

Reckless & Young

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Reckless & Young

by [some1_around](#)

Summary

Ilya was used to hazing. He had been subjected to it, he had participated in it, and, as a captain, he had stood guard over the rookies and protected them from anything truly harmful. But if he had been asked, Ilya would have approved of this prank. He would have authorized it, given Cliff and Vicky his seal of approval, perhaps even helped orchestrate it.

Any other day, Ilya might have been happy to play along.

But, in perfect dramatic irony, it had not happened *any other day*. It had happened today. And, cherry on top, of course the rookie had to walk in when Shane was already freaking out about Ilya saying his name.

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A prank-gone-wrong leads to the Boston Bears finding out about Shane and Ilya's relationship in 2016. The day Ilya first invited Shane into his house. Right after they say each other's names for the first time. *Fuck his life, honestly.*

Notes

boston bears, you barely exist in cannon, why do i love you so?

Also, as I'm posting this, like five of the WIPs I'm following have chapter updates in my email inbox, so i hope I'm joining the deluge of friday night updates for some people lol!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya bought his house in 2014, the year he won the Stanley Cup and the MVP award. He had signed two brand deals with Balenciaga and Adidas, paid his father's at-home nursing staff for five years in advance, and then bought what the Bears always mockingly referred to as "The Compound."

It was nothing like his condo in Moscow, and nothing like his childhood home. That had been intentional on his part.

In America, Boston was considered an old city. They boasted about churches that were barely three hundred years old and the houses of revolutionaries that had been renovated so many times that not a single roofing tile or doorknob was original.

Moscow was a thousand years old. History like that was impossible to escape. Ilya had learned that lesson young, and even after almost a decade in America, he had not forgotten it.

Ilya remembered grabbing his mother's hand in fear as he stared up at Saint Basil's Cathedral in the Red Square, terrified by her explanation that the building had stood for five hundred years. At six years old himself, the number had been incomprehensible, and something about the size of it had frightened him.

"How old are you, Mama?" Ilya had asked, trying to orient the age of the universe around the center point as he understood it: his mother.

She had smiled at him. Her eyes were blue and looked bluer because of the shadows beneath them. The wind in the square had whipped her hair wildly around her shoulders, barely restrained from blinding her by the scarf tucked behind her ears and tied at the nape of her neck. "Usually, that's a rude question, but I'll tell you, my Ilyushenka. I'm twenty-seven," she said. "This building is twenty times older than me." As she pointed, the wind kicked up and whipped her chain around her neck, the glittering cross bouncing up to hit her chin. She had laughed and tucked it beneath her coat's lapel. "People have worshiped here for five hundred years. Can you imagine?"

"No," Ilya had responded honestly. He tugged on her hand, and she let him stand so close to her legs that the toes of his boots were touching hers. "Mama, will you ever be five hundred years old?"

Her smile turned sad. "No, malysh," she said. Her hands were gloved in black leather as she reached down and tucked one of his curls behind his ear. "No, I will not."

He couldn't feel the heat of her skin through her gloves.

Irina died when she was thirty-three, a few months after her birthday. His father's sister had gripped Ilya's hand at her wake, tight enough to hurt, and pressed her thumb to his palm. "The age of Christ," his aunt had said insistently. "She was very lucky to reach that age."

Ilya was twelve, and his brother had just turned fifteen. They were under orders to remain silent for the day.

In 2016, Ilya was twenty-five years old. Shane was the same age. Their birthdays were only four weeks apart. He sent Shane his address for the first time that morning and waited, shirtless, in the kitchen for him to arrive.

"Hi. Should I... take my shoes off?"

"No, you're good," Ilya said, waving him in, and he caught the slight twitch of displeasure in Shane's eyebrow, though he obeyed the command. Ilya, wearing slides, let himself grin at the door, more than a little giddy. (It didn't matter, anyway. Shane's shoes would be coming off soon enough.)

Shane was not light, but he was easy to lift. His warm body and his thick muscles felt good in Ilya's hands. He especially liked the way Shane's legs immediately bracketed his hips, rising higher and closer, as if he wanted to wrap himself all the way around Ilya's body but couldn't while restricted by the fabric of his black denim jeans. Ilya grinned into the kiss, feeling like a conqueror even though Shane was the intruder in his house. Whatever. The specifics didn't matter.

He liked the way Shane tripped over the first step of the floating staircase (shoes already abandoned in the kitchen, where he had shucked them off mid-make out, flinging them off behind Ilya's back). He liked the way Shane let Ilya tug on his hand, dragging him up a little faster even as he stumbled.

He liked the way Shane folded his clothes, even his briefs, which he tucked neatly underneath his shirt as he set them on the dresser, as if someone was going to take a peek at his boring grey underwear. Ilya had always liked that Shane folded his clothes before sex. It delighted and infatuated him the first time Shane had done it, although back then, he had just figured Shane was nervous and stalling for time. He understood Shane's neuroses and habits better now. Shane carefully aligned his shirtsleeves, lips pursed in concentration, even as his eyes kept flicking toward Ilya sprawled fully nude on the bed, and Ilya just smiled, not stroking his cock or teasing Shane, or even encouraging him to hurry up. He was more than happy to wait. Ilya, for reasons he didn't quite understand, was obsessed with the fact that Shane was so neat with his own belongings and yet never cared when Ilya shucked off his own clothes into piles or left designer t-shirts in wrinkled heaps just a few feet from his hamper. He liked that Shane kept his socks on for another five minutes, until they had properly warmed up, and then suddenly he would wrench them off his feet and toss them into a corner of the room with reckless disregard.

It always made Ilya laugh. He liked having sex with people he could laugh with. Shane glared, but he was fighting off a smile.

Ilya liked Shane's body moving over his. He liked turning them over, pinning Shane beneath him, pressing their mouths together so that he could feel and inhale and ingest every shudder and tremble and gasp that left him.

"I should go."

"Or you could stay."

Ilya even liked the way Shane's voice cracked over the word, "Stay?" as he questioned Ilya's offer, planned well in advance of this afternoon.

Shane Hollander was in his house. Ilya intended to keep him there.

Just for an afternoon. One night. They could never have forever, but Ilya wanted to keep him, just for one night.

Ilya kissed him. He could practically hear the music swelling. "Stay," he begged.

"Okay."

Shane agreed, which Ilya had not allowed himself to hope for.

But it was nice.

Ilya pulled a blanket over their waists, holding Shane against his body as he dozed. He liked most things about Shane. He stayed awake as he felt Shane's body relax, just so he could drag out this afternoon a little longer.

Most of their hook-ups had been brief and to-the-point: get in, fuck, and get out before they broke curfew or anyone noticed they were missing. But not all of them. It was not the first time they had ever watched television together after mutually satisfying orgasms, and All-Stars usually gave them the opportunity to lounge in a hotel bed for longer than an hour or two. They had eaten together before, surreptitiously calling room service while the other hid in the bathroom. There had never been phone calls, but there had been texts, sometimes stretching into conversations that Ilya did not realize had lasted for hours until he scrolled through the messages later, almost entirely consisting of insults, hockey talk, and Shane's shitty sexts. They had even had marathon sex before, once going for almost five hours in a hotel in New York when their schedules miraculously aligned when Ilya played the Admirals the same night that the Voyageurs faced the Brooklyn Scouts.

But this was definitely the longest time they had ever spent together without having sex.

Shane was very pretty in the daylight. Ilya kept a hand down the front of his pants, idly touching himself without trying to get hard, and tried not to stare too obviously at Shane's profile. His jawline. The elegant slope of his nose. His straight, dark eyelashes. Shane had asked him for clothes, and everything he was wearing was Ilya's. They were the same height but Ilya was a little broader and thicker around the shoulders, and his shirt draped so deliciously over Shane.

He was beautiful to look at. He made Ilya smile. He made him laugh. He set his head on Ilya's chest and let him card his fingers through his short, dorky haircut, then pressed a kiss to Ilya's chest, then discarded his—Ilya's—shirt and crawled into his lap and spit in his hand.

“Oh, fuck, Shane.”

It felt good. Everything with Shane felt good. When they were together, everything felt good. Shane made Ilya feel good just by being around.

He was so warm. Ilya's house had large, sliding glass windows facing his manicured lawn, tall privacy hedges beyond that, and the afternoon sunlight streaming in turned everything about Shane golden. Shane never grew a beard, not even during playoffs, but it must have been several days since he had last shaved because Ilya could feel the very faint rasp of barely there stubble as Shane rubbed his face all over Ilya's, from his chin to his forehead, his perfect nose, long and unbroken despite years of playing a contact sport, pressing against Ilya's hard enough to wrinkle the tip. Shane was heavier than most of Ilya's hook-ups, even the other men. He was more muscular, too, and his hands were large, strong, and calloused. His finger span was broad enough that he could grip them both tightly and stroke, aided by the excess pre he always leaked. It was rough. It was so warm. Everything was warm, and Ilya loved him.

Fuck.

“Shane,” he said. He couldn't help it.

“Ilya,” Shane breathed.

Pressed together so close, Shane's face, above him like the sun, blocked everything else out, and Ilya was glad for it. He didn't want to see the rest of the world. He just wanted to see Shane.

They came together. They kissed, eyes lidded, their names in the air between them.

Recovering his breath, Ilya tried to kiss him again, and Shane didn't respond. Then he shifted, just a little, but they were so close that Ilya noticed it right away, and his eyes opened fully. He tried one more time to connect their mouths, thinking, *I take it back, I'm sorry, let me have this*, but Shane kept pulling away.

Shane straightened, still in Ilya's lap. He was still heavy. Still warm. But his face had gone pale, and his eyes were dull and blank.

Ilya tried to keep his hands on Shane's waist as Shane retreated from him, inch by inch, stuttered words falling from his mouth. “I should—I should-”

Shane stood. Ilya watched, helpless.

“I should go,” Shane said. He took a step back, nearly tripping over the coffee table, body still turned toward Ilya even as he kept his face angled up and away, averted. His abdomen

flexed, the muscles trembling, as he hastily picked up the shirt, Ilya's shirt, that he had been wearing before. "I should, uh... I should...."

"Go?" Ilya asked blankly. He could tell Shane was panicking again—which wasn't unusual, as it was far from the first time it had happened while they were together—but suddenly Ilya felt angry, watching Shane boldly and badly lie to his face about a team meeting or something equally stupid. As if Shane Hollander had ever forgotten a single obligation. "Hollander," he tried. He meant, *I take it back. I'm sorry. Come on. Fuck you, you coward.* Shane probably heard all of it.

"I'm sorry," Shane said, but he turned to leave anyway.

Ilya was prepared to watch Shane go and to remember him leaving forever. Ilya wondered if it would take them another six months to recover and if Shane would be the one to break the silence, or if Ilya would. Already, he was trying to remember the schedule for the season, the next time Montreal and Boston would play each other, and planning how he would make up for this mistake and take back the stupid, insecure intimacy he had tried to offer, because of course, Ilya had been totally wrong. He was stupid to think that one afternoon was enough, and Shane knew it, and that was why Shane was leaving. Even if Shane had stayed all day, all night, and then came back immediately after the game tomorrow, it wouldn't have been enough. There wasn't such a thing as enough Shane Hollander.

Ilya never should have pushed his luck.

But then Shane stopped.

Ilya's breath caught in his throat. He hoped, just for a moment, that Shane had changed his mind. But he should have known better.

Ilya had turned forward, jaw set, ready to listen to Shane's hasty departure, but when Shane's padding footsteps stopped abruptly, he looked back over.

Ilya watched Shane's shoulders creep up toward his ears, shirt still twisted in his hands in front of him, staring off into the distance, caught like a deer under the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler. He had already been slightly pale, but the rest of the blush from his recent orgasm drained from his cheeks until he looked sallow. He didn't even blink.

Ilya shifted, feeling hurt, angry, and stupid. He didn't want to have to chase after Hollander again. Sometimes it felt like he was the only one doing the chasing, which he knew wasn't exactly true. He had pushed Shane away before, and what did it matter if today of all days, Ilya had just wanted him to stay? Just wanted one fucking day, as if that would be enough to get Shane out of his system for good? It was wishful thinking, of course. He didn't think anything would get Shane out of his system.

But Shane still wasn't leaving. Ilya thought, *Turn around. Just turn around. Isn't that what doomed lovers are supposed to do? Even if you lose me forever, turn around for now.*

Because Shane still wasn't leaving.

“Hollander,” Ilya tried again.

Shane turned.

His face was almost white, his freckles standing out in alarming relief, visible even across the distance between them. His pupils had completely constricted, tiny little pinpricks in the warm brown of his eyes.

“I,” he said, completely breathless, and the shirt fell from between his hands with a flutter. “*Ilya.*”

Ilya stood up in alarm at the tone in his voice. Through the tornado of emotions wrecking his mind, he finally recognized the real, surging panic in Shane’s expression as his shoulders curled forward and he took two stumbling half-steps back toward Ilya, feet tangling in the shirt he had just dropped.

Automatically, Ilya lurched forward, hands held out, catching Shane as he tripped. “Shane, what the fuck?” he demanded, looking down at him, trying to force his face up so that Ilya could read his poorly guarded expression, but Shane was still pitching forward, arms wrapping around his own stomach as Ilya fought to get a grip on him, and his skin had broken out in a cool, clammy sweat. “Shane, what-”

Ilya’s head jerked up at the sound of movement behind the dividing wall that separated his living room from the rest of the open floor plan of the first floor. Shane made a noise, breathless, almost like a whimper. Behind him, out of sight, Ilya heard the creak of door hinges.

“What the fuck?” Ilya said, his own voice strained and shocked. His fingers flexed on Shane’s shoulders, and he forced himself to let go. Shane rocked in place but didn’t fall, now taking short, anxious gasps of air as Ilya stomped around him, panic and fear fighting in his stomach as his brain took over and forced him across the room until he could stare down the hallway, toward the side entrance door behind his dining table.

The glass door was half-open, propped around the body of Adam Feller, a nineteen-year-old rookie for the Boston Bears, who had evidently been trying to slide through the entrance when Shane had rounded the corner and caught him in the act.

Feller’s mouth was hanging open. Shane choked on a gasp behind Ilya. Ilya took one step back, instinctively, then squared his shoulders.

“Close that fucking door!” he barked, and Feller responded like they were on the ice and this was any other drill, darting inside with all the swiftness of a military cadet, coming to attention under Ilya’s orders. The door shut gently behind him, at odds with the tension between them.

There was about ten feet between Ilya and Feller. Ilya could still see the bobbing of Feller’s throat as he swallowed hard, looking almost as panicked as Shane. Slowly, Ilya extended his arm fully, pointing at him, steeling his muscles so that his hand didn’t shake.

“Why the fuck,” Ilya growled, “are you breaking into my fucking house? I think you had better have a good fucking reason, Feller.”

“I-” Feller looked like he was facing down a firing squad. His light brown skin had gone pallid in his cheeks (still slightly rounded with youth), and his eyes were so wide that the sclera seemed to swallow his irises. His mouth opened and closed repeatedly. “It was—hazing!” he squeaked. “Oh my god, bro! It’s just a prank! Is this—is this a part—of the prank? Oh, god, is Shane Hollander pranking me? Marly said—I was just supposed to break in and steal your fucking underwear, dude, *what the fuck?* Why the fuck is *Shane fucking Hollander* here?!”

Of course. Of *fucking* course.

“I’m gonna die,” Shane whimpered, still standing behind Ilya, breathless as a panic attack set in fully. Unfortunately, he was within Feller’s line of sight again now that the rookie had scampered inside, and Ilya had a sudden protective urge to grab one of the decorative throw blankets and throw it over his head. (Ilya wondered, with dread, if Shane had caught Feller while he was breaking in or if he had been on his way out, and what else he might have seen.)

No one should see Shane like this. This should have never happened.

“A prank,” Ilya said slowly, head on a swivel between his rookie and his—and Shane.

Hazing was a part of most athletic cultures. Ilya had experienced his fair share of the practice, perhaps more so, particularly in Russia, although sometimes his prodigious status meant that coaches had shielded him from the most brutal practices in his homeland. With the Bears, that had not been much of a concern. Although some of the players had expressed their bitterness over his popularity and early success, the truly heinous aspects of hazing—humiliation rituals, financial domination, and actual injury—were simply not part of their franchise and had not been in a long time. They were lucky. Ilya knew that. Not all the teams in the NHL were as kind.

Ilya was used to hazing. He had been subjected to it, he had participated in it, and, as a captain, he had stood guard over the rookies to protect them from anything truly harmful. This was their career, and they were essentially children, some of them still in their teens. They deserved his protection, and they had it. It had never really been a problem with the Bears, although Ilya had been called “soft” more than once. He simply didn’t see the point. As captain, he was more than willing to make any player on the team skate suicides until they were breathless, and he didn’t give a shit about their age.

This prank wasn’t even that bad (*although, really, Marly, a fucking panty raid? Really?*). If he had been asked, Ilya would probably have approved. He would have authorized it, given Cliff and Vicky his seal of approval, perhaps even helped orchestrate it.

He would have suggested that they break into Varkov’s penthouse, though. Or Kane’s home, on a weekend when his kids were absent. Or double the hazing and send Feller into the apartment of his fellow rookie, Cadyn, to scare the shit out of someone his own age.

He would not have ever approved of a plan to send any of them into his own house for any number of reasons, but that was the point, he figured. Haze the rookies and prank the captain, all in one fell swoop. Marly had probably been pretty proud of himself for coming up with the plan.

Any other day, Ilya might have put up with the invasion of his privacy. It was only fair, after all, that if the rookies were going to get roped into these pranks, then the captain should not be totally immune. Ilya's house was his sanctuary, but he might have been happy to play along.

But, in perfect dramatic irony, it had not happened on *any other day*.

It happened today. The first day he invited Shane to his house. And, as the cherry on top, of course Feller happened to walk in when Shane was already freaking out.

Fuck his life, honestly.

And *fuck* this rookie.

"Yes," Ilya said, very loudly. His house was purposefully minimalist, with glass walls, a floating staircase, and concrete support pillars. His booming voice echoed. Feller flinched, his hands raising in surrender like he wasn't facing down a shirtless, sockless Ilya Rozanov. "Yes—fuck you. Is obviously a fucking prank. What the fuck else would you think? Fucking of course it's a fucking prank. This is all plan, just part of the prank. You are pranked, bro."

Fuck.

"Okay," Feller said, speaking just as unnecessarily loudly. "Alright! Whatever you say, Captain!"

"Oh, fuck," Shane said, the words wrenched out of his chest. "Fuck—Ilya."

Well, at least Shane was saying Ilya's name again. But the way he was folding in on himself, hands hovering in front of his bare chest like he was trying to guard his heart, the breathless, thready quality of each shallow, quick exhale, did not bode well.

Ilya turned and reached for him instinctively. He was surprised when Shane caught the movement in the corner of his frantically darting eyes and reached out instead of pulling away. Their hands met in the air between them, a desperate, tight clutch, and Ilya was already trying to bring Shane to his chest, to do something about the panic gripping him—a panic Ilya had not seen get this bad in person since the NHL awards in 2014—when Feller made a noise, reminding them that he was there.

It was half-squeak, half-squawk. Ilya wanted to choke Feller until he never made a noise again because Shane gasped and dropped Ilya's hand like it had burned him, stumbling back deeper into the living room, nearly colliding with the couch as he scrambled to get further away from the interloping rookie. Ilya watched, attention torn between Shane and the rookie as the back of Shane's knees impacted with the sectional and he sat down hard, nearly

rocking back onto the floor, barely managing to regain his balance with how hard he was rocking.

“Shane,” Ilya said helplessly. Then he whipped back around to Feller and pointed again, shouting, “Hollander, I mean! Is part of the fucking prank, okay! And prank is fucking over now, we did it! So get the fuck out!”

“Um,” Feller said. “Um.”

“Oh my god,” Shane said, pitching over himself, face buried against his knees, hands gripping his short hair and raking across his scalp. “Oh my god, I’m gonna die.”

“No, no,” Ilya told him quickly. He spun in a circle, reoriented himself, then snatched the t-shirt off the floor. He threw it at Shane and it landed across his heaving, shuddering, bare, freckled shoulders. Shane grabbed it immediately, sticking his head through the neck hole haphazardly. “Is fine, you are fine, we are all fine because this is a fucking prank! Feller!” He pointed a finger and Feller raised his hands higher, pulling his entire bottom lip into his mouth with how hard he was biting it. “You are never fucking mentioning this, yes? You never fucking breathe a word. Because is,” he glared, and Feller took a step back, “*fucking prank*. Part of prank is that you never say a word or—or I hire Russian mafia squad who come and murder you in your sleep. Yes?”

“Um,” Feller said. “Yup. Yes. Yes, sir. Got it. I will never, ever, ever, ever-”

“Oh. Shit.”

Ilya looked at Shane. He had managed to pull the shirt around his neck and had one arm through a sleeve, but the other was bunched across the opposite shoulder. He was still bent over, chest touching his knees, his skin still snow-white beneath freckles that looked as dark as pepper. He had contorted himself oddly in his scramble to yank the shirt over himself and had frozen mid-motion, face turned away from Ilya. “What? What is wrong? Prank over, the idiot rookie is leaving, it is fine-”

“Damn,” Feller sighed, drawing Ilya’s attention again. “Fuck me, man,” he murmured solemnly to himself, staring over Ilya’s shoulder. “Ilya Rozanov's gonna murder me now.”

Finally getting a clue, Ilya spun around to see what they were both staring at.

Cliff Marlow, Victor St. Simon, Ryan Carmichael, and Connor fucking Connors were standing right outside the unfortunately enormous, floor-to-ceiling glass windows that lined the first-floor living space, which were lovely in the warmer months when he could slide them open, turning his entire backyard into an extended living room capable of hosting the entire team, staff, and their families. The same windows that had just shed warm autumn light on Shane as they spent a perfect afternoon together. Or tried to.

Ilya usually loved those windows. But after today, he might take a baseball bat to them and replace each and every one with blissfully opaque cinderblocks.

Connor made a run for it, booking it for the front gates.

Cliff tackled him onto the grass.

Victor and Ryan didn't seem to notice, just standing there, staring. Actually, they were all just standing and staring, except for Shane, who quietly slid off the sectional and curled up on the floor between the coffee table and the couch.

Victor waved.

"Okay, new plan," Ilya said, "I murder all of you. Except Shane. He can stay."

"Shane?" Feller asked.

Ilya clicked his tongue. "It's not the time. Just really, really not the time."

"Oh my god," Shane said, breathless with panic beneath the table.

Cliff wrestled Connor onto his back and pinned him to the ground. He looked up, met Ilya's eyes, and winced. "Sorry, dude!" he shouted, louder than necessary to be heard. Then he flashed him a thumbs-up.

Victor knocked on the glass, as if he didn't already have Ilya's attention, and pointed at the locked handle of the sliding door. "Maybe let us in, Capitaine?" he asked, muffled through the barrier, knocking again and smudging Ilya's pristine windows.

"Is he okay?" Feller asked. He still had his hands raised, palms out on either side of his face, but his expression had turned into careful concern as he craned his neck slightly to look at Shane, struggling to breathe on the floor.

"Fuck," Ilya said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Victor knocked again.

"Let those fucking idiots in," Ilya said to Feller, suddenly jumping into motion. He grabbed a throw blanket, mostly decorative, off the back of the couch and dived to kneel in the cramped space beside Shane, who had his hands over his face, fingers curled into claws. "Hey, hey," he said softly, reaching down to Shane with the blanket. "Hey, Shane. Shane. Look at me."

Shane blinked through his fingers, held tight enough against his blushing face to make pale, bloodless imprints. His eyes were watery and red, and his hair was a mess, and not for fun reasons anymore. His knees were pulled all the way to his chest, tightly locked in a fetal position in a way that must have ached and pressed his shins hard into the metal table legs.

"Shane," Ilya said quietly, doing his best to wrap the blanket around Shane's half-undressed torso. "Is okay. Is okay. I will deal with it. You want to wait upstairs?" He swallowed. "You want to—to leave now, maybe? Is okay. I would understand."

"Ilya," Shane said, and Ilya's heart tripped. It wasn't the right time, and the moment was as wrong as it could have been, but Shane was still saying his name. Even raspy, destroyed, his vocal cords trembling, it sounded beautiful to Ilya. "I'm going to die."

“You aren’t,” Ilya said, ignoring the sound of Feller unlocking and sliding the large doors open. He heard the shuffle of feet as his teammates walked morosely inside and gritted his teeth. “Come on,” Ilya said to Shane. “I will talk to them. Will be very serious and threatening. You can hide in bedroom, and I will come get you-”

“Um,” Feller said, voice high and thready. “Um, maybe not the bedroom.”

Ilya paused. He straightened a little, still on his knees, and twisted around at the waist to stare at his rookie.

Cliff coughed hard. “You know what, Cap,” his alternate captain said loudly, “this one’s on us. I mean, in our defense, no fucking way we could have guessed this, you know? But for real, don’t take it out on the rooks. We, uh, we could have thought this through more.”

“Sorry,” Victor said earnestly.

“‘Rooks’?” Ilya repeated slowly. “Are there... *more* of them?”

Shane whimpered (again, not in the fun way). Ilya hastily finished tugging his shirt on properly, and Shane let his arms be moved like a rag doll’s. Then, Ilya pulled the blanket up over his head, dressing Shane like an old babushka and hiding his face. He jumped back up to his feet and turned to face the Bears, mind strangely empty, heart beating fast, and put his hands on his hips as he glared.

At least none of his teammates looked happy about this either.

“Uh,” Cliff said. Then he shouted, “Cadyn? You up there?”

Louis Cadyn had been scouted from his college’s Division I hockey team last season. He was Quebecois, and Ilya usually enjoyed making fun of his accent and his status as a college dropout. Now, his voice responded hesitantly, audible but just out of sight at the top of the staircase that led to the second floor of Ilya’s home. “Um, what’s going on? Did something happen? Are we... good?”

Cliff sighed. “Just get down here, bro.”

Sheepishly, Cadyn trotted down the stairs. He was poorly hiding something behind his back. His eyes bounced across all the occupants of the room before, obviously, landing on Shane. He faltered mid-step, nearly tripping down the rest of the stairs, and froze in place.

“Fuck,” Ilya drawled. “Is all of Boston invited to join this prank? I win Stanley Cup, go to playoffs four times with you, and everybody is James Bond scaling my fucking house to break into the windows?”

“I climbed a tree,” Cadyn said numbly. Shane’s face was probably hidden from his view, but clearly he could tell that there was a man huddled under a blanket sitting on the floor of Ilya’s living room, and four older players standing in a straight line like chastised schoolchildren, or men facing down a firing squad. “Marly left your bathroom window unlocked when he was

here last week. And the side entrance.” Cadyn glanced at Feller, who had lingered by the door after sliding it closed and was staring determinedly at his feet.

“That’s unsafe,” Shane murmured, face once more buried in his hands, still tucked into the nook between the couch and the coffee table. “Oh, fuck.”

“Yes, ‘oh fuck’ is right,” Ilya said. He looked around and realized he didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to do. He sat down on the couch and set his hands on his knees. “Well,” he said, feeling more than a little numb himself. “Well.” He smacked his lips together. “What do we do?”

He really didn’t know.

Beneath the table, something touched his ankle.

Ilya’s eyes flickered down. He saw Shane’s wrist, extended from a gap in the fold of the blanket, holding onto him. Shane’s thumb stroked over Ilya’s ankle bone, tickling the fine hairs there. Ilya wondered if Shane could feel his pulse. His thumb slid up, just barely edging beneath the elastic hem of his joggers.

Victor, the second alternate captain of the Bears, a Frenchman from the same draft year as Ilya and Shane, cleared his throat. “I think,” he began, “that maybe we can all just try really, quite very hard to forget that this day ever fucking happened, and we move on-”

“I like men and women,” Ilya interrupted. He was staring at Shane’s hand on his skin, touching Ilya intimately, familiarly in front of other NHL players, trying to comfort him despite his own panic. Shane’s hands were always warm. “I am... bisexual.”

Shane glanced up to meet Ilya’s eyes, his face still shadowed beneath the hood of the blanket. Ilya couldn’t quite read the expression on his face. Shane blinked slowly, his long, straight, beautiful eyelashes fluttering. His cheeks were fully flushed now, terror turned into mortification, and his eyes were damp. Ilya held eye contact desperately, wishing that he never had to look away.

“There is no point pretending you don’t know, now that you do,” Ilya continued. He could hear the unsettling lack of intonation in his own voice, how flat it fell, but it didn’t bother him. Shane’s mouth, wet and still slightly swollen, opened a little, and Ilya, leaning toward him, was close enough to hear the tiny exhalation of breath escape his lips. “I am not ashamed,” Ilya said evenly, “and I don’t want to hide. But it is... not safe for me. Not in this career. Not with Russia. You must understand I could be deported if the wrong people knew.”

Shane’s hand tightened painfully around the bones in his ankle, a spasm of his fingers that rocked up his body until his shoulders shuddered visibly beneath the blanket.

Ilya looked up. Cadyn had sat down on the lowest step of the staircase, eyes wide, looking rather pale. Connor, who had grass stains down the front of his shirt from when Cliff had tackled him, was biting his lip. Victor and Ryan still lingered in the middle of the room, looking gobsmacked by the revelation of Ilya’s bisexuality as if they hadn’t just caught Ilya

making out with Shane Hollander. Feller had sat as well, criss-cross on the floor, his back against the glass window, as if he simply couldn't support himself any longer.

And Cliff.

Cliff was grinning.

"Well, congrats, man," he said, taking a few steps forward so that he could lean over the coffee table. He extended his fist forward slowly, knuckles curled loosely toward his palm. Ilya stared at his hand for a moment and then, realizing what the gesture was, raised his own and tapped his knuckles against Cliff's. Just like they had done a thousand times before.

"Thanks for telling us," Cliff said. He leaned in a little more and clapped one broad palm on Ilya's bare shoulder. "Can't say I expected it. I guess we're sorry for walking in on you." He laughed, loud and guffawing. Cliff was a notoriously terrible actor and a worse liar, and Ilya knew it was his real laugh—a little startled, definitely surprised, but real. "Not that we ever could have predicted this, though, am I right?"

Ilya smiled. "No, probably not," he allowed.

Cliff was still smiling at him.

Shane's grip on his ankle spasmed again.

"Merde," Victor said, a rush of air leaving his lungs, "fuck, you are serious? Okay," he said to himself, answering his question. "Okay, okay. Ilya Rozanov is bisexual, why the fuck not? Bisexual, mon dieu! Congratulations, Capitaine. I played with a few gay men in the Ligue Magnus, so—Ilya Rozanov, why the fuck not?" He laughed again, high and dramatic, and then stomped further into the room, collapsing into an armchair. "Oh, merde, my god, I am exhausted. It is like my heart thinks I have run a marathon." He pressed a palm to his chest and turned his eyes to the ceiling.

"Um," Connor said, eyes flicking around the room. Ilya tilted his head, waiting. Connor was a relatively new member of the team, having been traded at the start of the previous season from Colorado, but Ilya had grown to like his slightly awkward mannerisms and personality rather quickly. He was unlike many other athletes, preferring reality television and superhero movies to watching sports in his free time, but he was an excellent workout partner and one of the quickest skaters on the ice. He brushed a hand awkwardly down the front of his stained shirt. "Yeah. Yeah, uh—is congratulations right? Or are we supposed to... thank you? I mean, I guess I'm sorry we walked in on you." He winced. "And, uh, sorry for trying to run. I wasn't really thinking. Just figured we weren't supposed to see that, you know? Thought I'd dip, but, uh, yeah, sorry if it looked weird." He held up his hands. "I'm chill, bro."

Ilya shrugged, unsure what to say either. He had never come out to anyone before, not in so many words. He had grown up with Sasha and Svetlana, and the three of them had developed a mutual understanding about each other and the queerness that united them but set them apart from their home country. They had never needed explanations. Ilya had always been good at recognizing queerness in others (gaydar, Svetlana called it), so even with his hook-ups, there had never been the need for words. He had certainly never said anything to Shane.

Ilya glanced at the remaining occupants in the room. The rookies were still silent.

Ryan Carmichael met his eyes. "Shane Hollander," he said simply.

Cadyn squeaked.

Shane flinched.

Ilya stood up. Shane's hand did not fall away from his ankle. He met Ryan's flinty gaze, his jaw set, and didn't say anything.

Ryan took a breath, deep enough to raise his shoulders. "You've got Shane Hollander in your house the day before a game," he said.

"Say it," Ilya told him. "Say what you are thinking." Slowly, Victor shifted in his chair and then stood, tucking his hands into his pockets.

"You're hooking up, obviously," Ryan said. "He's at your actual house, so this probably isn't the first time."

"No," Ilya agreed, because really, what did they have to hide anymore?

"We have a game tomorrow," Ryan said. "So where's your playbook, Cap?"

"Fuck you, man," Cliff snapped. "Fucking, how dare you? He's your fucking captain!"

"Hey," Ryan snapped back, "we fucking walked in on them! We know! If something is going on here, it's on all our heads now!" He held his hands up, palms out, beside his head. "I gotta fucking ask."

"You don't," Victor snapped. "You really, really do not."

"Playbook is in that desk," Ilya said succinctly, "in a locked drawer with my tablet." He pointed to the small desk set up beside the living room area beneath the built-in shelves that stretched along the back walls. "You want to go check? Go fucking check." He bared his teeth. He would have taken a threatening step forward, even though he was still half dressed and had come crusting his boxers to his dick, if Shane had not been holding onto his ankle. "It's just sex, Carmichael. We are not cheating. We do not need to cheat."

"We know that, Cap," Cliff said immediately, completely loyal.

"His team just won two Cups," Ryan said, but he didn't try to cross the room to reach Ilya's desk. Whether that was because he believed Ilya or because four angry hockey players were blocking his path, Ilya didn't know. "We have a game against Hollander *tomorrow*."

"In 2014, the Boston Bears won two of four regular-season games against the Voyageurs, one in overtime. The Voyageurs did not make the playoffs. The Bears won the Cup, beating Carolina in the Conference Finals and San Francisco in the Finals. In the 2014-2015 season, the Voyageurs beat the Bears twice, final scores three-two and four-two, respectively. The Boston Bears did not make it to the playoffs. The Voyageurs won the Cup against the Calgary

Coals. Last season, we only played three games against each other. In November, the Bears beat the Voyageurs on home ice, scoring five-three. Ilya got a hat-trick. Cliff scored in the third period. In January, we played the Winter Classic against each other in Quebec City and went into overtime. The Bears won during the shootout thanks to St. Simon. In March, the Voyageurs beat the Bears six-two in the Bell Centre. I scored four points. Ilya assisted on both of his team's goals. During the playoffs, the Voyageurs beat the Toronto Guardians in the first round and advanced, while the Bears lost to the Brooklyn Scouts. In all of that," Shane's voice was exhausted, "when *could* we have cheated?"

Ilya sat down.

"We've always fought hard against each other. We've always played well against each other, and we've never had to throw a game to do it. Since our rookie season, the Bears and the Voyageurs have never played a game that would have mathematically clinched or revoked a spot in the playoffs for either team," Shane said, rote and calm, but Ilya could hear the devastation beneath the blank guise. "We've never ever faced each other in the playoffs. Neither Ilya nor I have set personal career records when facing each other, but, on average, both of us score more during games against each other. You can check the stats. We play *better* when we play each other." Still hidden beneath his blanket, he took a deep breath that must have been audible to the entire room. "We've never broken the law, or broken league rules. We have *never* bet on the outcome of a game, bet for or against ourselves or each other in any capacity, and we have never, *never* thrown a game. That's not what we're doing. We're just...." He sighed, quiet. His head bent a little lower. His thumb stroked over the soft skin of Ilya's ankle, over a bone that would have usually been hidden and protected beneath the laces of his skates. "We're just trying to play hockey."

The room was very quiet. Ilya put his hand on Shane's shoulder. He could feel all the tension held inside his body, and the way he shifted slightly, pressing into Ilya's palm.

Ilya forgot how young they both were sometimes. They were only twenty-five. They had done a lot in that time.

"Okay," Ryan said after a long moment. "Okay. That's all I was asking."

"It's not," Ilya said sharply. "It's not all you were asking. We know what you were asking."

"He's the captain of a rival team!" Ryan bit back quickly, and Ilya was about to snarl back a reply, but cut him off. "Look, look! Roz, bro." He put a hand on his chest. "I've played with you for six years. I do not care that you're gay—sorry, that you—" He gestured vaguely. "That you, I don't know, man, that you like men! I don't care. I know you. Why would it be any of my business? But, like, come on. I had to ask."

"If you had to ask," Ilya said, "then no, no, you do not know me."

Ryan frowned.

"I believe you, Roz," Cliff interjected. "And I mean, let's be real—I definitely don't think Shane fucking Hollander has been throwing games for *you*. Fuck, man." He rocked back on

his heels, expression suddenly going slack, as if it was hitting him all at once. “Shane fucking Hollander. How did this even happen? I thought you fucking hated each other.”

Ilya glanced down. Shane slowly lowered the blanket from around his head, the high points of his cheeks still flushed while the rest of his skin had a sallow, clammy color, and shifted to his knees and then up onto the couch, shoulders still hunched forward. But he met Ilya’s eyes, and he didn’t run away.

“No,” Shane answered. “No, we never hated each other.”

“Fuck,” Cadyn whispered, drawing the expletive out under his breath, a hand pressed to his mouth.

Ilya rolled his shoulders. “We understand each other,” he said. “I’ve known Shane since I was seventeen. He—he can match me on the ice, he can match me off it. It is... rare that anybody can do both. There is...” But he didn’t know how to say it. How to encapsulate everything that had happened in the past—God, if they had met when they were seventeen, then it had been almost ten years. That coming December, Christmas Eve Eve, would make eight years of knowing Shane Hollander.

“Not a lot of people,” Shane said quietly, “can understand what we’ve been through.” He nodded his head slightly, the blanket shifting across his shoulders. “Ilya does.”

“Right,” Victor said. “Shane. And Ilya.”

“Shut it, Vic,” Ilya warned.

“Wait,” Feller blurted out. “Is this, like, serious? You’re together? Not just fucking?” Then he threw his hands up into the air, voice suddenly taking on a hysterical note as he shouted, “Actually, start from the fucking beginning, *what the fuck is going on?*”

“Indoor voice,” Ilya told him.

“Oh god,” Shane said despairingly, hiding his face again.

“Of course they’re together,” Connor said, frowning at the rookie who was now rocking back and forth on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees. “You think they’d risk it all for a hook-up? Dude, be so for real.”

Ilya winced.

“He’s been with so many women, though,” Cadyn hissed.

“Man, that’s, like, mad disrespectful to bring up in front of Hollander,” Cliff tutted.

“Bisexual,” Victor said. “Huh.”

“Open relationships are a thing, bro!” Connor said sagely. “And I’m pretty sure it’s a stereotype that all bi people are cheaters. Right, Roz?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Ilya said, affronted. “Why would I know? I have never come out before!”

“This is hell,” Ryan said, finally sitting down, taking a place on the end of the sectional’s ottoman. “Jalo cut my throat open with his skate when I took that fall in New York, and I’m dead, and this is hell.”

“What, you hate gay people so much?” Ilya demanded. “You are saying that gay people go to hell?”

Finally, Ryan laughed, as though Ilya had shocked it out of him.

“I need a moment,” Feller said to his kneecaps. “I need a few moments.”

“Join the club,” Shane murmured.

Ilya put a hand on the nape of his neck. Shane’s skin was still warm, despite the tacky sweat that had gathered on him. Ilya leaned in, trying to block Shane’s body with his own as his teammate’s voices began to overlap as they argued about the timeline of their relationship. “You should go to my bedroom,” he said softly. “Take a shower, clean yourself off. You will feel better.” He squeezed, just a little. “But don’t leave yet, okay?”

Shane was still trembling, almost imperceptibly, as he let the blanket slip all the way down and stood. He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes as he nodded shortly and said, “Alright.”

“Uh, it’s nice to meet you, Hollander,” Cliff offered awkwardly. “Off the ice, I mean.”

“You’re a legend,” Cadyn blurted, looking like he already regretted it as the words spilled out of his mouth. “I had your poster in my room.”

“Me too,” Feller said.

“Thanks,” Shane said.

“Traitors!” Ilya yelled. “Betrayers! Not true Bears! Bag skates!” and the room finally thawed a few degrees.

“All this for a panty raid,” Cliff huffed, giving Ilya a wry smile. Shane grimaced.

“Oh, yeah!” Feller exclaimed, turning to Cadyn. “Did you get them? It would fucking suck if we went through all this and we didn’t even do the prank.”

“Uh, yeah, dude, of course,” Cadyn said. “God, does this count?” he asked, standing as he reached behind himself to grab the item he had been holding behind his back when he walked down the stairs. “Please say this counts. I can’t do another prank, and I nearly twisted my ankle on that fucking tree.” He laughed. “Don’t worry, though, all, they’re clean. Even a spot in the NHL isn’t worth fishing through Roz’s dirty laundry. These were folded on the dresser.”

Ilya stared at the plain grey briefs Cadyn was proudly holding out. Shane made a small, pained noise.

Slowly, Ilya dragged his gaze up and met the rookie's eyes, which were slowly widening in horrified realization. Ilya cocked an eyebrow. Then he nodded at Shane, who had already covered his face again and sunk into a deep crouch, groaning into his palms.

Cadyn dropped the small slip of fabric as if it were a hot coal. "Are these *Shane Hollander's boxers?*"

+++

Shane, despite his best efforts, did not melt through the floor and eventually found the strength to shove past the bright red rookies and the hollering Bears, disappearing upstairs. Ilya, without really trying to stop it at all, laughed himself nearly to tears for five minutes straight, and then he went into the kitchen and made everyone tuna melts because he was still hungry and it would have felt worse to kick them out immediately. He wanted... closure.

He never could have expected this day to turn out like it had, but he was smart enough to know that it could have ended much, much worse, in so many ways.

(Shane was still here. That might have been the most unbelievable part.)

Ilya heard the shower turn on, but at least he could trust that Shane wouldn't sneak out through the second-story windows. He never rejoined them, but that didn't surprise Ilya. It did surprise him, somewhat, that the rest of the guys stayed and managed to scrounge up an air of normalcy as they ate the food Ilya made them, jostling each other and mocking the blushing rookies.

"No more hazing for you two," Ilya declared. "Maybe no more hazing ever."

"Amen," Connor muttered, plucking at his shirt. "This is totally ruined, Marly! Thanks a lot, dude."

"You shouldn't have taken a runner," Cliff said unapologetically.

"I thought Roz wouldn't have wanted us to see!" Connor objected. "I wasn't going to say anything! I was trying to be-" He faltered, searching for the right word. "Polite. And I got fucking tackled for it!"

"Serves you right," Cliff snorted.

"I thought Hollander was going to bolt," Victor said, patting grease off his lips with a napkin. "He seems... skittish. Not your usual type, Roz." He grinned.

Ilya didn't know quite what to say to that. No, Shane was not at all like the girls he usually hooked up with, but that had nothing to do with Ilya's type. If anything, it was the other way around. He shrugged.

“This is crazy,” Cadyn said, shaking his head. “Like, actually bonkers. I think we’re in the Upside Down.”

Ilya didn’t know what that meant, but Feller nodded eagerly. “Exactly, dude, exactly that!”

“Shane fucking Hollander,” Ryan said.

Ilya shrugged. “You know I like trouble,” he simplified.

Ryan laughed a little. “Understatement of the fucking millennia, Cap.”

But, to his quiet delight, none of them were running away either.

They mocked him a little. Ilya blatantly ignored all their many questions, refusing to explain anything beyond, “Sometimes we meet up and fuck,” and giving no additional details. After a while, they reluctantly stopped asking. Ilya eventually heard the shower turn off, but Shane never reemerged, which was probably for the best.

“Well,” Cliff said at the end of a meal that was, admittedly, extremely awkward. “See you guys tomorrow, then?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “And, to be clear—tomorrow we will crush Montreal into the dirt.” He raised his eyebrows, meeting their gazes one by one. “That has never, ever been in question. Shane and I have never compromised the game. *Never.*”

“We believe you, Captain,” Cliff said, nodding once, and Ilya believed him.

He walked them to the front door, although a part of him wanted to kick them all out through the bathroom window, and thought seriously about changing the security gate passcode so Cliff couldn’t get in (or let any rookies run around Ilya’s lawn), and then let it go. Everything was out in the open now, anyway. There wasn’t much left to hide.

They spilled onto his front lawn, Connor immediately and unsuccessfully attempting to tackle Cliff in return for his earlier take-down. Ilya stayed in the doorway. Ryan lingered behind the others, and Ilya turned to him expectantly.

He didn’t obfuscate. “I won’t tell,” Ryan said immediately. “I wouldn’t. But Roz...” He shook his head slowly. “This is messy, Captain. This is real fucking messy.”

“I know. You think I don’t know? We don’t know?”

Ryan shrugged. “And if it got out, I wouldn’t be the only one who reacted like that.”

“So it better not fucking get out.”

Ryan glanced around his living room, then looked pointedly at Ilya’s windows. “You might not be able to control that,” he said, but he clapped a hand on Ilya’s shoulder, strong and unwavering. “But no one’s gonna hear about it from me. You can bet on that, Roz. And we’ve got your back, whatever happens.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said seriously.

“You got it,” Ryan said, smiling. “See you tomorrow.”

Ilya shut the door behind them and let his forehead rest on the cool wood for just a moment before he turned and jogged back into the house, taking the stairs two at a time.

Shane had crawled back into his bed and was curled beneath the sheets. A little color had returned to his face, but his eyes were red-rimmed when he peeked out beneath the covers as Ilya settled on the other side of the mattress, one hand landing on Shane’s shoulder, his thumb stroking over the scar he could feel through the thin sheet. He had cried in the shower, then. Ilya wasn’t surprised, but his chest hurt. He felt strangely young, looking down at Shane’s face.

“Okay?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Shane murmured, but he didn’t hide his face again. “Is it? They’re—they’re your teammates.”

“They won’t be a problem,” Ilya reassured him. “Not even Carmy. He had much respect for the game, and he felt like he had to ask, but none of them has a problem with us. Okay?” he repeated.

“Okay,” Shane said, a little hollow.

Ilya moved his hand up to cup his cheek. Shane’s freckles looked prettier when he had a healthy flush beneath them. Ilya clamored further onto the bed so that he could lie down across from Shane. They stared into each other’s eyes. Ilya wanted to count his freckles.

“That sucked,” Shane whispered, but he wormed a hand out from beneath the blankets, laying it, palm-up, on the bed in the small space between them. “I’m—for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. That you had to come out like that. And...”

Ilya shrugged as best he could lying down. With his other arm, the one pressed to the bed, he reached up. He didn’t take Shane’s hand but instead grasped his wrist. “Not your fault. Just stupid hazing and very, very bad luck.”

Shane swallowed. Ilya was close enough to hear it. “And I’m sorry,” he said, “that I was going to leave. I didn’t...” He shook his head, pressing his cheek deeper into the pillow. “I just got—scared.”

“Ah,” Ilya said. “I... understand that.”

“Do you?” Shane whispered.

“Shane,” Ilya said in response.

Shane closed his eyes. “Ilya.”

“Stay,” Ilya asked again. He held onto Shane’s wrist the way Shane had held his ankle, his thumb pressed over the rounded bone he could feel beneath the thin, delicate skin on the inside of his arm. If he shifted inward, less than an inch, it would have pressed flat against Shane’s pulse. “Stay,” he repeated.

Shane’s breath hitched. He nodded. “Okay.”

Ilya shuffled across the bed, folding their hands between their chests as he held Shane’s cheek and kissed him, his lips warm and his mouth opening beneath his, inviting him in. Inviting him to stay.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know exactly where I’m going with this or exactly how long it will be lol! Let me know what you think :) I am open to suggestions for this fic!

Also, please don’t be rude to me in the comments :) I have been feeling very perceived on the internet lately and it’s stressful :) thank you :)

(Edit: if you would like a list of some of the WIPs I'm reading right now, it's in the first page of the comments!)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Slightly relevant to say, Svetlana's knowledge is kind of vague and differs between book and show canon, but in this verse, she knows that Ilya is bisexual and knows that he and Sasha used to hook up (which was always the vibes I got in the show) and Ilya is aware of this, but she just hasn't admitted to knowing Jane's gender yet (and also she's also bisexual because I make the rules here). That's all, carry on!

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

Ilya had done many things with Shane Hollander, some of which he had never done with anyone else, but he had never woken up with him before yesterday afternoon, when they had napped, warm and borderline overheating. And even then, Ilya had barely slept. His eyes had fluttered, trying to shut, and he had forced them open wider, not wanting to miss a single moment with Shane in his arms.

After his teammates left, they could not keep their hands off each other. It had something to do with the panic, Ilya thought. The stress and desperation. One moment, he thought Shane might be walking out on him forever, and the next, his entire universe had imploded.

Maybe that was dramatic. But it hadn't felt that way when Bears kept crawling out of his fucking walls and Shane Hollander had been struggling to breathe on the floor of his living room. It had been a rough day, to say the least, but it was over now. It was a new morning, and Ilya was still warm.

Ilya blinked twice, then opened his eyes wide.

Shane was watching him, lying on his side facing Ilya. Just a few inches separated their noses, and only one of Shane's eyes was visible to him, the other sunk deep into his pillow. Ilya half-remembered, from the dozy haze of not quite being awake, that Shane had slipped out of the bed earlier to go to the bathroom (probably to brush his teeth, knowing Hollander), but he had returned, slipped back under the sheets, and, apparently, started watching Ilya sleep.

His jaw cracked open, yawning hard enough that his throat made a strange clicking noise.

"Weirdo," Ilya accused, humming through the yawn, eyelids fluttering shut as he smiled. "Staring at me asleep? You are a pervert, Hollander." As if he hadn't done the same thing yesterday afternoon. But Shane didn't know that, and he never would.

Shane huffed, unimpressed. "*I'm* the pervert? Sorry, am I the only one who remembers that you literally jerked off *at* me in a *public shower* before we'd ever hooked up? But no, I'm the pervert?"

Ilya's grin widened. He preened.

"Worked out for me, I think," he said, burrowing deeper into his pillow. "Worked out for both of us, really."

Shane didn't respond.

Ilya felt the mattress shift beneath him. The susurrant of his expensive, silky sheets was soothing, a sound like rippling water as Shane straightened and then sat on the side of the bed, his back now toward Ilya. Ilya took a moment to admire his musculature and the freckles dotted over his shoulders (he loved those freckles nearly as much as the ones on Shane's face) and then closed his eyes. He extended a hand slightly into the space Shane had vacated, still warm, and gave himself a few more moments to luxuriate in this morning's sleepiness before Shane broke the silence.

"They know."

"Some of them, yes."

"They know about us."

Ilya flopped onto his back. He stared at the ceiling, waiting for the moment when the panic would set in again, as it clearly already had for Shane. But it didn't. Ilya had panicked yesterday, though not to the extent that Shane had, but he did not feel the same anxiety closing in on him again. The secret was out, yes. It was done. Out of their hands.

So why did Ilya feel relieved?

"Rookies talk," Shane said quietly, staring at his feet, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Vets talk. Everybody talks."

"Not everybody."

"But some people," Shane allowed. "Six of your teammates know about us. *Six*."

"And none of yours?" Ilya asked because he had never been sure. Shane glanced over his shoulder, confused. "Not even Pike?" Ilya suggested.

"Oh," Shane said. He shook his head. "No. No one knows."

Ilya spread his hand across the bedsheets. "No one?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light, thinking about his youth in Moscow where, even when things were very dark, he still had Sasha and Sveta and one or two others—people like him. People very much like him, who had just as much to lose.

Shane shook his head. Just once. "No one, Ilya."

"Ah," Ilya said.

No one at all.

Except for the seven people who now knew. Yesterday, Ilya was the only person in the world who knew that Shane Hollander liked men, and now there were six others who knew as well. Six—*six*—and all of them were total strangers to Shane.

Shane's shoulders hunched slowly, deflating the longer the silence dragged out, so Ilya raised his hand and traced the outline of Shane's scapula. He pressed his palm flat to the center of Shane's back, outlining his shoulder bone with the angle between his thumb and forefinger. He felt Shane take a deep breath. Ilya knew, obviously, that Shane kept his personal life close to the chest. Ilya was sure that he had slept with girls at some point in his life, but even those women had never been papped with him, and there had never been rumors of a relationship, neither in celebrity magazines nor in the NHL's gossip mill. Players tended to chirp Shane for being sexless or robotic because Shane Hollander had always been alone, as far as anyone but Ilya was aware.

"Does it have to be that way?" Ilya asked, trying to keep his voice light.

"What do you mean?"

Ilya shuffled a little. He didn't sit up fully or pull his hand away, but he pressed a kiss to the soft, giving skin above Shane's hipbone. This far down his back, his freckles petered out. He kissed a back dimple instead, and then, to feel Shane shiver, dipped a little lower and traced the tip of his tongue across the barely visible stretch marks on his ass. Shane shuddered and Ilya smiled, just to himself. "Can you tell anyone?" he asked, finally shuffling upright. "Your people, I mean. Would only be fair, I think, now that my team knows."

Shane glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Tell them about me," he began, "or about you?"

Ilya shrugged, tossing an arm over Shane's shoulder. He buried his face in the crook of his neck and, with the arm draped down his front, grabbed onto the malleable flesh on his chest and squeezed. "I am thinking you could maybe start with yourself," he said, lapping at the hollow above Shane's clavicle between his words. From this angle, he could see Shane's feet, and he noticed with delight that when Shane had left the bed to brush his teeth, he had also slid a fresh pair of socks onto his feet—not Reebok's. Clean and pilfered from Ilya's drawers. Keeping his feet warm. Ilya felt a deep satisfaction, which spurred him to continue, "Tell them you like men." He nipped at the skin stretched over bone, more prominent from the way Shane was sucking in his breath as he tried not to rock into the ministrations of Ilya's mouth. "Or women, if you like both," Ilya added after a pause.

He deeply suspected that Shane did not like women, but it seemed polite to keep up the act. The way Shane immediately froze, a moan that had been halfway out of his mouth catching abruptly, made Ilya regret saying anything, although it was a further clue that his assumption of Shane's sexuality was likely correct. He tensed in Ilya's arms but did not pull away. Ilya had a better vantage point of his neck than his face, so he saw the way Shane's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I've been with girls, Ilya," he said testily.

Ilya hummed, mouth still pressed to Shane's skin. He kept the movements of his lips and tongue light, knowing that Shane would pull away at the slightest hint of pressure, worried about bruises and love marks. "I'm sure you have."

Shane gave a little jerk. Ilya, still holding him by the chest, slid his other arm around his waist and Shane settled. “Why do you keep bringing this up?” Shane grumbled.

Ilya paused. There was more bitterness in Shane’s tone than he had expected. He detached his mouth but didn’t shift positions yet. He had an inkling that Shane would be more honest, more open with him if they weren’t looking at each other’s faces. “Bring what up?”

Shane huffed, muscles tightening further. “Girls,” he said. “You keep trying to brag to me about all your—conquests. Like, I get it. I know you like girls.”

Bitter was the right word for it.

Ilya held him a little tighter, squeezing Shane around the waist and chest, and tilted his head to lay his cheek on Shane's shoulder. He hadn’t styled his curls yet, and after yesterday, after literal hours of marathon sex, they were certainly a complete mess. Shane had made them shower off last night after the final round, both of them almost falling asleep on their feet, even though it had probably been 9:00 p.m., but he hadn’t washed his hair.

Ilya had washed Shane instead. He had pooled soap in his palm and run his fingers over Shane’s body, his calves and thighs and shoulders, massaging the muscles that had tightened up during his panic attack. Shane had returned the favor, moving slowly from lethargy and attentive dedication. Ilya had leaned against the cool tiles of the shower stall and stared down as Shane meticulously worked lotion between the hair on Ilya’s shins, a concentrated set to his eyebrows, as if he were determined to get it *right*.

They had showered together before, many times in fact. Ilya had cleaned Shane up after sex on countless occasions, when Shane was boneless or exhausted, or when Ilya wanted an excuse to touch him for a little longer.

But they had never washed each other like that before.

Shane smelled like Ilya’s body wash. His lotion. His bed.

“I do like girls,” Ilya said, “but I like you more.” He swallowed, wondering if Shane could feel it. Surely he could. “I like you more than anyone.”

He could feel Shane’s chest rising and falling and the way his breath stopped for a moment. He also felt it when Shane exhaled, letting it go. Ilya felt his eyes burn and was glad they weren’t looking at each other.

But, to his surprise, Shane’s voice sounded just as choked up as Ilya's when he said, “I like you, too. I think I like you too much, Ilya.”

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It was hard to leave the bed after that.

The sun was barely risen, and the morning light was pale and blue, desaturated of warmth. It wasn’t a cold day, but that kind of light made it *feel* cold. Ilya wanted to stay wrapped around

Shane forever, nothing separating their bodies as they fell back into each other again and again.

“I have to go,” Shane whispered, caught in the same spell that Ilya was. He spoke quietly, as if he didn’t want to break it, even as he talked about leaving. “I need to go on a run before the game, eat breakfast, and get back to the hotel to meet up with the team.”

“I know, you have very specific game-day routine, ah? You are so predictable, Hollander—on the ice and off it.”

“Yes,” Shane murmured, eyelashes fluttering.

Ilya squeezed his thigh, dragging it and hiking it a little higher where it draped over his own. “Do your boring routine here,” Ilya whispered. “I have a blender. I have a treadmill.”

Shane blinked. “My regimen is very specific.”

Ilya swallowed. He kissed him. “Try,” he whispered.

“Okay.”

Shane, unsurprisingly, climbed out of bed first. His long limbs extended, extracted one at a time from Ilya’s navy blue bedsheets, muscles rippling beneath smooth, sparsely haired skin. He stood up, fully nude, and without asking, pulled a fresh set of clothes out of Ilya’s dresser drawers. Ilya realized he liked the way Shane looked putting on his clothes almost as much as he liked watching him take them off. He liked watching Shane put himself together, one piece at a time.

Ilya, unsurprisingly, trailed after him. Getting out of bed was worth it if it meant keeping Shane within his line of sight.

“I probably need to order some groceries,” Shane said as they trotted down the stairs, side by side. The den was still a mess, pillows and blankets askew, but Ilya could fix it later. At least Shane’s boxers were no longer lying on the coffee table. (Yesterday, Shane had snatched them up and taken them with him when he disappeared upstairs. Ilya was pretty sure they had ended up in the bathroom trash can.) “If that’s okay?” he asked apologetically. “I’ve got this smoothie I always drink—”

“Same one as in Men’s Health from last year?” Ilya asked, purposefully walking a little faster so he wouldn’t have to see Shane’s face. “What was it—spinach and spirulina and fucking vanilla grass-fed whey protein?”

“How—how did you—”

Ilya waved a hand over his shoulder, striding into the kitchen and immediately reaching into the cabinets, pulling down the ingredients to make Shane’s stupid, gross smoothie. “Marly read your addition, said he could not imagine how bad it must taste. Then we ordered all this stuff and took turns chugging it. Feller vomited, Shane. You made my rookie hurl. Of fucking course we had leftovers.”

He tossed a grin over his shoulder, wondering if Shane would play along with his story, but Shane had frozen mid-step next to the dining table, so surprised his face was wiped clean of emotion. (That happened sometimes, Ilya had noticed. When Shane felt something strong enough, sometimes his face would lose all expression. Shane wasn't a good enough liar to be doing it on purpose, so Ilya didn't really understand why.) "You read my Men's Health feature?" Shane asked, voice pitchy.

"Marly did," Ilya insisted immediately, even as he set a full tub of Shane Hollander's preferred brand and flavor of protein powder on the counter between them like the most ineffectual shield in the world. "Are you listening? I said *Marly*. Giant alternate captain for Bears, your rival team? He was here yesterday. Keep up, Hollander."

"Ilya," Shane said.

Ilya grimaced. He shunted the plastic tub across the table. Shane startled, rushing forward to stop it from tipping off the other side of the counter with an indignant squeak, and Ilya laughed. "Make your fucking smoothie, Shane," he said, hoping he sounded more mocking than fond.

Ilya fried himself a plate of sausages and eggs while Shane assembled his smoothie, occasionally asking where various measuring cups were stored. He even insisted on using Ilya's electric scale. Ilya tried very hard not to watch him do it, worried that he would break into a stupid grin if he looked at Shane for too long. (Or get an erection. God, this ridiculous man had Pavloved Ilya about the dumbest things. Fucking *measuring cups*.)

They settled side by side on the stools with their comically different breakfasts. Shane attempted to give Ilya's greasy sausages a disdainful look, but Ilya could see the way his nostrils flared. He speared a sausage on the end of his fork and waved it in Shane's face, earning a swat on his forearm. "Want a bite?" he leered.

"I'll bite *yours* off if you put that in my face again," Shane quipped. "I don't even want to know what kind of preservatives are in that. And the spices are definitely too much for a game day."

"What, you can't handle a little spice?" Ilya asked licentiously. Just for flair, he shoved the entire link into his mouth.

"You're a child," Shane said blandly, and then he smiled. Holding eye contact with Ilya, Shane leaned down slowly and wrapped his lips around the end of the metal straw sticking up from his smoothie. Ilya watched closely and saw a flash of his pink tongue stroke across the metal before his lips closed fully, and Shane sucked on the straw, eyelids fluttering shut.

"You are cheater," Ilya croaked, struggling to swallow his sausage before he had fully chewed it. "You are dirty cheater, Hollander."

Shane pulled back and laughed.

They sat next to each other as they ate, eventually pulling out their phones.

Ilya felt a spike of anxiety as he checked his email inbox first, but there was nothing unusual. He opened his texts next. Ilya perpetually had anywhere between dozens or hundreds of unread messages at a time, but he checked his Captain's chat with Cliff and Victor first.

Marly & Me

*brought the rooks back to my place after yours, cap
made sure they know whats up. you got nothing to worry about dude
love you bro, we got your back*

Saint Vic 😊

*Other members of the team knew what we were planning.
We have told them that the rookies walked in on you with a girl
They cannot help their little blushes! Needed an excuse
A very believable one too, no?*

Marly & Me

*let us know if you need anything, brother
(sorry again btw)*

Saint Vic 😊

We've got you capitaine! 🙏

Ilya felt an unexpected surge of gratitude. For the second time that morning, he felt his eyes burning.

You
*thank you.
really.*

He sent off a quick response to a text from Svetlana, confirming that he would not be free after the game (the Voyageurs' next game was in New York, so they weren't leaving until the morning. Ilya was hoping he could convince Shane to stay for another night, though he knew it was a long shot, especially if the Voyageurs won the game and wanted to go out celebrating with their captain). She sent back a winking and a kissy emoji and a brief, *Say hi to Jane for me.*

After a moment, Ilya tapped out, *I will*, and sent it before he could think through the implications.

Ilya checked the full team group chat after that, skimming back through dozens of messages. There was nothing implicating in it. Connor and Ryan had been a little quiet in the last twenty-four hours, and Feller and Cadyn had gone radio silent, but the rest of the guys were chatting, filling the chat with enough noise that their absence wasn't noticeable, and it was all casual and about their upcoming game against their biggest rivals. The newest message was from Benji Oregan, the Bears' starting goalie who infamously woke up at four in the morning every single day, regardless of whether they had played a game the previous night or not, who had shot off a *rise and grind brothers 🍊 game day!!!*

Ilya sent back a thumbs-down and then turned off his phone.

He glanced up, ready to mock his teammates, but paused.

Shane was staring at the far wall, at the boring tile backsplash over the sink. His face was blank again, but it looked different from the surprised expressionlessness Ilya had seen earlier.

Ilya immediately looked at Shane's phone, lying flat on the counter, neatly aligned with the edge. But the screen was black. "What's wrong?" he asked immediately.

Shane startled a little, his eyes flicking to Ilya, and then he shook his head, snapping himself out of whatever trance he had been in. "Nothing," he said, fingers wrapping around his smoothie. They flexed, then straightened, and he set his palm on the counter as well. "Nothing's wrong." He glanced at Ilya again. "It was Hayden. Pike."

"Ah," Ilya said, nodding in understanding. "Fifteenth-best player in Montreal. What, you are worried that he will trip over his wrongly tied shoelaces and take you down with him tonight?" Ilya raised his voice over the immediate bevy of Shane's objections. "Do not worry—it doesn't matter, the Bears will beat you, anyway." For good measure, he flexed.

Ilya had not put on a shirt that morning. He smirked when Shane's eyes automatically flicked down to his biceps.

Shane tore his eyes away with a dramatic roll. "Hayden's not the fifteenth-worst player in Montreal. That doesn't even make sense. He was tied for fourth in points last season." He returned to his smoothie, finishing it in several large gulps. (Ilya *knew* he saw the minor twitch of displeasure on Shane's face at the taste, he *knew* he saw it.)

"How many of those points were assisting you?" Ilya asked. "What is yours and Pike's WOWY score?"

He saw Shane's mouth open, the numerical answers about to pop out fully formed, and smiled as he watched Shane wrench his mouth closed, refusing to answer as he turned his nose into the air. "Why don't you google it yourself?" he sniffed.

Ilya laughed. "Very convincing argument," he said, nudging Shane with his elbow.

Shane glowered. "Shut up."

"Okay, okay," Ilya laughed, holding his hands up and letting his fork fall to his emptied plate with a clatter. "What does the *fourteenth*-best player in Montreal want, then?"

"Oh," Shane said, glancing back down at his black phone screen. His hand flexed anxiously on the table. Sensing that Shane might appreciate some space, Ilya stood, gathering their dishes and taking them to the sink, keeping his eyes slightly averted as Shane spoke. "He was just, uh, asking where I am, what's going on. He... wasn't surprised that I didn't come back last night, but I have a pretty strict routine for game days." Shane gnawed on his lower lip. "He's already texted asking if I am coming back."

“Hmm.” Ilya closed the dishwasher with his foot, studying the top of Shane’s bent head. “Where does he think you are?”

“Um.” Shane was blushing. It was pretty. His freckles looked much sweeter, much more bitable when he was blushing than when his face was pallid from fear. “He... well, he knows about Lily,” Shane said, wincing. “Sort of. He knows whenever we play in Boston, I take off, and he’s seen your contact name pop up on my phone a few times. So, uh, ‘Boston Lily.’ Actually, a few people on the team know now.”

Shane was glowing.

Ilya threw his head back and cackled.

“You suck,” Shane grumbled, then immediately held up a hand. “Don’t say it! Way too obvious!”

“Come on,” Ilya whined. “You never let me have fun! Boston Lily gets to have all the fun, I bet.” He pouted, sticking out his lip. “Your teammates think you are sleeping at some beautiful woman’s house when really, you are here, bullying me.”

“I’m not bullying you,” Shane said, but he had gone back to staring at his phone.

Ilya shifted, then walked back around the counter. He hooked his ankle around the leg of his stool and dragged it closer to Shane before flopping down, slinging his arm over Shane’s shoulder. “Talk to me,” Ilya said forthrightly. “What is wrong? Tell me, or I will kick you out, and you can jog back to your hotel instead of using my very expensive shock-absorbing treadmill in an air-conditioned room.”

Shane gave him an unimpressed look. His expression shuttered slightly, and then he groaned quietly and leaned forward. “I’m sorry,” Shane said in a rush, “that I was leaving.” He scrubbed his hands over his face but, unlike yesterday, didn’t try to hide behind them again.

“Leaving,” Ilya said. He felt a twinge of leftover annoyance resurface, shrouded by the desperate, seething regret he had felt yesterday when Shane pulled back from his kiss and lied to his face about some made-up team meeting. “You were running away.”

“Look, I-I’m sorry, okay?” Shane said quickly. “I—even before all of—all of whatever the fuck happened yesterday, Jesus.” He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, then took a deep breath. “I’m sorry I freaked out.”

“What happened?” Ilya asked because he still didn’t really understand. “What made you run?”

They were always trading places, Ilya thought. One of them would push. The other would shove them off. Then the roles would reverse, and someone else would be pulling desperately, trying to reel in a line while the other thrashed and darted away. They only made sense when they were fucking. The rest of the time, it seemed like they could never be on the same page.

Yesterday, Ilya thought it was his turn to push.

Between the two of them, Shane had instigated their introduction. He had been curious enough about Ilya to go out of his way and approach him despite his shy disposition. He had fluttered his pretty eyelashes, cheeks red from the cold, and shaken his hand. Twice, for good measure. Ilya had been curt and rude and mocking. He had done everything but blow smoke in Shane's face. And Shane had smiled. He'd even laughed.

Then it was Ilya, organizing the CCM shoot so they would have an afternoon together. And yes, he could pat himself on the back for that grand gesture, and he would never admit it to anyone, but fuck it, it had worked, hadn't it? He'd gotten Shane Hollander, nervous and borderline virginal, into his fucking bed. He'd made him laugh again.

Ilya had knocked, and Shane had answered. They were on the same page, then, for a little less than an hour.

They had chased each other between cities for years. Sometimes, Ilya rolled over the second their orgasms became mutual, hiked up his jeans, and bounced while Shane was still naked and reclining on the bed. Sometimes Shane disappeared into the shower the second they were done and barely looked at Ilya on his way out, muttering something about curfew or Pike. And sometimes Ilya turned on the television and folded his arms behind his head, rocking the pillows so that Shane, still lax with orgasm, would tip onto his chest, into his side, and rest there for a while. Sometimes Shane pulled Ilya into the shower with him and kissed him under the water without any motivation, not trying to escalate, just letting their tongues slide together until the contours of each other's teeth were familiar. Sometimes Ilya ordered room service and picked dishes he knew Shane would eat. Sometimes Shane wordlessly turned on the Russian subtitles on Netflix when it was late and Ilya was exhausted after a game, and the actors were whispering or slurring all their lines.

Sometimes Ilya would suggest something they could do after hooking up, maybe work out or watch a game, and Shane would look at him like a spooked animal and make some inevitable, trite comment about how they shouldn't do this anymore or *this was the last time* and darting out the door before Ilya could finish rolling his eyes.

Sometimes Shane texted Ilya his hotel room number, or a date they would be in the same town together, and Ilya ghosted him for weeks, endlessly rereading but refusing to respond to any of Shane's messages as he spent his days lying in his bed, listlessly staring at the screen but never touching it.

They pushed. They pulled. They ran away. They both did.

Shane starting to leave yesterday wasn't unexpected or unprecedented. It had just mattered more because Ilya knew he had panicked because Ilya had said *his name*, and that was a stupid fucking reason to abandon a hook-up, and Hollander should have been better than that. It had been eight fucking years. Were they really still so childish that they couldn't say each other's first names?

(Ilya ignored the fact that yesterday, he had held Shane in his lap and thought, *I think I love him*. Shane didn't know about that, so it didn't count.)

Shane turned to look at him, and their faces were very close. Ilya swallowed and, after a moment, repeated. “Yesterday. What happened? When you ran away?”

“I never know where I stand with you,” Shane said, voice raw with point-blank honesty. “I don’t know what we are.”

Ilya grimaced. “There is a reason for that,” he said, and regretted it immediately when Shane quickly looked away, shifting uncomfortably under his arm. “We can’t—you know we can’t.”

“I know,” Shane agreed quietly. “I know. Obviously, I know. That’s why I was running. Because... because it felt... different. It felt real.” He flicked his eyes to the side. They were close enough that Ilya could see the slight variation in the color of his irises. “I know what we have—I know what it is. What this is. What it *has* to be. I know we can’t have anything more. I get it.” He bit his lip. “And that was... it was too much for me to deal with.”

And yet, Ilya realized, they were having this conversation after they had spent the night together, after Ilya had made Hollander breakfast with ingredients he had ordered specifically for him a week ago. They were talking at his counter with his arm wrapped around Shane’s shoulders, and they hadn’t been apart from each other in almost twenty hours. For fuck’s sake, they had been doing this for years. Who the fuck did they think they were kidding?

His teammates already knew.

Ilya turned as well, facing forward, but didn’t remove his arm from around Shane.

“The phone call yesterday,” he said, voice low. “My father is sick. Very sick, in Russia. He is... it is difficult to get him taken care of, and my family is-” his throat clicked “-hard, sometimes.” There wasn’t a good word in Russian or in English. “You understand that Russia is not good place for gay people, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane said quietly. “Sochi....”

“Yes,” Ilya murmured.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Shane whispered.

Ilya shrugged, once more feeling his youth. “Family is hard. Life is hard. Dementia, it is hard. Hard to be around, and also hard to be away from. I have nothing else to say about it.”

“Okay.”

Ilya wasn’t sure where they went from here, and it was clear that Shane didn’t know either. He hitched his arm a little higher, trying to hold him tighter, and was almost surprised when Shane leaned into the grip, listing in his chair until his shoulder slotted perfectly into the space beneath Ilya’s arm. Ilya breathed out. “I like you,” he said. “It’s hard. But I like you.”

Shane put his head on Ilya’s shoulder. His hand slipped off the counter and settled hesitantly on his thigh. “I’m scared that people know. But, um. I mean... yeah, I guess. I like you, too.”

Ilya bent down and kissed the side of his face, right next to his ear.

Yesterday, he couldn't have imagined this. There was so much in the way. Even when he had desperately craved spending a day with Hollander, he had never imagined that it could, or would, turn into anything more than that. They had protected their secrecy for almost a decade—for their entire lives, really—and there was just no conceivable way for them to move forward.

But that didn't exactly matter anymore, did it?

People knew. Six people, as Shane had said. Any one of them could tell, for any reason. Ryan could report them for suspected tampering. Victor might tell his wife, who might harmlessly spread the juicy NHL gossip to her closest friends until it snowballed from there and circulated through WAG chats across the continent like a virus. Connors, infamously known for his horrendous alcohol tolerance, might blurt it out one night in a drunken haze. The rookies might get traded and whisper it to another player or have the secret pulled from them during some other, more terrible hazing ritual, and it might break containment.

People knew. The all-or-nothing secrecy that he and Shane had maintained for years—eight years, to be precise—was done for. Kaput. It was gone, and they could not get it back.

And if it hadn't been for Russia, for his father, and for his passport, Ilya would have felt nothing but relief.

Ilya closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose. Shane nuzzled into Ilya's shoulder, turning his face just enough to press a kiss to the bare skin over his thrumming pulse.

+++

Shane lingered at Ilya's house for longer than he had expected. Their game wasn't until the afternoon, but they both needed to be back with their teams much earlier than that.

It was lucky, Ilya thought, that they had gone to bed early last night and woken up with the sunrise. It gave him a full morning to spend with Shane.

Ilya did his own pre-game workout while watching Shane run on his treadmill. Shane, like a psychopath, didn't listen to music when he worked out, but he didn't object to Ilya putting a playlist on over his home gym's speakers. Shane rolled his eyes at the Russian electropop, but he didn't say anything, and Ilya smiled. The noise seemed to roll off Shane's back, anyway. A focused, calm expression settled over his face as he worked up to a fast running pace, arms pumping, sweat building on his cheeks and trailing down his neck.

Ilya spent most of his workout soundly distracted.

They ate a second breakfast after they had showered off together, exchanging soapy hand jobs in the shower along with slow, almost melancholy kisses.

"Will I see you after the game?" Ilya asked as he walked Shane to the front door.

Shane glanced at him. He was wearing the clothes he had arrived in and he slipped on his shoes, gaze contemplative as he studied Ilya. Ilya tried very hard not to squirm.

“Okay,” Shane said. “I’d like that.” He cleared his throat. “Maybe, uh, maybe you should see how things go with your team first? And then text me.” He coughed. “Text me how it goes, please. I want to know.”

Ilya tamped down a smile. He liked the protective jut of Shane’s jaw and the steely glint in his eye. As Shane straightened up, Ilya caught his hand and reeled him in again. “Team will be good,” he promised, mostly believing it himself. “And we will figure the rest out, I promise.”

Shane bit his lip. He nodded once, and then again, harder. “Okay.” His hand rose to toy with the curls at the nape of Ilya’s neck. “Text me anyway?”

Ilya kissed him. Shane opened his mouth without a thought, swallowing Ilya’s tongue when he pushed it deeper. When they pulled back, less than an inch, a translucent line of spit hung between their bottom lips like a tether. “Okay. I will. I promise.”

+++

Rocking up to TD Garden in a lime-green Porsche with blackout windows, it occurred to Ilya that he might be on a countdown. There might have been a limit to the number of times he would get to do this in the future. How many more games would he play with the Boston Bears? How many more would he play for the NHL?

How many more games against Shane?

Because Ilya deeply loved playing against Shane Hollander.

He pushed thoughts of impending doom out of his head as he shouldered his bags and surveyed the parking lot, sunglassed eyes passing over the sparse crowd of Boston fans already gathered behind the gates. He wondered if they would burn another Hollander effigy tonight. Probably not. Afternoon games were usually more relaxed.

An enormous canary-yellow Hummer pulled through the gates as Ilya shut his car door and leaned against it, watching it approach. Ilya and Victor both loved expensive cars, but they had opposing criteria for them. Ilya loved tiny sports cars that looked like they belonged on a Ferrari racetrack and sat flush to the road, while Victor loved nothing more than trucks the size of freight trains that boasted off-road, all-terrain capabilities that he never utilized.

They shared a fondness for vibrant paint jobs, though.

The four-door pickup truck rumbled to a stop two parking spots away from Ilya and he watched, fixing an unimpressed expression on his face. The door swung open and Victor popped out, head rising above the vehicle’s roof as he stood up in the driver’s seat. “Mon ami!” he called to Ilya, a wide grin plastered beneath designer sunglasses, an enormous, rounded pair with tortoiseshell frames that almost certainly belonged to his wife. “We meet again!”

“Under better circumstances this time,” Cliff called, emerging invisibly on the other side of the truck, which was so large that even Cliff’s impressive stature did not clear the roof.

“Hopefully,” Ilya heard him add in a grumble.

The door behind the driver’s seat opened and Connor stumbled out, shooting Ilya a quick, sheepish glance. “Hiya.”

Ilya cocked an eyebrow. “Hello.”

Cliff rounded the vehicle, shouldering his own gear, and walked right up to Ilya and clapped him on the shoulder. “All good?” he asked, keeping his tone light, probably just as aware as Ilya of the camera phones being aimed at them.

Ilya nodded once. “Yes.”

“And Hollander?” Cliff asked. “He was, uh... he was going through it yesterday. He all good?”

Ilya felt a pang in his chest.

Ilya had moved to America alone when he was nineteen, when his English was only conversational, before Svetlana had moved over permanently. He had been very alone. Or he would have been, if the Bears, and Cliff Marlow in particular, had not welcomed him in with open arms.

Boston had been good for a nineteen-year-old Ilya Rozanov. It was big enough that he could get lost in the bars and nightclubs, but the team dynamics had been solid enough that someone was always trailing after him, keeping him company but also not letting him stray too far. Boston loved its athletes, even if they were less intense about hockey than Montreal. Cliff and Ilya, both young and brash, had drifted together without the need for words that Ilya hadn’t felt fluent in. Boston had never demanded more than Ilya had been capable of giving. Boston had been easy, and rough, and rowdy, but it had been Ilya’s home for almost as long as he had known Shane.

It was still his home.

When Cliff reached out, intending to clap him on the shoulder again, Ilya extended his arm and reeled him into a one-armed hug, slapping his back twice.

Cliff laughed, loud and heartily, and squeezed him back.

“He is good,” Ilya said, thumping his shoulder a third time. “Thank you. Spasibo, Marly.”

“Hey, man, of course,” Cliff said, warm and welcoming. “Anytime, brother. I know you’d do the same.”

Victor’s hands landed on both their shoulders, not quite joining the hug but supporting Ilya as well. “You have our backs, and we will have yours,” he said as Connor sidled up beside him, looking awkward as he attempted to aim a supportive smile at Ilya. “Ah, my groomsmen!” Victor declared. “Some bonds will not be broken!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ilya said, letting Cliff go with a shove. “You are all so dramatic! Blegh! We are not even drunk, and it is too early for this nonsense.”

“Ah, shucks, Cap,” Cliff teased. “I know you’ve got an ooey-gooney, good, old-fashioned lover boy buried somewhere deep, deep beneath that manwhore exterior.”

“Very deep,” Connor quipped easily. “Like, iron core at the center of the earth deep, bro.”

Ilya waved him off. “I don’t know these words,” he said as Victor jostled him, his eyes drifting toward the parking lot gates as he heard them open again.

Casually, Ilya leaned back against his car again.

Ryan parked near the gate. The three Bears gathered around Ilya all turned to watch his approach. Ryan had clearly seen them as well and, instead of walking directly toward the entrance, he crossed the lot to join them. His hands were in his pockets, but his gait was steady and determined.

“Game on?” Ryan asked simply, joining the huddle. He pulled out his right hand and held it out to Ilya, open-palmed. “Ready to crush Montreal, Roz?” he asked, raising an eyebrow in an amused, if cautious, expression.

“When am I not?” Ilya said, taking his hand and shaking it.

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Feller and Cadyn couldn’t look at Ilya in the locker room without blushing. Cliff and Victor had downplayed the reaction to their statements in the group chat, and the locker room was uproariously filled with jokes about the two innocent rookies walking in on their notorious playboy captain with his latest hook-up, and how it had traumatized them forever. Someone called it a rite of passage.

It was a good cover, Ilya mused. Probably because it was mostly true. The rookies were simply unable to hide their reactions, and half of the team had known in advance about the planned panty raid on his house.

“Take this as a warning—stay the fuck away from my home!” Ilya barked, smiling despite himself. “You will see things that will forever be imprinted on your eyelids.” He leered, undressed to his briefs, and rocked his hips. “And you will forever after feel very, *very* jealous of me and inadequate for your wives!”

“Shut the fuck up, Roz!” Oregan, their goalie, barked through a laughing fit. “Put that away!” he yelped, jokingly shielding his eyes.

Ilya thrust his hips again to many boos and a roll of tape lobbed at his head that he neatly dodged. “Where would it even fit?” he boggled, wagging his eyebrows, and had to duck into the shower stalls to avoid the next volley of various pieces of equipment that flew his way.

He sent a quick text to Shane, bent halfway inside his cubby.

You
*all good. no one is spreading stories
teams think the rookies interrupted a regular hookup, they are mostly mocking the
babies*

He waited. A few seconds later, bubbles popped up, then disappeared, and Ilya smiled to himself, absently lifting his chain to his mouth and holding the cross delicately between his teeth. Shane was so awkward, even when they weren't in the same room. Ilya loved those stupid little bubbles.

"Jesus Christ," groaned Varkov, one of the only other Russian players on the team. Ilya didn't realize it was being addressed to him until Varkov, who had the cubby next to Ilya's, shoulder-checked him. "Look at that stupid grin on your face! Is that the girl from yesterday you are texting?" The rest of the locker room hooted, always as eager for gossip as any of the WAGs.

"Maybe," Ilya drawled, letting the cross bounce between his pecs. His phone buzzed and he immediately whipped his eyes toward it.

Jane 🇨🇦 🤔 🌊

Good. I'm sorry again. If it helps, H told everyone I never came back last night, so I'm being mocked too.

I never skip curfew. They all know.

Ilya had already started to respond, his message half-typed (*oh, poor baby, need me to comfort you maybe??*) when Varkov jostled him again. "You are blushing, Captain!" he said, then quickly ducked his head into Ilya's cubby. "Jane!" he called, and everyone immediately started shouting, the din rising several more decibels. "Jane alert! Everyone, watch out! Captain will be on *fire* tonight! Montreal Jane is in town!"

Ilya shoved him away, sent the text, and powered down his phone before dropping it into his bag.

"Code: Jane!" Oregan shouted. "Code: Jane! Stay out of Rozanov's way!" He laughed from the floor of the locker room, where he was half dressed in pads and already stretching out his hamstrings. "I'll tell you what, I do not feel jealous of Drapeau tonight!"

At some point, "Jane" had become akin to a cryptid in the Bears' locker room. No one had ever seen her, but purportedly, everyone had a Jane story: a nasty sext read over Ilya's shoulders, bagging an absolute smokeshow that their captain had turned down because he had been staring into his phone, an abrupt disappearing act, especially whenever they were in Ontario or Quebec—they talked as if Ilya had the power to teleport mid-conversation. Ilya had heard veterans tell made-up stories about seeing lingerie in his overnight bag, ostensibly a gift for the rare girl that Ilya Rozanov had been returning to since he was a rookie. She was legendary. They were obsessed with the fact that they knew nothing about her. None of them, except for Marly, were totally convinced that she actually existed.

And Ilya did like cultivating a certain reputation, so.

Ilya had never allowed himself to worry about anyone putting together the pieces (and he certainly hadn't told Shane, lest he spiral about it), but he truly wasn't worried because the Bears were not altogether very perceptive. Though they had realized that he had a regular hook-up in Montreal, they also knew that there were a few comparable women in various cities across the US. They had called "Code: Jane" before, and had often been wrong, once when Svetlana had unexpectedly surprised him in LA during a West Coast roadie, and several other random occasions over the years when he had simply been in a good mood.

Because they associated Ilya feeling happy with times when he was seeing Jane.

(They were, maybe, a little more perceptive than he gave them credit for.)

"Fuck, the rookies walked in on Jane?" asked Johannson, a Swede with annoyingly perfect English. "The legend herself? I'm surprised you didn't flay them alive!"

"I would never do this," Ilya said, resuming his routine. "They are babies. Peer-pressured and bullied into committing crimes against their wonderful and very understanding captains. It is my alternates," he said, tossing a playful glare toward Victor and Cliff, "who might go missing in the next week. I will need an alibi. Any volunteers?"

Ilya glanced around.

Cliff was staring at him, jaw dropped, and Ilya slowly grinned. Ilya winked and, even though he was sitting down, Cliff wobbled so badly that he nearly went sprawling face down on the dressing room floor. Ilya heard him swear under his breath.

"Wait," Feller interrupted, "who's Jane?"

That inspired more laughter from the guys as Johannson whooped, "He saw the legend herself and did not even know it! Montreal Jane!"

"Yeah, but who—"

Cadyn, apparently much quicker on the uptake than his fellow rookie, jabbed Feller in the stomach with his elbow.

Victor was gawking like a fish, his comically large sunglasses having slid almost all the way off his nose.

Ryan just sighed.

"Jane," Oregan explained, when none of Ilya's closest friends volunteered the information, "is one of Roz's girls. This Canadian chick. She's been around for years. Never knew that she visited you in Boston, though, Cap."

Ilya just shrugged, enjoying the slightly sea-sick look on Connor's face as he stared at the jersey hanging limply in his hands.

Apparently, none of them had realized exactly who Shane Hollander was, even after finding him in a compromising position in Ilya's house. Hockey players were not generally known

for being the brightest bulbs in the box. Only their skates needed to be sharp, after all.

Kane, a third-pairing defenseman, leered, leaning toward the rookies. “What, you didn’t get a name when you walked in on them? Her mouth was a little busy, I guess?”

Ilya turned sharply toward him. “Enough,” he said loudly. “Leave the rookies be. They are already traumatized, yes. No more.”

Cliff, sitting next to Kane, snapped out of his stunned stupor and shoved the defenseman. “And keep it respectful, bro.”

“Is it serious?” Johansson asked, drawing the attention of the locker room. “She is in your house the day before a game, visiting. Has the Lady Jane finally done the impossible and locked down Rozanov, Boston’s bawdiest playboy?”

Everyone was watching him. Ilya usually thrived under such attention, especially when it had to do with women and his sex life. This was a little different, of course. His teammates had teased him about Jane before, but never like this. There were twenty players in the locker room, getting suited up for their game. Including himself, seven—more than a third—knew exactly who “Jane” really was, and all of them were watching Ilya closely, waiting.

His answer was slightly impulsive, but it was honest.

“More serious than it used to be,” Ilya allowed, yanking his jersey over his head. His heart was beating a steady thud under his shoulder pads, not too quickly, but hard enough that he could feel it in his neck. Ilya hoped that he was telling the truth. He forced himself to shrug. “She is a girl, and I am irresistible—these stories write themselves, don’t they?”

“Was she hot? Blonde?” Kane asked the rookies, and Cliff shoved him all the way to the floor this time.

“We’ve got a fucking game to play,” Cliff declared, standing up and making his way back across the room, his freshly wrapped and waxed stick propped over one shoulder, elbow unintentionally framing the ‘A’ on his chest. The other arm, he slung around Ilya’s shoulders. Cliff grinned, looking down at Ilya and then back out to their teammates. “And it’s got nothing to do with Mrs. Rozanov,” he teased. “Come on, people, get your asses in gear!” The other guys laughed but let themselves be diverted, the volume in the room rising quickly as they broke off into many overlapping conversations. Cliff leaned in, using the din to hide his words, given that he was infamously terrible at whispering. “That dude is *Montreal fucking Jane*?”

“I am feeling faint,” Victor said, appearing at Ilya’s other elbow.

“Uhhh,” Connor gurgled, still avoiding eye contact. “I don’t even want to *think* about those texts I saw last year.”

“I can’t believe you guys didn’t figure it out,” Ryan commented lightly. “What, you didn’t hear Hol—her little speech yesterday? She was talking about games that happened years ago. *Obviously*, dudes.”

The rookies were clearly trying to eavesdrop, so Ilya very quickly broke up this little conference, clapping his hands together. “Enough about me!” he shouted. “For fuck’s sake, half of you are married! Your sex lives must be so sad and pathetic if you care so much about mine!” More laughter, and the conversations continued to rise and split up. Ilya looked at his friends, his teammates, the men he considered to be his real brothers. “Let us destroy Montreal tonight, yes?” he said, still loud enough to be overheard, directing the comment toward Ryan, who merely raised an eyebrow. “I have a girl to impress, after all,” Ilya continued, “and she *loves* watching some good hockey.”

Finally, Ryan smiled.

“Wait,” Feller blurted, because he was an idiot, “is she here *tonight*?”

Cliff sighed. “The kid is so young we can’t even blame it on the concussions.”

+++

They ran out onto the ice, and Ilya let the cheering of the crowd roll over him as the chilled air hit his cheeks, smarting pleasantly. He loved skating. He loved being laced into his skates and on the ice, and the way his body moved with the blades on his feet. Of course, he loved the game itself as well, but there was such a simple and abiding pleasure in feeling the way his body, so heavy and sometimes ungainly on land, suddenly flew. The ground cut away beneath him, and he could move fast enough that the world turned into a blur.

He lapped their side of the rink a few times, then looked over.

Ilya could recognize Shane even with his helmet on and his jersey rucked up, name and number obscured. On the ice, Ilya could have picked Shane out of a lineup of a thousand players wearing ski masks and bulky goalie pads. Ilya knew how Shane moved. Every joint of Shane's body was familiar to Ilya, embedded so deeply in his memory that he could never forget it. *That* was how Shane turned his corners, and *that* was how Shane’s knee bent beneath shin guards and socks and tape, and *that* was the flick of Shane’s wrist, and it couldn’t have been anybody else’s.

Shane looked up. Across the rink, their eyes met automatically. It was almost like playing on a line with someone who had the same intuitive approach to hockey that Ilya did—the sensation of a perfectly executed pass, of knowing exactly where the puck was going seconds before it was even moving. Their eyes met.

I love him, Ilya thought again, terrifyingly. *Just look at him.*

“Jane,” Cliff murmured, disbelieving, as he glided past Ilya, cutting in the opposite direction across the ice.

Ilya saw Shane smile, a fleeting, tight press of his lips—nervous and worried, but Ilya still recognized it as Shane’s attempt to reassure him.

Ilya grinned like a maniac, turning abruptly and chasing after Cliff, causing his alternate to yelp and start sprinting down the ice until they were both laughing and the fans were cheering

for them.

He hadn't lost his team. He hadn't lost hockey.

Ilya swerved by the center line, spraying ice over the laces of Shane's skates, laughter ringing out bright and clear across the rink as Shane Hollander, Canada's Golden Boy, the league's idol of sportsmanship and a two-time Lady Byng winner, pulled a single glove off with his teeth just to flip Ilya off.

Yeah. He definitely hadn't lost Shane.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the brainstorming and suggestions in the last chapter! thiefylilelf and Petrichordeiles suggested a detailed account of the next morning, Himynameis4 and nyxlyn asked how the game would go the next day and we're gonna get their next chapter, Lets_be_real32 suggested expanding on the Bears thinking that Ilya and Shane were more serious than just a hook-up (specifically, the request was "they want step daddy shane" lmao), and xphile3101 wanted to see a little bit of what the group chat was up to! ladyelementia also described last chapter as "Poor Ilya just trying to sort out the situation and his idiot teammates keep crawling out the walls" and I thought that was too funny not to include!

Thanks to everyone else as well, more of your comments might be incorporated later ;)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Marking this as complete for now but I've made it part of a series in case I ever come back to write more! A lot of suggestions were for events further on in the timeline and those were super fun to read through, but I wanted to walk through these three days closely first

Also, i need everyone to know that some poor ao3 volunteer wrangled my stupid "uh oh orpheus and eurydice parallel alert" into the "Inspired by Orpheus and Eurydice (Ancient Greek Religion & Lore)" tag LMAO

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

Ilya loved the first face-off of a game.

Perhaps part of that was due to conceited reasons. He was the first-line center. He started every game at the dead center of the ice, and he set the tone. All eyes on him.

All eyes on Ilya, and on Shane.

There was something truly enchanting about the way light reflected off Shane's visor. It made Ilya feel like he was staring at a hypnotist's watch—dazzling, arresting lights.

It was a shame that the referee was standing two feet away as they glided toward each other, because otherwise Ilya would have told Shane how pretty he looked.

As it was, he just smiled, more than a little infatuated. He wondered what the expression would look like on camera.

To Ilya's left, Cliff scoffed, noticing his besotted expression. Hayden Pike, Shane's fight-happy best friend, muttered a testy, "What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," Cliff sighed.

Shane glanced up, then at the ref, then back to Ilya. "Nothing to say, Rozanov?" he chirped lightly.

They weren't mic'd up, but the ref was right there. "Nope," Ilya agreed, reaching out to knock Shane's stick with his own. The distant sound of the crowd sounded like the ocean. All those voices blended together into white noise, but it was nice. Familiar.

Shane slapped his stick away and the ref barked, "Knock it off, boys."

Immediately, Shane's smile fled and his brow furrowed, an equally familiar expression of complete focus falling over his face. Ilya couldn't stop grinning.

The puck dropped and they clashed together on the center dot, helmets knocking, shoulders colliding, sticks slapping.

Ilya pushed, and Shane pushed back harder.

The puck whipped out behind Shane's legs, and the Voyageur's right winger (Montreal's seventeenth best player, in Ilya's opinion, and therefore not worth learning the name of), clumsily caught the puck for just long enough for Victor to steal it back immediately.

Then Shane stole it from Victor, and the game was on.

+++

"Okay, I take it back," Ryan grumbled under his breath in the locker room after the first period. "You're obviously not throwing games."

Ilya laughed in his face.

The score was currently 3-2 in Montreal's favor, but the energy in the Bears' locker room was still electric. Five goals in the first period was abnormally high, but Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander had been moving like there was literally a fire lit beneath their asses, and if they stayed still for too long, the ice would melt. Ilya had scored both goals. Shane had scored twice and assisted Pike on the third.

They would both have hat tricks before the night was over. Ilya knew it.

"What did you expect?" Johansson called out, not having heard Ryan's comment but responding to Ilya's laughter anyway. "Jane is watching, he said! Of course he has something to prove!"

"Especially against Hollander," Oregan muttered from the floor, going through his regular intermission stretches with a trainer in the middle of the floor. "Man, fuck that guy," Oregan groaned as the trainer pushed his thigh up toward his chest. "He makes me look bad, and he always fucking tanks my save percentage."

"You will make it up in Ottawa next week," Ilya promised. "We will pull our defense back, give them more shots on net, just so you can block them all."

"That's not how that works, Roz," Oregan grumbled. "Fuck you."

He laughed and before he knew it, the intermission was over—it always seemed to race by during Montreal games, or any games as fast-paced as this one.

Connor and Ryan tied up the score within minutes of the second period with an assist and a goal respectively, and Ilya made sure to taunt Shane about it when they lined up for the post-goal face-off. "Maybe everyone else on Montreal might wake up soon," Ilya said. "Would be nice for you, I think, if you did not have to score all their goals."

“Seems like I’m doing alright on my own,” Shane said, which was as cocky as he ever got in public, and Ilya grinned.

The first ten minutes of the period whizzed by. Shane and Ilya were both on the ice when a lull in play caused the refs to call for the television commercial break. Ilya swerved back toward the bench, waving to the fans. He always felt a thrill of pleasure during high-scoring games; while it was true that a strong defense was the real key to success in hockey, and especially in fights for the Cup, he knew that fans wanted to see goals (or, as the adage went, pucks in nets). He loved it when he could give the fans what they wanted, and Boston loved Ilya for it.

Ilya casually skated toward the bench, not feeling winded enough to need to sit, but accepting a water bottle filled with electrolytes over the barrier. He clapped Cliff on the shoulder as he drank, double-checking his stick tape job, and then caught sight of the calculating expression on his alternate’s face.

Cliff had a look in his eyes. It was a look that meant he was planning something, and it rarely meant anything good. Ilya could practically see the rocks tumbling around in his skull, polished smooth over the years. It was probably the same look that he had gotten when he had left Ilya’s bathroom window unlocked and told a rookie to climb a tree to break into his million-dollar home.

“Marly,” Ilya started, but Cliff, for once, was faster than him.

Cliff dodged his hand and skated a few more feet down the ice. “Hey, Hollzy!” he called, grinning and immediately drawing the attention of every player, coach, and equipment manager on Montreal’s bench. They were understandably protective of their star player, after all, especially given that Shane never fought. Shane had been frowning at a tablet (Ilya didn’t know what he had to frown about, given that he had already played a three-point game) and glanced up.

Ilya might have been the only person to understand the flicker of microexpressions that dashed across Shane’s face in that moment—the immediate anxiety, the ever-present dread, the cautious confusion—and he definitely hoped that no one else saw the way Shane’s eyes immediately found him. Shane looked at Ilya, questioning and worried. Ilya skated up slowly, trying to appear nonconfrontational as he draped an arm around Cliff’s shoulders. He gave Shane a slight nod.

“What do you want, Marly?” Shane asked, handing the tablet back to one of the staff with a murmur of thanks.

“I was just thinking maybe it’d be nice if you let one of your boys score for once,” Cliff chirped. “Hell, maybe let Boozy get a defenseman goal—pretty sure he hasn’t scored once this season.”

“Excusez-moi?” Boiziau exclaimed, performative as always. He was huge but lanky, and the spindly nature of his long wingspan always contributed to his physical comedy as he flailed on the bench, nearly slapping Comeau in the face. “Keep my wonderful name out of your ugly mouth, Marlow!”

The players still on the bench shifted, perking up, as the fans surrounding the boxes began to cheer. Everyone was clearly wondering if this was about to devolve into a fight while the game wasn't even in play, but Ilya didn't think so.

Cliff just laughed. "Prove me wrong!" he crowed to Boiziau. "Hell, if you score tonight, I'll take you and Hollzy out for drinks after the game, on me! Show you the best Boston has to offer."

Pike, playing his usual role as the Voyageur's rather clumsy knight in shining armor, ready to defend any damsel, abruptly leaned sharply around Shane to glare at Cliff. "Fuck off, Marly. Don't you have anything better to do?"

Cliff flipped him off airily. "You can come, too, if you're so jealous."

"You are bribing the other team with alcohol, Marly?" Ilya asked, leaning harder into his alternate's side. "Tampering," he tutted, but very quietly, lest the referees start listening in.

Victor hopped up to sit on the boards, balancing so that both his skates were above the ice. "A Bears and Voyageurs bar crawl," he mused loudly. He winked. "I will tell the missus I will be home late tonight, eh?"

"Invitation only!" Cliff taunted. "How to get an invitation: put a fucking point on that scoreboard!"

"Doesn't Cap have a girl to get back to?" Johansson teased, but he spoke too quietly for the Voyageurs bench to hear.

"Ah, team bonding is very important," Ilya murmured, keeping his eyes locked with Shane's. "And... sportsmanship. She will be very understanding, I think."

Shane glared.

The ad break ended before they could continue. A few minutes later, the Bears were called for icing, forcing their line—including Feller, who didn't have the stamina needed for long shifts yet—to stay on the ice while the Voyageurs changed shifts and lined up in the face-off circle. Johansson, their third-line center, was chirping Shane in his Swiss-accented French, but as usual, Shane acted like he had cotton in his ears and didn't twitch.

Ilya smirked. He was the only one who knew how to get a rise out of Hollander.

As it had been all night, play was blindingly fast. It took Hollander less than twelve seconds after the puck dropped to score his fourth point of the night, a masterful slapshot over Oregan's glove. Oregan was quick, and his hand was already shooting up, just managing to graze the puck that whipped into the net at probably 100mph. His glove glanced off the edge, and Ilya watched the slow-motion replay of the puck wobbling midair as it flew into the corner of the net, its trajectory changed but not completely deflected.

Hollander hat trick.

But it also put Boiziau on the scoring board, as he had assisted, catching the puck that Shane threw to him from the face-off circle and passing it back to him for the shot.

“I guess technically that’s what I said I wanted to happen,” Cliff said as they stood, ready to retake the ice, but he was frowning as if he had just realized the flaws in his plan. “Huh.”

Victor laughed at him as they scaled the boards, the first-line of the Boston Bears. Ilya really had lucked out. “What, you are just realizing now, my friend?” he asked, skirting the edge of the circle despite the watchful eye of the glaring ref.

Boiziau, still on the ice due to the defenseman's longer shifts, was close enough to hear and immediately flashed them a sharp smirk. “Esti de câlîce de tabarnak, c'est pas possible comment que t'es cave!” Even Ilya, who did not have a very good ear for accents, could hear how distinctly Quebecois the statement was.

Victor scoffed. “Stupid Canadian assholes, bastardizing our language,” he sniffed.

Shane, headed toward the bench after discussing something with a linesman, skated between them and made a sharp, cutting remark in precise French that got both Boiziau and Victor laughing, though Victor was quick to stifle it as if he were embarrassed that an opposing captain had made him laugh.

Ilya wasn’t really paying attention to Victor’s disloyalty, though. He stiffened a little at the sound of Shane speaking French. He didn’t understand the words, but he knew the accent. Shane caught his eye, and Ilya felt his eyes narrow. Shane tilted his chin up. “Ben, que veux-tu?” Shane asked Ilya in a low tone as he skated past, arrogantly cutting through the center of the circle.

Ilya’s eyes followed him back to the bench. He felt a little warm beneath all of his gear. He shuffled a little on his skates, then widened his stance. *Fucking French.*

“Oh my god,” Cliff muttered. “Get your fucking head in the game, Roz, this shit is embarrassing.”

Ilya shook himself, then bent down. Shane was watching, after all, and Ilya hadn’t been lying about his girl Jane enjoying a good game of hockey. In fact, he had probably downplayed it.

Ilya caught Shane’s eye from the bench again as someone passed him a tablet. Shane didn’t look at the screen. He looked at Ilya.

Shane raised an eyebrow, and he might as well have dropped his glove on the ice. Ilya recognized a thrown gauntlet when he saw one.

Play resumed. He got the puck.

It only took Ilya *ten* seconds to score. All tied up.

+++

In the end, the Bears won, but it was only because the Montreal Voyageurs, excluding Shane, were so fucking incompetent.

Obviously.

Really, sometimes Ilya had to remind himself that they were actually the twice-reigning champions of the Stanley Cup, because half of the team certainly didn't play like it. But, ah, well. It worked out for him, he supposed, that only Shane's linemates and Boiziau had managed to put any points up in that night's final score of 5-4.

It had been a great game, though. Bears vs. Voyageurs games were often intense and energetic, but usually there were far more penalties drawn by both sides. That night, it had simply been a frenzy of goals that had driven the audience into an ecstatic mania. It was the best of both worlds for their fans—they had equal opportunity to heartily boo the other team, to celebrate Boston's victory, and to silently revel in a high-scoring game, which were usually more exciting than low-scoring games or shut-outs. Oregon was pouting, but Drapeau had done even worse than him in terms of save percentages, and there was no one in the entire league that Oregon hated more than Patrice Drapeau, so their goalie wasn't too despondent.

Ilya let Ryan and Cliff hoist him onto their shoulders in the locker room, reveling in the joy that always came from beating their generational enemy. Everyone was flying high, and they had wrapped it up in regulation time, denying the Voyageurs any points in the league standings.

A very good night.

Ilya had a few ideas on how to make it even better.

"Yo, does anyone have Boozy's number?" Cliff asked in the locker room afterward. "Or Pike's, for that matter?"

"You can't be serious," Johansson exclaimed. "You are actually going to take them out for drinks?"

"In the name of good sportsmanship, why the fuck not?" Cliff shot back. "We just beat their asses! Not like I'm embarrassed!"

Ilya was already staring at his phone.

Jane 🇨🇦 🤪 🌊

Lucky.

You
no. your team is just terrible

You played well.
But delete that text, and don't mention teams. (Delete this one too.)

boring
but okay

did i impress you?
did it turn you on?

Bubbles. More bubbles. Ilya had to turn his eyes skyward for a moment, actually disgusted with himself.

Jane 🇨🇦 🤔 🌊

You're always very impressive. Lily.
Good job.

God. What was Ilya going to do about this? His heart was racing faster than it had during the entire game.

A large hand with worn knuckles snatched his phone away. Ilya gasped in outrage, spinning to face Cliff, who held the phone—screen turned off, thankfully—in the air above his head in challenge.

“Rozanov the Terrible!” Cliff called, backing away as the team laughed. “You look fucking ridiculous, man! I thought Russians didn’t blush, huh? Come on, dude, did you hear anything I just said, or was *Jane* distracting you?”

Ilya squared his stance and lowered his shoulders, getting ready to tackle Cliff, before Victor and Connor seized him around the waist, both laughing. “Bro, bro, bro!” Connor said, fighting to pin Ilya’s arms to his side as they quickly devolved into a two-on-one wrestling match. “Take it easy, dude!”

“Our dear Capitaine is in love,” Victor cooed, making kissy noises near Ilya’s ear. “How adorable!”

“But the brotherhood comes first!” Cliff declared, still holding Ilya’s phone. “For tonight, at least! Rozy, we’re going out, capeesh? Will you answer me now? I fucking asked if you had Hollander’s number?”

Faintly, Ilya heard Feller mutter, “Why would he ask if-” and then a grunt, probably as Cadyn elbowed him again.

“Drinking with the enemy,” Johansson booed, not paying the rookies any heed.

“And you’re not invited,” Cliff said. “Points-only boys’ night! Maybe that’ll give you all some fucking incentive next time to actually show up.” He waggled Ilya’s phone again. “Cap?”

Ilya stared at Cliff, trying to figure out his ploy. “Yes,” he said. “I have Hollander’s number. Got it at the Olympics, which none of you fuckers were good enough to be at,” he added, before anyone could question him. For good measure, Ilya planted his full palm over Connor’s face and shoved him away.

“Great,” Cliff said, tossing Ilya his phone. “Get him to round up his troops.”

“Tout suite!” Victor chirped, fully nude. Except he had put his sunglasses back on.

Ilya grinned.

+++

Jane 🇨🇦 🤔💧
No.

You
yes you are coming

No.

yes!

No.

yes yes yes yes yes
come onnnnn, we both know who can last longer at this game
and at other things 🤔🤔

I hate you.

not what you said this morning
i think you like me, jane
i won! give me my reward
yes
please?

...
...
...

ugh, you don't know what you do to me 🤔🤔🤔

What??
Never mind. I don't want to know.
Fine, I guess. But only H and J are coming.

they are the only ones invited
maybe now i can reward you later 🤔
as thank you

Yuck.
Where are we meeting you?

i will send address
wear something cute
or something slutty
dealers choice

Never mind, I'm not coming.

liar 
see you soon

+++

Shane arrived at the bar in a dressed-down version of the suit he had worn into the arena. All of Shane's suits were tailored but not very tight, and absolutely none of them were interesting. Shane wore blue, black, grey, or brown. His shirts were always white. His ties were always solid colors. He usually didn't wear any designer labels unless he was sponsored. Ilya much preferred him out of his clothes than in one of his generic, personality-void getups.

Ilya braced himself against the bar as he chatted with Cliff, Victor, Ryan, and Connor (Ilya's best friends, predictably, were also the best players on the ice; it was probably why Cliff had worded his challenge that way). Ilya kept an eye on the door throughout their conversation, so he was already watching when Shane, Pike, and Boiziau entered.

Pike and Boiziau had changed into casual clothes, straight-legged jeans and ill-fitting polo shirts, practically broadcasting their straightness. Ilya wanted to roll his eyes, but he was a little busy staring at Shane.

Shane had not changed out of his suit, but he had abandoned the jacket and tie. His slacks were charcoal gray and his shirt was white, untucked just enough that it hung a little loose around his waist, only emphasizing the way his belt nipped it in. The first few buttons were undone, exposing a tight, almost sheer undershirt beneath.

His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, the fabric folded back neatly.

Ilya swallowed.

"Here we fucking go," Cliff said, laughing at him before he stood up, raising a hand.
"Hollzy! Dudes, over here."

"Hollzy?" Ilya heard Pike whisper from clear across the bar. "He calls you Hollzy? Since when?"

"Everyone calls me Hollzy, Hayd," Shane explained with commendable long-suffering patience. "Come on, guys." He turned, walking toward the group of Bears.

He was unbelievably gorgeous. Ilya had the strong urge to cross the bar and wrap himself around him, maybe try to swallow him whole—or, if not, at least get his arm, body, and thigh touching every part of him possible, thus hiding him from view.

The outfit was so *basic*. Shane looked so *good* in it. Ilya was in *love*.

And he really didn't know what the fuck he was going to do about it.

“Welcome, fuckers,” Cliff began eloquently, holding up his half-finished beer. “What’s your poison?”

They were in a sports bar dedicated to Boston’s Major League Baseball team, where they would hopefully be mostly anonymous to the local population. The scene was dead that night anyway, only a handful of other patrons present, either watching television or sitting in the booths.

“I don’t drink during the season,” Shane said blandly. He hesitated for a moment, eyes sweeping over Ilya’s friends, and then he sat down on the stool next to Ilya. “Ginger ale?” he asked the bartender.

Boiziau slapped his hands on the counter, obnoxiously crowding into the space between Ilya’s stool and his captain, as if he were trying to physically block Shane with his body. On his other side, Pike did the same, and Shane let out a quiet, discontented sigh. “Well, I do drink!” Boiziau declared exuberantly. “Especially when I am drinking with the enemy, eh?”

“Yeah, I definitely need a beer for this,” Pike grumbled, glaring distrustfully at the Bears. “I don’t even know why we’re here.”

“I said you didn’t have to come,” Shane said, tone sharp enough that it made Ilya square his shoulders a little, almost like he was going to square up with Pike. Ilya and Shane had never had a physical fight on the ice, but he had exchanged blows with Shane’s best friend once or twice (or three times, admittedly, but one of those occasions had been in their rookie year, and Pike had instigated, so it probably didn’t count).

“We’re here because *you* wanted to come!” Pike exclaimed, oblivious. His wife must be long-suffering too, Ilya thought. Most of the WAGs were. “You never want to go out, then all of a sudden fucking Marly offers to grab a beer with you, and now you want to get drinks with him?”

“Marly is not even the worst of it,” Boiziau joined in, both of the Voyageurs acting like they weren’t standing in the midst of a huddle of Bears. Over Shane’s head, Ilya met Victor’s eyes and made a face. “Fucking Rozanov is here! You fucking hate Rozanov, Capitaine! You won’t get a beer with the supermodels who are obsessed with you, but you will with *Rozanov*?”

“I don’t hate Rozanov,” Shane said immediately. He was turning his ginger ale around and around on the counter, spinning it and smearing condensation across his palms. “I don’t hate any of the Bears.” He took a small, anxious sip. “Team camaraderie is important, guys. We should... learn to get along.”

“With *Rozanov*?” Boiziau demanded, while Pike grimaced, and Cliff shouted, “Here, here! And in the name of getting along, we should also do a round of shots together, eh, boys?”

“Right now, preferably,” Ryan said, glancing at the door. “I need to be drunk for this.”

“I love tequila,” Connor added helpfully.

Ilya boldly reached behind Boiziau's back and set his hand on the nape of Shane's neck, cupping it just for a second. He felt the tension in Shane's body rise, and then, probably as a conscious action on Shane's part, release. Ilya let his hand drop away, not wanting to stress him out unnecessarily, and Shane shot him a quick, thankful smile. "Yes, yes, shots for everybody except Mr. Toxic Diet Culture," Ilya said, knocking his knuckles on the bar with a friendly smile as the bartender returned to their group. She quickly complied, lining up glasses for all of them, and though he grumbled, even Pike picked one up.

They drank, except for Shane, and things got a little easier once the alcohol was flowing.

"That hit in the third was dirty and you know it!" Pike was spitting less than five minutes later while Cliff laughed in his face and taunted him.

"Just 'cause your captain can't take a hit-" Cliff instigated.

"Eh! Do not slander the Capitaine!" Boiziau shouted, too loud for inside. "That is last year's MVP you are speaking of!"

"Roz won MVP first," Victor said. "I think he is le capitaine in this bar."

"Shane got the Calder," Pike said loyally.

"Roz was first in the draft," Cliff said.

"And had the first Cup!" Connor added.

"Shane's got twice as many Cups and two Conn Smyths!" Pike shouted.

Ilya and Shane kept silent, watching their teammates volley compliments back and forth. Beneath the bar, Shane tapped his shoe against the toe of Ilya's. Ilya's hand grazed the side of his thigh. Their eyes found each other, and they smiled shyly. Usually, it was Ilya and Shane performing this routine, but it was sort of nice to hear the compliment battle coming from their friends.

The argument kept escalating until Boiziau slammed his empty glass onto the table and challenged Ryan to a duel over their captains' honors. "We shall decide like gentlemen!" he declared, pointing across the room, a confident smirk on his attractive face. "Darts!"

"Oh god," Pike groaned, immediately looking at Shane, who took a pensive sip of his drink.

"Sure," Ryan said, standing. "We've already beaten you once tonight, why not a second? Connor, you wanna play?"

"Hell yes," Connor said, jumping up.

"Ahah!" Boiziau laughed, face lighting up. "Oh, you want to play teams? It is your funeral. Hollzy, come help me put them into the dirt."

Shane didn't object to this request, standing with the rest of them. "Okay," he said mildly, amused. He was probably just pleased that no one was physically fighting yet.

Boiziau passed Ilya, headed for the dartboard with Connor and Ryan, already loudly protesting the distance of the starting line. Shane stood, and Ilya caught his wrist subtly while their bodies turned. Shane glanced at him, and their wrists twisted in such a way that Ilya's glanced off the frigid aluminum of the ginger ale can.

"Ilya-

"So you decided on something slutty," Ilya cut him off in a low murmur, dragging his eyes up and down Shane's outfit. Then he met Shane's eyes again. "I approve," he said, elongating the rumble in the 'r' because it always made Shane shiver.

Right on cue.

Pike knocked into Ilya's shoulder, almost spilling ginger ale over Shane's fingers. "Let go of him, dude."

"Hayd," Shane sighed. "It's alright. You need to calm down. Or go back to the hotel room. At this point, I don't care which." He turned on his heel and stalked away.

"Bro, I just don't get it!" Pike said, trailing after him like a puppy. "You could be with Boston Lily right now!" he hissed, poorly lowering his voice.

Standing beside Ilya, Cliff choked on his drink. "*Lily?* Fucking *Lily*, dude?"

"Shut the fuck up," Ilya said, but he was grinning.

If Shane chose to do something, it was usually because he had already attempted it, practiced it, and perfected it. He dominated at darts, as it turned out. Ilya hadn't known that about him, but he was happy to stand on the sidelines, cheering him on raucously as Boiziau and Victor finally found common ground in lamenting Hollander's perfect aim, on and off the ice. Shane did not gloat, but he did get a pleased look in his eyes and a cocky jut to his jaw every time his darts whizzed into the inner and outer bullseyes, surrounded by the much worse attempts of his fellow players.

Ilya loved watching Shane win almost as much as he loved learning new things about him.

He whooped and hollered and made a nuisance of himself, jostling Pike and Cliff in equal measure. He did another round of shots with the boys and was sure that Pike almost punched him when Ilya practically ran forward to clink their shot glasses together in a toast before he downed it. "To the Bears!" he whooped, throwing it back. Pike grumbled something but his annoyance didn't stop him from matching Ilya shot for shot. And Ilya was extremely pleased to note that he could hold his alcohol much better than Montreal's fifteenth-best player.

The night progressed. Victor and Pike ended up at a bar-height table together, showing off pictures of their wives as they slumped drunkenly and shouted over each other. A West Coast game started on the TV in a corner of the room, and Ilya saw Ryan and Boiziau standing shoulder-to-shoulder, loudly complaining about jet lag and Denver's altitude. Connor started chatting up a chick at the bar who was at least six inches taller than him, Cliff was talking to the blonde bartender, and Shane had finally drifted back to Ilya's side. It took Herculean

strength for Ilya not to immediately wrap an arm over his shoulders and drag him into a kiss. Ilya had never enjoyed the flavor of ginger ale (a fact which he would not admit to Shane under threat of death or deportation), but he very much wanted to lick the taste off Shane's teeth.

Shane glanced at him, still fidgeting. "I'm surprised there hasn't been bloodshed yet," he said, nodding to where their friends were now intermingling. He winced slightly. "It'd be a different story if Comeau or Drapeau were here, but this is going better than I thought it would, honestly."

"Thank you for coming tonight anyway," Ilya said. They were standing close enough, and the fit of Shane's shirt was loose enough, that he could gently nudge his elbow into Shane's side without it being obvious to anyone who might glance at them. "Very brave of you."

"Shut up," Shane grumbled.

"No, I will not be silent. You are brave, and a good friend, and slow on the ice but an okay shot, and congratulations, Montreal is such a trash team that you are its number one player! Yes!"

Shane glared, but his eyes were alight with mirth. "And you are drunk."

Ilya gasped in outrage. "Drunk? I am not drunk. Off of a few measly shots and shitty Boston beer? How dare you accuse me of this! You insult my whole bloodline!"

Shane raised a hand to hide his snickering.

Ilya shifted, just a little closer. Fuck it, maybe he should blame this on the alcohol. "But is okay," he whispered. "I will let you insult me for now. You look so fucking sexy, I can find it in my heart to forgive your rudeness."

Shane shimmied his shoulders a little. Ilya had to bite his lip hard to stop his smile from spreading. "I'm rude, am I?" Shane asked.

"Yes." Ilya nodded. "Very rude. Have not even congratulated me once on my very impressive win over Montreal. We are ancient divisional rivals, you know?"

"Rivals?" Shane hummed. "Well, then, congratulations are in order, I suppose." Then he tilted his head back and downed the rest of his drink, throat working in exaggerated swallows, a little line of bubbling liquid dripping from the corner of his mouth. Shane stroked his thumb erotically down the side of the can while Ilya watched, riveted. He lowered it and slowly stuck his tongue out, licking up the bit that had spilled.

"Fuck," Ilya said. "Bathroom."

He grabbed Shane's wrist. Shane didn't object.

He also didn't object when Ilya surreptitiously dragged him across the room, ducking behind tables and chairs to hide from their teammates as he herded Shane to the back.

The bar's bathroom was small but had two stalls, so the outer door didn't lock. Ilya shoved Shane past the sink and into the larger stall, flipping the flimsy latch, and then he was on Shane fully, one hand on his shoulder and the other in his hair as he backed him toward the wall.

"We can't," Shane said, but he was already raising his hands. By the time Ilya's mouth was on his, his fingers had carded through his curls, and he was holding on tightly. Holding Ilya in place as he gasped his name.

Ilya, at least, *could* blame the alcohol. Shane didn't have that excuse. Ilya felt a little glimmer of pride for how easily he could undo Shane Hollander.

"Ilya," Shane murmured, their hips moving together. Ilya was wearing denim, which felt rough and pleasant against his half-hard dick, but Shane's pants were a soft, malleable material. Ilya hoped they felt good as well. "Ilya. Not here."

"Then we go back to mine," Ilya agreed, still kissing him, speaking with their mouths pressed together and Shane's hands in his hair and Ilya's thumb pressed to the plump shape of Shane's bottom lip. "Right now. Immediately."

"Okay," Shane said.

Ilya wanted to drop to his knees and suck him off, get two fingers inside of him with nothing but spit until Shane was moaning loud enough for the entire bar to hear. His teammates would high-five him on their way out the door. He kissed him harder. Shane pulled his tongue into his mouth, then nipped at it.

"Not here," he repeated, dropping a hand to Ilya's chest. He groped the firm, fatty muscle of his pecs. Ilya moaned and spat a curse in Russian. Shane squeezed again, then shoved him away, and yet his head craned forward for a moment longer, mouth instinctively trying to stay linked to Ilya's even as their bodies came apart.

"You send mixed messages," Ilya panted, but he hadn't taken his hand off Shane's face either, and the other had somehow ended up on Shane's belt, fiddling with the buckle.

"Let's go," Shane said, pushing Ilya's hand off. He took a deep breath, as if he were steeling himself, and then finally unlatched his fingers from their tight, careful grip on Ilya's hair. "I have to get out of here, Jesus Christ."

He turned his back on Ilya, readjusted himself, and then rolled his shoulders. Ilya watched, enraptured by the view. He reached out, fingertips grazing the loose material of Shane's shirt over the dip in his spine, like a puppy biting its own leash.

Shane unlocked the door and stepped out, immediately heading toward the mirror, fingers already trying to ruffle his own hair into shape (as if he had not thoroughly destroyed Ilya's curl pattern) and running a thumb over his lower lip.

Fuck. He really didn't know what he did to Ilya.

Ilya followed behind him, peering around Shane's shoulder. "If you have a drink, maybe two," he suggested, "maybe the boys will think you are flushed for a different reason, hmm? Good cover. Good plan, Hollander."

Shane glared, unimpressed. "This is your fault."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "You pretend to give your ginger ale a blow job, so is not my fault," he said, and Shane blushed harder. "I have to look at you in this perfect outfit all night, and it is my fault? Watch you flexing your pretty arms, making them all look so bad at darts? Shane, you know it turns me on when you are showing how fucking good at things you are." Shane sniffed but couldn't hide the way he preened at the praise. Ilya shuffled a little closer, not fully pressing himself against Shane's back, but enough to feel the warmth. "So good at so many things," he cooed. He leaned closer, lips nearly touching the shell of Shane's ear, the sound of their teammates' voices in the bar a distant and unimportant reminder of the reality that awaited them. "Except that weak backhand."

Shane's laugh was bright and ringing as he spun around, grinning into Ilya's face.

Between their stomachs, their hands found each other's, fingers lacing together just as the bathroom door burst open and Pike and Boiziau stumbled through. Cliff and Ryan were right at their backs, and Cliff had one hand hooked into Pike's shirt collar, clearly having been trying to hold him back from busting into the tiny restroom.

Pike and Boiziau entered with angry, aggressive expressions on their faces, but within a millisecond, they were wiped clean by pure astonishment.

All four of their teammates froze, crammed together in the entryway, staring.

Ilya gave himself and Shane a cursory glance. Shane's face was still flushed, and Ilya's hair was a mess. Their lips were perhaps slightly swollen, but not really enough to be noticeable. They had all their clothes on, and they weren't pressed together or making out.

They were just... holding hands. In an empty bathroom. And standing with about an inch of space between their bodies.

Shane sighed.

"What—what—" Pike looked like he might be having an aneurysm.

"Wh—get off of him!" Boiziau hollered, surging forward, big hands waving in the air, and Ilya shifted his feet so that he was blocking most of Shane's body behind his own, but he defiantly did not drop Shane's hand.

And Shane didn't let go of him either.

"JJ, it's fine!" Shane said loudly. "Seriously, it's fine. I'm good."

"What," Pike repeated, caught on a loop. Cliff gave him a good shove, sending him stumbling into the small bathroom so that they could all pile inside and let the door close

behind them. The bartender probably thought they were doing blow or something, but it was better than letting any of the bar's other patrons overhear this.

Cliff folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the door, functionally acting like a lock. Ilya shot him a grateful look.

"Capitaine, what?" Boiziau declared, looking rapidly between their joined hands and their faces, his already large eyes getting wider and wider. "What on earth!"

"Um," Pike added. He hadn't even reacted to Cliff's shove, though on the ice he would have been throwing hands by now. His aneurysm had already rapidly advanced into a stroke, apparently.

Shane sighed again. "God," he muttered, then shouldered Ilya out of the way so they could stand side by side. "Listen, guys, it's—I'm sorry that you had to find out like this." He did look sorry, Ilya noticed, studying the side of his face. He also looked embarrassed, and pained, and scared. He did not look like he was on the verge of a panic attack, though, and something loosened in Ilya's chest. Shane took a deep breath. "I know—I know how crazy this must seem, and I promise, I was going to tell you soon, I just... I didn't know how?"

"Tabarnak," Boiziau said.

"Tell us... what?" Pike asked cautiously.

Shane glanced at Ilya, who was already staring at him, waiting to see what would happen next. "I—I like men," Shane said, and then quickly, "I like Ilya. I have for a long time. Fuck, I know this is so weird, but... I can try and explain everything, but... um." He bit his lip and squeezed Ilya's hand. Ilya shifted a little, then scooted his foot over so he could tap his shoe against Shane's. Shane breathed in. "I like men," he repeated. "Ilya and I are together. We've been together for a long time." He winced. "Sort of. It only just got serious. And because of that, I was going to tell you soon, and I'm sorry you found out like this. Genuinely, I'm so sorry."

Ryan and Cliff were still guarding the door. Ilya studied Boiziau but couldn't make out any emotions on his face except for sheer astonishment as he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, so he turned his attention to Pike.

Shane's grip was growing tighter. Soon, it would be hard enough to break his pinky, but Ilya didn't pull away or reprimand him.

Pike looked just as surprised as Boiziau, but his expression was narrowing slightly. Ilya wanted to shoulder his way in front of Shane again as the silence in the bathroom grew oppressive, but he didn't move.

"This will not be a problem, yes?" Ilya asked, rolling his shoulders a little.

Pike snapped. "Will what be a problem, exactly?" he demanded, head swiveling back and forth between Shane and Ilya, even though he was only standing a few feet away from them.

“What the fuck is this? Are you fucking with us right now? Is that what this whole night is? Is this—is this some kind of fucked up prank? Are we actually being hazed right now?”

Shane laughed.

The bathroom was small, and the six fully grown men standing outside the stalls filled what little space there was, so it couldn't really echo off the walls, but it was loud enough. Loud and sharp and hysterical.

It was Ilya's turn to hold his hand hard enough to break bones.

“So it is?” Pike insisted. “It is a prank? What the fuck, man?” he asked with a nervous chuckle.

Shane's strained laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun. He looked at Ilya, and Ilya raised his eyebrows. He thought Shane knew him well enough to know what the expression meant and everything he was offering in that moment; if Shane wanted him to knock Pike's teeth out, he would. If Shane wanted him to give both of these dumbasses permanent memory loss to hopefully erase this encounter from their minds, he would do it. If Shane wanted Ilya to sweep him into his arms, shoulder past his asshole teammates, and carry him into the night, Ilya would do it, and damn the fucking consequences. He would do anything.

Shane dredged up a smile. He shook his head and turned back to face Pike. “It's not a prank,” he said, voice suddenly exhausted. They had woken up early after an emotionally wrought day and just played three hours of intense hockey, and it suddenly seemed to crash down on Shane's shoulders. “It's not a joke, and I—I can't really explain it. Not right now. I mean, not here. We're in a fucking bar bathroom, for god's sake. God, this was so fucking dumb.” Shane ran a hand through his hair, and Ilya only let himself admire the flex of his bicep through his shirt for a second before he tuned back in. “God, this is just really, really not how I wanted you to find out.”

“You are not fucking with us,” Boiziau said slowly. “And...” he glanced over his shoulder at Cliff and Ryan. “You all know? None of you drugged me, right?” he asked suspiciously. “Laced my drink with something insane enough to explain this? No, never mind, I do not think there is any drug in the universe that could make me hallucinate this. I am simply not imaginative enough.” And he threw his hands up in the air in surrender.

“Hey, man, if it helps, we only learned yesterday,” Cliff said. “What a mindfuck, right?”

“Give it a minute to sink in,” Ryan advised.

“I'll explain tomorrow,” Shane promised. “Really explain, I mean. Or, when we get back to Montreal, I guess. I promise I'll explain everything.”

“It's not the gay thing,” Pike blurted. His voice was squeaky. Shane winced. “To be clear! I don't give a single flying fuck if you're gay, dude! And I'll fucking beat the shit out of anyone who does, buddy, you gotta know that!”

“Thanks, Hayds,” Shane said, still grimacing.

“But, uh, but-” Pike floundered. “Fucking Rozanov?”

“Rozanov,” Shane agreed simply, and Ilya felt warm.

Cliff, loyal to the end, objected, “Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” and was completely ignored.

“You’re sure this isn’t a prank?” Pike asked.

“Nope,” Shane said, almost apologetically.

“But Boston Lily,” Pike said, heartbroken.

Ilya laughed. “You always said you wanted to meet her, Hayd,” Shane said, and raised his and Ilya’s joined hands between them, showing off the way their knuckles overlapped.

“Now’s your chance. I guess.”

“Criss,” Boiziau muttered.

Pike’s jaw dropped. “No fucking way.”

“Way,” Ilya said, and dragged their hands to his mouth so he could kiss Shane’s knuckles.

The door opened, and Connor stuck his head in around the frame. “Um, everything alright?” he asked.

Victor’s head appeared over his. “You are all being a little loud,” he informed them politely.

Shane laughed again, covering his face with his free hand. Ilya smiled and pressed another kiss to his knuckles. “Probably we should get going then,” he said suggestively. Boiziau and Pike blanched, but all the Bears laughed.

“Are you always going to act like this now that we know?” Cliff asked. “God, they are gonna make Montreal-Boston games even more insufferable.”

“Wait, right, you already knew?” Pike objected. “Shane! How come they knew before us?”

“Hayden, come on,” Shane said, turning his face up.

Ilya gazed at him, amazed.

Ryan snorted. “Fucking lovebirds. You two are lucky,” he said to Pike and Boiziau. “When we walked in on them, they were both shirtless.”

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Their game had ended in the late afternoon but it was almost midnight by the time Ilya and Shane stumbled back to his house.

Neither of them were drunk but Ilya felt like the world was spinning.

They stumbled through the foyer, door slamming shut behind them, grasping every inch they could reach, mouths pressed together with so much desperation that Ilya couldn't have seen anything even if his eyes had been open. He was already hard, and he could feel Shane's erection pressed against him as they stumbled, kicking their shoes off. Shane had both his hands under the hem of Ilya's shirt, and Ilya was pushing a finger into Shane's mouth alongside his tongue as he shoved him down the hallway, not bothering to turn on the lights.

Ilya slammed Shane against the glass wall across from his kitchen island. Shane moaned into his mouth, pressing his shoulders flat to the wall so that he could thrust his hips out harder. Without Ilya even needing to do anything, Shane raised both his hands above his head and held them there, as though he were pinned at the wrists. Ilya panted into his mouth like a dog, feeling crazed with lust.

"You were so brave," he whispered. "Brave, and so fucking beautiful. Fuck, Hollander."

"Take me apart," Shane begged, eyes scrunched closed, almost looking pained as he gasped. "Make me forget."

"Yes, okay, yes," Ilya agreed desperately, hands flying down to tug the front of Shane's shirt out of his pants, reaching for the buckle and zipper.

Then, perhaps predictably by that point, they were interrupted.

Someone coughed loudly. They sprang apart as if they had been electrocuted.

Ilya took a moment to reboot. He took another moment to understand what he was looking at as he spun to face his kitchen, one palm extended. "Svetlana!" he shouted, glaring at his best friend, who was sitting at his counter in a vintage Bears jersey, face ominously underlit by her phone. "What—you fucking scared the *shit* out of me! Stop doing this!"

"Oh my god," Shane muttered, backing into the window with a thump. "*Again?* Ilya, change your fucking door code!"

"Oh, I will," he promised, pressing a hand to his chest as his heart stopped racing. "Blyat."

Svetlana laughed. "I would say, 'surprise,' but I think we are past that now." She waved.

Shane blanched.

"It's fine," Ilya reassured him quickly, jumping back toward him so he could put a hand on Shane's shoulder. "She is very old, very good friend. She will not tell anyone."

"Also, I am bisexual as well," Svetlana chimed in happily.

"Oh," Shane said. "Good for... you?"

She stood up, long legs unfolding from where they had been curled on the stool, sitting in the darkness at his counter and scrolling on her phone like a psychopath. She padded around the counter, barefoot. Ilya and Shane both stood stock-still, letting her observe them. She held out her hand to Shane. He took it automatically, because Yuna Hollander had raised a gentleman.

“Hello, Shane Hollander. I am Svetlana Vetrova,” she introduced. “Your secret is very safe with me. You may call me Sveta. I am a big fan.”

“Oh.” Shane’s voice was strangled, but it was strange, because Ilya could almost hear him fighting against the urge to fall into his regular media-trained persona when encountering a fan, even though Ilya knew for a fact that he was still rock hard in his trousers. “Thanks, that’s—that’s nice. I’ve actually met your dad. Great, uh, he was a great goalie.” He winced.

Ilya was so amused that it snapped him out of his shock. “Hollander, you are so fucking pathetic.”

Shane didn’t even protest.

“Thank you,” Svetlana said primly. “I hope that means Ilya has mentioned me before?”

“Um....” Shane trailed off helplessly. “Yes.” He coughed. “Sort of. In a... way.”

She immediately turned on Ilya. “What did you say?”

Ilya spluttered. “Nothing!” he objected, probably too loudly and too fast. “I told him you are an old friend from Russia who lives in Boston and sells nice cars! *And I said you were a big fan of his, but don’t mention that again because his ego doesn’t need to be inflated by you,*” he added in Russian.

She raised an eyebrow. “*Oh, his ego is the problem?*” she said, rolling her eyes at Ilya. “What did he tell you?” she asked Shane, folding her arms over her chest.

“Um...” Shane looked very quickly between the two of them and then sealed his mouth shut, his expression visibly shutting down.

“*Goddamnit, Svet,*” Ilya groaned, running a hand down his face. “*What do you think I told him? I said you’re my oldest friend and that we fuck sometimes because it’s convenient. But he’s shy! You can’t just bring it up like this!*”

She crossed her arms. “*Convenient,*” she repeated. Ilya winced.

“*You know what I mean,*” he grumbled. “*And it is your word, you used it first. I am just repeating what you always say!*”

She looked deeply unimpressed. “Do you tell all of your partners about the other people you are fucking?” she asked, in English, of course, because she secretly hated him and was on a campaign to ruin his life. Shane had already been blushing but it spread to his ears. “And,” Svetlana continued, sniffing, “it is rude to speak Russian around him when we all know English. Shane,” she continued before Ilya could get a word in edgewise, “I hope you know that you have no competition from me. Ilya is very dear to me, but there has never been anything more than friendship between us. My standards are far, far too high to date him. In fact,” she took a step forward and pointedly grabbed Shane’s arm, linking their elbows together and tugging him toward the living room, “we should begin working on *your*

standards. In the meantime, I promise I will help you teach him some manners, okay? Together, maybe we can whip him into shape.”

Shane’s mouth opened and closed but, apparently, he couldn’t think of anything to say as he let the willowy woman drag him toward Ilya’s living room.

“Sveta!” Ilya shouted, following them and making sure to stomp. “How dare you! You cannot steal my boyfriend from me and tell him that I am a bad partner!”

Shane stopped gawping for long enough to let out a strangled, “Boyfriend?”

Svetlana stopped at the couch, still holding onto Shane, and looked between them.

“Uh,” Ilya said, raising a hand to pick at his ear. “Er. Sure, right? Boyfriends. Why not?” he asked hopefully.

Shane blinked at him. Then he nodded.

Svetlana looked delighted (with herself, of course. Never with Ilya). “I will include this in my best woman’s speech when you are married,” she said, shoving Shane onto the couch and climbing onto the cushion next to him, folding her feet beneath herself like a pretzel. She didn’t give Shane any time to react, instead placing both hands on his knee and declaring, “Now, tell me everything. Ilya has been very tight-lipped about you, Jane, don’t worry—but now that I officially know, I expect to be told all the details. When did you first get together?”

And suddenly Shane started laughing. Ilya had been tensing for an implosion, or at least a negative reaction to Svetlana’s bossy, touchy nature, but Shane didn’t tense under her hands like he had beneath Cliff’s, and even now, he didn’t pull away. Quietly, Ilya padded further into the room and plopped himself on the end of the sectional by their feet. Shane tilted his head and smiled at him, still red as a tomato (*moy pomidor*, Ilya thought, maybe a little deliriously). “I don’t think you want to hear that story, actually,” Shane laughed. “It, uh—well, I could say that it’s not the polite conversation I usually make with women I’ve just met, but I don’t think you’d appreciate that sentiment either.”

She laughed, her real laugh, not her customer-service sexy chuckle, and shot Ilya an approving look. Ilya could only shrug and nod helplessly in agreement. “I am not a liar,” he said, trying to justify himself.

Svetlana rolled her eyes and touched Shane’s wrist lightly. Shane still didn’t flinch away from her touch and it warmed Ilya to see. Maybe that was just how Shane was wired—he liked pushy, inappropriate Russians who walked all over his boundaries.

Ilya was grateful for it.

“He can be very silly,” Svetlana said, “but I think you have him well in hand.”

“Well, we’re kind of new to this, I guess,” Shane said, shy and warm, just a hint defensively. “But... thanks.” Then he turned and glared at Ilya, who immediately raised his hands. “I

didn't really appreciate what you said about her either, just so you know."

"Mhm, sorry," Ilya said, bobbing his head.

Svetlana chuckled. "Shane, you do not know how long I have been waiting to have someone to gossip about him with," she said, and Ilya gasped, immediately protesting. She spoke over him. "I am sleeping over tonight," she informed Ilya loudly, "but I will take the couch. I know how you are. I would not risk the guest bedroom—it shares walls with your room," she said, tossing her hair in a way that made her curls bounce like a waterfall. Ilya laughed, loud and hard, and Shane tried to burrow into the cushions. "Tell me, Shanya," she said, and Ilya decided he quite liked the sound of that, "last week, Ilya was filling his cabinets with seaweed supplements and tofu and insisting it was 'just casual.' What changed his mind?"

"Um," Shane said, glancing at Ilya again. "It's... kind of an embarrassing story."

Svetlana smiled. "My favorite kind."

"Before we get to that," Ilya interjected, "guess what color his boxers are?"

Shane launched a throw pillow at his head. Even off the ice, his aim was impeccable.

+++

Waking up with Shane Hollander in his bed two mornings in a row. Ilya was on a roll.

He felt almost manic with joy, waking up curled around Shane, this time still asleep in his arms. It was another early morning, though the sun had risen this time, and he knew Shane would not be able to stay long after breakfast. Or maybe Shane could request to travel separately, Ilya thought hopefully, running the tip of his nose over the crown of Shane's skull. Montreal and Boston both had the day off before home games tomorrow. If Shane got last-minute permission to travel separately, maybe they could squeeze out one more morning. Ilya was dizzy at the prospect.

It wasn't guaranteed. Nothing was.

But he would mention the possibility to Shane, just in case.

There had been times in Ilya's life, stretches that lasted for weeks or months, when he felt as though he were only living for the next time he would see Shane. The longest stretch had been after he had won MVP. Technically, the six months beforehand, when he was ghosting all of Shane's texts, was the longest they had gone without speaking to each other since the CCM commercial, but after the MVP, Ilya had felt a looming sense of dread hanging over him from the moment he woke up in his condo in Moscow until the pre-season game in October. Though vets often didn't travel for preseason games, Ilya had requested to travel to Montreal to play Hollander, claiming he wanted more practice with a rookie left-winger.

Even though their texts over the summer had been friendly enough, it wasn't until Hollander opened up the back door of his murder alley apartment and nearly tripped Ilya while racing him up the stairs that Ilya had relaxed.

He'd thought he had ruined something in Las Vegas. He had worried that Shane's quiet little, "So, uh, I'm off," from the other room, after Ilya kicked him out of bed and didn't even walk him to the door, would be the last private conversation he ever heard from Hollander.

In Las Vegas, Shane had leaned into him, clumsily trying to talk to Ilya after sex, and Ilya had bullied him out of the room. He had done the same thing in Sochi, pushing him until Hollander finally caved and ran. In the two and a half years since Vegas and the day Ilya made tuna melts for them and asked him to stay, a lot had changed about the way they acted with each other. They were a little older. Ilya had learned how to be a little kinder. They were both more careful. Shane had learned some of his pressure spots and how to glide his fingers over them instead of pushing in.

Pushing forward, pulling away, shoving off, diving headfirst. It was their aching, stupid, ridiculous, time-wasting dance, and it had lasted for years, and Ilya was so grateful that now they could be *still* together.

Strands of Shane's hair ended up in Ilya's mouth, tickling his lips, but he couldn't pull away.

Shane shuffled a little, pressing his firm body back into Ilya's. Ilya's cock was hard, but it didn't matter. He had come more than a dozen times in the last three days, and it was as if he had finally gotten his fill of Shane. Carnally, that is. And just for now.

Actually, who was he kidding? Ilya could come again in five seconds flat if Shane asked for it, but that wasn't what this was about.

"S'hot," Shane slurred.

Ilya kissed his head again and unwound his leg, draped over Shane's thighs, to kick the duvet down the bed.

"Thanks," Shane mumbled, and pressed a soft kiss to Ilya's numb arm, pillowed beneath his head.

"Anything for you," Ilya said, scared by how much he meant it.

Shane wiggled a little, then gently detached from Ilya's hold so he could flop over. Ilya mourned the slight loss of full body contact, but it was somewhat assuaged by getting to stare into Shane's eyes, wet with sleep, crusty, his teeth unbrushed and his breath stale. Ilya wanted to wake up exactly like this every day for the rest of his life. "Good morning," Shane said, swallowing a yawn politely as he reached out and laid a hand on Ilya's chest, toying teasingly at the hairs around his nipple. "You know, I really, really love waking up like this."

"These have been the best days of my life," Ilya said, and it was true.

Shane. Hockey. His teammates and friends. Svetlana. Ilya's life in the past few days, despite the uncertainty and the panic, had been bursting at the seams with things he loved. Ilya himself felt like he might burst with the sheer gratitude of it, like his chest was swelling beneath his mother's cross.

He thought of her again, overheating in bed with Shane Hollander for the second morning in a row. As a child, he had wanted his mother to live forever because he thought she was the center of the universe. And when she died, he felt like his world had ended.

But you could live a lifetime in just a few days, Ilya had learned. He hoped that his mother, once, somewhere, had just a few days like these. A few days to make it worth it. That was all.

Ilya thumbed at Shane's face, noticing the slight impression of bags beneath his eyes. "You look tired," he said, confused and nervous.

But Shane smiled. "I couldn't fall asleep last night," he admitted, whispering.

Ilya frowned. "No?" he asked, wondering if he could find better pillows or change his sheets to something more comfortable for Shane. Ilya usually kept his house warm, and Shane had just said he was too hot. Ilya should have asked if he was comfortable before. Damn it.

"I had a lot to think about," Shane said.

"Oh. Serious thoughts?"

Shane hummed, nodding sleepily into his pillow, and Ilya studied his expression intently, trying to figure out if he should be worried or not. "Are you really my boyfriend?"

Ilya pressed closer, addicted to the soft, vulnerable expression on Shane's face. "It's the number one thing I am right now, I think," he said, reservations completely worn down. He could worry about Russia, about his family, about his team, about his passport when Shane wasn't here. For now, all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around him.

Shane inhaled quickly. "And... and are we going to..." Ilya watched him swallow and gather himself. "So many people already know, now. A lot of important people in our lives know. It's—it's out of our hands now." Shane looked like he dreaded the prospect but Ilya felt the same relief as earlier. Yes. It was out of their hands. It freed them. Shane looked like he knew that, too. "So, should we—are we going to try to make this into something real?"

"It is already real," Ilya said.

Shane nodded. "Yeah. Okay. So. I've been thinking about what comes next. What we're going to do."

"Do?"

"If we're going to be together, I can't only see you four times during the season," Shane said. "Or even less, if one of us has a back-to-back game when we play each other, or curfew is tight, or something."

Ilya hadn't really put much thought into what they could possibly look like beyond the confines of his bedroom. He frowned. "There is All-Stars?" he suggested, but he figured that Shane would probably still have reservations about hooking up in a hotel full of other NHL players. It would definitely be more stressful and harder to sleep together like this, which was all Ilya wanted to do.

“Sure,” Shane agreed, words quickly picking up speed, “but it’s three months until then. Even longer until the summer, and we have no idea what playoffs will look like. It’s a seven-hour drive, on average, from Montreal to Boston, not including the time it takes to cross the border, and you would probably have more difficulties crossing the border regularly without having a reason to be traveling for work. I can cross the border a little more easily, obviously, but even still, Boston to Montreal is only an hour and a half flight, which isn’t feasible or reasonable, but trying to fit seven hour drives on days off isn’t easy either, especially not when we both still have to attend practices—of course, by the middle of the season, we won’t have to worry about as many practices, but we’re still the captains, so who knows what will be going on. And-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down your horses,” Ilya said, pressing his palms against Shane’s stomach and blinking rapidly. “You have clearly thought more about this than me. Hollander, I just woke up.”

“Sorry,” Shane said quickly. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I just... I was up all night trying to figure this out.”

Ilya’s heart thumped in his chest. Had anyone ever stayed up all night worrying about him? His mother, maybe, but Ilya would never know for sure. And Svetlana too, probably. She definitely worried about him.

But it felt different with Shane.

“Tell me what you came up with,” he said, sensing the acceleration in Shane’s voice.

Shane smiled a little. “I’ve been thinking. What if—what if I—Have you ever been to Vermont?”

Ilya frowned. “The state?” he asked after a moment of deep thought. “What—I don’t know, maybe? Is, like, two hours away? Maybe we have driven through on the way to Canada sometimes, but-”

“Oh my god, no,” Shane huffed, wiggling a little and pressing his face further into the crook of Ilya’s neck, speaking against his skin. “God. Sorry. I’m doing this all wrong.”

Ilya cupped the back of Shane’s head, the short hairs tickling his palm. “Try again,” he suggested quietly.

Shane breathed. “Vermont,” he said quietly. “It’s halfway between Montreal and Boston.” Ilya ran his hand over Shane’s head, trying to coax him out of hiding. Shane peered up at him, the tip of his nose slightly red. “I’ve heard it’s beautiful there.”

“Good,” Ilya murmured.

“I was thinking about looking into buying some more real estate,” Shane said, eyes flickering all over the place. “My property management advisor recommended that I look into purchasing land in America.” He swallowed. “For my portfolio.”

Ilya's chest rumbled with laughter.

"Shut up," Shane said, but a smile was tugging at his lips. "Anyway," he courageously went on, "Vermont. It's in the US, so you wouldn't have to worry about crossing the border with a Russian passport to visit. Mid-state, it's about a three-hour drive from Montreal and Boston, but three hours is a hell of a lot shorter than seven." He sighed. "It's still far. It would be a hell of a lot of driving on both our parts. It would only really be feasible whenever both of us had two days off in a row, or maybe with some afternoon games, if we left the night of, and with the schedules, I mean, it's not like that would happen that often." He squeezed his eyes shut.

"You want to buy me a house?" Ilya whispered.

"I want to buy *us* a place where we can be together as much as possible. Just the two of us." He shrugged, expression turning a little wry. "With no more interruptions."

"Vermont," Ilya said quietly. "It's closer. We could meet more often."

"Looking at our game-day schedules, not barring practices or captain's meetings, I think we could manage once or twice a month until the end of the regular season, in addition to our games against each other." He smiled weakly. "So, a little more often, at least."

"A little is a lot, with you," Ilya told him, cupping his cheek.

He saw the tears bead in Shane's eyes. "I want to spend all my time with you."

Ilya paused. He stroked his thumb over Shane's freckles, tracing a constellation from the inner corner of his eye to the edge of his ear, and then back again. Before Shane, Ilya had not known that freckles came and went on people's skin. His own moles were stationary and did not change in color, and he hadn't ever been close enough with a person with freckles to notice them fading in the winter, or duplicating in the summer, shifting up and down cheekbones, or across the bridge of their nose. Shane's freckles were a little different every time he saw him.

Every time he looked at Shane, it was like seeing him for the first time.

Ilya said something—three words—very quickly in Russian, knowing that Shane would not understand. And Shane didn't ask him to explain, either.

Shane pressed their mouths together. Ilya didn't move his hand, didn't take his thumbs off those freckles.

They were a map, he realized. A map he had been trying to follow his entire life.

This was the destination. Here, with Shane, was the only place he wanted to be.

Or maybe Vermont, as it turned out.

There was a sudden banging downstairs.

Ilya and Shane both shot upright, hearts hammering. “Did you lock the bathroom window?” Shane asked immediately.

“Yes,” Ilya said, retroactively realizing that someone was just knocking very aggressively at his front door.

“I’ll get it!” Svetlana called cheerily up the stairs, and a moment later they heard the door open. “Ah, good morning, Cliff!”

“Sveta, babe, how’s it hangin’!” Cliff’s booming voice echoed up to them.

“What the fuck!” Ilya yelled as they scrambled out of his bed, reaching for their clothes and hurrying to dress. Ilya was a little surprised to notice Shane following him, even checking his reflection in the mirror. He was pleasantly astonished when Shane caught him around the waist and reeled him in for a kiss as they heard the clatter of shoes coming off downstairs and the sounds of conversation striking up between far more people than just Svetlana and Cliff.

“Let’s go see what those idiots want now,” Shane said, laughing.

Ilya was star-struck.

They tripped down the stairs together, Ilya already howling, “Get out of my *house*!” before they rounded the corner and saw all the guys from two days ago, including the rookies, crowded around his island counter with plastic cups of iced coffees and boxes of Munchkins. Svetlana was holding a blueberry muffin between two fingers, Connor had powdered sugar on his nose, and the rookies were already fighting over the last Boston Kreme. Victor had brought his wife with him (well, at least Ilya knew he wasn’t going to keep the secret from her for long), and she was sitting on his lap, pushing chocolate donut holes into his mouth while he grinned, toothy and veneered-bright.

Ilya blinked, and then his arm whipped out, instinctively catching the sealed paper bag Cliff had launched at him. “Bacon, egg, and cheese for the Cap!” his alternate hooted, slamming the second half of an iced coffee. “Hollzy, I didn’t know what your order was, so I texted Pike and he said you’d rather starve to death than touch a Dunkin’ with a ten-foot pole, and I couldn’t figure out if he meant because of the trans fats or because of Tim Hortons loyalty, so I just got you a black coffee and a bagel with cream cheese. Protein, right? Oh, and there’s jelly-filled donuts somewhere around here. That’s basically a fruit!”

Ilya opened his bag and stuffed the breakfast sandwich into his mouth to muffle his laughter.

“Um, thank you, Cliff,” Shane said. “I think I’m alright.”

“No worries,” Cliff said, snatching another coffee from Ryan, who was lingering outside the chaos taking place at Ilya’s counter. “Cap, you should invite Pike and Boozy over! Pike sounded jealous on the phone. Serious FOMO.”

“Yeah,” Ryan drawled, dodging the rookie pair who went careening past him to collide with the fridge, chocolate-smeared hands grappling each other’s shirts. “Who would want to miss this?”

“Not me,” Ilya declared, smiling bright and wide, looking over the room full of people who knew him. Who knew exactly who he was and accepted it without question.

Had it really only been three days?

Shane took his hand. He squeezed. Ilya turned his smile on him, blinding, and Shane looked nervous and overwhelmed, but he smiled back anyway.

Three days. A lifetime. Who was counting?

Chapter End Notes

Translations: “Esti de c lice de tabarnak, c'est pas possible comment que t'es cave” – a sentence I picked up verbatim from Wikipedia featuring lots of Quebec sacres: loosely, “Jesus fucking Christ, there's no way you can be this stupid.” Shane says, “Well, what do you want?” in a totally normal, non-flirty way, definitely.

(Ilya touching the back of Shane’s shirt was 100% inspired by Bingley reaching for Jane’s dress in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* btw because as much as Ilya wants to be Darcy, he’s actually Bingley, in this essay I will—)

Sorry if this was meh, lol, i was fighting with the entire bar scene. Regardless, huge shout-out to ch0bani (who always comments and is super nice on my fics, thank you!!) who completely sniped the Vermont ending for this fic after the first chapter! xphile3101 wanted to see some of the voyageurs and the bears going out for drinks together, bemusedlybespectacled and LEM1715 suggested a similar unplanned coming-out for Shane, nightskies asked for Shane talking to hayden and JJ and ally bears trying their best to wingman Ilya not very successfully, and Namita asked for besties Shane and Sveta teaming up against Ilya! Thank you again everyone else who helped me brainstorm, it’s always fun to work with comments, and thanks for reading! Subscribe to the series if you want to see any updates in this verse :)

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