reached his face. “Do you want me to forget?”

The same look Shane had seen last night crossed Ilya's face, his Adam's apple bobbing before he spoke. "No."

"Do you want me to leave?" Shane whispered.

Ilya's eyes were shining. "No. I—fuck."

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs, stuck halfway between fear and hope as Ilya slowly let go, but his feet were rooted to the ground.

"I don't ever want you to leave," Ilya finally said. And then, taking one hesitant step forward, "Shane."

There would never be a time where Shane wouldn't move forward, where he wouldn't reach for Ilya and curl his hands around his neck, threading his fingers through the mess of his hair and kissing him.

It was inevitable.

"Wait—" Ilya jerked his head back, far enough that Shane could see his eyes widen, "—have not brushed teeth."

In every universe.

His grin split his face to the point where his cheeks felt the strain and leaned back in. Ilya tasted stale, sour, and salty all at once, and there was something metallic and equally unpleasant on his tongue, in his nose, but Shane didn't stop, pushing forward hard enough that Ilya's nose pressed into his cheek. He tasted fucking terrible and smelled even worse.

He tasted like... like home.

Ilya's arms had wrapped around him, hands spanning over his spine. "Shane—"

"I don't care," he said against Ilya's lips. "Just kiss me."

He did.

At some point, Ilya had backed him up against the counter, feet shuffling until there was nowhere else to go, and Ilya's hands slid down his back, over his hips, knees bending and knocking in Shane's as his fingers curled around Shane's thighs and lifted.

Shane scrambled for purchase, holding onto Ilya's neck and shoulders until he sat firmly upon the countertop. Ilya slid into the space between his legs, thumbs pressing into his thighs, and it would have been enough—would have been plenty—to keep going, if something wet hadn't dropped onto his face.

He broke the kiss and swiped a thumb across Ilya's cheek. "Ilya."

"Is nothing," he said quickly, turning his head to the side and closing his eyes.

"Hey," Shane said, wrapping his arms around Ilya's shoulders and pulling him into an embrace. He held his own wrist tightly at Ilya's back. "What's wrong?"

He felt more than saw Ilya shake his head against his neck, and then Shane was being held just as firmly, his shirt pulling at his sides from where Ilya fisted the material. "Nothing is wrong. Opposite of wrong." Ilya lifted his head. "You are sure?"

"I have never been so sure of anything."

Ilya's gaze flitted quickly between Shane's eyes. Before, when Ilya would study him, Shane had hoped he wouldn't see, hoped that nothing gave him away so that he could still hide, still pretend. Now, Shane waited and let him look.

Ilya nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes. Okay." With a blink, Ilya's expression changed, the dour seriousness melting away like shaved ice, his eyes turning brighter and the smallest of smiles beginning to grow. Shane would have done anything to bottle it, keep it with him always and pull it out when he needed the reminder—needed the hope, the...

Love.

He rested his forehead against Ilya's. Neither of them moved—
—until an insistent snout nudged the bottom of Shane's foot.

Ilya muttered something in Russian as he nudged Maksim away from his legs. "You should shower," he said. His hands stroked up Shane's thighs.

Shane laughed. "I'm pretty sure you need one more than me."

"Yes, but first I must eat terrible eggs."

“They are *not*—”

“Cold and rubbery. Somehow also burnt.”

“They were fine when I tried them,” Shane grumbled. “But you don’t have to eat them.”

“No, no. You make, I will eat. Now go.” Ilya punctuated the command with a quick kiss before stepping back. “Then I will wash shitty eggs down by sucking your dick.”

Shane groaned but didn’t bother to hide his smile. “Fucking hell.”

Ilya winked. “This is what you get. Change your mind?”

For the first time, Shane saw the deflection, the bravado, that while Ilya was perfectly composed, everything about how he held himself from the suggestive smirk to the tilt of his head was just a mirage of confidence.

Shane slid off the counter, took his hand, and squeezed.

“Not a chance.”

“Is that my shirt?”

Shane looked down quickly at his chest and felt his cheeks flush. “Yeah? I didn’t want to put mine back on. Also your boxers? Sorry, I should have asked—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish that sentence before the towel was dropped and a slightly damp and very naked Ilya launched at him, pinning him to the mattress, burying his face in Shane’s neck.

“So,” Shane said through a breathless laugh, tilting his head back. “Not mad?”

“Mm, very mad,” Ilya said into his skin, scraping his teeth along the tendon. “Because you should be naked and also always wearing my clothes. Cannot have both.”

Ilya bit down, gently enough that the tease of it alone made Shane let out some sort of pathetic sound, the wet ends of his curls tickling the underside of his jaw. Shane's hands slid across the warmth of his bare back.

When they had kissed in the kitchen, the relief had been so overwhelming that Shane hadn't noticed how much he wanted this, *needed* this—that he had gone so long without Ilya's skin under his hands, against his own. Putting on clothes after his shower had been absolutely ridiculous, the stupidest idea he ever had.

Shane's hips canted upward. "How about they come off now and I put them back on later?"

Ilya propped himself up to meet Shane's eyes and nodded. "Deal."

The shirt came off, practically ripped from his arms before it was chucked onto the floor, and Shane lifted his hips for Ilya to slide the boxers down next. Ilya dropped those, too, and bent down to lick a stripe up Shane's cock.

Shane sucked a breath through his teeth. "Oh my god."

Ilya took his time, working his mouth over him at a maddeningly slow pace. Once, Shane had to stop himself from pushing down, the fingers on one hand threaded through Ilya's hair while the others grasped at his pillow, and he took it as his cue to let go, twist his upper body, and grab blindly at the nightstand drawer.

Then he threw the lube at Ilya's head.

"Ack!" Shane's dick fell from his mouth and Ilya clapped his hand over the spot where the bottle collided with his skull. He glared. "You could just ask."

"Fuck me."

Ilya hummed. "Is not asking."

Shane rolled his eyes and attempted to lift his hips even with Ilya holding them firm. He settled for bending a leg. "Will you fuck me?"

"Not very nice, though."

"Ilya."

"Shane."

He could have resisted harder, made another demand and hoped that it would be enough to distract from how his body squirmed, how red his chest was as the blush spread downward, but this was Ilya, exactly as he always was, and Shane was done resisting, too. “Please, will you fuck me?”

Ilya pressed his lips together to hide his smile, but it didn’t work. Shane knew those lips, those eyes, and when Ilya moved, guiding Shane’s legs up as he repositioned himself, aligning their bodies so that Ilya’s lubed finger touched his hole exactly at the same time his lips touched Shane’s, he knew that he’d give him anything he wanted, every time.

Ilya opened him up with the same slow pace as before, his tongue matching the probing of his fingers, licking into Shane’s mouth as he curled them enough to make Shane’s spine arch.

“Ilya,” Shane panted, trailing his fingers down his face. “Please.”

He made another annoyingly embarrassing sound when Ilya withdrew his fingers, then there was a condom being ripped open in Ilya’s hand before Shane even registered the movement.

“Oh, so you *can* move fast.”

Ilya shot him another glare, no anger behind it but plenty of heat. “I like it better when you beg.”

“And I like it better when you fuck—”

The last word was drawn out, nothing but vowels and a tight click of the k at the end, because Ilya had taken that exact moment to leisurely push inside him.

“—me,” Shane gasped.

“I know,” Ilya said. It wasn’t smug like it should have been. It was soft, just like his face had become, and a little awestruck.

Shane expected the pace, but not the tenderness. Ilya never looked away, even when he dipped his head to press a kiss to his lips, the corner of his mouth, his chin. His hand smoothed down Shane’s side, around the curve of his hip and up the underside of his thigh until it settled in the pit of his knee and held firm.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded, shallow and quick. “Very.”

It was not enough yet still plenty, Ilya rocking his hips steadily, the ache within Shane’s belly, his chest, growing with each precise movement. Shane’s jaw dropped open and stole Ilya’s exhale, the air minty and warm.

He knew that Ilya was close when he sped up, thrusting harder, the line between his eyebrows static and deep. Shane spread one hand flat against Ilya’s back right below his neck, his finger resting between two notches of his spine, while the other cupped Ilya’s jaw and held him so he couldn’t look away.

So Shane could watch as Ilya came.

He was beautiful, with one curl dripping a bead of water down his forehead, cheeks flushed and full bottom lip almost pouted.

“Fuck,” Ilya groaned as his hips slowed, jerking once more before he stilled and slumped, hand falling off Shane’s leg and chest heaving as he rested his weight on top of him.

Shane would have been happy to stay there, carding his fingers through Ilya’s hair as his head laid on Shane’s chest, if his still-hard dick hadn’t been trapped in between them.

“Yes, yes,” Ilya murmured when Shane’s hips rocked upward. “Have not forgotten.”

Ilya shifted his weight, enough that he could reach down and take hold of Shane’s cock. He stopped once for more lube then continued, stroking firmly with his thumb swiping over the head every so often. His face was still nuzzled under Shane’s chin when he came.

That was what he’d remember, later—how Ilya stayed close, how he slotted so perfectly into the contours of Shane’s body. He’d remember their limbs tangled, Ilya’s toes pressed against his ankle, his knuckles lightly brushing against the downy hairs of Shane’s abdomen. He’d remember the stripe of sun warming the bed where his arm fell against it, after.

Ilya insisted on getting up, grabbing water to drink and a washcloth, wiping the come off Shane’s stomach and then chucking it somewhere that it landed with a splat.

“Ilya, no. That’s gross.”

“What? Is my room, door is shut,” he said, flopping face first onto the bed next to Shane.
“Will get it later.”

Shane turned his head. Ilya was already watching him. A smile slowly blossomed on his face, and Shane couldn’t help but match it.

“You are ridiculous.”

Ilya shrugged. “You like it, I think.”

“I do,” Shane said earnestly.

Over his head, Shane saw the cap of the ibuprofen bottle askew, the glass he’d set there empty. He opened his mouth to say something, make a joke about the hangover Ilya *clearly* didn’t have, when his eyes caught on the picture frame, the postcard. It still sat upright.

“Ilya?”

“Hm?”

“What was your mom’s name?”

Ilya froze for a half second, then said, “Irina.”

“What was she like?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Funny. Beautiful.” Ilya’s smile changed, shrinking and drooping until it was no longer a smile at all. “Sad.”

Shane rolled over onto his side, resting his foot against Ilya’s calf. “How old were you, when she...”

“Twelve.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ilya’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Is okay. I carry her here.” He laid a hand on his chest. “And here.” He tapped his fingers to his temple. “She no longer hurts.”

“Was she sick?”

“No,” Ilya said quickly. “Not sick. She was strong. She just could not stay.”

“How did she die?”

His eyes were shining again, wet and glossy. He curled his arms close to his chest and his voice went flat. “She swallowed whole bottle of pills. I found her.”

Shane’s gut twisted. He gathered Ilya in his arms and dropped a kiss onto his forehead.

He hadn’t known what he was doing when he found Puck, only that he couldn’t leave.

It turned out he didn’t need to know what to do or how to undo the hurt—some things couldn’t be undone. He just needed to be there. To choose to stay. Maybe that was enough.

Maybe it always had been.

Shane brushed his thumb across the back of Ilya's neck. "Will you tell me more about her?"

Ilya shifted, nudging Shane onto his back and settling his head on his chest. He snaked his arms around him.

“When I was...” Ilya frowned. “Eight, I think. She took me to big department store. I thought it would be funny to hide in clothes racks to scare her.”

“Wait,” Shane said. “I did that, too.”

Ilya’s head popped up. His eyes were brighter. “You did not.”

“Yeah, I did. One time, I timed it just right and she threw the shirts she was holding.”

“When did you become boring then? I thought it was genetic but now you tell me you once were fun.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Shut up and tell your story.”

“Okay. Is better story anyway.” Ilya laid back down off to the side, their faces close. “So I am in clothes rack, Mama is shopping and I jump out at exact right moment, but too hard. My arm gets caught in hangers and next thing I know, all the racks are falling over like dominoes. Like fifteen of them—*crash, crash, crash.*”

Shane laughed. “My mom would have killed me.”

“I thought so too. She looked so mad.” Ilya laughed too now, the sound softer than Shane had ever heard it. “But she grabbed my wrist and we ran, we ran so fast, hurdling over racks, everyone staring. When we got out, she laughed and said clothes were ugly anyway.”

“Sounds like something you would say.” Shane tapped Ilya’s bicep. “I wish I could have met her.”

The smile lingered on Ilya's face for another heartbeat before fading once more.

“Me too.”

The scratching of claws and a high-pitched whine at the door broke the silence. How long they had spent lying there, Shane didn’t know, but Ilya’s hair was drying and his back was tight from not moving for too long.

“They need to go out,” Ilya grumbled, stretching as he stood.

Shane froze.

"Oh shit."

Ilya blinked, confusion replacing the sleepiness on his face. "What?"

"Puck." He grabbed the shirt and the boxers off the floor while Ilya opened a drawer. “I left him enough food, but he’s been alone all night and—”

“You need to check,” Ilya finished for him, almost urgently.

“Yeah.” Shane pulled the hem of the shirt down, adjusted the waistband of the boxers, and reached for his sweats. Ilya stared at Shane’s chest, on the clothes, but his gaze snapped up when Shane said, “Come with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” He smiled. “Dogs first, then go check on gremlin.”

They finished getting dressed and Ilya let Anya and Maksim out into the backyard while Shane pulled on socks and shoes. When Ilya reappeared, he had two bone-shaped treats in his hand. He held them aloft as he slipped his own shoes on, the dogs following his every move, nails clicking on the hardwood as their tails thwapped against each other.

“Hand me coat?”

Shane did as asked and put on his own, then watched as both Anya and Maksim sat on command when Ilya lowered the treats to waist level.

“You be good,” Ilya said to them. “Anya is in charge.”

After a few more seconds, tails now sweeping across the floor behind him in quick motions, Ilya gave each their treat. Anya took hers to the dog bed, but Maksim began crunching immediately.

Ilya pushed Shane out the door. “Quick. Or he will see.”

On the front step, he raised an eyebrow. “He’s not blind, you know.”

“No, he is dumb,” Ilya said as he locked the deadbolt. “But he cannot watch you leave or else he will think you are never coming back.”

Shane’s chest tightened as his eyes lingered in Ilya’s face. “Won’t he notice anyway?”

“Probably. But Anya knows what to do.”

“She’s a dog.”

“She is very best girl! Smart.” Ilya glanced at him, his lips quirked to one side.

“Smarter than you.”

The snow crunched lightly under their feet, just a dusting on the concrete, as they climbed into Shane’s Jeep. “What’s that supposed to mean?” The engine roared to life as Shane turned the key.

Ilya shrugged. “You know nothing about animals.”

“I know things,” Shane protested. “I’ve had Puck for months.”

“We shall see.” Ilya looked entirely too confident.

“Now what is *that* supposed to mean?”

Shane finally got his answer when he opened the door to his apartment.

Or what should have been his apartment.

But this couldn’t be it because the last time he checked, he had three throw pillows on his couch, not two with the deflated carcass of the third lying in the middle of the room with the stuffing scattered in every direction like the saddest excuse for a Christmas village decoration he’d ever seen. And the kitten that came barreling around the corner, the kitten that Shane scooped up from the floor couldn’t have been Puck, because Puck was all black, not black with a white toupee.

Shane plucked the tuft of stuffing off his forehead.

“What. The fuck.”

Next to him, Ilya laughed.

Chapter End Notes

No disrespect to Shane Hollander’s cooking skills because I do believe they exist, but the odds were against him here (and Ilya’s stove).

Ilya telling Shane about his mother is obviously heavily inspired by and sometimes quoted directly from the book. I generally like to reimagine scenes that are rooted in canon, but this was one that I felt needed that direct connection.

Raise your hand if you, too, hid in clothes racks to scare your mother and then stayed there as she frantically called for you and then suddenly things went quiet until you heard your name over the store's PA system and you shamefully came out knowing that you were about to be grounded for life. *raises hand*

Also, people have made some cover art! I welcome and encourage you to make art, as well as any interpretations as to how you visualize Puck <3 Maybe I'll drop an actual inspo pic of the black floof I fostered back in 2023 at the end of chapter 20, as long as we can all be cool about it (me still living in a bygone era of the internet where you stayed SO anonymous that once your internet friends dipped from the aol private chatroom or stopped updating their lj, that was it, you never heard from them again, and then decades later you'll wonder, did they even exist in the first place?)

(She says like she literally didn't hop in her car in her 20s and drive two hours to meet a bunch of lj friends on a whim once or the fact that she flew halfway across the country a few years ago to attend the wedding of someone she met in a Sailor Moon aol chatroom BUT MY POINT STANDS just be cool)

Cat Facts:

When adopting a kitten, it is super important to kitten-proof your home. Think baby/toddler level of proofing and then go one step beyond because kittens can get to places no toddler could ever reach. You may need locks for all your cabinets and cupboards and your toilet and possibly your fridge and maybe even your actual doors if the handle is a lever instead of a knob.

If you have houseplants, take the time to ensure they are not toxic to cats as they absolutely will get chewed on. "All my plants are hanging from the ceiling, a cat can't reach them" hahahahahahaha yeah no, I have seen cats launch themselves at hanging plants like it's a tire swing. Even plants that are considered non-toxic can still fuck up a cat's digestive tract if they eat too much (looking at you, spider plants), so I mean, be mentally prepared to have to remove all plants, just in case your furry little monster has serious herbivorous tendencies.

Do your best to keep all cords contained or unreachable (electronic and otherwise, like on blinds) as kittens can and will chew them, and make sure that small soft objects (like hair ties, rubber bands, cotton balls and swabs, etc) are put away at all times. Don't learn the hard way with silicone bracelets, either, or else you might be scooping the litter box one day and find a turd proudly declaring LIVESTRONG like I did.

Rapid fire (but not definitive) list of things your kitten might also chew on or eat: plastic bags (or literally any scrap of plastic), yoga mats, swimsuits, fleece blankets (or, in my case, a Snuggie—also wow I am really dating myself all over

the place with this author's note), foam cat toy balls, soft cat toy balls (such as pompoms), the tails of mouse cat toys, the ribbon from a wand cat toy, feathers from a cat toy, any dangling bit from any cat toy because not all cat toys are 100% safe so keep certain ones put away when not actively supervising.

Only one kitten I've personally met has attempted to destroy a throw pillow, but where there is a kitten, there's a way.

Chapter 19: Give-and-Go

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, happy Tuesday <3

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

Hayden glared.

Ilya smirked.

On the exam table, Muffin bleated like a goat.

“A hundred vets in Montreal,” Hayden said, glancing over his shoulder at Shane, “and you picked this one?”

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered for the hundredth time that day how he got himself into this.

Because when Hayden had come up to him after practice the other day and asked for his vet’s name, Shane had immediately and very decisively said *absolutely not*. It didn’t matter that Hayden had been visibly freaked out about some sort of growth he’d found on Muffin’s stomach, Shane would have personally called every vet in Montreal to find another option before he recommended *Happy Tails*. It was only when Hayden whipped out his phone and grumbled about how there couldn’t be that many Russian vets in the city that Shane caved and texted him himself—there would be absolutely no way Hayden was going alone.

He supposed it was, after all, for Muffin.

And maybe him.

Maybe Shane might have sort of thought it could be a good thing, his best friend meeting his... meeting Ilya. Introducing these two parts of his life was absolutely terrifying, but also reminded him that *trying* included things like that, even if Shane hadn’t exactly told Hayden that Ilya was anything more than his vet yet. Maybe it wouldn’t be a disaster and there would be smiles and handshakes or something and Hayden would like Ilya and Ilya would be nice—or, at the very least, not rude—so when Shane finally said something after they left, Hayden would simply give him a high five, maybe waggle his eyebrows, and that would be that.

Or maybe Shane brought this disaster upon himself.

Apparently telling Ilya to please be on his best behavior was an effort in futility, which was why Shane was now stuck in the small exam room with two of the most important people in his life shooting daggers at each other and one completely unbothered cat whose meows sounded like they belonged on a farm, not the million dollar Pike residence.

Ilya shrugged, still looking entirely too smug. “At least ‘this one’ knows what nipples are.”

“Well how was I supposed to know that’s what that was?” Hayden’s face was red as he gripped the table edge, and for a second Shane was just thankful that it was bolted to the floor. “He’s a boy.”

“Do you not have nipples, Mr. Pike?” Ilya asked with a quirk of his brow.

Shane groaned. “Guys. Come on.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Ilya continued, undeterred. “Maybe is why you are so slow on ice, lack of nipples affects aerodynamics.”

“I have nipples, you son of a—”

“Enough!”

Three pairs of eyes all turned toward Shane at once. Hayden’s mouth still hung open and Ilya had the decency to look at least a little shamed, but Muffin just yawned like this was nothing—and knowing the volume level that the Pike kids usually generated, maybe it wasn’t. Not for Muffin, anyway.

Shane, on the other hand, was trying not to lose his damn mind. “No one is allowed to say nipples ever again, got it?”

“Is not my fault Mr. Pike never learned basic biology—”

“Oh, will you—”

“Nope,” Shane interjected, snatching the carrier off the floor. “No more talking, either of you. In fact, Muffin is clearly fine so why don’t we just...” The door of the carrier creaked as it opened and Hayden grumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

Shane didn't stop to try to figure it out—he already had a guess. “Ily—Dr. Rozanov, thank you.”

Hayden scoffed. “Don't *thank* him.”

“Yes thank me, I squeezed you in on very busy day as favor,” Ilya said before his voice dropped and became more contemplative, immediately setting off warning bells, “when I could be squeezing into—”

“Okay bye!” It took a bigger push than Shane expected to get Muffin back into the carrier, with his and Hayden's combined effort coaxing the cat forward. He caught Ilya's eye, the raised brow and the way he bit his lip in a piss poor attempt to stop smiling, and mouthed *later*. With one last tug on the door to check that it was secured, Shane practically shoved the carrier into Hayden's arms.

Muffin bleated again.

There was some other woman at the reception desk that Shane had never seen, but considered it a blessing—the only one, for that matter—as Svetlana always looked at him with prying eyes. Hayden smiled and paid but his face was still flushed with anger as the bell over the front door jingled.

Two steps onto the sidewalk later, Hayden started talking. “You *cannot* be serious, dude. Like, you were messing with me, right? When you said *that* was your type?”

“He's not that bad.” Shane clenched his jaw and hoped that his tone was convincing enough.

By the look on Hayden's face, it was not. “I was all ready to get in there, hype you up.” He shoved a hand deep into his pocket to pull out his keys, pressing a button as they approached his car parked snug against the curb. Hayden slid the carrier into the back seat. “Whatever you needed to get the guy, you know?”

Shane climbed into the passenger seat opposite Hayden, doors slamming. He should have told him. Warned him, if nothing else. “Hayden—”

“I mean sure, maybe I don't have gaydar or whatever.” Hayden started the car. “But I'm like, the designated wingman! I'm good at that shit! But *that* guy—”

“His name is Ilya.”

“—is just a giant *dick* and you can do better! We’ll find you a nice man, maybe some cool yoga instructor. I think there’s one at the gym Jackie goes to, I’ll ask her to get his —”

“No,” Shane said quickly. “No, that’s—that’s not necessary.”

Hayden put the car in drive and checked the mirrors. “Okay, well, then maybe a personal trainer or something.”

“No, you’re not...” Shane trailed off, leaning his head back until it hit the headrest. “Fuck. I’m already seeing Ilya—Dr. Rozanov.”

“*What?*” The gearshift was thrust forward and the car rocked slightly when Hayden’s foot came off the brake. “Since when?”

“Since—I don’t know. Since last week,” he said, but the words didn’t feel right in his mouth, like they weren’t enough. “Or since I punched Marlow.” Which was probably closer to the truth, but even then something knocked against his rib cage, his stomach twisting.

Shane took a deep breath. “Since I found Puck.”

Hayden sputtered, throwing his hands up, “What the fuck, dude? You’re already—why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t even want you to go there in the first place.”

“Well no shit, but a heads up would have been nice. Or, you know, literally anything?”

Lesson learned the hard way, Shane thought as he ran a palm over his face. “I don’t know, I thought maybe you’d hit it off and then I’d tell you after and it would be—not this. Or maybe you already figured it out. Or something.”

Hayden stilled and blinked three times in rapid succession, then gestured wildly once more. “None of that makes any sense. I thought it was just a crush!”

Shane winced, just a little. “I’m sorry, okay?”

The air shot from Hayden’s lungs as he dropped his hands to his lap. “Yeah, well, *I’m* sorry for you. What a fucking asshole. Please tell me it’s not serious.”

“Um.”

“Oh my god.”

“He’s really not that bad,” Shane offered again.

Hayden shot him a skeptical look.

It wasn’t like Shane didn’t remember that first meeting, Ilya walking into the room like a greek god and immediately accusing Shane of attempted vehicular manslaughter—or, well, kitten-slaughter. He laughed, albeit a bit awkwardly. “Okay, yes, he can be a bit...”

“Douche?”

“I was going to say cocky, but sure,” Shane conceded. “He’s a good guy, underneath.”

“*Way* underneath, maybe.”

“And maybe I did this all wrong, but could you give him a second chance? For me?”

Hayden let out the longest, most dramatic sigh Shane had ever heard from him. “Ugh. Fine. But only for you. Because you’re like a brother to me even if you have some seriously questionable taste.”

“In his defense,” Shane said slowly, not even trying to hide the amusement that slipped into his voice, “it was pretty fucking funny.”

Hayden punched him in the arm hard enough to sting. “Oh, fuck you! It was an innocent mistake!”

Shane stifled his laughter while Hayden put the car back in drive and pulled out onto the street at last.

He slipped his phone out of his pocket.

Shane: You couldn’t have tried to be nice?

Ilya: I was nice

Ilya: I said hello how are you

Ilya: All nice things

Shane: You called him an idiot.

Ilya: No, I said is okay, lots of children ask same question

Shane: Same thing

Ilya: Disagree. Some children are smart

“...And when I told Jackie—oh shit, should I not have told her? I mean, she obviously loves you too—”

Shane snapped his head up. “What?”

Hayden’s voice came back into clarity. “I just came home and she asked why I looked so weird and I wasn’t thinking so I said you were gay!”

“Oh. No, man, that’s fine,” he said, glancing between Hayden and his phone, thumbs tapping the screen. “She’s your wife and she’s, you know, one of my best friends. Of course you can tell her.”

Shane: Were you talking about smart ones?

“Okay, phew.” Hayden laughed in relief. “I didn’t tell anyone else, though. Promise. That’s all you. But like, *are* you gonna tell the guys?”

“Probably.” Shane shrugged, then when he glanced down again, he huffed a small laugh that was more of a single puff of air out through his nose than anything else.

Ilya: Still coming over later?

Shane: Are you going to answer the question?

Ilya: You first

“...because I’ll fight anyone who says shit, you know? But I think they’ll be cool, it’s not like we live in the dark ages and obviously nothing bad happened with Hunter...”

Shane: Yes of course I’m coming over later

Ilya: Good

Ilya: And no I was not

Shane: No shit

“...I’m just saying—Shane, are you listening? Oh my god, you’re texting him, aren’t you? Don’t fucking give me that look, you’re grounded, mister. No texting your jerk of a boyfriend in my car!”

If Shane’s stomach did another flip for an entirely different reason this time, Hayden definitely didn’t need to know.

“Fuck, oh fuck.”

Ilya was trying to kill him. That was the only explanation as to why Shane had barely taken a step inside his house, dropped his overnight bag on the floor, and released Puck to his furry whims before Ilya shoved him against the wall and dropped to his knees in one quick motion. He was trying to kill him, starting by sucking Shane’s soul out through his dick.

If he died, he wouldn’t be able to leave for the next week, at least.

They were heading to the west coast this time, and if it was his least favorite trip before due to the length of the flights to get there and back, Shane had even less reason to look forward to it now—not the least of which was Ilya’s cheeks hollowing as he pulled off so fucking slowly that had Shane questioning if he wasn’t already dead.

“Do you forgive me?” Ilya said, hand curled around Shane’s cock and stroking lazily as he looked up at him.

“I don’t—” Ilya twisted his wrist and squeezed a little on the upstroke and words were not Shane’s friend while he was actively dying. “What?”

“Forgive me.” He leaned forward and dragged his tongue flat over the head. “For making fun of Hayden Pike.”

Shane groaned and squeezed his eyes shut so hard he saw white while Ilya swallowed him down again. “Is this really the time—ah, fuck—to talk about that?”

“Mm, maybe not yet,” Ilya said, rearing back to look up at Shane through his stupid fucking gorgeous eyelashes as his hand kept moving. “You are always less grumpy after you come.”

Ilya didn’t give him a chance to respond before he fit his mouth back over him—not that Shane could have said anything more than *don’t fucking stop again*—but maybe he said it anyway because Ilya didn’t. Shane twisted his hands into his hair and watched.

Watched how he glanced up when Shane gasped, watched how he took hold of Shane’s hip and pushed it into the wall when Shane groaned, watched how Ilya kept his pace steady when Shane’s grip in his hair tightened.

Shane watched while Ilya read his body like a book.

It wasn't fair, that he had to leave again, that they only had one more night. He would miss him.

"Ilya, fuck, I'm gonna—"

Their eyes met and Ilya read that look too, and swallowed when Shane came down his throat.

When his knees were weak and his pants were still around his thighs, Shane curled his hands under Ilya's arms and hauled him up, pulled him in and kissed him.

He always missed him.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya muttered against his lips.

He could taste himself on Ilya's tongue, salty and a little bitter, and before he could even think about doing otherwise, Shane had pulled up his pants and turned them around until Ilya's back was against the wall.

His knees hit the floor.

Above him, he heard Ilya mumble "Oh shit" as he tucked his fingers into both the waistband of his sweats and underwear, and tugged. Ilya's erection sprang free with a slight bounce.

Shane cleared his throat. "Just uh, tell me if I do this wrong." Without waiting, he took Ilya in his hand, then his mouth.

It wasn't even weird, not really, not when Shane had already thought about this enough times when he was alone—in bed, in the shower, midway through a sun salutation while holding an upward facing dog pose, chest open and chin pointing to the sky and imagining Ilya above him, feeding his cock to him. Those fantasies couldn't compare, though, to the sound of Ilya sucking in a breath and the heat of his hand in the back of his head.

Ilya moaned his name and smoothed his hand over Shane's hair. He thumbed at Shane's lip as he bobbed his head and praised him some more.

If Shane enjoyed that more than he probably should, his body making a valiant effort to remind him just how much, it was nothing compared to when Ilya murmured, "so good, fuck, you were made for this," and some things in Russian he definitely could not understand but felt in his body all the same.

When Ilya began saying something else, something frantic, pressing his hand against his forehead, Shane pulled back to ask what and got a face full of Ilya's release instead.

And fuck if that didn't get him *very* interested in round two, even if his dick could only give another twitch in response.

Because his come was on Shane's chin, his lips, his cheeks, and Ilya was looking at him with a mix of shock and excitement and *hunger* and Shane really fucking liked it.

But what he said was, "What the fuck."

"Shit," Ilya said. "Sorry, I did not mean to..."

Shane wiped the back of his hand over his face, coming away sticky. His tongue did the same, over his bottom lip, finally tasting what he'd imagined for so long, since that first time in his apartment. *Definitely* not gross.

Ilya's eyes tracked the movement and widened a fraction more.

He rose to his feet, let his lips curl into a copy of that smug smirk Shane had memorized, and said, "Is compliment, right?"

It took three seconds for the recognition to dawn on

Ilya's face. He barked a laugh and swiped a thumb over Shane's lip.

"Mm, you were... not bad. For beginner."

Then it was Shane's turn to laugh, the evidence of his *not bad* starting to dry on his skin. "Fuck you."

Ilya hummed. "Give me minute and I will see what I can do."

Shane splashed water on his face for the fifth time at the bathroom sink. He scrubbed his fingers over a crusty spot in his eyebrow, water dripping down over his chin, down his neck, but Shane kept going, wiping away the rest of the mess until he was satisfied. Still, he knew that he would absolutely do that again.

Ilya came up behind him, his hands resting on Shane's hips, the warmth of them reflecting in his eyes in the mirror. He pressed a kiss to the back of Shane's neck. "Ready for round two?"

Shane bit back a smile. "It's been like five minutes, there's no way you're ready."

"No, but I have seen *you* be ready so fast." Ilya hooked his chin on Shane's shoulder. "So yes?"

His cheeks flushed. He picked another small bit of come off the crease of his nose. "No."

"You should have left it," Ilya mused, hands sliding around until his palms lay under Shane's belly button.

"Ilya, it was already drying. That's gross."

"Also sexy."

"For you, maybe." Shane only hoped that the way his face had been continually growing redder could have been mistaken for annoyance.

"Exactly."

"Yeah, well." In the mirror, Shane watched as Ilya's grin grew. "I'm not sure you deserved it."

Ilya's brows rose and his hands slid up under Shane's shirt, lifting the hem as they went. "What? Why? I think I deserve to see you painted all over in my come."

If it was an intentional distraction, it worked—momentarily. Shane leaned back into Ilya's embrace, his head tilting up on its own accord. Until he remembered.

"Why couldn't you have been nice to Hayden?"

Ilya let out an exasperated groan, but his hands kept moving until his thumb flicked over his nipple. "Shane."

“I mean it.” Shane took hold of Ilya’s wrists to stop him. Mostly. “He thinks you’re an asshole.”

“So?” His brows settled, his chin jutting up. “Who cares what Hayden thinks? You think I am asshole, too.”

“I care,” Shane said, meeting Ilya’s expression with a stern one of his own. “He’s my best friend.”

Ilya scoffed. “You do not need his approval.”

“Maybe not. But I want it.” His heart rate spiked. Shane hadn’t realized how much until the words left his mouth. “I want my friends to like you.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you!” Shane’s grip tightened around his wrists, holding on like a lifeline even if Ilya hadn’t tried to pull away. “Because I want to be able to tell my friends and my parents about you and introduce you without worrying that you’re going to act like a dick every time.”

Ilya went quiet, staring at him long enough that Shane now knew was because he was waiting for Shane to take something back. Shane held his gaze.

His voice was almost too neutral when he said, “You want to tell your parents?”

Shane swallowed, nodding his head once. “Yeah. I mean, eventually. Not like—now, or anything, if you don’t want. But at some point.”

“Will they be okay with...?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“You don’t have to,” Ilya said, dropping his head to press a kiss to the crook of Shane’s neck. “We can keep it secret. Is okay.”

It was an out, Shane knew that much, and part of him wanted to take it. He had spent so long keeping this side of him locked up, hidden from even himself, that the thought of doing the same with Ilya was almost comforting. Normal.

But wrong.

“I don’t—not forever, okay?” he said, turning around in Ilya’s arms to face him. “I want to tell them. *And* the team. But I want...”

Ilya searched his face again. “What?”

“I kind of just want to enjoy this.” Shane pressed his hand to Ilya’s chest, above his heart. “You.”

“Mm, like this?” Ilya took advantage of the new position and slid his hands down to grab two handfuls of Shane’s ass. Shane felt Ilya’s half-hard cock nudge him.

“Stop that,” he chided, but still curled one hand around Ilya’s neck. “But yeah. Not to mention that today was kind of a disaster.”

“Was not.” Ilya ignored his directive and squeezed, going back in to kiss the space just below Shane’s ear. “Besides, Hayden will get over it.”

“Ilya.”

“Fine,” he murmured. Shane heard the eyeroll that he couldn’t see. “I will... be nicer next time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Promise.” His teeth scraped over Shane’s earlobe. “For you, though. Not him.”

“Deal.” It wasn’t perfect, but it was enough, even if both men were only on board with the same caveat. Shane would take what he could get. Maybe he could still have his moment of Hayden giving him that secret thumbs up, or waggled eyebrows and an innuendo that Shane would absolutely not indulge but also wouldn’t hate, instead of what actually happened in Hayden’s car.

“So. Hey. Speaking of. He, um, also said something earlier...”

Ilya jerked his head back up, eyes slightly narrowed. “What? What did he say?”

“Nothing—well, not nothing, he sort of ranted most of the drive back—but he said, he called you...” Shane looked down at the indent at the base of Ilya’s throat. His Adam’s apple bobbed. “...my boyfriend.”

“That’s it?”

Shane forced his shoulders to shrug. “Are you?”

“Of course. What kind of stupid question is this?”

“It’s not—” When he glanced back up to Ilya’s face, his eyes were bright and mischievous. “Really?”

“Hollander, you made big, sappy speech about wanting to be together.”

Shane frowned. “It wasn’t *that* sappy.”

“Was very sappy,” Ilya said with a sage nod. “Pretty sure you cried.”

“I definitely did not.”

“Is okay, you can cry and I will be there to dry your tears. But,” The amusement in his eyes wavered, “did you not mean that you wanted me to be your boyfriend?”

“No,” Shane said quickly. “Of course that’s what I meant, I’m just... making sure. That that’s what you are. My boyfriend.”

“I am.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. So round two now? Or do you still want to talk about Hayden Pike? Though it will not make me nicer if he keeps cockblocking me.”

Shane laughed and shoved Ilya’s shoulders. “Shut up and get in the bedroom.”

In the morning, Shane opened his eyes to see Ilya already awake and looking at him. Puck was snuggled under his chin, rubbing his cheek against Ilya’s stubble.

“I like you, too.”

Shane smiled sleepily. “Yeah?”

“No,” he said, scratching down Puck’s chin to his chest. “Was talking to Puck.”

“Jerk.” He knew it came out fond, probably too much so, but he didn’t correct it. Instead, Shane snuggled further into his pillow. He reached out from under the covers to stroke a finger over Puck’s cheek, the vibrations of his purrs growing stronger, before he let his hand fall to cover Ilya’s own.

Ilya entwined them.

There was a familiar weight on his shins, and Shane didn’t need to look to know that Maksim was draped across them, with Anya filling the rest of the space between.

“She would have liked you, too,” Ilya said, his thumb sweeping along the back of his hand. “My mother. Even though you have weak backhand.”

Shane laughed lightly. “Maybe you could show me how it’s done, then. If you ever wanted to get back out there.” He held Ilya’s fingers a little tighter, his eyes drifting to Puck. “At my cottage, I have a synthetic rink. You could come with me, this summer. If you want.”

(He’d wanted to ask since the thought popped into his head almost a week ago, when Ilya had turned on the television and ESPN was airing the rerun of his interview at the cottage.

“You can’t call a 5,000 square foot mansion a cottage, is false advertising,” Ilya had said, holding the remote control out of Shane’s reach when he tried to snatch it.

“It’s just a dumb fluff piece, Ilya. Turn it off.”

“No, no, we will miss my favorite part!”

He only did after it showed Shane in a downward dog on the dock.)

The smallest of smiles began to spread on Ilya’s face. “Of course your giant cottage also has rink. Probably next to private waterpark.”

“It’s on a lake, I don’t need a waterpark.”

Ilya gasped dramatically. “But lake is shared! How kind—millionaire hockey star swimming in same water as regular people.”

“Fuck off,” he said through a laugh. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. Then he let his eyes slowly slide down over Shane’s body, despite still being bundled in the duvet. “And also yes.”

Shane shifted to reach over Ilya's body to check the time. "You got five minutes."

Animals were shoed off the bed, each of them giving some variation of a protest, and they wrapped a hand around another and jerked each other off—which might have been the least efficient use of their time when Ilya's wrist knocked Shane's hand off his dick once, Shane's brain shut down at another point and stopped moving entirely, and the combined mess resulted in having to strip the bed while two dogs whined and a kitten screamed at them from the doorway.

Ilya fed the animals while Shane showered, Shane made tea while Ilya took his turn after being explicitly told, in no uncertain terms, that Shane was not allowed to cook.

He did not, however, say anything about blending.

The noise sent Puck skittering away and Shane was filling two glasses when Ilya came around the corner, wearing only sweatpants and a towel draped around his neck.

"What the fuck is that?"

"A smoothie." The last bit fell into the glass with a plop.

"Why is it green?"

"Because of the kale."

Ilya shook his head rapidly. "*Nyet*. No. *Non*," he said in all three languages. "When you brought over million vegetables, I assumed boring salad that I would maybe eat, but that? Is abomination."

Shane rolled his eyes and held out both the smoothie and a mug of tea. "Don't be such a baby. You can't even taste it."

That turned out to be a lie.

With the first bitter, grassy sip, Shane's eye twitched—meanwhile Ilya sputtered and coughed the second he finished swallowing.

"Seriously?"

"You are poisoning me."

"It's *kale*."

Ilya pointed at the smoothie accusingly. “Nothing humans are supposed to eat should taste like that.”

“You don’t have to drink it.”

At that, Ilya looked offended. “Did we not establish that is not true? You make, I eat—or drink. Even if poison. And then we add no smoothies to no cooking rules, is okay.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You like it.”

Shane couldn’t, and didn’t, argue. He held up his glass. “Race you to finish this abomination?”

“What are we, children? You expect me, full grown adult, to—” Ilya started chugging.

“You fucking—” The green sludge collected at the corners of his mouth, but Shane locked eyes with Ilya and kept drinking anyway. The grassiness of it all somehow only got worse with each gulp, and it was only as the bottom of the cup was tilted so far up that Shane wondered what was the fucking point of adding apples and kiwis in the first place.

“I win,” Ilya said, setting the glass on the counter and taking a long, slurping sip from the steaming mug in his other hand.

Shane finished his last swallow and wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. “You cheated.”

Ilya hummed in doubt. “You would have to check the tapes.”

The alarm on Shane’s phone blared from his pocket.

“Already?”

Shane silenced it and stepped forward. “Fifteen minute warning. I got to finish getting ready.”

Ilya nodded, tilting his head down for the quick peck.

Shane brushed his teeth as quickly as he could and collected the trail of clothing off the floor, shoving them into his bag. Even with nothing on it, just a bare mattress, the bed looked far more inviting than whatever the hotels in California could offer.

By the time he made it back out into the living room, Ilya was sitting on the couch, carefully drinking his tea with Anya at his feet, Maksim by his side, and Puck curled up on his lap.

He took a photo and put his phone away.

“Okay,” he said, coming around the side to stand in front of Ilya. “I have to go. No—don’t get up. You look comfortable.”

With one arm braced on the arm of the couch and the other on the back, Shane bent forward—

—and kissed Puck on his fluffy forehead.

“Rude.”

“Payback.” Shane smiled before he kissed Ilya, letting himself linger as long as his arms could hold when Ilya took Shane’s face in his hands.

“You are back next Saturday?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I’ll call you when I land.”

“Okay.”

Ilya kissed him again and muttered one last thing in Russian against his lips—something that sounded like loo blue, whatever that meant—but one day Shane was going to learn the language.

He was going to learn how to cook.

He was going to learn how to tell his parents and his team.

He was going to learn how to navigate hockey schedules and intertwine them with long clinic hours.

He was going to learn everything about Ilya.

He was going to learn how to build a life. Together.

Chapter End Notes

And that, my friends, is the end of the main story. Epilogue coming next week <3

Hayden thinking Muffin's nipple was something nefarious was absolutely inspired by the CATHELP subreddit and its infamous 'days since nipple' counter.

Muffin's bleats are based on one of my own cats whose nickname is obviously Goat Boy

Cat Facts:

Cats make approximately one billionty (technical term) different sounds and vocalizations so let's talk about some! Most cats do not meow at each other to communicate (aside from kittens who absolutely do meow and cry to alert their mother to their needs) so meows in all their various forms are generally reserved to talk to humans. This is why truly feral cats rarely, if ever, meow. (If you come across a cat outdoors that does meow at you, it's most likely socialized to humans and may be a lost pet!)

Cats primarily communicate amongst each other through body language, but will absolutely use vocalizations like growls, spits, and hisses when angry or scared, yowls and caterwauls when trying to mate, and chirp or trill to their friends when trying to play or receive affection.

They will also make the ekekekekek chittering sound when trying to attract birds or rodents for prey (presumably, at least, as there is some debate on this one since cats are also like I DO WHAT I WANT and will chitter at other things or nothing at all, too), purr when happy (but also when sick or in pain as a way to self-soothe), and yell into the void as a way to summon demons or banish ghosts.

(Okay, maybe no on the last one, but you tell me why one of my cats just howls randomly at the wall sometimes then)

Chapter 20: Epilogue: Line Change

Chapter Notes

Hello and thank you all for joining me, one last time <3

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

“So we will get a few shots with you in front, film some segments for the promo, and go from there.”

“Whatever you need,” Shane said, following Andrea down the familiar corridors toward the adoption floor. “No rush.”

Andrea smiled kindly and held the door. “We really cannot thank you enough, Shane. We actually just took in our first newborn kittens of the year and the timing couldn’t be better.”

“I hope it helps. You guys do great work.” Shane’s own smile grew when he spotted Ilya standing amongst a group of employees waiting for them, and then faltered at the mischievous tilt of Ilya’s lips.

Construction had been quicker than Shane expected, and a month after the donation had been transferred to the SPCA, Andrea called him to let him know the good news. Scheduling the visit, however, had been somewhat tricky—but not because of him. Every time Shane had repeated a suggested day and time, Ilya shook his head or scoffed or looked so offended that Shane would even dream of doing this without his presence that it took the better part of fifteen minutes to finalize anything.

“Since when are you invited?” he had asked when he hung up the phone.

“Since everyone would still not shut up about this very boring hockey player with beautiful freckles last time I was there,” Ilya said.

“They’re not—beautiful.”

“Hm, so he is stupid, too.” He grinned when Shane held up his middle finger. “Besides, I have surprise for you.”

Shane had attempted to get him to spill the beans through what he thought was a very reasonable plan of lulling Ilya into a false sense of security by groping him on the couch

and then demanding an answer just before he came, but Shane had barely gotten started, his hand only just wrapped around Ilya's cock, when a crash in the kitchen and the sound of skittering claws ruined everything.

After cleaning up a thousand shards of glass, Ilya had pressed him up against the refrigerator and Shane promptly forgot that there was anything he needed to ask in the first place.

He was beginning to think that might have been a mistake.

There were handshakes and names as Andrea introduced staff members—including Rachel who shook his hand eagerly, stars in her eyes once more. Shane kept his smile friendly and his eyebrows neutral, even as his heart rate quickened as he moved down the line.

“And of course you know Dr. Rozanov,” Andrea said at the end, placing her hand lightly on Ilya's arm. “After he told us you were his client, he became instrumental in finalizing the finishing touch.”

One of Shane's brows escaped containment. “Did he now?”

“Was nothing.” Ilya shrugged. “Just made a suggestion.”

Andrea gestured to the door behind Ilya. “Come. Let me show you.”

Everyone filed into the smaller room that Shane had been shown on his last visit. The walls were now lined with tall stalls, each with a plexiglass door and twice the width of the standard kennels. The windows along the left side that looked out to the main lobby were still visible through them. Within the condos themselves, tiered shelves were anchored to the sides—some with additional ramps and others with a cubby or a hole to climb through. On the bottom, food and water dishes sat in front with two more cubbies, one small and one large, a litter box tucked away in the corner. A large cardboard scratcher hung from the bottom third of the back wall and a hammock was attached to the wall above it.

And painted high on the far wall of the room, in big bold letters with black paw prints on either side, were two words: *Puck's Place*.

“Oh.”

“Dr. Rozanov told us how you rescued your kitten,” Andrea said at his side. “He thought it was only fitting that this space bore his name. The first of many cats and kittens that

will benefit from your generosity.”

It was just a name, one that he had chosen on the fly, written hastily on a piece of paper, when all he knew was that the little black kitten needed help so he took him to the first place that could offer it. But seeing it above the cat condos, proudly displayed, Shane felt his throat tighten.

He looked over at Ilya and in a small voice asked, “You did this?”

Ilya shrugged again, but the muscles of his jaw flexed and his smile was tight. “Is okay, yes?”

Shane wanted to reach out and take his hand or to throw his arms around him, hold on tight and not let go. He wanted to let out the three words that had been rattling around in his chest like stones, finally release them to where they belonged.

But he didn’t.

He turned back to *Puck’s Place* and smiled. “Very okay. It’s perfect.”

When he took a few steps closer to the row underneath the words, a furry little orange head popped up out of the hammock in the center condo and Shane startled. Then another brown and white one peeked out from the larger cubby on the floor before emerging with a big stretch. “They’re already occupied?”

“Just this one,” Megan, one of the employees, chimed in. A camera hung around her neck. “We’ll be moving in others over the next week or so, but for the video we wanted to show just one way we’ll be utilizing the space.”

One by one, kittens appeared out of cubbies, stretching and yawning and jumping down from higher shelves to lower ones, until there were six in various shades and combinations of orange, white, and brown, all crowding and pawing at the plexiglass and beginning to scream.

He gave Megan a helpless look. “What is happening?”

“They were bottle babies,” she explained, “so they’re kind of obsessed with people. Makes it easier on us, at least.”

And it was. The kittens were more than willing to be active participants, purring nonstop from the second anyone even remotely made eye contact. The hardest part was trying to get the kittens to actually look at the camera when pairs were brought out for

him to hold first, as they were far more interested in chewing on his shirt collar or attempting to shove their entire faces into his mouth. Shane lost count of how many shutter clicks sounded as Megan took photos and how many tiny hairs he plucked off his tongue before they had him sit down in front of the condo and unleashed the horde all at once.

How exactly he was supposed to answer questions or remember what to say with six kittens climbing up his back or burrowing their way into the space between his crossed legs was anyone's guess. It took three tries alone just to get the microphone threaded under his shirt and the pack secured at his waist. Somehow there had been only minimal bloodshed, as every movement was apparently an invitation to attack, but when Shane had looked for help with getting tiny kitten claws out of the foam windscreen, he caught Ilya trying not to laugh and shot him a glare.

"Tell us about Puck," Rachel prompted once he was mic'd up and the kittens momentarily wrangled, reading off her clipboard. Megan was still taking pictures while another employee had already set up a tripod with a GoPro during the chaos, and four others knelt in a semicircle around him, presumably to capture any escape artists who grew tired of using Shane as their personal cat tree.

"Puck is my cat," Shane said, plucking a kitten off his shoulder and holding back a wince when its claw scratched through his shirt. "I found him back in November when he ran in front of my car one morning. At the time I didn't know he had a broken leg, I just knew that I couldn't leave him there." Another kitten jumped onto the other shoulder and stood on its hind legs to chew on his hair. "I didn't—ow, *ow*, can we not?—I didn't know anything about cats, really."

Rachel and a few others laughed. "So you weren't already a cat lover?"

"Not at all. But Puck changed that." He locked eyes with Ilya. "Now I couldn't imagine my life without him."

Ilya's eyes widened for a split second, then softened.

"Is that why you chose this project?"

Shane quickly looked back at Rachel, then at the kitten attacking his shoelace, before he answered. "Yeah. I mean, Puck changed my entire world, for the better. Someone once told me that animals are good for the soul. That you helped them—loved them—just because they deserved it."

He let his eyes find Ilya one more time before he continued. “I didn’t understand it then—what it meant. Now, I think... sometimes it’s simple. Sometimes you just have to be there. Give them somewhere safe to land. And just... show them love, even when they can’t give anything back.”

Ilya shifted his weight from foot to foot, just enough to draw Shane’s attention.

“But not every cat is lucky enough to be found by someone who can do that, and that’s where places like the SPCA come in. Even if it’s temporary—” This time, Shane definitely winced as a kitten chomped on his fingers “—they deserve somewhere good to wait. Somewhere they can feel safe. Somewhere they can know love. And I knew I could help.”

There was a pause when he finished and, for a split second, he wondered if he’d said something wrong. Ilya’s arms were crossed, one hand scrubbing over his lips, but his eyes were shining and he didn’t look away.

Shane cleared his throat. “Was that okay?”

A few hands wiped at their faces. “Absolutely,” Andrea finally said, glancing to Rachel’s clipboard. “I think we just have the adoption fees left, non?” At Rachel’s nod, she continued, “And then we can go get some more photos with some of the other adoptables and we’ll be set.”

“Right,” Shane said, scooping up two of the kittens in a probably—okay, definitely—futile attempt to stop some of the mayhem. “Should I just... start?”

“Yes, we’re going to edit the footage anyway, so go ahead, like we talked about,” she said. “Whenever you’re ready.”

He took a breath and smiled the way he had a thousand times before, holding the kittens up against his chest. “The SPCA needs your help, too. The shelter is overcrowded and new animals are coming in every day. That’s why I’m sponsoring adoption fees for the next two weeks for every animal here, and permanently sponsoring those for the ones that have been waiting the longest. Come meet your new best friend and together we can all play a role in helping Montreal’s homeless pet population.”

As if on cue, a furry paw smacked him on the nose.

“Perfect,” Andrea said, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter as she moved to press a button on the GoPro. “Let’s show you some cute dogs next. Should be slightly less chaotic.” The wink she gave him didn’t fill him with a sense of hope.

Shane let himself be led around the shelter while more photos were taken and video filmed. Dogs of all sizes and colors jumped on his legs and licked his palms—and his face, neck, and ear, as one particularly overeager dog was not content until Shane was crouched on the floor and cradling his entire giant body against his own. They handed him bunnies that were softer than anything he had felt before, even Puck, and he held still while parrots and budgies took turns being placed on his shoulder. Shane considered it a win that he only got nibbled on once.

Through it all, anytime Shane looked up, Ilya was there, quieter than Shane had ever seen him, smiling at him like he was proud. Like he understood.

By the end, they had made their way back into the room with the cat condos and employees came in one by one with a cat they wanted to feature. There was Soup, a grey and white behemoth of a cat who was less interested in being held than he was in investigating the once again contained and complaining kittens, and Misty, a calico who gave Shane the stink eye and turned away when he held out his hand to her to sniff. “Fair enough,” he said with a laugh. “I probably still smell like dog.”

Next came Buttons and Whiskers, two brown tabbies who would be moving into one of the condos next. “They’re bonded,” the employee said, “so it’ll be good for them to be together in the same space again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bonded pairs are like best friends,” she explained. “Or even like a married couple, but you know, cats. They are happiest when they’re together, but the regular kennels themselves are too small to safely hold more than one.”

Shane swallowed around the lump in his throat and posed with both standing on his lap. He didn’t even care that their paws dug into his thighs and somehow felt like a hundred pounds, but did let out a small sigh of relief when they stepped off him.

“Almost done, I promise,” Andrea said. She tapped Megan on the shoulder and nodded to the door. “Will you come for a second?”

Shane was left alone in the room, the kittens still safely secured in the condo. Four had disappeared, likely back into one of the cubbies, while the other two were engaged in some sort of wrestlemania death match in the center of the floor. One body slammed the other with a thud, mouths open, little paws kicking rapidly as they twisted and rolled in a fuzzy flurry of movement.

The door opened, and Ilya walked in holding another cat.

“They’re brutal,” Shane said as the body-slammer bit down on the other’s ear until it yelped, the tiny scream barely muffled by the plexiglass.

“They are kittens. Is what they do.”

“No shit.” Shane huffed a laugh. “Pretty sure I’ve seen Puck try that exact move on Maksim.”

“Mm, yes. Maksim is good, but he cannot play like that.”

Ilya came up beside him, scratching the cat’s chin. It was another brown tabby, smaller than the bonded pair—smaller than Puck, now that Shane could see it up close—and its whiskers were shaking slightly, its body trembling.

“He’s nervous,” Shane said.

“Little bit.”

Shane held out one finger through the space between them, letting the kitten sniff it before Ilya shifted him closer. The tiny nose bumped against his knuckle. “It’s okay, bud.”

The kitten's eyes flicked up at him before it tucked its face against Ilya's chest again.

“Or maybe not,” Shane said. He’d drifted closer to Ilya without realizing it, their sleeves brushing, close enough to feel the warmth of him through the fabric. Over his shoulder, he checked the door for movement through the glass, then the windows. There was no one to be seen.

He pressed a quick kiss to the underside of Ilya’s jaw. “Thank you.”

“Was nothing.”

“It wasn’t. So thank you, for everything. For Puck, for this,” he inclined his head towards the painted words. “For, I don’t know. Being here. With me.”

Ilya nodded sagely. “Yes, was such hardship. Watching you get mauled by kittens and slobbered on by dogs.” And then, almost as an afterthought: “Shat on by bird.”

“What?” Shane exclaimed, grabbing at his shoulder, pulling his shirt forward with his neck craning to see. “Where? And no one fucking told me?”

“Language, Hollander,” he chided with a grin. “Remember this is respectable place.”

“Oh, fuck you,” he shot back, taking a handful of his shirt on the other side and tugging.

Ilya barked a laugh. “Calm down, I was only fucking with you.”

Shane stopped, letting his hands fall, and glared. “You asshole.”

“Yes, obviously,” Ilya said, practically thrusting the kitten into his newly unoccupied arms. “Here.”

“If you think—” He adjusted his grip, cradling the trembling creature to his chest securely “—you can just hand me a kitten and that makes everything okay, you’re wrong,” Shane said, but by the time he had finished his sentence, the annoyance had turned to fondness.

“And I think it does. Is already working.”

“No, it’s not.”

“You are smiling.”

“Shut up.” Gently, Shane ran his hand down the dark stripe along the kitten’s spine. “Who’s this one anyway?”

“His name is Oberon. All his brothers and sisters got adopted and he is last one left.” Ilya’s fingers brushed Shane’s as he stroked Oberon’s cheek. “Has been alone for too long.”

His smile faded. Oberon shoved his face so far into Shane’s armpit that only the tips of his ears were visible. “Well, hopefully people will be lining up to adopt these guys once the video is posted.” The lobby beyond the glass was still empty. “Which—shouldn’t they be back soon? To take the last photos?”

“Probably,” Ilya said in a way that was too casual, too dismissive. “But Oberon is not available for adoption.”

“Why not?”

“He is already being adopted.”

“Then what? You just wanted to show him off?” The kitten only shook intermittently now, but Shane wasn’t sure if it was because he was comfortable or simply waiting for Shane to lower his guard so he could parkour off his chest like Puck. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s cute, but shouldn’t he be getting picked up by his family or something?”

“He is.” His voice was still too purposefully relaxed, so much so that Shane was going to say something about it, until Ilya added, “By you,” and Shane’s mouth fell open instead.

“*What?*”

“Puck needs a cat friend, so does Oberon,” Ilya said, nodding his head toward Shane’s arm. “I told you I had solution for gremlin problem. Here is solution.”

“What are you—” His brows drew together as he searched Ilya’s face. Then he remembered. “That was over two months ago!”

“I know. Surprise.”

Shane’s head spun. “Wait—*that’s* the surprise? You planned this whole—Ilya, no. You can’t just get me a kitten.”

“Technically I am getting your kitten a kitten. Is subtle difference, but important.” Ilya shrugged, but this time there was something less certain in it. “You can say no. Is surprise, not obligation. If you don’t want him, Megan comes back and takes photos, we find him another home. Is okay. But...”

“But what?”

“Kittens need other kittens, to teach them manners, how to play. How to be a cat,” Ilya said, gesturing toward the still-wrestling kittens in the condo. “And Puck has been alone too long, too.”

Shane frowned, looking away. Maybe Puck was too rough sometimes, maybe his hands sported new scratches and marks every day, and *maybe* Shane had been woken up too many mornings by Puck biting his toes—

“He’s not alone,” Shane said, but even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t entirely accurate. “He has me. And Anya and Maksim.” He looked back to Ilya. “And you.”

“And now he has Oberon. And Oberon has us.”

“Us?”

Ilya scoffed as if the question was ridiculous—and maybe it was. “Who do you think is going to take care of him while you are off winning Stanley Cup?”

He almost said it then.

Shane laughed. Because this *was* ridiculous—standing in front of the cat condos he sponsored, Puck’s name emblazoned on the wall above, and holding a kitten next to the most ridiculous man he knew.

And Shane fucking *loved* him and his stupid face and his giant heart and his small house that already had three animals taking up every inch, even if Puck only stayed there half the time, for now—

But when he looked down and saw Oberon’s face peeking out, yellow eyes wide and fixed on him until they slowly blinked, well.

Maybe there was room for one more.

“Okay,” Shane finally said. “But... what kind of name is Oberon?”

Ilya stared at him. “Seriously?”

“What?”

Ilya’s expression shifted from confusion to something approaching horror. Then he laughed. “*Shakespeare*, Shane. You think I am letting you give second kitten boring hockey name? No.” He shook his head slowly. “‘What kind of name is Oberon’—is perfect name. Matches Puck. I knew you were boring but uncultured, too?”

“I know who Shakespeare is,” Shane said, rolling his eyes.

Ilya raised a brow. “Do you?”

“Fuck off.”

“Maybe I get you a book next. Or I am sure there is movie version we could watch, might be easier for you.”

Shane resisted punching his boyfriend’s shoulder, but only just, as Oberon closed his eyes and let out a long sigh.

Chapter End Notes

When I started this in March, I just wanted to write something fun with minimal stakes that also encompassed everything I loved about cats and romantic comedies

and to make my bestie laugh. It quickly became a bit of an escape from some of the harsher realities of rescue work as another awful kitten season began. I remember thinking that I'd be surprised if it was longer than like, 40k words, with only the start and the end firm in my head. Shane was always, ALWAYS going to get a second kitten, but the journey to get there grew into something a little unexpected, even for me.

And what a journey it was! So thank you all for being here, whether you've been here from the start or jumped in somewhere along the way, or even if you're reading this after the epilogue was posted. It has been so much fun engaging with you all and I'm honestly a bit sad to say goodbye to that. You can find me on threads (soheroically) if that's a thing you're interested in, but admittedly I have not been very active as, you know, writing this took most of my free time.

If nothing else, we will always have Puck <3 He belongs to you just as much as he does me (and Shane and Ilya, Anya and Maksim, and now Oberon, too).

As promised, here is the [foster kitten who inspired Puck's appearance](#). He wasn't a tripod (that was a separate foster) but he absolutely was more floof than body.

Now without further ado, probably the most important Cat Fact that I've been secretly holding onto for this very moment:

Kittens absolutely should have a feline friend in their forever home and shouldn't adopted solo if there's not already a resident cat. If you have no cats and want a kitten? Get a pair. If you don't want two for whatever reason (all reasons are valid)? Then get a teen (at least 6 months old) or an adult!

Developmentally, kittens learn good manners and behaviors from other cats during the first six-ish months of their lives—things like appropriate play and bite inhibition in particular. Kittens also get bored and destructive as well as lonely and distressed, and while you (or your dog) may be able to play with them for hours, it doesn't quite function the same as another cat with a similar energy level.

Which, energy level is also important to consider. If you have an older cat, a kitten may not be the best fit either. Sure, your older cat will still smack some sense into the kitten (literally), but also your cat is likely going to be annoyed and pissed off at the lunatic terrorizing them and then one cat will be miserable and the kitten will still be attacking your ankles as you walk around every corner.

Of course there is still nuance, and some single kittens absolutely do grow up to be behaviorally well-adjusted, but I just don't see the point in risking it when there are so many adult cats who would absolutely love to be your one and only. I promise you there are just as many cats who are exactly what you are looking for.

(Quick note: this is not to shame anyone who does have or has had a single kitten! When I moved out on my own, I adopted my first cat as a single kitten and definitely learned the hard way with him. By the time I adopted a second kitten, he was nearly a year old and was a premium Grade A Asshole. I loved him anyway, but I wish I knew then what I know now.)

And that's it. Go volunteer, foster, donate, or support your local rescue in whatever way you can <3

Works inspired by this one

[\[Cover Art\] for A Lesson in Puck Handling](#) by [hapahana](#)

[Cover for "A Lesson in Puck Handling" by heroically](#) by [Emmota_de_Hayd](#)

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