Better Days To Come

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by PlatitudinalTeen

Summary

Refusing to let Ilya ruin his career by signing with Ottawa, Shane chooses to really give their relationship a try and moves to Boston to live with Ilya and become a Raider. What follows is enough public scrutiny and backlash from his team that it has him questioning if he made the right decision. Until moments with Ilya and the Raiders show him exactly why he chose correctly.

Hayden's eyes flickered to Shane as he sat on the bench, chewing on the edge of his mouth guard.

"Don't fucking look at him," Ilya insisted as he bent down for the faceoff.

"Excuse me?" Hayden mumbled, eyes darting back to him.

"You heard me," he retorted, his tone clipped. "He's not your teammate anymore; he's mine. If you think Marlow is a problem to your game, wait until you see what I will do to your team if you hurt anyone on mine again."

Hayden scoffed, dipping his head as he tried to focus on the game. Something about Ilya's words still rang through his head though, sounding so definitive that he didn't want to risk seeing what he was actually referring to when he said that.

The puck dropped again, and Ilya stole it before he could comprehend how quickly it happened.

Chapter 1: Who We Were

Chapter Notes

> Guuyys wtf is going on right now? I wrote this is four days and don't even remember half of it. But at least it's done!!!! (And so am I, lmao. I'll be sleeping until noon after this one.)
>
> (Quick side note! I did write an additional 16k and slip that in, so if you're someone who is rereading then A) Omg, hi? Welcome back. And B) you're not crazy, I added new stuff!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya tipped his foot slightly, brushing it against Shane's under the blankets they were covered under on the couch. Things had gotten a bit tense from the moment he suggested marrying Svetlana. Which, he would admit, hadn't been his finest moment. It was an idea crafted by fear, mostly. A desperate attempt to find a way to realize his real dream, which was to be with Shane permanently, even if not publicly.

He knew from the moment Shane looked up, though, that it wouldn't work. He hadn't pushed it, since, he was too afraid to cause conflict when they were having such a nice few days together. It felt peaceful. He honestly didn't know the last time he ever felt that. Or if he had at any point, truly.

Winning the cup brought excitement, sure. A rush of endorphins that could never be mimicked. But being with Shane brought him something different- contentment. He wasn't ready or willing to give that up, not without it being ripped from him.

"I could move," Ilya murmured hesitantly. "To Ottawa, I mean. My contract is about to end."

Shane didn't need to be reminded; he had pretty much everything about his hockey career memorized by now. From his stats on the ice to his personal achievements and awards outside of it. He also knew Ilya loved the Raiders and that Ottawa was, well, shitty. That was probably an understatement, actually.

"The Centaurs are the worst team in the league, Ilya," he murmured back, shaking his head as he put his phone down in his lap. "You can't sign with them."

It would probably humiliate him publicly, if not destroy the momentum he had been building. It was practically a one-way trip to never winning the cup again. He couldn't be the reason Ilya started losing games and let him resent him for it.

"I could make them good," he defended. "I made the Raiders good."

“You made the Raiders *better*,” Shane corrected. “They’re a great team consistently and you’re too good to spend your time training other players. You need a team that works for you, not the other way around.”

“Oh, what, like Metros?” Ilya grumbled, rolling his eyes. “I would be kicked out of the locker room before a single practice started.”

He sucked on the inside of his cheek. “Why don’t you just re-sign with the Raiders?” he wondered. “Didn’t they make you an offer? You could probably get them to raise the salary if you wanted, my mom knows a really good manager who could replace-”

“Is not about money,” he interjected, shaking his head. “I have money. I could retire this season and be set for life.”

Maybe he would have to cut back on some expenses, but he wouldn’t need to work ever again. He didn’t play for money; he played because he loved it. Because it made him feel alive and got his heart racing in a way no other experience seemed to manage.

“I’m not letting you ruin your career for me,” Shane insisted, resting his head against the side of he couch as he stared at him with soft eyes. “You’d hate me if I did.”

“I would not hate you,” he assured him firmly. “Could never.” Even if he broke his heart, whatever pieces of it were left would still belong to him.

He sighed, the gesture both comforting him and making his chest ache all at the same time. “Let’s just…go to bed,” he suggested. “We can decide that stuff later.”

Ilya nodded, a bit frustrated over the lack of a real answer but too tired to fight him on it. Sitting up, he shoved the blanket away, reaching for Shane and pulling him up to his feet. “Fine,” he agreed, kissing his neck. “Bed it is.”

He huffed, shoving him away playfully. “Not what I meant,” he grumbled, heading towards the bedroom.

Ilya just kept his hands wrapped around him, trailing behind him closely. “Liar,” he claimed.

Shane hummed, lips quirking into a smile as he pulled Ilya into the bedroom, thoughts still lingering on the concept of their contracts. On the idea of Ilya being devoted enough to move to Canada, to fight for citizenship here when it was so difficult.

It was, to say the least, an act of love. A declaration of devotion, even. He couldn’t let him, of course. And he couldn’t imagine the Metros even being willing to offer him a contract with how steep his price would be. To say nothing of reputation and rivalry.

Even if he claimed it wasn’t about money, that did matter. It had to, at least a little bit. Besides, even if the Metros found the money somehow, his teammates wouldn’t be okay with it. At all. They’d probably start fights the second they saw him in blue.

Still, Shane knew he was right. At least about the distance between them. It was so difficult to be that far apart from each other. Especially now that they had finally admitted to each

other that they were truly committed to this relationship. Monogamous. A word he never thought would apply between them.

But it did.

That's what led Shane to being up early the next morning, kissing Ilya on the cheek and leaving a note beside the bed for him that read, *'Had to run an errand, I'll be back before lunch.'*.

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Knocking on his parents' door, Shane took a breath to himself, running his thumb over his knuckles in a weak attempt to self-soothe his own nerves. Something he was acutely aware he picked up from watching Ilya do it over the years.

His dad came to the door first, a look of surprise on his face. "Thought you were on a silent retreat or something during break," he muttered, pushing the door further open to let him in.

Shane let out a nervous huff. "I- Yeah, I am," he assured him, entering the house. "I just needed to take a break from that for something. Where's mom?"

David pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "Patio, eating breakfast," he replied, a curious expression on his face. "Did you need to talk to her?"

He nodded. "Alone, preferably," he admitted, quickly noticing the shock in his father's eyes. "It's nothing bad or anything, I swear," he added. "Just hockey stuff."

He looked a bit skeptical, not used to seeing his son nervous over hockey. Not since the draft, anyway. "Alrighty, then…" he mused slowly, closing the front door. "I'll be in the kitchen making an extra omelet, I guess."

Shane opened his mouth to tell him not to bother, that he wouldn't be staying long, but just snapped it shut after a moment. There was no point, really. He was better off just accepting it.

Watching his dad walk into the kitchen, he took another breath, trying to steady himself before making his way to the patio. Sliding the glass door open, he peeked his head outside, where his mom was sitting at the table, picking through a bowl of fruit in search of a strawberry.

Yuna glanced up, looking a bit surprised to see him. "What are you doing here, hon?" she wondered, setting down her bowl and opening one of her arms for a hug.

Shane reached down, giving her a partial hug at the odd angle. "Oh, you know, just… visiting," he muttered, sitting across the table from her. He could see his dad through the window, busying himself with a few eggs.

She hummed skeptically, noticing the tension in his posture. "Well, did anything specific incite the visit?" she asked curiously, tilting her head a bit.

He cleared his throat a bit, looking away for a moment as he tried to figure out how to say what he wanted to. It was so absurd, after all. He still wasn't even sure what he was trying to get out of this whole idea, just that it had been rolling around in his head all night as Ilya held him and he couldn't knock it loose.

"Yeah, there is something," he confessed, looking her in the eyes. "You know how I have one more season until my contract with the Metros ends?"

Yuna nodded. Of course she did. "I'm already getting in touch with someone about a renewal offer," she replied. "I figure another five years, maybe a 10% or 15% increase in pay is worth it to them given your history there and all that."

Shane tensed again, his teeth visibly grinding nervously. "Right, I- I wanted to talk about that, actually," he told her. "Um…how would you feel if I- if maybe I didn't re-sign with the Metros?"

She froze, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Not re-sign with the Metros?" she repeated like she was trying to make sure she heard him correctly.

Why the hell would he not want to re-sign? They were one of the best teams in the league right now, he had an incredible following there, the owner could afford his price, and he had friends amongst the players. Hell, he even mentioned wanting his jersey to hang in their rafters one day.

He panicked a bit, seeing her look so surprised. "I know it sounds a bit crazy-"

"That's certainly one word for it, sweetheart," she murmured, sipping her coffee to try to steady herself from the shock. "Wha- I mean why? Is there something going on with them I don't know about?"

Shane shook his head. "No, no, of course not," he assured her. "I just think it might be…good to have some change, is all."

Ilya was already risking so much by committing to him; he was giving up his playboy image which could harm his reputation, he was slowly severing ties with his home, he was fully prepared to lose his career by joining a team that was horrible just to be closer together. The least Shane could do was show him that he was willing to do the same and give just as much up to make their relationship work.

Hockey was temporary, after all, even if he didn't want it to be. When he eventually retired, it wouldn't matter what team he had been on, only that he had someone he loved to come home to.

"That's some change," Yuna muttered, still confused. "I mean, I'm not judging your decision but…they drafted you, Shane. The fans expect you to re-sign, so does your team, probably."

"I know," he stated, nodding. "It's just- what if I'm not getting everything out of hockey that I could be if I played somewhere else?"

He knew the rink, the entire building by heart, even. He spent more time in the locker rooms than he did at home, most days. He liked the consistency, but if there was even a chance of being able to make his relationship with Ilya stronger, he'd jump on it. And since there was no way the Metros would accept Ilya, the only other option was to hope the Raiders would accept Shane.

She pursed her lips slowly, trying to think things through in her mind. "Okay, I- I can understand that, I suppose," she murmured, blowing out a breath. "People would be shocked, but whoever you sign with would be thrilled, I'm sure."

He huffed slightly. "I hope so," he mumbled, swallowing harshly again.

"Let's see, there's Seattle of course," Yuna suggested, ticking off her finger. "They're a solid team, looking to make changes I hear. And New York; that could be good since you're already on good terms with some of the players. Pittsburg has a decent funding, too, they might be approachable."

Shane nodded slowly, pretending to care about those teams. "What about uh- Boston?" he broached delicately.

"Boston!?" she exclaimed, eyes flying wide open. "Honey, that's Rozanov's team." Not that he needed to be reminded of it, of course. They had only been rivals since before the draft. "I know he's got a contract ending soon, too, but we can't bank on him switching teams and the Raiders taking you, instead."

As smooth as that transition might manage to work if all the stars aligned, there was no way she would take that risk. Rozanov loved the Raiders and there were whispers that he had been approached about a new contract with an even higher salary than before.

"I know, I- I don't expect him to change teams or anything," he clarified. "I was thinking of maybe, you know, joining with him as captain."

If it was possible for Yuna's eyes to widen any further, they would have. She tried her best to get a grip, though. To think things over logically. But that was, frankly, pretty difficult. Her son just suggested signing to the same team as his sworn enemy, after all.

That was tough to wrap her mind around no matter how hard she tried to break it down in terms that made sense. They were a good team, sure. Strong odds each season, wonderful fans, a tendency to retain players instead of constantly trading them like some did. But it was still *Boston*.

"Okay, let's say for some reason you want to do that," she muttered, reaching out to take his hand. "You wouldn't be walking into a friendly environment. They would be…hostile, to say the least. And you wouldn't be captain; you would need to take orders and earn first line again."

"I know," Shane assured her, seemingly alright with all of that. "I don't think they'd be cruel or anything, though. They want to win and anyone helping them do that is probably okay with them."

Yuna scoffed slightly but composed herself, squeezing his hand a bit harder. “Alright, say that’s true,” she noted hypothetically. “They’re already paying Rozanov top billing and might give him a raise to keep him, not accounting for Marlow or Hammersmith. They just don’t have the money for someone as expensive as you.”

They paid their players well, she knew. And they had a lot of good ones. Carmichael and Connors might not make quite as much as most of their first liners did, but they were still one of the most expensive teams in the league to pay per season. They couldn’t match Shane’s current salary and afford to keep everyone else, let alone raise Rozanov’s salary as well.

“I know that too,” he insisted, voice firm as if trying to push the matter a bit harder. “But I’m okay taking a pay cut.”

“No, you aren’t,” she replied, shaking her head. “Especially not if your cut is feeding Rozanov’s salary. You’re worth more than he is.” More awards, more cups, her son deserved the higher paycheck, not him.

Shane tried not to roll his eyes, looking a bit frustrated. “Look, I have like eight sponsorships right now,” he reminded her. “You’re probably sitting on three more you don’t want to tell me about, too. My investments are stable, my house is paid off, my savings alone are enough to live on pretty lavishly for a few decades. I don’t need a raise.”

He could easily take an extra commercial or two and make back what he was losing with a salary cut. Besides, he could be gaining something so much better than money if he lived in Boston. If he lived *with* Ilya. God, it sounded like a dream he was too stubborn to let himself believe in just yet.

Yuna didn’t relent. “But you deserve one! If you’re the best of the best, then you should get paid like it—”

“Mom,” Shane interjected firmly, his tone serious and his eyes reflecting the emotion just as much. “I *want* to go to Boston. Please, help me make it happen.”

She paused, slowly inhaling as he let go of her hand. She couldn’t understand it. He could have his pick of teams with his reputation. Any coach, any arena of fans would be thrilled to have him. And he wanted to walk into the one locker room full of players that actively hated him more than anywhere else.

“Okay,” Yuna eventually conceded, nodding. “I will…reach out to someone over there and see what I can figure out.”

Shane’s tension visibly eased, a small smile gracing his lips. “Thank you,” he whispered. “I know it doesn’t seem like it makes much sense—”

“It doesn’t make *any* sense,” she insisted with a huff of disbelief, rubbing his forehead. “But if it’s what you want, I’ll make it happen for you.” She wasn’t quite sure how, yet, but she would. “Maybe we can spin it for some publicity… *‘Rozanov and Hollander: enemies to allies.’* or something like that.”

She scrunched her nose over it, the fake title already leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. She couldn't even imagine her son in one of those jerseys or think about having to buy Raiders merchandise and actually rooting for that team after a decade of insults and eye rolls thrown at the television set each time they played against Montreal.

Still, she would work it out. For Shane, she always did.

Shane stood up, kissing her cheek. "Thank you," he repeated, even more sincerely. "I mean it, mom. I really think this is going to be good for me."

She hummed, smiling back for as long as he glanced at her and then let it drop the second he went back inside to see his dad. Shane as a Raider. She couldn't fathom it in her head, let alone actively try to make it happen without a pit lodging itself in her stomach. Even so, she had given him her word and would keep it.

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Later that night, Shane watched Ilya fuss with the blankets in his lap as he stared at the fire outside again. It wasn't something he lit very often when he was here alone, but Ilya had liked it so much that didn't mind building one almost every single night. Besides, he enjoyed watching him jump when the Loons called every once in a while.

Shane hadn't quite lied when he came back, but didn't tell him the full truth, either. He said he went to his parents, which was true. He said he talked to his mom, which was also true. He just didn't mention the topic of it.

"Soo…about this morning," he muttered, tapping his fingers against his leg anxiously. "I need to tell you something about it."

Ilya glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. "Ah, finally," he mused.

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

Ilya's glance turned into a glare, gesturing towards him. "You have been jumpy all day," he explained. "I'm assuming it's because of your trip to your parents house, yes?"

Shane nodded a bit as he huffed slightly, realizing he might not have been as smooth about it as he hoped to be. "Oh, right," he murmured awkwardly.

Ilya wasn't blind or stupid. He could see the way Shane had been a bit tense coming home, how he seemed to keep zoning out during their conversations and needing to be brought back with his name or the snap of his fingers. And how he immediately apologized but never mentioned what he was thinking about. It didn't take a genius to know something was going on.

"So?" he wondered, covering some of Shane's legs with the fabric even without being asked. "What is it? Are they suspecting or something?"

He shook his head a bit. "No, I- no," he muttered, resting his hand on the back of the loveseat and winding one of Ilya's curls around his finger. "It's…well, you remember last night, right?

When you wanted to move for me?"

Ilya nodded, humming softly. "Did you think about it, more?"

"All night," Shane confessed, chewing the inside of his cheek as he fussed with his hair. "And I realized that you were already giving up a lot by being with me, and I think maybe it's time I give something up for you, too."

He frowned slightly, leaning into his touch. "What do you mean?" he asked, not following along.

Shane exhaled deeply. "I asked my mom today if she would reach out to the Raiders," he admitted. "I'm going to try to sign with your team."

Ilya froze. His eyes didn't widen and his mouth didn't drop. He seemed too stunned for either of those reactions to happen. Instead, he just stared in shock, searching Shane's face for any sign of this being a joke of some kind. He looked entirely serious, though.

"Y- you are going to come to Boston?" he repeated, the words making no more sense once saying them out loud. "For me?"

Shane nodded, hand sliding down to cup the side of his neck, his fingers fussing with the nape of his neck. "If my mom doesn't blow the negotiations," he murmured. "I thought- I mean your team would want me, right? They'd be okay if I joined them?"

He nearly scoffed. "Are you kidding?" he replied. "You have no idea how much they respect you, Shane. They would love to have you on the team. Not nearly as much as I would, of course, but they would be thrilled."

He blew out an anxious breath, a bit relieved. "Good," he whispered to himself. "And I figured if I was living there, maybe I could just…live with you, too? We would take separate cars to practice, obviously, and I'd rent an apartment so everyone thinks I don't but…we could, if you wanted."

He held his breath a bit, the offer both managing to see so abrupt and yet so long overdue, all at once. Being in the same city, on the same team was more than enough for him already. But if he was going to uproot his life he might as well go all the way, he figured.

"Yes, yes of course I want to live with you," Ilya responded immediately, before the question had even fully slipped out of his mouth. He pulled him into a kiss. "I get to play with you on my team *and* wake up next to you every day? That is better than anything I could have imagined."

Shane's lips tugged into a wide smile, pressing his forehead against Ilya's. "We've waited long enough for it, right?" he murmured. "Figured we needed to actually make some changes if we want this to work."

Ilya nodded in agreement. "I will make it worth it, I swear to you," he promised him. "You will love Boston. And I can take you places in public without anyone caring." His voice

nearly cracked at the end, the thought of being seen together without fear riddling them both making his chest ache with joy.

They still couldn't kiss, couldn't get overly affectionate or slip up on their words. But it was something. And compared to having nothing, something seemed like *everything*.

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Time passed and their contracts came to an end not too far apart. Ilya decided to re-sign with the Raiders to no one's surprise, even if the media tried to pretend like it was somehow shocking news.

'Raiders captain Ilya Rozanov to extend his contract for another five years, according to inside sources.'

Shane pursed his lips, staring at the headline as he sat on the bench in his locker room, post practice. He had barely changed before the article was published and if he wasn't so obsessed with Ilya, maybe he might not have gotten the notification for a few more hours or days. But he googled him frequently enough to get recommendations, he supposed.

Hayden leaned over his shoulder, nudging him slightly. "No shocker there, huh?" he mused, reading the headline over the phone. "Why do they always say *'sources'* like it's some massive secret and not purposely announced with everyone permission, anyway?"

Shane shrugged. "More views, I guess," he murmured, clicking his phone off and shoving it into his bag. He made a mental note to text Ilya later and congratulate him on it.

His best friend hummed, supposing it was a good enough answer. "What about you, then?" he wondered, bending over to tie his laces. "You got your new contract sorted out, yet? I hope you don't take all that money they scrounged up for you; the rest of us would like raises too."

It was a joke, of course. Hayden knew Shane got paid the big dollars because he was the face of the Metros, not to mention their captain. But for some reason, his friend seemed to go quiet over the comment, taking it seriously or something.

"You don't have to worry about it," he assured him softly, words getting drowned out by the chatter in the locker room as everyone continued packing their stuff up for the day. "I'm not…"

"Not what?" Hayden questioned, furrowing his brows in confusion. "It's too loud in here; I didn't catch that."

Shane wet his bottom lip, not repeating himself for some reason. "Nothing," he muttered, shaking his head as he brushed it off.

He hadn't technically signed his new contract yet. But he was pretty much as ready as possible. His mom had managed to get him a three-year contract, at just shy of the money he was currently making. Which, he honestly hadn't expected given the way their finances were pretty much all accounted for with the current roster.

There had been some financial shuffling, apparently, she said. He wasn't quite sure where they cut the costs, but they did it. For him. The papers were drafted up and as soon as his mom went over it with the lawyer, he could sign them. Hopefully by the end of the week.

That just left him clueless about what to tell him team. To tell Hayden, especially.

"Are you alright, man?" he questioned, frowning. "You look a little…pale or something."

Shane snapped his eyes towards him, feeling a bit nauseous. "What? Yeah, totally good," he assured him.

"Really? You're not about to faint, then, and that's just your face for some reason?" Hayden teased.

He felt the lump in his stomach grow larger, unsure how to explain to them exactly what he was planning to do. It was nothing against them, he knew. But they wouldn't believe that. To them, it would be a blatant betrayal. Walking into their sworn enemy's city could very well be, in their eyes, unforgivable.

He swallowed harshly, getting even sicker to his stomach. He had known, for months now that this was happening. But there was never a good time to tell them. He even considered letting them find out through the inevitable news articles posted after he green-lit it. That was cruel, though. They deserved better from him.

Shane swallowed harshly, noticing Berkes about to walk out of the locker room. "Berkes!" he shouted, stopping him. "Wait a minute, before you leave."

He glanced over his shoulder, surprised but not annoyed. "Why?" he wondered, lingering the door. "I thought we were finished for the day."

He nodded. "We are, I just—" he flexed his fingers nervously. "—have to make an announcement before everyone clears out of here, today."

Berkes looked a bit skeptical of his tone but dropped his bag by the door and walked a bit further into the locker room. He gestured to him, like he was letting him make his announcement. He figured it was probably about their technique or their lack of enthusiasm, something to criticize.

Shane glanced at Hayden, who looked equally confused. Slowly standing up, he felt his heart hammering harder than it ever seemed to as the other guys quieted their conversation to listen to what he had to say.

"Um…I- I know that everyone here is well aware by now that my contract with the Metros ended," he started, his voice slow and hesitant. "I've been here mostly out of routine and a sense of duty more than anything, lately. Because you guys are- you're family to me, you know? We've won championships on the ice and off the ice I've seen some of you get married, have kids, just…grow as people."

“Why is this sounding like a cheesy goodbye speech?” JJ questioned, his tone teasing and light.

“Yeah, right, like Hollander would ever leave us,” Wilson retorted, huffing in amusement. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Shane just swallowed harshly again, glancing down in silence as he counted his breaths in hopes of keeping it together both emotionally and physically. This was not the place for a panic attack or tears.

Hayden frowned, confused. “Shane?” he muttered, sounding like humor was the last thing on his mind. “T- that’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

He clenched his jaw, shaking his head for a moment before finally lifting it. “No, it’s not,” he admitted, his voice a bit rough with emotion. “I am…signing with another team.”

They were silent for a moment, more stunned than anything else. It felt like the floor crumbled under their feet in the blink of an eye and Shane, frankly, looked like he wished it would. If for no other reason than being swallowed into the center of the Earth would be preferable to their scrutinizing gazes.

“That’s a joke, right?” Mitty questioned. “You’re jerking our legs before you tell us you’ve already worked things out with management.”

Shane shook his head again, a bit firmer. “No,” he clarified. “I declined their offer to extend my contract two weeks ago.”

They had been approaching him, anyway, trying to offer more money or better perks but it wasn’t working. The only reason that had been kept out of the news was because they were still hoping he would come back to them after looking elsewhere.

“How could you turn them down?” Drapeau asked, his tone confused, if not a bit accusatory. “I mean you- you’re the captain! What could make you walk away from that? Where would you even go?”

“Tell me it’s not New York or some shit,” Compeau added, finding his voice too. It had a bite to it, like he was suddenly more upset than disheartened. They all were.

“It’s not New York,” Shane assured them.

That should have helped calm their nerves, but instead, it just made them more apprehensive. Because Shane wasn’t willingly sharing where he intended to move. He was only explaining where he *wasn’t* going. And that could only mean he planned to sign with a team that they didn’t like. Which, frankly, was a long list.

“Who are you signing with?” Hayden questioned bluntly, his voice cutting through everyone else’s inquires or clamoring. They played together for over a decade and were best friends off the ice. He was someone Shane would answer; he had to be.

He blew out a breath, contemplating the risks of telling them. They could blab it around before news officially broke and blow up the entire deal. But he doubted they would, they would probably be too busy trying to pretend he was dead to them.

Shane wet his bottom lip, looking at the floor instead of anyone specific. He couldn't; it was too hard. "Boston," he whispered under his breath. It was quiet, but in the dead silence, everyone heard it.

And just like that, every friend he had in that room turned into his enemies. Their gazes hardened, their breaths hitched, and their jaws clenched. Everything Shane just said about them being his family was tossed out the window like he hadn't been their friend and their teammate for years.

"No fucking way," JJ muttered to himself. He didn't want to believe it, at first, but given how distraught his former captain looked, he knew it was true.

"You wouldn't," Drapeau insisted, his tone harsh and bitter as he shook his head. "You'd rather answer to Ilya fucking Rozanov than be our captain?"

Shane winced, barely lifting his gaze long enough to catch his eye before Drapeau looked away. "It's not personal," he insisted. "You guys are always gonna be—"

"No, no, it *is* personal," Berkes interjected before he could even finish speaking, pointing his finger at him accusatorily. "We *hate* the Raiders, Shane. That means we don't get to be anything to you if you step foot into their locker room."

"Have you already signed the contract?" Hayden asked, finally breaking his silence.

He was still in a state of shock, frankly. Some part of him was in denial, too. He wanted to believe this was a cruel joke or some temporary lapse in judgement that his best friend would realize was a mistake and correct as quickly as possible. But he knew better. Shane wouldn't tell them he planned to leave unless he was following though on it.

Shane's shoulder sagged a bit. "I'm going to," he replied. "In a few days. The details are just being double checked."

"What details? Like which fucking parking space is yours?" Comeau snapped. "What wall they're gonna put your face on at the arena because you don't have enough of them here?"

He grew even more uncomfortable, the anxiety physically manifesting as he tensed, his throat working hard just to try to form a single sound. Even when he got one out, it was interrupted by more comments and accusations, all filled with venom.

"You're such a fucking traitor," Wilson claimed. "You know the way they play, how they act. They put you in hospital for God's sake!"

"On accident," Shane defended weakly, hearing someone scoff amongst the crowd that was starting to grow closer to each other in proximity. It seemed almost like they were forming a wall against him, arms crossed and expressions disgusted.

“You know what, maybe if you can jump teams this easily then you do deserve to be with them,” JJ told him. “You clearly have the same mindset as they do.” That teammates were just that, teammates, meant to be used and discarded.

Hayden opened and closed his mouth, looking between his team and his best friend. He wanted to protect Shane, but he was also just as upset as the others were. And he couldn’t risk them thinking that he was condoning what Shane was planning. So, he kept his lips sealed, his head and heart utterly torn.

“I- I’m sorry that you feel that way,” Shane murmured, trying to fight how badly their words stung. “I thought…never mind.” He huffed lightly, glancing at his bag. “I’ll leave you guys alone.”

He reached for his stuff, grabbing his bag and slinging it over shoulder. He ducked his head, pushing the door open quickly to leave before any of them could say or do anything. Walking out, he felt his breaths quickening as his panic attack began to build back up inside his chest.

It felt constricting, hammering inside of him in a way he couldn’t expel, and it was difficult to tell if it was his body shaking or real tears that made his cheeks feel so warm. Either way, he didn’t stop, just kept walking until he left the rink.

For the last time, he was pretty sure.

· — ·✶· — ·

Shane stared down at the coffee table with a blank gaze, the stack of papers sitting beside a pen. A few days had passed, the only texts he had received were cruel. That was if the team contacted him at all.

They hurt, of course, but weren't nearly as brutal as Hayden's silence. He tried to reach out, to apologize and talk, but the only response he got was that he needed time to think and would text him back when he was ready.

“Are you sure about this?” Yuna questioned, sitting across from him in the living room, her hands clasped together as her brows furrowed. He didn’t look as certain as he should, given the circumstances.

He nodded anyway. “Yeah, of course,” he muttered, meeting her eye.

He reached for the pen, clicking it and leaning over the table. He scribbled his name on the bottom of the first page, then flipped it and repeated it on the next and the next, each one getting a bit faster and more determined.

Yuna watched at he seemed to get more comfortable with his choice, almost even excited if she were to guess. Even though she still couldn’t understand why. She had tried to figure it out, ever since he asked. But when she pried, he shut down or gave some answer that was clearly forced and fake.

“No need to get through the whole stack right away,” she reminded him. “You’ll get carpal tunnel or something.”

Shane shrugged, still signing. “It’s fine,” he assured her, flipping to another page.

As much as his brain wanted to think about his team, to guilt him into feeling like traitor the way they called him and be upset over what felt like abandonment, he was also so ready to move forward. To move to Boston, to live with Ilya, to play with a new team beside him. It was making him feel a bit lighter with every signature he gave.

He wasn’t oblivious to the look on his mother’s face, the way she had been confused from the moment he brought up the idea of playing in Massachusetts. She attempted to get an answer a few times, but he never gave her a very clear one. He hoped she would drop it or at least find some assumption and stick with it. That hadn’t happened, yet.

“Okay, I’ll uh- let you finish signing them, then,” she muttered, straightening up a bit in her chair. “After I mail them back to Boston, the Raiders wanted to announce your contract publicly. Is that alright?”

Shane nodded. “Mhm,” he hummed, adding another signature. “Soon as possible would be best.”

She pursed her lips. “I’ll let them know,” she replied, gears in her head spinning with curiosity.

He hadn’t been himself all week, maybe a bit past that, if she was being honest. But the last few days he absolutely refused to mention the Metros, and she could only assume it was because he tried to do the right thing and be honest with them, which probably didn’t go very well.

“You’re staring,” he commented flatly, still not looking up. It was just a feeling he had, knowing what it felt like to have someone’s eyes on him after being in front of so many cameras for so many years.

Yuna cleared her throat a bit. “Sorry,” she murmured. “I was just wondering about your team- old team, technically,” she admitted. “Have you told them yet? About the move, I mean.”

Shane stuck his tongue against the inside of his cheek. “Uh huh,” he responded succinctly.

“How’d they take it?” she pressed a bit, trying to keep her voice gentle in case it was going to upset him.

“Called me a traitor and implied I was self-absorbed and doing it for more attention,” he told her, shrugging again like it was irrelevant information and not something that had been tearing him apart all week.

It wasn’t like he could do anything about it, explain or apologize when no one was speaking to him. And why should he even try to? If they wanted to treat him like a bastard just because he was looking out for himself for a change, then so be it. He could be a traitor in their eyes.

Yuna's eyes softened, feeling a bit disgusted with the team. "Oh, honey, you know that isn't —"

"Don't wanna talk about it, mom," he interjected, shaking his head as he eventually lifted it, looking her in the eyes. "And I don't want any sympathy, either. This is a good decision for me, I know it is."

She paused, the conviction in his voice catching her off guard for some reason. She knew it was hard for him to walk away from the Metros, that he could never do this out of betrayal to them. He loved his team, his city, and his fans.

But there was something about Boston that had him looking more determined than he had been in years.

He was comfortable with the Metros, stable. And now he seemed…excited. Over what, she didn't know. But something. And it was big enough to cause that look in his eyes, the one he always got when something difficult was something he wanted *badly*.

"If you think it is, your father and I will support it," she murmured. There wasn't much else to say about it, after all. Manager or not, she couldn't make his choices. "We don't mind helping you move, if you want. We can come see your apartment and help you unpack, maybe see some of the city."

Shane seemed to tense a bit, just giving a partial nod like he wasn't agreeing but also didn't want to shoot her down, either. "Maybe," he replied. "It's a pretty small place, compared to the one I have now, though. And there won't be a lot of time between moving and practice starting."

He didn't have the schedule, yet, but knew Ilya's typical routine pretty well. The Raiders came back a bit early for informal practices, bonding exercises more than anything, really. The Metros didn't do that, so much as a few intermittent practices over the course of their yearly break.

Not all of the team showed up, since it wasn't mandatory, just a few of them practicing to stay sharp and keep from going stir crazy. That's where he had been when they- well, when he announced his departure. He hadn't been back since and unless there was a reason, he wouldn't.

"Oh, well, maybe a later, then?" Yuna suggested. "We can come down for the first game of the season and root for you."

He nodded more firmly that time. "Yeah, sure," he agreed. "I'll let you know once I get the timeline figured out."

"Sounds good," she mumbled quietly, watching as he kept blowing through the stack of papers, finishing the contract pretty quickly.

Quicker than most of his others in the past, which he reviewed and sometimes filled out over several days. He tended to be skeptical of new deals, but for some reason that didn't seem to

be the case. He breezed through every page, not even checking the fine print like he somehow knew the Raiders were going to be fair to him.

Finishing the last page, Shane put the pen down and slid the papers back to her with a deep exhale of relief. “Officially a Raider,” he murmured, his voice filled with a tinge of suppressed excitement.

“You are,” Yuna noted, watching him bite back a smile at the thought of it.

· — ·✶· — ·

News broke early in the morning. Near seven, if not just before. And as expected, people were shocked. They had every emotion, really. Stunned, angry, confused, elated. It all depended on where they were from and who they supported.

Montreal was pissed and that word, *betrayal*, came hurtling back at him again. Raiders fans were enthused about it, already commenting on social media about how they were surely going to win the cup back this year, now.

Fans from other teams were a mix of surprised by his decision, perplexed by what caused it, and pissed that Boston now had both of them on the same team, essentially ruining everyone else’s chances for the championship.

“People are going insane; you know this right?” Ilya noted, his voice coming through speaker phone.

Shane set it on the counter in his kitchen, picking up a cardboard box and taping the end of it shut. “I’m trying to stay off the internet,” he replied honestly. He usually did, for his own sake. It made his anxiety flare if he was on it too much. “Don’t have much interest in seeing what my city is saying right now.”

“Hm, yeah, they are not happy,” he confirmed, scrolling through different sports pages, all of which had started scrutinizing the choice. “You should still see what Boston is saying, though. Fans are thrilled and wish you a warm welcome.”

Shane huffed, putting his carefully bubble wrapped appliances into the moving box. “At least one city likes me,” he murmured sarcastically. “Has anyone on the team reached out to you, yet?”

He was curious to know if they were against it or in favor of the decision. At the very least, he hoped for a solid neutral ground, wanting to come in with the opportunity to win their trust. That would be difficult if they hated him right away.

“Group chat is very active but nothing negative so far,” Ilya admitted. “They are mostly confused about the reason for it and a bit upset they weren’t aware of it until it happened. But they agree it’s going to be a good year for us.”

“Good, I just don’t want them to hate me or anything,” he explained, pausing to contemplate his packing a bit.

“No, definitely not seeing anything bad towards you, just management,” Ilya clarified, his tone implying that it was a pretty standard topic for complaint. “I’ll add you to group chat pretty soon, once things settle. They’ll like to text you properly before practice starts.”

“I’ll try to pay attention to this one instead of just muting them,” he replied, used to mostly ignoring the Metros group chat. It was too hectic for him to keep up. “Hey, do you own a KitchenAid?” he asked out of the blue.

“A what?” he wondered, sounding confused.

Shane laughed slightly, wrapping an extra layer of bubble wrap around the heavy machine. “It’s for baking, usually. I didn’t know if you had one or not,” he responded. “I don’t want us to have doubles of a ton of stuff.”

But given he didn’t even know what it was, it was fairly safe to assume he didn’t have one. So, Shane lifted the stand off the counter, placing it into the box on the floor and tucking a few other items inside of it before taping it up as tight as possible. He reached for a sharpie, labeling the box to make sure he remembered what was in it. As if the weight alone wouldn't be enough of an indicator.

“Yeah, no, I don’t have one,” he replied, stating the obvious. “And don’t worry about duplicates of toasters or anything, you can put the spares in your apartment and make it look like you actually live there or something.”

“Hm, clever,” Shane admitted, honestly forgetting about the lease he just signed. It was hard for him to think or care about it when he was only a few days away from actually living with his boyfriend for the first time.

“Yes, I am brilliant,” he retorted with faux arrogance. “You will notice this a lot once we live together.”

He was trying, and mostly failing, to act like he wasn’t equally elated that Shane was moving in. That he didn’t have to set an alarm and sneak away to the airport or worry about someone seeing them having a conversation in public. Hell, they could change each other’s contact names in their phones, now.

“I can’t wait,” Shane told him, enthusiasm coming through in his voice. “I don’t know what we’re going to do in the bathroom, though. Between my skin care and your hair products, we’ll run out of room before—”

He stopped abruptly and all the way in Boston Ilya pulled his phone away from his ear to check that he hadn’t got disconnected. “You got tired of mocking my hair care mid-sentence?” he wondered dubiously.

“Uh- no, sorry,” Shane apologized weakly. “I’m just getting a call from Hayden, is all.”

Ilya was silent for a moment. “You should take it,” he eventually replied after a moment.

Now that caught Shane off guard. Even before things had changed, he didn't exactly like Hayden. On or off the ice. And since hearing about how he kept his mouth shut while the guys ripped into him, not to mention ghosted him when Shane tried to reach out, Ilya had been even less of a fan if that was possible.

"You think?" he wondered, a bit unsure. "He hasn't talked to me in eight days."

"He was shocked, probably, and felt a bit upset," Ilya reminded him. "Just hear what he says now that he had time to process it; if he's still and asshole, we will never speak to him again."

Shane huffed. "Alright, I'll text you after," he promised, disconnecting the call to take Hayden's.

He didn't speak, just setting down the tape gun he was holding and bracing his hand against the counter as he took the phone off speaker and held it to his ear. For a moment or two he wasn't even sure if Hayden had meant to call him or not. Maybe it was a fluke or some attempt to reach out that he was quickly regretting. Worst of all, maybe he expected Shane to apologize for something.

Before he could spiral, though, he heard Hayden's' voice come through. "Hey."

It wasn't much, but it was acknowledgment of his existence. "Hi," Shane replied, voice measured, like he expected the worst at any moment.

"I uh- saw the news," he muttered awkwardly. "Three years in Boston, huh?"

"Mhm," Shane hummed defensively.

There was another stretch of silence, and he ran his thumb over the edge of the counter, a bit anxious as he waited for his friend to say something else. Were they even friends anymore? He wasn't sure, honestly.

"Look I…wanted to apologize for the other day," Hayden admitted sheepishly. "I should have told the guys to lay off, I was just surprised and I couldn't- well, that's not really a good excuse, I guess. I just wanted you to know I don't agree with them about you being a traitor."

That served to ease some of his anxiety, but not very much of it, honestly. "Thanks," he murmured. "I knew they wouldn't take it well, I just hoped they'd be a bit more supportive."

"I mean, you did kind of blindside us," he reminded him gently. "We all thought you were re-signing. And then on top of that, you pick Boston? What could even draw you to that team?"

In Hayden's mind, it could only be two things. Self-loathing, driving him to do something stupid and put himself in a position where he would be verbally abused by his new captain and team. Or publicity, since his rivalry with Rozanov might not have been cutting it the way it used to and playing for the same team would stir up new topics.

"It's just a good team, Hayden," he defended. "A nice city, great fans—"

“Rozanov,” he interjected, the single word being enough of a reason to stay far away from the team in his opinion. “Can you honestly take orders from him without wanting to punch him?”

God, could Shane take orders from him, he thought to himself. It was kind of the basis of their romantic life, not that he could say that to his best friend or anyone else.

“I’ll deal with it,” Shane replied casually. “I know it sounds crazy, but I know he’s a good captain. I’m just looking for a change of pace, something new after so many years of the same routine.”

It was comfortable, sure. He liked the consistency, but he was sick of the sneaking around and tired of only getting a few hours or a single day with his boyfriend for most of the year. He wanted to share a home with him, and play beside him, even if no one knew why they worked so well together.

“I guess…I can maybe understand that,” Hayden admitted. “I’m not saying I agree with the change you’re making, but you’re allowed to want something new after carrying our team for so many years.”

“You really think so?” he wondered, a bit unsure. It was what he wanted, maybe even needed. But it still felt like he was turning his back on his community after they have given him everything.

“Yeah, really,” Hayden assured him, pausing for a moment. “I could maybe…come over, if you want? We can keep talking.”

Shane pursed his lips a bit. “I’m actually packing right now,” he admitted cautiously. “I have a flight to Boston on Wednesday.”

There was silence on the other end, which for a busy house with many kids, was sometimes worse than the noise. He tapped his fingers on the counter of his kitchen, waiting for him to say something else.

“You’re really not wasting any time, huh?” he mumbled, his voice still laced with something a bit bitter. Not necessarily for Shane’s decision to leave, but the irrational part of his brain which felt like he was being left behind for some shiny novelty.

“I just wanted to get used to the city before the season starts,” Shane claimed.

“Okay then,” Hayden told him, tone kind of defeated. “I’ll be over in twenty minutes.”

He froze. “What?”

“To help you pack,” he clarified, keys jingling as he pulled them off the hook and headed for the door. “It’s a big apartment and you have a lot of stuff; you’ll want an extra set of hands.”

Hayden didn’t really give him a chance to decline the offer, not that Shane would have, honestly. The line went dead and he huffed, staring down at his blank screen for a moment. At least there was one Metro that didn’t completely hate him for his decision.

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By the end of the next week, Shane had mostly finished moving. His KitchenAid was perched on the counter, his shoes were in the closest on the side they'd made space for him to have, and some of his favorite paintings and awards were hung on the walls beside Ilya's.

It felt, quite simply, like home.

Even before getting all of his stuff unpacked, there was something about it that just felt warm. Probably the fact that for the past three nights, he had fallen asleep and woken up in bed with Ilya.

He usually rose with the sound of an alarm clock of the sun in his eyes, but instead he started to wake up to kisses peppered on his cheek and deep Russian murmurs that were so sleepy it was difficult for him to even try to translate them. It felt like everything he thought he was crazy for wanting.

"Mmm, it's still real?" he mumbled sleepily, blinking awake.

Ilya nodded, another kiss planted on the back of his shoulder blade. "Still real," he assured him. "How many nights will you fall asleep before you realize you live here?"

Shane huffed lightly, glancing over his shoulder a bit. "Don't know," he admitted, inhaling deeply and exhaling. "A lot, probably."

He had lived this moment before, in his dreams. Where time wasn't constricting them and he got to reach into a closet for his clothes instead of an overnight bag. He just didn't expect it to ever be real. It still, frankly, didn't feel that way sometimes.

Ilya shifted, rolling Shane over to look at him. "Well, I will be happy to remind you just how real this is," he promised, running a hand through his hair. "For as long as you want me to."

He hummed in content, burying his face against his neck and closing his eyes again. Despite never really enjoying sleeping in, there was something so peaceful about sharing space with Ilya, about being suffocated by his presence physically and emotionally.

"Want it forever," he mumbled, hand winding around him to hug him.

"Am just sorry it took so long," he murmured back, kissing the top of his head. "Sorry for so many things."

He wished, desperately that Shane could have his parents here. They cared about him so much, wanted to help him move and unpack, and that couldn't happen for obvious reasons. Instead, Ilya was stuck hearing him on the phone, lying about being at the apartment he rented across town to keep up the pretense.

Hearing him mutter about a leaky pipe that didn't exist and spotting a sunset that they had watched together hurt, in some ways. In others he reassured him that this—their relationship—was something Shane was truly invested in.

“No more being sorry,” Shane murmured, resting his head against his shoulder and looking up at him from an angle. “We’re done being apologetic. We’re here, right? We’re together.” That was all that mattered to him.

“Mhm,” he hummed in agreement, fussing with his hair a bit. “We’re together.” And that alone was a damn miracle, he thought.

Running his hand up and down Shane’s back, he closed his eyes again just absorbing the moment for as long as he possibly could. He knew this wouldn’t last. That their break would end and they would start to have a hectic routine instead of late mornings cuddling.

They would be grabbing breakfast and rushing out the door to practice, staying late for drill, traveling for long hours on airplanes and sleeping in hotels again. Just like they did individually for a decade.

Only now, they could see each other at those practices, sit next to each other on those planes, and share those hotels instead of sneaking into each other’s rooms. And even if no one knew that, it was something he was looking forward to, anyway.

A few hours later, Shane stared at himself in the mirror, the new jersey hanging on his body like it didn’t belong there.

He had worn Ilya’s once or twice, after losing a bet or just wanting to try it on. That was different than this, though. That was almost romantic, wearing his boyfriend's jersey. This one was his. His number had carried over, but there wasn’t a speck of blue attached to it now.

He honestly couldn’t pinpoint the feeling his reflection brought him.

“You look incredible,” Ilya mused, wrapping his arms around him from behind and planting a kiss on his neck. “Like my teammate now.” Which he was. The thought had his stomach flipping.

“I don’t look like I’m playing pretend or anything?” he wondered, still feeling a bit weird in it.

He shook his head. “No,” he replied. “It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

He hummed skeptically, but turned around to avoid criticizing himself in the mirror any longer. “We’re still driving separately,” he reminded him.

They might have been waking up in the same bed for a week or two, but they needed to get used to also keeping certain things secret. Like showing up to practice in different cars, preferably at separate times, too. Just so no one started thinking they were too close.

At least not this early, when the whole world still thought they were rivals. Maybe after a season or two they could drive together without it being as suspicious. That might be nice.

Ilya nodded. “I know, I know,” he responded, gently running his hand up and down his arm. “No need to be nervous; you’re just meeting the team for a bit of scrimmage.”

They weren’t really going to be in full gear or anything, just home and away jerseys to split them up for a bit of a game this afternoon. It was a ritual before the season started to get back into the swing of things before practice started to become brutal again.

“I’m not nervous,” he bit back defensively, lying through his teeth so badly it wasn’t even remotely convincing.

He looked, sounded, and acted terrified. Because he was. He was going out of his mind with anxiety, a thousands thoughts coursing through his head, most of them negative. Ilya said the team was okay with this, with him.

But Ilya was also their friend and wanted to assume the best from them. They might pretend to be okay with this and then meet him and realize exactly how much they disliked having him infiltrate their space.

Ilya hummed skeptically but didn’t call him out on the lie. Instead, he reached for his own keys off the nightstand. “I’m going to the rink early to meet up with Marlow,” he told him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You will be there soon after, yes?”

He nodded, still feeling his anxiety settling in his chest like a heavy weight. “Yeah, I’m leaving twenty minutes after you.”

That was a good enough space between their arrivals, he figured. No one would automatically assume they arrived together or that they even saw each other since he moved to Boston, yet. Maybe he’d fake introduce himself just for good measure. No, that was ridiculous. He couldn’t push it that far.

Ilya noticed his expression, the one he got when he was overthinking things. “Twenty minutes, then,” he repeated, trying to keep his voice casual so he couldn’t read into it at all. “Looking forward to having you meet everyone.”

Turning, Ilya left the bedroom and Shane blew out a long breath. The idea of actually being a Raider had seemed so much more simple when his mind was just filled with thoughts of having dinner on Ilya’s couch and parking in the same garage.

Now that there were all these other thoughts swirling in his head, he was realizing exactly what he was getting into. An entire shift in his social image. One he had worked insanely hard to try to cultivate to become someone kids looked up to and families bonded over watching on the ice.

The Raiders were amazing, don’t get him wrong, but they weren’t exactly family friendly compared to the Metros. They were known for starting and ending fights, getting thrown in

the penalty box more than most players, and avoiding the typical publicity like open practices.

Shane supposed he should be grateful for that last one. If the Raiders did tear him apart this afternoon, there wouldn't be many witnesses to it.

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Shutting his car door, he slung his bag over his shoulder and locked it. He somehow already had his name on a parking space plaque, right in between Connors and Ilya. His mind, overactive and a bit paranoid, almost wondered if Ilya had asked for it to be done and how suspicious that might come across.

But he calmed himself down, realizing it was probably just something management wanted to do as a way to make a good impression. He didn't have to worry, he told himself. No one knew anything. This was just a simple afternoon scrimmage match. Friendly and everything.

Walking into Boston's arena felt different than it usually did, today. He wasn't filing in with a group of teammates cursing the very ground they stood on. He was alone, wearing a yellow jersey with their logo on it. And he wasn't going to the guest locker rooms, either. He was walking straight towards the home team-…*his teams* locker room he reminded himself.

Bracing himself with a deep breath, Shane pushed open the door, eyes immediately flitting around the room as some of the team stopped what they were doing to look up at him. They stared, silent and tense. He felt his heart pounding, some sort of ice breaker stuck on the tip of his tongue.

"Hollander," Dubek muttered harshly, still staring at him, unblinking.

This was his worst nightmare, them hating him. Not even wanting him here. Making his life difficult for daring to try to be one of them—

Before he could spiral completely, their straight faced cracked into smiles and Hammersmith walked over, clapping his hand over Shane's back. "You're here!" he exclaimed, no malice in his voice.

He stiffened, looking at Ilya for some sort of understanding but he was just smirking to himself as he rifling through his cubby for something, trying not to focus on him too much.

"Sorry about the cold pretense," Carmichael explained, his expression gentling. "It's tradition to scare the new guy a bit when we meet officially. Just for fun."

"Oh, right, yeah," Shane murmured, huffing slightly as he relaxed a bit.

That was something that he would have liked to know before walking into their locker room feeling more terrified than he was when he thought a hit he took might have ended his career. Ilya probably left it out of their discussions on purpose, not wanting to spoil it.

"It's nothing personal, we swear. We do it to everyone," Hammersmith assured him, eyebrows furrowed. "How was the drive? Not too much traffic, I hope."

“Hm? Wha- no,” he shook his head, fingers clutched a bit tighter around the strap of his bag. “No traffic, surprisingly.” He had just sat in his car for a while, zoning out as he tried to mentally prepare himself for, well, this.

“Good, wouldn’t want you to be exposed to how many horrible drivers we have right away,” Sebbin remarked, tossing his jersey over his head. “You might be running for the hills before the season even starts.”

“You are all so brilliant at being welcoming,” Ilya murmured sarcastically, glancing up at them. “How about *‘Hi, we’re glad you’re here’* or perhaps *‘Good to see you again’* before all the other stuff?”

Mockingly, Marlow straightened up. “Hi, we’re glad you’re here, Shane,” he said extending his hand dramatically. “It’s good to see you again.”

There were a few chuckles and Ilya rolled his eyes. “Группа комиков,” he mumbled to himself, grabbing his jersey off the hanger and pulling it on over a compression shirt.

Just seeing the familiarity of the gesture and hearing the fondness in his teasing helped ease some of the nerves still wound tight in Shane’s gut. So did seeing the relaxed expressions on the guys’ faces, how most of them went back to adjusting their cubbies for the upcoming season the way they did every year they came back.

Marlow huffed in amusement, lowering his hand. “Seriously, though, it is good to see you, Hollander,” he told him earnestly. “It’s nice to know we’ve got you on our side, for a change.”

No one really enjoyed losing to him. Losing in general, really. But there was a specific kind of dread they always shared as a team when it came to facing Montreal. And now, well, that fear had all but disappeared.

“Your cubby is over here, next to mine,” Victor told him, gesturing towards it. There was a sign with his name, but not much else.

Shane set his bag down on the shelf, pulling out a few things that he tended to just keep at his old rink year-round. “Thanks, St-Simon,” he muttered.

He wrinkled his nose. “Vic, is fine,” he replied casually. “I don’t usually respond if you call a pass with my full name.”

He nodded slowly. “Noted,” he responded, filing the information away. “So, uh- away jersey, huh?” He pointed at the colors on his jersey, the scheme different than the one he was wearing right now.

“Yep, still playing against you, I guess,” Vic retorted with a small huff of amusement. “The jersey looks good on you, by the way. I could be biased, though. I think seeing you in anything other than blue is a step up.”

Shane chuckled, glancing around the locker room as the knot in his stomach unwound a bit more. This wasn't so bad, he realized. They weren't being standoffish with him or making comments about him being out of place. They were kind of…embracing him, in a way. Exactly like Ilya claimed they would.

And given the self-confident smile he was sporting from his own cubby, Shane would say he was reveling in knowing he had been right.

Putting on just a bit of padding for the sake of safety, everyone laced up their skates and he followed them out onto the ice. The rink wasn't even fully lit, the upper lights dimmed a bit. Which, honestly kind of made things feel a bit comfortable. There were no screaming fans or bright lights, just some guys getting back to what they loved doing.

"Okay, away jerseys will be on that side of the rink," Ilya announced, shooing them dramatically towards the other end of it. "Everyone on my team stays here. Five minutes to strategize and Kane will referee today."

Shane watched as Vic, Varkov, Connors, Kohn and Feller skated off to the other end of the rink, already smacking each other or whispering a little too loudly about their offense plans.

They have played six on six or even seven on seven despite the actual rules of the game if the whole team was there, but some were still enjoying their break, and there was no reason to drag them back early when practice officially started next week.

The others huddled around Ilya and Shane joined them, glancing at Marlow, Hammersmith, Sebbin, and Dubek. He knew them all both professionally and from Ilya's stories, but it felt different to actually be conversing with them like this. Especially on their side.

"What, no goalies?" Shane wondered, a bit confused.

Dubek shrugged. "We go back and forth of whether we use them," he admitted. "It generally works better without them, though. Like a team builder— you have to communicate better to keep the puck out of the net if it's not one person's designated job."

He nodded slightly, also adding that to his new and quickly growing file of what he knew about the Raiders. "Oh, makes sense," he murmured.

"Okay, listen up," Ilya insisted, his voice low despite the others being too far away to overhear anything. "The plan is three on offense, two on defense. The net is never empty if the puck is in natural area or ours."

Marlow agreed, "But if it's in their zone, then all of us are, too. We overwhelm them to keep it there."

"Take every shot instead of worrying about making them," Sebbin added like it was some sort of mantra. "The more we take, the more we make."

"And stay off the boards as much as possible," Hammersmith noted, like it was a general reminder to them all. "Feller can get the puck out of any pile of players if he's against them."

It was normally one hell of a thing to witness on the ice against any other team but now, it would be like just handing them a goal if they got tangled up against the boards.

Shane just listened, absorbing the information as best he could. It wasn't really instructions, so much as reminders about stuff they all knew about each other that made it a bit more difficult to score against each other.

A few more minutes passed pretty quickly and they broke apart, already skating into position. Ilya glanced at Shane, tilting his head towards the center of the ice, as is gifting him the faceoff against Feller. He suppressed a smile, making his way towards Kane who was holding the puck.

"As a reminder, the puck needs to stay *on* the ice as much as possible," he stated, glaring specifically at Feller. "Coach won't approve of anyone getting a concussion while not wearing full gear."

They had helmets and knee pads on, sure, but not much else and if anyone shot the puck too hard or high, they could easily bruise some ribs or cause some even worse damage.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine," Feller muttered, stick gently hitting the ice as he bent slightly. "Puck stays on the ice. No fast shots."

With a nod of approval, Kane dropped the puck and the two of them fought for it. Shane came out victorious, immediately passing it to Marlow who sent it towards Ilya.

Shane felt a wave of peace wash over him as he watched him, skating after in an effort to keep Vic off Ilya's back. They played on the same side exactly once in their careers, and it had been one of the best games he thought he ever had. It was a feeling that landed just under winning the cup, where he felt thrilled to look towards Ilya to pass him the puck, instead of attempting to steal it.

"Varkov, clear!" Connors shouted, skating towards the other end of the rink as Varkov shot the puck across it.

Shane raced after it, trying to beat Connors to it before they could get it anywhere near their net. Getting there first, he got slammed into the boards, shoulder hitting it hard enough to jostle the panels.

Connors paused, reaching his hand out to steady him with a squeeze on his shoulder. "You alright?" he questioned, having rammed into him a bit harder than anticipated with how fast he had been skating.

Shane barely heard him, giving a brief nod. "Sebbin!" he called, the puck nestled against the curve of his stick as he passed it before Connors noticed.

"On it, Hollzy!" he retorted, the puck gliding towards him smoothly as he kept it away from Carmichael.

Connors huffed at him, slightly annoyed. “And to think I was trying to be polite,” he muttered, giving him a small shove before skating off to try to help Carmichael recapture the puck.

Shane went around their net, stopping a few feet away from it and looking towards Hammersmith whose eyes were flitting around as quickly as the puck was. He gripped and regripped his stick, moving it a fraction of an inch at a time like he was anticipating something.

A moment later the puck came sliding back towards their goal and he reached out, stick stopping it cleanly before he smoothing hit it back where it came from in the direction of Ilya. A small smirk graced Hammersmiths lips, waving at Kohn who had shot the goal.

“Fuck you Smitty!” he shouted, middle finger flying up as he turned his back.

Hammersmith cackled, head tilted towards Shane. “Three years ago during a scrimmage, I told him I’d give him a hundred dollars if he got a shot past me,” he explained, biting back his laughter. “He’s still trying to make it happen.”

Shane huffed, teeth baring. “That applicable to everyone or just Kohn?” he wondered curiously.

He raised an eyebrow. “No one else is petty enough to care, usually,” he muttered, shrugging. “But give it a try next time we scrimmage on opposite sides.”

He gave a curt nod. “Maybe I will,” he mused as Marlow skated up, bumping his shoulder on purpose with a gesture towards the other end of the ice.

Right, they were supposed to be switching off on offense and defensive positions. Shane skated back towards the center, eyes scanning the ice for the puck and re-inserting himself right back into the game again.

It was surprisingly easy, scrimmaging with them. There wasn’t much trouble calling to them or convincing them to pass the puck to him, he wasn’t fighting for them to trust him like he thought he would be. Even when he blatantly lost the puck, no one complained over it. In fact, Dubek just shrugged and muttered something about that was the way the game worked.

Shane wondered if that easy come-easy go mentality was because this was just for fun or how they actually felt in games against other teams but figured he would find out eventually. In the meantime, he just wanted to keep getting used to the way they played, which was weirdly harmonious. No jealousy over the puck or arrogance over who technically scored it. Assists were praised just as much.

It was different, to say the least, from how the Metros interacted. He thought because they were the family friendly, held to a higher standard of morals team, that they were already communicating well enough. If anything, the rough, so-called aggressive team would be the guys who fight each other to score and argue over the puck.

But they weren’t. It was the complete opposite.

As the scrimmage ended, he expected to hear the same thing he heard from the Metros—the forced congratulations, petty comments, even technicalities called to try to invalidate certain goals.

But all he got was a bump on his helmet and a “That was fun,” from Feller.

“I’ll get that money next time,” Kohn swore, making Hammersmith cackle again as his own expression shifted into a petty grin while nudging him towards the locker room.

“Next time, we’re splitting Roz and Hollzy up to make it more fair,” Sebbin added.

That got a few cheers and Ilya chuckled, falling slightly behind them and bumping his shoulder against Shane. “Told you they would like you,” he murmured softly to him with a soft tone and even softer eyes before heading into the locker room.

Shane had to admit, he was right. The guys had been exceptionally nice to him, not even treating him like an outsider for a single moment. It was the second they were on the ice together, they were already a team who had played for several seasons. And that alone had eased every remaining fear he had about his decision to come to Boston.

Tugging off his jersey, he hung it up in his cubby, feeling a lot better about seeing his number in Raiders colors. “Hey, Sebbin?” he called to the man as he packed his own stuff with Vic between them. “What was with that nickname?” he wondered.

Sebbin stuck his head out, looking around Vic. “I don’t know, just slipped out,” he admitted, shrugging. “Didn’t your team call you that?”

He shook head a bit. “Not really,” he replied. “Usually just Hollander or Shane.” And pretty often, it was captain without his name attached. But that clearly wouldn’t work anymore.

“Hm, I would have thought you’d shorten the name given how natural it sounded,” he muttered. “I can cut it out, though, if you don’t like it.”

Shane was quick to shake his head again. “No, no it was fine,” he assured him. “Felt natural to hear it too, actually.”

A little more so than he could have even hoped for. His eyes scanned the locker room again. *His* locker room. *His* team. *His boyfriend* catching his gaze and giving him a small smile that no one else noticed. All of his fears, he realized, were entirely irrational. This wasn’t just a decent idea, it was a pretty damn good one.

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A few weeks later, practice was in full swing. The remaining players had come back from their breaks and met Shane with equal enthusiasm about his joining the team.

Hours at the rink grew brutal in terms of the drills, but they still managed to keep the tone as light as they could, joking around and smacking each other playfully even when their arms ached. Afterwards, if they weren’t too exhausted, they’d grab drinks at a dive bar a few blocks away and play billiards until someone ran out of cash.

Unlike the Metros no one teased him for not drinking during the season.

“That’s dedication, Hollzy,” Marlow once admitted, contemplating it for a moment before ordering a Ginger Ale instead of a second beer.

Shade, in response, just huffed, watching him try it for the first time in probably three or four years, and remembering that it actually tasted pretty good. To be honest, the nickname, which others started using as well, was pretty comforting to hear.

They weren’t expecting him to bear the weight of the whole team, calling him captain like it meant he had to fix everything all the time. He was just a teammate. And a friend, he liked to think.

Media outlets kept digging deep, though, into both teams. Most thought there was some sort of secret the Metros were hiding, an explanation for the captains sudden departure, but none of Shane’s old teammates made many comments. The ones they did, were usually passive aggressive and indirectly called him a traitor, a liar, or a bad friend. Maybe all of the above.

Reporters staked out the rink, which coach kept closed like usual, not wanting anyone getting in their heads with practices getting so intense. But even so, it was still tough to avoid all the questions entirely. Especially not when they were forced into press events that the team was usually known to skip

“We never have press for picture day,” Ilya muttered, his tone a mix of confusion and annoyance all at once. “I don’t like her.”

Shane glanced at the woman in the corner, taking notes on a pad while Dubek had a few photos and short clips taken for the seasons promotional videos. “She’s not even doing anything right now,” he replied.

“She will,” he stated confidently. “I can feel it.”

He furrowed his brows, watching as the photographer walked around with the camera to show Dubek, then coach for extra assurance that they were good enough. Dubek looked thrilled to finally be done with his. Individual were the worst, for all of them, really. Everyone was always just staring, sometimes heckling a bit playfully in an attempt to make the others break character.

That was another thing Shane had noticed pretty quickly—the Raiders were all phenomenal actors. Annoyed, brutish, assholes because it’s what the league wanted from them, even though together they laughed and joked like every other team did.

Hell, probably more and with better attitudes since their humor didn’t seem to center around truly insulting or attacking anyone, even the other teams.

They’d check the news, comment on some practice videos they saw from New York or Chicago and instead of calling them sloppy or muttering how weak someone looked, they noted how quick one player was and the reaction time of another. They sounded like they had genuine respect for their competitors.

Did the Metros ever do that? Not that Shane could remember. There was some idea that tearing the other teams apart verbally would help bond them emotionally.

“Hollander?” The photographer called.

He snapped his head up, realizing they were all waiting for him to take the group picture. “Oh, sorry,” he murmured, walking over while the assistant’s moved players around according to their heights and who looked best next to each other.

“You alright?” Kane wondered, shuffling a bit to the side as one of the assistants repositioned him.

He nodded. “Yeah, it’s just cold as hell in here,” he replied, rolling his shoulders as the fans blew on them. Kane huffed, nodding in agreement.

In the corner, the reporter jotted something down and Shane felt his stomach churn a bit. Maybe Ilya was right.

One of the assistants turned to her boss. “Do you want Hollander on the left or right?” she questioned.

“Left,” the photographer responded, gesturing towards the other side of Ilya. “We’ll pay homage to their draft picture.”

Ilya huffed, scrubbing his forehead. “Joy,” he murmured in annoyance.

Picture day never was his favorite day; it was all so posed and fake. It made him feel like he was back in elementary school, being touched and primped when he didn’t want anyone’s cold fingertips fussing with his hair.

Marlow moved to the right side of Ilya, letting Shane stand on the left. The photographer nodded, the lineup looking better that way in his eyes. He held his hand up, trying to get them to all pause, standing up straight.

The jokes subsided, smiles dropping into their typical expressions for a moment while the camera went off a few times, the shuttering filling the cold, quiet room.

“I’m getting a drink after this,” Kohn stated through gritted teeth, trying to keep his lips from moving as he had his head angled on his behalf. “Or better yet, ice cream.”

“Me too,” Dubek agreed, holding his breath as the camera shuttered again.

“Place downtown does a twenty scoop bowl,” Carmichael noted, getting his hair pushed a bit further to the side by one of the photographers assistants. “We could split.”

“Team reward for putting up with this bullshit,” Vic agreed. “I’m in.”

Shane’s expression faltered a bit, his attempt at keeping the straight, serious face they asked for failing. He cleared his throat, taking a breath in and trying not to smile as they quietly grumbled through their teeth for the entire photoshoot.

They weren't his favorite, either. But he was good at them. He had been in enough promotional videos to know how to stand still or when to say his lines.

During Metros pictures, they wanted smiles or laughs that built a sense of comradery for their promos. He was almost so used it that scowling seemed impossible. But he was doing his best.

"Alright, alright, I've got enough," the photographer said, waving them off to dismiss them.

Everyone immediately let out their deep breaths, unflexing their arms, letting their shoulders sag or otherwise relaxing now that he was putting the camera up. Rolling out his neck, Varkov walked over to his bag, checking his phone for a moment.

"Closes at like midnight tonight," he announced, glancing over his shoulder. To no one's surprise, it seemed. It was downtown Boston, after all. Most places were open until midnight if not later.

There was some clamoring and agreements as everyone started gathering their stuff. Shane huffed, his smile finally breaking through as he tilted his head towards Ilya. "You want to go with them?" he wondered.

He thought about it, shrugging. "Could be interesting," he admitted, sounding enticed. "I do feel like a reward is deserved after spending five and a half hours here."

The only time he even had his skates on were for them to take pictures of him lacing them. The suggestion alone had him rolling his eyes and actually going through with it nearly killed him. He would have much rather just spent the day on ice and let them take their pictures that way.

"I could use it, too," Shane admitted, nodding. "At the very least, I need to spend more time downtown." Even after two months of living here, he wasn't very aware of the area and needed to at least try to rectify it.

"We can drive with Connors, then," Ilya suggested. "Minimal parking downtown and he's the only one of these idiots I actually trust behind a wheel."

He loved the guys, really, he did. But they were insane. Even more so than he was himself in the driver's seat. And if he was going to die, it would not be because of something as stupid as a car crash.

Sane nodded again. They couldn't drive together alone, but with others in the car, there was no reason for anyone to suspect anything. "Sounds good," he replied. "Let me just—"

"Mr. Hollander!" the reporter called as he began to turn to gather his stuff.

He winced and Ilya shot him a glare that screamed *'I told you'* louder than any choice of words possibly could. "—Let me answer that, then I'll meet up with you," he muttered, letting out a small sigh as he turned back around, smiling at the reporter with the peppiest grin he could manage.

Ilya grabbed his stuff, leaving with the others but Shane saw him tapping on Connors shoulder, presumably to tell him they had to wait for him. He wasn't overly shocked that this woman wanted to speak with him, but he had hoped to escape it anyway.

After all, she got quotes from over half the team throughout the day. Maybe he could have managed to wiggle out of it if he had just slipped out a bit faster like Marlow did.

"I just wanted to grab a few quotes from you, if that's alright?" she wondered.

Saying no wasn't possible, even if she phrased it like a question.

"Sure," Shane agreed, planting his hands on his hips and trying to keep a smile on his face like he was always trained to do. "Shoot."

"Right, well first of all I know a lot of other reporters have asked this but is there any specific reason you chose to sign with the Raiders over extending your contract with the Metros?" she asked, pen gripped tightly in her hand.

He shook his head. "Nope, not really," he told him. "Same reason I tell everyone else—My contract was up and I wanted a change of pace. I don't have any resentment towards the team, the management, or the fans. This was just what I felt was best for me."

"And is it, so far?" she pressed. "You certainly look comfortable in that jersey and with the team too, maybe to a surprising extent."

Shane shrugged. "It's a sport where things are always moving and that includes people," he replied. "The Raiders know that and so do I. We're all just figuring out a new rhythm and planning to do our best this season."

She hummed, almost skeptically, looking down to jot something on her notepad. He didn't quite like that, for some reason, but bit his tongue. Trying to correct or recant his statements always made things worse, never better.

"Do you have any current apprehensions about the upcoming season or your ability to play under Rozanov given your quite public disdain for each other?" she inquired, looking back up. "And if so, could that be a potential weak spot for other teams to exploit?"

Shane nearly scoffed, because animosity was the last thing between his and Ilya. And it showed, when they played. They were in sync, always on the same wave-length, whatever else possibly fit in the area, too.

"Rozanov is and always has been a phenomenal player and a great captain," he responded earnestly. "I respect that, even if we've had our differences in the past. As for weak spots… guess the other teams just have to play us and find out for themselves."

She nodded slowly, writing it down and underlining it a few times. "So, do you—"

"Actually," Shane interjected, tilting his head towards the door. "I would really like to get out of here, if that's alright. *My team* is waiting on me."

The woman pursed her lips, flipping the top page of her pad over. “Of course,” she murmured softly. “Thank you for your time.”

He nodded and gave a hum that was lackluster, to say the least, before grabbing his stuff and walking out of the room. Ilya, Connors, and Dubek were there all waiting for him while chatting.

“Sorry, she was grilling me about the upcoming season,” he muttered in annoyance. “I didn’t mean to keep you waiting or—”

“It’s fine,” Connors assured him, sensing he was spiraling into a bit of a tizzy over it. “The others are going to wait for us before ordering so the ice cream won’t melt.”

“Really?” Shane wondered, sounding a bit surprised. Usually, if one person was late, no one waited around without being asked. Unless Hayden counted. But even then, he sometimes forgot.

Dubek nodding, slinging his arm over Shane’s shoulder. “Still, we should hurry,” he insisted with mock urgency. “I can drive, if you want. I always cut the GPS time in half—”

“No!” Ilya exclaimed before he even proposed the idea, shaking his head firmly as he glanced at them from the side.

Maybe he should have felt a bit jealous that another man was hanging off Shane, but he didn’t. Because it was Dubek, and he never meant any harm with his pushiness. Besides, for a man who barely tolerated affection from the Metros, Shane was remarkably alright with being shoulder bumped or having his hair messed up by the team.

Ilya liked the smile it brought him. The way he looked so much more relaxed around the Raiders. *Content*, even.

He knew that was a bit difficult for him, fully relaxing. Shane wasn’t the kind of guy who ever truly let his guard down unless he was completely alone of felt entirely safe. Both were rare. It came from years of being on camera, different angles trying to catch every micro expression he let slip and spin it to make him look angry, afraid, even envious or disgusted.

Shane managed his face as much, if not more than he managed anything else in life. Including his diet, which was always his way of seeking control when everything felt like it was spinning out.

That’s why Ilya had been so surprised to hear his willingness to partake in something as sugary and energy dense as ice cream. If anything, he would usually get sorbet, maybe something fat-free or low calorie. He supposed it was because he didn’t want to feel left out, but didn’t comment on it.

When they got to shop, the bell on the door chimed as they entered, the smell of cream and sugar filing the mostly empty ice cream parlor. The rest of the team was already, there pointing at the board and discussing some topic that ceased the moment they got there.

“Do any of us know how big this thing actually is?” Connors questioned *after* they had already ordered, taking a seat at a table while the other guys pushed some together so everyone had room to sit down.

“Eh, part of the fun,” Carmichael retorted, one table bumping against the other until he figured there was enough space. He sat beside him, planting his elbows on the table. “Besides, after that shoot, we deserve every scoop.”

Marlow nodded, humming in agreement as he wedged himself between Varkov and Vic. “What even was that?” he wondered, still a bit confused by the entire afternoon. “Coach never lets press watch during team photoshoots.”

Not the first of the season, anyway. Maybe later on, during designated press days when they opened the rink. But they had plenty of advance notice for those and always acted a very specific way in front of the cameras. Like assholes, really.

That was the easiest way to put it, because, frankly, that’s what was expected. The fights, the crude language, the lack of empathy for anyone including each other. And they were happy to provide the material to make those assumptions. They even liked the persona’s, in a way. It made them a lot easier to write off as brutish and cruel instead of clever or conniving.

“Guess Desjourney is trying to capitalize on Hollzy and Roz,” Vic commented, shrugging. “It’s not that surprising, given their history.”

“We don’t believe it for a second, by the way,” Hammersmith clarified, keeping his voice down a bit as he gestured between the two of them. “I mean sure, you’re both competitive. But c’mon, hatred? It’s an act just like our whole team schtick is.”

Ilya blinked, turning to Marlow. “Schtick?” he repeated slowly, the word sounding a bit odd with his accent.

“A deception, basically,” he explained for him. “It means you play up your rivalry for the cameras because people wanted to see it.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes as Marlow described the word. He couldn’t remember a time when that one had been used around him. At least not directly or recently enough for him to add it to his vocabulary. He quietly repeated it to himself, filing it away in his mind.

“Ah.” He nodded as he got it. “Yes, is exaggerated,” he replied, the admission sounding pretty casual. It was. The team always knew it was a ruse, even if not quite to what extent. They knew Ilya respected Shane as the best player in the league, if not one of the greatest of all times.

“I’m sorry he brought a reporter in,” Shane told them apologetically. “I know it wasn’t what you guys wanted.”

And despite talking to most of them, it somehow still seemed like she was mostly there for him. Which gave them every right to be upset with him for ruining what should have been a private, not to mention quick afternoon getting their season roster pictures updated.

Kane gave him a weird look, just shrugging. “So what?” he questioned rhetorically. “We were inconvenienced for a few hours, no big deal.”

“Yeah, besides you can just say no next time,” Dubek added, looking over Shane’s shoulder as the massive bowl of ice cream seemed to grow taller while being prepared.

He blinked, looking around the table. “Wait- I can?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

Sebbin huffed a laugh, nodding his head as he bumped Shane’s arm. “Of course you can,” he responded, nodding. “Raiders are known to be assholes, remember? We decline media all the time because we want our privacy.”

Shane looked like some sort of epiphany had washed over it. “You guys just…say no?” he repeated, still shocked. “Coach allows it? The media crew doesn’t get upset?”

“I mean, it’s not like we have a huge media team anyway,” Kohn reminded him, also shrugging. “It annoys the hell out of the reporters, but they’re used to it. They print all those bullshit headlines about us being cruel to them and that’s kind of funny.”

Coach swung fifty-fifty on whether or not he cared, really. Sometimes, when they really needed some attention, he would cave and allow a bit of press here and there. But usually, he let the team decline or accept whatever was brought up and if Desjourney disagreed, he just got over it.

Especially since even refusing an interview still impacted their reputations, in a way. The way he wanted, no less. It was good when they declined comments or refused to let people watch their practices. It built the illusion of pomp that brought fans to the rink and kept them coming while they tried to unravel the overall mystery of the team dynamics.

“That’s- wow,” Shane murmured in astonishment, wishing he had known that earlier. He would have tried to refuse whoever that journalist was instead of letting her contribute to such a tense afternoon. “I usually don’t get a choice in media; I’m just forced to do it.”

“You don’t ask for it or anything?” Feller wondered, furrowing his eyebrows. “I would have thought you liked it, given all the sponsorships and stuff you do outside the rink.”

He shook his head. “No, I kind of hate the cameras actually,” he confessed, looking down at the table. “It’s just expected that I take all the brand deals and do all the interviews. The Metros always called me a bit self-obsessed for how many I did, actually.”

Ilya wrinkled his nose. “It is not self-obsessed if you are doing it to please management,” he retorted in disagreement. “You don’t want to be plastered on walls; they want it for you and you want them to be happy. Big name draws in a crowd.”

Shane had, especially recently, become more famous as an advertisement than anything else in his career. People associated him with energy drinks, clothing lines, shoe companies, not his stats. Even in the rink, he was the name they put on merchandise and said was having a great year for jersey sales, not the one they talked about being dedicated or disciplined.

“Well, I don’t how much my opinion matters *yet*,” Vic told him earnestly. “But I think from an outsider perceptive, you have been a brand not a player for far too long. And I for one am excited to see the cutthroat version you were as a rookie come back out.”

“I second that,” Marlow agreed, dipping his head. “We’ll make an athlete out of you again.”

Shane chuckled slightly, feeling a strange tightness coil in his chest for a moment. It wasn’t quite out of anxiety or fear, though, like usual. It was more like the one he got when he was around Ilya. Comfort, perhaps. Or maybe *acceptance*?

“Oh, here we go!” Sebbin exclaimed, brightening up as a man brought over a massive glass bowl of ice cream, scoops of different flavors piled high and covered in whipped cream and cherries. “This might make all of this afternoon’s discomfort worth it.”

“Mm, what discomfort?” Kohn noted, playing along as it was set down in the middle. “I can’t even remember what happened today.”

A second waiter set down a plethora of spoons, the metal clinking on the table as the guys all reached to grab one like they’d have to fight for it or something. They were already scanning the bowl, trying to figure out what each flavor was based on the color or toppings around it.

Strawberry, chocolate, vanilla, of course. Rocky road and pecan, too. One looked like cotton candy, Shane was pretty sure.

“No one touches the Rum raisin; it’s mine,” Feller insisted, already spinning the massive glass bowl around so his preferred flavor was closer to him. “I’m calling dibs.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about anyone stealing it,” Kohn retorted, already diving into the pistachio. “You’re the only one here who eats that flavor.” Maybe the only person in all of Boston, for that matter.

He shrugged, scraping his spoon against the ice cream. “Can’t tell why,” he replied, bringing his spoon to his mouth. “It’s the best one.”

There were a few grimaces, even downright disagreements as everyone started listing flavors they considered better. Mint chip, butterscotch, even Bubble gum. Shane just watched, nodding slightly whenever he agreed with one of the comments.

Ilya watched him from across the table, taking a small bite of the nearest flavor. Raspberry, he was pretty sure. Made with fresh fruit, too, since there were seeds in it.

“What’s you favorite flavor, Hollzy?” Vic questioned, gesturing to the massive bowl with his spoon that looked ridiculously small in comparison.

He paused for a moment before shrugging. “I uh- don’t eat a lot of ice cream, honestly,” he admitted cautiously, preparing for a comment about his diet the way JJ or Berkes would always make one.

They’d call it bird food or a form of self-loathing, things like that. He never told them, or anyone, technically, but he kind of agreed deep down. He just tried to pretend otherwise.

Kohn perked up a bit, fighting back Sebbin's spoon for some of the Salted Carmel ice cream. "Do you prefer cake or cookies or something?" he asked curiously. "I make an amazing bannana bread, too, if you want something healthier than that."

"You do?" he replied, a bit surprised.

He nodded, finally getting a bit of the flavor and bringing his spoon to his mouth. "Yeah, I have a friend who is super into healthy recipes so I always bake him a loaf for his birthday," he explained. "It's got yogurt, protein flour, low-cal sugar, all that stuff. But it actually tastes pretty good because I use honey for a little extra sweetness. Don't blab it around, though. Secret recipe and all that."

Shane huffed a small laugh, finding himself picking up the last spoon off the table. "I'll keep it to myself," he muttered, glancing at the bowl and reaching to try some of the Oreo flavor that looked like it had crushed pieces in it. "I typically just watch my calories pretty closely, is all. Ice cream is sort of a special thing."

He brought a small bite to his lips, having almost forgotten how good ice cream tasted. Ilya's lips twitched into a small, almost proud smile over it. Even though it didn't really seem like anything terribly significant, it was important to him to see Shane try it. And even more so to see him not immediately regret it.

"Team bonding definitely counts as a special excuse for it," Dubek replied, digging into the coconut flavor. "Then again, I think most things are a reason for ice cream. I love it," he muttered with a very serious expression. "Best fucking dessert to exist, bar none."

Shane laughed, gravitating towards another bite without even realizing it until the flavor was hitting his tongue again. "So, an ice cream cake for your birthday then?" he questioned.

His eyes lit up and he pointed his spoon at him. "You are my new favorite teammate, Hollzy," he replied firmly, nodding dramatically.

Hammersmith looked around the team a bit, glancing at the window where a few people had stopped outside of the ice cream parlor and were just staring through the glass like they couldn't be seen if they didn't come inside. They did that a lot, actually. Which, he supposed was better than if they trampled in and interrupted their conversations.

"We're gonna be signing shit in a few minutes," he warned the table, leading to everyone else looking up at the spectators.

"We're zoo animals," Vic commented, mildly annoyed but not truly upset as he went back to the bowl of ice cream.

It was something they had all signed up for, after all. Something they also knew a lot of guys dreamed of having happen to them. People would kill to be in their shoes, and they were aware of it. They were just as grateful for the opportunity to play in the NHL as any other team was, they just acted like they weren't.

Varkov ignored the flash of the camera going off through the glass, having gotten pretty good at focusing when there was a lot of commotion around him. “We are downtown,” he replied, shrugging. “Hard to get away from it.”

Shane glanced at the group of people outside, a small frown of confusion tugging at his lips as his spoon fell from them. “They’re all just standing there,” he noticed. “Why aren’t they coming inside or anything?”

Ilya spun the bowl around a bit. “They’re being respectful,” he replied like it was obvious.

Well, sort of respectful. He didn’t expect them to act like the entire team being in public together without a media crew or their jerseys was totally normal. It obviously wasn’t. But it was polite of them to wait for them to be done rather than intruding on their space.

“Part of the asshole thing,” Feller explained to Shane with a vague gesture of his hand. “If they barge in or crowd around, we don’t give any autographs or pictures. They know they have to be patient and courteous.”

“Plus, we stay and talk with them more when they’re nice,” Marlow added, scraping his spoon against the side of the bowl. “It’s kind of common knowledge around the city.”

It helped that it extended to the rink, too. They didn’t really have to worry about being spotted if they wanted to see the public parts of the arena they didn’t normally get to visit or they could just walk out into the lobby and parking lot before a game if they were bored and wanted to meet some people.

“No one ever oversteps or anything?” Shane wondered, taking another bite of ice cream.

Vic shrugged. “Not often,” he replied, shaking his head. “Every once in a while someone from a visiting city gets rowdy but it’s usually the other fans that call out the behavior.” They didn’t want to spoil it for everyone else because one person got too pushy and invaded their space.

“You guys basically trained your fanbase by being such jerks that they behave in order to get your autographs?” he summarized in a bit of awe. “That’s kind of brilliant.” And a bit hard to comprehend, honestly.

Usually, if the Metros were anywhere together in public, they’d be bombarded until they were blinded by cell phone lights and overwhelmed with shouting. No one would have waited outside if they were at a restaurant or something; they would have to rent the whole place out to avoid the attention.

The fact that the Raiders could just walk in and people would let them, especially downtown of all places, was astounding to him.

“I can’t believe we finished that,” Sebbin noted, finishing the last of the ice cream.

“I can,” Kane replied with a huff, leaving his spoon in the empty bowl. “And now I’m freezing my ass off.” He was actually looking forward to heading outside where it was a bit

warmer and honestly, he was looking forward to meeting some fans, too. He always liked those interactions.

Everyone pulled their wallets out and Shane furrowed his brows slightly in confusion, watching as everyone threw a twenty-dollar bill onto the table and Marlow stacked them neatly together. Some even tossed multiple.

That was like at least a four-hundred-dollar tip. Jeez. Shane didn't consider himself cheap or anything, but he had no idea the team tipped to that extent.

"C'mon," Ilya muttered, rising to his feet as he slipped his wallet back into his pocket. "I see them getting antsy."

There was a chuckle from someone Shane couldn't quite discern and everyone began following him outside, the bell on the door chiming again slightly as they left. He stared for a second, watching how none of the fans crowded them or shoved pens towards them either.

It was the exact opposite, actually. They all took a few steps back, leaving a respectable distance between them and the team while talking to them. *Talking.* Not clamoring or screaming or shoving phones in their face. Just chatting.

Marlow shook some guys hand and a teenage boy asked Feller something and he stepped closer to take a picture with the kid. A woman held out a pen towards Ilya with a sheepish expression and he nodded, gesturing for her to turn around so he could sign her shirt. It was so casual and low-key that his brain was kind of struggling to comprehend it, honestly.

"Shane?" Dubek commented, staying behind with him. "You alright?"

"Hm? Yeah," he replied, nodding. "I was just a bit surprised by how relaxed everyone is." Usually, a crowd made the Metros act like caged animals.

He glanced at the window again. "They're pretty good to us," he agreed, looking back at him. "But I was actually talking about the ice cream."

Shane frowned slightly, confused. "How so?" he questioned.

Dubek gave him a small look, pulling a chair back out and sitting down for a moment. "It's none of my business, so feel free to tell me to fuck off," he prefaced gently. "But I recognize that look in your eyes when you were contemplating eating. The language, too, when you said you count calories. You meant you *restrict* them, right?"

His expression darkened a bit, not quite getting defensive just get but certainly getting caught off guard. People usually didn't equate his diet to a problem *that* quickly. They typically only noticed when they saw him checking something most people didn't think about like a salad dressing bottle or cooking oil.

"It's all sort of the same thing, isn't it?" he retorted, shrugging as he tried to downplay it like he had in the past.

“Look, I’m not assuming I know anything about you or your diet,” Dubek clarified, holding his hands up. “I just know I used to struggle with mine pretty badly—checking calories, cutting out stuff I loved eating, trying to defend my choices even when no one asked me to. And I’ve been told it gave me this hollow look in my eyes, kind of like you were getting when we sat down.”

A look of realization flashed across Shane’s eyes. “You did?” he wondered.

He nodded. “It’s not terribly common knowledge, but the team knows about my problem. I had a really hard season a few years back, lost some weight and struggled to put it back on,” he confessed. “I always wished I had been able to talk about it sooner; maybe it wouldn’t have been so hard to bounce back from it.”

The Raiders had, obviously, supported him through it. They never teased or mocked and tried their best to be gentle with their suggestions about dinner. Desserts especially were treated cautiously, offered occasionally and with no pressure to partake while he recovered.

“I’m sorry you- I didn’t know,” he muttered softly. “I’m glad you feel better.”

“You and me both,” Dubek retorted with a soft laugh. “I guess I just wanted to say that *if* that is something you might think you’re struggling with…talk about it. With me or with Roz, maybe. He helped me find a dietician that I still talk to every once in a while, when I feel like I’m slipping. No pressure, though. I could be totally off base. Maybe you just prefer pie to ice cream for your sweets.”

It was a bit of cop out, a way for Shane to push him away and drop the subject without either of them feeling bad about it if that’s what he wanted to do. Honestly, with Mitty or Wilson or even Hayden, he might have accepted the out.

But something about how gentle Dubek was approaching it, the sincerity in his concern had Shane feeling like maybe it woudn’t be the worst thing in the world to have someone understand him.

“No, I-I do like ice cream,” Shane admitted, nodding slowly. “Just always makes me feel a bit…”

“Guilty?” he assumed correctly, watching him nod. “For me it was cookies. Kohn would bring them to practice, and everyone would have one while I watched and imagined what they tasted like. Sometimes, I even left the room because they smelled so sweet I couldn’t take it.”

“Yeah, guilty. And I uh- feel proud, I guess?” he added hesitantly, grimacing at how strange it sounded. “If I manage to avoid the sugar during a barbeque or something.”

Dubek hummed, something akin to familiarity in his eyes. “If anyone gets that, I do,” he assured him gently. “And I know it’s probably pretty hard to trust a group of relative strangers, especially after the years we’ve spent as rivals, but these guys have your back on *and off* the ice. I promise.”

Shane nodded slowly, gazing back at the window where Kohn was laughing at something a fan told him and some of the others were still signing whatever people handed them like it wasn't even the slightest bit of a bother to them. It probably wasn't, actually. They looked like they were genuinely enjoying the interactions as more people showed up, still trying to give the team their space.

"Yeah, I'm starting to realize that," Shane murmured softly.

Dubek followed his gaze for a moment before his lips ticked up into a smile. "Let's go," he suggested, leaning forward to gently smack his shoulder as he stood up. "I'm sure the fans want to see their new Raider, too."

He huffed lightly, getting to his feet and following him outside cautiously. He hadn't really been overly social yet, still a bit nervous about how Boston as a whole was reacting to his choice to move here. Sure, online they were pretty excited. They wanted to win. But him as a person they ran into on the streets was totally different.

Stepping outside, almost everyone's head turned and he gave a small wave noticing a few people getting a little excited. No one crowded him, though. No one shouted his name or started taking pictures of him.

One girl just introduced herself. "My dad is going to flip that I met you," she told him, her voice no louder than it would be in a normal conversation. "He actually loves Montreal. It's his second favorite team after Boston."

He shook her hand. "I hope he's okay with the switch," he muttered.

"It's the best news he's heard all year, I think," she joked, pushing a strand of dark hair over her ear. "Would you mind signing something for him? He won't believe I met you otherwise."

Shane nodded. "Yeah, sure," he told her, taking a pen that had been passed around the team for a few minutes.

Uncapping it, he signed the hem of her shirt, sharpie staining the fabric as he swooped the letters in his name. Once done, he passed the pen back to Vic who signed someone's phone case, his eyes flitting up to Ilya in the process. Ilya, unsurprisingly, didn't look the least bit shocked to see people welcoming him so openly and getting excited by his autograph.

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It was only a few days before the first game of the season that an article dropped, the title reading, ***'Former Metro star dares other teams to "play us and find out" just ahead of first game of the season.'***

Shane wouldn't say he was furious or anything, but he was a bit peeved that his words had been twisted like that. He sounded, well, like a Raider with that kind of tone. Social media hadn't been quiet since then. Neither had his parents or Hayden, who wouldn't drop it, even several days later.

“I told you, I didn’t say it like that!” he exclaimed to his mom, who was standing in his apartment while his dad looked around the place. Snooped was a better word, but he wouldn’t use it out of politeness. “I mean, I did. But it was out of context!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter how you meant to say it, honey; it’s what they printed,” Yuna replied gently. “Now, it’s a few days late but if we address it—”

“What? No,” he insisted, shaking his head. “I’m not addressing anything. If that’s what people think I meant, let them.”

She raised an eyebrow, a bit caught off guard not just by reluctance to try to change the narrative but the outright refusal. He was usually just as worried as she was about his public image, always wondering if the sponsorships looked good or if his approval rating were falling.

“Wow, Boston has changed you,” she murmured softly, looking around his apartment a bit. It was small. Very small. And he still wasn’t fully unpacked, for some reason.

“No, it hasn’t,” Shane muttered quietly, shrugging his shoulders. “I just don’t care about a headline as much. I want to play; it’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

He forgot that for a while. Becoming a brand had stripped away the part of him that was, at his core, meant to be on the ice not in a studio.

His mom hummed slightly, fingertips still clutched around the handle of her suitcase. “Publicity aside,” she clarified. “Are you going to show us the guest room?”

Shane let out a slow breath, nodding his head and taking her bag from her. “Yeah, it’s down the hall,” he told her, taking her stuff that direction.

“Hm, I’m surprised this place is big enough for a hallway,” she murmured, following him. Rightfully so, too, since his idea of a hallway was a tiny, rather inconvenient corner that blocked off the view of the guest room door.

He put her stuff by the bed, backing out of the room and turning to grab his dad’s bags too. Meanwhile, she looked around a little, her gut telling her something about this whole apartment was off. Shane was clean, sure, but this place looked practically untouched.

And frankly, it was. This was only the third time he had ever actually stepped inside of it since moving to Boston.

The first was to put some spare boxes of things he wouldn’t need after moving in with Ilya, the second was when his parents wanted to facetime and see the place so he had to drive over there, and the third was right now as they planned to stay with him for the week and watch the first few games of the season.

Which meant now, instead of going home to his boyfriend, he was stuck living the apartment he *technically* rented for the next seven days. Ilya wasn’t exactly pleased about it, but given

how much more time they got together these days, he was much more willing to share his time with them.

“Okay, that’s pretty much everything you brought, right?” Shane asked, clasping his hands together. “I know you just got here, but I promised I’d be at the rink early for an extra practice and some strategy before the first game so…”

He didn’t quite tell them he had to leave, but the message was pretty damn clear.

“Go,” David told him, tilting his head towards the door. “It’ll give me time to convince your mom that wearing a Boston shirt won’t kill her.”

She rolled her eyes and Shane huffed. “I think it might,” he admitted, noticing her lingering apprehension. “I’ll see you guys later tonight; everyone should already be expecting you but tell them who you are if they’re being difficult.”

Yuna nodded slightly, wondering exactly who all he told about their visit and what his new teammates thought about it. “See you tonight.”

He grabbed his keys, looking practically thrilled to leave his own apartment as he closed the door behind him with a bit more force than necessary. She knew things had been moving quickly for him, that practice was grueling and his new coach was a piece of work, to say the least. But he was so standoffish from the moment he picked them up from the airport and it was just so strange.

The calls they had with him since he moved to Boston were strange too, usually cut short or sometimes temporarily paused when he started to laugh or hush someone in the background. His team, he claimed, but considering how small his apartment was, it was doubtful he could fit many of them in here.

And not to be called nosey or anything, but his closet didn’t have as many clothes as it should, his favorite shoes weren’t in there either. To say nothing of his awards, which weren’t hanging on the wall. Nothing was. It was practically bare, sans the furniture it came with.

Still, she tried to let it go. She reluctantly wore a Raiders jersey for the first time in her life, which she had sworn repeatedly she would never do and stepped into their arena with her husband and as much hope as she could manage.

“It’s this way, right?” David murmured, pointing down a hallway towards a restricted area.

“Probably,” she muttered, nodding in agreement as she walked with him.

They passed one man, a security guard, who looked like he was close to telling them to leave before some epiphany dawned on him and stayed put. She guessed Shane really did mention they were coming to watch him play.

Down the hall, there was loud clamoring outside. None of the team were in the locker room quite yet, just standing outside in the corridor and laughing about something.

“No, no, no! That doesn’t fucking count, Sebbin!” Marlow claimed, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “We’re starting again.”

“I didn’t touch it!” Sebbin defended, smacking Feller slightly. “He’s lying to you and you’re all buying it.”

Yuna and David paused, stopping a bit further back and watching them from afar as the entire team stood in a wide circle around each other. Shane was standing in between Marlow and Rozanov, wearing a Raiders hoodie and rolling his eyes like he had already gotten used to their nonsense.

Shane huffed, gesturing towards the soccer ball in Marlow’s arms. “Just kick it,” he insisted, refocusing. “Not at Sebbin, though. He cheats.”

The laughter continued for a moment but as soon as Marlow bumped the soccer ball towards Varkov, it died down. Keeping the ball from hitting the ground, he tapped his heel against it and it bounced towards Kane who smacked it with his elbow in Vic’s direction. They both stepped back, leaving the circle.

Vic shuffled a bit, bending and knocking it off the top of his head. It flew towards Hammersmith who stepped back and kicked it off his knee in the direction of Connors. He made a panicked sound, hitting it off the side of his shoulder before retreating from the circle.

It shot back at Shane who stepped towards it, lifting his leg to kick it off the side of his shoe towards Sebbin. Finally playing by the rules, Sebbin left the circle after he bopped the soccer ball with his elbow towards Ilya, who bounced it on his knee for a moment while glancing around at who was left. He knocked it towards Carmichael, who hit it back towards Dubek with his head. Jumping back, he kicked it with the tip of his toe towards Kohn, who elbowed it towards Feller.

A few more moments and the rest of the guys slowly left the circle until Zadonsky was left. He caught the ball on the tip of his shoe, kicking it into the air and Shane lunged to catch it as the clamoring erupted again.

“Only four tries tonight!” Kane praised, slapping Shane on the back. “Not a bad pregame at all.”

“Better than the night we had to do it seventeen times,” Hammersmith retorted, taking the ball from Shane and tossing it at Sebbin, who caught it and tucked it under his arm.

“That was not my fault!” he exclaimed. “It’s human nature to want to use your hands when something is flying at your face.” They didn’t even wear helmets during their pregame ritual!

Ilya rolled his eyes right until they landed on David and Yuna. He physically stiffened a bit, tapping Shane on the shoulder and motioning towards them. He followed his gesture, noticing them with a look of, well, many things. Excitement, probably. Also a bit of panic since he hadn’t seen them sooner.

He pushed through the team, quickly rushing over to them. “You made it,” he noted, a bit out of breath.

Yuna nodded. “Of course, we said we’d be here early,” she reminded him, glancing over his shoulder at the guys as they began to settle down a bit. “What was all that?”

“Hm? Oh, just a pregame thing,” Shane explained with a shrug. “Everyone has to keep the ball from hitting the ground without using their hands until the entire team has gone.”

It was meant to help them get into some sort of collaborative mood or something, he supposed. He wasn’t quite sure. But it was fun. Way better than the Metros pregame rituals of screaming their energy out in the locker room.

“Sounds…questionable,” she murmured, contemplating it. Didn’t that wear them out a bit? Should they be playing games before an actual game? The first of the season, no less.

“She means interesting,” David corrected, squeezing her shoulder.

“Uh- right, well did you guys want to meet my team?” Shane wondered, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

They, honestly, weren’t sure. Yuna wasn’t anyway. Her husband nodded a bit quickly, though, pushing her towards them since her feet wouldn’t move on their own. They were still a bit rowdy, but had calmed down a little, too, seeing them walking over.

She was expecting some of this, the loudness and the foul language. That was pretty standard. She also expected them to force their smiles and maybe awkwardly shake her hand the way some of the Metros did in the past because she was, apparently, a bit intimidating to them.

Instead, though, Kohn was quick to wrap his arms around her in a full-blown hug.

“Oh! Hi?” she murmured, a bit surprised. “It’s…nice to meet you?”

He pulled back. “We love your son, ma’am,” he said firmly. “Or Mrs. Hollander? Do you like Yuna?” he questioned. “Mama Hollzy?”

Varkov smacked him on the back of the head. “Ignore him; he’s always overhyped before a game,” he explained. “But he’s also not wrong, we’re very big fans of your son. And you.”

“Me?” Yuna repeated as they crowded around her a bit.

Shane, she could understand. He was a brilliant player and she liked to think he was an incredible person, too. Even outside of hockey. But her? What on Earth did they know about her to receive this kind of welcome?

“You bargained for his contract with us, right?” Hammersmith muttered, nudging her son’s shoulder. “We get him for three whole years because of you.” His voice was tinged with a mix of enthusiasm and gratitude.

“Yeah, we’re thinking of putting up a statue or hanging a picture in your honor,” Connors noted. “You basically gave us the key to the cup this season.”

“Woah, let’s not get overdramatic,” Ilya interjected, gesturing to himself. “Am still here, you know? We’ve won it before; are not total losers.”

Hollander rolled his eyes again, huffing in amusement as he bumped his shoulder against Ilya’s fondly. “We’re sure as hell not losing this season, though,” he murmured, a smile tugging at his lips. “We’re gonna win it *together*.”

His own mouth lifted slightly, nodding in agreement. “Of course we are,” he agreed. “Have all the best players in the league on my team. …Plus Sebbin.” There was a loud cackling as Sebbin tried to reach over to hit him. Ilya laughed, shoving his hand away and tugging him towards him to throw his arm over his shoulder. “Kidding! Would not be complete without you, here.”

Shane laughed, fussing with the strands of his Raiders hoodie as he caught his mom and dad’s gazes again. Something in them had shifted from being weary to almost having a realization of sorts, but what exactly they were realizing, he couldn’t be sure.

Maybe just the fact that he was happy. That moments before a game, he was laughing. Not stressing or sitting in silence to prepare for it like he usually did, but joking and kicking a ball around with his team.

From the locker room, someone called out, “Twenty minutes before faceoff!” without ever leaving it.

“Ah, serious time,” Ilya muttered, unhooking Sebbin and clapping his hands for a moment. “Come on! Let’s get it together and focus,” he insisted, shooing them towards the locker rooms. “First game sets the tone for the whole season, and I want to start it off right this year!” With a win, of course. Nothing else would be acceptable.

Nodding along, they all filtered into the locker room to change into the gear and take a few minutes to actually review their game plan. Not that it was needed, after they had gone over it so many times.

Shane lingered for a moment, unsure what else to say to his parents. “I’ll uh- I’ll meet you after the game, same spot?” he muttered, still fussing with the tassels of his sweatshirt.

They both nodded. “Yeah, of course,” David told him.

With another quick smile, he followed the others into the locker room, shouting something that didn’t quite carry well enough for his parents to hear as the door slammed shut behind them. They caught the tone, though. Light, excited. Something that he never really had before.

Yuna let out a slow breath, turning to her husband. “Well, that was…wow,” she murmured in disbelief.

“I know,” he replied, somehow not needing her to say anything else to understand exactly what she was thinking and feeling.

Their son, who was dedicated to the point of obsession and so hard on himself that hockey had grown into something that made him a bit short-tempered to discuss, was laughing before a game. Not a fake one, either. A real, wide grin. Because of the Raiders.

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The Raiders won that night against Nashville. They won two days later, too, against Minnesota.

News articles got published the moment both wins happened, homing in on the teamwork they showed and trying to spin it into some drama that didn’t really need to exist. They questioned if it was skill or luck, if Shane and Ilya were faking their collaboration on the ice or if ten years of publicly hating each other could really dissipate that fast.

Shane didn’t pay attention to most of it, but his mother read every single article.

“Is it a respect thing or a likability thing?” she wondered, pressing a paperback book on top of the suitcase she was packing up as their visit came to an end. “Because likability, I don’t understand. But respect…I also struggle to get.”

He huffed, glancing up from his phone as he texted Ilya. “Both,” he replied. “He’s not that bad, once you know him. It’s all just…kind of an act for the cameras.”

And that was true. It was an act. No one quite understood the extent of it, but he didn’t need them to. They could think what they wanted.

Yuna hummed, still skeptical. “He’s a good leader, I’ll give him that much,” she admitted begrudgingly. “And you did seem to have fun the last two games.”

“I always have fun,” Shane murmured.

She didn’t comment on the response, but she also didn’t need to. They both knew what she was thinking. *Not like that*. He had a good time, sure. He liked being the best, liked the adrenaline rush, liked the rules. But he hadn’t enjoyed it the way he did this week for a *long time*.

“Well, I wish we could stay and watch tonight’s game,” she noted in disappointment. “But we’ve monopolized your apartment for long enough, so after breakfast, we’ll be out of your hair.”

That meant he could, finally, drive home to Ilya and sleep in their bed tonight instead of on a stiff, cold mattress he didn’t even like. And even as he tried to hide his relief, it still came through pretty clear.

“Hey, I could- I mean, I could ask Ilya to join us,” he suggested hesitantly. “For breakfast, I mean. He knows downtown better than me, anyway. Might know a good restaurant.”

Yuna froze a bit in the middle of zipping up her suitcase, looking over at her son with a look of surprise. It was their last day in Boston, really just their last few hours, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to spend it having a meal with someone she despised.

"Just…to eat?" she wondered, almost confused. "Are you trying to convince me to like him or something?"

Shane shrugged slightly. "I don't know, maybe. He's my captain, now. It'd be nice if you could at least be civil with him," he admitted. "You don't have to, though. It was just a suggestion."

"No, no it- if you want to, then we'll do it," she replied cautiously, giving him a slow nod. "If you think he would want to, that is. I wouldn't want to make him go out of his way—"

"It's not, he hasn't eaten yet," Shane assured her quickly.

She glanced at the phone in his hand, realizing he must have been texting Rozanov the entire time they were talking and not, well, literally anyone else, her mind conjured up. "Alright, then," she agreed.

Zipping her suitcase the rest of the way up, she tilted it up, feeling a lump of dread begin to form in her stomach. Breakfast with Rozanov. Was that something her son did very often? She knew he was the captain and all that, but that didn't necessarily mean they had to become buddies.

Or maybe it did. Maybe they were trying to put their rivalry in the past. Maybe being seen with her son would give Rozanov some good publicity for a change and that's why he was so willing to accept having him on his team.

She wasn't quite sure. All she knew was that less than half an hour later, she was sitting across from him in a little café with a name too obscure to have found it through an internet search.

Rozanov looked…softer in person, out of his jersey. Like he was relaxed when he wasn't in front of a dozen cameras or thousands of fans. It was strange, to say the least, to see her son go from avoiding him at events to sitting beside him at the table.

"Just water, please," Rozanov told the waitress. "Thanks."

Wow, she thought to herself. A please and thanks. Those were manners she didn't know he had, especially not towards anyone in customer service.

"So, this is a nice little place," David muttered, glancing around the restaurant. It was small but not overly crowded. The outdoor patio helped with that. "Do you come here often?"

Rozanov tipped his head back and forth uncertain how to answer. "Not too much," he admitted. "I usually cook at home, actually. But it's nice here, good food. One of the first places I found on my own without team recommendations or Zagat guide."

And at the time, when he moved to Boston, that had been something he took a decent bit of pride in. It was tough to navigate the city in general, even harder when he had barely spoken the language and tended to take a teammate everywhere to help him translate.

“They have amazing waffles,” Shane told his parents, glancing at the menu. “You can get them with anything added.”

David’s eyes widened a bit at the mention of what was typically an item his son refused to eat. He often claimed it had too much sugar and there were too many carbohydrates in them. That it would take too long to burn off the calories, and he would be slow for practice if he ate any.

“Waffles huh?” he repeated, closing his menu. “I do like them.”

His son huffed slightly, nudging Ilya. “Once, when I was kid, my dad and I overfilled the waffle maker so badly we couldn’t open it,” he told him. “And even after unplugging it, it kept burning and the smoke alarms went off while my mom was on a phone call. Furious would be an understatement for her reaction.”

Ilya chuckled, lips tugging into a smile. “Oh, golden boy actually got in trouble for something huh?” he mused with fake surprise. “I didn’t know that was possible.”

Shane snorted, looking back down at the menu for a moment. “Yeah, well, I have my moments,” he clarified, sounding casual about it. Like admitting his flaws wasn’t something overwhelming and nearly impossible. It was just a fact that he wasn’t perfect, even if he had spent a decade trying to prove otherwise.

Yuna stared at him. How calm he looked and how easy it seemed to be to admit to his fallibility and share childhood memories with Rozanov. Did she ever hear him do that with the Metros? Did they know about his hockey scrapbook or his worst fears? Did Rozanov know that, for that matter?

As the waitress came back over, they ordered starting counterclockwise with Yuna and ending with Ilya who took Shane’s menu and handed it back over stacked on his own. She lingered for a moment by their table, her lips pulling into a tight, almost embarrassed line.

“Uh- you probably get this a lot,” the waitress noted. “But I’m a huge fan and I was actually at the game on Wednesday. You were- well, it was a good game, is all. I hope you guys win tonight, too.”

They both smiled, but she turned to take their orders to the kitchen before either of them could say something in response. Hm, they’d just have to thank her later or leave a nice tip. Probably both.

“That was sweet,” Yuna murmured, sipping her coffee.

David furrowed his brows. “Which one of you was she talking about?” he questioned, slightly confused.

Ilya and Shane glanced at each other shrugging at the same time.

“Probably you,” Shane assumed. “She couldn’t be a fan of mine if I’ve been in Montreal for a decade.” Roz had a pretty steady following, after all, since he had been here so long.

Ilya made a sound of disagreement. “You know the second you became a Raider, everyone flipped, right?” he reminded him. “You are big star no matter who you play for, Hollzy.”

He rolled his eyes slightly. “Now you’re calling me that, too?” he wondered.

“I thought you liked that nickname?” Ilya wondered, tilting his head a bit. “Vic called pass with it on Wednesday, and you responded to it on ice.”

Yuna’s eyes bounced back and forth between them. He did? She knew that was something the guys had taken to calling him but had no idea he was that receptive to it. She just heard it once or twice when meeting up with him after the game when the team said their goodbyes for a night. They hadn’t been wearing mics on the ice or else maybe she would have caught the name again.

“No, I do like it,” Shane assured him, nodding. “I just figured you’d stick to Shane or Hollander.”

“Могла бы называть тебя своей любимой,” he murmured, reaching for his water and taking a sip. “Но я не думаю, что вы бы одобрили это публично.”

Shane barely kept his eyes from popping out at the comment. “Probably not,” he agreed in English, staying calm. “At some point, though,” he added, his tone dipping into something that sounded almost disappointed.

His father blinked at him from across the table. “You speak Russian, now?” he wondered.

“Hm? No, I- well, I’m picking it up,” Shane explained weakly. “A lot of the guys know it because Varkov and Kovalev will talk shit to each other in private and they don’t like being left out.”

So did Ilya, for that matter. But he tried not to talk in Russian too much, not because he was being polite but because terms of endearment had always slipped out easier in his mother tongue and he never wanted to risk forgetting there were others on the team who would know what he was saying if it ever came out. It was safer to try to avoid his language for the most part when they were with the team.

“He’s very good at it,” Ilya muttered, nudging him gently. “Say something.”

He huffed, shaking his head. “My pronunciation is really not great,” he insisted. “I know what you’re talking about, not how to respond.”

“Try,” Yuna encouraged, propping her chin against her palm as she watched her son curiously.

“Uh- Я с нетерпением жду возвращения домой сегодня вечером,” Shane said, glancing at Ilya who bit back a smile.

“я тоже,” he murmured. “Pronunciation was almost perfect.”

He pinched his fingers together for emphasis and Shane shrugged lightly, tapping his fingers on the table for a moment or two. Yuna could swear she saw him taking a deep breath, like he was trying to relax for some reason. She had never particularly wished to know Russian until that specific moment, but now she did. Badly.

“Well, I’m certainly impressed,” David muttered with a tinge of pride. “Russian can’t be an easy language to learn.”

Ilya shook his head. “Is very difficult, yes,” he agreed. “All languages are, though, I think. English still has words that are uh- punchy sometimes?”

Or metaphors. He truly hated those for many years. He never knew when to believe one of them was real or when his teammates were just messing with him. Especially when they played in the South.

“I can imagine,” David noted, nodding slightly.

The waitress came back, four plates balanced on a single tray, and began setting them down for everyone. Yuna’s eyes widened a bit at the size of the waffles her husband and son had both gotten or perhaps more so at how excited Shane looked to take it from the waitress.

She wouldn’t go as far to call her son’s tendencies to restrict himself an eating disorder because, frankly, she worried about the implications of a real diagnosis. But she suspected it for at least two years and with how much worse his limitations got, she seriously considered broaching the subject to him.

But now, well, he was cutting into his waffles like he planned to eat the entire thing. He even knocked Rozanov’s fork away when he tried to steal some.

“You got boring food, deal with it,” Shane mumbled in mock annoyance as he tried to keep Ilya from stealing his food.

Ilya just kept trying to get around his silverware, jabbing his own fork into the waffle. “Just want to try it,” he insisted, murmuring the words quietly. “Learn to share for God’s sake.”

“I share fine when I’m properly asked,” he defended, reaching to grab Ilya’s wrist and keep him from eating the piece he stole. Snatching it off the end of his fork with his teeth, he chewed a bit, talking through a full mouth. “You didn’t ask.”

They usually ate the same thing as eat other for breakfast, but for dinner if they ordered in they’d get separate meals and share. It was probably why Ilya hadn’t thought to request permission to try any of his waffle.

Ilya huffed. “You stole it,” he exclaimed in slight disbelief.

“It was my waffle!” he retorted, reaching for his lemonade and sipping it. “It’s delicious, by the way. Crispy edges.”

He rolled his eyes. “Пошёл на хуй,” he complained, gesturing to the plate. “May I have a piece of your waffle *please*?” He sounded a bit petty over it, like he was doing it to comply not genuinely asking.

Shane nodded, sliding his plate towards Ilya with ease to share it. “Have as much as you want,” he replied, nodding towards his plate. “Can I have some of your eggs?”

Ilya hummed, barely even acknowledging the request.

Yuna watched them squabble a bit, though unlike in the past, there wasn’t any real animosity behind it. They were laughing. Sharing. They almost forgot they weren’t alone, it felt like.

“So, um…the game tonight,” she mentioned, dipping her spoon into the fruit parfait she ordered. “Any idea what the lineup looks like?”

Ilya shook his head. “Not yet,” he replied. “But soon. Before our practice later ends, probably.” Coach would have to give it out before the hard dead line dropped, at least, and usually tried to put it out a bit sooner as a little psychological warfare for the other team.

“I might be late,” Shane added, gesturing across the table. “I was gonna drop them off at the airport.” Even if they insisted, they could grab a cab, he just couldn’t allow it. It felt wrong not saying goodbye to them there. “Probably get there twenty after?”

He nodded, finally pushing his plate back towards him and digging into his own meal. “I’ll tell him,” he replied casually.

Yuna refused to let her eyes widen again because they had already been doing that far too much all morning. All week, really. She saw Boston natives asking for her son’s autograph, thrilled to have him as a Raider, she read the articles praising how well he worked with the team, she heard the commentators complimenting how well the new jersey fit him.

Everything seemed so…picturesque. But she knew how hard coaches could be in the major leagues. Being late to practice wasn’t acceptable, especially not for something as trivial as a trip to the airport.

And yet, Rozanov wasn’t worried about him being late. He wasn’t worried about breaking the news to their coach or being yelled at over it, either. This whole thing just kept her brain spinning in circles she couldn’t quite seem to figure out.

She was pretty sure her mind didn’t settle once for the entire breakfast, not even when Ilya got up to take a phone call from Kohn. It should have, probably. But her son, started to look a little stiff in his absence, glancing up to the keep an eye on him like he’s disappear as he stepped away from the patio even though he was still in eyeline.

It wasn’t until after they paid the check—Rozanov technically, which she wasn’t sure how to feel about—that things seemed to clear up for her.

Shane pulled his jacket on, shoving his hands in his pocket. “I’ll text you when I’m heading towards the rink,” he muttered. “I know you’re not going to see it, though so I don’t know why I’m gonna bother.”

Ilya shrugged. “Because you’re you,” he replied simply, setting down a few twenty-dollar bills for a decent tip. Around 35%, he was pretty sure. “я тебя люблю,” he added, hushing his voice slightly.

Shane glanced at him. “я тоже тебя люблю,” he responded, trying to keep his tone casual, like it was just a normal way to end a conversation.

Maybe he could tell them it was some Russian goodbye he was learning about or something stupid like that. His parents had never even been to Russia, let alone knew anything about the culture or language.

But Yuna didn’t need the words to make sense of them; she heard the repetition, the slight deviation towards the end like he was editing it just a tinge. It was comfortable, sure. But Ilya was expecting a very specific response, too. A declaration, of sorts.

She watched as Rozanov turned and left the restaurant, no doubt heading to the rink earlier than necessary. He was a lot of things, but she would never claim he wasn’t dedicated. And now, she was starting to think he might be in love with her son.

The entire drive to the airport, Yuna was silent. She hummed in response when her son asked something, forced a chuckle when her husband made a joke, did everything she could to act normal. But inside, she felt jittery. Overwhelmed, even.

It all began to make sense in her head, the sudden insistence to switch teams and Shane’s certainty about the Raiders treating him right. Why he hadn’t even checked the contract before signing it and why his apartment looked like it made him uncomfortable to be in.

Shane parked, helping his dad with their bags to keep his mom from carrying anything. The airport was just as busy, if not worse than Montreal’s. They took a lot of international flights, keeping the foot-traffic from every lightning up.

“I’ll check our bags,” David muttered, dragging them towards a long line at the proper counter.

Yuna nodded, watching him step away for a moment before she reached out and gently grasped her son’s shoulder. “Shane,” she murmured, pulling him to the side, towards a quieter corner of the airport. “Can we talk?”

He frowned a bit, nodding. “Sure,” he replied skeptically, noticing the drastic shift in her expression. “About what?”

She inhaled, glancing around them like she was trying extremely hard not to blurt out everything that was on her mind. “Look I- I could be completely wrong, here,” she prefaced. “But everything about your decision to move to Boston and join the Raiders, is it…because of Rozanov?” she questioned softly.

Shane's face flashed with a mix of emotions, most prominently surprise and, strangely enough, relief. "I- what?" he wondered, sounding caught off guard.

Yuna got the sense that while he wasn't willing to blatantly advertise it, he was hinting at this for a while, hoping they would notice without needing to be told. Maybe she had just missed the signs he needed her to see a whole lot sooner, like how uncomfortable he felt when a nice girl flirted with him or how he subconsciously angled his body towards Rozanov throughout breakfast.

Hell, even inviting him to breakfast at all had clearly meant something. It might have been *called* an attempt for them to get to know their son's new captain, but she was pretty damn sure it was more for them to meet their son's boyfriend.

"Honey, I'm not going to force you to admit anything," she assured him, blowing out a slow breath. "Just- can you answer one question for me?"

Shane hesitated, pausing. "Okay," he responded, his voice barely audible above the clatter around them in the busy airport.

Yuna took a moment, almost unable to even believe she was asking him this at all. "You don't…live at that apartment, do you?" she whispered.

He practically froze, tension coiling in his shoulders as he mouthed the word, '*no'*, unable to even say it out loud.

She sucked in a deep breath, wrapping her arms around them. "Oh, Shane," she muttered, squeezing him tightly. She didn't really know what else to say to him. "Sweetheart, you could have said something," she muttered. "Your dad and I- we could have made this so much easier for you."

She could have helped him move. Really move, to wherever he was actually living here in Boston. And maybe she wouldn't have monopolized him so much, or actually asked Ilya about himself over breakfast and gotten to know him better. Not just as a good player but as someone who her son clearly cared about enough to want to introduce them, even if was under pretense.

He pulled away from the hug, rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry—"

"No," she interjected, not even letting him apologize for a single moment. "You have nothing to be sorry for, okay? I should have known. I'm your mom, it's my job to know who you are and I- I didn't."

"Of course you do, mom," Shane insisted. "You do know me, just not…all of me."

Yuna squeezed his arm, nodding. "I want to, though. I want to know who you are and who you love," she assured him, her face twisting as she tried not to cry. "He's gotta be pretty special to give up everything for."

Her son got that look in his eyes, perhaps one she never really connected the dots too, before. One he got whenever Rozanov became the topic of conversation. She always thought it was avoidance, like he didn't want to discuss it. But now she knew she'd been misinterpreting it this whole time. It was only ever fondness.

"That's just it," he explained, shaking his head. "I don't feel like I gave anything up, I feel like I- I got everything I wanted."

Her shoulders sagged in sudden relief as the pieces all settled into place so well. His attitude, his eating habits, his whole routine was different. And that was intentional. He told her months ago, this would be a good thing for him and she had been skeptical about it at the time. But clearly, she shouldn't have been.

"That's all we want," Yuna promised him. "We want you to be happy and to love hockey instead of feeling like you have to play it because it's expected because you- you have always done what's expected. You deserve to do what you want, for a change."

No matter what that entailed or who it was with.

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That night, the Raiders won again. Three for three in the first few games of the season. And when Shane got home and his parents called to congratulate him, he didn't leave the room to keep them from hearing Ilya on accident. He didn't exactly announce he was there, either. But he figured small steps were better than none at all.

And over the next week, he got a bit better about dropping him into conversations, mentioning certain couple-like activities as casually as he could. They developed a pretty steady routine where Ilya did most of the grocery shopping and cooking, whereas Shane cleaned and preferred doing laundry.

Throwing every color in existence into a washing machine and hoping for the best didn't quite cut it for him, after all.

They lost when traveling to Vancouver but won in Indianapolis and blew New York out of the water on their own rink. Which meant, overall, they still only had one officially loss two weeks into the season. It was a solid start, to say the least.

"I think we deserve a night to ourselves after that game," Kane admitted, towel drying his hair in the locker room as the arena started to empty out with mostly pleased fans.

"Isn't every night a night to yourself?" Carmichael retorted, a teasing lilt in his voice as he nudged past him to get to his own locker.

Kane gave him a soft shove as he chuckled, along with a few other teammates. "I meant all of us and you know it," he countered, rolling his eyes as he reached for a clean shirt and tugged it over his head. "I'll buy the first round for everyone aside from Carmichael."

“If my drink is paid for, I’m in,” Hammersmith agreed easily, nodding along as he packed his bag up. “We haven’t really gone out this season, so far.”

Granted they were only six games into the season, but they usually went out around the third just to kick off the season right. He supposed winning so much right off the bat kind of was the celebration, recently, though.

“You’re so easy, Smitty,” Sebbin muttered, laughing under his breath as he laced his shoes up, balancing on one leg. “You’d get an elective surgery for fun if it was already paid for you.”

He shrugged, not disagreeing. “If it gave me a sick scar, sure,” he claimed casually, zipping up his duffle. “I go where the wind blows.”

There were a few more chuckles and Shane shook his head wearily, eyes flitting up and down between the room and his phone as he sent a text to his mom. She was no less strict about checking in now that he was in Boston as she was when he lived in Montreal. Especially since he’d gotten into a bit of a spat with the referee over a penalty he didn’t think he should have had.

But that was neither here nor there.

“What about you?” Vic wondered to him, fussing with his socks as he sat on the bench nearest to their cubbies. “Want to join?”

Shane hesitated, thinking of a polite way to decline. “Clubs and bars aren’t really my thing,” he admitted apologetically. “I don’t drink during the season and it’s kind of tough to be as enthusiastic as everyone when you’re not drunk.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough,” he replied, pulling his shoes on. “But, for the record, we’re never drunk when we go out.”

He scoffed, a disbelieving expression tugging at his lips unintentionally. “No offense, Vic, but I’ve seen videos of you guys celebrating,” he reminded him with a knowing glare. “It’s like a frat party on steroids.”

Vic’s jaw dropped, the comment a bit out of character but very much appreciated. He liked that Shane was getting more comfortable with them, even if it meant taking a few jabs. “I’m serious!” he exclaimed, glancing at the others for some support. “Guys, tell him we don’t get drunk when we go out.”

Varkov nodded, confirming what he was saying as the truth. In fact, Shane watched as all of them nodded. Not just one or two, but the whole room. Convincingly, no less. None of those overexaggerated or joking nods they gave to be funny.

“He’s telling the truth,” Dubek clarified, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “We stick to a pretty strict two drink limit during the season unless it’s a long weekend or a holiday.” Sometimes they also went over limit on someone’s birthday, too. But those were pretty much the only times.

“Seriously?” Shane questioned, putting his phone down on the shelf in his cubby. “But you guys are always so…” he trailed off, grimacing slightly as every word sounded too crass to accuse them of.

“Hammered?” Marlow offered up. “We give that illusion, yeah. It’s mostly a lot of pent-up energy that gets more hectic the later we’re out,” he admitted, shrugging.

“We don’t push two drinks because losing control in public could be bad press,” Varkov explained with a vague gesture of his hand. “And we don’t want to risk stupid drunk injuries or hangovers if we have travel days or practice.”

Shane glanced at Ilya like he was seeking confirmation about it and wasn’t just being teased. The Raiders didn’t really pull off elaborate pranks, though. At least not between each other. He was pretty sure they wouldn’t joke about something like this.

“It looks chaotic to the public because we like it too,” Ilya assured him, his hand in his hair as he scrunched some of his curls that were damp from the post-game shower he just took. “We have fun because we like each other, not because of alcohol.”

“Well, a little alcohol,” Kohn replied, pinching his fingers for emphasis. “Kane is paying, remember?” They couldn’t just let the opportunity pass him by.

“We’ll keep it low-key tonight, in case you choose to join us,” Vic promised earnestly as he finished gathering his stuff up. “Totally optional, though.”

Shane hummed softly, meeting Ilya’s gaze again for a moment. He just shrugged, as if silently conveying that it was his choice. If he wanted to go out with the team, they’d go. If not, they could stay home together and make dinner and watch a movie like they usually did.

“I’ll uh- I mean maybe I can join for a little bit,” he eventually told them, a bit hesitant. “As long as drinking isn’t mandatory or anything.”

Feller wrinkled his nose, shaking his head. “Of course it’s not,” he replied. “People think we’re crazy, it doesn’t mean we are.” Pressuring someone into drinking wasn’t their style, especially not if it was clear they didn’t like doing it.

Shane’s shoulders slouched back a bit, almost relieved in a way a few of them noticed. Including Ilya, of course. He noticed everything these days. It was both an exhilarating and slightly off-putting habit, frankly.

He thought that was the end of it, as they filed out of the locker room, all heading to their cars for the night. But it wasn’t. The second he got home, somehow several minutes after Ilya despite leaving a few minutes earlier, the topic got brought up again.

Shane barely had the chance to set his bag down on the table in their bedroom before he was being questioned about it, the slight relief in his expression from earlier still lingering in Ilya’s mind even after half an hour of traffic.

“Did they pressure you?” he questioned, changing out of his t-shirt into something slightly more appropriate to wear outside of the house. “Metros, I mean? Into drinking when you didn’t want to?”

He let go of the strap of his bag. “Jeez, at least let me put my stuff down before you start the interrogation,” he teased lightly.

He could tell by the expression on Ilya’s face, though, that he wasn’t in much of a teasing mood. That to him, someone trying to convince him to drink when he typically hated the feeling of inebriation was a very big deal. Not one he could sweep under the rug very smoothly.

“Am serious, Shane,” he insisted, turning to look at him completely. “Did they ever make you feel like you had to drink?”

“No, I- not really,” he replied, toeing his shoes off. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow, not entirely sure if he believed him. “You don’t think?” he repeated skeptically. “That does not sound like a convinced answer.”

Shane shrugged, eyes drifting to the shirt he had on for a moment, getting a bit distracted by the silk before he met his gaze again. “They never forced me or anything,” he clarified. “It was just a very…all or nothing environment, I guess.”

He leaned against the dresser, folding his arms. “What does that mean?” he wondered, brows knitting together tightly.

He didn’t exactly need any new reasons to hate the Metros. He already had a list that was several miles long after the years he spent playing them. Their country loved them and frankly so did the United States, for some reason. But to him, they were even bigger posers than the Raiders. Only his team were good people pretending to be otherwise and the Metros were the exact opposite.

“I guess it was just- I had to drink a lot or not at all,” Shane explained, gently. “They didn’t really like that when I did drink, it would only be one because I wasn’t fully emersed or whatever.”

They liked to be stone-cold sober or completely drunk and nothing in between.

If he had to pick one, Shane always picked sober, too afraid of what might happen if he lost control entirely. He could blurt something out that was meant to stay private, he could trip and be taken out of the season, he could just turn into a emotional mess because too much alcohol made his head spin and he hated how it felt.

“That is bullshit,” Ilya told him firmly. “You know that, right?”

He shrugged. “I get it, though. I wasn’t really trying to be apart of the team or anything, just kind of watched them.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter,” he clarified, tone just as unwavering. “You are part of the team whether you have Ginger Ale, Vodka, or some fruit beverage with a little umbrella and they should have treated you like it.”

Shane’s expression softened slightly, the conviction in his voice sinking in slowly. “Is that your way of assuring me I don’t have to drink tonight?” he wondered.

“You already knew it was optional, am just reminding you,” he replied earnestly, uncrossing his arms to put his hands on Shane’s waist. “Whether you have water all night or a sip of a drink or a full one, it doesn’t matter as long as you drink what *you* want to. And have fun, obviously. That part is important, too.”

He huffed slightly, nodding slowly as he leaned into him. “I’ll try to remember that,” he murmured, eyes fliting back down the shirt he had on. It was, quite frankly, making him want to stay in tonight. But he had already told the team he’d go and he felt bad about backing out at the last minute. “Want to help me find something to wear?”

Ilya’s eyes lit up. “Something that shows you are not confined to suits and gym clothes all the time?” he clarified, already lunging at the opportunity. “I thought the day would never arrive.”

Shane rolled his eyes as Ilya let go of him to rifle through their closet for something that would look nice. He didn’t fully understand what was going on frankly, not overly involved in the social aspect of Ilya’s life.

They talked about the team before he joined it, sure, but he never really questioned where they celebrated wins or what they did because he feared getting jealous if there was some pretty girl involved or something like that. He never really allowed himself to consider what it might feel like to join that atmosphere.

Probably because it filled him with the same type of dread he got when the Metros wrangled him into going out late at night. It was loud and disrupted his schedule, it was usually overly crowded and led to him getting incredibly antsy, especially because he was the only one sober. He felt like a babysitter for a group of guys who wouldn’t even remember what happened the next morning.

But he tried to push those memories and preconceptions away like he had done with the others he formed about the Raiders. They hadn’t just been surprising him the past few weeks but exceeding any fragile hope he had about his decision to move to Boston.

And they kept doing it, too.

Like Vic promised, it was a bit low-key. Still loud, still dark with flashing lights but not so overly obnoxious he couldn’t hear what anyone was saying or see the steps in front of him.

That was in part due to the fact that they were upstairs, where the lights were one solid color, even if they were a bit dim. He glanced over the railing, at the lower level which was significantly louder and brighter as he walked with Sebbin and Marlow towards a pretty wide, circular table.

“I got those little taco things they do,” Carmichael muttered, gesturing to the food sprawled across the table while already biting into one.

Shane huffed, taking a seat. “I didn’t know we were having dinner,” he joked just loud enough to be heard over the music.

Sebbin reached over him cautiously, grabbing an appetizer. “Part of not getting drunk is making sure the alcohol doesn’t hit our stomachs before food does,” he told him, shoving the entire thing into his mouth and chewing for a moment. “Learned the hard way that Feller will lie about eating if we don’t get snacks.”

“I don’t lie!” he exclaimed defensively, raising a finger and talking to Shane directly. “I forgot *one* time to eat before drinking and they’re never going to let me forget it. Don’t fall for it.”

Shane stifled a laugh. “I don’t know, sounds like something you might do,” he replied, picking up one of the tiny tacos for himself and biting into it.

He hummed slightly, surprised that the food was actually pretty good. He probably shouldn’t have been, though. It was Boston, after all. Every restaurant he had tried so far had been pretty good. He had been talking with Dubek, too, more often about his diet. Or the leeway he was trying to give himself with it.

He didn’t quite consider it recovery because that would imply he had an eating disorder in the first place and he wasn’t ready to fully admit it, yet. But he was trying to loosen up and felt like it was getting easier, especially with the team’s support.

He didn’t outright explain anything, just mentioned very briefly that he had some of the same problems as Dubek. They seemed to understand pretty well what he meant, even though they never pressed for details.

“Have as many as you want,” Kohn told him, nudging his arm gently. “We’ll probably order half the menu before getting the tab.”

“Speaking of the tab!” Kane came back to the table, a tray he managed to coerce away from a waitress in his hands. “The alcohol is on me, not the food,” he clarified, setting them down. “I made no promises to pay for your third and fourth dinners.”

There were a few chuckles as everyone grabbed their drinks off the tray, most of them ordered with specific people in mind because he had learned what they liked over the years.

“You’re a real philanthropist, Kane,” Varkov muttered sarcastically, raising his glass to him. “Always willing to put your credit score on the line for the team.”

“Ha. Ha.” he retorted dryly ignoring him as he picked his own drink up and sipped it for a moment before he gestured to the tray. “I got you a Ginger Ale, Hollzy,” he told him. “I’d drink it fast, though, because Connors might pour into his whiskey if you wait.”

Shane laughed slightly, reaching for the can and popping it open to take a sip. “Thanks,” he told him, the small gesture of getting him his preferred drink even amongst all the alcohol meaning more to him than most of them would understand.

Ilya understood it, though. He knocked Shane’s ankle under the table softly, giving him a small, nearly indiscernible smile from across the booth which he returned just as quietly.

“Why do you make me sound like an alcoholic or something?” Connors questioned, furrowing his eyebrow as he stole the lime off the rim of Marlow’s Margarita. “I’m an opportunity seeker,” he clarified, gesturing to the table. “I exploit what’s offered to me.”

“Oh, is that what you call it?” Ilya wondered, barely suppressing a laugh as he sipped his Vodka. “Here I thought it was just theft. Can’t account for your two drinks if you keep sipping on other peoples.”

He shrugged, not denying the accusation but not agreeing with it, either. “Alcohol is to me what money is to Hammersmith,” he clarified, raising his glass for a moment, the ice clinking around.

Hammersmith scoffed, raising his own and gently tapping it against Connor’s glass before taking another sip of his drink. “Sure, buddy,” he replied with a chuckle, head bopping from side to side to the beat of the music.

Shane nudged Vic’s shoulder softly, pointing across the room for a moment. His head turned, eyebrows furrowing but he stood up anyway, grabbing a soft taco off the large plate before following him through the club.

Was it even a club? The internet reviews weren’t sure and neither were the people who visited, he was pretty sure. It was kind of a mix between one and a bar. Relaxed enough that it wasn’t suffocating to breathe and impossible to move but too upbeat for anyone to fall asleep.

“What’s up?” Vic questioned, wiping the edge of his mouth as he finished his taco. “Wanted something other than Ginger Ale?” That was the only reason he could think of for why they were heading towards the bar right now.

Shane shrugged, still sipping on his drink. “Thinking about it,” he admitted as they navigated towards it. Things weren’t as crowded as he assumed, thankfully, so, it seemed like Vic really had kept his word about the night being low-key.

“You know there’s no pressure, right?” he reminded him, hand reaching to grab his arm and halt his steps just a few feet away from the bar. “You don’t have to drink to be fun. We want you here because you’re our teammate and our friend, regardless of whether you drink.”

He nodded, the hesitation in his chest subsiding slightly. He rarely drank, mostly just because he hated how it made him feel. And when it came to the Metros, he hated it even worse because it felt like he either had to be entirely invested or left out completely.

But here, it felt like he could stick to soda all night and they wouldn’t bat an eye over it.

So, maybe one drink or hell maybe even half of one would be alright to indulge in. He had been indulging in more sugar recently, after all.

“I know,” Shane prefaced. “I just think alcohol might be…I don’t know, another thing on my list, if that makes sense.”

It wasn’t a literal list and definitely not that he really told people about, even if the team did know he was struggling with his relationship with food. It was more of a vague outline of everything he restricted himself from having, seemingly unnecessarily. And maybe it didn’t have to be.

Vic nodded, seeming to understand what he was getting at even without much being said. “Okay,” he replied supportively. “If you want a drink, we’ll grab you one.”

“Maybe uh- like a shallow one,” he added. “So I can mix my soda into it, like Kane was talking about.” Sure, that hadn’t actually been intended for him, but it did sound kind of good now that he was thinking about it.

He nudged him towards the bar. “Shallow one it is,” he agreed, leaning his arms against the counter and signaling to the bartender.

When the man passed him the glass, Shane poured the rest of his soda into it, diluting the drink a bit and swirling it around before taking a sip. He hadn’t had alcohol in so long he kind of forgot the way it burned the back of his throat, if he was being honest.

Regardless, the flavor wasn’t nearly as bad as the stinging was. Probably because he wasn’t trying to drink something entirely stiff just to please JJ or Drapeau.

Sitting back down at the table, no one commented on his drink, even though they noticed it. It wasn’t a big deal, really, whether he drank or not. It wasn’t what made or ruined their night. As long as no one went overboard with their inebriation, it wasn’t anyone’s business who drank what or how much of it.

“Where did Kane and Connor disappear to?” Shane asked, glancing around.

Ilya stuck his thumb over his shoulder, motioning to the crowd of people on the floor below them, barely visible through the balcony around them. “They like this song,” he replied flatly, like it was pretty standard to lose them. “Can’t keep them in their seats when it comes on.”

“Ah,” he muttered, having another small sip of his drink and twisting a bit to search the crowd for them. “Makes sense.”

Even if the place wasn’t packed to the point of suffocation, it was busy enough that spotting them was a bit like playing Where’s Waldo. Still, he was pretty sure he could spot the shirt Kane was wearing, the shade of blue pretty obvious even as the lights changed colors down below.

“Oh! Someone take a picture,” Kohn suggested, snapping his fingers in realization. “It’s our first night out with Shane; we have to document it.”

He grimaced slightly, laughing. “Please don’t make me pretend to be drunk like you guys do,” he pleaded slightly as Feller pulled his phone out.

“Alright, it’ll be uh- whatever stage of drinking we’re in currently,” he replied, flagging down a waitress. “Buzzed? Tiddly?”

“What the fuck is tiddly?” Ilya questioned, blinking in confusion.

“It’s British,” Marlow told him, sipping through his straw. “Means tipsy or something like that.”

Shane watched as Marlow pulled the tiny umbrella out of the glass and tried to sneak it into Sebbin’s hair without him noticing. He did, of course. But he also didn’t yank it out, just pushing further behind his ear as he

“Why are you using British words?” Ilya asked, looking disgusted by the vocabulary, maybe even offended. It was hard enough for him to learn English in Boston of all places when he first moved; they didn’t have start confusing him with other versions of the same language, too.

Feller shrugged. “Why not?” he retorted, passing his phone to the waitress and immediately jumping on the Vic at the end of the booth.

He leaned on him so hard, his drink nearly spilled as he laid further back to try to make room for him not to fall off. As Vic pressed into him, Shane laughed, lifting his drink a bit higher to keep it from sloshing as he tipped backwards against Dubek.

“Sorry,” he apologized, still chuckling a bit as he accidentally forced him back a bit.

Dubek rolled his eyes fondly, willingly trying to lean into Carmichael as the man tipped towards Ilya who just threw his arm around Marlow.

“At least act like you like us, Sebbin,” Marlow insisted, pulling further into frame.

“Yeah, I want to be in the picture,” Hammersmith replied, squishing himself against him as to not be cut out of the photograph.

Varkov just moved out of the booth walking around it and leaning over the back to be included without as much hassle. He sipped his drink, idly poking at Carmichael to try to annoy him. Not that he even really noticed it.

Vic tipped his head to the side, trying to talk to Shane amidst the chaos. “I told you,” he reminded him. “We don’t get drunk, just seem to always unintentionally act like.”

It was a mix of being away from the rink that allowed them to cut loose and the energy they gave each other that always magnified further and further as the night went on that had them acting so differently. Well, alright, maybe not that differently.

“Yeah, that part is starting to make sense,” Shane muttered, halfway through another laugh as the waitress took a few pictures for them, most of which Ilya were scowling in just because

he could.

As she handed Feller his phone back, he attempted to straighten up, letting Vic sit back up in the booth. He set his drink down now that it was finally safe and reached for another Taco.

“Thank you very much,” Feller murmured to the waitress, pulling a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet and handing her the tip for taking the time to oblige their request.

“Damn, I could have taken it for you and made some cash,” Varkov murmured, leaning even further forward between Marlow and Sebbin to set his drink down on the table.

He pressed his hand into the edge of the booth, hopping over the back of it and expecting them both to move before getting crushed.

They did, of course. Quick enough they accidentally nudged Ilya a bit too harshly and caused his drink to splash over the rim. He glared at them for a moment before grabbing a napkin and passing it to Carmichael, who he had spilled on.

“If you’re going to be obnoxious, do it downstairs,” he requested, shooing them away with his hand dramatically. “Tons of clumsy idiots down there.”

“Wow, now that there’s no camera on us, you’re back to being an asshole,” Kohn joked, sipping on his drink.

“Yes, I despise each of you,” Ilya confessed sarcastically, pointing at the menu. “Someone order more food, yes? Feller is about to eat the last taco.”

Even if they weren’t starving, the night didn’t feel complete without munching. It might have honestly been his favorite part of every time they went out. Besides, once the others came back, they’d be plenty hungry and an empty table wouldn’t go over very well with them.

“On it,” Vic replied, grabbing it off the table and jumping back up to get someone’s attention.

Watching him wander off, Shane turned to the rest of the table. “I think I’m gonna try to find Kane and Connors,” he admitted, setting down his own drink a few sips shy of finishing it.

Ilya raised an eyebrow, a mix of surprise and pride warring on his face. “How strong was that drink?” he teased, glancing down at it.

He knew it wasn’t very strong, frankly. Probably less than half a drink. Which was fine. He just wasn’t expecting Shane to immerse himself so fully he was willingly suggesting going towards the more crowded section of the place. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t glad to see it, though.

Shane kicked him under the table, just hard enough that he laughed over it. “I can like music too,” he retorted, nudging Dubek. “Want to come with me?”

He shrugged, finishing his drink off quickly. “Might as well,” he replied, following Shane as he stood up from the table. “Last one to find Kane has to be on his team for scrimmage.”

Shane huffed, shooting Ilya one last glance before he headed downstairs with Dubek to find the others. He watched, of course, eyes tracking his for as long as they could before they disappeared into the crowd of people. Even so, Ilya could see find them if he focused.

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The days following Shane's departure from the Metros had been rough for them. Some players took it harder than others, pretending he didn't exist to them anymore or insulting him to the team at every given opportunity. It was hard not to be pissed off when they had been betrayed so brutally. Made to look like fools in the process, no less.

They were facing media like never before, being asked about the reason he left and scrutinized by the fans for losing him. It only got worse when they started seeing pictures of Shane in his Raiders Jersey, the post about officially updating their roster to include his number had been expected but hurt worse than they thought it would.

And if seeing him as a Raider in his first few games had been a slap in the face, then seeing him partying with the team outside of the game was a fucking punch to the gut. One none of them ever thought could bruise so badly.

"It's barely the first few games of the season," Mitty mumbled in annoyance, grimacing at his phone as he sat on the bench in the locker room before an early morning practice. "How can they already be staying out late to get drunk?"

Wilson shrugged, pulling his shirt off and reaching for his jersey. "Winning makes them even more obnoxious than they usually are," he surmised, tugging it over his head and fussing with the material. "My question is how the hell did they drag Hollander with them?"

Drapeau scoffed as he tied his laces on. "He doesn't even drink," he added, tone laced with bitterness. "He should be home with a fucking *salad* or something."

Berkes chuckled sardonically. "Probably part of their plan to plaster him everywhere until everyone forgets he was ours first," he complained, running a hand through his hair. "Did you see that bullshit picture of the team outside some ice cream shop a while back? How much do you want to bet it was staged?"

"Oh, it had to be," JJ agreed, nodding. "What are the chances they all just randomly went out in public and actually believed they wouldn't be noticed? I bet media set it up to back up that article about him *'figuring out a rhythm with the team'* or whatever it was he said."

Hayden furrowed his eyebrows, just staring down at his phone in the corner of the locker room as he tried not to pay too much attention to their conversation. He scrolled through the pictures online, mostly posted by Feller and then reposted by everyone on the team, including their main social media page. And even Shane, who notoriously never reposted anything unless it related to his sponsorships.

He looked so…immersed in it. The dynamic, that was. He was laughing, a drink in his hand as they all squeezed together around the table for a few pictures. It didn't even look like sparkling water or something non-alcoholic in a nice glass. He was *actually* drinking.

And singing too. With Kane, Connors, and Dubek to some song that was so loud the music could barely even be heard through the phone's speakers. It was mostly just him leaning into Kane, who was bouncing around like a ball of energy who hadn't just won a pretty intense game of hockey.

"Drunk Hollander was never that fun with us," Berkes muttered, leaning over Mitty's phone as he kept scrolling through the pictures and videos from last night. "He usually got all mopey and shit, then went home with Hayden."

He glanced up when he heard his name, humming in affirmation. "Yeah, alcohol makes him sleepy, usually," he murmured, tone a bit contemplative, like he was trying to figure out why he wasn't acting that way with the Raiders.

Clicking through the end of Feller's stories quickly, he paused a few from the end and let them play again. The team was filtering out of the…bar? Club? He wasn't even sure where they could have been. Regardless, they left, still just as hyperactive as they walked through the parking lot.

Shane stumbled over the curb, laughing as Varkov dragged him upright again and patted his shoulder firmly with a smile tugging at his lips. They looked absolutely hammered, to say the least.

Half of the team was bouncing around, still enthused even though it was at least one in the morning and the other half were shoving each other around harder and harder in the background while Feller gave a recap of the food. Apparently, the tacos were amazing, the mozzarella sticks decent, and the bruschetta was overly healthy.

Shane leaned over Feller's shoulder a bit, bumping him slightly. "Don't forget about the French fries," he reminded him, pointing at the camera. "They were seasoned with the good stuff."

Hayden barely even caught his voice, the volume on his phone so low it was hard to make much out. He was pretending not to care about seeing his best friend hanging out with the same guys they used to make fun of, but honestly had no idea if it was working.

Wilson apparently had a good enough set of ears to hear what was being said, too, since he leaned closer to Hayden with a wrinkled nose. "Since when does he consume anything fried?" he questioned, scoffing.

"Yeah, didn't he once say French fries were an unhealthy carbohydrate or something?" Comeau questioned. "And that eating them would mean he had to run an extra half hour the next morning?"

Mitty laughed, nodding as he remembered that night. "Then he pulled out those stupid apple slices and ate them instead," he recalled, rolling his eyes. "Fucking bird food, man. At least we don't have to accommodate his ridiculous diet anymore."

"Not that he's even on it anymore, apparently," Berkes grumbled, tossing his phone into his bag. "Boston got him off that micro-whatever it was called pretty fast. Ice cream, French

fries. He's probably trying to bulk up so he doesn't look so tiny compared to Marlow and Rozanov."

"Oh, please don't say Satan's name," JJ pretended to plead, holding his hands up like a prayer. "I can't think of him and then go smile for the cameras, it's too difficult."

Wilson laughed, grabbing his gloves from his cubby. "Fair point," he mused with a smirk. "Someone has to keep the league looking respectable while the Raiders gallivant around and curse out every reporter who comes near them."

Hayden's jaw ticked quietly enough, no one noticed it as he clicked out of Feller's social media and opened his texts. Shane used to be at the top, messages so frequent that the only person he texted more often was Jackie. He had rapidly slid to the bottom, though, right beside the spare babysitter they used when the one they liked wasn't able to make it.

He wasn't sure why he felt the need to text Shane. It wasn't like he knew the whole team was talking shit about him behind his back. If anything, texting him out of the blue might have actually made it more conspicuous than anything else.

But still, he sent a quick message—something about seeing Feller's post and being glad he looked so happy. A mostly true sentiment, even though it kind of made his chest ache with a strange sense of jealousy to see him become friends with the Raiders so quickly.

Once the text went though, he clicked his phone off and slid it into his bag. "C'mon," he muttered, tilting his head towards the door. "People expect the team to actually show up to the practices they come to see."

There was a chorus of annoyed groans; early practice was the last thing anyone was interested in having right now. They followed him, though. He was the captain now, after all. They couldn't exactly say no, even if none of them really wanted to face a crowd after the shit show of a game they had had the night before when they played and lost against Baltimore.

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Shane truly liked being able to decline the media. It wasn't that he was cruel about it or took joy in refusing to comment when they approached him outside of practice, it was just nice not having to sit and smile for them all the time.

He still chose to give a few interviews, mostly after games. Partially because it felt weird not to and also because his mother borderline threatened him into it in the name *'controlling the narrative'* as she put it. Still, he found himself being a lot more invested in their questions now that he only did one a week or so.

That's why when their media coordinator asked about keeping a mic on him during the game he hesitated but eventually agreed. On the condition that he didn't have to do post-game interviews for the following week, of course. They agreed and he allowed himself to be put in what most players considered a pretty uncomfortable position.

It wasn't his first time having the mic on him during the game and wouldn't be the last, either, probably. Still, the others were a little cautious around him. That was typical. No one wanted to say something out of pocket or spill team secrets in front of millions of people watch their game on television.

"I'm sitting on the other side of the bench," Kane muttered to him, patting his shoulder before sitting as far away as he possibly could from Shane.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Can't keep your mouth shut around a mic for one night?" he teased, earning a gloved middle finger from his teammate. He laughed lightly, nudging Shane beside him. "You are the plague tonight," he informed him. "Very avoidable."

He huffed, nodding. "I kind of figured that part out already," he admitted, glancing at the clock.

They were only a few minutes into the first period of their game against Asbury, but ever since their media team hooked him up with a mic pack under his jersey, the team had been cautious. They were trying to find that space between staying jerks for the cameras and also not pushing too far to the point people actually got mad at them. It was a fine line to walk, to say the least.

Desjourney tapped Shane on top of his helmet just enough to grab his attention before gesturing towards the ice. "Take over for Hammersmith," he told him.

He perked up immediately, reaching for his stick as he saw Hammersmith skating over to the bench. Tightening his grip on it, he stood up and braced himself against the edge of the rink, just waiting for the moment he could hop over it.

Hammersmith skidded to a stop, out of breath. "Go get 'em, Hollzy," he muttered as coach opened the door to let him into their area.

Shane just jumped over the ledge, skates hitting the ice with a soft sound as he took off towards the other end of the rink.

He'd been watching the puck from the bench, acutely aware of where it had been the whole time. For the most part it was with his team, which was a good thing. Now, they just had to make sure it actually made it into the net.

"Hard around!" Varkov warned him, dropping the puck behind their own net.

Shane was quick to keep it close, skating around to the front of their end zone and crossing into the other team's side. "Marly!" he shouted, shooting it towards him as a player caught up and tried to crowd him.

It was just a bit too late, though, and the puck had already disappeared into Marlow's care. The player didn't fully back off, but loosened slightly, his attention split between the two of them as equally as possible.

Marlow tried to get puck closer to the other team's net but didn't get terribly far as one of their players slammed into him. An annoyed sound escaped his lips as he gritted his teeth against his mouth guard, trying to pin the puck down.

Someone else skated up, attempting to help their teammate and he felt an elbow jabbing into his ribs hard enough to feel it through the padding he wore.

"Watch it," he snapped, pushing back against the player as he kept the puck nailed to the wall to keep them from getting it.

"Give it up, Marlow," the man retorted, referring to the puck as he shoved him harder to try to get him away from it to get the disc out from behind his stick. "That's our puck."

"I didn't see your name on it," Marlow replied sarcastically, pushing them over the edge.

That was, quite frankly, not a very difficult thing to do in hockey. Emotions ran high all the time with how much adrenaline they had coursing through their veins. And the Raiders were known for starting disputes and causing trouble. It was expected to the point other teams would fight them over chirps that no one on the team ever took very seriously.

Of them broke away from the boards, going after him and Marlow couldn't say he was surprised by it. The other player got the puck away from him at last as he was forced away from it, but Shane slammed into the man before he made it anywhere.

Tripping, the man hit the ice and the puck slid away from all of them as Shane yanked at the player attacking his teammate. "Get the fuck off him!" he shouted, pulling him away and giving him a harsh shove.

The player skidded a bit back but came back for another hit, this time against him. Marlow tried to stop it but wasn't fast enough and he winced as the man's glove connected to the side of Shane's helmet, jostling it.

"Fuck you, golden boy!" he spit back. "You think wearing a Raiders jersey makes you one?"

Shane didn't even respond, just threw a punch right back, effectively starting a brawl between them. The rest of both teams stopped entirely as the refs skated over, trying to break them apart. That was easier said than done, as they were tangled in a mix of limbs that were tough to distinguish from each other.

"Cool it, Hollzy," Carmichael called, tugging his arm back from throwing another punch, managing to get his attention when the refs were failing. "He's not worth it."

Huffing loudly, Shane reared back and gave his teammate a small nod as if to assure him he was done and Carmichael could let go of him. He looked pissed, frankly. Maybe even furious. It was a look he rarely had around them, so far. And probably one that was pretty uncommon in general.

Shane was always known to be someone who didn't really start fights. He barely got involved with them if benches cleared, either, more concerned with trying to keep everyone

out of the penalty box. Around the Metros anyway. Clearly, that mentality had shifted.

Or maybe it was always how he wanted to react and he just never allowed himself too, busy trying to maintain his brand as a family-friendly player and a good role model. Carmichael wasn't quite sure and didn't really care if he was being honest.

Anyone who threw fists for them was their brother, after all.

"Sorry," he murmured apologetically to them.

Carmichael shrugged, nudging his arm. "Don't apologize for protecting your team," he told him earnestly. "See you in a bit."

Shane scoffed, nodding slightly as he followed the ref to the penalty box. A place he rarely visited, usually.

Unhooking his helmet, he set it on the bench and stared at the other player in his box across the ice. At least he hadn't been taken there alone.

The minutes of his penalty ticked down slower than they would in any other circumstances and he waited patiently to be let back on the ice. Alright, impatiently. His leg was jostling the entire time.

But even so, he stayed on the bench instead of standing and banging on the glass the way he was tempted to when he saw the other team trying to rough up Kohn out of nowhere.

When he did finally get out of the penalty box, the first thing he did was skate back over to Marlow who was trying to get a shot off the other team's goalie. He was pretty close, too. If only the other players weren't doing such a damn good job of blocking his shots.

Kohn and Connors were trying to keep them occupied, at the very least making it more difficult for them to keep track of Marlow and he and Carmichael passed the puck back and forth to each other while waiting for an opening.

Shane whistled, gesturing towards them and Marlow passed him the puck. He tried his best to break up some of the stagnant positions they had been forced into, taking the disc a bit further away from the net on purpose to try to lure some of the other team's players into following him.

He knew he couldn't make the shot. There was no chance it hell he'd get it through them. He wasn't really trying to, though. He just wanted to get them away from their net to actually give Marlow or Carmichael a fighting chance of scoring.

With another sharp whistle, he passed it back to Carmichael. "Shoot it!" he shouted, unable to see very much aside from the behemoth of a man in front of him.

Shane did, however, hear the sound of the groan's collective frustration ringing out. When they were in their own rink, that might have been a gut-wrenching sound but while they were at another arena, it was practically music.

Their goal music played a second later and Shane caught sight of Carmichael skating around to click his helmet against Marlow's before coming towards him, as well. "Thanks for the assist," he muttered, bumping his head on Shane's appreciatively.

He clicked his tongue, shrugging like it was no big deal. "Gotta pull my weight around here," he joked. "Especially after being cooped up in the penalty box."

Carmichael grimaced, rolling his eyes. "Don't sweat it," he assured him. "That asshole deserved to be roughed up, anyway."

Shane's eyes widened and he smacked him gently, gesturing to himself. "Still have a mic on, dumbass," he reminded him with a huff of laughter.

Apparently, with all the excitement they forgot about the fact that everything he was saying and everything the mic picked up from the others was being played live. Not to mention recorded for everyone who had the game taped.

"Oh, sorry, let me just say it closer," he replied seriously, leaning into him to repeat himself even louder and more clearly. "The asshole deserved it!"

Shane shoved him away, laughing. "You are *so* getting quoted in an article next week," he muttered, shaking his head exasperatedly. He wasn't even sure what kind, just knew at least a few of what they said tonight would wind up being used online.

Carmichael shrugged. "Eh, so what?" he wondered, skating over to the faceoff as Marlow set up in the middle of it. "I'm colorful, they should be used it by now."

"Colorful? Is that what we're calling it?" he wondered, tone tinged with amusement as he lowered his voice to focus on the game. "I like it."

Shane redirected his attention back towards the faceoff, giving Marlow a small nod of assurance as the ref dropped the puck and he fought for it. Losing it, the other team escaped with the disc, and they automatically fell back towards their own goal to try to protect it before they tried to get any shots in.

He crowded around another player, trying to sweep the puck away from him and failing at it as the man passed it towards someone else.

"Slot the net Hollzy!" Connors yelled at him, urging him to swap positions and be where he wanted him at.

Why he wanted him there, Shane wasn't sure. But he listened to him, anyway, skating closer to their goalie and propping himself into a position their defensemen usually took. His eyes flitted around him, mind going a mile a minute as he tried to keep up with the play.

A few seconds later, the puck came barreling towards their net and Shane blocked it as fast he possibly could, shooting it back before even thinking to aim it anywhere specific. The player who shot it had already skated past, but another teammate grabbed the puck for a moment or two.

Shane watched Marlow slam the man against the boards, stick fighting to grab the puck back. He passed it towards Kohn, who let out a whistle. “Switch!”

Connors skidded towards Shane. “Play it back to their side,” he muttered to him softly, bumping him in the arm gently to get him to head towards Kohn as he passed the puck back and forth with Carmichael.

With a small nod, Shane left his spot. Making his way back towards the others, he stayed on the other side of the ice, eyes bouncing around to the others as he tried to align himself with them.

He tapped his stick on the ice, catching Carmichael’s attention as the other team tried to grab the puck back before they crossed out of the neutral and into the other end zone. Carmichael passed it across the ice, trying to get some of the guys to lay off him.

Shane snatched it, glancing at the net and then at Marlow, who had raced to position himself just beside the opposing team’s net. “Marly!” he shouted, puck already in motion as he passed it towards him.

The players nearby broke off. They tended to do whenever they saw the puck disappearing and as they did, Shane tapped the ice again while inching a bit closer. Marlow caught the puck, skating around the net like he was planning to shoot it before changing course at the last minute and passing it back to Shane.

The disc slammed against his stick, breaking up the inertia for barely a second before it was flying off the curve of the wood again. Shane shot it towards the net, watching the goalie reach to stop it. And it did hit the man, technically. Just not hard enough.

The puck skimmed the top of the goalie’s glove, flying just over it before hitting the back of the net and Shane could swear he heard Marlow’s enthusiasm before he heard the official sound of their goal ring out. Regardless, both were nice sounds.

Marlow skated over, gloved hand finding Shane’s arm and giving him a firm shake. “A goal and an assist in the first period?” he wondered, slightly out of breath. “Good night for you, huh?”

“I’d call it luck but I’m not that modest,” he kidded as he caught his breath. Sparing a glance over his shoulder, he could see Desjourney calling him back to the bench. “Looks like I’m getting a break,” he added, bumping his helmet against Marlow’s quickly before he headed over to the team.

He didn’t really feel like he needed one, having already spent a few minutes in the penalty box. That was a break in itself, for the most part. But he could tell from the fact that he was the only one standing that Ilya was the one taking his place and he, quite frankly, looked antsy for his turn.

It wasn’t intentional by any means, but the way he was tapping against the edge of the barrier came across as impatient as Shane skated over to him. “Same team and yet we are never on the ice at the same time,” he joked, hopping over the ledge at last. “Maybe next period, yes?”

“Hopefully,” he replied, raising his arm and tapping against Ilya’s lightly before he entered the Raiders area, taking a seat on the bench and reaching for his water bottle.

Shane watched as Ilya caught up with Carmichael and Marlow, muttering something between them before he bent down for the faceoff. He chugged his water in the meantime, eyes just flitting around to keep track of the puck in case coach happened to put him back in before the period concluded.

“What’d he say to you?” Vic wondered, moving over an inch to give him extra space on the bench. “The uh- asshole, as Carmichael put it.”

He huffed slightly, wiping his mouth as his heart rate started to come back down. “You heard that from all the way over here?” he replied, a bit surprised.

“It wasn’t hard, what with the yelling of it and all,” he replied as he scooted forward a bit and interlinked his hands while watching the game. “I’m just curious, since you don’t rile up that easily.” At least, he never used to be.

They kind of liked this side of him, honestly. Vic did, anyway. The part of him that got upset, that became protective and didn’t let the other team walk all over him, that was. It was how he used to play long before he had to inhibit himself and become someone who didn’t promote violence for the sake of being someone kids looked up to.

Shane shrugged. “Nothing worth bringing up with I’m attached to a mic,” he told him, voice tinged with something akin to frustration or perhaps restraint.

Vic could tell he really did want to talk about it and was just biting his tongue, the way he was expected to. Sighing, he leaned over, silently slipping his hand around Shane’s back and flipping the mic pack off for a moment.

“There,” he murmured, tone laced with self-satisfaction. “Now they can’t hear.”

Shane’s eyes widened a bit. “You can’t do that, Vic!” he exclaimed.

“Why not?” he replied, sounding like he would need a pretty good response if he was going to actually flip it back on. “They’ll probably just think it’s interference for a few minutes. I’ll turn it back on before they actually notice.”

Even if they did notice, they couldn’t do anything about it. Coach wouldn’t yell at them for it since he never liked having them mic’d up, anyway, concerned about their behavior for some reason. And the media team couldn’t bully them back into it, either. Not when nearly everyone on the team was in favor of leaving it off.

Shane let out another huff, disappointed in himself for bothering to be surprised by the action. “Look, I really was only trying to get him off Marlow,” he admitted, shoulders rolling slightly. “Then he said some shit about the jersey not making me a real Raider and…yeah, I punched him back.”

It felt good, too. To just give in to the feeling of wanting to defend himself and his team instead of trying to settle things civilly. He used to have a motto about getting even though the scoreboard not fights, which the Metros constantly quoted in a mocking tone.

Shane, quite frankly, agreed with how stupid it was but didn't have any choice aside from abiding by it.

Vic took his eyes off the game for a moment, just long enough to glance at him better and get a read on how that had made him feel. He supposed he kind of already knew, given he served time in the box for the fight. Still, that wasn't the kind of comment that rolled off the back easily.

"He's not wrong," he told him simply.

Shane blinked, his heart dropping for some reason. "He's not?" he repeated.

"The jersey doesn't automatically make you a Raider," Vic affirmed, shaking his head. "Commitment and loyalty to the players does. And you don't have to worry about either, believe me."

At the end of the day, the Raiders were a brand. They were an organization and label that was over one-hundred years old. It was the players that brought it to life, though. They were the ones that made it what it was and kept it alive by breathing life into it with each game they played.

Shane clicked his tongue softly. "I doubt many people would agree with you on that, right now," he mused, taking another sip of his water.

He bumped into his shoulder lightly. "Hey, I just told you—You're a raider, Shane. That means we don't listen or care about other people's perceptions of us," he reminded him firmly. "Besides, we're a lifetime membership kind of crew. Once you're one of us, it doesn't matter if you're traded, sign with another team, or retire. You're *still* family."

Regardless of what the Metros seemed to believe these days, Shane *was* a loyal person. He was there to pick someone up for practice when their car stalled, to bring them an ice pack if their arm got bruised too badly, to call them and pretend to have an emergency to help them out of an awkward situation.

He was always at the rink early and usually the last to leave, too. He was neck and neck with Ilya in terms of dedication, to say the least.

"Mushy," Shane muttered, shoving him back playfully.

"Eugh, I'm trying to be nice," Vic retorted, rolling his eyes. "You want me to turn your mic pack back on or just wait to see how long it takes the media crew to figure out their tech isn't the problem?"

He chuckled, shrugging. "We can let 'em sweat a bit longer," he admitted after a moment of contemplation.

That probably would invalidate the deal he had made with the team and also result in him going back to giving one or two interviews a week again. But it was worth it to have some peace for a bit. Feeling like he could relax again, at least marginally, he turned his gaze back to the ice, watching Ilya glide across it like it was as easy as breathing for him.

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After the game, Shane stood in the back of the hotels elevator and listened to the clamor of some of the guys on the team recapping their favorite moments from it. His tussle was up there, of course, right next to Feller '*accidentally'* launching the puck so hard it got lodged in the goalie's mask.

That was, in his opinion, way more interesting.

"Ooh, wait! First thing tomorrow we're grabbing breakfast before the airport, right?" Dubek questioned, his hand covering the sensor to keep the doors from closing as he, Kane, and Varkov got off on the fourth floor.

"For sure," Feller agreed, nodding his head. "We were gonna try that restaurant a few blocks away that Hammersmith found during intermission."

That was apparently his new thing, this season. Instead of constantly losing to Carmichael in poker, he preferred to search for local places to eat in the cities they were visiting.

Content in the response, Dubek muttered a quick "Yes!" in satisfaction under his breath before clearing his throat. "Uh- I meant good night. See you guys tomorrow."

Kovalev hummed skeptically. "Uh huh," he retorted, watching him let go of the sensor and allow the doors to close behind them. He stepped into the newly freed up space they made by leaving the elevator and leaned against the wall, yawning as the day began catching up with him.

Even though he had gotten a decent amount of sleep, it never seemed to feel like enough when they were travelling. The jet lag always hit him worst out of anyone on the team and by the team he got over it, they were back on the plane heading home or to another city.

"Tired?" Marlow questioned, his own sleepiness starting to kick it as well once the majority of the team had already disbanded to head to their rooms for the night.

He nodded, blinking slowly. "I'll be awake for breakfast but I'm sleeping the entire flight back to Boston," he murmured as the bell dinged and the doors opened to the fifth floor of their hotel.

"This is us Kov," Connors reminded him, giving him a small nudge as he got off the elevator.

He was looking forward to getting some sleep, too. So much so that he made it a few feet down the corridor before he realized he was walking alone. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see Ilya holding the door open and glaring at him, gesturing to Kovalev whose eyes had closed completely.

“Forgetting something?” Ilya questioned, raising an eyebrow as he nodded towards his teammate who was nearly asleep.

Connors’ shoulders deflated in exhaustion and Marlow huffed, moving to pull Kovalev off the wall. “C’mon, I’ll tuck you into bed before I head to my own room,” he teased, jostling him awake a bit to keep him upright until there was an actual mattress underneath them. “I’ll be up in a bit, Feller.”

The man just nodded, chuckling as he watched the three of them wandering down the hallway for a moment before the elevator closed again. They stood in silence for the most part, the doors opening a short moment later on the sixth floor. Why they were all so spread out, no one was quite sure. Booking errors, apparently.

“Goodnight guys,” Feller muttered, giving a weak, fatigued wave goodbye as he got off and headed towards his room.

The doors closed again and Shane looked towards Ilya. “And then there were two,” he mumbled softly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“Mhm, just two,” he mirrored, nodding slightly. “Want to come tuck me into bed, too?” he joked.

He rolled his eyes and if he had the energy for it, he might have smacked him for the comment too. Instead, he just hummed, waiting for the doors to open again on their floor. “Tempting,” he muttered, playing along.

When the elevator finally stopped at their floor, they stepped off and made their way down the corridor towards the end of the long hall. Ilya took out his copy of the keycard, opening the door first and walking in before holding it a bit longer for Shane.

The second the door closed behind them, he was groaning, tossing his bag on the chair in the corner. “Was such a long day,” he complained, rolling his shoulders like it might help expel some of the tension that had accumulated in his muscles.

“Yeah, but a good one,” Shane added, setting his own stuff down much more gently before toeing off his shoes. “Vic said I was apart of the Raiders family, tonight.”

He glanced up, a slightly ironic expression playing across his face. “You didn’t already know that?” he wondered, confused.

He scoffed, reaching for the nearest pillow and throwing it across the room at him. “Of course I did, it was just- I don’t know, it was nice to hear it so overtly.”

There was no assumption that he could gleam as much by paying attention to how they treated him or acted around him. It was just a clear statement, just like the one Dubek gave him a while ago. He didn’t have to work for their friendship; he already had it. A lifetime membership to their circle, even if he swapped teams again.

Though, he honestly couldn’t see himself leaving willingly.

Ilya caught the pillow, lowering it as he let out a soft hum of understanding. “They are not overly sappy very often, but they will always have your back,” he assured him. “So will I.”

His eyes softened, stepping closer to wrap his arms around his neck. “Thanks,” he murmured. “For sharing your team with me and your house, and…your life, I guess.”

A small huff of amusement slipped past his lips before it turned into a smile. “Thank you for wanting me to share it,” he replied softly, leaning in to capture his lips in a gentle kiss. “Never thought I had a life worth being envious of, honestly. But now- well, how could I wish for more?”

The trophies were great, don’t get him wrong. The awards and the cup were the third most important thing in his life, but even so, they still fell short compared to his devotion to his team and his love for Shane. Hockey had given him his family and for that he would love it eternally, but the ice wasn’t all he lived for anymore and there was no contest about which he cared about more.

“Do you want to take another shower?” Shane mumbled against his lips, breaking their kiss for a split second before he was already leaning back in, not even giving him time to answer.

Their post-game one was rushed, at best. And not nearly as satisfying when they purposely stayed on opposite sides to keep from accidently staring at each other.

He nodded, hands sliding lower down his back to get a firmer grip on him before he lifted him off the ground. “Definitely,” he rasped, Shane’s weight settling against his arms securely as he walked them towards the bathroom. “I deserve something nice after barely even playing with you all night.”

Shane laughed, shaking his head as he pulled away from the kiss, fussing with his curls. “Can you even go one day without an innuendo?” he questioned dubiously.

Ilya’s face contorted as he feigned confusion. “Innuendo?” he repeated, pretending like he had no idea what it was. “Never heard that word in English. No idea what it means.”

He just scoffed again, lips tugging into a smile as he leaned back down to kiss him again. His back pressed to the glass of the shower as Ilya haphazardly opened the door and turned the water on, refusing to put him down or break the kiss in the process. Then, it was just a matter of time until both of them had shed their clothes, leaving them sprawled across the tiles.

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The next few games went similarly to their first few and Shane was more than pleased with how their season was starting out. He knew that logically, it was because the Raiders were great players, competitive and driven to succeed.

But he also liked to think it had something to do with their attitudes, too. How none of them were in the game to please the press or the public. They were only ever trying to make each other and themselves proud.

If their games had been going good, Shane would say his personal life both with the team and with Ilya had been great. So good, in fact, that it almost made him forget about his old team for a few full days in a row.

Until there was a reason to bring them up, that was.

“Have you seen it?” Marlow wondered, running a towel over the top of his head as he tried to cool down from the last-minute practice coach demanded in preparation for their game on Friday.

“Seen what?” Shane wondered, still a bit out of breath as he chugged some of his water, trying to cool down enough that a warm shower wouldn’t make him faint.

He passed him his phone, the screen already open to a news article. “Comeau got sent to the hospital half-way through their afternoon game against Portland,” he explained. “I didn’t watch the footage, but the article said he took a pretty hard hit to the head without a helmet on.”

He felt his heart plumet, eyes scanning the text but not really comprehending much of it. “I- no, I didn’t see that,” he muttered, passing the phone back to him and immediately digging through his bag to find his own.

“Calling Hayden?” Ilya questioned, watching him open his phone as fast he possibly could. It wasn’t surprising that it would be his first reaction.

No matter how tense things were between him and the Metros these days, Shane was first and foremost a compassionate person. The kind of player who could put aside his feelings for the sake of ensuring someone was safe even if that person hadn’t spoken to him in weeks.

Shane lifted his head, nodding. “Yeah, I wanna check in,” he responded, hitting call before he could even process it. “I’ll be in the hall, guys,” he added as the line began to ring.

“Take your time,” Hammersmith assured him. “We’ll try to keep in down in here, for you.”

Whether or not Shane actually heard that, none of them were quite sure. But regardless, they went about their business a bit quieter than usual. Okay, a lot more, technically.

Usually, they were rowdy enough to be heard, even through the door or down the hall. But they moved so gently, practically murmuring to each other instead of speaking, trying not to let the sound carry outside of the room and distract him.

Outside, Shane paced the hallway a bit, his phone ringing too many times for his liking. Things with Hayden were honestly still tense, he had to admit. They didn’t clear things up as much as he would have liked to, when he came to help him pack his things, and they hadn’t really called each other much since, either.

Things were fragile between them, at best. And about to shatter, at worst.

Still, Hayden picked up like Shane hoped he would.

“I figured you’d call,” he murmured. “Didn’t think it would take this long, through.”

There was a distinct bite in his tone but Shane ignored it, pausing his pacing for a moment. “I was in practice,” he replied. “I didn’t even see the news until a second ago. How is Comeau?”

“Stable,” Hayden replied earnestly. “They suspect a brain bleed but we’re waiting on his doctors to actually read the scans and tell us.”

He blew out a breath of relief, running his hand through his hair and leaning against the wall to steady himself as his nerves settled. Well, lessened, anyway. They were certainly still their. Head injuries had always been a big deal in this game. One concussion too many and it could end a career.

“Marlow said he wasn’t wearing a helmet when he got hit?” Shane wondered, confused. “How the hell did that even happen?”

“Marlow needs his eyesight checked,” he retorted sharply. “Comeau got bashed into the boards and his helmet got *knocked off*, then he tripped over the other teams stick and hit his head on the ice.”

It was freak accident, really. Nothing malicious or planned. The other player even apologized as they carried Comeau off the ice. Not that it had meant much to any of the Metros or helped ease their worry about their teammate.

“I didn’t say he read the whole article, just summed it up for me,” Shane explained, feeling a bit defensive over the way his friend had said Marlow’s name like an insult or something. “Is he allowed to be near a screen? Can I talk to him?”

“He’s uh—” Hayden hesitated for a moment. “—no, sorry. I don’t think he can.”

He paused, letting the silence fill the space for a moment. “Can’t or won’t?” he asked bluntly. When he didn’t respond right away, he got the feeling he had his answer but wanted to hear it anyway. “Hayden, did Comeau refuse to talk me?”

There was some rustling, the sound of him getting up from a hospital chair followed by the sound Comeau’s door closing while he stepped out into the hallway for a but more privacy. It was tough, trying to not piss off a sick man or his friend all at once.

“It’s not personal,” he muttered walking off to find a vending machine or something. “He just said he- he didn’t want to bother you after practice.”

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” Shane spat with more venom than either of them expected, feeling his frustration flare. “I know when you’re not telling me the truth. What did he actually say when you saw me calling?”

Hayden sighed. “He said *‘I don’t want to talk to that traitor’*, technically,” he admitted, already regretting his choice of honesty.

He was silent for a moment longer, just staring at the floor while his mind raced. He was worried, is all. That's why he called. And he hated to admit it, but now he was fucking pissed.

His own so-called friend was still calling him a traitor as he repeatedly tried to reach out to each Metro individually the first week he was in Boston? They were still acting like he had personally betrayed them all by signing to a team they didn't know the first thing about aside from hating them? How the fuck was that fair?

"Wow that…is cruel, is for you guys," Shane confessed with a sardonic laugh as he scrubbed his face.

"Even for us? What is that supposed to mean?" Hayden wondered, getting equally as defensive right back.

"Oh c'mon, Hayden," he retorted, pushing off the wall to pace again. "I gave you guys everything. My blood, sweat, and tears for ten fucking years. I covered for everyone's mistakes, I pushed for them to be better, I won you multiple goddamn trophies!"

"Now, wait a minute—" he insisted. "We earned those cups, too, you know? It wasn't like we were just slacking off while you carried us to victory or anything."

Maybe not directly, but he scored more goals than any of them ever had, even the oldest guy on the team with added years of experience. He was the face of their team for a reason and it wasn't just his looks.

"I drove myself into the ground!" Shane exclaimed, trying to get it through his head. "I was fucking starving myself to try to stay on that ice for the Metros. And now that I'm finally playing this game for myself and not a group of ungrateful, undedicated, selfish assholes you want to play the fucking victim? You want to act like I abandoned you just because I couldn't put up with it?"

The constant quips and chirps about his diet, his personal life, his fucking personality that they didn't realize hurt him. Badly. To say nothing of the neediness and the blame. The way everything good was *their* achievement and every single loss was *his* because he was the captain and the buck stopped with him no matter who was truly to blame.

He put up with it because he didn't feel like there was another choice; that was his group. He was where everyone wanted to be and even if it was killing him, he would have been an idiot to try to leave. But he had done exactly that and every single day that passed he grew more grateful he finally had the courage to because it was one of the best things he had ever done for himself.

"Shane—" Hayden tried to interject.

"And I still tried to reach out, too," he added in disbelief over his own stupidity. "I texted everyone, I apologized because you were my family and I didn't want to lose that. But I didn't do anything wrong, Hayden. I'm not some villain you get to blame because none of you can handle your own emotions and I'm done trying to get you guys to see that."

Shane didn't even bother telling him that he hoped Comeau felt better. If the guy couldn't be bothered to hear it directly from him, then he didn't need to hear it at all. He just hung up the phone, clutching it in his palm tightly as he felt his anger begin to subside into sadness.

If anyone had been betrayed in the situation, it was *him*. His family gave up on him long before he left to become a Raider; he just didn't know it until that moment.

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Shane was playing harder than usual. It was pretty clear to everyone, even the fans in the highest seats of the arena, which had been packed consistently since he moved to Boston. And while not everyone knew why he was hyper focused, the team did.

They had overheard most of his conversation and despite not mentioning it, they sure as hell discussed it amongst themselves. To them, his crash out was rather reasonable. He had, after all, carried them to the championships on multiple occasions. To say nothing of the time he spent working his way up to captain and the dedication he gave them off the ice, too.

He was at every wedding, birthday, or relative's funeral, they asked him to attend, always with a gift or a few words of support. It wasn't like he had cursed his team out and left or purposely tried to screw them over before the start of the season. He simply chose to sign with another team.

The Metros were, simply put, overreacting. But the Raiders didn't care. Hell, they were benefitting from it. From the spiteful, pissed off version of their captain they had abandoned who seemed to be playing against Wichita like every second of the game could be his last on the ice.

Marlow watched as Shane slammed himself against the boards, trying to snatch the puck before a ref dared to call it icing. He had shot back down the center before the other forward even got to him and was gone before he could turn around.

Ilya was the first to reach it, shooting towards Kane who didn't even think before smacking the puck as hard as he could. The goalie lunged to catch it but he missed, the puck hitting the top corner of the net before the clock ran out in the second period.

Kane turned towards Ilya; a mix of relief and confusion sprawled across his face as his captain skated. "I'm fucking defense," he reminded him. "How the hell did that get passed to me?"

He shrugged, glancing around the ice to place everyone on his team. "Shane was too far, Marlow didn't have the angle," he replied. "Varkov was keeping someone off my back."

Ilya frowned at the man as he mentioned him, noticing Varkov rolling his neck from being a bit too abrasive with the other team. Shane skated over from the other end, joining them as they exited the ice for the intermission.

They were up now. Well, had been and continued to be. An extra goal never hurt, though. And somehow, Shane still wasn't calm. He sat down in the locker room, taking a breath as he

watched Kane get tapped for a quick interview.

“What? No, I don’t want to,” he complained in between drinks of his water. “It’s intermission.”

“When you score the goal, they want to hear you talk about scoring the goal,” Ilya reminded him, patting him on his back hard enough he could feel the impact through his gear as he began shrugging it off to get a bit of a breather.

He huffed, grabbing a towel and dousing it in fresh, cold water before wrapping it around his neck. “You passed it and screamed at me to shoot it so I did!” he exclaimed. “There wasn’t much thinking behind it.”

“Same as usual, then?” Hammersmith mumbled, earning a few laughs as Kane grumbled something else under his breath and left for the interview.

It wasn’t like they were ever very long or for that matter terribly interesting, either. But the fans liked them and they had all put up with it at some point or another. Lord knows Ilya had done hundreds over his career and any chance he had to actually rest during intermission instead of trying not to pant over a microphone was a blessing to him.

He sat beside Shane who was tugging off some of his padding to try to breathe a bit better for the next few minutes. “You alright?” he murmured.

He nodded unconvincingly. “Fine,” he replied. “Just wanna win this, is all. Keep our momentum.”

Glancing back up at the clock, he squinted, waiting for the seconds to tick by faster. He didn’t want or need to take a break. In fact, he was pretty sure it would only inhibit him. He had been so focused, and intermission could ruin it if his heart rate dropped and he started getting comfortable.

Ilya hummed. “Is seventh game of the season,” he reminded him gently. “We don’t need to play like our lives depend on it when we’re up by two right now.” The season was long and grueling, there was no reason to exhaust themselves before they even began playing the harder teams in the league.

“Getting cocky is how you get blindsided,” he retorted, bouncing his knee anxiously in an attempt to stay in motion until their intermission ended.

“Shane,” he stated, reaching over and setting his hand on his knee in front of everyone, trying to settle it. No one noticed or read into it, but he tensed anyway, keeping the touch brief. “You don’t have to prove anything.”

He turned to look at him, his leg staying still even after his hand left it. “What?”

Ilya lowered his voice. “You do not have to prove anything,” he repeated slower, heavily enunciating himself to make sure it was crystal clear for him.

Shane seemed to hear that one a bit better, his shoulders sagging slightly as his words set in. “I know,” he murmured.

His glare harshened into something only someone who truly knew him could give. It was the kind he reserved for times when he knew, with absolute certainty, that Shane was deflecting. That he didn’t believe something that was already true and well-known to everyone else but him.

“You do not have to be player of the game every night or set records to prove to anyone that you were the heart of the Metros,” he assured him. “You don’t need to prove they’re suffering without you or that you’re doing better without them. *Everyone* knows this.”

Ilya knew he was afraid of people thinking he made a mistake by joining the Raiders. That maybe he left a prominent team and great position for no good reason. And with him officially cutting ties to the team, sans Hayden in very small increments, he wanted everyone to know they were a weaker team without him. He just couldn’t admit it without feeling like an asshole.

He huffed, pressed his hands against his face. “Do they?” he wondered, not quite sure if that sentiment was shared by as many people as his boyfriend seemed to think.

Ilya nodded without hesitation. “*Yes*,” he stated firmly. “And you are already demonstrating that just by playing the way you normally do. Stop killing yourself out there and just enjoy the game.”

Shane rubbed his arm, where he had purposely slammed into the boards to stop himself instead of even trying to slow down.

Maybe Ilya was right. He left the Metros to enjoy hockey, not feel this anger that was currently swelling inside him.

Sighing, he stood up and stretched his arms over his head, humming softly. “Speed Poker before intermission ends?” he questioned softly, shrugging as he suggested it.

Ilya glanced at the clock, checking how long they had before they needed to be back on the ice. “Alright, until we have two minutes left,” he agreed, reaching for them out of his cubby. He chucked them across the room, hitting his teammate on the head. “Dubek, deal the cards!” he shouted.

Bending over, he snatched the cards, pulling them out. “You coulda’ just asked, Roz,” he replied, already shuffling them. “No need to get violent.”

Shane huffed, extending his hand with the palm open and waiting for his cards to be placed in them. Maybe playing poker in between periods wasn’t the wisest choice when they could be strategizing, but they would get to the stressful stuff later in the season. Right now, they were ahead and Ilya was right, loving the game would keep them there.

In the meantime, the stress of only having fifteen seconds for a turn in poker would keep Shane’s mind busy as the intermission clock ticked down.

And it was indeed stressful, with yelling and countdowns and a distracting amount of laughter as some of the guys who weren't playing peeked at everyone else's cards. There wasn't even time to read into anyone's facial expressions or mumbling like in a normal round of poker, too busy just deciding whether to call, check, or fold altogether.

"Pair of eights beats a pair of six!" Carmichael shouted, throwing his hand up. "I win *again*!"

"Thank God, we don't do this for money," Kovalev muttered with a huff, patting Carmichael on the back. "Good game, man."

Shane clicked his tongue, a bit disappointed to have lost but even so, he could still feel his nerves settling a bit. Even with the chaos, the team still functioned like one, congratulating Carmichael instead of complaining about losing.

That was the most refreshing part of the Raiders dynamics, Shane thought.

They teased when it was actually light-hearted, never crossed boundaries, and always tried to be good winners around each other. On ice was a separate story, of course. But that was publicity, nothing more.

"Alright, we're all proud of your victory but we have another game to win, now," Ilya reminded them, thumb pointing towards the door as the intermission clock began to get dangerously low.

They clamored, putting their padding back on and getting a few more sips of water in before heading back out onto the ice. Shane took a deep breath as he did, reminding himself he could still play to win without losing his love for the game.

Desjouney seemed pretty thrilled about his attitude for the most part, though, sending him out for the faceoff as the third period started. He bent down, letting his nerves wash over him and escape rather than storing them.

He saw the puck drop and raced to get to it first, just trying to get it to Ilya or Marlow before the other team did. Hitting it toward Marlow, he passed it back to Kane who skated it around the back of their net and towards Varkov.

And just like that, his blinders were off. He remembered he had a team and could work with them instead of racing around the ice on his own, with the intent of getting everywhere faster and harder than the others.

Minutes ticked by and the score remained the same static number they had been at. 5-3. It was better than letting the other team score, at least, even if he wished they could snatch another goal before the game ended soon.

Shane winced, seeing his shot bounce off the post of the goal instead of hit the net. The puck hit the ice, and another player from the other team grabbed it, trying to get it out of their end zone and towards the Raiders instead.

Shane raced after him, noticing Ilya on the other side, trying to grab the puck with his stick.

The rest happened fast. Too quick for his mind to fully process, if he was being honest. All he knew was that in between trying to get the puck back and skating into their end zone, Ilya had somehow got slammed against the boards. Hard. And it wasn't a clean hit.

Shane skidded to a stop, the puck slipping past him as he reached out on instinct, grabbing onto the players jersey as shoving him back against the board while Ilya grabbed his side. The others caught up, crowding around as the player shoved him back and Shane felt himself throwing a punch before he could fully comprehend it.

The other team tried to pry him off their teammate and Marlow shoved one of them to get their hands off Shane, too as Ilya yanked them away from his boyfriend too from the other side.

The other player persisted, face inches from Shane's as he screamed at him. "That was clean!"

Shane, to his credit screamed back, "No, it wasn't you *fucking idiot*!"

The whistle blew as the refs dragged them apart from each other, both of them being ushered across the ice and towards the penalty box. Good, Shane thought. If he wasn't getting a penalty for that hit, he would at least make sure that he got it for some roughing.

Sitting on the bench in the penalty box, he pulled his helmet off and caught his breath, leaning forward to keep his eyes on the game. It restarted on the Raiders side of the ice, Ilya taking the faceoff as he raced the puck to the other end of the rink.

Shane hit his stick against the glass, shouting through it at him to take the shot before the other team crowded around their goal too much to let him get a clear angle. He watched him do exactly that, shooting the puck the moment he saw an opening and landing it directly in the net.

They screamed and Shane could admit he did too, standing up quickly to pound on the side of the penalty box as his team rose to their feet too on the bench beside him. Skating all the way around the other teams net as the goal sign lit up, Ilya glanced at Shane, giving him a small nod.

Desjourney clicked his tongue. "That kills the penalty," he muttered, shoving a tablet in Shane's hands as he took a seat on the bench next to him.

"I've got ninety seconds," he muttered. "It won't be unfair for long."

He nodded once, curt and final. "It better not be."

They reset for another faceoff and Shane looked down at the tablet in his hands, studying the live film on it as the commentators went to town on the game from their perspective. He lifted the headphones to his ear, tilting one side to hear it without putting it on completely.

'Whatever bad blood these two had seems to be ancient history by now,' their commentator remarked. *'Not only did Hollander jump in and rough up McGinnis for that check against*

Rozanov but you can see him still cheering from the penalty box. There definitely wasn't an ounce of regret as he got hauled off the ice.'

'Exactly, you can just tell that was personal to him from how fast he snapped, letting the puck slide right past him in order to go after McGinnis. And I mean, we get that, don't we? You don't get away with that kind of behavior, especially not against the Raiders captain,' the other replied, agreeing. *'The whole team is notoriously defensive over Rozanov and clearly that extends to Hollander despite not being apart of the lineup for very long.'*

Shane huffed slightly, keeping his eyes on the clock as he listened to their commentary. It ticked backwards quickly and he passed the tablet back to Desjourney, pulling the headphones off and hooking his helmet back on.

The second his penalty ended, he was back on the ice, finding Marlow and crowding beside him to try to keep the other team from getting a clear shot at their net or goalie. He stayed in their way as much as possible, just eating time up as the last minute played out.

Periods always felt faster when Shane spent part of them watching from the box. Though, he wasn't exactly known for landing himself in it all that often. It was a newer experience; one he found himself starting to make a habit since it was multiple games in a row now.

Still, as the clock buzzed to signal the end of the game, with a 6-3 score, he skated to a slow stop and leaned against Kane lightly. "Good game, man," he muttered, bumping his helmet against his.

"Back at you," he replied. "I especially liked the entertainment."

Scoffing, he bumped his head against Marlow too, then Varkov's, Kohns, Connors, Hammersmiths, Vic's, etc. Pretty much the whole team one by one until his head was practically vibrating from at the jostling against the hard shell of his helmet.

Following them off the ice, Ilya gave him one last bump, his a bit lighter compared to the others. "That was very attractive," he whispered to him, voice barely audible over the teams clamoring and the sound of the fans still cheering.

Nudging him back, Shane urged him towards the locker room to get off the ice.

They filed into the locker room, making a few more comments over putting away another win or noting small details of each other's plays. Another habit they had, to try to acknowledge each other even when the media liked to try to focus on one of them per day specifically.

"That was a good save earlier, Varkov," Feller noted, nodding at him as he tugged his jersey over his head and unhooked his padding. "Kept the game from tying in the first period."

"Says the guy who stopped a puck with his body on accident," he retorted, gesturing to his arm. "Think it'll bruise?"

He shrugged. "Guess we'll find out."

Shane watched, untying his skates on the bench as they passed compliments around. With one skate off, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned, seeing the media coordinator beckoning for him to come into the hallway for a post-game interview.

He sighed wearily, nodding after a second. “Give me a minute,” he muttered, bending back over to finish untying the other side of laces as well.

“Good luck with the wolves,” Vic told him, ruffling his hair as he pulled his stuff out of his cubby and headed towards the showers.

He hummed, figuring he’d need it if the snippet of the commentator’s discussion was any indication of the kind of questions they’d ask. Pulling on his regular shoes, he wiped his face and neck down, sticking to his jersey. There was no point in getting his other clothes dirty before he got to take his post-game shower.

Shane bumped Ilya’s arm on the way out intentionally, mouthing something to him with a glare as he followed the coordinator out. There were a few reporters, all buzzing with more energy than he honestly had himself after that game.

Clearing his throat, he stepped in front of them, the bright lights of their camera’s flashing in his eyes as he tried to get his vision to adjust to them quickly. There was microphone in his face before he even got a pick a reporter to answer.

A woman with blonde hair was first, her head tilted curiously as she asked, “McGinnis claims that check against Rozanov was entirely fair, do you believe that?”

Shane scoffed, shaking his head. “No. Not for a second,” he told her, planting his hands on his hips. “Rewatch it and you’ll see he went for the head on purpose, Roz just managed to move out of the way.”

That hadn’t kept him from getting checked at all, but it at least prevented him from a much worse hit than the one he took to his ribs when he hit the boards.

“Follow up question,” she called before he could take a different question. “Was there a moment you decided to defend Rozanov or were you just looking for a fight?” He had been playing pretty aggressively all night, after all. Some guys just wanted an outlet regardless of who they went after.

“Neither,” he replied with a slight frown. “I don’t fight unless I have a reason to and protecting my team is one of those reasons. I didn’t decide to, it’s what you do if you teammate is in trouble. Especially if the refs aren't doing their job and calling penalties that deserve it.”

She withdrew her microphone as another reporter, a man with short brown hair leapt in with another question. “Last week you got thrown in the penalty box for defending Marlow as well,” he noted. “Given your emerging pattern, do you think the other guys would also do the same for you?”

Shane nodded immediately and firmly. “Yeah, of course they would,” he stated.

There was no doubt in his mind they would, if the opportunity arose. It probably would, at that, but for now people were still avoiding starting fights with him. They had always done that for the majority of his career, actually.

He supposed it was the reputation he had cultivated as a polite player that made them think twice, not wanting to get called out if they got physical with him. Not that he ever took it half as personally as the fan always tended to.

“You work so well with the Raiders that a newer fan to hockey might think they’ve been your team this whole time,” another man noted, slightly impressed. “Is there something that makes that connection work?”

Shane tugged his lips to the side, thinking about it before he shrugged slightly. “I guess it’s just trust and respect, honestly,” he admitted, not sure what else to say. “We try to play for us first and foremost and it makes a world of difference.”

It wasn’t about making the fans proud or pleasing management; Ilya wanted to win. The guys wanted to win, too. They all wanted that for themselves and each other, not outside sources that made each loss feel twice as devastating as it normally would have been.

A red-headed woman piped up, “You play Montreal next week, is there any apprehension about seeing the team?”

He was quick to shake his head again. “Not really, we’ve had a strong start to our season,” he reminded them. “Hopefully we’ll keep it up no matter who we’re up against.”

Sure, the personal aspect didn’t make it easier, but he wasn’t expecting it to make it more challenging, either. They knew him, at one point. Knew how he played and all his tells. But he had been learning new things since joining the Raiders and doubted even a decade of teamwork would help them figure out his plays.

“By now you must have heard about your former teammates injury,” she added, tone softening slightly out of respect. “Have you been in touch with Comeau since his accident?”

Shane blinked for a moment, his mind racing to decide whether or not he should lie about the phone call. For a second, he almost did. It was the polite thing to do to protect everyone’s reputations. But then again, the Metros hadn’t had much loyalty towards him, so he figured he wasn’t required to have it for them, either.

“Uh- no, I haven’t spoken with him,” he admitted earnestly, shaking his head.

Her eyes widened, like he had surprised her with that answer for some reason. “You said you haven’t reached out to him?” she tried to double check, microphone inching a bit closer to him to make sure it picked up his words correctly.

“No, I said I didn’t *speak* to him,” he clarified. “I reached out the moment I found out about it. It’s a horrible thing to have happen to any player, especially so early in the season. I’m wishing him a fast recovery.”

And that much was still true. He never wanted to see anyone on his old team or any other team get seriously hurt. He knew from experience that it was terrifying, not to mention gut-wrenching in an emotional aspect to lay in a hospital and know people relying on you couldn't anymore.

"You're saying he couldn't or wouldn't speak with you then?" a different reporter asked, now joining in on that specific topic after realizing it was a bit more interesting than the standard *'yes, we spoke, he's doing well'* answer that everyone expected.

Shane shook his head, bending closer to the microphone for emphasis. "He *wouldn't* speak to me, that's correct," he told them. "I tried, but was told he refused to accept my call."

The blonde woman from before chimed back in, "Have you kept in touch with *any* of the team since deciding to sign with Boston instead this year?"

He made a so-so gesture with his head, huffing slightly. "Uh- not really," he confessed looking more exasperated than anything else. "Pike and I still talk, *technically*. But no, the rest of the team hasn't spoken to me since I told them about my decision."

He could practically see them doing that mental math in their heads, even though it was pretty tough. He signed at a different date than he made the decision too, and no one knew the exact day his relationship with the Metros came to a full stop. It was at least two months ago, though. If not longer.

The man with short brown hair was shoving his microphone back towards him as another question popped into his head. "They refused to comment on it but amidst your departure there were rumors of your former teammates calling you a traitor for walking away from them," he mentioned. "Can you confirm or deny those in any way?"

Shane hummed, nodding. "Oh, yeah, they definitely called me a traitor," he affirmed without hesitation. "As well as a liar and backstabber, before entirely refusing to speak to me."

And maybe that was a bit cruel to reveal, but it was the truth. It had all been said and a bit more if he was being honest. Before completely ghosting him, some bothered to leave a parting insult, which he technically still had buried somewhere in his texts.

Not that he cared enough to show them to anyone, it was just his own way of reminding himself why he shouldn't reach out each time he got the urge to try to fix things.

"What's it like having so much animosity build between you and the Metros so quickly?" the red-headed reporter questioned.

He huffed a bit, shrugging. "I mean, honestly? It's one-sided," he told them indifferently. "They were like my family and I'm always going to love Montreal for everything it's given me; I wish them the absolute best this season."

He had hoped they felt the same about him, but if they wanted to feel victimized and claim he was the reason why they had been a wreck during the first few games, then that was fine with

him. Maybe a joint enemy would unite them like it had when they spent their days tearing into the Raiders before games.

“Do you have any plans to make further attempts to mend this rift with the Metros?” she tacked on, voice tinged with curiosity.

Shane shook his head immediately. “No, I won’t. The Metros were a big part of my life and they’re why I am where I am, but they’re also in the past,” he admitted, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. “I’m focusing on my future, and it’s got an R on it, right now.”

The media coordinator waved his hand, signaling he’d only let one more person ask a question before wrapping things up. Thank God for that, frankly. Shane was getting a bit tired in front of all the lights.

One last reporter piped up, the question relatively tame as they asked, “Do you have anything to say to your former teammates in anticipation of the upcoming game against them?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Just that they should bring their A-game, because we plan to,” he replied. “Thank you guys,” he murmured to the reporters, stepping away.

The media coordinator kept them away, shielding Shane as he headed back to the locker room to finally start recovering after that game. He wanted to check on Ilya’s ribs, too, after seeing him clutch them earlier. But knowing him, he’d claim they were fine no matter how bad they hurt.

He’d probably have to seduce him later at home in order to get him to ice them.

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Shane sat at the kitchen counter, watching Ilya scrape some eggs onto two plates in the morning before their game against Montreal. He scrolled through his phone, the headlines looking relatively similar to how they had since their game against Wichita.

Stuff like ***Metros under fire after former player reveals cruel parting words from teammates***. and ***Hollander exposes teammates malicious opinions about his decision to leave the Metros during post-game interview***, was everywhere.

Some were a bit more dramatic than others, but all in all, they tended to say the same thing. And for the most part, were alarmingly accurate for websites that tended to spin everything a player said into something else.

He watched in real time as the fans rallied behind their behavior, agreeing they had every right to feel betrayed. He also watched as fans of pretty much every other team in the league came to his defense saying that no matter who he signed with, they had to respect his choice.

“Put your phone down and eat,” Ilya muttered, plate clinking in front of him as he set down some French toast, fruit, and eggs for breakfast.

He hummed, setting his phone on the counter and grabbing his fork. “Bossy today,” he replied, stabbing a strawberry on the edge of the prong.

“You like me that way,” he retorted, leaning against the counter as he cut a piece of his French toast with his fork. They sat in silent for a moment or two before he spoke up again. “Sooo, how are you feeling?”

Shane shrugged. “It’s a game like any other,” he replied, scooping up some eggs on his plate. “Just have to play our best and make sure we don’t lose on our own ice.”

The past few days, they had beat Florida, lost in Dallas, then won against Carolina. To say they had been having a good season would be a massive understatement. They had only lost two out of twelve games so far, which was more consistent than almost any other team in the league currently.

Especially the Metros who were either winning big or crashing hard in their games. They had five out of twelve wins, including their most recent against Ottawa. But frankly, they were starting to clean up their act a bit offensively speaking and he worried they might have gotten their shit together just in time for tonight.

What a humiliating way it would be to lose if they allowed that to happen.

“We won’t,” Ilya retorted confidently, shaking his head. “Guys already agreed we’re winning this one for you specifically.”

He huffed in amusement, lips twitching. “Thanks,” he murmured, cutting into his own French toast. “I just hope I’ve got my head on right, tonight, you know? I don’t wanna choke out there.”

He nodded in understanding. “You love the game, yes? You love our team, too?” he questioned, shrugging. “Then you are already in the right frame of mind, just have to stay there. Don’t let your history with them control how you play.”

Shane bit back a scoff, stabbing his plate a bit too hard as he took another piece of French toast off it. “Oh, trust me, our history is driving this game,” he responded bitterly. “Just not in a good way.”

Ilya watched him closely, humming with a tinge of skepticism.

He knew tonight would be, uh- interesting, to say the least. He wasn’t worried about how Shane or the rest of the team would play, though. They were solid right now. Good defense and amazing offensive plays throughout the first few games.

What worried him, was how Montreal would play. Not if they were good or bad, necessarily, but if they were fair. He had, frankly, already worried about that before Shane’s interview reopened the controversy of his departure from the Metros.

But now he was even more concerned with how many articles were floating around and how much of the community was turning on the team. He didn’t want them taking it out on Shane, blaming him for their bad publicity just because he was honest about what happened between them.

That sinking feeling in Ilya's stomach never quite lifted throughout the day, only worsening as the hours passed and they left the house to drive to the rink. Separately, of course. Throughout an early practice and a late lunch with the team, the knot loosened and tightened periodically depending on how distracted he was.

But the moment he sat on the bench in the locker room, tying on his skates, he felt it for sure. Constrictive and nearly painful with how hard it felt for him to breathe. He wondered if this was what Shane's anxiety made him feel like and if so, he was astounded that he managed to live like this so long.

"You ready Hollzy?" Vic wondered, standing next to him at their cubby's as he checked his phone for a moment before setting it down and giving his teammate his full attention.

He shrugged. "I don't have a choice, do I?" he mumbled with weak sarcasm.

"Not really, no," he replied gently, lips tugging to the side. "Look, just remember you can love the Metros without respecting what they stand for, anymore, okay? People change all the time."

Hammersmith nodded his head in agreement. "We've all lost teammates, that doesn't mean anyone who walks away from our team isn't our friend just because they chose what's best for themselves," he stated. "We still talk to the guys who were traded or who decided to sign with other teams."

They had all left on good terms, with disappointed goodbyes even when they were the ones choosing to leave willingly. And why wouldn't they? The team loved each other; they were a family. No matter who came through those doors and who walked out of them, that wouldn't change.

The fact that the Metros could dismiss Shane so quickly from the group he practically built from the ground up wasn't just astounding, it was disrespectful in Hammersmiths opinion.

"I met up with Price over break," Carmichael reminded them with a shrug. "He's doing great in Buffalo."

Not that he wasn't looking forward to destroying his team on the ice next week, when they played in New York. But he wasn't gunning for the man with some personal vendetta or anything. That was how this game should be, he thought. Rivalries, sure, never true hatred.

"I traveled with a few guys who left our team willingly when I was gone," Kovalov added, nodding. "It's not difficult to respect them even if they've changed teams." They were still good people, and they had history from playing together even if was only two or three seasons.

"Point is, if the Metros can't support you as a Raider, they were never your friends to start with," Marlow told him, shrugging. "A real team wants you to succeed no matter where you play or who its with."

Shane felt something settle in his chest as a wave of realization seemed to wash over him. They were right, after all. The Raiders had shown him more trust, respect, and compassion in a few months than his old team had for a full decade. He didn't need to go out there feeling like a *former* Metro, just trust that everyone on his team knew he *was* a Raider.

Nodding slightly, he strapped his helmet on. "Yeah, you guys are right," he murmured.

"Of course we are," Feller quipped, shrugging as he patted him on the back. "Why don't we go show them how you play when you've actually got a good team, huh?"

With a huff, Shane's lips lifted into a smile. "Let's do it," he agreed, following Ilya out of the locker room.

Hitting the ice for warmups, it seemed like the arena was already packed. Not that it was unusual for them to sell out the place these days, especially tonight, but the fans usually trickled in. They got snacks and walked around during warm ups, then took their seats for the faceoff.

Not tonight, though. It felt like every seat was already filled and no one dared to get up even though the game hadn't even technically started yet.

Skating around their half of the ice, Shane's eyes flitted towards the other side where the Metros were practicing a bit harder than he usually saw them try. He almost felt a bit happy about it, that they felt intimidated enough to need to put the extra effort into it.

"Thinking of Italian for a late dinner," Kohn mumbled as they warmed up. Sure, they had all had a group lunch like three hours ago, but by the time they finished playing and left the arena, they'd be hungry again. He would be, at least.

Sebbin laughed slightly, gently gliding around the ice with a puck. "I'm getting Mexican," he replied. "Nothing beats the taco truck by my apartment when I'm starving at ten pm."

Varkov hummed, nodding as the puck got passed to him. "I want Indian," he added. "Extra spicy curry with a side of rice from the good place downtown." They practically knew his order by now with often he was there.

Shane listened to them discuss the random meals they planned to eat for dinner once they finished the game, barely concerned with the other team at all, and it brought him an odd sense of comfort to know how unbothered they all were. He thought about what he and Ilya would have when they headed home. Probably Chinese, if he had to guess. That always seemed to sound good.

Ilya broke away from them for a moment, skating over the bench where Desjourney had called for him. He perched his gloves on the side of the railing, talking with him for a moment before glancing over his shoulder. Coach pointed at Shane specifically and Ilya nodded for a moment, then shook his head, then nodded again.

If Shane had been a bit closer he might have been able to hear what he was saying, but since he didn't want to look overly conspicuous, he just stayed with the others and occasionally

glanced over there as the two of them talked. It felt, admittedly, like a much longer conversation than it actually was.

Skating back over, Ilya reached for Shane's arm, nudging him even though he already knew he had been watching them. "Coach wanted to know if you would be in the right place for opening faceoff," he told him.

Shane glanced at Desjourney, then at the Metros and back to Ilya before he nodded firmly, once and only once. "Yeah, of course I am," he assured him firmly.

His lips twitched as he tapped his arm in approval. "Good," he replied, reaching out to take the puck from him and slide it over to Kane. "That's what I lobbied for."

With a huff, he watched Ilya skate back over to the goalie, muttering with him for a moment like he always did. He seemed to enjoy his routine of individually talking to everyone as they warmed up, giving small suggestions about their game or a few compliments if that's what he felt like they needed to boost their spirit before the game.

Tonight, though, it didn't really feel like anyone needed to be given a pep talk. They were antsy to get the game started, to play *and beat* Montreal.

When warmups ended, they got their wish.

Shane skated towards the middle, lights flashing for a moment to signal the start of the game. He saw Hayden coming to meet him, bending down slightly. He stared at him, looking like wanted to say something for a moment.

Eventually, though, he decided to bite back whatever comment was planning to make. "Good luck," he murmured instead, blowing out a breath.

Shane kept his eyes on the ice, not his friend. "Don't need it," he retorted.

The puck dropped and he caught it first, smacking it away from Hayden before he could even fight for it. Slipping past him, Marlow caught it immediately, heading directly into the Metros side of the ice.

Shane followed him, eyes on Mitty and JJ who were trying to snatch the puck back. He slammed into Mitty, pushing him against the board to keep him away from Marlow who spun around JJ before he got too close. He shot the puck towards Drapeau at the net, just missing as it bounced off him.

Ricocheting back, Ilya swept it up before Hayden got to the puck, passing it to Shane who shot again. This time, it made it past Drapeau, hitting the back of the net. The sign behind it lit up, the familiar red confirming his goal.

The crowd roared and Marlow bumped his helmet against Shane's. "Nice one Hollzy," he praised with his lips tipped upwards into a smile.

JJ grimaced, glancing between them. "Hollzy?" he repeated, tone mocking.

Shane ignored the comment as Marlow skated off to say something to Vic and Feller. He wasn't really sure how public that nickname was or not anymore, but if they were shocked by it, that wasn't his problem.

He raised his arm, bumping it against Ilya's. "Thanks for the pass," he murmured as both teams reset for another faceoff.

He shrugged. "Figured it'd do you good," he replied, heading into the circle to take the next faceoff himself.

Bending, he met Mitty's eyes as a small smirk crossed his lips. This puck would be too easy to win, he thought, stick inches from the ice while waiting for the ref to drop it.

It fell after a moment and he was quick to smack the ice, stick getting caught against Mitty's for a split second before shoving it away and passing the puck towards Shane who JJ was crowding around a bit too closely.

He passed it to Feller, puck flying through the air to reach him in the corner. Catching it with the end of his stick, he past it towards Marlow who got slammed into the wall by Wilson, losing the puck to him.

Above the ice and even above the crowd, the commentators were enjoying the game, their usual discussion of play statistics put on the back burner while discussing the teams instead.

'We're less than a minute into the game and it's Raider one, Metros zero in the thirteenth game of the season,' one announced. *'This team has already been on fire this season so far, but I would argue that this is probably the most anticipated game yet. People are dying to see how Hollander copes on the ice against his former team.'*

'With that shot against Drapeau, I'd say he's coping pretty well,' he other noted, laughing a bit. *'Of course, a great assist from Rozanov to make that goal work out as efficiently as it did, too. The pair have been absolutely racking up points by working together as well as they do.'*

He nodded in agreement. *'There was definitely some apprehension bout Desjourney's decision to put Hollander on first line with Rozanov and Marlow the first time he did it,'* he remembered. *'But clearly that was the right decision and even though it's still early in the season, I honestly can't see him changing their specific lineup right now.'*

'Well, that would be foolish, if he did,' was the response. *'The three of them have such a great rhythm out there, especially when their defensemen do such a great job of manipulating the other team. I mean, you see it right now in the way Vic is just annoying the hell out of Wilson to keep him off Hollander.'*

Vic crowded the man, never doing anything against the rules like tripping or grabbing him, but skating so close that he was blocking Wilson's view of the ice. Hollander moved around them, his shoulder smacking into JJ but he stayed upright long enough to clear the puck.

He would rather get called out for icing than let them take the puck willingly.

“Feller, it’s long!” he shouted as he stumbled, eyes finding JJ already skating away from what was technically a clean hit.

In an instant, Feller was on it, trying to beat him to the other end of the rink before the refs tried to call the penalty. He hit the boards at the same time as JJ, both of them getting stuck against them as they both tried to scrape it back towards them.

Hayden crowded around too, trying to help JJ but it didn’t matter. Eventually, Feller came away with it, either way. He always did. It was practically his own personal superpower.

Stick slamming into the edge of the puck, he shot it all the way across the ice through the air, directly towards Ilya who was seemingly waiting for it. He caught the puck, immediately discarding it to Shane who only made it a few feet towards the net before Mitty’s stick was in his way, trying to grab it back.

Tripping over it, he tumbled forward, headfirst into the boards hard enough to shake them.

Ilya’s eyes widened, glancing at the nearest ref who either didn’t notice or didn’t care enough to call the penalty. He would have gone after Mitty in heartbeat if Marlow hadn’t beat him to him, starting a fight before Shane even had the chance to try to stand up.

Shoving Mitty away from Shane, he shouted at him for the tripping, only getting a few words out before he was tackling him back. Pushed onto the ice, they slipped and Vic tried to separate them before things got too out of hand. They couldn’t risk letting the Metros score on a power play right now.

Shane stood up, watching the referee intervene and push both of them away from each other. He glanced at Ilya, slightly frustrated but he just mouthed something to him, shaking his head like he was silently telling him to let it go. Marlow was making a point and Shane didn’t need to blame himself for it.

He blew out a breath, grabbing his stick off the ice and glaring at Mitty without saying anything as he skated over to the bench, taking a seat for a moment.

‘And we’re seeing Hollander going to take a breather on the bench, now. Maybe get his head checked real quick after that hit he just took,’ the commentator noted. *‘Meanwhile it’s seeming like Marlow is going to be penalized for roughing and Mitty will also be given two minutes for tripping.’*

Shane scrubbed his eyes, blinking harshly for a few moments down on the bench, muttering something under his breath. Desjourney tried to get him to take his helmet off, wanting their doctor to at least make sure there wasn’t a delay with his vision. Shane refused, though, shoving his coaches hand away a bit.

“I’m good,” he insisted, keeping his helmet on. “Just need a second.”

With a huff of annoyance and perhaps respect, he nodded, tapping on Hammersmith who quickly hopped over the ledge, taking his place as they reset for another faceoff. Down a

player wasn't nearly as bad when the other team also had a disadvantage, but Ilya still would have preferred not to lose Marlow, even if he knew it was for a good reason.

He could see Hayden's eyes flicker to Shane as he sat on the bench, chewing on the edge of his mouth guard. "Don't fucking look at him," Ilya insisted, bent down for the faceoff.

"Excuse me?" Hayden mumbled, eyes darting back to him.

"You heard me," he retorted, his tone clipped. "He's not your teammate anymore; he's mine. If you think Marlow is a problem to your game, wait until you see what I will do to your team if you hurt *anyone* on mine again."

He scoffed, dipping his head as he tried to focus on the game. Something about Ilya's words still rang through his head though, sounding so definitive that he didn't want to risk seeing what he was actually referring to when he said that.

The puck dropped again, and Ilya stole it before he could comprehend how quickly it happened.

That seemed to be the theme of the game, if he was being honest. The fact that had scored at all against their goalie was actually kind of impressive. Or it would be, if they weren't still losing 2-1 at the end of the first period thanks to a rather angry play produced by Marlow once he was let out of the penalty box.

It was like the whole team was letting him have it, passing the puck to him as soon as possible, letting him shoot against Drapeau with a little under a minute until the clock ran down. After that, they were just eating time, wasting seconds to keep the Metros from even getting the chance to take a shot.

The clock buzzed as the period ended and Hayden watched as they circled around the bench, muttering amongst themselves for a few seconds before heading into their locker rooms. And maybe he was just hallucinating it, but he could have sworn he heard one of them mention the words *'poker'* and something about *'wearing a crown'* before they left.

Following his team off the ice, Hayden blew out a breath as he entered the guest locker rooms.

He'd been in them dozens of times before, of course, but there was something different about being in them without Shane. About knowing that he didn't currently have that feeling a player always got when they were reevaluating their game at intermission after spending the first period losing.

"They threw us on defense before we even reached their half of the ice once," Wilson complained, throwing his gloves onto the bench in annoyance.

"What the fuck was that Hollzy shit, too?" JJ wondered, rolling his eyes. "Did you hear all those passes they called with it?"

Drapeau nodded, huffing as he leaned against the guest cubby he was using. “Mitty shouldn’t have even been penalized; it was accident,” he retorted. “Marlow’s a fucking guard dog, trying to stir shit up for no reason.”

Hayden just drank some of his water, trying his best not to let his anger get the best of him. Because accident or not, Mitty did trip Shane and it *was* a penalty. And Marlow overreacted but it was damn clear why.

“I hate their *‘teamwork makes the dream work’* attitude this season,” Berkes noted with a mocking tone. “Rozanov was practically giving his team those shots like a farmer dishing out his animal’s food.”

“Enough, guys,” Hayden insisted, sick of their whining. “Stop bitching about the fact that we’re losing and start playing like we actually want to win.”

It was easier said than done of course. He wasn’t an idiot; he saw exactly how in sync they were playing a few minutes ago. Hell, he probably spent more of the intermission thinking about the Raiders game than he had his own.

Mostly because it made him cringe to think back to the way Wilson and Mitty had lost the puck because neither called it and they smacked into each other while Feller skated off with it.

Still, he tried to clear his head before the second period. *Tried*, being the operative word there. Because whatever chance of actually clearing it he had disappeared the moment he saw Shane leaving their locker rooms while laughing so hard about something he had to hold onto Ilya to keep from tripping.

What hurt more than seeing them being teammates was how blatantly obvious it was that they were friends now, too. Shane and the same man who taunted him, who insulted the Metros, who their team bonded over hating. It felt wrong.

The Metros coach sent JJ to the faceoff to start the second period while Marlow took it for the Raiders. On either side of him, Ilya and Shane glanced at each other, giving a small nod, almost like they were expecting something very specific to happen.

What that was, Hayden wasn’t quite sure.

He glanced back at the faceoff where the puck dropped and Marlow hit his stick against the ice in one motion, not moving it. JJ took the puck as he made no attempt to steal it. Hayden looked back up, confused, and saw the Raiders already skating towards their own goal.

Something felt off about it in his gut, but his mind was just trying to keep up with the game and racing into their end zone where they were all crowded around the net. At least, he thought they were. He hadn’t counted, just saw enough Raiders jerseys to think the whole team was there.

JJ passed the puck to Berkes who Vic skated past without trying to stop him from passing the puck to Hayden. He had an open shot. Despite every Raider being in front of the net, none of

them were clustered tight enough to block him.

The right angle and he'd score.

But he didn't.

The puck bounced off the net, towards Shane who caught it and turned, shooting it across the ice. Hayden's face furrowed, head twisting to try to see what the hell he was doing. In his mind, that had to be an icing penalty since there was no one over there.

But as his eyes caught up, he saw Feller standing in the neutral zone, an inch away from the line.

Catching the puck Shane shot towards him, Feller twisted, keeping the puck in motion and aiming it at Drapeau who lunged to catch it and missed. The crowd deafened Hayden's ears as he tried to figure out what just happened.

"What the fuck was that!" JJ exclaimed to no one in particular.

He wasn't sure how something so shoddy could have worked. Or how none of them seemed overly astounded by their own luck, almost looking smug about it. Like it had been planned that way.

Shane bumped his forearm against Ilya's, grinning at him. "Nice play," he murmured with a tinge of pride in his voice.

He shrugged, gesturing to the goal they had scored while five of their players were in the opposite end zone. "Gotta keep them interesting," he replied cockily, smirking at Hayden as he passed him.

The crowd hadn't quite calmed down, and he doubted they would for a bit longer, but either way, they set up for another faceoff. There was something almost ludicrous about all of them having to skate to the other end of the rink for it since that's where the goal had been scored, even if none of them were over there.

Feller wasn't either, technically. He sixty-four fucking feet away from the goal.

Vic bumped Feller's helmet, beaming with pride. "Knew we picked the right man for that," he murmured. "No one makes a puck fly like you do."

"And to think you accuse me of needing to play with the puck on the ice more often," he retorted with an arrogant expression, raising his gloves as he reset for the faceoff.

The next faceoff, the Raiders actually fought for it. That's why they won. And frankly, if they hadn't tried to win it, Hayden was pretty sure JJ would know better than to take it a second time. There was no way they would get away with that kind of play again. At least not against the Metros.

Feller passed the puck towards Ilya, who took the shot against Drapeau and missed it. It slid into the corner and Berkes grabbed it, passing it to Hayden who shot it towards the far end of

the rink, wanting it out of their end zone as fast as possible.

Shane went after it and Wilson raced after him, trying to get to the puck before the ref could call them out on icing. He glanced over at his former teammate, his stick outstretched to try to reach the puck first.

Slamming into the boards at nearly the same time, Shane felt one of Wilson's hands jostling him a bit, trying to push him away. He pushed back with his shoulder, trying to trap the puck before he got it out. Wilson, clearly pissed, used both hands to shove him and Shane knew from how much force he used that he didn't give a damn about the puck anymore.

Wilson lunged at him, but before either of them fully comprehended it, Ilya was appearing in between them. He shoved Wilson away, forearm pressing into the base of the man's throat as he slammed him against the boards with an expression that could only be described as furious.

Wilson pushed back of course, knocking Ilya towards the net. He felt the bar hit him, but it didn't stop their tussle even as the referees pulled them apart. Wilson shouting something at him, calling him insane for quite literally going for his throat.

The referee put his hand over Wilson's chest, pushing him further away from Ilya to keep them from starting something again and he reluctantly went with the ref to the penalty box. Ilya glanced at Shane for a moment, eyes catching his with an indiscernible expression before he turned and let the other referee guide him towards the penalty box, too.

Passing Hayden, who was skating to a stop, he pointed directly at him. "I fucking *warned* you, Pike," he reminded him. "Tell your damn team to play fair or I'll keep them from playing at all."

The ref gave Ilya a shove and he snapped at him, too, before throwing his hands up defensively and entering the penalty box with a mostly willing attitude.

Hayden blinked, watching it play out for a moment before his eyes scanned the ice for Shane who was nodding at something Marlow was telling him, looking as pissed as his captain was. He skated over hesitantly, bending down for the faceoff and Shane did the same.

"I'm sorry about Wilson," he clarified. "That wasn't okay."

"I don't need your apologies," Shane retorted bitterly. "Just shut your mouth and play the game."

Hayden let out a breath, the pit coiling in his stomach a bit tighter over his defensiveness. He watched the puck drop, trying to get to it but failing as Shane snatched it, immediately shoving past him with a hard smack against his shoulder.

From the penalty box Ilya was watching the game with concentration, his eyes focused on Shane who was following Marlow as he naturally stepped into the captain position on ice like he did every time Ilya got thrown in the box.

He wouldn't exactly call it a good thing that each time they got penalized, the Metros also did, which effectively cancelled each other out. But he would still take it over them having an advantage any day of the week.

Even once Ilya was out of the penalty box, they didn't score for the rest of the period.

They came close, but Drapeau had seemingly gotten his shit together at some point because he wasn't letting their shots get past him, even if the rest of the Metros were sloppy enough that they were outshooting them by double right now.

It was aggravating, to say the least.

As the clock ran down and the buzzer rang out, Ilya huffed in annoyance. He skidded to a stop, looking up at the rafters and letting the lights blind him on purpose for a few moment while catching his breath. They had been so close to that goal, too. A few more seconds and they could have had it.

Vic bumped his shoulder. "Come on," he murmured. "Let's grab some water."

Looking back down from the rafters, he nodded, leaving the ice. They were still up, 3-1, if nothing else.

Entering the locker room, Ilya glanced around, finding Shane already chugging his water like he had spent the week in a desert without it. He knew the feeling, frankly. He was dying for some water, too.

Shane extended his own bottle before Ilya was even all the way across the room, still catching his breath after the last few minutes of the second period. They were a bit more brutal than they had needed to be, for some reason.

"Thanks, for earlier," he murmured, pulling his towel around the back of his neck to try to cool down a bit quicker.

Ilya shrugged. "Knew from the way he was skating that he was going to pull something like that," he admitted.

Or maybe he had just been expecting it out of all the Metros and was just finally proven right. There was no way to know for certain, really.

"I thought he was going to rip my head off for sure before you showed up." Or at the very least give him a concussion. "You came out of nowhere," Shane huffed, a bit astounded.

Truthfully, Ilya couldn't recall a time since they were playing the championships that he had gotten anywhere that fast. That he had genuinely been screaming at himself in his mind to move even quicker, even if he tore something or risked tripping.

But at that moment, he just needed to be there, in between them, keeping that man from starting a fight that he knew Shane could have finished but didn't need to.

“I just wished we did better during the second half of that period,” he admitted, sounding a bit disappointed.

Shane nudged his arm. “We’re up by two,” he reminded him. “And we at the very least blew their minds with Feller’s goal.”

He huffed, nodding in agreement. “Understatement,” he muttered, tipping his head towards Feller in appreciation. It had been a spectacular goal. “But I still want more goals and points.”

Shane, in his opinion, deserved that. He didn’t want to win with a few goals over Montreal, he wanted to fucking obliterate them. He wanted them to see exactly what the rest of the Raiders season was going to look like and feel terrified for the next time they had to play against his team.

“Like you said a week ago—” Shane took his water bottle back from him, fingers brushing. “—Stop killing yourself out there and just enjoy the game.”

It was the best way to win for them. Not when they were stressed and panicking about technical stuff, but when they were just having fun. Hockey was called a game for a reason, after all.

Ilya rolled his eyes, lips tugging into a smile as he nodded. “I am a very wise man,” he mused, reluctantly, blowing out a breath as he started to cool down both physically and emotionally. “So, then, poker or charades?”

“Charades!” Marlow shouted from across the room before anyone had a chance to chime in. “I’m not losing to Carmichael again two intermissions in a row.”

“Cowards,” Carmichael replied, unbothered as he balanced his plastic crown on his head regardless of the game they were playing.

Huffing, they set up for a brief game. One with slightly different rules, just like how they adapted poker to be playable in such a short amount of time. It was a bit harder, mostly because the teams always wound up stacked in some way or another, even though they drew names randomly from slips of paper.

They still enjoyed it though. It was a good way to clear their heads for a few minutes and still stay in motion, so their muscles didn’t get cold waiting around for the third period to start.

When the game did restart, Ilya found something about the horrible energy around the Metros pretty satisfying. He didn’t know what had happened during their intermission that was so terrible, but they looked both pissed off and reclusive all at once.

The smirk on Ilya’s face probably worsened it, frankly, not that he cared.

Hayden watched as Rozanov muttered something to his teammates and they all nodded, bumping their forearms against his like some kind of promise or deal as they broke apart to set up for another faceoff.

“Уничтожьте его,” Ilya said to Shane specifically with a knowing look.

Shane nodded. “Я буду,” he replied, gaze lingering before he bent down in front of Hayden in the middle of the ice.

Hayden narrowed his eyes a bit, his concentration flitting between Rozanov’s protective glare and Shane’s concentrated one. “You speak Russian all of a sudden?”

His eyes flitted up at him, giving a half-assed shrug. “Have for a while,” he admitted, lowering his stick as much as allowed, waiting for the ref to drop the puck.

It fell, and their sticks clattered as Shane managed to pry it loose, passing it towards Marlow who was a bit less protected. He supposed they were banking on him relying on Ilya for some reason, given a few of their past plays.

Marlow shot the puck long and Ilya managed to lose the Metros crowding around him, skating towards the corner where it was discarded before Berkes could get there. That was one of the problems with being a big man, he was also a slower one.

He skated away with it, Berkes on right beside him trying to snatch it. Focus divided between what was going on behind and in front of him, he barely noticed Mitty in time to switch directions, stick covering the other side of the puck from his attempt to grab it.

Ilya turned sharply and Berkes ran into his teammate, grabbing onto Mitty to steady himself. “Tailgaters,” he muttered in annoyance as he skated around them and shot the puck towards Drapeau.

It hit the edge of the net, bouncing in just before the goalie could try to stop it.

Ilya pumped his fist into the air, feeling a rush of relief wash over him. That was the goal he’d been trying to get all night so far. Don’t get him wrong, he had no problem assisting Shane or Marlow, even Feller if need be. But he still wanted a shot or two for himself, as well. Individual points still counted in Hockey, after all.

Vic bumped his head against his captain. “No assists?” he wondered in mock annoyance. “Don’t even need us out here, huh?”

“Of course I need you,” he replied, slapping the side of his arm. “You’re my shield to keep me from getting body checked every five seconds.”

Huffing, he gave a quick congratulation and skated off for the next faceoff. Ilya set up, too, nodding towards Marlow to take it.

They stayed at a pretty consistent 4-1 for the majority of the third period too as players came and went off the bench throughout it. Connors made it off the bench for a bit, taking over for Shane for a bit and Carmichael went out in place of Ilya, too.

They sat on the bench, side by side, eyes glued to the ice as they muttered to each other every once in a while. It was pretty clear they didn’t actually want to be sitting out, but coach had pulled them and they couldn’t exactly go against his wishes even if they wanted to.

“They’re in our end zone too much,” Ilya commented, shaking his head in irritation. “They’ll score with how many shots we’re letting them take.”

Desjourney rapped his knuckles on top of Ilya’s helmet as he stood behind him. “Commentators get paid to comment, you get paid to play,” he reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. “And yet I have time to comment because I am not busy playing,” he retorted, gesturing to the ice. “Is offensive to keep us both here.”

One of them was bad enough, but him and Shane together on the bench felt they were being punished for something they weren’t even being told about. And he could tell by how Shane was bouncing his knee that he wasn’t comfortable sitting here there. Every time Hayden or JJ got too close to their net, his entire body lurched like he could somehow stop them from getting any further.

“You’re sitting here so you can play the end of the game,” Desjourney replied, putting his hand on Shane’s shoulder. “I want a strong finish.”

He nodded slightly, understanding the logic, even if he wasn’t a fan of it. He sat there, watching as players came and went, the Metros also seeming to have a similar theory as they pulled Hayden out after a while.

Shane stared at him from their bench, a mix of emotions he could figure out swelling inside of his chest. He was, compared to the others, playing fair. And well, too. A stubborn part of him wanted to see that, wanted his friend to do well and feel bad about their current situation. The other part of him was still pissed at the rest of the team so much so that it extended to Hayden just because he kept associating with them.

Vic entered the Raiders bench area and Varkov hopped the ledge, taking over as defenseman for him. On the other side, Theriault pulled JJ out, sending Taylor in his place.

“I don’t like all the switching,” Shane murmured under his breath, growing uncomfortable as the minutes ticked down and he waited for the moment Desjourney would eventually let him back on the ice.

“Me neither,” Ilya agreed, just as antsy as he watched the game continue. Some might call the bench a ringside seat of sorts, but he didn’t want the second-best seats or any for that matter. He wanted to be in the game.

He resisted the urge to reach over and squeeze his hand, knowing that was pushing things too far in front of everyone. Instead, he spread his legs just slightly, pressing the side of his leg against Shane’s. He breathed out slowly, trying to stay invested in the game as he felt Shane nudge his leg back gently.

“I want you both out there when the clock hits three minutes,” Desjourney muttered.

They glanced at him, nodding, then shared a look between themselves. There was no telling exactly what coach wanted in those last few minutes, but they were pretty sure he was expecting something showy, even if it wasn’t a goal.

The clock ticked down, big red letters moving slower than they ever had before as the sound of skating cutting up the ice rang out amidst the players shouting at each other to pass or clear the puck. Shane felt himself getting even more antsy, standing up and pressing his hand to the edge of the rail like he didn't plan to waste a single second of the time coach gave him once he got back into the game.

The moment they saw Connors and Carmichael approaching them, Ilya and Shane were hopping over the edge, finally getting back on the ice.

They exchanged a glance, skating away from each other as Shane went after the puck Feller had ahold of and Ilya headed towards Marlow to try to coordinate the best he could. Mostly to tell him they weren't eating time anymore, that coach expected them to do something with the last few minutes, even if there were only three of them left.

Feller skated the puck around their own net as Taylor tried to grab it and Shane slammed him into the board, keeping him off his teammates back as best he could. He wasn't sure at one point coach made it so they were defending their own defensemen, but that's how things had seemed to work out the last few minutes.

With a groan, Taylor skated off, back to the Metros bench and JJ came back on the ice.

"If we're doing something, we need to do it fast," Shane told Feller, skating beside him towards the net. "They're putting Hayden back in the game, too."

Feller glanced up at the bench, trying not to let the changes get to him, even though they admittedly had been doing that a bit.

"Passing it," Feller muttered, gliding the puck towards Shane as he saw JJ approaching.

Grabbing it, Shane broke away, looking around for his options. Which, he honestly didn't see many of. Hayden practically snuck up on him, stealing the puck with a quick glance that might have been apologetic if it weren't for the fact that they were losing.

Hayden headed towards the Raiders goal, getting cut off by Varkov who shoved him into the boards and tried to get it away from him. Feller was on them in a second, stealing it away, even as Mitty tried to help Hayden keep it in Raider's end zone.

Feller shot it into the neutral zone and Shane got to it quickly, keeping it away from JJ by passing it to Marlow with a harsh smack.

He felt the impact before he heard the crack, his stick *snapping* in half after a few too many aggressive hits all night.

Marlow froze, unsure what to do as Shane glanced around like he was trying to figure out in the blink of an eye how much time he needed to get a replacement stick and how that time stacked up to the dwindling clock.

Before he had time to even try it, they both heard Ilya shouting at them.

“Pass it back!” he screamed at Marlow, already in motion and heading towards Shane at the same time Wilson was.

Marlow’s brain probably wasn’t thinking as fast as he needed it to, but he listened and shot the puck back towards Shane without hesitation anyway. Ilya skated past him, shoving his own stick into Shane’s arms before giving him time to think about it.

Shane tightened his hand around Ilya’s stick, barely tapping it against the ice before the puck slammed into the curve of it. A *different* curve. Not the one he was used to or liked to play with. But that didn’t really matter right now.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the number on the back of Ilya’s jersey as he body checked Wilson, keeping the man from trying to steal the puck back. The clock on the wall ticked down and without thinking, Shane took off.

There wasn’t time to pass it back to Marlow or to wait for Varkov to cover him; he just had to try to take one more shot before the game ended. Even if it was a long one. Skating down the middle as fast as he could, Shane came to an abrupt stop a few feet away from the Metros net, ice kicking up as he shot the puck as hard as he could.

Drapeau leapt for it, reaching at the perfect angle to catch it but moving a little too early.

The puck flew over his head, slamming into the back of the net and lighting up the goal sign a bright red just before the clock ran out. Shane sucked in a deep breath, two or three seconds passing before the buzzer rang out, signaling the end of the game.

He dropped his head, huffing a laugh for a moment and he shook it in utter disbelief.

Shane felt the impact as Marlow came up behind him, nearly tackling him to the floor. Varkov, Feller, and Ilya weren’t far behind. He got crushed by them as their bench cleared and the others joined him on the ice to also bump helmets and get in on the clamoring.

“That was fucking crazy, Hollzy,” Connors told him, knocking him on the back.

He just looked at Ilya. “No, he was fucking crazy!” he exclaimed, lifting his stick. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“We were going to run out of time! I couldn’t turn around fast enough to catch the puck and Marlow didn’t have anywhere else to shoot,” he defended, taking his stick back into his own grasp. “Is good stick, no?”

Shane just laughed in disbelief, wrapping his arm over Ilya’s shoulder to keep from having his legs give out after the exhaustion and shock crashed over him all at once. “I like my own better,” he retorted.

“Yours is being picked up in pieces by referees, right now,” Feller told him, pointing across the rink at the larger chunks of wood that were being grabbed.

Shane chuckled again, his gaze drifting away from the referees and towards the Metros, who were already leaving the ice without even bothering to congratulate any of them. That was a

pretty shitty thing to do, but he didn't really expect much else from them, either.

Hayden lingered a moment longer than the rest of the team, but still turned and looked away, leaving the ice to head back to the locker room. Shane looked back at his own team, forcing a bit of a smile back onto his lips. That had been a good play and he knew it. A great game by anyone's standards.

Even coach looked happy, which was pretty tough to achieve.

Filing back into the locker room, Shane felt more slaps and nudges against his back. There were a few comments for Ilya, too, still questioning how his brain managed to move fast enough to decide to give his stick away rather than go after the puck himself. He shrugged most of them off, just repeating himself.

"Is called trust!" he insisted as he ran his hand through his curls, damp from the game and compressed from his helmet. "I trusted Shane to make the goal for us. Clearly, I was right."

"Would you trust me enough to pass me your stick if mine broke?" Sebbin wondered, tugging his jersey off and unhooking his padding.

Ilya tugged his lips to the side. "Do not ask questions you don't actually want to know the answer to," was his response.

Sebbin's mouth dropped open in mock offense, huffing. "Roz, I'm gut wrenched," he claimed, clutching his chest. "Physically ill over your lack of faith."

"Mhm," he hummed, rolling his eyes. He glanced over at Shane, who wasn't exactly thrilled about the win. Even with a 5-1 score, there was still something about the game that had his heart aching a bit.

Shane untied his skates, taking his time as he pulled them off. He knew what the Metros were doing right now and it was blaming him. For their heads not being in the game, or their passes getting disrupted, or his presence on the Raiders stacking the odds. They always found a reason to blame the other team or the ref or the ice. Anything but the way they played.

"Looking forward to your Italian food?" he muttered, looking up at Kohn for a moment.

He nodded. "Oh yeah, getting a massive piece of tiramisu after that game," he replied. "You planning on ordering in when you get back home or stopping somewhere?"

"Probably ordering in," Shane responded, shrugging. "I don't think I have the energy to order in person without making up a new language in the process."

Kohn chuckled. "Fair enough," he agreed, patting his arm. "Get yourself some sustenance, though. You deserve cheesecake or something after that game."

He walked into the locker room for a quick shower and Shane hummed, hauling himself to his feet and putting his gear into his bag. His phone, beside his bag, lit up and he reached for it. Hayden's name popped up on the screen, a single message popping up on it—***Can we talk***?

Shane stared at the text for a moment before typing back, telling him he'd be waiting by the storage closet down the hallway. He finished packing his bag before slinging it over his shoulder.

"Heading out already?" Dubek asked, noticing him darting towards the door.

Shane turned, nodding his head. "I'm dead tired," he admitted, sounding a bit weary. "Just want to head home and sleep until nine for a change."

He huffed a laugh as he accepted that answer and Shane glanced at Ilya for a moment, mouthing something to him before heading out of the locker room. There were already reporters waiting if he went in one direction and hoping to avoid them, he walked the other direction before they noticed him.

Hopefully, he wouldn't be in too much trouble for skipping the post-game interview they were probably going to have him do. He had scored two of the five goals, after all, and it was his former team they beat. But they could yank Ilya or Feller out, instead, he figured.

Approaching the storage closet, Shane dropped his bag on the floor and leaned against the wall, sighing heavily as he shut his eyes. He really was exhausted after that game. He couldn't fucking wait to go home and go to bed.

Footsteps echoed from the opposite direction and he opened his eyes, spotting Hayden's figure in the dim lighting. "You came," he murmured, almost surprised.

"I asked you to meet, remember?" he replied, setting his own bag down next to his on the floor.

Shane shrugged. "Could have been fucking with me," he noted with a sardonic tone, almost like he expected him not to show. To just waste his time like the team had done so many times in the past.

"Stop," Hayden mumbled, shaking his head. "You can hate the team, okay? I get that, I really do. I kind of wanted to knock them around a bit tonight, too. But me? Shane, you're like family to me."

His lips quirked and he glanced down. "Wish I believed that." Truly, he did. He wished beyond anything that he could.

It wasn't that Hayden had done anything in particular to make Shane feel abandoned by him. Sure, there were comments about his diet or his personality that never felt right, but compared to the stuff the others said, it was always tolerable.

It was the fact that he never stood up for him, that made Shane pull away. That while JJ, Wilson, Mitty, Berkes, and the rest of the team called him a traitor, he kept his mouth shut. His silence hurt.

"You never answered my calls after what happened with Comeau," Hayden murmured, trying to prove that he really had tried. "I texted, too. Even talked to Yuna."

His gaze snapped towards him. “You talked to my mom?” he questioned. “About what?”

He gestured weakly at his entire body. “About you,” he replied meekly. “About you moving to Boston.”

Shane’s eyes widened, suddenly looking a bit panicked. “What did she say?” he demanded. “She- just hockey right? She told you it was a good contract?”

Hayden furrowed his eyebrows a bit, confused about his sudden defensiveness. “Sorta, yeah,” he replied hesitantly. “She said you were going through some stuff that no one knew about and that being here was really helping you.”

He knew, now, about Shane’s problem with food. It was something he had sort of noticed but never really realized the extent of until the phone call where his friend yelled at him about starving himself. He felt like an utter idiot for not seeing it sooner or doing anything to help him with it.

“Oh.” Shane leaned back against the wall, looking a bit relieved that she hadn’t accidentally mentioned anything along the lines of his relationship with Ilya.

“I- look, I know I tried to be supportive quietly by helping you move but I should have been more supportive publicly, too. Regardless of what the team thought,” he added, pursing his lips slightly. “Yuna said you were doing better here and with everything I saw tonight, I agree with her.”

“You do?” he asked, squinting a bit.

Hayden nodded. “Yeah, you look…lighter when you were playing,” he muttered earnestly. “Sort of like you did when you were younger, all excited for the game and laughing. Until stuff got intense, I mean.”

He huffed slightly, rubbing the back of his neck. “That was uh- unintentional,” he admitted. “The guys just get protective and then I feel like I’m to blame for it and- I’m sorry that I told you to shut your mouth.”

He shrugged. “I deserved it,” he replied honestly. “And it’s good that they’re protective, you deserve to have a team like that, who fights for you. Metros didn’t do that as much.” Or at all, really.

Shane wasn’t the type to fight very often so they mostly figured he wouldn’t want anyone to start anything on his behalf. Hayden had still done it a few times, like when Marlow sent him to the hospital and he attacked him before a ref pulled him back.

He could have done it more, though. Could have made sure everyone knew Shane couldn’t be roughed up without consequences and was a player worth losing several minutes to the penalty box for.

“Yeah, they’re good to me,” he confirmed, nodding softly.

“Even Rozanov, apparently,” Hayden noted, slightly impressed. “That last goal was, well, it made our loss far more humiliating for starters. But it was also kind of incredible. A lot of those goals were.”

His lips quirked slightly. “Thanks,” he muttered quietly.

“No, seriously, what the fuck was that with Feller?” Hayden questioned a bit more banter fading into his voice, mind still reeling from it.

Shane let out a chuckle, feeling another fraction of his frustration dissipate. “Just something we came up in between rounds of poker,” he admitted.

His eyes widened. “Wait- I heard you guys correctly, then, when someone mentioned poker before intermission?” he wondered, mouth falling open a bit. “Is that actually what you guys do during breaks while the other teams are trying to rearrange their game plans?”

Shane nodded, clarifying it was speed poker for more efficiency and Hayden let out a disbelieving huff, that bordered on hysterical. He scrubbed his face, trying to process how relaxed of an environment their locker rooms must be in order to play games during intermission instead of talking shit about the other team or panic over plays.

“That’s insane,” he stated decisively. “I kind of need to know what the hell else happens during intermissions now, is there also Gin or Uno?”

“Just poker and charades, usually,” Shane replied. “Carmichael somehow wins almost every hand so we got him a plastic crown; he takes it very seriously now.”

“Because nothing screams serious quite like a grown man wearing a plastic crown,” he noted, huffing again. “Man you- they sound like the team you deserve.”

He wished the Metros could have been that team, but after Shane left, he started to realize exactly how rose-colored his glasses had been the entire time. The guys were, in a way, still his brothers. But they weren’t the saints he always considered them to be. And they sure as hell weren’t very loyal.

“I know it’s crazy, but I- I really do love it here, Hayden,” he told him. “I forgot why I liked hockey, couldn’t even go to practice without dreading it. And now, well, practice still sucks—it’s harder here than in Montreal—but the guys make it fun.”

“You don’t have to convince me it’s great,” he assured him, a small, saddened smile tugging at his lips. “I saw it all night long.” He paused, reaching for his bag as he realized how late it was getting. “I just hope…maybe next time we play in Boston we can hang out without the forty thousand witnesses.”

Shane scoffed slightly in amusement. “I’d like that, yeah,” he agreed. “I could show you around, if you wanted.”

Hayden nodded in agreement. “I’ll hold you to it,” he responded, reaching an arm out for a tentative hug. When he wasn’t immediately pushed away, he took it and gave him a quick

embrace, patting him on the back. “Answer my calls, too. Please.”

“I will,” he promised, pulling away from the hug.

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Unlocking the door to his house, Shane slipped inside and locked it. The lights were out in the kitchen but he could hear the television still playing from within the bedroom. He peered through the door, watching Ilya pout at the screen as he laid in bed, the remote perched under his chin.

It didn’t take him very long to notice Shane, though, immediately lowering the volume on the television. “There you are,” he murmured. “Where have you been? Your text was vague.”

Something along the lines of needing to fix something and telling him he’d see him at home.

“I was with Hayden,” he confessed, sliding his shoes off by the door and setting his bag down beside Ilya’s. “We were trying to work things out.”

To his credit, Ilya didn’t look as disgusted by the mention of his name as usual. Winning always put him in a nicer mood, after all. “And?” he wondered. “Did you talk things over and realize he is slightly more tolerable Metro than others?”

Shane nodded slightly, leaning against the dresser. “Yeah, I think so,” he replied. “It’s not like we’re back to best friends or anything but…we might get back there.”

Or hopefully someplace a bit better than that, honestly. To a place where Shane could actually be himself around Hayden and not worry about some secret slipping out or being judged over aspects of his life he couldn’t control.

“Good,” he responded with a remarkable amount of sincerity. “You should be able to keep in touch with at least one of your old teammates.”

Even if he wasn’t a huge fan of Pikes, he knew how much Shane had always relied on him and how much he considered Jackie and the kids his own family. He wasn’t cruel enough to want him to lose out on that, even if he did think some of the comments Pike had made in the past were less than acceptable.

“Have you eaten?” Shane wondered, his stomach growling slightly. He had been exhausted the entire drive home but now that he was shrugging off his hoodie, he began to remember how long it had been since he last ate.

Ilya shook his head. “Was waiting for you,” he admitted, sitting up a bit more in bed. “Go shower, I’ll get the food.”

“Don’t you mean the takeout menus?” he muttered, crossing the room towards the bathroom.

“*Nooo*, I mean the food,” he repeated, getting out of bed. “I ordered Chinese and picked it up on the way home. It’s in the fridge.”

He blinked, pursing his lips. “Oh.”

Ilya hummed, shooing him towards the door with his hand as he left to go warm up the food for both of them. Shane bit back a smile, closing the bathroom door behind himself and turning on the water before he tugged his shirt off.

Washing off the dirt, sweat, and frankly, every negative part of the day that was still clinging to him, Shane could hear the television in the bedroom begin to play again. It was the same broadcast as before, the one Ilya always recorded so he could watch their own games back and critique it from a different angle.

Getting out of the shower, he changed into his pajamas and walked back into the bedroom. “What’s it going to take for you to shut that off?” he wondered.

Ilya hummed dramatically, lifting his head from where he rested it on his hand. “My boyfriend, in bed with me,” he replied.

Shane pulled back the sheets. “Done and done, then,” he replied, crawling into bed and kissing his cheek for a moment. “Do you want to watch the Great British Bake Off while we eat?”

His eyes lit up slightly. “There is new episode!” he remembered, smacking Shane’s leg softly. “You are you are so smart. I cannot believe I forgot about that.”

He shook his head, disappointed in himself as he clicked through their streaming channels and clicked on the latest episode. Settling the remote down, he pulled the reheated food off the side table and passed one to Shane.

“Extra Chicken?” he asked, already taking a bite.

Ilya nodded, scooting over a bit until their arms were touching. “I wouldn’t dare forget,” he replied, turning to kiss Shane’s shoulder briefly. “Love you, you know that?”

He hummed, tilting into him more as the opening of the episode played out. “I love you too,” he murmured, leaning over to kiss his lips for a moment.

Pulling away after a second, he turned, sighing as they lay there. It wasn’t anything special, in retrospect. Just a cheesy show, soft blankets, and some takeout food after a hard-won game. But for some reason, it felt that way to Shane. To be in love and be able to make it work despite how many factors made it feel impossible had to be something extraordinary, he thought.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to jump on the Metro hate train after writing such an uplifting(ish) fic about them last time, yk? I love the revenge trope and I don't think there's any better

type than a character majorly succeeding after leaving a person/place.

Also! I mistagged a fic with Shane as a Raider a while back and I really hope the person who I disappointed sees this and knows I had them in mind while writing it <3

Chapter 2: Who We've Become

Chapter Notes

> Soooo, here we are again, huh? I would like to preface this by saying I use fake players because I *personally* do not feel comfortable using real ones in a setting like this. It feels invasive. PLEASE stop commenting about them not being real; I am well aware of it. (Please move on, I'm begging you)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane let his eyes rake over the cabinet in the bathroom, searching for something he could use for his hair, which was damp from his shower. The problem, unfortunately, wasn't finding a product. It was sorting through the dozens they already owned.

Ilya had a strange habit of collecting them, despite claiming he used all of them. Creams, oils, leave in conditioners, and multiple dry shampoo brands were all littered along the shelves without much rhyme or reason.

Shane would argue harder for him to pick a few he preferred and throw the others away, but he knew it would be futile. Ilya would just try to argue he needed them all.

Reaching for the first one that didn't look overly complicated, he ran a small amount of it through his hair, trying to be quick about it. If Ilya ever caught him using it, he'd launch into an explanation about what oils it had and how it protected the hair. He just hoped he didn't recognize the scent of it, somehow.

Closing the cabinet, he walked out of the bathroom and grabbed his keys off the dresser in the bedroom, slipping them into his pocket before looking for his jacket. It wasn't quite noon, yet, but he didn't like being late anywhere.

"Ilya, do you know if sixth street has decent parking?" he questioned, one arm through his jacket as he wandered into the living room. "I can't decide if I wanted to steal your pass and park in the garage or—"

Before he could finish his sentence, he spotted Ilya waving his arm towards him harshly, trying to get him to close his mouth. He paused, snapping his lips closed and frowning. Ilya gestured widely at the phone he was holding up to ear, continuing the pacing he had temporarily halted in an attempt to shut him up.

"Мы можем перенести тренировки на час позже," he said, tone contemplative. "Или мы можем начать без тебя и просто задержаться допоздна. Хотя парням это может не понравиться."

Shane rested his hand on the back of the couch, tilting his head as he listened to one side of the conversation. It was a bit quicker than he was used to hearing. When he and Ilya and spoke in Russian, it was usually slower to help him learn.

And when someone at the rink said something, it was usually just a few words instead of full sentences. Still, it had to do with practice; he was pretty sure. He also mentioned the guys not being happy. Or maybe he had just said *likewise* and he misheard it. He wasn't positive.

"Who is it?" he whispered, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Ilya shot him a look, covering the mic on his phone. "Kovalev," he muttered before returning to his conversation. "Сообщите мне до завтра, чтобы никто не пришел не вовремя." He hummed over something, laughing slightly. "Я бы не удивился, если бы они сделали вид, что не получили сообщение."

Shane furrowed his eyebrows, leaning to prop his arms on the couch. He was half focusing on trying to translate what was being said and half just listening to the way his voice changed. It was always intense in Russian, which was saying something considering how deep it already was in English.

He liked it better, though. Even if he couldn't always understand everything, he was saying.

Ilya nodded to himself, adding something else before he hung up the phone and set it down on the coffee table. Shane perked up, pushing off the back of the couch and watching him walk into the kitchen.

"Well?" he wondered, both eyebrows raised like he expected a complete rundown of the conversation. "What did Kov want?"

"He had something come up and couldn't make practice tomorrow," Ilya responded with a vague gesture of his hand. "I told him to get back to me with a time frame so I can move things around."

Shane pulled out the seat at the counter and sat down. "I was right then," he mused, a little proud of himself. "I thought I heard you say training. You just talk so fast when you're with him or Varkov that it's hard to know for sure sometimes."

"I couldn't exactly slow down without him asking me why," he muttered. "Besides, snooping is an invasion of privacy. What if I was talking about you or something?"

He hummed skeptically. "Oh, I'm sure you've probably had a few conversations about me in Russian," he retorted. "I've seen Kov looking at me weird too many times for you to only ever be talking about the game with him."

Ilya shrugged dramatically. "Guess you won't know until you're fluent," he teased, turning to pull the notepad off the front of the fridge and grabbing a pen out of the drawer.

Shane watched him open their pantry, glancing at the methodically organized shelves for a moment. He reached for a shook the jar of protein powder before setting it back down and

jotting something on the notepad. He counted their energy bars and made a similar note.

“Grocery shopping?” he assumed, barely able to read the Cyrillic that he preferred to write in when the list was for himself only instead of both of them.

Ilya nodded, tugging at the door of their fridge. “Do you think I should buy any fruits or vegetables?” he asked, tugging his lips to the side as he considered it. “I don’t know if we have time to eat them before leaving town.”

They had a few upcoming games that would require travel and usually didn’t bother stocking their fridge or freezer as much when they knew they wouldn’t be there to eat everything.

“We’re only gone for two games, though, not three or four,” he reminded him. “Maybe buy enough for dinner the next few days and then just stock up on nonperishables. We’ll get new milk and eggs when we’re home.”

Ilya nodded, closing the fridge and leaning over the counter to jot down a few things worth grabbing while he was out. Things that they would either eat immediately or that could last a while before expiring.

“You look nice,” he murmured, glancing up for a brief moment before going back to his list. “Do you have a date with someone else or something?”

Shane huffed, shaking his head. “No, just lunch with Kane today,” he replied. “That’s what I was trying to ask you about a second ago when I got shushed.” Not that he didn’t understand why, of course.

His eyebrows cinched together, trying to remember what he had been trying to ask. Frankly, his mind had just told him to focus on keeping Kovalev from hearing Shane’s voice. “What were you wondering?”

“Parking on sixth street,” Shane clarified. “It’s some burger restaurant, I think, and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to find something nearby or if I should just steal your parking pass and walk a few blocks from the main garage.”

Ilya racked his brain for a moment, trying to think of the places he had eaten downtown in the past. “Ah, is the new place, yes?” he wondered, pretty sure he knew what he was referring to. “It replaced the barbeque restaurant a few months before you moved here. Has its own parking lot as long as you are eating there.”

He tore his list off the notepad and pinning the magnet back onto the front of the fridge, glancing over his shoulder at Shane, who was still staring at the paper. He looked back at it, noticing it was slightly crooked and adjusting it to line up evenly. That helped ease the disgruntled expression Shane was wearing.

“Wow a restaurant downtown with its own parking lot,” he mused pushing off the counter as he stood up. “Must have been a bidding war when the owners sold it.”

Ilya scoffed lightly. “You joke, but there was,” he replied, folding his list up and sliding it into his wallet. “It made the news.”

It was a pretty prime location, after all, always doing good business. If the owners weren’t desperate to move closer to their family, they probably would have stayed for several more years, if not longer.

“Of course it did,” Shane mumbled, shaking his head softly. “Will you be home the rest of the day after going to the store?”

He nodded. “Just going to brush up on some broadcasts from last nights game,” he replied, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Enjoy lunch with Kane, but not as much as you would enjoy it with me, yes?”

“Uh huh,” he teased, pulling back from him and heading towards the garage. “I’ll enjoy it a decent amount but not too much!” he shouted over his shoulder.

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Less than an hour later, Shane lifted a French fry off the edge of his plate, taking a bite of it as he listened to Kane recount some story of how he had spent his day off at the mechanic last week because his car wouldn’t start. A place he had been in the past which, apparently, decided to overcharge him this time.

“I don’t know why, either,” Kane claimed, tapping the saltshaker over his own fries. “It was a dead battery and they’re acting like they had to personally rebuild the car.”

He hummed, watching him oversalt the hell out of his food. “Labor prices?” he suggested. “Could be charging you for the effort it takes to replace it more than the part.”

Shane glanced out at the street where people were walking past the restaurant. The weather was nice, for the middle of November, anyway.

He scowled, shrugging as he finally set the ceramic shaker down. “Who knows with those places, right?” he murmured, picking up his burger and taking a massive bite out of it. “So, wh…th…in…il?”

Shane blinked, grimacing as he tried to talk through a full mouth. “I couldn’t hear any of that,” he told him, huffing a small laugh as he reached for his soda and took a sip of it. “Swallow and try again.”

Kane rolled his eyes, grabbing his own drink for a moment to clear his throat. “I was asking about that interview with you and Ilya,” he clarified, setting the cup down. “It’s soon, right?”

He nodded, lifting his own burger up. “Yeah, day after tomorrow. We’re doing it a few hours before the game,” he told him, biting into his meal.

The bread was sweet, the meat flooded with flavor, and the toppings crunchy. Everything he used to never allow himself to have. A tinge of guilt sometimes remained, if he was being entirely honest, but he could push it away for the most part.

All he had to do was remind himself that any meal which he wanted to eat was something he was allowed to enjoy having. Plus, it helped seeing how enthusiastic Kane was about his own meal. He always was a foodie, so to speak and invited Shane out for lunch more than anyone else did, always wanting to try a new restaurant he found.

“I don’t want to say you’re breaking the team tradition or anything,” Kane prefaced with a teasing tone. “But why the hell did you two agree to sit down with a reporter in the first place?”

The usual broadcasters were bad enough, harping on them before and after a game. But an actual journalist meant nice clothes, studio lighting, cue cards. Everything they tried incredibly hard to avoid.

“Would you believe me if I told you coach actually said please?” he wondered, raising an eyebrow.

He frowned dubiously, shaking his head. “No,” he replied. “No, I would not.” That man barely kept an inside voice unless he was having a good enough day. “Bribery, I would believe. Or threats, maybe."

Shane chuckled, reaching for another fry. “No bribes, just an alarmingly polite offer,” he clarified, raising his hands defensively. “He said there’s a chance it impacts a sponsor that the team is trying to pick up.”

“Now that makes sense,” Kane retorted, eyes sparkling with amusement. “He never misses a chance to exploit us for more money.” It fed his salary too, after all.

He shrugged, not overly bothered by it. He did so few interviews since signing with the Raiders that being asked every once in a while didn’t bother him terribly much. Besides, it was kind of humorous watching Desjourney’s face turn purple while he was trying to remember how to ask for a favor instead of demanding one.

“It’s one hour of my life, not the end of the world or anything,” Shane responded. “Plus, I get out of my skates for an afternoon while you guys are stuck doing drills before the game.”

He snorted lightly. “Now that is a cruel response,” he muttered, eating one of his overly salty fries without noticing it. “I’m very proud of you, Hollzy.”

His lips tugged upwards. “Glad I live up to expectation,” he admitted.

When he first moved to Boston, his head had been filled with fears about being ostracized by the team or respected as player but not as a person. And despite those worries quickly being put to bed, he was quietly relieved each time someone reminded him why those thoughts were so ridiculous in the first place.

“Oh, you surpass them, don’t worry,” Kane admitted, wiping the edge of his mouth with a napkin. “I mean, I always knew you were a great player, but you’ve got way more personality that you let on.”

He wasn't the rigid square everyone acted like he was on social media, including the Metros' own reporters. Shane was actually pretty funny. Kind and reliable, too, of course. But he could tease and joke just as much as any of them. It just took a minute or two for him to get comfortable, which was pretty clear after the first time they officially met.

"It was sort of hard to balance my actual personality while pretending to be the role model everyone wanted," Shane confessed, shrugging. "It's easier, now that you guys don't put that kind of pressure on me."

Kane nodded understandingly. "You were censored; I get it." He reached for another fry, biting off the end of it. "And I'm going to sound selfish, but I'm actually glad the Metros treated you like that, because otherwise you never would have joined our team."

He let out a genuine laugh over the comment, head tilting back slightly for a moment. "Super selfish," he agreed, biting back his smile. "But hey, no one ever said being selfless was a mandatory trait for the Raiders."

"Very true," he agreed, lifting up his soda like it was a mock toast before sipping it.

Despite Shane telling them he didn't care, some of the guys were still a bit cautious when it came to bringing up the Metros. They thought he might get defensive or upset over it if they accidentally made a comment, which was why he always appreciated Kane's bluntness.

It wasn't like the Raiders ever really insulted other teams anyway since they didn't believe in it. But if they would, the Metros would be the team they chose. Not because they had anything against how they played in the past, but because the more they learned about Shane's experience over there, the more they all started to have personal grudges against the team.

"So, how's the apartment hunting going for you?" Shane asked, lifting his burger up but not yet taking another bite. "Still struggling?"

He nodded, shoulders sagging slightly. "It's hard to find somewhere close enough to rink on such short notice," he admitted, sounding annoyed. "I'm going to drag Connors with me next week, though. There's a place on Sunshine Lane that looks promising."

Shane pursed his lips, biting back a laugh. "You're seriously going to live somewhere called Sunshine Lane?" he questioned, the words already coming across humorous to him just in his tone alone.

Kane shot him a glare. "When your landlord abruptly decides to sell the building to a company that plans to put a wrecking ball though your kitchen, you stop caring about the trivial details," he replied seriously. "Besides, think of all the puns I could make. I can literally tell people I'm walking on Sunshine."

That had a snort slipping out before he could help it and he ducked his head down, nodding in amusement. He knew it wasn't a very funny situation. Kane had been a good tenant and loved his apartment for the past six years he had it. It wasn't his fault the landlord wanted to make a quick buck by letting it get torn down.

Still, Shane could appreciate that he was taking it in stride and trying to find the humor in the situation.

“Glad you’re in good spirit,” he mused. “I don’t think I’d be this calm if I was about to be homeless.”

Kane shrugged. “I’ve got like two more weeks to figure it out,” he replied. “Besides, I wouldn’t really be homeless unless our entire team suddenly dropped dead. Any of them would let me crash on their couch if I asked. Some already offered.”

He just didn’t feel the need to put them in that position, yet. He could probably find something before the actual move out day came and if not, he would cross that bridge when he got to it. No need to stress until he truly had to.

Shane nodded slightly. “Huh, I didn’t actually consider that,” he confessed, almost embarrassed the thought hadn’t crossed his mind.

Sure, if Kane asked he would gladly give him the spare key to his own apartment, but he didn’t realize anyone already offered up their own like that. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised, though. They were all supportive when Kane came into practice late, grumbling about having to find a new place.

“That’s because your subconscious is still stuck thinking your team is working against you; it’ll catch up, eventually,” he told him, watching him furrow his brows slightly. “What? I took like three weeks of a psychology class in university before I got drafted and dropped out.”

Shane gave him a puzzled look, brain fighting to catch up. Both with his assessment and the revelation that Kane used to take psych courses. “You were a psychology major before the NHL?” he questioned.

Kane shrugged. “I had to have a plan in case I didn’t get picked up,” he replied. “But it worked out, so I left. Thank God, too. I didn’t want to have to take stats.”

He huffed, finishing off his French fries. “God, I feel like I’m playing catch up 24/7 around you guys,” he confessed, shaking his head in mild frustration. “I wish your Wikipedia pages included this shit.”

He understood it, of course. They had bonded over years of playing beside each other and he couldn’t expect to just miraculously know everything there was to learn about them just because they accepted him as a Raider. It was still difficult sometimes, though, knowing he could only hear about their stories after they had already happened.

“Wait- did you seriously read our Wikipedia pages before joining the team?” Kane questioned, laughing.

“Of course I did!” he exclaimed defensively. “I study anyone I’m going to meet.”

He did it before joining the Metros, and again when he played the All-Star game. It helped him understand the people around him better. Or it was supposed to. Clearly, the information

was a bit lacking.

Kane's laughter grew louder but wasn't mocking by any means. "I'm flattered you bothered to take the time," he admitted, finally composing himself. "Was mine interesting?" He didn't really Google himself that often, surprisingly.

Shane shrugged. "Wasn't boring or anything," he replied. "It didn't mention you dropping out of college, though."

He crumpled up his napkin and tossed it onto his empty plate. "Well, I doubt it was exactly a top priority on a page about my stats on the ice," he reminded him. "But if you want the rundown on any of us, just ask. We don't keep secrets or anything."

Not from each other, anyway. From the public, they kept plenty. But the moment someone actually joined the team; they also joined a code of silence that became a safe space for anything and everything—mental and physical health, family problems, other burdens they weren't sure how to cope with.

Hell, if one of them needed help covering up a crime, he doubted anyone would refuse.

"I know you guys would open up, it's just sort of weird to ask you to," Shane explained, scrunching his nose. "I'm not familiar with a team being so…authentic."

It was a word he had never really considered using when referring to the Raiders before but also felt like the only one that was accurate, too. They put on a pretty convincing act but around each other they were more genuine than he ever could have imagined.

"Well, try to get used to it," Kane suggested, kicking his foot lightly under the table. "Because there's no way coach is going to let you go now that he's got his claws in you."

He tugged his lips to the side. "There's worse things in life than job security," he joked.

Kane nodded in agreement before he tilted his head towards the check that a waiter had dropped at the end of the table. "Did we ask to split it?" he asked. "I don't remember them checking with us."

Shane plucked the check off the table, flipping it open. "They didn't," he responded in mild annoyance, already glancing around to see if he could find their waiter to have him correct the error.

Before he could wave the man down, though, Kane was already reaching over to snatch the bill out of his hands. He frowned, watching him enclose his credit card in it and prop it back on the end of the table again.

"I've got it," he assured him, shrugging. "It's not like we had a twelve-course meal or something." Just a few burgers and fries. Both of which were worth every penny after the rough week they.

Shane just stared at him securitizing him for a moment. "See, this is why you confuse me," he admitted, leaning back in his chair. "The team teases you about being cheap, then you

cover the bill without asking or tip stupidly well whenever possible."

It was contradictory, to say the least. And he honestly couldn't tell if it was intentional or not.

The waiter came back, grabbing and disappearing with the check for a moment to run the credit card. "Eh, it's more of a running joke than anything," he clarified, propping his elbows on the table. "Plus, there's a big difference between covering lunch and paying the tab for the bill we run up after a night out."

"Fair enough, I guess," Shane murmured, aware those bills could easily break a thousand dollars. "You know I'm going to pay you back though, right?"

He scoffed in disagreement, maybe even in offense. "Not happening," he replied, shaking his head firmly.

He could respect the gesture of it, of course, but truly didn't care about a few dollars. He had invited Shane to lunch, after all. If anyone should cover the check, it was him.

"I'll literally sneak the money into your cubby, if I have to," he insisted, hating to take advantage of anyone or be indebted. Especially not a teammate. Maybe that was just because Mitty still owed him upwards of two-hundred dollars after borrowing a bit of cash here and there without ever repaying it.

"Try it," Kane dared, lifting his chin. "I'll find a way to slip it back into yours before practice ends tomorrow."

Shane rolled his eyes, somehow believing him despite how ridiculous it was to actually deny being paid back. The waiter came back, dropping their copy of the check-off and Kane crumpled it up before he got the chance to grab it, just in case he tried to double check how much his half of the meal cost.

Huffing, Shane raised his hands in defeat. "Fine, be generous," he conceded with faux irritation. "Next lunch is still on me."

Kane hummed, nodding in agreement. "Now *that*, I'll allow," he told him.

Their chairs scraped across the patio as they stood up, getting ready to leave and Shane reached for his soda, finishing it off and setting it back down. He gestured towards the exit, following Kane out of the restaurant and back to the lot where their cars were parked beside each other's.

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The day after next was the last game they had in Boston before leaving the following morning bright and early. Shane was already packed, if he was honest. A few shirts tucked away in a suitcase he left in the corner of the bedroom to avoid having to pull his stuff together after the game left him exhausted.

If the interview didn't achieve that first, of course.

He knew, from the hesitation coach showed when asking, that it would be bad. Not one of those quick ones that reporters clamored for in the hallways after games, but the sit-down kind with proper lighting and nice clothes.

A while back he would have accepted without complaint and sat through the entire thing with a smile on his face the entire time. These days, however, he felt a bit more claustrophobic sitting in a studio as someone tried to touch him to adjust the microphone hooked to him.

Shane pulled away from the woman, a slight grimace on his face. “I can fit it, thanks,” he murmured, fussing with it for a moment or two before she seemed to accept it enough to leave him alone.

Blowing out a breath, he shifted in his chair. It was one of those deep seats, soft blue cushions made of velvet that were meant to be comfortable. It wasn’t.

“Just relax,” Ilya murmured to him, equally stiff sitting in the chair beside him but doing a better job of covering it. “They can’t hold us hostage; we have a game tonight.”

In just under four hours, technically. That left plenty of time to be grilled by media, in Shane’s opinion. At least they weren’t at practice, getting winded from running drills all afternoon.

They had done that yesterday, though, after accommodating Kovalev’s abrupt schedule change. It left them at the rink until nearly ten at night. Shane blamed it for the reason he was so tired, wishing desperately he had time for a nap in-between the interview and tonight’s game.

“Anything specific we need to avoid?” Shane asked him quietly, angling his body towards him to try to ensure no one would overhear them.

He shrugged. “Same things we usually do,” he replied. Their relationship, of course. The teams’ personal secrets and anything that directly contradicted the way the press viewed them, too.

Shane hummed softly to himself, fiddling with his thumbs. It was his first real sit-down interview as a Raider, despite the media teams and his mom’s attempts to get him to do extra press. Usually, he was just answering a couple of post-game questions.

“I feel like I’m gonna slip back into old habits,” he admitted under his breath, sounding reluctant to even imagine it. “Media training is hard to forget.” Especially when he had been going through it from such a young age. The moment the attention was on him, so was a smile, authentic or not.

“I’ll just kick you if I see you starting to be a people pleaser,” Ilya retorted, only half joking.

They both glanced around a bit more, getting impatient. They had already been in the building for an hour, mostly just waiting to get started. Ilya was hungry, frankly, the large breakfast he had seemed like a distant memory at this point.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” a woman told them, shrugging off her blazer and passing it off to someone whose name she didn’t know. She set down her cup of coffee, extending her hand. “I’m Shannon Williams.”

Shane shook her hand for a moment, giving her a small smile. “I know,” he replied, having already gotten her name from Desjourney as part of his conditions for doing this.

He had spent the past few nights watching some of the interviews she had done with other teams in league, including the Admirals and Guardians. She was, overall, a pretty decent reporter. Good at getting to the root of things, even at the expense of player’s not wanting to disclose certain details.

“Nice to meet you,” Ilya murmured, also shaking her hand and watching her sit down to get comfortable in her own chair. “Is good coffee shop,” he added, gesturing to her cup whose label he recognized.

She nodded, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear. “It is, yeah,” she agreed, crossing her legs. “I usually stop and grab a cup midday when I’m lagging a little.” She glanced over her shoulder as someone brought her some cards with questions on them. “Are you both ready to start?”

Shane nodded, eyes flitting to the cameraman. “Go for it,” he told her, watching as the red light atop it began to blink.

She glanced at the cards in her hands, shuffling through them for a moment. It was clear that she was used to being on camera and unafraid to force the editing team to cut out wasted time. That was the good thing about this being taped instead of given live, Shane supposed—he wouldn’t have to worry about screwing up without any chance of taking his words back.

“It’s been a little while since you traded in your blue jersey for a gold one, effectively sending the entire hockey community into a panic,” Shannon began, looking towards Shane. “Did you anticipate or intend to cause so much commotion?”

He clasped his hands together, posture staying tall despite the chair making it easy to slide back into comfortably. “I definitely knew it was going to be shocking but I didn’t expect everyone to be so opinionated on it, no,” he confessed.

“It’s safe to say there were a lot of thoughts being thrown around,” she noted lightly. “In past interviews you’ve clarified your former team wasn’t very supportive about your decision to move to Boston, but Ilya is there anything you want to say about the Raiders reaction? How did you all come to hear the news?”

He thought about it carefully for a moment. “We found out like everyone else, though headlines and twitter posts,” he confessed.

Shannon nodded slowly, humming curiously. “Coach didn’t give you any indication that Shane would be signing with your team, then?” she clarified. “It must have been pretty easy to feel blindsided by that news. Was there any concern about the decision or perhaps judgement?”

Ilya shook his head. “No.”

She blinked for a moment, pausing as she waited for him to say something else or elaborate in some way. He just blinked back, his one-word response seeming like the only one he intended to give. Pursing her lips, she glanced back down at the cards again, shuffling through them for a moment.

“The Raiders are notorious for having closed practices, even when traveling for games,” she prefaced, switching gears. “How did those first few meetings go, trying to get to know so many new people after having a rather consistent group of teammates for such a long time? Was there any tension or uncertainty walking into the Boston arena?”

Shane hesitated, feeling a bit trapped by the question. If he told her there was, she probably would dig deeper into something untrue. But if he told her they had welcomed him with ease, it wouldn’t align with what most people considered their typical behavior. Neither was a great option.

“There’s always a bit of uncertainty at the start of a new season, even with the same team. Players come and go all the time,” Shane reminded her. “I just tried my best to be as open with them as possible right away and start building the kind of trust that’s needed in a game like this.”

“And would you say the guys were receptive to that honesty, Ilya?” she asked. “Or were you hesitant given your relationship with Shane?”

He shook his head a bit. “No, not really,” he admitted.

Again, he stopped after a rather short answer. This time, though, the reporter didn’t allow him to get away with it and made a small gesture with her hand, urging him to elaborate on the comment, much to his disappointment.

“I may not have considered Shane a friend, but talent recognizes talent,” Ilya told her, shrugging. “I have always known he was an amazing player, and I respected him as a rival long before he became my teammate. The guys feel the same as I do.”

Shannon smiled softly, as though she liked the answer. Ilya wasn’t known to make sentimental statements often, so she knew it would make a good headline. Their dynamics were already going to pull the attention of every current viewer she had and probably double it after this released without the marketing, they planned to ramp up before releasing it.

“As closed off as your team tends is, usually, we have been able to notice a few instances where Shane seems to be speaking Russian around Varkov, Kovalev, and yourself during games or fan interactions,” she added, leaning in slightly. “Is that something you’ve been teaching him? If so, is there any specific reason why and do other members of your team also speak the language?”

Shane wet his bottom lip, her question towards Ilya catching him off guard. It was a pretty normal thing to ask about him, he supposed. He had only lived in Boston for a short while,

after all. But he forgot, or maybe just didn't realize at all, that the general public wasn't aware the rest of the team had been learning Russian for years.

Most of them were able to carry a conversation or at the very least understand their Russian players, if nothing else. It was the reason Ilya was so cautious about using it at the rink around him, terrified to let a term of endearment slip like he used in private or when they were in public but sheltered enough to let it slip.

"He's been picking it up, yes," Ilya admitted, nodding. "I wouldn't say any of us teach him, it's more of a- what do you call it? Experienced learning?"

"Immersion?" Shannon offered, head tilted curiously.

"Yes, that," he agreed, tipping his head in appreciation for the word that had been alluding him. "We use enough words here and there that they become part of the conversation even if no one really knows how it happened. It's not speaking Russian so much as speaking Raiders, if that makes sense."

She chuckled and Shane felt something strange tugging at his heart as he heard Ilya lie, the blatant dishonesty so different than how honest the Metros had to be with the news. He had been learning Russian for years at this point and technically *did* have lessons with Kovalev and Varkov while picking them up from their houses or helping them build the random furniture they bought at IKEA.

The deceit felt weird to him, but at the same time, he realized he really didn't care if the media knew that or not. Or if they knew that team all spoke it or knew Marlow could even read Russian after years of rooming with Ilya and stealing books off his shelf at home.

"It sounds like you guys have a pretty unique group of guys," she commented, voice tinged with interest, like she was searching for an angle. "Do all those personalities ever clash, either in the locker room or on ice?"

Shane shook his head. "No, we're all really good at reading each other during a game, I think," he told her. "There's no jealousy or anything."

"None?" Shannon questioned, sounding and looking surprised. "I know the Raiders are known for being very collaborative and this season especially you guys are practically gifting each other goals, but there has to be some sort of emotion you feel when you're not the one scoring."

He stared at her blankly, shrugging. "Pride?" he retorted with a scoff, like it was the obvious answer. "What else would I feel?"

"I- well, I don't know, maybe a bit of disappointment that it couldn't have been your goal?" she suggested, unsure. "That's certainly easy enough to understand, especially in a competitive environment."

"Competitive with the *other* teams in the league, not each other," Shane corrected. "I've scored sixteen goals in the first twenty-four games of the season and I'm sure by the time this

airs, it'll be higher. Assisting my teammates doesn't mean I don't get the puck, I'm just not stupid enough to hog it and try to do everything myself."

Ilya kicked his foot softly, the tone of his voice a bit too rough compared to how he usually acted. It was a bit strange, hearing Shane sound so annoyed or baffled when he had been worried about falling back into his old habits by tacking a *'ma'am'* to the end of his answers and smiling too much.

He didn't hate it, though. In fact, he would probably let him keep going if it weren't for the fact that he knew once they left the studio Shane would have a small freak out after realizing he spoke a bit too harshly.

Shannon cleared her throat lightly, fussing with her cards for a moment. "So, um- it's certainly true that your stats at this point so far are some of the highest of your career, only outdone by your record breaking fourth season with the Metros," she noted, trying to get back on track. "Would you say it's been luck or some way of trying to prove your worth to the new team? Or is it something entirely different?"

Shane ran his thumb over his knuckles, thinking about it for a moment. "I wouldn't call it luck, no," he replied, shaking his head. "We're just *really* damn good at what we do." And they enjoyed doing it, too, which made all the difference in his opinion.

Ilya shifted in his seat slightly, not quite uncomfortable but easily able to notice the way Shane was eyeing the exit like he might contemplate leaving. That was always an option, after all. A great way to solidify the whole cruel, standoffish attitude that they loved to portray themselves with.

But he also worried that letting Shane do that might cause a problem with Desjourney. This was a favor to their coach, after all. An attempt at getting some sponsor to invest some extra money. As much as Ilya didn't care about it, he knew they'd both get an earful if they left before the cameras cut.

"I'm sure a lot of people will be glad to hear you speak so highly of the Raiders, but that bond you've been forming with them doesn't seem to be very well accepted by the rest of the league right now," Shannon added. "In fact, we know from some footage during your time being mic'd up that it's a source of conflict."

He huffed slightly, rubbing his temple for a moment as he nodded. "I guess so," he replied without much effort, clasping his hands together again loosely.

"Despite some technical problems that occurred later in the game, your mic did pick up some words exchanged during a scuffle," she reminded him. "It was implied that your jersey didn't really make you part of the team. What was going through your head when you heard that?"

Anger, if he was being honest. He knew the team shared that sentiment, too. But she had very conveniently chosen to ignore the part where Carmichael acknowledged the guy who said it was an asshole and he figured bringing it up wouldn't go over very well. Not with his mom or with Desjourney, anyway. The Raiders would probably love to hear his unfiltered comments.

He pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I think people are just so used to seeing my in blue that they can’t accept that I’ve moved on from that part of my career,” he admitted. “They like to act like I made some rash decision but it’s not true.”

“It’s understandable for other teams to still be getting used to this, considering how strong your Montreal roots have been for the past ten years,” she replied, tilting her head slightly. “How long do you think it’s going to take before this really starts to set in for everyone?”

Shane just shrugged. “I don’t really know how long it’s going to take for them to understand, considering I’ve been pretty clear about it,” he answered honestly, voice tinged with annoyance. “But uh- if that’s how they want to see me, then it’s not my job to fix their perception.”

“Ilya, do you think you or your team has had any impact on how the public views Shane lately?” Shannon questioned, realizing she had been neglecting his presence a little. Which, he frankly seemed to prefer.

He blinked once, then twice, feeling a little defensive if not offended over her question. “You are implying what, exactly?” he replied.

He wasn’t sure what she was really saying, but it seemed clear that she was trying to point him in a specific direction. Probably trying to get him to admit the Raiders the reason Shane seemed to be acting differently the past few weeks.

“I only mean to say that Shane is known as a rather stable player. He doesn’t start fights or decline press very often,” she elaborated gently. “Your team on the other hand is known to do both and now he’s also been exhibiting those patterns. Is it possible your teams’ unusual… *dynamics* have been rubbing off on him?”

His lips twisted into something almost disgusted. “Shane acts however he wants because his behavior isn’t being dictated anymore,” he retorted, shaking his head. “We don’t tell him who to talk to or rebuke him when he chooses not to.”

“You’re saying the way he acted with the Metros was a bit more restrained because that’s what management wanted from him?” she summarized, brows raised with curiosity.

“*I am saying* that we are hockey players not puppets,” Ilya clarified, enunciating slowly. “Shane is capable of making his own decisions and we will support his choice to refuse reporters whenever he wants to just like we will support and protect him on the ice if things get aggressive. We do that for anyone on our team; it’s our job.”

It was Shane turn to nudge his shoe against Ilya’s, glancing at him for a moment with an expression that he attempted to keep relatively indiscernible. Still, there was something in it that he could see even if the cameras didn’t quite know what to pick up.

“The Raiders *dynamics*, as you put it, are just fine,” Shane told her, look back. “We simply choose to prioritize each other over your expectations of us in a game that demands we don’t. Of course, our actions will be viewed as defiance when no one else pushes back because they’re too afraid of the press.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ilya taking a breath as he tried to reel his own emotions back in. It wasn't the first time he had snapped a reporter and probably wouldn't be his last, either. But Shane couldn't say he blamed him for it. She was digging for drama, trying to figure out how their team functioned when the Raiders had purposefully spent years trying to keep the press from understanding it.

"Surely you must admit some of the behavior exhibited by the team over the years has been a little more than disrespectful," Shannon pressed, lowering her cards.

Shane shook his head in disagreement. "I fail to see how refusing to answer your questions is viewed as more disrespectful than the ones you're choosing to ask us," he confessed, shrugging. "My job is to represent Boston on the ice and make the city proud, which *I do*. It is not, however, my job to dance around your studio and entertain you at the expense of me and my teammates personal lives."

Ilya's lips tugged up, a small smirk gracing his face just prominent to be noticeable. He couldn't have said it any better, even if he tried. And that was saying something, since he had already imagined his own choice of words before Shane beat him to it.

She glanced at Ilya, clearing her throat. "I believe this has proven my point," she joked weakly, expression faltering.

He tilted his head to the side slightly. "Oh?" he wondered with curiosity. "What point was that again? That we are, what, brutish and cruel? Perhaps undeserving of public platforms just because we do not enjoy jumping through your endless hoops?"

Shannon shook her head, looking like she was malfunctioning slightly as he turned it back on her. "N-no, I wasn't saying either of those things," she clarified. "Just that you- well, as whole your team is…"

Ilya gestured with his hand prompting her further. "We are…?" he repeated, giving her the chance to finish her thought. "Go on Miss Williams, use your words. Believe me, we are more accepting of your criticism than you are of ours."

He glanced at Shane, as if to see if that last comment was a bit too far in his eyes. But he seemed to be waiting with equal curiosity to see if she could come up with a response when put on the spot. It wasn't unusual to walk away from their reporters, of course, but he had never interrogated one back in this way before.

Frankly, he thought it was about time one of them faced the same level of scrutiny they had been putting athlete through for years.

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The day the interview was released Hayden was at JJ's house. His kids had watched a musical the previous night and then promptly spent the following hours before their bedtime singing the wrong lyrics over and over until they were so engrained in Hayden's brain that he forgot the real ones.

Waking up hadn't deterred them, either. Which was why he felt pretty strongly about his decision to change their meeting to JJ's house instead of his own, which was currently an out of tune, way off Broadway act.

"I love your kids, Hayden, truly," JJ prefaced, passing him a cold drink and bottle opener. "But I don't think I could have one, let alone four without ripping my beautiful hair out of my skull a few times every day."

He wrapped his hand around the cold bottle. "The good parts outweigh the bad, but they definitely drive you a bit crazy," he admitted, popping the lid off as the beer fizzled slightly.

JJ covered the lid with his palm, pulling it off the counter and tossing it in the trash. "You sure you weren't already crazy when you decided to have them?" he replied, brow raised skeptically. "I mean, you have suffered *a lot* of brain damage from work."

Hayden chuckled, shaking his head. "Fuck off," he muttered, sipping his drink. "I have less brain damage than you and half the idiots on our team."

He leaned against the kitchen counter, shrugging. "If you say so," he responded skeptically.

He was pretty sure there wasn't a single one of them that didn't have at least a few concussions, if not more serious conditions, as a result of some rougher hits. It was his favorite past time, though, to blame anything and everything he could on it.

"So, how pissed off do you think the guys will be if I start asking for an extra two practices each week?" Hayden wondered cautiously, glancing down at the calendar on his phone.

"I think for your safety, you should have your own room when we fly to Florida," JJ replied earnestly, the idea already sounding like a bad idea. "When would there even be time for them?"

Hayden wrinkled his nose. "Good point," he mumbled quietly, contemplating it as he tried to look over his schedule and figure out how he could move things around.

It was already nearly full. There were normal practices, flights, home and away games mixed with the twins' school talent show, his son's dentist appoint, or Amber's pediatrician visit keeping his time occupied.

He had already been busy enough that his entire life was planned out, even on his days away from the rink. But now, after getting promoted to captain, he couldn't even find the time to eat breakfast unless stale muffins scarfed down in the car at red lights counted.

"Maybe we can extend our current practices but keep the days the same," JJ suggested, sipping his own beer as he pulled out of his phone to glance at his calendar. "Not that you'd be praised for that either."

He huffed, well aware that regardless of how he managed the schedule, the guys would still have complaints. "I'm trying to help us win," he reminded him. "How come I'm the bad guy for forcing them to do the job they get paid millions for?"

He shrugged. “Captain is a thankless position,” he murmured, phone clattering against the table as he set it down.

Hayden hummed in agreement. That was one way to put it. He might have taken it a bit further and called it a bit of a rip-off, in all regards.

He got a bit more power, perhaps some respect to go with it. But he also suddenly became their scapegoat for everything and had to plan everything when he would prefer to just go along with whatever someone else came up with.

“If we’re extending practices we should start two hours earlier and leave an hour later,” he told him. “Or instead of adding two normal practices we can add an extra-long one.”

JJ shook his head, waving off that idea. “No, there’s no way that’ll go over well with the guys,” he replied. “Let’s just start with longer hours and if that’s not fixing things we can add more days.”

They weren’t exactly in the trenches just yet, but they could definitely be heading in that direction if they didn’t get their shit together quickly. People had been joking that the team flipped a coin to choose whether they actually wanted to play or not each night. And it wasn’t that much of an exaggeration.

They were acting more like one of those sporadic teams with amazing wins and dreadful losses instead of presenting their usual stability. As much as it would piss some guys off to need even longer practices, it was necessary.

“I’ll double check the hours don’t overlap with any press or anything, then let everyone know,” Hayden told him. “You’ll pretend it’s a great idea, right?” He needed at least one of his teammates to be on his side.

He nodded. “I’m not thrilled over it, but we’ve gotta do whatever works,” he murmured. “I don’t want to play another game like the one last week.”

Hayden grimaced at the thought of how badly they played, losing the puck and running into each other, tripping and missing shots when the net was literally empty. Social media had been having a field day

“That’s not happening again anytime soon,” Hayden insisted like he simply wouldn’t allow it. “I’m genuinely shocked they didn’t throw tomatoes with how humiliating it was.”

No matter how supportive his wife was, assuring him every team had bad days, he felt responsible for the loss. All of their recent losses, actually. It was his job to keep things running smoothly, yet he kept falling short.

JJ hummed in agreement, feeling upset all over again, just thinking about it. He took another sip of his drink, his phone chiming on the counter. “Oh, speak of humiliating,” he added, voice tinged with annoyance as he pushed it a bit further away as if trying to distance himself from it.

“What?” he questioned, sitting up straighter in his chair so he could lean over and look at his phone. “Shane’s interview is out?”

JJ glanced at him, brows furrowed. “You knew he was doing one?” he asked, caught off guard by how casual his captain looked over the notification popping up.

Hayden blinked for a moment, temporarily forgetting that he had been trying to keep his friendship with Shane a bit quiet lately. He figured they all knew he was still talking to him as he tried to keep them from having the chance to comment on it. But maybe they really did believe he had cut off his best friend.

“Yeah, I mean he’s my friend, JJ,’ he told him. “He was yours once, too.”

He let out a small huff, not quite as bitter as it used to sound. “That was before he embarrassed all of us by walking away,” he replied. “Not to mention insulting us on live television and doing a complete 180 on his personality.”

It was hard not to feel betrayed by Shane’s abrupt exit. But even if he had, for whatever reason felt compelled to sign with Boston, the way he acted after moving there caused enough extra damage. He was going out with them in public, drinking, partying, doing things he complained about doing with the Metros.

“He didn’t insult,” Hayden defended. “We *did* call him a traitor and Comeau *did* refuse to speak to him. It sucked hearing him tell people that, but if we didn’t want him saying it maybe we shouldn’t have said it in the first place.”

He looked at his friend like he had grown a second head. “Are you actually defending him?” he questioned in disbelief.

“I shouldn’t have to, but apparently I am,” he retorted with a weak shrug. “Shane left us, alright? I get that it hurt and we were all shocked, but he’s happy in Boston. If you cared about him, that would be more important than your pride.”

Hayden was stunned, too, at first. But he was trying to get over it. And he liked to think that after clearing the air in Boston, he and Shane were actually closer than before.

He was certainly lighter during conversations over the phone, likely due to the amount of laughter in the background. He was honestly glad that his best friend had such a strong team supporting him, despite what the others thought, even if it wasn’t the one he expected him to sign with.

JJ pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, shaking his head for a moment in fatigue. Most days, he just tried to pretend Shane didn’t exist anymore. “Of course, I care about him,” he replied. “But Boston is- it’s the Raiders hometown. Out of every team he could have picked, why that one?”

Hayden wasn’t sure. “I don’t, man,” he admitted, shrugging weakly. “He called it a change of pace but he’s the only one who really knows, I think.”

Lily was always a factor that sprung to mind. It was actually his first thought when he first heard the news, but he had been so blindsided he didn't have the chance to ask. Then, things had gotten so tense that he and Shane weren't talking at all.

Even after reconciling, he was a bit worried about broaching the subject in case he was way off base and ruined their progress, so he kept his theory to himself.

JJ tapped his fingers against the side of the cold bottle, like he was reluctantly considering Hayden's words. "Still, an interview in an actual studio is weird," he muttered, even though he only saw the thumbnail of it. "Isn't he like, all about refusing the press these days or something?"

"Like you wouldn't avoid it too, if you were given the option," he countered with a knowing glare. "I'd love to get out of it. Hell, we could start closing our practices off, too. I wouldn't complain." He'd probably cheer; they all would.

"Not the point I was making, and you know it," he murmured, sipping his beer as he dragged his phone off the counter and unlocked it. "I just can't understand what's going on with him anymore."

He didn't like feeling so out of touch when he used to be able to read Shane so well. He thought he could, anyway. But after that sudden announcement in the locker room, whatever illusion of friendship he imagined seemed to shatter.

"You could always, you know, reach out?" Hayden suggested, the rational option seeming a bit tough to comprehend for some reason. "He'd pick up the phone."

If he was near it, anyway. He tended to keep pretty busy, these days.

JJ clicked his tongue, shaking his head. "No, he wouldn't," he assumed. "I was too cruel." Both on the ice and off it. He didn't know which would have hurt him worse, but both were bad.

His shoulders slouched and Hayden tugged his lips to the side. "Trust me, JJ," he insisted firmly. "He would answer if you actually wanted to talk to him."

He knew that despite acting completely fine with it, Shane still missed the feeling of friendship he tricked himself into believing the Metros offered him. And Hayden would be the first to tell him not to fall for it if Mitty or Drapeau started reaching out.

But JJ was another story.

JJ really was his friend; he just didn't know how to cope with Shane's absence any other way beside pretending he no longer existed. A shitty mistake on his part, but human error influenced by emotion more than any actual disdain for Shane.

"Even after I called him a fucking traitor?" JJ questioned, his own words sounding so harsh. He wanted to grimace at the thought of Shane hearing them, let alone thinking he meant it.

“Hey, I didn’t say he’d forgive you right away,” he clarified, raising his hands defensively. “He definitely didn’t excuse the way I acted, but we’re getting past it.” Slowly and steadily through more conversations and plans to meet up next time they played against each other.

“And that’s working?” he wondered skeptically, a bit worried that if he did call Shane, it would only result in him bringing up his recent and rather foul behavior before hanging up.

Hayden nodded. “I think so, yeah,” he admitted. “This version of him is- he’s different but in a good way. I feel like it might be who he’s always been, deep down, and we were just holding him back from it.”

He wished, pretty badly, that he might have been able to notice sooner how miserable Shane was. Maybe he could have straightened the team out, gotten them to lay off their quips about his diet or his personal choices, and kept him as their captain for a few more years. But even if he had managed it, he still didn’t think Shane would be nearly as happy as he was now.

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Later that night, Hayden had checked off most of the items on his to do list for the day. He had sorted out the scheduling mess, picked up the dry-cleaning Jackie requested he grab, stopped by the grocery store and helped her make dinner.

He even found a bit of time to spare so he could watch the interview Shane gave with Ilya, folding the laundry in the living room as he did. It was, well, interesting, to say the least. Not at all the kind of thing he had expected from his friend and *exactly* the kind of thing he expected from Rozanov.

Hayden laid another of Jade’s shirts on top of the stack he had been folding before reaching for another, his attention split between the laundry and his best friends growing frustration over the reporter’s questions. He could admit they were pretty accusatory, the kind asked with a clear motive behind them.

Ilya was about to respond to one of her questions about the team when Hayden’s phone froze. He frowned, glancing back at it as he spotted Shane’s name at the top of it. He reached for it, answering.

“Hey, I was just watching your interview,” he noted, setting another shirt down on the pile. “That reporter was a real piece of work, huh?”

On the other end of the phone, Shane’s huff came across loud and clear. “Yeah, the afternoon didn’t go quite as well as any of us hoped,” he admitted, wrinkling his nose. “How much of it did you see?”

“The first few minutes, so far,” he replied, turning some socks inside out and trying to find the one it matched. “Why? Is there some part of it that I shouldn’t see or something?”

He didn’t think it would be the kind of interview where they brought up the Metros, considering it was supposed to focus on Shane’s adjustment to the Raiders. But aside from the team, he couldn’t think of anything his best friend would be worried about him watching.

There was a slight hesitation. “No, no it’s all fine, mostly,” Shane told him, sounding a little uncertain in his own belief. “I didn’t call to talk about it, anyway.”

“Oh. Why’d you call, then?” he wondered, eyes glancing over the array of mismatched socks as he kept searching for the right one. He honestly had no idea how six people could have so many.

“I uh- I got a call from JJ earlier today,” he admitted, voice tinged with hesitance. “And he didn’t exactly say it, but I had a suspicion that you were the reason for it.”

He couldn’t fathom anyone else on the team talking him into it since Hayden was the only was he was still in contact with and after some of the stuff JJ said and did he also struggled to believe he would just decide to call him on his own. Especially because JJ was known to prefer texting unless someone insisted on actually talking on the phone.

“I might have…suggested it when I was at his house earlier today,” Hayden confessed after a moment, grimacing to himself. “Are you pissed at me?”

He didn’t respond right away, but when he did, he didn’t sound angry. “No, I was just caught off guard, is all,” he replied. “We actually talked for like an hour.” It was the first time in months they had really spoken to each other.

“And?” he questioned with a tentative amount of hope in his voice. “Do you think you’re going to be able to work things out?”

God, he wasn’t sure at what point the three of them had their friendship start to resemble a group of middle school girl’s drama, but he really hated it. He didn’t want to talk to them individually and hide conversations or mend their arguments. He just wanted things to be normal again. Well, whatever the new normal was with Shane living in Boston.

“I can’t immediately get over it,” he admitted, wishing he could. “But he apologized and that’s definitely a step in the right direction.”

“I know it’s not an excuse, but he really does feel horrible,” Hayden assured him as he went back to sorting the laundry. “He probably would have called sooner if he wasn’t so afraid that you wouldn’t pick up. He hates rejection.”

Which made it all the more ironic that their rift had stemmed from JJ rejecting Shane’s attempt to leave the team on good terms. Not that he wanted to bring that back up just when they were finally starting to move on.

“I know he does,” Shane admitted earnestly. “Thanks for talking him into it, anyway.”

“Is this the part where I say, *‘that’s what friends are for’* or something?” he joked, hearing him chuckle weakly on the other side of the phone. “I don’t think I’ve ever actually had the chance to use it, before.”

“I think we can skip that part,” he replied. “I’ll keep in mind your desire to recite cheesy one liners, though. Maybe you can use that material next time you come to Boston.”

“One can only ever dream,” Hayden deadpanned a little too effectively. “So, back to that interview of yours—why did you sound so concerned about how much of it I’ve watched?”

He might have been several hundreds of miles away, but he could still recognize his tone, even over the phone. It was the one he got whenever he wanted to avoid the topic or try to inconspicuously gleam a little bit of information.

Shane huffed softly. “I wasn’t concerned,” he lied poorly. “I was just, you know, asking. It’s not even that interesting of an interview.”

Now *that*, he didn’t believe for a single second. He had been very enthralled up until the moment his phone rang, breaking his concentration on the video.

“Uh huh,” he hummed dubiously, not believing him for a single moment. “What’s the real reason?”

“Okay, fine, I just don’t want you to judge me for some of the stuff I say towards the end of it,” Shane confessed. “It wasn’t my finest moment or anything.”

In fact, some might actually call it his worst, he was pretty sure. If someone with absolutely no information on the NHL watched it, they would probably assume he was a rookie in dire need of media training and anger management classes.

Hayden’s expression grew more intrigued. “Like what?” he questioned curiously. “You were already inadvertently calling her an idiot for some of those questions. I especially liked the disgusted tone you had when she was asking how you feel watching the other players score goals.”

“It was a stupid question,” Shane retorted defensively. “And that’s actually probably one of my better responses, I think.”

“Seriously?” he wondered. “What were some of the worse ones, then?”

He cleared his throat, a little uncomfortable. “I’m not positive or anything, but I might have crossed a line when I said she interviewed people as a way to compensate for her own inability to produce anything worth being praised for.”

Hayden paused, blinking before he let out a harsh laugh of disbelief. He honestly couldn’t imagine what kind of question someone could ask to make Shane respond with that kind of insult but was definitely looking forward to watching the rest of the interview to find out.

“You actually said that?” he asked in shock, sitting down on the couch to process it better. “*And* they left it in?”

“Apparently!” Shane exclaimed, scrubbing his face. “I swear I thought they’d take it out before it aired. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have said it. But it can’t be that bad, right? They would have cut it if it was going too far.”

Hayden was mostly silent, pursing his lips as he tried to think of the best way to answer that question. “Uh- no, it’s pretty bad,” he answered honestly. “But I- wow, I’m face timing you.”

He frowned to himself. “Huh? You’re wha—”

Before Shane could protest, Hayden had already hung up on him and recalled. He was pretty sure he could already envision his expression but needed to see his face after that declaration, just to be certain.

Shane picked up, standing in front of the nearest white wall for some reason. He was already glaring at him in annoyance over being cut off so abruptly, but Hayden didn’t care. He just leaned his phone against the laundry basket, trying to hide his own amusement over the situation.

“So, you were telling me about how you insulted the hell out that reporter?” he summed up, gesturing for him to elaborate. “Continue.”

Share rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean to, she just kept asking worse and worse questions,” he clarified. “Every time Ilya or I tried to get back on track, she’d bring something else up that pissed us both off.”

“What did Ilya say about it?” Hayden asked, still trying to get used to using his first name around his friend. “He’s pretty used to having his interviews go off the rails, isn’t he?”

There were compilation videos about him snapping at journalists, after all. Some of which were actually pretty fair or funny. And he was pretty sure if he actually searched for it, he could find a tally of how many times he walked out mid interviews, too.

“He says they left stuff in because it would draw views,” he replied, shrugging. “And that it’s fine because it fits with the Raiders reputation, so I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“He’s not totally wrong, honestly,” Hayden admitted, unintentionally towing a pretty fine line between comforting him and insulting him all at once. “It’s probably going to fit right into a folder of things Marlow or Feller have said to the press, too.”

“I know it will, I just- do you think I’ve changed?” he asked, looking slightly concerned over the potential answer. “In a bad way, that is. Have I become mean?”

No one had outright said it to him, yet, but he felt like that was how the press had started to view him. And he didn’t care much about what the reporters thought, but he hated to think his fans might no longer see him as appreciative of their support. Because he was. So much more than they could ever possibly know.

“You’re definitely different,” Hayden confessed, nodding. “But I don’t think you’re meaner, just…more honest. And I think most of the league would act the same way the Raiders do, if our coaches let us.”

He huffed slightly. “Funny enough I said that in the interview too,” he mused, wrinkling his nose.

“Oh, I cannot wait to finish it, now,” he told him honestly. “This call is just preventing the inevitable, Shane.”

Shane grimaced. “Just remember you said I wasn’t mean, when you do,” he replied. “You’ve already made that decision and can’t take it back after seeing the rest of it.”

Hayden chuckled, but his laugh quickly died down as he saw Shane’s eyes widen slightly. He watched him glance away from the camera for a moment, seeming freaked out for a second before looking back. He wouldn’t say the look of panic hadn’t entirely faded, either, but he was at least a little calmer.

“You alright?” he wondered, voice tinged with a mix of curiosity and concern.

Shane nodded. “Yeah, fine,” he replied, eyes flitting up and back down for a quick moment. “I was checking the time. I should be making dinner by now.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Hayden muttered, shrugging. “I’ve been wanting to see your apartment for a while, anyway.”

For some reason, Shane seemed weirdly protective of it. He mostly preferred phone calls to facetime and even when he did manage to get him on a video call, he was always in front of the same while wall, somewhere in a hallway, he assumed.

He huffed, rolling his eyes. “Give me a second,” he murmured, lowering his phone as he carried it through his home.

Hayden squinted, trying to make out whatever shapes of furniture he could from it. The camera was too jostled, unfortunately, to see much of anything as Shane’s hand kept *‘accidentally’* covering it. Shane was clever but not nearly as smooth as he believed and if Hayden hadn’t been working so damn hard to earn back his trust and friendship, he might have commented on secrecy.

But he wasn’t going to risk ruining things after they had finally got back into a place where they could banter and talk with relatively little tension. Instead, he just waited patiently, watching him prop up the phone against something on the counter.

“Satisfied?” Shane questioned sarcastically, gesturing around himself.

Only his kitchen was on display, but it was more than Hayden had seen so far, and he would take whatever he could get. “Nice cabinets, I guess,” he mused, shrugging. “Very…pristine.”

He huffed a laugh. “I didn’t exactly pick the color,” he reminded him.

Hayden watched as he seemed to notice something out of the corner of his eye. Shane reached out, grabbing the notepad off the fridge and putting it into the nearest drawer before he could even figure out why.

Rather than mentioning the strange behavior and making his friend uncomfortable, he chose to ignore it, just watching him pull out some ingredients from the fridge as he started making his dinner. “So, are you going to make time for a visit when you come back to Canada for Christmas?” he asked. “The kids miss you.” He did, too. But that was a little overly sappy.

Shane paused halfway through rolling up his sleeves. “I- actually, I’m not coming home this year,” he confessed after a few seconds. “I’ll still send the kids gifts, though. Have they been asking for anything specific or are they still changing their minds every few days?”

Hayden blinked a bit, caught off guard. “They’re…still changing their minds like usual, yeah,” he eventually responded. “I’ll let you know when they narrow it down.”

He nodded, preheating his oven and turning on the faucet to wash some vegetables under the water before laying them out on a chopping board. Hayden watched him grab a knife out of the block and begin to dice the butternut squash.

“Just give me enough time to wrap and ship it so you don’t have to tell them Santa forgot it and sent it late,” Shane teased, eyes so focused on the vegetables that he couldn’t see how hard his friend was staring at him.

He hummed lightly. “Of course,” he murmured softly, wondering if he should let it go or keep prying for more information. “Does uh- do your parents know? That you’re not coming back, I mean.”

He glanced up for a slip second, giving a brief nod. “I told them last week,” he replied, snatching a small piece off the board and biting into the raw vegetable to try it. “They’re coming down to Boston next month and staying until the 28th.”

Again, Hayden felt himself caught off guard. “They are?”

“Yeah, they’d stay longer but we’re traveling on the 29th and playing in New York on the 30th, so there’s no reason for them to stick around,” he explained, shrugging. “I think they’ll like Boston in the winter, though. The guys keep telling me it’s beautiful.”

They also said it was freezing and made the traffic even worse. But that could be said of a lot of places during December and January. He was still looking forward to his first official Christmas with Ilya despite it.

“That sounds nice,” Hayden mused softly.

He stayed quiet for a while, just watching Shane chop up the rest of his vegetables and toss them into a glass pan. Maybe he was reading into things, but it seemed like too many to be a single portion. And staying in Boston for the holidays seemed like the kind of thing someone did if there was someone worth staying for.

“Are you alright?” he questioned, noticing how silent he had gone for a full minute or two.

“Hm? Oh, I’m fine,” he assured him, not sounding terribly confident about it. “I was just… thinking.”

“Ouch, wouldn’t want you to strain your brain,” Shane teased, rinsing off the chopping board. “Everyone knows those muscles aren’t as strong as the ones in your legs.”

Hayden huffed a laugh, the comment breaking up some of the hazy thoughts that had come over him for the past few moments. It was funny, sure. He wasn't upset over the joke or anything. It just seemed a little familiar for some reason, like a quip he might have heard from someone on his team at some point.

"Can I ask you something?" Hayden wondered cautiously. "While keeping in mind that we're friends and I want to know about your life even when it's a sensitive subject like Boston, that is."

He wiped his hands on a towel, nodding slightly as he slowed down. "Of course you can," he replied.

He wasn't sure if it was Hayden's tone or his expression that made him worry, but both of them combined made it sound like his question wasn't going to be a one off that he could answer and then move past. He leaned his hands on the counter, trying to offer his full attention.

"I've just been wondering about something for a while and I uh- I didn't want to imply anything in case I was totally wrong," Hayden confessed, hesitating for a while. "But did you…move for Lily?"

Shane blinked. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting him to ask, but it wasn't that. He thought it might have been about his relationship with the Metros or the Raiders or something like that which was an equally delicate topic at the moment.

He didn't respond right away. The answer was far more complicated than either of them seemed to want it to be. Eventually, though, he nodded. It was slow at first, just a weak gesture of admittance.

"Yeah, I did," he muttered softly.

Hayden blew out a slow breath. It wasn't relief, per say, but he felt a little bit lighter after realizing he had been correct the whole time. "I- why didn't you tell us that?" he asked softly. "Or me, at least. I would have been thrilled for you."

He had known for years that his best friend was pining over that girl. That he was self-sabotaging every date or relationship he had because he was totally infatuated with Lily. It wasn't surprising that part of the reason he seemed so happy these days was because he had finally admitted to himself that he needed to be with her more than a night or two every few weeks.

Shane shrugged lightly, brushing it off. "It wasn't a huge deal," he murmured. "We've just been—"

"In love for nearly as long as I've known you," Hayden interjected, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I'm glad you finally got things figured out with her."

He dipped his head, huffing as his shoulder sagged. "Me too," he admitted, voice tinged with relief and a tenderness that was rare to hear from him.

Hayden stared at him for a moment, still sensing something wrong with his response. It was genuine, that much he knew for sure. But it was also restrained, somehow. Like there was more behind it that he wasn't saying for some reason.

"I haven't seen anything about the two of you in the news, lately," he noted astutely. "Does she like her privacy?" He deserved that, too, frankly. It was just pretty tough to get for someone that the press enjoyed following around so much.

Shane's expression twisted into something unreadable, like he was agreeing and denying it all at once. "H-she's not a huge fan of the media," he explained slowly, tapping his fingers on the counter.

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince Hayden, but he didn't call him out on it. "Fair enough, they can be pretty annoying," he murmured. "It's good you've found someone who feels the same way about the paparazzi as __"

Before he could finish his sentence, Shane was pushing off his counter and turning away. Hayden froze, unsure what he had said wrong that was currently making him scrub him face with a rather upset expression.

"I can't do it, Hayd, I- I just can't," he muttered as he sighed in frustration.

He nodded quickly, trying to reel his curiosity back in to an acceptable degree. "O-okay, I'm sorry," he apology. "I didn't mean to pry. We can talk about something else."

Shane scrunched his nose, shaking his head. "No, no it's not that, I swear," he replied, trying to think of the easiest way to explain it. "I just can't handle you being all supportive while I feel like such an asshole for not being honest with you."

Hayden narrowed his eyes, growing even more confused. "You're talking about your girlfriend with me," he replied. "That's pretty honest, in my opinion."

Maybe for some people, it would be the bare minimum. A casual topic, even. But he knew how hard it was for Shane to understand his own feelings, sometimes, let alone voice them.

Aside from briefly mentioning her once or twice, everything he knew about Lily came from accidentally reading his notifications when they shared a room or making assumptions that Shane didn't overtly shut down. This was the first time he actually admitted they were even in a relationship out loud in the years he had known about them seeing each other.

That made this entire conversation pretty monumental to Hayden. He didn't want to screw it up or make him feel like he had to share more than he was willing to.

"It's not honest, though," Shane muttered in disagreement. "*I'm not*."

He slouched, somehow feeling even worse about his lies when Hayden acted so understanding. It was easier to lie when there had been this emotional safety wall between them, so to speak. They talked about hockey, the kids, and other easy topics.

But their last fight tore it down to the point they had to talk about some personal stuff for the sake of their friendship surviving and neither were attempting to rebuild it once the conflict ceased. In fact, they had actually felt closer. Shane did, anyway. It made lying far more difficult.

“I don’t know what that means,” Hayden clarified gently. “But whatever it is, you don’t have to talk about it unless you want to.”

“I know, I just…we’ve been trying to be more truthful, haven’t we?” he murmured. “And I really like feeling like I can talk to you again, without all the locker room noise.”

It felt like they were finally being sincere around each other instead of being teammates first and friends second. Shane didn’t realize how big of a difference there was until he stopped associating Hayden with practice and the logistics of their respective titles in the organization.

He nodded slowly, trying to follow his train of thought. “We’re being more sincere, yeah,” he agreed. “Jackie says it’s how normal friendships are supposed to work and that we’re just not used to them because of our typical work environment.”

Shane huffed a laugh. “She’s probably right.”

“She’s *always* right,” he retorted, glancing over his shoulder like she might appear behind him as if summoned by the praise. She didn’t, thankfully, probably still reading the kids their bedtime stories. “What’s your point, though?”

He pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek for a moment, contemplating. “I just… don’t want to keep lying to you,” he admitted. “I’m finally really happy and I want someone to know why.”

Someone besides his parents, that was. They didn’t even really know the extent of his relationship yet, either. The person closest to understanding the full extent of it was probably Rose and her work schedule was so damn busy they could hardly even text each other back sometimes.

“You mean that you’re happy because of Lily?” Hayden surmised. That didn’t seem like the kind of thing he needed to be told. It was pretty obvious.

Shane hesitated, shaking his head for a moment. “No,” he confessed quietly, his chest tightening nervously. “That I’m happy because of Ilya.”

He blinked, confused. “Ilya?” he repeated, the name catching him off guard as it was thrown into the middle of a rather personal conversation. “As in Ilya Rozanov?”

He nodded slowly, swallowing harshly. “I moved for him,” he confessed earnestly. “*He’s Lily*.”

Hayden felt like he was going through all five stages of grief in a matter of seconds, his brain malfunctioning a bit. Still, some rational part of his brain was still telling him he needed to

focus on his friend before he figured out his own emotions. Shane looked like he was regretting his decision to be honest, a wave of panic crossing his face and making him seem pale.

“He’s what?” he asked. “He’s…her?”

Shane nodded again, even more cautiously. “Always has been,” he muttered, his heart thudding a little faster as he watched his best friend try to figure out what to say.

“Ilya is Lily,” he repeated like it would help it make more sense. He blinked a few times, shaking himself out of his stupor. “T-that…makes way more sense once I say it out loud,”

“It does?” Shane questioned, voice tight with cautious.

It struck Hayden, rather suddenly, that his friend didn’t just look panicked. He looked like he was mentally preparing for something. For his feelings to be ridiculed or his identity invalidated.

Which, he then realized were probably pretty valid fears for a closeted hockey player. Especially one who was romantically involved with his biggest rival. Past rival, he supposed. No wonder they seemed to work so well together on the ice. Everyone thought it was professionalism when it was probably their relationship manifesting through trust in the rink.

“Yeah,” Hayden admitted, nodding even as he still felt a bit stunned. “Always meeting up in Boston should have probably been a bigger clue, I guess. And he has always seemed obsessed with you, in a way. I just thought it was that creepy rival behavior or something.”

Clearly, he was wrong.

Shane shook his head. “No, I-I’m pretty much the same way about him,” he confessed before grimacing slightly like he regretted how quickly the admission slipped out. He still didn’t know if it was technically something Hayden was okay with and shouldn’t push it by mentioning anything too personal or romantic.

Hayden scrubbed his hand over his face, years’ worth of memories reemerging as he sorted through them in the blink of an eye. “I- I’m sorry I…this is just giving me whiplash,” he confessed.

“It’s alright,” he murmured, leaning against the counter to steady himself. “I know it’s a lot.”

That was one hell of an understatement in Hayden’s opinion, but at least Shane wasn’t rushing him for a response. He wasn’t really sure what kind he would even have. Acceptance, sure. He didn’t really care about his friend’s sexuality or anything like that.

It was more of the general shock of hearing him say Ilya was Lily that had his mind reeling, wondering how many nights he snuck out of their hotel to meet him or how many times Shane hid his phone because that’s who he was texting. God, Hayden felt like such an idiot for not seeing it sooner.

“So, um…Ilya, huh?” Hayden mused with a huff of disbelief. “How the hell did you- I mean, he’s so…” he trailed off, unsure what word would fit best. Arrogant and abrasive were probably not words that would be appreciated right now. “…emotionally reserved?”

Shane shrugged. “I- I don’t really know, honestly,” he muttered earnestly. “We met before the draft and just sort of clicked, I guess.”

He blew out a deep breath, nodding as he did his best to understand. “And you moved to be with him? That was the change of pace you wanted.” He wasn’t running away from Montreal or abandoning the Metros, he just wanted to be with his boyfriend. “Does anyone else know?”

“My parents found out at the start of the season,” Shane admitted. “But the team doesn’t know, if that’s what you mean.”

It might have been a little self-centered, but Hayden was kind of glad he learned about it before any of the Raider or other Metro’s. It made him feel like Shane really did trust him. That the decade of friendship between them hadn’t been completely erased by the distance between them.

“David and Yuna *just* found out?” he repeated, a bit shocked. “You guys really have been keeping it a secret.”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t really like we had a choice,” he muttered, sounding a little disappointed. “And I don’t think either of us ever thought we’d actually be together. Not long term or anything, just in moments.”

Hayden’s heart ached slightly at the thought of his happiness needing to be constantly contained in order protect his reputation and career. It didn’t seem fair that something as simple and pure as love had to be monitored and hidden like it wasn’t such a universal feeling.

“Woah, wait a minute- do you live with him?” he questioned abruptly, sitting up straighter.

Shane blinked, laughing slightly. “Did you just connect those dots?” he teased, trying to get some semblance of lightness back into the conversation.

Hayden’s eyes widened a bit. “I’m sorry, I was still trying to wrap my head around you being in love with the devil of hockey,” he retorted tenderly with a huff. “You said you moved *for* him, not moved in *with* him.” He squinted, staring at the screen. “Is that his kitchen?”

“*Ours*, yeah,” he corrected lightly, tapping his fingers on the counter for a moment before reluctantly pulling the drawer open and taking the notepad back out to stick it to the fridge.

Hayden could see the scribbles on the front of it, but wasn’t able to make out anything they said. Probably because they weren’t actually written in English, he realized. Not entirely, at least. There was a smattering of it, along with Russan beside it. No wonder Shane had rushed to hide it.

He looked away from the camera, feeling stupider than he did when he failed math in high school. “You speak fucking Russian for him,” he realized out loud, shaking his head as he ran a hand through his hair. “Jesus, how dumb was I?”

“That one is actually pretty easy to come up with excuses for,” Shane admitted. “The whole team speaks it to some extent and whenever someone asks, I just say it’s because of Kovalev and Varkov too.”

“But you learned for him, first, didn’t you?” Hayden assumed; his tone was far more accepting than either of them were expecting it to be.

He paused, nodding after a minute. “Technically,” he revealed. “I just like being able to know what he’s saying when he mumbles in Russian, is all.”

And when his brain forgot English the first few minutes after he woke up each morning, it was nice to hear his sleepy thoughts and actually know what they meant.

Hayden shook his head softly as everything started to finally settle a bit in his mind. “Wow, I-I was just trying to watch you insult another reporter while I sorted the laundry,” he muttered. “I didn’t think we were gonna get into…this.”

He winced slightly, pursing his lips with worry. “Are you mad?” he asked.

He hesitated, trying to figure out the right words. “No, no, it’s not that,” he assured him. “It’s more like surprised. And a little disappointed it took so long for you to tell me, but I understand why you kept it a secret.”

The more people who knew, the bigger the risk of their secret getting out. Even if Hayden would never intentionally do anything to out either of them, there was still a chance he could fuck up when he was drunk or accidentally say the wrong pronouns. He’d never forgive himself if either happened.

“I thought about telling you, a lot,” Shane admitted, tipping his head to the side. “It just took me a long time to understand it myself and once I did, I didn’t want to risk anything changing.”

Not with the Metros or with Ilya. But now, everything was different anyway. One more confession wouldn’t kill him, even if this specific one had been lingering over his head like the blade of a guillotine for years.

“I get it,” he replied with a firm nod. “I mean, I don’t entirely, but I understand enough. You know this is going to keep me up all night thinking of things I missed, right?”

“You’re always up with the baby, anyway,” Shane retorted, chuckling slightly.

“You aren’t going to find it funny when you wake up to a three-page document of questions I come up with,” Hayden retorted, trying to wipe the smile off his face. “Including but not limited to my curiosity about the teams closed practices and that game several weeks ago where neither of you were there.”

He might have thought he was kidding, but Hayden could already see the list forming in his mind. Some questions he had were about their relationship's longevity, but others were just about Ilya in general. Things he always wondered about him or his cars that he couldn't find the answers to online.

Shane furrowed his eyebrows. "We were sick and had to stay in bed," he explained. "But closed practices have virtually nothing to do with Ilya and I," he added in confusion. "Why do you want to know about those?"

Hayden shrugged. "Morbid curiosity and a tinge of envy," he replied. "Also, show me the house."

Shane blinked, caught off guard by the sudden deamnd. "What?"

"Your house, I want to see it," he clarified, waving his hand around in a vague gesture. "You're always in front of that stupid white wall as a way to hide the rest of it, so I'm assuming you guys have pictures up or something you didn't want anyone noticing."

He huffed softly. "Where was that detective work the past decade?" he wondered curiously, picking his phone up and walking out of the kitchen.

Hayden shrugged. "Hybernating, probably," he replied. "Does Ilya have a shrine dedicated to himself, somewhere? That's what I'm imagining right now."

Shane scoffed, shaking his head. "No shrine, just a wall dedicated to awards," he replied, even though that might have been close enough in his opinion. "I can show you around really quickly, but then I actually have to finish making dinner before he gets back from a meeting with Desjourney."

It was likely over the interview they gave, now that the final version was released, but neither of them actually knew. Coach asked for both of them but before agreeing, Ilya made up some lie about Shane needing to help Connors with something and being unavailable. Thank God for it, too. He didn't know if he could take another minute of having to think about, let alone discuss that woman's questions.

"Fine, I'll accept a brief walkthrough," Hayden conceded. "Start with the shrine, though."

Shane huffed a laugh, nodding his head and flipping the camera around. He was sure Ilya would be home soon, but he could spare a few extra minutes to show Hayden the house. It was kind of nice, actually, finally having someone see where he really lived.

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A few weeks later, Shane reached for his phone on the nightstand beside the bed, checking the time. He hadn't meant to sleep so late, honestly. He was just so exhausted from the game last night he needed to turn off all of his alarms before falling asleep.

And alright, maybe he was tired from *other things*, too. He felt one of Ilya's hands tugging his shoulder back, trying to get him to put his phone down before he could use it for

anything.

He groaned slightly, annoyed and sleepy. “Оставайтесь в постели,” he grumbled in Russian, his mind always going to his first language right after he woke up. “Ещё слишком рано меня игнорировать.”

Shane huffed lightly, rolling back towards him but keeping ahold of his phone anyway. “It’s almost ten,” he reminded him, rubbing his eyes. “My parents flight gets in at noon.”

Ilya pulled him closer, nuzzling his nose against his neck as he closed his eyes again. “Времени предостаточно,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to his skin.

Time to relax, time to cuddle, time to do other things. Whatever they could get away with in the next two hours would work for him. Unfortunately, Shane seemed less than agreeable with the idea, already giving him that look he got whenever he was about to turn him down.

He scrunched his nose, internally fighting with himself for a moment or two before he eventually pushed him away lightly. “We can’t,” he stated, trying to make himself sound firm even though his willpower wasn’t very strong. “I need to get dressed so I can meet them.”

No matter where he lived, that was not up for debate. It was a tradition for him to always meet them at baggage claim when they came to see him in Montreal and he had done it last time they visited Boston, too. Of course, last time they came to visit, he was also pretending to live across town. And this time, he wasn’t.

Ilya allowed himself, reluctantly, to be pushed away. He even went so far as to fall a bit further back against the pillows rather dramatically to emphasize it with a disappointed sigh. “Fine,” he conceded, pouting slightly. “What am I supposed to do, in the meantime?”

Shrugging, Shane pushed the blankets off, reaching for his clothes. “I don’t know, maybe dust or something?” He heard him snort a laugh before trying to hide it behind his hand. “I’m serious! I don’t want them thinking you’re a slob or anything.”

He furrowed his brows. “I am not a slob,” he retorted, almost offended. “I kept my house very clean before you moved in, was just not uh- what’s that word? For spotless and stuff.”

“Pristine?” Shane suggested, raising an eyebrow.

He snapped his fingers, nodding in agreement. “Yes, that,” he noted. “It was clean but not like a museum. Not like you and your weird obsession with making it look like model home.”

Shane glared at him, the gaze causing him to crack a small smile as he fussed with the blankets, pulling them up higher to cover his waist. “Well, then just…plan dinner for tomorrow, maybe? Or double check there’s nothing scandalous they could find when we get back.”

Ilya snorted again, doing a poor job of pretending like he hadn’t. “Fine,” he grumbled, watching him disappear into the bathroom. “I will keep myself busy while you go the airport.”

He let out a small sigh, settling back against the pillows more firmly while one of his hands fussed idly with his earlobe. He knew this was important to Shane. And to him, too, frankly.

He had met David and Yuna, sure. Both as Shane's rival and as his captain. But he had never really met them as his boyfriend before. Not officially, anyway. They might have come away from breakfast a few months ago knowing their relationship was more than just platonic, but they certainly didn't go into it with that knowledge or spend the morning being aware of it.

Hell, he was pretty sure David didn't actually know until he and Yuna were already in the air, heading back to Ottawa.

Tugging his lips side to side, Ilya pushed off the blankets and stood up. He figured he should at least get dressed, make the bed, probably eat something. Normal things, even if his stomach felt like it was kind of in shambles. That wasn't a sensation he was terribly used to, if he was honest.

Maybe from time to time, he got anxious before a big game. The playoffs, usually. But not for things like this. Personal and important to him emotionally. It was strange. He knew Shane's parents weren't big fans of his, especially Yuna, but he wanted them to like him. Wanted them to believe he was trying his best to be worthy of their son's love.

"Our shower pressure is acting weird," Shane muttered, still running a small towel over his hair as he exited the bathroom a little while later. "Should we call some—wait, are you primping?" he questioned, huffing in amusement.

He glanced over his shoulder from where he was, in fact, meticulously staring at his appearance in the mirror. "What? No," he retorted, frowning as he shook his head. "I was just making sure glass was clean."

"Uh huh," he mused skeptically, a small smile tugging at his lips. "You want to look nice for parents," he teased.

Ilya's lips tightened in annoyance. "So what? Is my first time meeting them as your boyfriend!" he exclaimed defensively. "Is it a crime to want to look nice?"

He had dressed similarly last time he met them but wanted to make sure he looked even better this time. Like he was normal and not an asshole the way they believed he was for so long. Button ups did that, he thought. As long as they weren't unbuttoned too low. Then it gave the opposite effect.

Shane's expression softened slightly, seeing how quickly he got a bit protective. It was nerves; he could tell. And it was sweet, in his opinion. "You look fine," he assured him, returning to the bathroom to hang his towel up.

Ilya hummed dubiously, looking back at himself in the mirror and tugging at the collar of the shirt to try to keep it crisp. "Maybe," he muttered, not nearly as convinced. "Doesn't hurt to try to look…nondouchbagish."

He rolled his eyes. “That’s not a word,” he teased, turning him away from his reflection and glancing up and down at his clothes. “I know it’s hard but trust me, they’re coming around to the idea of us. And once they meet you again, officially, they’re going to love you. Just like I do.”

Ilya’s lips tipped downwards. “You think so?” he wondered. “They are not going to hold everything I’ve ever said against me?”

He wasn’t a fool; he knew he was a bit difficult for some people to understand. Most people, really. He didn’t allow himself to be known very often outside of his team. Especially not parents. He didn’t do very well with his own, let alone someone else’s.

He had never in his life wanted to, for that matter, and certainly never actually tried actually make a good impression on someone’s family. His hookups never got to that point and if they had, he was pretty sure he would have sent them running for the hills.

Shane reached for the bottom of his shirt, untucking it from his jeans to make it look a little bit more like him in a way. “They’re going to be incredibly civil,” he assured him. “You know why? Because they understand how important you are to me.”

And no matter how they felt about Ilya, they wouldn’t bring that kind of history up. Not when they wanted him to be happy and could see that Ilya was a key part of that.

He tugged his lips to the side, nodding slightly. He tried to believe him. Needed to, even. “Okay,” he murmured softly, leaning in to nudge their noses against each other’s. “I should um…clean, I guess. To make you happy.”

And perhaps help settle his own nerves, too. But that part could stay unspoken.

Shane huffed a bit, tipping his head to kiss his jaw. “Thank you,” he muttered quietly, pecking him a second time. “It’ll make me feel a lot calmer, I swear.”

“One of needs to be calm, that’s for sure,” he mused, shaking his head a bit. “And it will definitely not be me, so…” he trailed off, but the implication was clear enough.

“It’ll be me, today. I can handle that for both of us,” Shane assured him, glancing over his shoulder at the clock. “I should go, in case there’s traffic,” he told him. “We’ll probably be back around one-thirty after we make a stop at my- well, *the* apartment for them to put their bags away. But I’ll text you when we’re on our way home.”

It was clear now, to both of his parents, that he didn’t live at the apartment he rented. And there was something so relieving about them knowing that. He had no idea it was weighing so heavily on him to pretend during phone calls and face times until he stopped doing it. Both with them and with Hayden.

Ilya nodded, not thrilled about being given so much time to stir and be restless but realizing there weren’t many other choices. “I’ll double-check reservations at the restaurant, too,” he added. “Make sure it’s a table in the back to try for more privacy.”

It wasn't like they would get very much of it, but he would do what he could to at least try to help soothe his nerves about being spotted. The two of them being seen together made more sense these days; it wasn't uncommon for them just like Dubek and Shane were seen together or Ilya and Hammersmith were.

But Yuna and David were another thing altogether. They were personal. Emotional. It meant something for Ilya to meet them and even though it technically wasn't the first time, it felt like they were tempting fate each time they tried to do something so…familial.

"Alright, I'm off, then," Shane noted, breaking away from him to grab his car keys off the dresser and kissing the side of his cheek.

Ilya quickly turned, capturing his lips for a short kiss that he had no choice but to melt into before eventually pulling back. Shane glared slightly, the look of someone being tempted into doing something they didn't have time for. He held strong, though, walking out of the bedroom with a noticeable pep in his step.

Ilya had no clue if it was caused by excitement, nerves, or both. Regardless, he tried to shove it into the back of his mind and looked back at himself in the mirror, unable to stop himself from primping slightly.

He knew how scrutinizing Yuna could be about players, contracts, and pretty much anything, even remotely important to her son. There was no telling how she would react to his company now that she knew he wasn't just Shane's captain.

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Ilya was in the middle of scrubbing down the stovetop for the second time in two hours when he heard Shane's car pull into the garage, where he kept his just in case someone recognized the vehicle for some reason. The first time he cleaned it was because it needed to be done.

And by that, it was more so of him worrying that Yuna and David would see the single spec of dirt on the burner and think he was a slob.

The second time, however, was because he had already made the bed, fluffed the pillows, vacuumed the house, cleaned the mirrors, shined some trophies, and wiped down the counters. He was, frankly, out of things to clean, and it left him with very little else to do.

Ilya felt his heart rate speed up a little bit, looking down at the sponge in his hand and panicking. What if he seemed like he was trying too hard by actively going out of his way to this extent? He set the sponge down behind the sink and moved some stuff into the middle of the counter.

Then, he immediately grimaced and moved them back, unsure if cluttering it would make things seem more natural or just messy. Probably the latter. And regardless, Shane wouldn't like random items stacked where he usually ate breakfast.

"Ilya?" Shane called, walking in through the garage. "We're back."

He tensed hearing his voice as he, presumably, tried to give him a chance to prepare himself before letting his parents in. “I- uh…in the kitchen!” he replied, trying to remind himself how English worked.

Hell, how thoughts in general worked regardless of the language they were spoken in.

He blew out a breath, running his hand through his hair one last time and planting his hands on the edge of the squeaky-clean counter with a tighter grip than necessary. Shane rounded the corner with a cautious expression, eyes darting around the house to check that it was actually a bit tidier than when he left.

To his surprise, things were so clean it looked like he might have been the one to do it.

Yuna and David followed their son, gazing around the house as well with even more curiosity than him. Ilya suddenly felt like he was being judged. Harshly. Like his ability to fluff a pillow or put the remote on the coffee table instead of the couch would directly translate to how he treated Shane.

“You remember my parents, right?” Shane murmured, gesturing towards them as they stopped in the kitchen.

He nodded, lips sealed tightly as he stared, unsure whether a handshake, hug, or neither would be the correct approach. He couldn’t even remember what he did last time, frankly. It was so tense he blocked out the first half of the breakfast until he got comfortable enough to actually talk to them.

“It’s nice to meet you in a…different capacity,” David eventually told him with a polite smile, sticking close to his wife.

Yuna just kept blinking, unsure how to proceed. She spent the whole plane ride over thinking about it. Then, the whole car ride, too. She still couldn’t figure it out.

Don’t get it wrong, she had nothing against her son’s sexuality or his decision to live with Ilya. It was just such a well-guarded secret that she still didn’t fully understand it, even after knowing about it for a few months.

She was trying to give Shane time to unravel everything on his own terms, but that was increasingly difficult. Especially when she was now standing in front of said secret boyfriend who, for a decade, she was committed to loathing on her son’s behalf since she figured he was too nice for it.

“Is good to see you again, too,” Ilya replied, nodding as his grip on the counter tightened even further. “Plane was good, yes? Not bumpy or anything?”

Shane’s dad glanced at Yuna who didn’t look entirely invested in the chit chat. “No, it was pretty smooth,” he answered, taking over a bit. “You have a nice house, good lighting.”

He blew out a small breath, looking relieved that the conversation was currently sticking to the boring topics. “Thank you,” he murmured, glancing around his own place. “It’s not

custom-built or anything, like Shane's home in Ottawa was but I like it. Tall ceilings, lots of space, nice neighborhood."

Shane tugged his lips to the side a bit. "Было бы хорошо воспитывать детей в," he murmured, tilting his head slightly as he thought out loud.

Ilya's brain took a second to realize he was speaking Russian, then an even longer one to comprehend what he was saying. And even if David and Yuna didn't speak Russian, he still felt panic swell inside of him.

"Oh, and look—KitchenAid is here, now," he noted, glancing at it to avoid Shane. "We bake cinnamon rolls with it sometimes; I'll try to find our recipe while you are here."

He furrowed his eyebrows, barely suppressing a laugh as he watched Ilya try to change the subject quickly. "What, was my pronunciation off or something?" he teased.

Maybe that was a bit cruel to say, honestly. He knew damn well his Russian had only gotten better in the past few months once he finally had an excuse to practice and use it more often. Sometimes, he would grab lunch with Varkov just to seek some help with it instead of bugging Ilya about it.

Ilya wasn't quite freaking out, but there was definitely something in his expression that he was trying to tamp down. "Не начинай," he retorted firmly, releasing his death grip on the counter to point at him. "Я стараюсь произвести хорошее впечатление."

He raised his hands. "I'm not stopping you," he defended, chuckling weakly. Yeah, definitely cruel. But also a little hilarious.

And fair payback, in his opinion, since last week Ilya had kept purposely muttering in Russian to Kovalev during practice and whatever he said was something Shane hadn't learned yet. And it was also, he assumed, about him, given Kovalev couldn't stop staring at him all day and laughing to himself.

Ilya blew out a breath, settling his hand back on the counter and clearing his throat. "Uh- anyway…I hope you like Iranian food. There is wonderful restaurant downtown," he explained. "Very lively."

Yuna stared at how tightly he was gripping the counter. And at his shirt that looked recently pressed with how crisp it was. He looked more nervous than the last time they met him, which she supposed she could understand.

"That sounds lovely," she eventually replied, nodding. "We already dropped our things off at Shane's- uh…the apartment," she amended, well aware her son didn't live there. "We're free all afternoon."

This was a bit intimidating for her too, honestly, for entirely different reasons. Her son had already hidden so much that she was acutely aware of the impact this trip would have. If she and David weren't accepting enough or gave off the wrong signals, Shane might never open up.

Or worse, he might shut down completely and choose his relationship with Ilya over them.

Months ago, she would never have thought that was even possible. But he was certainly willing to leave the Metros for Ilya. There was no telling how he would react if he felt like she wasn't fully on board with their relationship.

"I'll grab my coat," Ilya murmured, finally releasing the counter as he glanced at Shane. "You want to drive, yes?" he assumed.

Given his own car was brightly colored, loud, and extremely fast, he figured it would be better for them to take the Jeep. It was sensible and all that.

He nodded, fingers brushing against the keys he had shoved into his pocket. "I think that'd be good, yeah," he agreed, voice laced with something familiar sort of like a joke that was only between them. "I have to grab something too, before we leave."

Ilya furrowed his brows, confused about what he could need. Regardless, he fell in step with him as they walked past Yuna and David, leaving them there to scrutinize the house and draw whatever conclusions they saw fit.

Pushing open the bedroom door, Ilya went directly towards the closet, pulling it open and rusting through the hangers for a jacket. One that wasn't worn enough that he looked like he didn't care about how he dressed but also looked nice without being overly expensive to make him look frivolous. It was a difficult middle point, to say the least.

"What about this one?" he muttered, showing Shane a dark blue jacket in contrast to his shirt. "Too matchy?"

Shane looked a bit busier analyzing the bedroom but spared him a glance. "Hm? It's fine," he assured him with a small nod before gesturing around. "Did you actually clean in here, too?" he wondered.

Ilya tore the jacket off the hanger, putting the empty plastic back in the closet and closing it. "You said to clean, so I cleaned!" he retorted defensively. "What, you think I did too well of a job or something?"

It was just supposed to take a quick few minutes to make the bed and throw a load of laundry into the washer. But then he got carried away a bit, noticing dust on the dresser and wiping it down. That made him rearrange some of the pictures they kept on top of it, which led him to also reorganize their nightstands.

He huffed, shrugging. "I don't know, I didn't expect you to organize my stuff," he admitted, a bit surprised. "It's kind of sweet, though. You're cute when you're nervous."

He glared at him, annoyed. "I am not nervous," he reiterated from earlier, even though it was clearly bullshit since he could barely get his hand through the hole of his jacket.

"Ilya, you nearly broke the counter with how hard you were gripping it," Shane reminded him, shooting back a glare just as strong. "Did you actually think I needed something from in

here? I just wanted to make sure you weren't panicking."

In the living room, Yuna and David could make out almost every other word. Enough to understand the gist of their conversation, at least. To know that it was about them and their presence here. It wasn't hard to figure out why that might cause problems, given the secrecy behind their relationship.

Yuna tried her best not to eavesdrop, instead choosing to focus on their home. She looked at the décor on the walls, half of which she recognized as her sons. His framed awards were hanging right next to Ilya's in an even amount, like they were equal not competing for who had more of them.

No wonder the apartment he rented was so bare. Everything he cared about was here, on these walls.

His picture of him winning the cup was next to Ilya's too, right beside a picture of a woman she didn't recognize. A beautiful one, she could admit. With long blonde hair and dimples. She was laughing outside, in the snow, with a child in her arms.

A young Ilya, she realized after staring at him for a moment. It must have been him and his mother. Yuna was pretty sure she had never seen a picture of him as a kid before. Not this young, anyway. Certainly not giggling as his mom lifted him up in a puffy snow jacket.

And then, as quickly as she focused on the picture, her attention was stolen again when she heard Ilya steadfastly refusing to admit he was uncomfortable and her son trying to prove he was.

"I am not panicking either," Ilya pretended, shrugging a bit too heavily for it to be natural. "Not nervous, not panicking, not anything. Just fine…totally fine."

"Uh huh," Shane hummed skeptically, pointing to his jacket. "That's the wrong arm, baby."

Ilya froze, realizing why he was having so much trouble putting it on. Slowly pulling it off, he let out a slow breath. "This means nothing," he insisted stubbornly, putting it on correctly.

He rolled his eyes, knowing that despite the refusal to admit he was concerned about David and Yuna being here, he wasn't trying to snap or start a fight. He had just never done this before. Meeting parents, worrying about making a good impression.

Those were things for stable, straight men to worry about, he thought. Not closeted ones with enough mental and parental problems to be a therapist's personal case study.

"We're just having lunch," Shane reminded him gently, reaching out to fuss with his curls in an attempt to soothe him a little. "And I know it's tough, but just think about how much easier it's going to be if we just get through one uncomfortable day."

Yuna had all but given up on her attempt not to eavesdrop, which she only considered acceptable since her husband hadn't even tried not to. He was doing the opposite, actually, trying to listen harder while she snooped around.

It hurt beyond words that her son considered spending time with them to be uncomfortable, even if she knew it wasn't them specifically so much as the situation. The tension of untangling lies that she didn't even understand the depth of, yet.

Ilya hummed, lowering his head for a moment before nodding slowly and looking into his eye. "I'm trying to get through it for you," he assured him. "I really am."

"I know," he muttered, leaning in so he could press a gentle kiss on his cheek. "It means everything to me that you are, even though I know you would rather be anywhere else right now."

He huffed, nodding earnestly. He really wished he could be. He would take a grueling practice, a flat tire on the side of the highway, a snowstorm hitting them despite the winter weather being remarkably gentle lately over a full afternoon with David and Yuna.

At least last time, they immediately hopped on a plane and left the state. This time, they were meeting at the beginning of their trip, which meant if things went poorly he and Shane would both have to cope with it for the rest of the week they spent in Boston.

"моя любовь?" he murmured, hesitating as he leaned into his hand to let him play with his curls. "Do not check the cabinets in the bathroom until later, okay?"

Shane furrowed his eyebrows, slightly confused for a second before realization dawned on him. "You organized the cabinets?" he questioned in disbelief.

His lips twisted in reluctant admittance. "Maybe," he confessed, shrugging like it wasn't a big deal.

He huffed slightly, more amused than anything. "You mocked me for alphabetizing our spices but the moment my parents visit you're turning into me," he noted. "You see the irony, right?"

"Do not laugh at me," Ilya insisted, frowning. "I was anxious and needed to stay busy," he defended. "You know I play hockey to help get my energy out. There is no fucking ice rink in the backyard, and I had no time to drive all the way there—"

"Okay, okay, sorry for teasing you," Shane interjected before he got riled up again. "I'm glad it helped keep your mind occupied for a while, I really am." He squeezed his arm firmly. "Maybe I'll buy you a backyard ice rink for Christmas or something."

That didn't seem impossible. Expensive and impractical, absolutely, but not impossible. Some figure skaters had them, after all. He was sure he could find a way to make one for Ilya, too. Especially as the weather grew colder throughout the month.

"I can't tell if that is a joke or not," Ilya admitted, looking a bit confused. At least his mind was taken off the other things making him anxious.

Shane shrugged. "Guess you'll find out soon enough," he replied, tugging him backwards a bit, towards the door. "C'mon, my mom is going to find all the shit you hid in the closet if we

leave her alone to snoop any longer."

His mother was nothing if not predictable, much like himself, and when they walked back out of the bedroom, she was straightening up from peeking inside the cabinets under the television consol in the living room.

Yuna clasped her hands together, trying to act like she hadn't been trying to gleam information about Ilya from the pictures on his walls and the temperature he kept his thermostat at. "Ready for lunch?" she wondered curiously.

Shane nodded, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "Yeah, we're ready," he answered on behalf of both of them, sparing Ilya a small glance.

He was trying to silently reassure him that things would be just fine as long as they were the right amount of cautious and honest. Whatever that level was, he wasn't quite sure, though. He figured they'd know it when they hit it.

Heading back through the house, Yuna let her eyes linger on the picture of Ilya and his mom on the wall for a few more seconds before trailing behind her husband and son.

Ilya, to her surprise, easily offered her the front seat despite her assuming he would want it. Perhaps even take it out of habit. Did they drive places together these days? She wasn't quite sure. They must. Probably not all the time, considering the public still questioned if they actually liked working together or just happened to be good at it. But occasionally, she figured.

When they got downtown, traffic slowed as expected. Shane didn't look terribly uncomfortable in it, though, despite all the horrible drivers.

They were rude, in her opinion. Honking and cutting him off. He just tapped the steering wheel in a slow rhythm waiting for the light to turn green, even if he could have gotten through it if a car didn't cut in front of him first.

"You know the area pretty well, already," David noted from the backseat, glancing out of the window at the tall buildings and busy sidewalks.

His son kind of shrugged. "It's actually really small, once you get around it a few times," he admitted, voice a little distracted as he made sure not to hit any pedestrians heading through the crosswalk. "Just walking the blocks helped."

"It's beautiful despite the weather," Yuna mused, spotting all the trees wrapped in lights and painted storefronts, that were celebrating the winter season.

Ilya hummed in agreement. "Isn't terribly cold yet, this year," he muttered. "January is worse, usually."

For now, the ground was still clear and a regular jacket would work without needing to pull out the thick, insulated ones. Not that either of them were strangers to the colder

temperatures. At least in Boston, the snow wasn't typically bad enough for him to need chains on his tires or purchase something sensible to drive.

Shane turned the car into a parking garage, pausing in front of the machine and reaching his hand behind his seat. "Parking pass, please," he requested.

He tutted slightly in amusement as he pulled the card out of his wallet. "Is not that expensive for a yearly pass," he reminded him, placing it in his palm. "We can both have one."

They cost a bit, sure. But they were downtown for the food, the music, to meet the team for drinks, etc. It was worth it, in his opinion, to have one instead of paying each time they came downtown. Besides, it wasn't like either of them were exactly struggling financially.

Yuna watched her son wrinkle his nose, shaking his head in disagreement. She wondered how she could have made it through nearly an entire breakfast with them before noticing all the little telltale signs of fondness in his eyes and voice.

"Why would I spend the money, though, when I can just use yours?" he replied, leaning out of the window for a moment to swipe the card through the machine. It beeped and the bar gate lifted. "It's more efficient to share."

Ilya tugged his pass back out of his hand, sliding it back into his wallet as Shane pulled forward. "Uh huh," he responded skeptically. "I think you just enjoy taking advantage."

A smirk tugged at his lips, shrugging without a verbal response as he parked in the first open spot he saw and turned the car off. He got out, tugging open Ilya's door politely.

Or it would have been polite if there wasn't a constant competition between them to see who could open the most doors for each other.

Ilya scowled slightly and Shane closed it, the sound echoing through the parking garage. "The restaurant is East, right?" he questioned, ignoring the look.

He nodded. "Only a block from here," he affirmed, pointing towards the street before he lowered his voice and whispered to him, "You will be walking behind when we get there." He wouldn't allow him to get any extra points in their little contest, even if they technically didn't count them. Mostly.

"Over my dead body," he replied under his breath. "I'm on a winning streak right now." The door to the rink, the pub they went to with the team afterwards, and now the car door. He wasn't giving up that lead.

Ilya rolled his eyes as they walked out of the parking garage and down the sidewalk. His attention was, as usual, split between the company he was with and the plethora of people around him.

Christmas was around the corner that meant shopping crowds, along with everyone too lazy to go buy groceries and cook their own meals until after New Years Day passed. It made an

already busy city even more hectic, and he couldn't tell if that brought him more comfort or anxiety.

He didn't want to be paranoid about who might be nearby, listening to their conversations or making assumptions just from seeing them together. But he was. If the two of them were alone, it would be different. But Yuna and David made it so much more difficult to come up with hypothetical reasons the four of them were together.

Spotting the restaurant, Ilya and Shane both reached for the door, hands clasped around the handle for a moment as they glared at each other. David just paused, tilting his head curiously.

"I will stand here for an hour," Ilya warned, waiting for him to let go.

He scrunched his nose, contemplating for a moment before eventually sighing and giving in. "Fine," he conceded in annoyance. "You're exactly *one* door closer to catching up to me."

Yuna heard him mumble something under his breath but couldn't catch what it was. She wasn't even sure if it was in English, frankly. Either way, her son definitely heard it enough to huff in amusement as he followed him inside the restaurant.

Ilya wasn't kidding when he called the place lively earlier. She could see strands of lights hanging along the ceiling and hand painted murals on the walls. It smelled wonderful, too. The spices were potent enough to carry out of the kitchen and envelop the entire restaurant.

He and Shane sat on the same side of the booth, both preferring to have a better view of the space despite having a table closer to the back. There was something comforting about being able to notice where everyone was and spot someone staring long enough to recognize one or both of them.

"I think I want the lamb kabobs," Ilya murmured, barely glancing over the menu before he set it back down on the table with little intention of needing it.

"You always order those," Shane replied, eyes still raking over his own options. "Try something new for once."

He sighed dramatically, lifting his menu back up. "Fine." He tugged his lips to side for a moment or two. "I will get the Sabzi, instead," he decided, putting it back down and glancing at Shane.

"That's just a different version of lamb, isn't it?" he questioned, watching Ilya nod with a smile. He rolled his eyes, giving up. "Alright, eat your lamb. I'm getting the Mirza Ghasemi with rice."

Ilya hummed, like he approved of the choice. Not that he had ever had it. Eggplant wasn't his favorite vegetable, despite using the emoji quite often. He preferred squash or even cucumber.

They waited a few minutes for David and Yuna to figure out what they wanted as well before a waiter came over, taking their orders. Ilya passed his menu to Shane, who stacked them and passed them back politely before lowering his hands into his lap and staring at his parents.

Now that the actual food had been ordered, there wasn't much to do aside from talk to them. He had done that, of course, the past few months. More honestly than he had in years, if he was being totally honest. But it was still a bit tense.

He tried to spare a lot of details that involved Ilya, not wanting to accidentally push them too far. They had been trying so hard to accept them, already. He didn't want them knowing more than they could handle or risk grossing them out if they ever witnessed them being overly romantic with a hug or a kiss or something.

Hence the public restaurant where they were forced to not even brush hands, let alone hold them.

"Well, I uh- I'm very happy to have a chance to finally get to know a bit more about you," Yuna told Ilya, sincerity in her voice. "Shane mentions you sometimes, but we don't really have a lot of details on…this."

She gestured between them discreetly and she could swear she saw her son blushing. She had really only ever met one of his past partners, a girl named Jessica who he wasn't with for very long and didn't seem terribly broken up when it ended. It was safe to say Shane didn't talk to her about it afterwards. Or any other partner he had, for that matter.

For all she knew, there could have been other boyfriends she wasn't informed about or perhaps this was his first one. She had no idea and the part of her that was used to having all the details was screaming a little bit internally from the lack of understanding.

"You don't have to answer anything you don't want to," Shane assured him quickly, already sensing his discomfort. "They can be pushy sometimes, is all."

God, could they be. He knew all too well how scrutinizing his mother was. And his father, despite what some believed, wasn't much better. He was just a silent intellectual. Which, Shane might argue, was worse because he never knew what his dad was thinking.

"No, no, of course not," David agreed as well. "We just want to get to know you outside of, well, what we thought we knew if that makes sense. We've had a pretty static image of you for so long and now that's been shattered."

He nodded slightly, a bit tense. "I'm sorry if you were caught off guard by this, by *me*," he admitted apologetically. "Was never my intention to have Shane lie. I know he hated it. I just…there are circumstances that make this difficult."

Yuna hummed softly. "I can imagine," she muttered softly.

The NHL was already a pretty brutal place to exist as a queer person inside of, but she couldn't imagine the pressure of having an entire country rejecting someone's very existence

because of the gender of the person they loved. To call it unfair would be a grave understatement.

“If it’s alright, can I ask how this happened?” David wondered gently. “Given the nature of your work it seems a bit difficult to understand how you both…figured the other out, so to speak.”

It was clear he wasn’t any more comfortable than Shane or Ilya was, the topic alone already confusing without all the external factors convoluting in even worse. He was just trying his best to understand and not accidentally say or do anything that pushed his son away or made him sound as old as he really was.

Ilya gave an uncomfortable chuckle, glancing down. “Uh- small looks, I guess,” he admitted, shrugging. “Lots of them, just here and there when we played against each other.”

And some other, more personal things. But he had no intention of airing those details in front of the Hollander’s.

“Well, they were definitely subtle,” Yuna agreed, nodding. “We thought you hated each other, no offense. Everyone did.”

“It was intentional,” her son clarified. “And pretty easy, too, since everyone already wanted to believe it.”

It seemed easier for them to believe Ilya and Shane hated each other than liked each other, even now that they were playing on the same team, frankly. They chalked it up to professionalism, curtesy, publicity. Rarely just a true enjoyment of each other’s company despite them being seen together pretty frequently.

“So, did you just text a lot since you were always apart or- I’m sorry, it’s just been very difficult to wrap my head around all of this,” his mom admitted, trying not to get ahead of herself. “I really want to give you both time to explain when you feel comfortable doing so, not because we want answers.”

Ilya glanced at Shane. “Я думаю, мне никогда не будет комфортно,” he confessed to him earnestly, the tone soft despite the language sounding rather harsh on its own. “Я не очень хорошо разбираюсь в чувствах. И в честности тоже.”

He tugged his lips to the side, trying to translate what he said in his head. He knew Russian, sure. Considered himself pretty good at it, too. But it still took him a minute to catch up and formulate a response.

“Вы просто не привыкли к тому, чтобы вам позволяли быть честным,” he replied, gesturing to himself softly. “Я тоже.”

Yuna glanced between them, mind spinning with theories she couldn’t confirm without their help. She didn’t want to push her son away. Or Rozanov either, oddly enough. But she just had so many questions that she had been forcing herself not to ask for a few months. Like

how they even started dating when they barely saw each other as competitors or if anyone aside from them knew about it.

“What I’m struggling to understand is just the extent of this, I suppose,” she confessed, trying to figure out how to frame her words. “Shane’s Russian sounds so good it couldn’t be something newer he just picked up and you don’t switch teams on a whim, let alone…*you know*.”

She wouldn’t be stupid enough to say they lived together in public, but that was the sentiment. Her son had moved his entire life to America for Ilya. That wasn’t an easy decision to make, let alone one that happened after a few weeks or even months of a relationship. It left her wondering just how long they had been in the dark about this whole thing between them.

And if she wasn’t so terrified of her son shutting down, she might have dared to ask sooner. But it didn’t really seem like the kind of conversation to have over the phone, no matter how badly she wanted the details.

Ilya scratched at his neck, finding the table rather interesting for the time being. Meanwhile, Shane just sipped his water like he was trying to come up with a way to say something he knew she wouldn’t like hearing.

“Shane,” his father muttered softly. “We completely support you no matter what,” he reaffirmed with more looming behind his words. “*But* we’ve also been incredibly patient trying to let you sort things out. It would be nice to be…let in a little bit more.”

He wasn’t asking for a chronological breakdown of every single step in their relationship or anything ridiculous like that. He just wanted to understand a bit more. To figure out if they should also be learning Russian or not.

“This is uh- not new,” Shane eventually murmured, blowing out a slow breath. “Or casual.”

Yuna nodded slowly. “I think we assumed as much,” she explained gently, trying not to push him too hard, even as he restated what they were already aware of. “Is there a point when things changed? Or was the rivalry always…fake?”

“No, it- we *are* competitive,” Ilya clarified firmly. “Just played it up for media. Whole time was more of us enjoying the deception.”

It was nice to have something private, something no one could have an opinion on or ruin the way the media always tried to.

“And by whole time you mean…?” David gestured vaguely with his hands, silently asking for elaboration.

“Dad, he means the *whole time*,” Shane clarified, putting emphasis on it. “Since before the draft.”

Their eyes both widened a bit and he watched them freeze, like they were realizing in real time that whatever timeline they refused to admit they created in their minds was *much* longer. That it wasn't something they were working through the beginning of or planned to tell many people about willingly.

"So…so the last uh- what, ten years? Longer?" Yuna muttered out loud, not really needing confirmation, just trying to settle the thoughts in her mind into something resembling calm or rational when both felt out of reach. "That's…a very long time to hide this."

Ilya swallowed harshly. "Was not easy," he clarified. "We did not lie because it was fun, even if the ruse was sometimes entertaining."

"It didn't really seem possible to ever actually exist like this," Shane told them softly. "Like you guys do."

His words were vague but carried enough emotion that they understood what he was trying to say—they never believed they could actually be together in any real way. Nothing beyond text messages and what Yuna assumed must have been clandestine meetings before or after they played hockey, anyway.

They had believed, for a long time, that their love was confined to strange schedules and secret declarations. Nothing tangible or lasting. It, frankly, broke her heart wide open all over again just like it had when she first found out.

Ilya nodded in agreement. "We would take the break before training as the closest we would get to being a normal…" *Couple*.

"And now you guys are playing for the same team," David mused as things settled into place and he realized this was their way of making it work, of being together even the world still considered them teammates and nothing else.

"I just wish I would have moved sooner," Shane admitted bashfully. "And I wish I would have told you both more honestly. I just- at first, I didn't really know what was happening and as things kept getting more serious it felt like…" He trailed off, unsure what he was even trying to say.

"Like it was the only thing either of us had control over," Ilya finished on his behalf. "When everyone demanded more of us or when things were falling apart, we wer- *are* a safe place for each other."

Shane was somewhere soft to land after a nasty article, a bad injury, or a death in the family. And Ilya was somewhere the harsh edges of the world couldn't get in and cause more damage after a bad game or a cruel comment from his former team.

Yuna watched her son nod, a barely indescribable sigh escaping him as Ilya seemed to read his thoughts perfectly. It looked so sweet from the outside, his ability to understand him so well. She always worried that maybe Shane wouldn't find someone capable of it, the way she had found David.

Now, she felt almost foolish for ever thinking that in the first place. For ever being concerned about him not being social enough to date when he had found his soulmate a long time ago and was just trying to find a way to make it work out since then.

“You have no idea how much I want that for Shane,” she murmured earnestly. “It’s all a mother ever wants, I think. For her child to be safe and loved.” Everything else seemed to pale in comparison.

Ilya nodded softly. “Is all I want for him, too,” he confessed.

Yuna felt something tug at her heart, her mind flashing to the picture she saw of Ilya’s mother on his wall. She wanted to ask about her, about where she was or if she knew about them, but before she got the chance the waiter came back with their food.

She was so distracted by the conversation that she had honestly forgotten they were there for lunch, let alone that she was starving when they first walked in. The plates were set down in front of them, piping hot and smelling delicious. Enough spices that her hunger was reignited the moment the waiter walked away from their table.

Yuna dug in, using the food as a small respite from the weight of the conversation. It had gotten heavier than intended, but she didn’t regret any part of it. These were the answers she had been seeking since she said goodbye to her son at the airport two months ago, after all.

“So…the season has been going well,” she noted in between bites, picking what she considered a pretty safe topic to dive back into the conversation. “I bet Desjourney is happy with your current wins.”

Ilya nodded slightly, also trying to shift gears to something more tolerable for him. “He’s a hard man to please,” he replied earnestly. “But he’s not yelling very much.”

Not as often as he would if they were losing terribly often or by bad margins the way some of the other teams had been. He was well aware the Raiders had been really putting pressure on the rest of the league, forcing them to put their best forward each night they played.

“That’s good,” David mused, tapping his fingertips over his knuckles. “And you guys got that new sponsor recently, right?”

Shane hummed in affirmation. “We weren’t sure we would after the interview got derailed,” he confessed. “Apparently, they liked it, though. Said it was authentic or something and our behavior matched their brand.”

Yuna’s lips quirked. “I really hated that woman’s questions,” he admitted, shaking her head in annoyance. “It was unprofessional to dig like that.”

Ilya nodded in agreement, cutting into his lamb and immediately putting some of it onto Shane’s plate before snatching some of the rice out of his bowl. Unlike last time, he didn’t fight him on it or force him to ask first. He just sipped his water before trying the lamb and mumbling about it being cooked well.

“I like the fundraiser from a few weeks ago,” David muttered, the short-lived silence bothering him for some reason. “Raiders don’t sell signed pucks very often; I’d bet fans were really excited. That was a nice charity to donate to, as well.”

He couldn’t even think of the name, right now, honestly. But he knew it was something for Veterans experiencing PTSD, which he thought was a good cause.

“Was media’s idea,” Ilya murmured, shrugging. “We spent a few hours just signing them, it wasn’t very much work.”

Not as much as the people who individually wrapped them had put into it, anyway. He just felt bad for whoever bought the ones he signed after his hand began to cramp several hours into the process. They probably wouldn’t even know it was his signature if they weren’t told.

“Still, it was a nice gesture,” Yuna agreed. “I think it’s good to do those kinds of things when you have such a public platform.”

It wasn’t uncommon for teams to dedicate nights to raising money for certain places, people, or overall illnesses. The Metros did it all the time. Majority of teams did, actually.

The Raiders just had a tendency to avoid that kind of stuff, usually. They didn’t visit the children’s hospital in their jerseys or read to third graders at their schools like the Admirals liked to every single year like clockwork.

“The Raiders actually do a lot of charity work, mom,” Shane replied. “It’s all just kept very quiet to maintain our image.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly, a bit caught off guard. Not only by the fact that they apparently did charity work but also by the fact that they would actually want to keep it private. Publicity was how the team earned sponsors, how they got more fans to show up, how they stayed in the media’s good graces.

It was important to have it and for it to be good. And charity work was one of the easiest ways to win people over. She knew, according to Shane, that the team was very different privately than they were in front of cameras or on the ice. But still, she couldn’t understand why something like that would be kept secret.

“They do?” she asked, shaking her head quickly as she caught her own mistake. “I mean, *you* do?” The team as a whole, which now included him.

He nodded, shrugging. “Not like actively; that’s kind of hard with our schedules,” he clarified, despite wishing he had time for it. “But a third of the profits from our individual merchandise sales are sent to a number of different organizations.”

Yuna furrowed her eyebrows. “That wasn’t in your contract.”

In fact, the one he signed had specifically stated that 65% of the merchandise in his name would go to him, which was far more than most teams would allow. She remembered reading over it very carefully and double checking it with a lawyer before even showing it to him.

Her son grimaced slightly. “That’s because I didn’t know it was something they did,” he admitted earnestly. “I only found out a few weeks into practice when the guys were talking about it. It’s not something they force or anything; I went to management separately to talk about it.”

“They are not really even involved, either, aside from ensuring the legality of it,” Ilya added.

She blinked, propping her elbows on the table. “O-okay, hold on,” she murmured, taking a moment to let her brain catch up. “Walk me through this slower. You, what, signed a second contract? What does it do? Who did you clear it with?”

It couldn’t have been their usual lawyer since he would have told Yuna if Shane came to him with any documents, he needed proofread or explained to him. Which meant he either used a lawyer he didn’t know or didn’t even bother to use one at all.

“I checked it with the lawyer the guys have for the project,” Shane clarified before she had an aneurism thinking he had been stupid enough to sign a legal document without someone checking it. “All it does is move thirty percent of any sale made regarding my merch—like jerseys or hats—to a bigger fund with everyone else’s percent for the month, too.”

She flattened her palm on the table, stunned. “That- who even started this?” she asked. “How long has it been going on?”

“About five years, I think. Is not new or anything,” Ilya answered, doing the math in his head. “Originally it was just Dubek who gave a portion of his sales to…” he trailed off, not wanting to spill any secrets. “Let’s just say there was a charity he cared about and contributed to privately for a while.”

“Then Varkov found out and wanted to do the same with his percent of the sales because he had a charity that was important to him, too,” Shane added with a vague hand gesture as they explained. “And after a few more players got on board, they realized they could just have a contract drafted to automatically move the money instead of independently calculating it each month on their own.”

“It all gets put into a joint account with a legal representative for the team to control the funds,” Ilya clarified. “We decide, as a group, where the money goes. Youth camps, cancer foundations, homeless shelters. Places like that.”

They bounced around a few of the same charities, of course. Places that were important to them for specific reasons, like how Dubek preferred funding awareness for eating disorders and Varkov liked giving the money to pro bono lawyers who represented immigrants and refugees. They still gathered together once a month to discuss it, though, in case anything new came up or they decided to split the funds in a different order.

“And none of this is tied back to your team?” David double checked, getting hung up on that detail for some reason.

He thought it was rather noble, in a way, but knew his wife was practically malfunctioning at the thought of such good press slipping past them.

Shane nodded. “Donations are listed as completely anonymous,” he confirmed.

“But…why?” Yuna questioned, words failing her as she struggled to understand why they wouldn’t want people to know they were giving up so much of the money that technically was supposed to belong to them.

They’d all be so much more eligible for the King Clancy award, if nothing else. And the press would love it, too. They could earn so much more funding if fans knew and contributed.

“Because we don’t want attention for it,” Ilya jumped in to respond, shaking his head firmly. “We have no interest in boasting about being good people just for giving away some money. We are not philanthropists, just hockey players who care about the city we live in.”

And the country, too, really. A lot of organizations they donated to were national ones, representing different cities in California, New York, Detroit, etc.

“Besides, if a lot of people knew, they might try to monetize what we’re doing. That would make it harder to control our own assets,” her son tacked on. “We like picking where the funds go personally because they’re places that are important to us, not because the brass says it’s good for our image.”

Yuna blew out a slow breath, a mix of pride and disbelief warring inside of her. The part of her that was used to managing and seeing publicity everywhere she went was appalled at the idea of letting the opportunity slip away. But the mother in her was beyond proud that her son was trying to make a difference out of the goodness of his heart.

“So, w-where do you two give it to, then?” she wondered, folding her hands over each other as she tried to become a little less concerned and a bit more curious.

They glanced at each other, as if silently deciding if their answers were acceptable enough to tell them about out loud. It wasn’t necessarily that they were ashamed of them, but Shane knew how personal it was for Ilya to talk about and he could understand why he might feel uncomfortable about it.

“There’s a program called Project Heal that I like,” Shane eventually explained, tapping his finger on the top of his spoon. “They have recovery plans for eating disorders, anything from group therapy to full-time inpatient care. It can cost a lot for people with the more severe ones, and they try to take care of the costs for as many people as possible so if we send a few thousand dollars it helps pays for their recovery.”

He wasn’t sure how the charity split the money up, honestly. He didn’t know if the funds went to covering a lot of individual therapy to stretch it out or if it was applied to just a few people’s intensive treatments and the salary of their dieticians. Either way, he knew the money was going somewhere important.

A place he hadn’t even heard of until he found out it was the charity that started everything. The one Dubek regularly donated to it until setting off a whole chain reaction that led to their current, rather elaborate, set up.

David's eyes softened slightly, nodding in understanding. "It sounds like an important place," he murmured, not wanting to directly correlate it to his son, even though it was pretty clear why Shane felt so strongly about it.

"What about you, Ilya?" Yuna asked, using his first name.

She didn't do that often, even when she was on the phone with Shane. She still called him Rozanov because no matter the connection to her son, he still felt like a relative stranger in her mind.

Up until getting off the plane, she still felt that way. But once she had actually been to his home, seen the walls of his life without the faux bravado, and heard how he spoke about her son, it seemed abundantly clear that this man was no longer a visitor to Shane's life. Or to her own, either.

Shane noticed the immediate buffering in his expression and was quick to remind him it wasn't necessary to bear his soul right now. "You don't have to say anything," he assured him. "It's alright to leave it at my answer."

Ilya cleared his throat a bit. "No, no, is fine," he muttered, hesitating for a moment. "I prefer mental health centers, and uh- helping pay for children and adults to get treatments paid for," he confessed slowly. "It is expensive to receive medications, and a lot of insurances do not cover therapy."

Yuna's lips tugged into a small smile at the response. "That sounds like a very worthy cause," she agreed. "Is there a reason it's important to you?"

"Mom," her son all but snapped, staring at her with an expression that told her she had overstepped without meaning to or even realizing it. "That's not the kind of question you get to ask."

He shook his head firmly, trying to get her to back off but Ilya turned slightly, mumbling something to him gently. She presumed it was some sort of assurance, since Shane quickly loosened up afterwards, going back to eating his lunch. The way he tried to shut down her question wasn't lost on her though, nor was the defensiveness in his tone.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to offend you," Yuna promised sincerely, feeling like she had once again managed to stumble into a bear trap during what she hoped would just be a honest conversation.

"It's alright, really," Ilya replied gently. "He gets defensive since it is- I don't talk very often about it, is all." He took a sip of his water. "The charity is important to me because I lost my mother to suicide when I was a kid."

There was a chance that a prescription or therapy, some sort of real help, could have kept her from overdosing on sleeping pills, but he would never really know. All he knew was that for millions of people with depression, it already did help save them.

And if his donations could provide help for even one or two people, to keep other kids from experiencing his pain, he would give every cent he ever made to try to make it happen.

Yuna sucked in a deep breath. “I had no idea,” she confessed.

“It’s not very common knowledge,” Ilya assured her earnestly. “My father was a strict man, and we were not allowed to discuss those kinds of thoughts or feelings. It’s behavior I am working to unlearn.”

At least she hadn’t apologized for his loss, he thought to himself. That was usually the default phrase when people found out she died, even if they didn’t know how. And maybe the first or second time, it had been nice to hear, but it lost its ability to comfort him rather quickly.

Ilya had heard it dozens of times at his mom’s funeral, from strangers, no less. People who never knew her smile or heard her laugh because she never did either when she was standing beside his father or forced to meet people that didn’t accept her kind of vivacious joy.

Shane nudged his knee against Ilya’s under the table, unsure what he was even trying to do. Provide some sort of comfort, maybe. “You’re doing a good job of it,” he mumbled.

The unlearning part, he meant. He knew how difficult it sometimes was for Ilya to be honest about his feelings. About his family. Heaven forbid some sort of memory that involved both at once. But he had been trying so hard, especially lately, to get better at it.

Ilya bumped his leg back softly, lips twisting. “No one can know I am a sap,” he responded, voice tinged with a teasing lilt. “Would ruin my reputation.”

David huffed a laugh, leaning his elbows against the table. “You have a pretty unique one, that’s for certain,” he agreed.

Yuna nodded slowly, the realization that Shane didn’t just love Ilya but had loved the side of him no one else got to see finally sinking in for her. “Unique has never been a bad thing,” she muttered. “Better than boring.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. It was never really intentional to become known for my attitude,” he confessed. “When I came to Boston, I had never left home before and didn’t speak much English so I stayed quiet and uh- spoke with my actions, I guess.”

People quickly began to associate him with being pompous because he didn’t speak to others and thought he was rude since he was quiet when he was really just trying not to make a fool of himself by pronouncing things incorrectly. He knew he was a good player and hoped showing it would negate the need for small talk and interviews.

Instead, he just got labeled as aggressive on the ice. There were worse things to be called, though, so he leaned into it. Even when his English got better, he stuck with his old habits. The press would have probably called him fake if he acted any other way, these days.

“You really didn’t have anyone, when you got here, did you?” Yuna recalled.

She couldn't imagine how hard that must have been on him when he was just seventeen years old. Shane had struggled and he was playing for his own country just a few hours away from his childhood home. Moving across the world without the vocabulary, let alone support system necessary for it must have been incredibly difficult. Not to mention isolating.

Ilya nodded. "I had a friend back home I kept in touch with, but very few in Boston at first," he admitted. "Thankfully, Marlow talked enough for both of us. I picked up the language from him."

"That explain so much about the way you talk," Shane teased. "You latched onto the guy with the thickest Boston accent possible."

He rolled his eyes but didn't dispute it. "If I moved somewhere else, I might have learned differently. But I don't regret it," he clarified. "Marlow still translates, sometimes, if there is a strange word or idiom I don't know."

Shane snorted a laugh. "Like tiddly?"

His shoulders rolled back like a bad memory hit him in the face. "I spent a decade learning English in America. *America*, Shane. Not Australia or Canada or wherever else they speak it," he reminded him, still peeved. "Feller purposely confuses me with stupid British words."

It wasn't the first time he did it and probably wouldn't be the last either. Sometimes, Ilya could swear they the team expanded their own vocabulary just to fuck with him and act like he should know what nidificate means.

"It's a normal word, Ilya," he defended on Feller's behalf, even though he could count on one hand the number of times he had actually heard it used in conversation.

"No, it is not," Ilya insisted, shaking his head. "You are a liar. Both of you. This is why I don't trust anyone on the team when they tell me stupid metaphors about fat kids eating cake and cats being stuck in bags at first. Marlow is the only one who is truthful."

Yuna glanced at her husband, noticing his own suppressed laughter. She couldn't blame him for it. She was pretty sure she had to reach deep into her mind to remember what that word even meant, let alone figure out a sentence it might fit into.

"So, you'll trust me enough to pass me your stick if mine breaks but you won't believe me if I tell you about a metaphor you haven't heard of?" Shane clarified skeptically.

Ilya paused, thinking it through, then tipped his head in agreement. "Exactly," he replied after a moment. "Not until I ask Marlow or look it up first."

"Wow. You've known me longer but trust him more," he accused, sipping his water. "Sounds like favoritism to me."

"I- no, don't twist my words like that," Ilya retorted in slight annoyance, shaking his head. "I merely believe him because he has never made fun of me for not understanding a word. He's also never tried to convince me that a stupid word is normal when it isn't."

He glared at Shane, very clearly trying to remind him of a time or two when he pretended some rather complex words were completely common ones that he just couldn't pronounce correctly. Yuna saw her son grimace sheepishly, looking away from the direct gaze and going back to eating his lunch.

"I have never done that before," he pretended, feigning his innocence poorly.

"Stop lying in front of your parents," Ilya insisted, gesturing to them. "They are right there. They raised you better than that and you're disappointing them—"

Before he could further berate him, one of their phones began to ring. The similar sounds drew both of their attention, and they set their forks down, reaching to check which one of them was being called.

Shane pulled his phone out of his pocket, the screen still black. "Not mine," he muttered, glancing at Ilya's whose was lighting up. He leaned over, trying to see the caller ID. "Who is it?"

"Vic," he replied briefly, showing him his screen. "I forgot I promised to give him January's practice schedule early so he can check what dates correlate to some volunteer work."

He hummed, tilting his head towards the door. "Take it," he encouraged him. "Also ask him about where he hid the tape last week after he used it. I wanted it for my knee yesterday and couldn't find it."

"Because that is easy to drop into a conversation about something entirely unrelated," Ilya teased, rising from the booth as he answered the phone, pressing it against his ear.

As he walked off, Shane waited until he saw him grab his coat by the front door and leave the restaurant before attempting to steal some of the lamb off his plate. He sliced off another piece of it, moving it to his own dish before biting into it.

Yuna and David stared, his mom's stare especially judgmental over the theft.

"It'll get cold," he defended, shrugging as he bit the lamb off the end of his fork. "He'd let me have it, anyway."

She didn't doubt it, considering Ilya had already willingly given him some earlier without even being prompted. "Hon," she murmured gently, reaching over the table to touch his wrist. "We didn't know."

Shane looked up at her, slowly lowering his fork "What?" he questioned, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

"That is had been going on this long," Yuna clarified quietly. "We didn't realize your history with each other was this…*extensive*."

That was putting it mildly, of course. A decade was more than just extensive; it was the kind of milestone that couples would celebrate with elaborate parties. But she couldn't allow

herself to think of it that way, too afraid her eyes might swell with tears if she thought about all the moments, she missed out on.

“Oh, that.” He suddenly looked down, expression shifting to one that resembled shame or remorse. “I- we would have told you.” He wanted to, anyway. At some point.

“Why didn’t you?” David wondered, head tilting gently.

His son opened and closed his mouth, like he was searching for words he wasn’t sure existed. “I just…kept waiting for the right time, I guess,” he admitted. “There wasn’t one.”

He thought after figuring out his sexuality, he could explain it better. But he wasn’t able to tell them how he knew without mentioning Ilya. He thought after becoming exclusive, he could come clean. But he worried they might break up and wanted to make sure they were stable, first. He thought after living together for a while, there would be enough proof of their commitment to make it easier to be honest. But it wasn’t.

“Any time that you wanted to tell us, could have been the right time,” he assured him. “For anything. Ever. We’ll always listen.” Even if it was a hard conversation to have or one that, frankly, left him feeling like he didn’t truly know his own son.

Yuna ran her thumb back and forth over his arm for a moment. “Your father and I are still learning,” she said softly. “But we’re trying our best to make sense of everything and be there for you. We just need you to let us.”

Her worst fear had always been watching him get seriously injured on the ice, losing him to what he loved more than anything else. She never realized she would also have to fear being pushed away because he fell for what he considered the wrong person for such a long time.

Shane nodded slightly. “I’m trying,” he promised. “It’s just…a lot harder than I thought it would be.” He felt like even after they found out, he was still keeping them at a distance. Like maybe the concept of him being gay was alright but the person he chose wasn’t.

“Hard things are usually the ones most worth it in the end,” his mom reminded him.

Shane glanced over her shoulder, eyes finding the door as Ilya walked back into the restaurant. He pulled his coat off, hanging it up again before heading back to their table. Yuna looked back as well, pulling her hand away as Ilya sat back down.

She wasn’t blind. She could see the way his body immediately tilted into her son’s, as if compelled by some gravitational pull before he corrected himself. They had to do that a lot, she suspected, in order to keep up the pretense.

“Vic is single handedly ruining our team image by teaching kids to play hockey at some camp in Bridgewater,” Ilya muttered, laying his napkin back over his lap. “It better not wind up in the news or fans will start thinking we’re good people.”

Shane huffed a laugh. “I think it’s great that he wants to get involved,” he muttered earnestly. “I also think you’re secretly encouraging him by changing our schedule to accommodate the

commute."

He narrowed his eyes at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied, shrugging with strangely convincing deception. "I've had the practice schedule laid out since last month, I just gave it to him early. Dates happened to align well."

Shame hummed skeptically. "So, I didn't see you spend half the flight to Anaheim googling the distance from our rink to the camp to figure out how long Vic would be driving every day?" he wondered. "And I also didn't see you crossing days out on the original schedule you keep on the desk, moving things a few hours later than they'd typically be?"

Ilya pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, blinking at him. "You are alarmingly astute, sometimes," he replied. "It's unsettling."

His lips lifted into a small smile as he shook his head softly, dropping the subject. If he wanted to pretend like it was all a massive coincidence that their practices were going match up with the exact dates Vic told Ilya he would be volunteering, then they could pretend.

But everyone at the table and everyone on the Raiders team knew the only reasons those times aligned so perfectly was because Ilya spent three days figuring out how to make it work for his friend.

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The next day, Yuna and David spent the majority of their afternoon at some historical museum they had wanted to see the last time they were in town but missed out on. Or at least, David wanted to see it. Yuna mostly went along because staying cooped up in the apartment wasn't an option according to her husband.

Regardless, she went and pretended to have at least some semblance of interest for his sake.

Then, as night fell, they made their way to the arena an hour before the game started. Early, yes, but then again, they always were for their son's games. It didn't matter which city he played in, that wasn't going to change.

And this time, Yuna didn't have quite so much trouble wearing something gold. She might have even felt a little excited about it, after discovering a few secrets about her sons' past teammates during the last couple of months.

"I think I like these seats better than the ones in Montreal," David admitted, gesturing towards the row to let his wife go first.

"They're definitely closer," she agreed as she sat down, crossing her legs and scanning the rink with her eyes.

The first time they had visited, the arena and its fans were still getting used to the idea of Shane playing here. There were a few pictures of him up, though it was tough to find a place for him to fit in when the murals were already painted and the crowd mostly still wore their jerseys with Rozanov, Marlow, or Dubek on the back of it.

Now, Yuna could notice the difference. The way they had repainted their walls and hung vertical banners above the escalators just like they did with Sebbin or Hammersmiths picture. There were far more jerseys with his name on the back, too, intermingled with other players' names.

"Think he'd respond if we texted?" her husband questioned, only partially teasing her.

Yuna furrowed her eyebrows, looking in his direction. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "Try it?"

Usually, he was so busy before a game that he was impossible to reach for several hours, let alone just one. But he was also typically a lot more stressed than he had been in the past few months.

Playing games before the faceoff and apparently during the intermissions as well seemed to actually help him relax, somehow, instead of making him anxious like she thought it would have.

She leaned over her husband's shoulder, watching him send a text to Shane that they were already in their seats. It was read almost immediately and a few bubbles popped up as he texted back. Before anything came through, however, they disappeared.

"Guess he's busy after all," David murmured, shrugging as he set his phone down in his lap. "Maybe Boston hasn't changed everything."

"It's changed enough, though," she replied earnestly, fingertips twitching against her knee. "In a good way, I think."

He nodded. "Definitely in a good way," he agreed. "I can't remember the last time I saw him as happy as he's been lately." Honestly, it might not have been that much of a reach to assume he truly never had been this happy before.

The energy in the Raiders arena felt different than in Montreal. But he liked it better, for some reason she couldn't explain. Maybe it was his imagination, but he felt like the fans here appreciated their son more.

They expected a lot, still, of course. But he never saw them immediately taking their outrage to social media if the Raiders lost a game because Shane missed a goal or had a bad night. They seemed to notice when he looked tired and gave him space when they asked for an autograph on the street.

David's phone buzzed and he picked it back up, frowning slightly as he clicked on the text Shane had sent back.

"Did he respond?" Yuna questioned, sounding a little surprised. She couldn't think of why it would take him so long if he had been able to read the text so quickly in the first place.

"Uh- sorta." He nodded, tilting his screen towards her for a moment.

She leaned closer to the phone, realizing their son's response had been a picture of the arena taken from somewhere pretty far away. It was zoomed in on their row, as close as possible to

a photo of them he could manage to take.

“Wha- where is he?” she wondered, slightly confused as she looked around the rink. There were already a few thousand fans finding their seats and it would only get busier as the faceoff grew closer.

Her husband tapped her arm gently. “There he is,” he muttered, pointing towards the tunnel the team came out of.

Shane was trying his best to be discreet about it, tucked away but waiting for them to notice him. He wasn’t in full gear yet, but enough of it to make it clear he had dashed out of the locker room before he finished getting ready.

Yuna huffed, pulling out her own phone and calling him. She watched him in real time as he noticed his phone started to ring and pick up. “What are you doing?” she wondered, voice tinged with amusement.

Across the rink, he shrugged. “You guys texted me first, remember?” he replied. “Dad asked what I was doing.” He gestured to himself, as if it was the answer.

“I don’t think we asked you to run into the tunnel, hon,” she muttered, even though she was secretly a little glad he had gone out of his way to wave to them. “You should be playing whatever that game is before the faceoff or something. Where’s your team?”

“Uh- pretty sure they’re running down here, too?” Shane admitted, sounding a bit uncertain.

He lowered his phone for a moment, turning to peer down the tunnel as he heard a bit of clamoring. The kind that was usually reserved for the locker room or the hallway outside of it before the game started.

David squinted his eyes as Yuna put her phone on speaker, propping it between them in hopes it would still be possible to hear despite the growing commotion around them as more people found their seats. They could see Kohn, Sebbin, and Connors bounding towards their son. They craned their heads, peering out of the tunnel far less inconspicuously as they searched the crowd.

“Where are your parents?” Sebbin wondered, trying to spot them amongst the thousands of people filling their arena.

Shane pointed to the row they were in. “Over there,” he replied before he glanced at him. “How did you know I was coming out here to see them?”

“Because you told us they were coming to the game tonight multiple times, then you got a text and ran off?” Connors reminded him, spotting the phone in his hand. “Oh! Is that them?”

He nodded, pulling the phone away from his ear and putting it on speaker to let them say something to either of them if they wanted to.

Immediately they did, voices overlapping as they told them hello and said they were glad to see them again. Kohn even got a bit too close to the edge of the tunnel, waving until Connors

tugged him back to keep the rest of crowd from noticing them.

“Hi mama Hollzy,” Kohn greeted, voice light and sing-songy. “We hope your flight yesterday was good. Shane’s been bugging us nonstop for the last week about your visit, so we wanted to see you guys.”

He smacked his teammate against the chest softly. “I have not,” he retorted defensively. “I mentioned it like twice.”

“Six times,” Sebbin corrected. “Once when you suggested they spend Christmas in Boston, again when they booked their plane tickets, twice at practice the day before they got in, another time in the group chat yesterday, and tonight when you got to the rink.”

Shane glared at him in annoyance, but he just shrugged. In his own defense, he had been pretty excited for them to visit again now that they knew about him and Ilya. He really wanted the chance for them to get to know him the way he did and love him enough so that they would fully accept the relationship.

“It’s nice to see you too,” David muttered, still squinting. “Sort of see you, anyway.” He didn’t realize he needed to bring his glasses to a hockey game. Usually, the screens were big enough that he could see everything pretty well.

“Shouldn’t you guys be heading back to the locker room?” Yuna wondered, leaning closer to the speaker of her phone to talk over the commotion. “Warmups start soon.”

At a distance, she could see Connors shrugging dramatically as he leaned against Kohn. He looked like actually getting ready for the game they paid him to play wasn’t the highest item on his list of priorities right now.

“We’ve got a few more minutes until Roz realizes he lost track of us,” Sebbin assumed. “Plus, that atmosphere was getting *way* too intense for me.”

Kohn hummed in agreement. “It’s always weird in there when we play Tampa because of how aggressive they are,” he muttered, wrinkling his nose. “They hate every team, but I think they’ve got something against us specifically because we can actually handle what they dish out.”

And give it right back, too, which Tampa hated but the fans loved. It was almost a given that before the night was over, one or two of them would have a new concussion or bruised ribs, if nothing else. And if they were going to come out of this game with injuries, they sure as hell were going to send the other team home with a few of their own.

Shane rolled his eyes. “Maybe don’t mention how blood thirsty their players are to my parents who worry if I trip off a curb,” he suggested. “We’ll handle them, just gotta be more focused than usual.”

“Oh, oops. Sorry,” Connors muttered sheepishly, leaning towards his phone. “It’s gonna be totally fine, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander. We always beat Tampa. Haven’t lost to them in four consecutive years.”

Yuna somehow didn't feel put at ease when she heard that, given what she knew about Tampa off the top of her head. They were a pretty aggressive team, much like the Raiders were. But they also didn't favor clean hits and fair plays as much as her sons' teammates did. It was concerning, to say the least.

"Soon to be five," Kohn added with a little too much confidence, wanting another full season without losing to them. "It's over my dead body they beat us on our own ice."

Sebbin nodded in agreement. "Your dead body? Try *all* of our dead bodies," he muttered. "Leave one sheep and all that."

He knew some guys on their team had more or less respect for specific teams; it depended on their personal feelings towards the players. But he was pretty sure that as a collective they didn't have this much disdain for any other team in the league aside from the Metros.

"It's gonna be an interesting night, that's for sure," Shane mumbled, growing a bit antsy as he saw the rows of seats still filling up.

"At least we're getting dinner afterwards, no matter what happens," Connors noted, nudging him slightly before pausing in realization. "Wait- are you coming out with us afterwards?"

"Uh—" He honestly forgot about their tradition to always celebrate after games against Tampa because he had only played them once this season. "—I don't know," he confessed, tilting his head towards his parents. "Probably just grabbing something to eat with my parents."

Kohn frowned, not a fan of that answer. "Oh, come on, you can't skip out on celebrating another successful victory against Tampa," he insisted. "That's the best part of playing them."

That and seeing how pissed they look when they had to leave the ice. Sometimes, if it was a bad enough beatdown, one of their players would snap a stick-on purpose.

Shane huffed. "We haven't even beaten them, yet," he replied.

"*Yet*," Sebbin emphasized. "But we will and then we're going to that steakhouse on North end and getting a really nice bottle of wine. C'mon, you love their food, Shane. And their dessert, too. Remember how good the berry pavlova is?"

He let out a dramatic sigh, nodding his head. "It's delicious, yes," he conceded. "But I'm not abandoning my parents after—"

"Invite them, then," Connors interjected before he could finish his sentence. "Kane knows the owner, we can add them to the reservation without a problem."

Shane opened and closed his mouth, tilting his head to look back out of the tunnel. He could see, even from a distance, that his parents were looking at each other. Probably with skeptical glances. Aside from meeting the team briefly before and after games, they never really spent much time with them.

They never spent much time with the Metros, either, for that matter. Maybe they met a few at a time, every once in a while, and knew Hayden pretty well. But they actually got dinner with the whole group or anything.

Frankly, it was because he worried about his teammate making a joke at his expense in front of them. But he was fully confident that he wouldn't have to worry about the Raiders doing that.

"I mean I- I guess that's true," Shane admitted. "Would you guys want to come with us?" he questioned cautiously, waiting for an answer.

Yuna and David just stared at each other, like they were both waiting for the other to respond so they could just agree with whatever was said. There was some floundering, admittedly. A mix of shaking and nodding their heads in a circle that didn't really answer anything.

"Uh- sure," David eventually agreed slowly, watching his wife's expression closely to make sure he hadn't said the wrong thing. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No problem at all," Kohn assured them. "We'll let Kane know."

He was the one who seemed to know every restaurant in the city, after all. And just as many owners or head waiters to be on decent terms with a majority of them.

"We should go," Shane muttered, head tilted back towards the locker room. "I'll see you guys after the game."

Yuna nodded, even though she was fairly certain he couldn't see it and let him hang up. She put her phone away, taking a deep breath to settle her nerves about the game. And apparently about dinner, too.

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The game was rough, to say the least. That wasn't to imply the Raiders were losing, though. Because they weren't. It was a fairly decent score of 3-2 in their favor as they approached the halfway point in the third period.

A lead, yes, but not one as overwhelmingly successful as any of them hoped for.

It wasn't the number of goals scored, however, that caused both Yuna and David to worry throughout it. It was watching the other team attack their son, repeatedly. Multiple Raiders, technically. Including Ilya, Varkov, and Feller, too.

Yuna winced, watching a player hit Feller in the face with the end of his stick. The refs weren't calling it a penalty, for some reason, but she was fairly certain it hadn't been an accident. Not with the way the player didn't look shocked by the injury, let alone remorseful.

Feller dipped his head, hurt too badly to even engage in a fight with the man. They saw Vic go after the guy, anyway, though. Shoving him against the boards, he snapped at the player who promptly took a swing and David tensed.

He could feel his wife's nails digging into his arm, leaving marks as they watched the two of them getting more aggressive. Carmichael stood up from his place on the bench, shouting some inaudible to anyone except the other players.

"What's he saying?" David wondered, trying and failing to read his lips at such a distance.

She squinted. "I don't know," she confessed, watching their son point at the ref and scream something at him. "Seems like Shane agrees, though."

He hummed, lips twisting as he saw Vic get knocked to ground and drag the player who hurt Feller with him until they were brawling on the floor.

Shane kept his attention half on Vic and half on the referees as he tapped his stick against the wall along with the rest of the team. "Do your fucking job!" he shouted.

There was more clamoring from the bench. "They wouldn't be fighting if you called that penalty like you were supposed to!" Dubek snapped, stuck watching his teammate fight while he was still on the bench.

Feller leaned over the rail with his head in his hands and Shane let go of his stick to tend to him. Patting him on the shoulder as he groaned, he helped him get his helmet off, letting it clatter against the ground.

"Get the team doctor," he insisted, looking over his shoulder at Desjourney who was already sending someone to grab him.

Why they didn't have him wait closer to the rink when they played Tampa, he wasn't sure. It seemed like they had a pretty consistent pattern of needing him.

"That fucking hurt," Feller grumbled, trying to breathe through the pain as he raised his head.

Shane grimaced, noticing the blood on his face. "Bright side? Vic is definitely roughing up Gericault worse than he got you," he murmured, trying to bring him a little bit of comfort as the referees finally tried to break up the brawl that was still going.

He huffed weakly, nodding. "Good," he replied.

Keeping one hand planted on his arm firmly, he helped Feller get off the ice and take a seat on the bench. Carmichael picked up his helmet, resting it beside him as Kovalev, on the ice, passed them Feller's discarded stick from a few moments ago. Hammersmith leaned it against the wall.

"You guys hate to give me a night off, don't you?" their doctor asked, finally emerging from his office. "How you feeling, Feller?" he wondered, squeezing his arm gently as he knelt in front of him.

"Like I got hit in the face with a blunt hockey stick," he deadpanned, wincing in pain as an eyeroll hurt worse than expected.

He nodded, checking his face carefully. “Seems like he got you right under the eye,” he muttered, pressing his thumb against the bruise lightly. “Any higher and we’d be looking at a very different injury.”

“Speaking of injuries, you’ve got another skating disaster getting time in the penalty box,” Dubek muttered, motioning to Vic who was settling in pretty quickly.

Their doctor glanced at him. He looked banged up, cheek bloodied but was probably more pissed off than anything else. The adrenaline helped to numb the pain a bit, but the ringing in his ears persisted anyway.

“Let me check there wasn’t too much damage here, first,” he insisted, already fussing with Feller more than he liked having done. “I’ll check on Vic in a second, make sure there isn’t any problems with his cognition.”

Desjourney tapped Shane’s arm, nodding towards the ice. Even with Vic in the box, they’d still have to replace Feller. “Get out there,” he muttered before redirecting his attention to his injured players.

Shane grabbed his stuff, strapping his helmet on before he hopped over the railing. He wasn’t even sure what the point of wearing it was, though, if the other team was going to keep fucking tearing them off every time they got into a fight.

He skated over to Ilya, who was alarmingly silent. Contemplating, perhaps. Or just planning the most efficient way to rip someone’s head clean off their shoulders without getting arrested for it. It was hard to tell, frankly.

“How is Feller?” he murmured, eyes still trained on someone from the other team.

Shane shrugged. “Bruised up, but doc didn’t look overly worried about it,” he replied, slowly setting up for a faceoff as things settled down even though the tension remained.

Ilya hummed softly. “Let’s just try to get through the rest of the game without any other emergencies,” he suggested.

His gaze flitted towards his boyfriend’s jersey for a moment like he was scrutinizing something about it or what was under it. He let it go, though, blowing out a breath and he stood across from Hammersmith.

They exchanged glances quietly, mostly unreadable despite the anger simmering below the surface. Kane was the only one who really looked like he was about to lose it, pissed about working overtime as their only defenseman on the ice right now.

Tampa won the faceoff, but they didn’t let them get far with the puck, chasing after it quickly. One of their players shot it across the rink and Hammersmith was quick to block it before it even got to their goalie, passing it back towards Kane.

Shane watched him get checked against the boards, glass rattling as the puck was stolen. If anyone who didn’t know Kane personally saw him at that particular moment, they’d think he

was the most aggressive man alive with how red in the face he was. Shane understood the feeling, pretty damn frustrated himself. Not with their own game, but the other teams.

Shane hurried after one of Tampa's forwards as their team skated into their end zone. He didn't get the puck back but managed to knock it off course, in the direction of Hammersmith, before getting shoved against the boards himself.

He winced, forcing the player off him harshly. Probably with more vigor than was necessary, if he was being honest. But he wasn't looking for a tussle or anything, just wanted a bit of distance between them. He felt borderline claustrophobic around the other team tonight, the proximity wearing his patience thin.

Even if it could have been easy to move on from the shove Shane had given, the other player didn't let it go. They never seemed to let anything go when they played the Raiders, for that matter. And in seconds, the man had pushed him back like he was trying to start a fight thirty seconds after the last one ended.

"Oh, for fucks sake," Shane snapped, his stick clattering to the ground as his gloved pressed into the guy's jersey, trying to push him off before things escalated to a full-blown brawl.

There had certainly been plenty of those all night, but he really didn't want another right now, and before the player could elicit a rise out of Shane, Ilya was breaking the scuffle up.

He shoved the man away, pointing at him. "Can't go one minute without starting shit, can you, Pressly?" he accused, shaking his head in annoyance as he gestured towards Tampa's captain. "Go back to your damn ringleader before you get us both thrown in the penalty box."

And he would, in fact, get himself tossed into it if they kept going after his team. He was trying to be civil, not because he gave a shit about breaking one of their noses but because he actually wanted this game to end before they had the chance to hospitalize any of the Raiders.

The man scoffed, rolling his eyes and falling back towards his team as a referee skated up to him, likely questioning the spat. Ilya just hoped he was wise enough to brush it off instead of trying to pin it on Shane.

"Why do I feel like they're trying to break the record for most fights in a single hockey game?" Shane wondered, furrowing his eyebrows as he watched the player shake his head at the ref.

"They're probably not far off from it," he admitted with a half-assed shrug, still pushing down his own temper before it exploded. "How are your ribs?"

He frowned slightly before trying to school the expression. "Fine," he replied. "He barely touched them."

They all seemed a lot more interested in going for the face and head tonight, for some reason, despite knowing it would get them into even worse trouble than a normal fight would.

Ilya glared at him for a moment. “Not what I was referring to,” he retorted, shaking his head. “But I want to win, so, for now, we’ll pretend like you didn’t bruise them when you got punched in the stomach earlier.”

It had been one of the first fights of the night and Ilya should have known from how violently they started it, that tonight would be difficult. He was just trying to keep his team in one piece, frankly. Easier said than done when they were just as willing to engage in a fight as he was.

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Shane muttered, conveniently ignoring the ache that had been killing him all night as he skated back towards Kane.

He knew there was no way he could convince Shane to sit down, especially after he just came off the bench. No matter how sore he was, he would insist on playing through it. Ilya would just need to make sure he got them checked after the game.

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When the clock ran down and the Raiders officially won against Tampa, several players on both teams were injured. There was varying severity, from split lips caused by fist fights to concussions caused by tripping. Shane considered himself pretty lucky to only have some bruises on his ribs, even if the others disagreed.

“Cooperate Hollander,” Dubek insisted, using his full last name instead of his usual nickname to fully cement how serious he was. “It’s not going to be tight if you keep fidgeting.”

He sighed, sitting on the bench in the locker room as his teammate wrapped his ribs for him. It was compromise, after he refused to let anyone call the team doctor and everyone else refused to let him leave without any medical attention. He still felt like he somehow drew the short straw, so to speak.

“I can’t fucking believe you hid this all game,” Connors insisted, gesturing to the bruising on his skin that was already darkening after being not being tended to for over an hour. “How were you not dying?”

Shane met Ilya’s gaze, the glare unescapable as he just shrugged. “It didn’t hurt that badly,” he promised. “And they look worse than they are; my ribs have always bruised easily.”

He was pretty much bruised with the slightest impact, which always left him covered in marks that looked more intense than they truly felt. Granted he actually was in quite a bit of pain tonight, but even so, they still won, and that’s what was important.

Kovalev hummed skeptically, changing into a nicer shirt after his shower. “You look like a plum,” he muttered, buttoning his shirt up.

“Thank, Kov,” Shane murmured back sarcastically with an equally tight smile.

Dubek tore the bandage off the roll, pressing it against the wrap as it self-adhered to it. The fact that Shane tried and failed to hide a wince of pain wasn’t lost on him, but he ignored it,

having already chewed him out for pretending to be fine all night.

“There,” he stated, letting Shane grab his stuff “Just take it easy for the next few days.”

He nodded in agreement, slipping his shirt over his head. Thankfully, it was their last game before Christmas break, and they would all have plenty of time to recover from their injuries. And they could also take a little bit of joy in knowing Tampa would also be resting up after getting a few wounds of their own.

Kane was hanging his jersey back up as Shane leaned beside his cubby. “Thanks for getting my parents added to the team’s reservation,” he muttered, watching him zip up his bag.

He just shrugged. “No big deal,” he replied. “I’m glad you’re not ditching us tonight. It’s gonna be a good dinner.”

Any meal after they won always was and their appetites would probably be massive after the game they just played. He knew he intended to eat enough for two people, at least. To say nothing of the dessert menu.

“Yeah, me too,” Shane admitted. “I haven’t had that pavlova in so long I think it’s more of a fever dream.”

Alright, it had been three weirdly long weeks. He ate it after the last time they played Tampa. But still, the memory of it lingered.

Kane slung his bag over his shoulder, nudging his shoulder. “Let’s get out of here,” he muttered.

The team filed out and Varkov shut the lights off behind them as they spilled out into the hallway. Reporters were waiting for them, as they aways were. Yuna and David were standing there, too. Between the choices, Shane’s parents received a much warmer welcome.

“There you guys are,” Carmichael exclaimed, shaking David’s hand. “Good to see you, again.”

“Likewise,” Shane’s dad muttered, voice tinged with worry and pride as he accepted the handshake. “That was a pretty rough game out there.”

Kovalev shrugged, not disputing it. “They’re always hostile towards us,” he muttered, giving Yuna a gentle hug. “Nothing we can do except give them the same treatment.”

“You certainly did that,” David affirmed.

Yuna hummed in agreement, nodding as she glanced around, mentally tallying some of their injuries. Feller’s face had bruised and the cut on Vic’s cheek had stopped bleeding but still looked raw and painful.

“I don’t condone violence, but that wasn’t a fair hit,” she murmured to quietly Vic. “You did the right thing.” Even if it had given her a small heart attack to watch.

He bit back a laugh, tipping his head slightly. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Yuna reached to tip Feller’s face to the side like she was scrutinizing a child’s injury. “And *you,*” she stated firmly. “You need to make sure you keep some ice on that tonight to help with the swelling.”

Feller nodded his head in agreement. “I plan to, Mrs. Hollander,” he assured her, already thinking about the bag of ice he kept in his freezer.

Shane grimaced as the reporters tried to interrupt; cameras already pointed towards his team and his parents. It seemed like they were incapable of giving any of them personal space or reading the room. Or perhaps they could but just didn’t care.

Regardless, he gestured to the exit, eager to get out of the arena. “Let’s go,” he suggested, finger tapping against the strap of his bag. “I’m starving.”

Marlow hummed, nodding in agreement. “Me too,” he agreed.

“Me three,” Varkov tacked on, wrapping his arm around Sebbin and using him like a crutch after getting his leg smacked by a stick that flew out of someone hand previously in the game.

He already knew it was bruising from the color distortion he noticed during his post-game shower but was trying his best not to think about how much worse it would get over the next few days.

Shane nudged his mom’s shoulder gently as they all walked away from the reporters, ignoring their attempts to ask questions or get their attention. “Are you guys really okay getting dinner with everyone?” he asked softly.

The last thing he wanted to do was force them to waste one of their nights here hanging out with his team after just watching them play. They probably would have preferred a quiet dinner at a casual restaurant or at his and Ilya’s house so they could keep getting to know him. A steakhouse wasn’t part of their plans, that was for sure.

Yuna nodded her head. “Of course we’re fine with it, hon,” he muttered in response. “We love that you enjoy going out with them.”

It was actually something that brought her a lot of peace, really. Instead of refusing to celebrate and heading home to wind down like he used to in Montreal, he was willingly staying out and looking forward to joining his team for things he could do alone. That was more important to her than he could have realized.

Shane gave a small nod, not entirely seeming to believe her but accepting the answer anyway. He tapped Connors on the arm, pulling him out a conversation with Marlow. “Who are you driving?” he questioned, figuring they’d probably condense themselves into a few vehicles to make the parking less of a hassle.

He huffed, shrugging. “Whoever follows me to my car, I guess,” he replied in amusement. “I don’t know how I became the designated driver in this group. I got like three tickets last year.”

“You’re the only one who doesn’t try to mimic a Fast and Furious movie, that’s how,” Shane told him. “Besides, do parking tickets really count?”

It was definitely impressive when someone who lived so close to the center of Boston didn’t have tickets, but no one really expected it to happen very often. The parking regulations were so unnecessarily convoluted that a few parking tickets really weren’t a big deal.

It was the speeding tickets that always had Shane’s jaw dropping, confused how any of them could manage to get up to eighty-five or ninety when the speed limits were so much lower. Especially with all the traffic constantly getting backed up.

“Notice how I stay away from Ilya or Dubek when they want to drive?” Kohn questioned. “That’s intentional.” He pointed toward Kovalev. “Only three guys in this entire group I trust behind the wheel and it’s Connors, Kov, or you Hollzy.”

“Hey, I’m a good driver!” Dubek insisted, giving him a gentle shove. “I just tend to disagree with the maps estimated time of arrival, is all.”

Kovalev shook his head. “Not a thing to be proud of,” he retorted, rolling his eyes. “I’m glad Kohn at least recognizes that he’s a public safety hazard on the roads.” Now if he could just get the others to admit their own habits were questionable, they might actually get somewhere.

“Oh! Hollzy’s car is an option?” Hammersmith questioned, raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t know that.”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll be driving his own parents, Smitty,” Ilya retorted, patting his shoulder. “Maybe you could lay in the trunk, though?”

There were a few chuckles and Hammersmith shoved him hard enough that he stumbled into Marlow, laughing harder as he claimed abuse. He pushed Ilya upright as they left the arena, the air outside was cold and crisp.

They could see their laughter in the air in front of them with each huff as Dubek tipped his head towards his car as an open invitation to anyone who wanted to drive with him. “See you at the restaurant,” he muttered.

Kane, Feller, and Vic followed after him. One of them made some stupid joke that had the others groaning loud enough it carried across the parking lot.

“Varkov and I drove together,” Kovalev reminded the others, pointing towards his car. “But anyone is free to come with us.”

Kohn immediately shot his hand into the air. “Dibs,” he exclaimed, glancing at Ilya. “Sorry, cap, but I’m looking forward to my steak. I don’t want to die before getting it.”

Ilya scoffed, watching Kohn and Carmichael fall in step with Varkov as Kovalev pulled his car keys out of his bag and unlocked it from a distance. He was slightly insulted, admittedly.

“What is it that makes everything think I am a horrible driver?” he wondered, gesturing to himself as they walked away. “I haven’t gotten a ticket in like eight months.”

“Kov hasn’t had one in three years!” Carmichael shouted over his shoulder.

Ilya blinked, his lips tugging to the side slightly. “Alright, that might be a decent reason,” he confessed, shrugging it off. “Maybe.”

Connors chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, if I was bleeding out on the side of the road, there would be no one I trust more to break traffic violations and get me to the hospital than you, Roz,” he assured him with a straight face.

Marlow nodded slightly. “He’s not wrong,” he mused in agreement. “You’d be a great EMS driver.”

“Ах, спасибо. Огромное спасибо,” Ilya muttered, taking a dramatic bow for a moment before he straightened up and pointed across the parking lot. “А теперь убирайся от меня.”

Marlow chuckled, waving over his shoulder as he turned to follow Sebbin and Hammersmith to Connors car. Ilya huffed, shaking his head in annoyance as he shoved his hand into the pocket of his coat while mumbling something else under his breath.

Shane let out a soft whistle and Ilya turned, realizing he was holding his keys out for him. He didn’t want to drive with his ribs feeling so sore and knew his parents weren’t used to navigating the kind of traffic they had in Boston. Besides, taking Ilya’s car wasn’t an option when it only seated two.

“Don’t crash my car, please,” he muttered, handing over his keys. “I just had it washed.”

Ilya took them from him. “I have never crashed any car!” he exclaimed in confusion. “You know who has? Kovalev! His second week in Boston he wrapped it around a tree and was so panicked that he forgot English for an hour. His host family had to call me because they couldn’t understand him. I had to translate for the police and insurance company.”

Yet everyone seemed to think he was such a brilliant driver, for some reason.

“He’s never had a single accident since then, though,” Shane reminded him, waiting for him to open the car before sliding into the passenger seat. “It’s all about learning from your mistakes.”

Yuna and David opened their own doors, getting into the back seat of the car as they silently watched their conversation play out.

“I have no mistakes to learn from because I am a good driver!” Ilya insisted, starting the car. “You are the one who nearly got pulled over because you forgot we use miles per hour here, instead of kilometers per hour.”

His mouth opened and closed a few times and he buckled his seatbelt. “That’s on the American customary system being stupid, not my ability to drive,” he defended, pointing at his speedometer.

He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “Is that seriously what it’s called?” he wondered dubiously. “The customary system?” He had never once heard someone say that before and he had lived here a long time.

Shane turned to stare at him, blinking. “You don’t even know what system of measurement you use?” he questioned in disbelief.

“I call it the American system!” he defended, shrugging.

He snorted, leaning his head back on the chair. “Yeah, alright,” he muttered skeptically. “Just drive, Colonel Sanders.”

Ilya frowned in annoyance but put the car into drive and pulled out of the parking lot. He even kept both hands on the wheel the whole time, instead of just using one, the way he was used to. He didn’t want Yuna or David to think he was reckless or anything. He just had a tendency to accidentally drive a little quicker than the speed limits allowed sometimes.

Yuna tapped her fingers on her jeans, feeling like she should say or do something. She didn’t really know what, though. Their conversations seemed so easy and natural that she wasn’t really sure how to fit into it if she wasn’t being honest.

“I saw how you tried to break things up between Shane and Pressly,” Yuna noted after a while, bored of looking out of the window. “You were very…efficient.”

Ilya couldn’t look back, of course, eyes focused on the road. “He is like a yappy puppy who wants to be a Rottweiler,” he muttered, shrugging. “Just following his captains orders.”

Had it been one of the other players on the team, he might have actually been worried. Especially since Shane was already in pain with his ribs. But he knew that even if he hadn’t broken it up, Shane could have handled it himself against Pressley. Ilya just didn’t want him to have to.

“Do you ever have your team do that?” David questioned curiously. “Start fights, I mean. The press kind of makes it seem like you do, but clearly, they’re wrong about a lot of things when it comes to you.”

“That is an understatement, I would say,” Ilya muttered. “And no, I never tell them to start fights. They do that because they want to. Usually, to protect each other when it seems like the other team is getting uh- rowdy.”

“Like when Marlow went after Tampa’s captain for messing with Varkov in the second period,” Yuna assumed.

He had served two minutes for it, only because the fight was mutual and they both got torn away from each other before it could get out of hand. She suspected, though, that if no one

got involved, it would have lasted longer.

He nodded to himself. “Marly is very loyal. Very protective too,” he told them, voice tinged with respect. “Probably more than any of us, even me.”

And that was saying something since Ilya was pretty damn defensive when it came to his teammates. He was always more than willing to start or finish a fight if someone hurt any of them, sometimes even said something that he thought crossed a line. Insults about race or nationality.

The one time he heard some hick player from Texas calling Kovalev a Soviet boot licker, he felt a level of disgust he couldn’t describe. But before he even had the chance to make the man pay for it, Marlow nearly put him in the hospital all by himself.

“Those are important qualities,” David muttered in agreement.

Ilya nodded as the car slowed to a stopped at a red light when they got closer to the restaurant. His phone buzzing in his pocket and he reached for it, spotting Carmichaels name for a brief moment before it was immediately snatched out of his hand.

“Eyes on the road,” Shane told him firmly.

He blinked, gesturing to the light. “It’s red,” he reminded him in confusion. “Do you want me to just stare at it with anticipation?”

“Yes,” he responded succinctly.

His answer elicited a sigh of defeat from Ilya, who just tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he watched the light, waiting for it to turn green. Shane unlocked his phone and opened his text messages, tapping on the most recent one. He huffed a soft laugh and Ilya frowned, glancing over at him.

“What did Carmichael say?” Ilya wondered as the light changed colors and he drove through it. He could hear the sound of him typing a response out, sending it. “Are you responding on my phone? What are you texting?”

“Relax, it’s not the first time I’ve texted him from your phone,” he reminded him. “I know how to sound like you.”

Yuna’s eyebrows shot up slightly, leaning forward slightly to try to read over her son’s shoulder as he sent a message to Carmichael without hesitation. There was a word or two purposely taken out of it, an acronym Shane would never use, and an emoji added to the end. She supposed that’s how Ilya texted.

“That does not answer my first question,” he replied, furrowing his eyebrows. “Also, when have you texted him from my phone?”

“When you were too busy diffusing your curls to send a response last month, remember?” Shane recalled. “He just wanted to let you know they stopped outside the restaurant because

they ran into some fans." The phone beeped again. "He also wants to know if you have a pen because no one else does and they feel bad not being able to sign stuff."

"I don't," Ilya muttered, shaking his head. "I should start carrying one, though. A sharpie or something." He got asked for an autograph often enough that he probably had a good reason to keep one on him. Or in his bag, at least.

"I have one you could use," Yuna chimed in, trying her best to be helpful. "It's in my purse somewhere."

Her son nodded, deleting the text he had been typing and sending a different one, instead. "Telling him now," he muttered, shutting off Ilya's phone as sliding it back into his pocket for him.

As they pulled into a parking spot on the street, Ilya shut off the car and passed the keys back to Shane. David could hear him muttering something in Russian, a joke or some sort of comment that made their son chuckle before unbuckling. He got out of the car, closing the door softly and getting out of the road.

"Give me a few dollars," Ilya muttered, holding his palm out as he stood beside the parking meter. He already bought the parking pass they both shared, he wasn't going to shell out more money for street parking, too.

Shane huffed, reaching for his wallet and passing him some cash without complaining. "How much time are you putting on it?" he wondered, hand lingering on an extra dollar, unsure if they needed it.

"Two and a half hours?" he assumed, shrugging. "Why, should I make it three?"

Yuna watched her son tip his head side to side contemplating it for a moment before pulling out the extra dollar he had been deciding on. "Might as well," he told him, handing it over. "We're always out later than we think we will be."

They always faced the same, annoying problem of actually *enjoying* being with their team outside of the rink. No matter what time they planned to leave, they stayed later, not wanting to miss out on the conversation and shenanigans. Usually, the group broke apart hours after they intended to.

"Which way is the restaurant?" David wondered, pulling his jacket back on after spending most of the hockey game not wearing it inside.

Shane gestured down the sidewalk. "It's this way," he replied, staying on the outside of it as his mom walked beside him.

"I don't hear any screaming fans," she teased, rifling through her purse as she searched the pen she knew had somewhere inside of it. She really did need to clean it out more often, apparently.

“You won’t, either,” her son explained as they strolled the pavement a bit further. “They’re never loud enough to cause a scene.”

Yuna furrowed her eyebrows, lifting her head as she finally found her pen. She looked further down the street, spotting a decent sized crowd lingering around a restaurant. Maybe twenty or thirty people were standing around on the sidewalk, some taking pictures but most of them just chatting.

David made a curious sound as they got closer. “Huh…” He tilted his head, watching Feller point up at the sky with his hands, seemingly deep into telling a story.

Shane snatched the pen from his mom, muttering quick thanks for it before he and Ilya immersed themselves in the crowd. Everyone shifted a bit, moving to make more space for them. Yuna blinked, watching her son wave while Ilya shook someone’s hand politely.

“Did you ever find the puck?” some girl asked Feller, wanting to hear the rest of the tale.

Kovalev huffed. “Oh, we found it,” he assured her, nodding. “It got lodged in the rafters for an hour until it eventually came loose.” He tapped his own head. “It nearly gave me a concussion when it fell on me during practice.”

She covered her mouth in surprise, but Feller just shrugged, looking more amused than remorseful. In his defense, it had been long ago enough that most of them found it more funny than annoying. Aside from Kovalev, of course. But that was only because he was the one it hit.

“Do you guys know anything about the All-Star game yet?” a tall man asked curiously. “Is Rozanov going again?”

Ilya shrugged, unsure. “I think voting starts early January, like fourth or fifth?” he presumed. “I’d be glad to go, if enough people want me there.” They had to vote for him to attend, though.

“Do you actually enjoy playing with guys from the other teams?” the man’s wife wondered, leaning against him.

He nodded. “Of course I do,” he muttered. “It’s nice to get a break from the stress of the normal season and I have a lot of respect for the players that attend. Some of them like me better than others, but they all have to deal with me for the week. I try to make it tolerable for them.”

There were a few chuckles. “Yeah, imagine how unlucky we feel dealing with him every single day,” Dubek commented, purposely messing up his curls. “It’s been years and he’s never once woken up on the right side of the bed.”

Ilya shot him a glare of mock annoyance, fixing his hair for a moment.

Yuna and David wandered a little closer, just lingering by their son as Shane laughed over something someone said. He uncapped the pen his mom gave him, watching someone try to

balance on one leg so he could sign her shoe.

He held the girl's ankle, trying to make sure she didn't trip as he wrote his autograph on the side of her Converse. "I like these shoes," he muttered, putting her foot down with a huff. "They're a cool color." He didn't even know they sold them in Lavender.

She chuckled softly, looking down at her own shoe. "Sorry if that was a super weird request," she apologized. "I don't have anything else on me."

Shane shrugged, unbothered by it. "I've signed some pretty strange things before," he told her. "That definitely wasn't anywhere close to the weirdest."

He passed the pen towards Marlow, who barely even noticed it, just took it while still keeping a conversation with some guy who was telling him that he flew across the country to watch them in the championship the year they won the cup.

"That's amazing," Marlow muttered in awe, always pleasantly shocked by how many people made the trip. "Thank you for being there for it."

"Thanks for making it worth missing work," the man replied with a chuckle, holding out the hem of his shirt to have it signed.

Yuna turned towards her husband for a moment. "They're so…polite," she whispered, covering her mouth with her hand, eyes still glued to the interactions.

He nodded slowly, seeing it too. The lack of shoving, and cameras flashing. The way they were just chatting, taking pictures when asked and even letting their fans look at it and ask for a redo if they were blinking

"Woah, it's gonna be permeant?" Vic questioned, the pen hovering over someone's arm. "Shit, now I'm scared. I don't want you to get an ugly tattoo." He bit down on his lip, concentrating as he drew.

David's eyes widened a bit, his attention dragged to Vic as he doodled on a woman's arm so she could get it turned into real ink. Then, just as fast he heard another question being asked and had his attention yanked to it, instead.

"There was an article a while back that said Connors was mad at Carmichael because they weren't sitting next to each other on the bench like usual," some red head mentioned, voice tinged with skeptical amusement, as if she didn't believe it but wanted to ask anyway. "Was there actually a fight?"

They frowned, glancing at each other like they were both trying to remember what night the press could have been trying to twist for the sake of drama. It was pretty hard to remember, frankly, so they both just shook their heads.

"No, I don't think we were ever—Oh! Wait- yes, I do remember that," Carmichael realized, smacking Connors lightly. "We got in trouble for accidentally laughing when they were playing the National Anthem that night and coach separated us for the rest of the night."

“Ohhhh, right!” Connors remembered, nodding his head in agreement. “We weren’t fighting, the whole team just kept having to pull us away because we were unintentionally trying to sit beside each other like we normally do.”

“So, do you guys ever actually get on each other’s nerves?” some guy asked, head tilted with intrigue. “Or is it always just banter and publicity?”

“Uh- yes, and no?” Sebbin replied, head bobbing from side to side. “Sometimes, when we’re travelling and we’re tired we can sometimes get a bit snippy and need more space from each other. Usually, we’re pretty close, though.”

They saw each other way too much to actually have any hostility towards each other linger. He knew that wasn’t always the case for teams, especially in hockey. The Raiders were, by all accounts, incredibly lucky. But he honestly couldn’t imagine being on a team where he didn’t love every single teammate he had, let alone actively despised any or all of them.

“How do you guys make up after a real fight, then?” a blonde woman questioned.

“I will only accept a dozen red stemmed roses and a heartfelt note,” Hammersmith deadpanned a little too well. “Seriously, though? We just apologize to each other and sometimes we’ll buy the other a drink or something.”

“When we fight, it’s out of stress or because of a misunderstanding usually,” Feller added, the pen winding up in his hand somehow. “None of us want to stay mad at each other.” He bent over, signing someone’s water bottle as they passed it to him.

“Because of the game?” she questioned.

He shrugged slightly, passing the pen towards whoever wanted it. “The game is always part of it,” he agreed. “But these guys are also my best friends. I hope I get to keep playing beside them until I retire, but either way it’s way more important for me to have them as my family than my teammates.”

Yuna already liked the answer before Feller reached out to nudge her son’s arm. But the emotion grew when she saw how he was effectively including Shane in that statement despite only knowing him for a few months. It made her heart swell with appreciation for Feller. For the whole team, really.

She couldn’t believe she had been so apprehensive about Shane’s decision. That she was foolish enough to believe what the media said about the Raiders and their fans when it was clearly all bullshit.

“Thank you guys for stopping and hanging out with us, but we’re starving after the game,” Kane told them politely, pointing towards the restaurant behind them. “So, unless anyone has anything else to ask or have signed, we’re going to head inside.”

Yuna expected the crowd to groan, complain, maybe push back and ask for more of their time and attention. Instead, they all nodded, putting away the things they had gotten autographed.

Some of them shook Kohn or Feller's hands again as a way to say goodbye. Then, they just went on their way, continuing their evenings without any fussing or grumbling. It was so alarmingly respectful.

She just blinked, tugging her son's arm to keep him from walking inside. "Is that normal?" she asked in confusion. "I mean, I know you said they didn't make a scene but that- they *really* didn't make a scene."

Shane nodded. "Yeah, they're really sweet," he muttered.

Yuna just glanced back at her husband, who looked equally surprised but also pleased by how courteous they all had been. She just huffed, figuring she'd ask a few more questions later on, either when they were back in the car or tomorrow over breakfast.

"Uh- excuse me?" someone called, before they had all gone inside for dinner.

Ilya paused. Hammersmith, Dubek, Kane, Carmichael, Vic, and Kohn were already inside by the time he heard it. He turned. "Yes?" he wondered, noticing the young woman still standing there.

She'd been there the whole time; he was pretty sure. She had been standing next to the married couple without saying anything, but was definitely there, practically from the start.

"I- sorry, I know I should have asked a second ago when everyone else was," she admitted, a little tense. "I just got a little nervous and I- could I, please? Have an autograph, I mean."

Yuna froze, eyes flitting between him and the girl, feeling bad for her. She was going to suggest he take another moment to sign something. It really wouldn't take long, after all. Before she could, though, Ilya was already nodding.

He let the door to the restaurant close. "Of course," he muttered, stepping towards her extending his hand to take whatever she wanted signed.

He was sure the others would be asking why the rest of them weren't following behind, the way they should have been, but they had already waited all night for their dinner. They could wait an extra minute or two longer.

She let out a short breath, digging through her bag and handing him a rather thick stack of stapled papers. "Thank you so much," she murmured, wringing her hands anxiously.

"No problem," Ilya assured her as he signed the blank backside. Curious, he flipped it over, studying it for a moment before frowning. "Math homework?" he questioned curiously, looking at the equations.

She nodded. "Yeah, for my calculus class," she confessed. "I'm obviously not handing it in, now, though. I'll redo it."

He chuckled, letting his eyes rake over it for a moment. Math never was his strongest subject, despite passing it with pretty high marks. He had no deep hatred of it, the way he knew many people did. It just didn't interest him very much.

Ilya handed her back her math homework. “Do you go to UMass?” he questioned, gesturing in a vague but general direction.

She shook her head. “Tufts, actually,” she replied. “For international relations. I’m taking Russian for my foreign language elective because you.”

His eyes widened slightly, perking up in surprise. “Really?” he wondered, voice tinged with appreciation as he gestured to himself. “Me?”

“Him?” Kovalev noted, exchanging a look of mock envy with Varkov.

She nodded. “I saw this interview you did once in your first or second season and they asked you about why you liked hockey and you answered in Russian,” she explained. “I remember thinking it was such a pretty language even though everyone says its harsh.”

Ilya listened with rapt attention, remembering the conversation she was talking about. He hadn’t been in America for very long and most of his interviews were kept short at the time because he couldn’t answer as well as they liked and he refused to be embarrassed in front of a camera.

That day had only been his third attempt at a much longer, more formal interview in a studio and he wasn’t able to think of a single word in English that could express how he felt about hockey properly.

He didn’t even try, really. Just explained in Russian and had the staff translate everything with subtitles before releasing it.

“It is a beautiful language, yes,” he agreed, nodding. “Have you been learning it long?”

“Just two semesters,” she admitted. “I think I could spend ten years learning and still not be fluent.”

Ilya shrugged, pointing to himself again. “Ten years in America and I still learn new words every week,” he told her, waving off the concern as natural. “Would you want to try to say something?” he suggested gently, giving her time to speak.

She looked a bit sheepish, hesitating for a moment. “Uh- Меня зовут Amelia,” she introduced slowly, pointing to herself. “Приятно познакомиться.”

She hadn’t been planning to meet him at all, let alone introduce herself in his native language. It was, admittedly, terrifying. It felt like months and months’ worth of homework and classes had suddenly flown out the window, leaving her mind blank to the most basic of words.

Kovalev beamed. “Мне тоже приятно познакомиться,” he replied. “That was really good. Can you say anything else?”

Yuna smile softly, her attention originally on the girl switching to her son. Or rather, the fond expression he was wearing as he watched some of their reactions. They seemed overjoyed at hearing someone just trying to say hello in Russian.

She racked her brain trying to think of something when her mind was blanking in front of all of them. “I- oh! Я много лет являюсь поклонником этой команды, но никогда не был на матче,” she told them, a look of concentration on her face. “And…Смотрю по телевизору. Вместо? Вместо этого я смотрю по телевизору?”

She shook her head a bit, scrubbing her forehead as she got a little confused towards the end. If she had a bit of time to actually plan and practice what she was going to say, it might have sounded smoother. At least, she hoped it would have. There was no point in imagining it now.

Varkov nodded slightly. “Yes, вместо means instead,” he assured her, gently.

Ilya frowned, looking a bit disappointed. “I don’t like that,” he muttered, watching her expression immediately drop. “Oh, sorry, not the Russian! Your Russian is very good. I mean I don’t like that you’ve never been able to come to a game,” he clarified quickly. “Why is that?”

She opened and closed her mouth for a moment. “It’s just expensive,” she admitted bashfully. “And I’m enrolled in a lot of credits, so I don’t have the money or the time. I’m really sorry. I’d love to—”

He shook his head. “No, no, do not feel sorry,” he insisted, waving his hand. “Our tickets should be affordable. We play for you to be able to watch it.”

What was the point of even having an arena if fans couldn’t come and join them? He didn’t understand why someone who had been watching them play for years, who didn’t live terribly far from the arena, either, couldn’t come see them. It seemed like she should at least be able to afford seats on the upper floors, even if it wasn’t a VIP spot.

“Well, they’re reasonable at first but then they sell out and people resell them for hundreds of dollars more,” she explained with an apologetic expression.

Ilya hated the tone in her voice, as if she was somehow blaming herself. Or worse, considering herself less of a fan just because she couldn’t attend their games in person. That wasn’t true at all in his mind.

He bristled slightly; a mix of befuddlement and annoyance sprawled across his face. “You said your name was Amelia, right?” he wondered, watching her nod. “What is your last name?”

“Uh- Charles. Amelia Charles,” she told him, voice tinged with confusion.

Ilya filed the information away as he glanced around to see who had wound up with the pen. “Yuna, may I have your pen again?” he asked politely. “And something to write on, if you have it.”

She blinked once before nodding, fishing it back out of her purse. She couldn’t find a blank sheet of paper; her notebook recently filled to the brim before she had the chance to replace it. Instead, she found an old receipt in her bag, handing that to him.

“Will that work?” she asked curiously, head tilting as she watched to figure out what he was doing. He clearly had some sort of intention.

He nodded, passing both to Amelia. “Here, write down your information and I will find you tickets for home game after break,” he told her. “Sometime in early January. Maybe against Winnipeg? Those games are always interesting.”

Her eyes widened, taking the pen from him. “Really?” she questioned, looking down to jot something on the paper.

“You have classes on week days, I assume,” Ilya noted. “You could make a weekend game, though, yes?”

Something on a late Friday or a Saturday afternoon, so she could still manage to get homework done. That seemed plausible to him.

“I- yeah, please,” she muttered, handing him the receipt back. “Thank you so much.”

Yuna nudged her son gently, giving him an inquisitive glance. She wasn’t sure if he was technically allowed to just give people tickets, unless it was the personal seats they offered to friends and family of the players.

Shane just shrugged, though, like he wasn’t overly surprised to hear his boyfriend offering them.

“Everybody should see hockey live once,” Ilya told her firmly, folding up the paper and sliding it into his pocket so he could give it to someone later. “It’s much better in person.”

“I- would it be okay…?” she couldn’t quite finish her sentence, but the vague gesturing was there enough that he understood what she was asking.

Nodding, Ilya gave her a quick hug, practically towering over her for a moment. “Don’t tell anyone I’m nice,” he muttered, pulling back. “Media thinks I’m an asshole and we’re going to keep it that way.”

She nodded again, letting out a disbelieving laugh. “I promise no one will hear about it,” she told him.

David then watched as the girl double checked her autograph was tucked away safely before leaving, a small squeal escaping herself when she was much further down the street. Ilya chuckled, gesturing towards the door where half the team was still waiting on him.

“What? She was nice,” he stated defensively before they could say anything. Which they would, he was sure.

“Uh huh,” Marlow hummed, glaring at him with a knowing look.

Ilya ignored it and just brushed past him. “Just go inside,” he demanded, tugging at the handle and holding the door open for him.

With a huff, the rest of his team wandered inside. Shane, Yuna, and David trailed behind them, and he couldn't exactly tell what the expression on his mom's face was, but there was definitely something behind her eyes when she met his.

Letting the door close behind himself, Ilya followed them through the restaurant, towards the back where there was a more private room. Half of the guys were already seated as the others pulled their coats off, hanging them on the rack in the corner beside the long table.

Unsurprisingly, Kane had already ordered two bottles of wine.

"Wow, you guys took forever," Carmichael joked, fussing with the edge of his menu. "I'll let you in on a secret, the door was a pull not a push."

Feller smacked him on the back of the head lightly, walking around to sit beside him. "Ilya got caught up with another fan," he explained, tone implying it happened pretty frequently. "Said he'd arrange for her to see one of the games next month."

Kohn's head lolled to the side. "Really, Roz?" he muttered. "How many times are you going to do that this month? Four? Five?"

"It's Christmas, Kohn! Let me give people things," he defended, sitting down beside Shane and picking up his menu.

"Wait- I'm a little confused," Yuna admitted, sounding a little perplexed as David pulled out a chair for her. "You do this often? Give people tickets when you meet them?"

There was an immediate clamor of agreement and her eyes widened slightly. Glancing at them all, pretty much every single one of them began nodding their heads with a mix of amusement and exasperation, like the answer was obvious.

"I mean, we all do it here and there," Sebbin admitted, shrugging. "Ilya just has even less self-control than the rest of us."

She let out a small huff, watching Ilya roll his eyes and pour himself a small glass of wine while he acted indifferent to the comment. "How come I've never heard that before?" she wondered. "Wouldn't the news mention it at some point?"

It would be great publicity. No wonder they didn't take advantage of it; they hated receiving that for some reason.

"The fact that we keep our interactions away from the media is part of what gives us a strong community," Vic explained with a vague gesture of his hand. "We're not taking advantage of them by putting them on tv and making ourselves look good."

Marlow nodded. "They feel like we're people they can actually talk to, that we care about them and what they say." Which they did. "And they give so much to us that we feel like we should at least try to give something back occasionally."

Plus, the more publicized it got, the more likely it was that people who didn't even like hockey would actually ask or beg for free tickets. They didn't want anything to disrupt the

dynamics they had cultivated with their fans already.

“Yeah, some of us just give back a little more frequently than the others,” Connors noted, staring directly at Ilya. He was seriously going to get in trouble one day for some of his decisions.

“In Ilya’s defense, the people want to see us play; they just can’t always afford it,” Shane added, pouring himself a glass of wine. “That’s not their fault.”

He knew extremely well how well off they both were in terms of financial stability. They had no mortgages on their houses, no down payments on their car, no loans of any kind that they had to pay off. But even the people without debt were still often living paycheck to paycheck and couldn’t scrounge up enough money to devote a full day to hockey.

Ilya gestured to him. “Exactly,” he agreed. “It’s not fair that fans who have followed our team for years can’t see us play but VIPs get a special area despite knowing absolutely nothing about hockey or who any of us are,” he insisted, shaking his head in annoyance. “I don’t want to play for rich snobs; I want to play for the people who want to be there.”

“We can talk to the lawyers,” Kovalev suggested, shrugging. “If we convince them price jacking is preventing actual fans from getting tickets, they might cancel their deals that allow it.” It would negatively impact the arena, too, not just their team’s energy.

“You think they’d listen to you?” David asked curiously.

He was somewhat under the impression that teams were supposed to play, not manage these kinds of decisions. That’s what he had seen from the Metros, anyway. Sometimes, management didn’t even allow them to voice their opinions, let alone actually lobby for some kind of real change.

Kane shrugged, elbows propped on the table. “If they don’t want us causing a problem for them, they will,” he assumed. “We can be very…*persuasive* when we feel strongly about something.”

“He means we argue and they threaten us until they eventually realize we know better than their greedy, bootlicking, cooperate administration when it comes to certain things,” Dubek interpreted, sipping his wine. “It’s a finely honed system.”

It was pretty damn difficult to replace an entire hockey team in general, let alone one with such expensive players. Their brand was nothing without them and they were more than willing to threaten to walk out as a group if push came to shove.

“Okay, okay, we’ll discuss doing stupid things tomorrow,” Kohn suggested, pouring a glass of wine for anyone who didn’t already have one. “Tonight, let’s just celebrate a good win and make some toasts.”

There was a moment of quiet as they hushed down, glancing around to see who would speak first.

Hammersmith eventually raised his glass first. “Alright, then I would propose the first toast to Vic who very gallantly bruised his beautiful face in Feller’s honor,” he declared. “It was a beautiful brawl and well worth your time in the penalty box.”

Everyone nodded, sipping their wine. Some of them even tapped their hands against the table like they were trying to clap, even though it didn’t work out terribly well.

“I would also suggest a toast to every injury any of us sustained tonight,” Varkov added. “They might have hurt but they’re the reason we sent Tampa home as losers and I, for one, know the bruises were worth it.”

There was a round of agreement, the cheering louder from the other end of the table. Yuna pursed her lips, taking a sip from her own glass. It was sweet in a somewhat dark way, she supposed. The kind of compliment that really only made sense in sports.

“And one more toast,” Shane insisted, keeping his glass raised. “To the dedication everyone here has for the game and each other. You guys gave your all tonight, like you always do, and it’s always a privilege to watch and be part of it.”

There was some awing, partially mocking but mostly sincere. Ilya bumped his shoulder gently, mouthing something to him silently as he sipped his own glass.

“Now, let’s order a lot of food, please!” Kane suggested, eagerly browsing his menu.

David chuckled, lifting his own to look over the array of options as the quiet moment faded. It was replaced by the same kind of commotion and overlapping voices as before, but in a way, he almost felt like it was warm. Less chaotic and more like a family gathering, full of banter and discussion. And he wasn’t quite sure what he felt, but something certainly tugged at his heart seeing his son in the middle of it.

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The rest of Yuna and David’s trip played out similarly to their first two days in Boston, sightseeing on their own and having a meal with Shane and Ilya whenever they were free for a few hours.

That was rare, apparently, with how often the team invited them to do stuff. But they made it work, declining some stuff and still attending other things. Shane was able to get away with it far more than Ilya could, but he tried, anyway, to be around Yuna and David as much as possible.

He even left Kane’s housewarming party, after he finally got everything moved into his new apartment. Really, it was more of him forcing the entire team to assemble his new furniture for three hours while they complained but complained.

When Christmas finally came around, Yuna had to admit, she was a little disappointed to be nearing the end of their trip. She hadn’t expected to like Boston as much as she did. Or to like Ilya, either. But she did.

“Do Hollanders always do Christmas this early?” Ilya questioned, still half asleep as he leaned against the kitchen counter in his pajamas.

Shane nodded, like it was expected, but also made him a bit tired. He was still enjoying his break, short as it was. “We like to celebrate in the morning,” he explained. “We usually visit family or something later in the day. Or go for walks.”

He practically groaned, barely biting it back because he was in the presence of Shane’s parents. “Exercise, even in winter and on a holiday,” he murmured with a tight smile. “I should not be surprised.”

Yuna chuckled, patting his shoulder. “Why don’t I make those cinnamon rolls while you rest?” she questioned.

Ilya wrinkled his nose, straightening up quickly. “No.” He shook his head. “I can do it, I’m up and partaking in things.”

Even if he hadn’t expected her and David to show up on his porch at the absolute crack of dawn, it still didn’t feel right to have her lift a finger while she was in his house. They were guests and he should at least try to be somewhat of a host to them. They had gone out of their way to spend Christmas in Boston, after all.

“*Don’t* get the ingredients mixed up because you’re too sleepy to read the labels,” Shane insisted firmly, separating the salt and sugar as far as he could. “I’m gonna see what dad’s gotten himself into with how quiet the living room is."

Ilya raised his hands defensively, as if promising he wouldn’t make such an error, and watched him walk out of the kitchen before lowering them again.

“I’m assuming that’s happened before?” Yuna wondered with a pointed look. “Using salt instead of sugar?”

He floundered for a moment before eventually shrugging. “Once or twice, yes,” he confessed sheepishly. “In my defense, who needs to store salt like this? It comes in its own box; it’s like he wanted to trick me.”

She watched him hold up and shake a jar of salt that easily two or three bottles combined. “That is a lot of salt,” she agreed. “I’m surprised you let him move so much around. Didn’t you like how your stuff was before?”

Ilya shrugged, putting the salt down and flipping open the cookbook. “Liked my stuff, yes. Love Shane more, though,” he muttered, looking for the recipe. “Organizing makes his life easier, and I can always get used to a new system.”

Yuna took a sip of the coffee they had just made, imagining how that scene might play out between her and her husband. She probably wouldn’t be able to stand it if David decided to rearrange her pantry or suddenly start labeling things that technically already had them in some way.

“Well, it’s sweet of you,” she told him, tapping her fingertips against the side of the mug. “So is this coffee, actually. Is this what you both normally brew?”

Shane usually didn’t like his coffee to be overly sweet. No sugar and rarely any creamer, just a bit of oat milk.

“Ah, is good, right?” he replied with a nod. “I get it from this marketplace that pops up every once in a while. Shane was so disappointed when we ran out the first time and he realized I could not just go get more. We buy extra, now. Only drink it occasionally, though, so it’s a treat.”

Yuna hummed, glancing down at it like she was studying the components of its flavor. She couldn’t really describe how she felt, picturing such domesticity from her son. Shared chores and disputes. It brought her joy, of course, to see his. But it also felt like more than that. Relief, maybe, that he had found someone he felt safe enough around to allow his rigid structure to loosen.

“Can I ask you something, Ilya?” she wondered after a moment or two of silence.

He nodded, eyes flitting between her and a measuring cup as he made sure to scoop the sugar instead of the salt again on accident. “Of course,” he muttered, having gotten pretty used to her inquires over the past few days.

“I know your family is…complicated,” Yuna commented, her tone gently. “I was just wondering about your holidays with them, if you had any traditions or things you used to do.”

It seemed a little unfair that she and David had been bringing up all of their family’s traditions without asking about his. She wasn’t sure what he did for Christmas or how he liked to celebrate it. Even when she asked Shane, he didn’t seem to know very much, either.

Ilya paused, pursing his lips before he shook his head slightly. “Not many, no,” he told her earnestly. “It’s not a very big holiday in Russia. We don’t even celebrate in December, actually. It’s January seventh, for us.”

She straightened up in her seat a bit. “Oh, I- I didn’t know that,” she admitted. “What would you do on the seventh?”

He shrugged, thinking about it as he turned the KitchenAid on for a moment to mix the sugar and butter together. She could practically see his mind turning, like he was siphoning through childhood memories and trying to remember how he spent them. It looked, honestly, like he was more interested in forgetting them.

Ilya shut off the machine for a moment. “We would go to Church in the morning and uh-my brother and I got a few gifts, later in the day, I guess,” he told her. “Then, mostly just prepared for the party my parents would throw. Wore suits from the time we were five or six years old, I think. Stood by the buffet, mostly, eating tiny cakes until we got yelled at.”

“And after your mother passed away?” Yuna questioned hesitantly.

He hesitated, the memories feeling a little depressing for what should have been a happy day. “Much of the same, minus the gifts,” he replied, shrugging. “I would sneak out of whatever event my father hosted or attended, sometimes. Usually got caught and grounded for it. After he died…there was never a reason to go back for another Christmas.”

Yuna furrowed her eyebrows a little, the images her mind conjured seeming less festive than the holidays she and David had tried to give Shane growing up. They always started the morning with waffles or pancakes, opened gifts and watched him play with them before he inevitably wanted to go outside and play in the snow or skate on the frozen pond.

Her face twisted with sadness on his behalf. “What about your brother and his family?” she asked. “Don’t you have a niece in Russia?”

Ilya nodded, sucking on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I do, but uh- they don’t invite me, anymore,” he confessed with a shrug. “Alexi and I fought at my father’s funeral, and I haven’t seen his since. I send gifts to my niece, and I know she gets them. That’s enough for me.”

Alexi may loath him for his opinions of their father, his sexuality, and about a hundred other small things, but he still loved his daughter. He would give her whatever gifts Ilya sent, whatever dresses he bought her or letters he mailed.

It wasn’t the same as really being there, but he knew that if he was, it wouldn’t end well. Even before their father died, the two of them had *always* fought on Christmas.

“You’ve just been celebrating alone since he passed away?” Yuna asked, seeming to abhor the notion. It seemed so lonely, in her eyes. And he could shrug, pretending it didn’t hurt all he wanted to, but she knew it was a lie. He did care, at least in some way.

“I wish,” Ilya huffed, only half joking. “Marlow has insisted on dragging me to his families Christmas dinner every year since my father died. I sit between him and his sister at the table, usually. They make me wear one of their ugly matching sweaters and force me into the pictures they take in them. Very uh- Hallmark?”

She chuckled lightly, sipping her coffee again as she imagined him in an itchy sweater, scowling as Marlow probably smacked him until he smiled for a picture. “That’s sweet of him.”

His lips tugged to the side in reluctant agreement. “Yes, it is,” he admitted, nodding softly. “I think of Christmas as a break from hockey, really. But he likes it and I…do not mind being included, I guess. He was very disappointed when I said I would not go this year.”

Yuna frowned slightly. She hadn’t realized, until that moment, that by spending Christmas with them, Ilya might be abandoning a different family.

“You still could,” she suggested gently. “We can eat early and you can go with him for a few hours.”

Ilya hesitated, shaking his head. “It’s alright,” he assured. “He’s just being dramatic about it, is all. He’ll understand.”

Yuna’s shoulders sagged as she leaned forward a bit. “Ilya, if you see his family every year, then that *is* a tradition, hon,” she told him. “And we’ll understand if you want to visit with them. You can have multiple celebrations.”

He blinked, the thought seeming a bit difficult to comprehend. “I can?”

He frankly, never even enjoyed having one Christmas. Not after his mother passed away, at least. Having two, now, felt a little greedy. And what’s worse is that he didn’t quite care about it making him feel that way, because he wanted both.

She nodded in affirmation. “Of course you can have multiple,” she replied. “We’ve spent all week with you and have a few more days before we leave. A couple of hours with the Marlow’s doesn’t exclude you from Christmas with us.”

Ilya tipped his head slightly in realization. “Oh.”

Yuna chuckled, setting her coffee down before sliding off the barstool. “C’mon, I’ll help,” she insisted. She walked around the counter, rolling up her sleeves and washing her hands. “I think we’ve probably lost Shane to whatever his father dragged him into, anyway.”

He huffed, searching for him and nodding in agreement after a moment. “Seems so,” he agreed. “I will…text Marly really quickly, I guess, to see if I am still allowed to visit.”

She hummed in agreement, watching him step back from the counter so he could pull his phone out of his pocket. He looked a bit lighter, sending a quick message to Marlow that, if he was still welcome, he would like to drop by later.

She assumed, due to the quiet chime of his notifications, that Marlow texted him back immediately. “Well?” she wondered, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Ilya glanced up, putting his phone away. “Marly says I am still welcome to come by,” he told her, a slight grimace on his lips. “And that this year’s sweaters are particularly bad.” Which made him a little more nervous than he cared to admit.

Yuna laughed softly, trying her best to not absolutely plead with him to send her a picture of it once he had it on. She could probably just bother Shane for it in a few days, anyway. Once they were back in Ottawa and safely out of range of Ilya’s glaring.

“I knew he’d be alright with it,” she muttered, as if it was obvious that their friendship ran deep enough the offer would always stand. “I think the media is sorely mistaken in their interpretation of Marlow. The whole team, really.”

He nodded. “Probably,” he agreed. “Definitely, actually.”

They often considered him so pretty or so brutish that he was automatically unintelligent. Or that he was a follower, not a leader, despite being the alternate captain for several years.

Neither were true. Marlow had always been incredibly smart, quick and clever both on and off the ice.

He was also just exceptionally good at hiding how calculating he was, which the whole team knew and appreciated. But Ilya, especially, never got bored of watching people underestimate him.

“Why is that?” Yuna wondered. “That you all act so…differently in front of the cameras, than you do alone or with fans, I mean,” she elaborated, choosing her words very carefully. “I know you said you don’t want anyone dictating the charities you donate too, but that’s just one little detail to keep private. You guys hide, well, a lot.”

Maybe not quite everything, since they did thank their fans during interviews, as rare as they were for them to willingly participate in. But they hid enough about themselves.

Ilya shrugged. “Is how we’ve always been, I guess,” he responded. “Hockey is not uh- overly emotional sport. A team like ours, that truly care about each other and lean on each other during personal hardship isn’t what they want. They want bullies and rivalries with the other teams, the kind of attitude that sells.”

“You certainly pull it off,” she murmured, thinking back to how long she fell for it without ever considering there could be more to him. “Your fans seem to know the truth, though. Local ones, at least.”

He nodded, expression turning into one of pride. “Is too hard to keep the pretenses in front of them,” he admitted. “Press is deserving of our behavior, but the fans just want autographs or pictures or taken. We can’t treat them cruelly. Wouldn’t want to, either.”

“You seem to care about them a lot,” Yuna noted, the cinnamon rolls long forgotten about as she leaned against the counter, ignoring the mixer.

“They are part of the reason I love this city so much,” he confessed earnestly. “They are so enthusiastic and protective, like we actually have some sort of impact on their lives aside from just being entertainment for them.”

There were a lot of teams with fans that could be cruel. They fought amongst themselves about which players were better, pleaded for certain ones to get traded, even insulted the team when they were on a losing streak. They turned, to say the least. Quickly.

Ilya had never seen that here, though. He saw loyalty from them. Saw them respecting their team’s boundaries, showing up with energy at the rink, sending letters and cards that told them how much their games meant to people.

“It seems like you do, from what I’ve seen,” she admitted. “Boston has a strong community.”

Probably one of the strongest she had ever seen, if she was being honest. It wasn’t easy to get fans to reign in their impulses and act rationally around one or two players, let alone the whole team. But the Raiders didn’t seem to have any trouble with it, even enjoying the spontaneous meet and greets instead of it interrupting their plans.

He hummed in agreement. “We have a saying, sometimes, for whenever we feel tired or discouraged. We say *if our fans can show up for us, we can show up for them*,” he told her. “Helps us remember that we don’t play for management or a paycheck. We play for each other and for the people who support us.”

Not that he would ever say no to the large paychecks, of course. But if it came down to it, he’d take a pay cut to keep his team exactly as they were. Most, if not all of them would. They’d rather play beside each other for less, than leave for the bigger bucks.

“Shane said something similar in an interview, a while back,” Yuna muttered, recalling the fallout of it. “That you play for yourselves first and anyone else after. It’s a good mindset. Probably part of the reason you’ve been winning so often this season.”

“Talent helps a little, too,” he joked. “We don’t believe in luck, terribly much, though. Dangerous to get into the habit of relying on the universe or God for help.”

She huffed a laugh, nodding in agreement. “I can understand that,” she told him, gesturing to his neck. “Why do you wear that, if you’re not very religious?”

Ilya immediately reached for his necklace, fingertips grazing the cool metal cross that sat over his shirt. He didn’t even realize it was untucked, for a change. Usually, he always made sure nothing, but the chain was visible.

“It was my mother’s,” he explained. “I may not believe in God the same way she did, but I like knowing that I have part of her with me.”

He wasn’t a frequent churchgoer, or even a true believer in most ways. But he did, sometimes, think that if there was a God, he must have sent him Shane. Perhaps as an apology for taking his mother so early, to give him someone else that made him feel capable of being loved.

Yuna’s eyes softened slightly, her heart aching each time he mentioned Irina, whose name she only recently learned. “I’m sure she’s very proud of you, Ilya,” she stated firmly. “Any mother would be.”

He pulled his lips into a tight line, like he wasn’t sure how to let his face respond. “Thank you.”

She knew it was a bit presumptuous to start envisioning him and Shane getting married, since they were still so new living together, but her mind couldn’t help but conjure ideas. If she was being honest, she didn’t think she would mind being Ilya’s mother-in-law.

She might even be looking forward to it, a bit.

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Shane loved Christmas, don’t get him wrong. He liked having his parents visit, liked having them meet his team and come to appreciate Ilya more. But he was, at his core, unable to rest very long.

Which meant the second they came back from break, he was twice as energic and eager to win. To the point he was being compared to Kohn in terms of how damn hyper he was, nearly bouncing off the walls in a locker room that didn't even belong to them.

"I resent the comparison," Shane stated, trying to roll his shoulders out to calm some of his energy out. "I'm nowhere near as energetic as him."

"I agree," Kohn added, nodding towards his teammate. "You haven't even left the locker room to run laps yet."

He wrinkled his nose. "And I don't plan to," he told him.

Although, he had been pacing. A fact he didn't even realize until it was pointed out to him with a silent gesture from Hammersmith. He paused, sitting down to try to pretend like he hadn't been about to tred a pathway into the rug underneath them.

"He's just excited to be back," Kovalev noted, ruffling his hair as he passed by him. "Aren't we all?"

They were coming back to a pretty good winning streak, after all. They were looking forward to keeping it up, even if they weren't playing in their home rink.

Sebbin nodded his head in agreement, tugging a tight compression shirt over his head. "A win against the Admirals and we get to spend New Year's Eve in New York?" he muttered, sounding gleeful. "I know Christmas just passed, but this is the best gift I got."

"Don't jinx us!" Kane insisted, immediately knocking on the side of his guest cubby. The sound echoed as a few other players did the same thing.

They were always superstitious, like most teams were. But their little habits seemed to become even more important when they were winning, as if missing even one might cause them to lose.

"Sorry!" he apologized quickly, throwing his hands up defensively. He hadn't meant to jump the gun; he was just elated to be back on the ice. "But regardless of how the game plays out, New York itself is still a gift."

A slightly foul scented one, most of the time. But a gift, nevertheless.

"Oh, should I take back the incredibly expensive Ninja slushie maker I got you, then?" Dubek wondered, head tilted accusatorily.

"You couldn't if you tried," he replied, shaking his head smugly. "I've already used it like six times." And it had been worth every cent he knew his friend paid for it. "Plus, I'd take back your gift, too."

Vic huffed a laugh, sitting beside Shane and sharing a small look of amusement with him. "The concept of gift giving is completely lost on them," he murmured under his breath.

He nodded slightly in agreement, just tugging on his skates. "Just a little," he whispered.

They might have liked to banter about it, but at the end of the day, they did both give each other some very pricy gifts. Thoughtful ones, too, since Sebbin had been complaining about his slushie maker breaking for a few weeks straight.

The whole team had given each other gifts, actually. Stuff that everyone mentioned at some point or another, like new headphones for Feller and a signed book for Varkov. Shane didn't quite know them well enough to be as personal as he wished he could have been, but Kane and Vic had both helped him out, giving him suggestions about things everyone might like.

"Think you'll come out after the game?" Vic asked him, rolling the edges of his socks down a quarter of an inch. His own pregame superstition.

Shane shrugged. "Probably," he admitted after a second. "It is New Years Eve, after all. Sitting in a hotel room alone while fireworks keep me awake would be pretty pathetic."

"Hey, it's what I did last year," he replied, scoffing. "But it should be fun this year. There's a rooftop place you can see the ball drop from, according to Connors. Plus, there's some stupid specialty drink he wants to try."

"Leave it to him to find alcohol before we find the hotel in every other city," Shane murmured, laughing quietly.

He tied his laces, starting with the left foot before moving to the right. Then, he pulled them lose and retied them a bit tighter before standing up and giving either side a single stomp to make sure they felt good.

Vic stood. "You must admit it's a talent."

Shane snorted, nodding his head. "It's something," he replied, glancing around the room for Ilya, who was discussing something with Carmichael.

He had his arms crossed, back leaned against the cubbies as he nodded intently in response to whatever his teammate was saying. After a moment, he nodded, the focused expression on his face breaking into one of amusement.

Carmichael tapped his shoulder before disappearing from the locker room and Ilya turned, spotting Shane's curious eyes. It wasn't hard to tell that he had been trying to eavesdrop. Probably failing, too, since they were so far away.

"He's just going to make a phone call," Ilya told him before he even got the chance to ask, like he knew he would. "No need to be nosey."

Shane shrugged. "I can't help it, I like knowing what's going on," he responded. "Which reminds me, actually, about a question. Have you talked to Coach about the faceoff?"

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, you are an addict," he teased, shaking his head in disbelief. "You can't wait for one to fall in your lap? You need the opener? Greedy."

He dropped his shoulders, glaring at him. "It's the first one after break," he reminded him defensively. "I don't wanna wait until someone is penalized to get a reset."

Shane stared at him a little bit longer, like he was silently trying to goad him into admitting who coach had asked for. He would have to tell them at some point. In like four minutes, technically. He could do it earlier.

“He wanted Marlow for opener and you to have the first faceoff in the second period,” Ilya eventually conceded with a small sigh. “*But* I’m sure if you both agreed to swap places, coach would allow it.”

He was immediately glancing around the locker room. “Marlow!” he exclaimed, getting his attention from across the room. “Can I take the opening faceoff in the first period from you?”

Marlow just shrugged. “Go for it, man,” he responded without thinking twice, turning back to Hammersmith.

Shane’s lips tugged upwards, refocusing his attention on Ilya. “Done deal, then,” he muttered. “I’m opening.”

Ilya let out another breath, a mix of exasperation and fondness rolled into one. “Fine,” he agreed, poking him in the chest. “You are a junky, though.”

He didn’t even try to dispute it, just turned to tease Kohn about his bouncing around as if he hadn’t been doing the exact same thing a few minutes ago. And he probably still would be, too, if it wasn’t for the blades strapped to his feet, keeping him from pacing any longer.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait much longer to get his energy out. Carmichael came back from his phone call pretty quickly and Ilya lobbied for coach to let Shane and Marlow swap out so he could have the first faceoff the night.

Desjourney agreed with a rather gruff response about not giving a shit who opened, as long as they won it, which led Shane to be the first in the center. The crowd was loud and even if it wasn’t him they were cheering for, he missed the volume.

Breaks were already difficult for him to take when he was struggling to connect with his old team, but they were damn insufferable now that he actually looked forward to their practices and games.

“You look like you’re about to jump out of your skin,” Scott noted, bending down in front of Shane.

“Just looking forward to having a good game,” he retorted, lips tugged into a small, less than friendly smile. “It’s a great crowd. Too bad they have to watch you lose at your own rink.”

“Chirps before the game even starts?” he murmured, lips twisting into something akin to amusement. “Guess you really are turning into a Raider.”

Shane shrugged, his grip tightening against his stick. “Guess so,” he replied without a tinge of remorse for it.

The puck fell and the sound of it clattering against the ice was quickly covered up by the sound of their sticks hitting each other’s. Shane could feel Scott encroaching on his personal

space a bit further, trying to leverage the disc away from him.

He didn't allow it, though, reciprocating by bumping into him with enough force to knock him down.

Scott hit the ice, eyes narrowing behind the visor of his helmet as he stared up at Shane, who was already passing the puck to Ilya. He had never been a particularly nice man, but there was something unimaginably smug on Rozanovs face as he got the puck. Like his normal arrogance had been multiplied by twenty, maybe even thirty percent.

He supposed there was a reason for it. If the Admirals had managed to sign Hollander for a single season, let alone three, they'd also be pretty damn elated about it.

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After the game, well, slaughter, as their commentators called it on live television, the guys packed up their things. If they weren't terribly welcome before, they definitely weren't welcome after ending the game 3-1.

Shane was pretty sure the way other teams treated theirs was one of the only changes in his life he wasn't fond of. Whatever he thought or said about the Metro's, he knew other teams would separate the players from the game. They'd talk briefly during warmups or catch up in the hallways after the building emptied out.

That didn't happen anymore. In fact, there was always this strange sense of urgency to leave. Flee, almost. Like they'd be kicked out if they didn't willingly get the hell out as fast as they knew how to.

"Just the way the world works when people think your team is full of bullies, unfortunately," Kane muttered. "On the bright side, we fulfilled part of Sebbin's belated Christmas gift."

"Because the other twenty he got from us weren't enough?" Connors questioned, bumping Sebbin's arm intentionally as they filed out of the locker room and made their way down the corridor together.

"I can never receive enough gifts," Sebbin proclaimed firmly. "But I appreciate everyone's contributions to this one." His lips quirked to the side. "Now, you guys just have to make New Year's Eve interesting."

"We make any night out interesting," Dubek insisted, rolling his eyes. "But I'll buy you *one* drink because I'm in a good mood after that game."

Shane watched Sebbin pump his fist in enthusiasm, like having a single drink bought for him lifted the weight of a nonexistent financial burden.

Marlow pushed the door to the building open and walked outside. "It's cold as shit," he complained, hands tucking even tighter into his pockets. "Are you really going to make me stand outside at night in this weather?"

“It’s a rooftop bar,” Hammersmith replied, tone implying it was somehow entirely different. “We’re not standing in a snowstorm or anything.”

“It actually could snow, though, according to the forecast,” Carmichael muttered, glancing at his phone. “Just saying.”

“You guys wouldn’t last one month in Russia during winter,” Ilya claimed, gesturing towards Shane. “Or Canada.”

“He’s not wrong,” Shane agreed, nodding his head. “You’d probably get sick of it after a few days and try to fly to Florda or something.”

Not that the thought hadn’t crossed his own mind a few times, frankly. He was used to the snow, sure. Even liked how beautiful a fresh blanket of it looked in the early morning. But he didn’t exactly love shoveling it off his porch in Ottawa or trying to drive anywhere in Montreal, especially if the ice was bad.

“That’s just straight up bullying, now,” Kohn stated defensively. “We could absolutely handle it.”

“Uh huh,” Varkov murmured dubiously. “Sure, you would.”

“Our ability to endure the weather aside,” Connors said, changing the subject smoothly. “What time are we meeting back up? I assume we are, anyway. To keep Feller from getting there early to get drunk alone.”

“It happened one time!” Feller exclaimed for what felt the seventh or eighth time they had brought it up. “Get over it!”

Ilya chuckled, shaking his head. “Not happening,” he told him earnestly, just shrugging in amusement. “Say ten in the hotel lobby?”

The good part about afternoon games, in his opinion, was their ability to do something with the rest of the evening. Whether that was going out for dinner, sightseeing, or just getting extra sleep.

Kovalev nodded, humming with approval. “Это даст мне время вздремнуть.”

Shane snorted a small laugh but said nothing. He understood, pretty well, the urge to rest after a game. He usually preferred decompressing when he got back to the hotel or home, then just went to bed early most of the time.

Lately, though, he had been trying to take naps more often.

He used to never even consider throwing off his circadian rhythm like that, but Ilya made them look so appealing when he fell asleep on the couch during the afternoon or before dinner out. And if the thought of laying in his arms wasn’t already appealing enough, the shorter days in winter certainly did.

The sun was already partially set by the time they got back to their hotel room, which made it even easier for Shane to kick off his shoes and crawl into bed where Ilya had already dramatically fallen onto it. He laughed, arms wrapping around him before he buried his face against his neck and closed his eyes.

They napped longer than expected, not that Shane cared. It was always Ilya who took longer to get ready, claiming his hair needed more attention. He would bite his tongue and just sit and watch him, instead of mocking the routine after learning how important it actually was to him.

Irina used to fuss over his curls. Used to wind them around her fingertips one by one when his hair was damp after a bath and make sure they looked nice before family portraits were taken.

For a while, after she passed, Ilya didn't touch them. Didn't try to take care of them, let alone put any real effort into it. He didn't put a lot of effort into himself in general, for that matter. Until he started to feel worthy of letting himself.

"You are staring," Ilya murmured, meeting Shane's eyes in the mirror as he fussed with a strand that seemed to refuse to act properly.

He nodded. "Yep," he replied, jaw pressed against his palm as he waited patiently for him to finished. "I like watching you."

"Voyeur," he accused with a small huff, his lips quirking in annoyance as his hair tried to split his curl in half. "Завиток не завивается…what good is it?" he whispered to himself.

Shane stood, entering the small bathroom they were sharing until they left town the next day. "Let me try," he insisted, pulling his hand away from his hair.

Ilya's shoulders slouched in annoyance, facing him to let him try to fix the curl. Shane wet his fingertips, trying to smooth out the strand before winding his finger around it and blowing on it for a moment or two.

"I should cut them," he muttered absentmindedly, most out of irritation more than sincerity.

"You make that threat often enough that I know you don't mean it," Shane clarified, standing nearly toe to toe with him. "But if you ever do actually cut them, I'll leave you."

Ilya let out an involuntary laugh, rather abruptly. "Possessive over my hair, huh?" he mused, trying to fight back an endeared smile.

He nodded softly. "You in general, mostly," he clarified. "But yeah, the hair is part of it. It makes you…look like you." And he really liked how he looked.

Slowly unwinding the strand from around his fingertip, Shane nudged it into place with the others and tilted his jaw towards the mirror so Ilya could approve of it. He seemed to, since he stopped focusing on that one damn curl compared to all of them as a whole.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Looks nicer, now."

Shane hummed, kissing his cheek. “Can we go, now?” he questioned, head tilted curiously. “I’m afraid the guy’s will beat down our door if we’re late.”

Nodding, Ilya flipped off the bathroom lights and gathered his things. “They’d use Connors as the battering ram, probably,” he mused, sliding his wallet into his pocket.

He pulled open the door for him, making a show of it, as if proving he once again was up in their unofficial game of who was more chivalrous. Shane wasn’t thrilled about it, frankly, but allowed it anyway.

Meeting up with the others in the lobby, they left the hotel as a group and walked towards the bar. It was always lively in New York, the few times each year Shane visited. It was called the city that never slept, for a reason, he supposed.

But tonight, things were even more bustling than usual. People were out in herds on the sidewalks, celebrating the new year. And if there were a lot of them at eye level, the number of them clustered together from above was something else entirely.

He knew people had probably been waiting around for the ball to drop since they first started setting up early in the morning, but even so, he couldn’t really comprehend the number of people he saw in the crowd.

“Here,” Sebbin offered, passing Shane a crystal glass. “It’s 90% ginger ale, 10% whiskey. On the rocks, obviously.”

“Thanks,” he murmured, taking it from him and sipping it.

He had gotten a bit more used to drinking during the season in the past few months. Not frequently or in high amounts, but a glass of wine with dinner or a drink after a game didn’t feel like a huge deal anymore.

Mostly because they made sure it wasn’t. There was no hurrah if he drank, no fuss if he didn’t. They just asked him beforehand and brought him whatever he requested.

“You look contemplative,” Sebbin told him, leaning against the railing a bit to mimic his posture. “More so than usual, I mean.”

He shrugged, pressing his lips against the glass again. “I’m just watching the city,” he admitted. “It’s pretty at night.”

“It’s definitely a more tolerable sight than watching Kane losing horrendously to Carmichael at pool,” Sebbin agreed with a small nod as he sipped his own drink. “We should keep him away from the ledge in case he tries to jump after the game ends.”

Shane glanced over his shoulder, watching as Kane rested his forehead against the end of his cue dramatically while Carmichael cleared three solid-colored balls with a single shot. Most of the team that was watching didn’t look shocked over it, more like just sympathetic towards Kane.

“God, he’s a pool shark and a card shark,” he muttered in disbelief, adding it to the list of things he now knew Carmichael had a knack for such as poker, gin, and darts.

“Ironically, he doesn’t like water very much,” Sebbin noted, glancing away from the nauseating sight of him taking more money from his teammate as he cleared the last ball. “Maybe one of us could beat him in swimming or something.”

That seemed to be the only thing, aside from hockey, that they had any real shot at outdoing him in.

Shane laughed quietly, redirecting his focus to the city. “I wouldn’t put money on it,” he clarified, tipping his head towards Sebbin’s drink. “What are you having?” he wondered, realizing it wasn’t his normal glass of bourbon.

He lifted it slightly to show him. “It’s a woo woo.”

“You made that up,” Shane claimed accusatorily, looking at the pink tinged drink. “It sounds like something Marlow would drink.” Minus the tiny umbrella, that was.

Sebbin shrugged. “Probably because he ordered it for me,” he muttered, drinking from it again. “It’s pretty good, though. Vodka and some peach schnapps with cranberry juice. Wanna try?”

He wrinkled his nose, pulling the glass from his hand to try it. The ice clattered softly as he took a sip. It wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be, but it was definitely sweet for an alcoholic beverage.

“It’s not terrible,” he admitted, passing it back to him. “I’ll stick to mine, though.”

Sebbin nodded understandingly. “I’d expect nothing less,” he replied earnestly. “I actually really appreciate your consistency. It’s comforting, in a way.”

“Yeah?” Shane questioned dubiously, his face contorting slightly. “Not boring or anything?”

He shook his head. “You think you’re boring?” he asked, sounding surprised. “No way. You’re…I don’t know- your mind works interestingly, is all. It’s fun to see it work, sometimes. Especially on the ice.”

His lips quirked to the side. “Thanks,” he murmured. “I’ve been told by some people that they wished it worked *normally*.”

Sebbin scoffed, as if offended on his teammate’s behalf. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” he wondered, looking confused.

Shane shrugged, just sipping his drink. “No idea,” he told him. It was an insult, though, he was pretty sure. The tone had been pretty damn demeaning, even if it was said as a joke.

Sebbin didn’t even bother to ask who would say something like that to him, pretty sure he already knew exactly what group he’d been around when it was said.

“Well, I like your mind,” he clarified, tapping Shane on the head softly. “And not just because it’s part of the reason why we’ve been winning.” That helped, though.

They weren’t the kind of team who would ever turn on each other if they started losing, but the victories definitely made their dynamics smoother. It was easier to joke around and enjoy their days away from the rink when they weren’t constantly thinking about what was around the corner.

“Can I ask you something?” Shane questioned, turning to rest his back against the railing and staring at the rest of the team. “Without being mocked for sounding overly sappy, that is?”

Sebbin did the same. “Sure,” he replied with a nod, watching him curiously to see where he was taking things.

“Do you believe that people can change you? Quickly, I mean. Not gradually, but in a sudden moment?” he asked. “Like…things just click and you become aware that you’re different and it’s because you have something you didn’t realize you needed?”

He blinked for a moment, not answering immediately. He sipped his drink, really thinking it through for a moment. Eventually, though, he nodded. Firmly and without judgement.

“Like life doesn’t feel like a solitary responsibly, anymore? And maybe everyone was always wrong about you being difficult or weird, but you needed the right group of people to make you understand that?” Sebbin added. “Yeah, I know that feeling.”

“Do you think everyone here does?” Shane wondered, eyes flitting from Feller who chalking his pool cue to Kane, who was resting against the bar and ordering another drink.

He shrugged. “We’ve never sat in a friendship circle and discussed it, but yeah, I’ve heard most of them say it at some point,” he answered sincerely. “I never know what’s going to happen in this game, you know? I could get hit next week and end my career without warning. But I know I’m still going to have them in my life forever, even if I don’t have them on the ice. So will you.”

That was, in his opinion, a lot more important.

Shane hummed contemplatively. “Sounds nice,” he confessed.

He glanced down at his glass for a moment or two before finishing off his drink. The burning of the alcohol went down smoother with the sweetness of the soda and the two of them stood there for a while before Sebbin eventually finished his glass too.

“I’m going to grab my second drink,” he told him, taking Shane’s empty glass to be polite. “Do you want one?”

He shook his head. “I’m alright with one,” he replied.

Nodding, Sebbin left. Shane watched him place both glasses on the counter, gesturing to his own and saying something to the bartender before the woman nodded and took them.

Hammersmith came over and rested against it beside him. His head tilted as he started a conversation by pointing over his shoulder at Carmichael, who was now beating Feller in pool. Whatever he said must have been funny, since Sebbin began laughing, his shoulders shaking gently as he nodded in agreement.

“You better not be leering at him,” Ilya murmured quietly, sneaking up beside him rather effectively.

Shane nearly jumped, eyes quickly straying from the bar. “Jealous?” he replied, voice tinged with smug curiosity.

“Of Sebbin? No, not really,” he responded, tipping his head slightly to look Hammersmith up and down. “Smitty on the other hand really works out his glute muscles—”

He cut him off, smacking him against the chest with the back of his hand. “Don’t even start,” he told him, rolling his eyes. “I’ll lock you out of our room and make you go knock on someone else’s door.”

Ilya chuckled, dropping the joke with ease. “Alright, alright, no jokes,” he promised, nodding his head towards the exit with a barely noticeable gesture. “C’mon, let’s go.”

He furrowed his brows, straightening up a bit. “Go where?” he wondered.

Ilya didn’t respond, though, just pushing off the railing and making his way through the bar. Shane didn’t even hesitate to do the same, following him. They passed some of their teammates, along with strangers they didn’t know, until reaching the door.

Shane beat him to it, opening it first.

“I let you do that,” Ilya lied, walking past him.

They left the bar, entering the hallway outside of it which was practically empty aside from a couple who were standing by the elevators, waiting for it. After a moment, though, the doors opened and they left.

Shane squinted, glancing around in confusion. “What are we doing?” he asked, once they were alone.

“This.” He planted his hand on Shane’s hip, pushing him against the expensive wallpaper and kissing him.

Shane hummed for a moment, melting into it at first as their lips pressed together. He could taste the Vodka on Ilya’s tongue, his hand reaching up to tangle in the perfect curls he had spent twenty minutes obsessing over a few hours ago.

After a second, though, he broke away, trying to shove him off. “What the hell?” he questioned. “We’re in public!”

Ilya made a sound of skeptical disagreement. “*Technically*, there is no one around,” he stated, like it was a loophole. His eyes turned into a sad pout. “It’s about to be midnight and I want

to kiss you. Is tradition."

Shane huffed, softening as he leaned his head back against the wall and stared at him with fondness. "Our first real New Year's Eve kiss?" he questioned, the thought of it sounding rather appealing.

He nodded, lifting his hand off his hip to check his watch. "In thirteen seconds," he told him. "Twelve seconds, eleven seconds—"

Shane didn't let him finish, kissing him again even though it wasn't midnight yet. Ilya stiffed in surprise before immediately reciprocating. Forgetting all about his watch, he pressed his palm against his cheek, holding it gently.

Shane's own grip became firmer in his hair again, fingers threading through his blonde strands to pull him closer. He tipped his own jaw upwards, seeking more from him and he could feel Ilya's thumb swiping over his cheek as he deepened the kiss.

Ilya's lungs started to lose oxygen, and he was pretty sure the clock had already struck midnight, making it the new year. It was such a perfect way to start it, in his opinion. Even if his lungs burned the way they did when he ran out of breath during a game.

Shane slid his spare hand under Ilya's shirt, desperate to feel the warmth of skin instead of the material he was wearing. His fingertips pressed against the defined ridges with ease, already aware of every crevasse and dip he had in his muscles.

"…Ahem?"

There was a sudden throat clearing and Shane's eyes shot wide open, the sound breaking through his hazy mind. Without meaning to, he was automatically shoving Ilya away as hard as he could.

Ilya, didn't try to stay put either, willingly stepping far away from Shane to put distance between them. He knew that wouldn't undo anything, though. What they had been doing was obvious.

Marlow and Vic were standing there, both blinking at them with wide, confused gazes that kept bouncing between their teammate and captain.

"Uh…" Vic opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to find the right words. Any words, actually. "W- we were just…" *Looking for them*, he was trying and failing to say.

"This isn't what it looks like it," Shane said, shaking his head quickly as he tried to catch his breath for the kiss they had interrupted. "We- I mean it wasn't—"

Shane looked like he was going to recoil, more uncomfortable than he had been in such a long time as he stood there. It killed Ilya to see, to know that he was the cause of it.

The answer didn't clarify much, though. Their gazes stayed stuck, scrutinizing the two of them.

“You were…” *Kissing.* “…why?” Marlow questioned, eventually remembering how to blink after his eyes became so dry he felt like he needed it.

He knew they had gotten close. Fast. Quicker than Ilya pretty much accepted anyone who joined their team in the past. But he had chalked it up to a respect thing. Shane was a great player and a good person, so it wasn’t hard to be enamored by his company.

“Why?” Ilya repeated, like it might help him think of a reason. He glanced at Shane, who was probably fighting the urge to wipe his mouth and hide any evidence of their kiss, even if it was invisible. “I- It was me. I pushed myself on him. Too much alcohol.”

It was technically the truth. The first part, anyway. He started it, even though they were still in a public enough place that he shouldn’t have. He had been known to be a flirt, too. At least once upon a time, he was. It wasn’t a stretch to get most people to think he was enough of an asshole to also force himself on someone.

Except, Vic and Marlow weren’t most people. They were his friends and they didn’t look horrified by his response, so much as skeptical of it. Like they needed Shane to confirm it before they believed it.

Shane snapped his head to the side, staring at Ilya for a moment. The way the lie slipped out with such ease made him feel sick. So did the thought of them believing him, somehow.

More than that, though, it made him realize how quick Ilya was to demeane himself. To paint himself as the problem just to let him stay in the closet a little longer, even if that meant pretending he was the kind of man who would kiss someone without their consent.

“That’s not true,” Shane clarified before he could help himself.

He wasn’t sure what he was doing, just knew that letting them think Ilya could be capable of that wasn’t an option. And frankly, neither was letting them think he didn’t want to be kissing him back. Because he did. Really fucking badly.

Ilya glared at him, as if silently urging him to accept the easy way out that he was offering. “Shane—”

“No,” he interjected, shaking his head. “Don’t fucking lie like that, Ilya. You’ve never done that before, you *wouldn’t*.”

“Yeah, I’m sort of with Shane on that one,” Marlow admitted, still a bit dazed from what he just saw. “That was uh- it looked reciprocal.”

“It was,” Shane confessed, swallowing harshly.

He felt like his mouth was spitting out words before his mind could decide whether he should allow them to come out or not and oddly enough, it wasn’t the worst feeling in the world. It might have actually felt a bit good to get it off his chest.

“Shane, knock it off,” Ilya insisted through gritted teeth. “One drink is clearly too many for you. We’re both probably drunk. We’ll chalk it up to a mistake and move on.”

As much as the idea of ever calling one of their kisses a mistake killed him internally, it was the easiest option. He didn't want Shane to wake up tomorrow and realize he had said or done something he would regret just because he felt backed into a corner currently.

"We're not drunk, though," Shane reminded him, shifting slightly to look at him. "We were kissing because we…we love each other, that's not-…it's not a bad thing." His words grew quieter, like a realization had dawned on him as his stiff shoulders slouched back.

Ilya looked at him, eyes filled with a mix of surprise and cautious hope, both of which were tender and fond. Perhaps more than he had ever shown to another person in front of other people.

He already knew how Shane felt. He said and showed it constantly. But actually saying it in front of their teammates made his legs feel weak.

"L-love?" Vic repeated, sounding confused. "You guys are in love?"

Ilya tore his gaze away, reluctantly meeting his teammates' eyes for a moment before he nodded in affirmation. He could see the deep inhale Vic took, like he wasn't sure how to process that information.

"Wh- I mean, how?" Vic questioned, trying to wrap his head around it. "I know you guys have never really been enemies, but love is…that's a deep fucking emotion, Roz. Not something you say about someone you've been on a team with for two months."

It wasn't his sexuality, throwing him for a loop, if he was being honest. Ilya was the kind of guy who was always appreciating anybody's beauty regardless of gender, then playing it off as an observation not attraction.

No, it was the definitive word love that caught him off guard. And, well, Shane. Because he, frankly, screamed straight, for some reason.

Ilya wet his bottom lip, glancing at Shane like he was trying to understand how he was feeling and what he was thinking. He was pretty good at reading his expressions, by now, but felt clueless currently.

"It's been a few months of us playing on the same team, not knowing each other," Shane reminded them uncomfortably. "We're- we've been…*together* longer."

"How much longer?" Marlow asked, eyes drilling into Ilya's like he wasn't going to look away until things started to make sense. "Months? A year? Longer than a year?"

"A decade, okay?" Ilya eventually confessed, practically tossing his hands up in exasperation. "I have been stupidly in love with him for a decade and he is- I don't know how long he has felt that way in return, but we have been hiding it for a long time—"

"Roz," Marlow tried to interject.

He ignored it. "And no, I could not have told you because no one was supposed to know and it wasn't supposed to be serious," he clarified. "Until it suddenly was and he decided to move

so we could be closer—”

He tried again; his hand raised in a placating manner. “Ilya.”

“I’m sorry if having a bisexual captain and a gay teammate is embarrassing or you cannot fathom it for some reason,” Ilya went on, gesturing between them both weakly. “But it’s not something we can control and—”

“*Ilyusha!*” Marlow exclaimed, reaching out to grab his arm and shake him.

The movement didn’t catch him off guard as much as the name did, though. He rarely heard Marlow use that nickname. It was mostly reserved for family members. His mama, exclusively, really.

“What?” he murmured, voice quieter, almost afraid.

Marlow let go of his arm. “I don’t give a fuck about my captain or teammate,” he stated firmly, shaking his head. “I care about my *friends*.”

“…Oh,” was his only response, quiet and slow. Almost like out of all the reactions he had expected to receive, that wasn’t one of them.

Marlow eventually let out a breath, still feeling overwhelmed. Not to mention stunned and admittedly a little disheartened that his best friend could have hid something for so long, let alone believe that sharing something like this would be met with a negative response.

He would have thought Ilya knew by now that homophobia wasn’t his style. But he supposed fear could be a powerful thing and between his career and his country, there were enough reasons not to risk coming out.

“C’mon, man, you’ve known me a long time,” Marlow reminded him. “Do you honestly think liking a guy would suddenly change things?”

He hesitated, giving a weak shrug with one arm. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It could.”

Maybe not for him specifically, but there were a lot of people around the world that didn’t agree with same sex relationships. Even in places where it *was* legal, like America, there was still discrimination.

Marlow just let his head loll to the side a little, giving him a stern glare. “It doesn’t,” he clarified, in case there was any residual doubts. “I mean, it’s Hollzy,” he added, gesturing to him. “You won the fucking lottery.”

Shane huffed softly, still mentally reeling more than he cared to admit. “Thanks?” he murmured, a bit unsure what about him made him think that. Not that he’d complain about the compliment.

Ilya scrubbed his face for a moment; the seemingly stressed gesture was actually done in relief. “I know I did,” he admitted, lips tugging to the side.

Vic cleared his throat. “So…you signed with us just for Roz?” he questioned after a moment or two.

Shane pursed his lips, nodding his head gently. “Not *just*, I was- sorta,” he confessed. “It was for him originally because long distance was just- it was tough. But leaving Montreal was good for me for other reasons, too. You guys are all important now.”

He contemplated his answer for a moment before smiling slightly. “Good,” he stated. “We better not just be your cover story or something. I don’t do fake friends.”

He snorted. “Me neither,” he assured him. “I left those in Canada, I swear.”

Vic believed him, when he said that. Even if he might have been more interested in Boston for Ilya, not the Raiders, he knew Shane wasn’t the kind of guy to lie and go out of his way to make friends with all of them if he didn’t mean it.

“God, this explains so much,” he murmured as the pieces all started to fall into place. “No wonder you learned Russian so fast; you had me thinking you were some fucking prodigy. I was so insecure hearing you speak it.”

Shane grimaced.

Ilya laughed, shaking his head vigorously. “Was not a prodigy, believe me,” he told him. “His pronunciation made me want to scratch my ears off. Then, he threw things at me when I corrected him.”

“I threw *one* thing,” Shane corrected. “And you didn’t correct me, you said you would rather endure a firing squad than a conversation in Russian with me.” There was a massive difference.

“Such a romantic, Roz,” Marlow muttered in amusement, patting his arm gently.

“Agh.” Ilya shoved his arm away. “You would have said it too if you heard him a few years ago. Worse than when you first started learning. That’s saying something because you were horrible too.”

Shane was so used to being the best at everything, or at the very least good, that when he fumbled through his pronunciation or forgot words, he grew incredibly frustrated. It was actually funny, in some ways. Until a spoon flew at Ilya’s head. Then, he learned to stop heckling and just keep his mouth shut if he couldn’t find any polite way to criticize.

“I just- wow, for every one thing that starts to make sense, I think of like six more questions,” Vic admitted, still trying to understand. “Who started this? When did it happen? Who knows?”

“Ilya, summer before we were rookies, and pretty much no one except my parents,” Shane responded, ticking the answers off on his fingers. “And I told Hayden last month, too. He’s the only one from the Metros who knows.”

“And now you, too,” Ilya stated bluntly, still looking a little apprehensive over it. “So, maybe don’t…you know…”

“What, tell anyone?” Marlow assumed. “You know we wouldn’t do that. To *either* of you.”

“But for the record, you could tell the team,” Vic added. “I’m not saying you have to; that’s your choice and we’ll keep this a secret regardless, but they won’t judge you for being happy.”

They looked happy, anyway, before they interrupted it by accident. And maybe Vic didn’t fully understand this, yet. Maybe he still had questions, and his ego was still slightly bruised by the fact that he was oblivious this whole time to their relationship.

But he wasn’t a monster. Let alone a homophobe. He didn’t find it fair that they had to sneak off to kiss or pretend to be friends when they clearly meant so much to either.

“We just- we don’t want things to impact the team,” Shane explained. “We’re in a really good place and there’s no reason to risk messing it up by coming out.”

Vic honestly couldn’t tell if he was referring to their games or their relationship. He always knew they were dedicated players, but to put it above being able to be open about loving each other was a whole other level of devotion to hockey.

“I’m not suggesting you come out to the whole world,” he said. “I’m saying… every single guy in there loves you two. They’d commit crimes to keep you safe, and this isn’t going to change that. So, just think about it, alright?”

The guys would understand. They might be a bit caught off guard, like he and Marlow had been, but they’d understand. He knew that, deep in his bones, without any uncertainty or doubt.

Ilya nodded slowly. “We’ll consider it,” he assured him. “In the meantime, are we…okay?”

The question was pretty simple, but they both looked a bit nervous anyway, like they had been hiding this for so damn long that they truly worried about what might happen now that they found out.

Marlow and Vic nodded at pretty much the same time, both agreeing easily.

“Of course we are,” Marlow told him, as though it should have been obvious. “I’m honestly just shocked you had your boyfriend on the team for two whole months before you slipped up. Kinda glad you did, though.”

Marlow couldn’t imagine how long they would have kept hiding it, if not. Pretending to be enemies when they played on separate teams was one thing but acting like teammates when they were more than that was just ridiculous to him. They couldn’t possibly keep up the charade for the full season, let alone the next few. At least, he really hoped they wouldn’t try.

“C’mon, they’re gonna send out a search party for us if we stay out here much longer,” Vic muttered, tilting his head towards the doors. “And I don’t have any excuses that would

explain what the four of us are doing out here."

"You would think of something, I'm sure," Shane noted. "You're pretty good at escaping the presses questioning."

"Ah, the press, yes. I hate them. My friends aren't as easy to lie to, though," Vic clarified the difference, wrapping his arm around Shane's neck. "But for you guys, I'll suffer through it."

His lips tugged upwards into a smile, still feeling his heart beating a bit quicker than it needed to, given their quick acceptance. Glancing at Ilya, there was a similar expression on face. Something along the lines of relief and contemplation, like maybe they really should consider telling the others the truth. Maybe they deserved to know.

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A little over a week later, they were back home in Boston, playing against Dallas. They were, frankly, playing better than the Raiders anticipated given the team's recent track record. It wasn't impressive, to say the least.

But they had apparently gotten their shit together for tonight's game, making Hammersmith work twice as hard for the only goal they had scored in the first period.

"Is it just me, or are they actually kind of…good tonight?" Connors questioned, his tone a little incredulous as they entered the locker room as intermission began.

Kovalev nodded in agreement. "It's weird, yeah," he affirmed, unhooking his helmet and running his hand through his hair. "Makes me wonder if we actually have to get serious to beat them." What a horrifying thought.

"They'll burn out next period," Kohn predicted, sounding overly confident about it as he pulled his padding off to try to cool down a bit quicker. "We just have to wait for them to tire out, then swoop in."

"Yes, wait and hope is a great strategy," Dubek teased with a sardonic tone. "Or we could just score some fucking goals next period instead of barely tying the game."

"At least no one can say we handed them that goal," Varkov insisted, patting the sweat off his neck with a damp towel. "We're making it just as hard for them as they're making it for us."

"Anything you want to throw in, captain?" Hammersmith questioned, chin tilted towards Ilya who was sitting on the bench beside his cubby and scrolling through his phone.

He didn't even bother glancing up, just shaking his head. "Think Dubek covered it," he retorted, his voice rather monotone as he kept his eyes glued to his screen. "Score goals, win game."

Shane stared at him for a second before glancing away. He caught Vic's eyes. It wasn't hard to do when their cubbies were right beside each other, but he could tell there was something different in his gaze. Acknowledgment, maybe.

Not the smug kind someone got when they had leverage, but the understanding kind when someone felt like they finally fully knew a person.

“What’s got you more invested in your phone than us?” Sebbin wondered, frowning at his captain’s laser focus on his device. “Don’t tell me you’re texting a girl.”

Ilya’s gaze flickered up, meeting Sebbin’s before he rolled his eyes. “No, dumbass, I’m not,” he clarified, turning his phone around. “I’m keeping up with pissed off fans.”

“What?” Feller questioned in confusion, crossing the room to look at his screen better.

“They are mad at us,” he muttered, pausing before he shrugged. “Well, mad at higher ups, technically. We are just the face of their frustration, I think.”

He clicked his volume up a few notches, some man’s voice coming through the speakers a bit more clearly. Calling his tone furious might have actually been an understatement as he ranted about how horrible it was to attend their games because of the parking and entry lines.

“Woah, we seriously only let them come through the South and East entrance?” Feller asked, looking surprised. “What about the other dozens of doors we have around the West and North? Can’t they come in through those?”

“Ah, he gets to that,” Ilya muttered, holding up his finger as if asking them to wait for a moment.

Sure enough, another few seconds later, the man mentioned how understaffed the doors were, which made things take even longer. He said something about factoring in an extra two or three hours to find parking and just entering the building before Ilya shut off his phone, looking somewhat stumped but mostly just irritated.

He loved hockey for the game, not the politics behind it. But he wasn’t a fool. He knew they made the company a lot of money every year. *A lot.* There was no excuse for them not spending at least some of it to pay their employees and fully staff the building.

“First the ticket prices, now this, and yet they accuse us of fucking sabotaging our fanbase?” Dubek commented, sounding disgusted. “Do they even want people to come see us play?”

Hammersmith shook his head. “Seems like they don’t,” he admitted. If they actually wanted the fans to come see them, they wouldn’t be scrimping to the point people posted videos in outrage.

“I don’t like this,” Ilya murmured, pressing the edge of his phone under his chin as he stared at the carpet in contemplation. “It feels…*bureaucratic*.”

If someone who didn’t know English had been present, they might have thought he just used a slur with the tone his voice took. As though bureaucracy was the worst thing in the world. In his mind, it kind of was. Or at the very least, it was pretty up there.

“What’s going on in your head, Roz?” Connors questioned, almost nervous to ask.

Anytime he got that look in his eyes, there was almost always a plan of some kind behind it. Usually a half-baked, or hell, maybe a completely raw one.

Ilya clicked his tongue softly, gears whirring in his head. “Oh nothing,” he pretended coyly, setting his phone down and standing up. “I was just thinking that if we don’t know these things because management won’t tell us, maybe we should go directly to the source of this distress for information?”

“You want to talk to the fans, you mean?” Carmichael assumed, shaking his head softly. “That kind of post won’t go over well. They’ll tell you to take it down.” Not before a few million people saw it, though.

Ilya shot him a look that suggested he should know better than to doubt him after so many years. “Who said anything about a post?”

Marlow followed his gaze towards the clock on the wall, then huffed. “You’re gonna talk to them right now,” he realized, pausing for a moment. “Or *we* are gonna talk to them right now, I suppose. Aren’t we?”

He shrugged, already heading for the door. “If you want to come with me,” he told them, pushing it open. “You’re more than welcome to stay and rest until next period.”

Kohn was rolling his eyes before the statement even left his mouth, already crossing the locker room to catch up. “Like hell I’m missing a chance to get some energy out, piss of the brass, and talk to fans.” It was like his perfect trifecta.

With a bit of clamoring, the rest of the room quickly shed whatever gear they needed to and chased after them, not letting the door close. Even if it probably wasn’t the wisest idea, especially given their time constraints, they were still going to do it. Because, well, why not?

The hallway was filled with reporters, as usual, all of whom turned to look their way as if expecting an interview even after all this time. They could probably tell, though, from how many of them had come out of the locker room, that they were doing something. And it had absolutely nothing to do with them.

“Excuse me,” one woman called, walking beside them. “Is there a reason you’re leaving the locker rooms during intermission?”

Kane gave her a tight-lipped smile that most would call petty. “No comment,” he told her, hand gently pushing the camera in another direction to get it out of his face as they rushed past the reporters.

They all stared at each other, pausing for a moment as the team continued down the corridor at a brisk pace until they broke out into a complete run. It was hard to know which one them had started it, but considering Ilya was still in front, they could assume it was him.

One of the reporters gestured to the cameraman, pointing down the hallway as if telling him to follow them. There was no point in waiting for them to come back, after all, since they’d just be ignored again.

At least if they went after the team, they might get some footage of them for a change, instead of just seeing them shoving the cameras away.

Once one of them did it, the other reporters also did the same, hoping for the same story as each other. Whatever it was. With the Raiders, they never got much, which made anything better than nothing.

Racing upstairs, Ilya halted his steps once he started to see people that weren't employees allowed in the restricted area. He honestly had no clue what section of the arena they were in, too used to being on the ice to know where the different sections were.

People stopped, immediately, as expected.

One woman was able to notice sooner than some of the other fans who were still standing in line for concessions or refilling their soda's. "Y-you're—" she didn't even bother finishing her sentence, just stopping abruptly.

Sebbin gave a small, awkward wave. "Hi," he muttered politely, glancing around a bit at the part of the arena he never got to see. "Ooh, they sell smoothies?"

The lady behind the counter, dressed in a uniform, nodded slowly as she pointed to their menu. He eyed it curiously, contemplating it for a moment. But before he could actually decide to order one, he heard Ilya let out a rather sharp whistle. The kind that always bruised ear drums.

"Sorry to interrupt your intermission, but we wanted to say *hello* and talk to some of you," he explained, gesturing for them to be quiet. "We don't have a lot of time, though, clearly, so we'd really appreciate it if you could settle down a bit."

Shane furrowed his brows as one guy pushed a bit closer, bumping into a woman and nearly making her drop her bag of popcorn. "Hey, no shoving," he stated, shaking his head. "Apologize to her."

Ilya's head snapped in that direction; a look of equal annoyance sprawled across it. "Yes, don't do that to each other," he concurred. "That's very rude, we don't like when you do that."

"We don't like camera's, either," Kane added, waving his hand at someone who was already trying to film them without permission. "We have enough of them on us from the press. Put the phones down, please."

He knew they were mostly alright with boundaries, that a cluster or two of fans on the street was smart enough to give them room to breathe. But a crowd this large became a bit harder to manage and they didn't really have time to set them straight if they didn't listen the first time.

A security guard, positioned in front of one of the doors perked up, looking like he was getting ready to move. Having anyone from team up here wasn't common, let alone all of them. He didn't even know if it was allowed, frankly.

Kovalev shook his head. “We’re fine,” he assured him respectfully, trying to send him back to his post. “We know it’s your job, but you can stand further back. Thank you.”

No one here was going to hurt them, even if they sometimes got a little overzealous.

“Excuse me,” someone called, her hand halfway raised as if stuck between hesitance and opportunity. “Can I get a picture?”

Ilya nodded, gesturing for her to come closer. “Yeah, of course,” he muttered, hand hovering near her instead of touching her when he was still sweating from the first period. Or perhaps the jog upstairs.

“We’re all happy to take pictures or sign things, but please don’t push,” Vic told them gently.

A pen had already somehow made its way into his hand without him even realizing someone gave it to him, and he probably shouldn’t have been shocked by it. Just going along with it, he jotted his signature down on the replica jersey someone had with his name on it.

“Finally, they do something worth filming,” one of the reporters muttered, catching up with them. She pointed at some of them, sending her cameraman to get a better angle.

Marlow, who had been signing something for a little boy, glanced at the cameras, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. “Get that out of his face, *now*,” he insisted firmly.

He gently moved the boy a bit further back, closer to his father, not wanting to put a child in that position. The lights were hard on the eyes, the lack of space irritating, and the overall invasion of privacy unacceptable for someone so young.

“He’s just doing his job,” the reporter assured him, already eyeing the boy like she was going to interrogate him.

“And we’re doing ours,” Hammersmith retorted, stepping in between her and the kid, pointing towards the security guard. “Now, back the hell up or we’ll ask him to do his.”

When she didn’t immediately move, as directed, Hammersmith gave a nod towards the guard, letting him handle her. He moved from the door, hand covering the camera lens as he turned it the other direction and told the reporter to step back.

As the security guard made them leave, another showed up, presumably because word spread quickly enough that someone left their post to come ensure things were kept in check. They both kept the rest of the reporters away, trying to send them back to the hallway where they usually dwelled.

“We have press badges,” one of them reminded the man. “We’re supposed to capture these kinds of moments. It’s—”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s your job to harass the players,” the security guard interjected, rolling his eyes. “Keep moving; I don’t wanna see any of you bothering these people.” That went for the Raiders and the fans.

Ilya hummed. “I like that man,” he murmured to Varkov. “Remind me to ask him his name so I can make sure he gets a late Christmas bonus.” Or a second, higher one, more likely.

He knew they at least gave most of their staff an extra check around the holidays. Not vendors, usually, but security and janitorial members. People that were constantly here and had been for years. Some even longer than he had played here. But he also knew it wasn’t as high as it could or should have been.

Another thing he eventually planned to rectify if he got his way.

Varkov huffed, unsurprised as he gave a nod. “Got it,” he promised. “Now, were you actually planning to discuss this whole malfunctioning arena thing or…”

His eyes flickered as he remembered that was what he had intended to do all along before getting sidetracked with fans, like usual. “Ah, yes, uh- can you all listen for a little bit?” he requested, projecting his voice rather loudly.

When they didn’t immediately quiet down, Shane chimed in, “Shh, please. Just a few moments of your time and we’ll keep signing things, I swear.” That would get their attention.

After a few more seconds, they slowly stopped clamoring, quieting down until they could literally hear the music playing over the speakers in the actual rink during the intermission. It was rare that the arena was ever so silent when people were in it. Nicer, though, too. The team could at least think a little better.

“It’s been brought to our attention recently that the ticket prices have been far higher than what we think you should be paying and that there are issues with the entry lines being too long,” Ilya explained remorsefully. “We want you to know that we’re working on a way to fix that for you.”

“It’s unfortunately not something we have much control over, typically,” Kohn told them with dismay. “But we’re talking about it with management and trying to get it sorted out. There’s no reason any of you should wait in line for three hours to have a ticket scanned.”

That was earlier than the team even got here, usually. It was absolutely ridiculous to ask their fans to waste that kind of time when they should just be able to show proof, they have a ticket and walk right in within a few minutes.

“In the meantime, are there any other complaints or problems that we can fix to make you guys enjoy our games more?” Carmichael asked, trying to make sure he gave everyone an equal amount of eye contact and attention.

“*Excluding* the fact that you want us to win more, of course,” Kovalev commented, hands raised in clarification. “We’d like that too but can’t make any promises on how the rest of the season goes.”

It was silent for a moment before some guy eventually spoke up, “Uh- just like any problems?”

Ilya nodded immediately, eyes briefly glancing at the clock to make sure they still had enough time. “This rink belongs to all of you just as much as it does us,” he told them with conviction. “And we’re not always aware of the problems with ticket prices or entry problems because they keep us separate from it.”

It was a very deliberate choice, too. He knew that as a fact. They wanted their players to focus on the game, not the socioeconomics behind pricing their merch or making it more difficult for fans to actually support them.

It never stopped the team before, though. And it certainly wasn’t going to stop them now.

“Well, parking is kind of hard,” one woman confessed hesitantly. “I found a garage a mile away and then walked.” Which of course, had made her late by a few minutes.

Kane glanced down at the chucky black heels she had on. “In those shoes, really?” he wondered, slightly impressed. “That must have killed your feet.”

She nodded sheepishly. “The lot here is really expensive, but even though I’m still willing to pay, I can’t because they closed a third of it for some reason.”

There just wasn’t space for all of their cars.

Ilya wrinkled his nose. “It shouldn’t be closed,” he clarified. “We’ll look into it and figure out why they’re doing that.” Probably due to their staffing problem, again. Just like the damn doors.

Honestly, he always knew they were a money hungry corporation. They made everything incredibly expensive for the fans, then cut corners for the staff and building renovations in order to pay the athletes and send all the spare money to people so high up the chain that Ilya would probably never even meet before his career ended.

But he had never seen it impact people firsthand the way he was witnessing it currently. It was infuriating, to say the least.

“The food is also pretty pricey,” a guy told them, shrugging slightly. “I know all sporting areas upcharge, but I can’t afford it anymore. I just eat before the game starts.”

“Oh c’mon, eating during the game is like the best part of it,” Feller insisted, shaking his head in annoyance. “I’d do it, if coach didn’t slap me on the bench.”

There were a few chuckles, the—partial—joke still landing even amidst the topic of conversation being rather serious.

“Concessions name their own prices,” Dubek noted, eyes glancing at the expensive menus. “These companies are too big to change their minds if we talk to them, but we can get in touch with some local vendors who might want to sell their food here.”

They usually charged less since they weren’t corporate, yet. Besides, it would be a good opportunity to support the businesses around them, instead of having fans spend minimum wage for a single damn bottle of water.

“One of the escalators on the third floor has been out of order since the start of the season,” another guy said. “I have bad knees, so I had to walk around the building to the other one, then walk back to where my seat was.”

Connors frowned, the older man’s confession was probably the most upsetting one so far. To him, at least. “We’ll get maintenance on it,” he assured him confidently.

They would have to fight for lower prices, probably haggle if not threaten just to make someone listen to him. But they could handle a broken escalator by just discussing it with someone on their normal staff.

“Thank you for telling us about these things,” Shane muttered appreciatively. “We know this stuff can discourage you from coming back if it gets out of hand, but we don’t have any intention of letting this go without at least trying to fix as much as possible.”

Ilya nodded in agreement. “We want you to enjoy coming here and feel like this space is the best atmosphere for you because you all make it feel like that for us,” he told them earnestly, gesturing to the entire team. “You all spend your hard-earned money, you take days off work, you give us so much of your time and your energy and we want to make that worth it for you.”

“…wow, you’re so much nicer in person,” a blonde woman whispered, her voice a little too loud unintentionally.

He let out a chuckle that turned her cheeks bright red. “Thank you,” he replied with a smile, eyes flitting back to the clock again. “I wish we could stay longer, but intermission is ending soon, so we can offer you guys a few more pictures and autographs if you want but they need to be quick, yes?”

Almost instantly, their fans snapped out of conversational mode and started reaching for their phones or asking to have stuff signed.

There wasn’t much time for proper introductions or long conversations, the way they tended to prefer, but they were able to get through a majority of the crowd, even if some of their signatures got a bit sloppy as they rushed through as many as they could in a short amount of time.

“Alright, alright, we have to be back on the ice in less than two minutes!” Vic called out, waving his hands to get them to all halt what they were doing. “If we’re not there when the second period starts, we’re blaming you guys.”

Everyone on the team immediately started to back away, turning to leave as quickly as they could when they realized how close they were cutting it. They had to run practically the entire way back, including rushing past the same reporters that were meddling earlier.

Still, they managed to get back to the locker room with a bit of time to spare, grabbing their stuff as fast as they knew how to. They were probably the only team in history to be more exhausted as intermission ended than they were when it started.

“Sebbin, where the hell did you get that smoothie from?” Varkov asked, frowning in confusion as he ran a hand through his hair to settle the out of place strands before putting his helmet back on.

He hadn’t even seen him ask for it, let alone jog all the way back downstairs with it. How the lid hadn’t slipped off and caused a massive disaster, he wasn’t sure. But it was a damn good thing it was secure, otherwise they’d be in even more trouble than they were already going to be in when coach found out about their stunt.

He blinked, sipping it before giving a pleased hum at the flavor. “The vendor gave it to me,” he stated, shrugging as he set it down in his cubby. “I’m gonna drink next intermission.”

Shane huffed a disbelieving laugh as he managed to strap the last of his padding back on just before someone came to grab them, telling them they were needed back on the ice. “Never change, Sebbin,” he urged.

“Why would I?” he questioned, a goofy grin of faux arrogance on his lips. “I’m already perfect.”

Shane hummed in agreement, giving him a shove towards the tunnel. He followed the guys out, still fussing with part of his gear to try to make sure it was on properly before they stepped back into the rink and the lights grew astronomically brighter above them.

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The next day, Shane’s phone was bombarded with texts from Hayden, JJ, and his own mother. All of them were curious about the photos going viral of the Raiders hanging out with their fan’s mid intermission. Yuna even said she was hoping he was finally getting the team to accept the possibility of good publicity.

They weren’t, of course. That disappointed her greatly, but she had given up on being surprised, if nothing else.

“You’re going to get hit by a car if you don’t look up once in a while,” Ilya murmured, only partially joking as he grabbed the back of his boyfriend’s shirt and tugged him back.

She looked up from his phone, realizing the crosswalk was still red and there were cars that would run him over if he kept going. “It’s downtown, they’re always trying to kill pedestrians,” he muttered, glancing back down.

“Doesn’t mean you need to make it easier for them,” he replied, letting the fabric of his shirt slip through his fingers. “How is Yuna?” he wondered, pressing the crosswalk button a few extra times before peering over his shoulder at their texts.

“Fine,” Shane answered, shrugging. “She’s pressing for details about last night’s intermission; thinks we might get in trouble with management since were criticizing the way they run things.”

“What are they going to do, fire us?” he teased, rolling his eyes. “We’ll be fine.”

Besides, they only criticized them because there was something worth complaining about in the first place. If the arena had been properly staffed, the parking lots were fully open, and the prices kept reasonable, the fans wouldn't have ever gotten upset in the first place.

If anything, the Raiders were just cleaning up the mess that their brass had made.

"That's what I'm telling her," Shane assured him, sending another text. "She's still skeptical."

"Good quality to have, but unnecessary at the moment," he responded, gesturing to the walk light they had. "Remind her that we've done this before and have like a total of seventeen lawyers who are useful in helping us get what we want."

He hummed dubiously. "I know, I know. You guy's love keeping them on retainer," he recalled, stepping off the curb and glancing back down at his phone.

He didn't quite send his mom those exact words but something similar, hoping it would help ease her mind. He wasn't terribly worried about things, either, if he was being honest. The fans were forthcoming in their concerns and all of them seemed valid, if not pretty easy to fix for a corporation that cultivated millions of dollars per year.

"Another step," Ilya stated, hand wrapping around Shane's arm to drag him up it before he tripped.

"Hm? Oh." He hopped back up onto the sidewalk, feeling Ilya's grip loosen as soon as it was safe to let go. "Thanks."

"Please put the phone away before I have to steer you the entire walk," he requested politely, with a tinge of linger exasperation. "I thought I was supposed to be the one attached to a screen, not you."

He would have gladly kept holding Shane's hand the rest of the way if he could have, but even occasionally guiding him away from the edge of the sidewalk seemed a bit too risky. Instead, he just shoved his hand back into the pocket of his coat, warming up his cold fingertips.

"I'm not attached to it," Shane defended, his thumbs still typing another text as he talked. "I have lower screen time than most of the guys on the team. Especially you."

Ilya shrugged. "Could have fooled me," he teased. "And Kovalev does even more boring puzzles and Sudoku than you do, his screen time is always lowest."

Huffing, he sent one final text to his mom and slid his phone back into his pocket. "There, it's gone," he muttered, dramatically wiping his hands against each other. "You have my undivided attention until we get to the car."

Ilya's expression blanked as he gestured to the parking garage they were about to walk into, where Shane's car was immediately coming into view. "You mean that car, right there?" he asked. "The one we are already at?"

Shane made a half surprised, half apologetic sound, like he genuinely hadn't realized they walked the entire way back while he mostly responded to the messages he ignored during their breakfast. In his defense, the restaurant hadn't been that far in the first place.

"Okay, you uh- can have half of my attention while I drive to the rink?" he offered, pulling his car keys out. "And then my full attention again for like the three-minute walk inside?"

Even though he was still cautious about the amount of time people saw them spend together, he had given in and let them start driving to practice together every once in a while. Usually no more than twice a week, though.

"Uh huh." Ilya rolled his eyes in mock annoyance, walking around and climbing into the passage seat. "A whole three minutes, wow."

He pulled his seatbelt on, watching Shane double check his mirror and the settings on his heater like he always did before reversing out of the spot and driving out of the garage. He tapped his fingers against his knee, half paying attention to the road and mostly just staring at Shane with curious eyes.

"What?" he wondered after a few moments, able to see his gaze out of the corner of his eye. "Are you upset that I nearly walked into traffic? Because you've done that too, before. More often than I have."

Ilya huffed softly, head lolling to the side a bit to stare out the window. "No, am not mad at anything," he assured him. "I'm glad your mom cares so much about you, really. I was thinking of other stuff, is all."

Shane narrowed his eyes slightly, lightly stepping on the brakes as they came to a red light. "What stuff?" he asked, one hand falling from the wheel as he pivoted his body to look at him better.

He gave a weak shrug. "Just about what Marly said on New Year's Eve," he confessed. "About the team not judging us for being happy if we ever…you know." *Came out to them*.

"Oh." Shane glanced back at the road as the light shifted colors quickly, slowly rolling through it. "Do you want to? Tell them, I mean."

"I don't know, maybe," Ilya murmured contemplatively. "It was one thing lying when you were in Canada but now…I feel guilty with you so close. Especially for making Marlow and Vic lie for us."

Even if they assured both of them, multiple times, that they were going to, it felt selfish to put them in that kind of position. It also felt disrespectful to the rest of the team to let two of them know and keep everyone else in the dark about it. How long were they even planning on hiding it, anyway?

The Raiders always preached loyalty, privacy, and respect towards each other. This was no different than keeping Dubek's eating disorder under wraps or hiding the fact that Carmichael missed a few games due to family problems last season.

Ilya didn't fear their rejection, even if he was a bit anxious thinking about their reactions. He worried they would feel betrayed by how long he had hid this from them, all while claiming they were his family and closest confidants. Which, they were, for everything else.

"I think…if we did tell them, it would be okay," Shane confessed. "Like Vic and Marly said."

He furrowed his eyebrows a bit, nodding. "I think so, too. It's just- I don't want them to feel deceived by us. Me, especially."

Shane at least had a good excuse, given how recent his move still was. He couldn't have come out to a team he wasn't on for the past decade. And when he got to Boston, there was no way he would make that kind of confession to a group of people he only knew in small increments over the years the first few times they hung out. But Ilya was like their brother. He didn't have those excuses.

"Ilya, you have chosen the Raiders at every turn for ten fucking years," Shane reminded him. "You turned away other contracts, showed up to support their personal issues, hell you've taken pay cuts to keep everyone together."

"Your point?" he questioned, feeling like none of those things were particular special. It was just what a good captain did for his team.

"They know exactly where your loyalty is," Shane stated decisively. "That's my point."

The Raiders weren't like the Metros, quick to jump to conclusions and hurl insults around. They would understand why Ilya hid this from them, why he *had to* for so many years even when it was isolating and painful.

Ilya's lips tugged to the side slightly. "I am loyal, yes?" he murmured, as if trying to convince himself.

He nodded in agreement. "Like a Golden Retriever with softer curls," he replied.

Ilya huffed, running his thumb over his bottom lip as he contemplated it. "Maybe," he mumbled quietly.

He did go to bat for Connors when he heard Desjourney contemplating trading him last season, threatening not to re-sign once his own contract ended if he did. And he spent the night in the hospital with Kohn after he got into a car crash and was on painkillers for hours, waking up periodically when a night nurse came to check on his condition.

They wouldn't forget those moments, right? They couldn't somehow mean nothing just because he hadn't been honest with them about his sexuality and his relationship with Shane.

"It's up to you," Shane assured him, reaching over to put his hand on his leg. "But if it's just their judgement you're worried about, then you really don't have anything to fear."

He placed his hand over Shane's squeezing it. "You would be okay with it?" he wondered. "If I wanted them to know about us, you would come out to them with me?" That's what it sounded like he was saying, anyway.

He hesitated for a moment before nodding slightly. “I think so, yeah,” he admitted. “I trust them. And you.”

Ilya pursed his lips. “Hmmm,” was his only response, quiet and thoughtful.

He studied Shane’s side profile for a moment, watching him pull into his designated parking spot. He pulled his hand away from his leg to put the car in park, head tilting to look at Ilya like the silence wasn’t quite the answer he had wanted or expected to hear.

“Okay, I know I’ve said this before,” Shane prefaced. “But I really don’t like when you go silent mid conversation because it makes me feel uncomfortable and I—”

Before he could finish speaking, Ilya was kissing him gently, lips pressed to his as he bent over the arm rest between them. Shane softened into it, humming quietly as he kissed him back for a moment. His mind, temporarily relaxed enough to forget they were in the parking lot, in front of their arena.

“Thank you,” Ilya murmured, eventually pulling away.

“For…?” he trailed off, looking a bit dazed and confused.

“Just reassuring me that all the scary thoughts in my head are total bullshit,” Ilya replied earnestly. “I love that you can do that so easily.”

They spiraled, sometimes. Often, actually. They grew dark and manipulative, telling him they would never be happy or truly together in the sense that other couples were. Or worse, they told him Shane would get sick of him, eventually wake up and realize he could do so much better and leave him.

But those thoughts were ridiculous, he knew. They were far from true and he was reminded of it often.

Shane shrugged. “You do it for me all the time,” he reminded him. “Guess we’re both overthinkers.”

“Is easy to stress when there’s so much to lose,” he admitted, head tipping to the side. “But maybe there is also a lot to gain, too.” He paused for a moment, shaking his head gently. “I don’t want to force you to come out just because I can’t stand being in the closet anymore. Either we both want it or we don’t do it.”

Shane’s lips quirked into an appreciative smile. “I told you, I trust them,” he reminded him. “And I know it’s internally killing Vic to lie to the guys.”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “We should never come out, then,” he joked. “It’s amusing watching him try to not look between us when we are in the locker room.”

“You’ve noticed that too?” he wondered, chuckling as he unbuckled his seatbelt. Reaching into the back seat, he pulled both of their duffle bags up front.

Ilya nodded, slinging his bag over his shoulder as he got out of the car. Slamming the door shut, it closed just hard enough that Shane glared at him for it, contemplating a reminder about being gentle with the doors before he eventually decided against it.

“Of course I have,” he said, leaning his arm on the top of the car and looking at him over it. “He looks like he is trying to solve the mysteries of the universe whenever we’re talking to each other.”

“We’re that fascinating, I guess,” Shane mumbled, locking his car as they walked towards the door of the rink. He stopped in front of it, turning to look at Ilya. “Wait- are we really going to tell them, then? Like…today?”

Ilya paused too, as if the full implications hadn’t fully sunk in for him yet either. “I think… yes, right?” he muttered cautiously, as if seeking reassurance that Shane wanted the same thing.

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, right,” he murmured, pulling the door open. “It’ll be fine.”

He said it mostly to and for himself, needing to mentally remind himself that the team would be supportive. Marlow and Vic already were, even if he could tell they still had questions they were just a bit hesitant to ask out of fear that they might accidentally offend or push him and Ilya away.

Walking into the locker room, things seemed normal. They were, by all standards, aside from the occasional glance he got from Vic that felt sort of like he was being looked at in a new light. He’d been getting that look a lot lately, but it wasn’t as invasive as it might have seemed. More like understanding, in a way.

Like the last layer of Shane’s self-protection had been stripped away and there was nowhere else to hide his authentic self. It was an odd mix of terrifying and liberating.

“You need to stop going to that dry cleaner, Smitty,” Varkov muttered, looping his laces around tightly. “I’m telling you, they’re taking advantage of you.”

“But they’re so close to my apartment,” Hammersmith defended. “I don’t want to drive seven miles to pick up a suit like you do. I barely wear them often enough to go to the one down the block anyway.”

“I will literally pick them up for you,” he insisted firmly, glancing up the look at him as he finished tying his skates on. “Just stop wasting your money on a mediocre presser.”

Hammersmith rolled his eyes, gesturing to Varkov’s overall appearance, which was easily cleaner than half the guys on the team. “That’s the European in you, always needing to look overdressed,” he teased. “You’d think it would have worn off with how long you’ve lived here. You don’t see Kov spending hundreds of dollars on his dry cleaning.”

Varkov shoved his hand away playfully. “That’s because he’s a traitor who likes sweatpants and jeans,” he accused. “Roz hasn’t changed, though. He still puts the effort in to look nice when it’s necessary.”

Conners let out a snort of amusement, patting Kovalev on the back as he made an offended sound and wore the expression to match it.

“If it’s acceptable and convenient, why can’t I wear them?” Kovalev questioned in confusion. “I would get stranger looks in nice clothing than I would in jeans.”

He had, actually, in the past. When he first moved to Boston, he had heard American’s were casual in their attire but didn’t fully understand how much so until going to the grocery store earned him odd looks.

“It’s just the principle of the matter,” Roz agreed, tugging his shirt off to start changing. “Sweatpants are comfortable, yes but I would not be caught dead leaving the house in them.”

Varkov gave an *‘I told you so’* look towards Kov that practically burned the title of a bad Russian onto his forehead without ever stepping towards him.

Shane glanced down at his cubby, the easy banter helping to settle his nerves a bit as they continued to get ready for practice. He and Ilya hadn’t discussed when they would tell the team or how. Clearly it wasn’t now, though, as they finished getting ready without any massive secrets coming out from anyone.

Practice was closed, as always. They found they worked better without feeling the need to perform for an audience, like the rest of the league always had to put up with. Besides, they could mess around far more when they weren’t expected to look and act professionally in front of the fans.

“Do not even think about it!” Marlow shouted, finger pointed at Feller. “I swear to God, Feller, I’ll key your fucking car if you hit me with that puck!”

Feller looked borderline offended. “Don’t be so dramatic, Marly,” he replied, tone overly blasé. “I’m just going to hit the other puck off your hand. Hold it still.”

“And if you hit me, then what?” he shouted back, practically at the other end of the rink, too far away from him for Feller to have enough control over the disc. “It’s still going to hurt, even though it's my glove.”

“Only if I actually hit you, which I won’t!” Feller called, hand cupped at the edge of his mouth so his words would carry.. “…I don’t think,” he added under his breath quietly, tapping the edge of his stick on the ice while eyeing the distance between it and Marlow.

“Did you just say you don’t think!?” he exclaimed, arm wavering as he somehow still kept the puck on the palm of glove for reason’s unknown.

Kane’s singular semester of psych classes would probably say something like it was his subconscious trusting his teammate, but Marlow was pretty sure he was just an idiot who would probably stand in front of a firing squad if someone pointed him in the direction of it.

There was a loud echo as Feller slammed his stick against the puck and Marlow grimaced, glancing away. Most of the team did the same, reluctantly watching without any clue how

things had even escalated to this point anyway.

Flying through the air, the puck knocked the other one out of Marlow's hand and they both went clattering to the ice.

Marlow let out a relieved sigh, glaring at Feller, who just shrugged as if he wasn't sure why everyone was so worried.

"I told you I wouldn't hit you!" he shouted, ice crackling under his skates as he glided over to pick them both up. "I should shoot the next one off your head."

"Over my dead body," Marlow retorted, disagreeing firmly. "Use someone else as your dummie."

"Oh, c'mon, I'd let you put your helmet on," he offered with a shrug, as if that made the risk disappear entirely. "You're acting like you don't even trust me." Marlow scoffed, shaking his head gently and skating away without saying anything. "Is that a no!?" he shouted after him.

"Give it a rest, Feller," Ilya called out, glaring at him from the edge of the rink where he was resting his back against the boards. "This is hardly even practice anymore, just a bunch of children being paid to play with expensive toys."

"You're the captain; it's your fault if you can't control them," Shane reminded him, nudging him gently.

He hummed, lips tugging to the side. "No wonder you do not miss being captain," he muttered. "You get all the fun of being on the team without any of the responsibility to keep them in line."

He nodded. "Exactly," he agreed without hesitation.

It was no secret that he felt a lot freer after losing his status, even if it might have been viewed as a bad thing to the general public. Some people, most in fact, considered it a step down from his previous position.

But being captain was stressful. He was in charge of drills, practice, and a dozen little details that stressed him out worse than dealing with his own schedule did. Besides, every failure or mistake they made was his problem, too. That was a lot of pressure to put on anyone.

So, no, he didn't miss it. He actually loved having Ilya as his captain and having the Raiders as just teammates, not necessarily responsibilities.

"Alright, enough of the tomfoolery," Ilya declared, making a large sweeping motion with his hand. "We've done plenty for this afternoon."

He hadn't, apparently, killed them too badly with drills if they were still playful enough to fuck around so vivaciously. Still, they had managed to find time to actually get some work done and that was enough for the day. He'd just make sure they skated until they passed out next practice.

“Wow, seriously Roz?” Kohn questioned, sounding a bit surprised as he skidded to a stop. “That sounds so weird coming from your mouth.”

He frowned at them. “I can be nice,” he defended, gesturing to himself. “Am not always a cruel captain.” Just most of the time.

“No, not that,” he replied, shaking his head. “The other thing- tomfoolery? Way too colloquial for you.”

Ilya blinked, head jutting forward as if he didn’t hear the word. “Huh?” he questioned, furrowing his brows in confusion and looking around for Marlow quickly. “Marly, translate please.”

He glanced up from where he was dropping his gloves over the side of the wall, tossing them lazily on their team bench. He was so used to Roz needing him as a human dictionary that it didn’t catch him off guard anymore. In fact, he kind of feared the day he became outmoded by Shane in his role.

“It means informal,” he replied, barely lifting his head. “Like slang that everyone understands. He’s calling you overly conversational.”

Ilya nodded slowly, filing the word away. “Ah, right,” he murmured, pretending like he already knew that and just needed to be reminded. “I changed my mind, more drills now because of Kohn.”

“What? I was complimenting you!” he exclaimed, met with a skeptically raised eyebrow. “Okay, I wasn’t. But that’s still unfair!”

He pretended to contemplate it for a moment as if unsure whether to let the comment go or make them do a few extra laps just for the hell of it. Some of the guys gave him a mix of glares and pleading looks, but he really never had any intention of keeping them any later in the first place.

“Alright, fine,” he muttered, hands raised to concede. “Original statement stands. We’re done for the day.”

“Yes! I get to walk out of here instead of crawl for a change,” Carmichael realized in relief, already trying to leave before he could change his mind.

“Wait a minute!” Ilya called, reaching for the fabric of his jersey and dragging him back a little bit. “We’re not done.”

He looked practically betrayed. “But you just said—”

“I said we are done with practice, not done,” Ilya clarified, his tone a bit softer than one might expect. “I need to talk to everyone about something.”

Shane’s head snapped to the side, suddenly remembering their earlier decision. He hadn’t really forgotten about it at all in first place, actually. It had just settled in the back of his mind

as something that Ilya might have decided not to go through with out of fear or concern about their reactions.

“Now?” he wondered, heart immediately starting to thud a bit harder as his brain started to file through the potential consequences of going through with it.

“We agreed, yes?” he replied, a flicker of confusion and panic flashing across his eyes.

“No, yes, I know,” Shane muttered, nodding. “I just- yeah, now. Now is good.” Better than later, he figured.

They’d understand, he was sure. He told Ilya as much earlier. But that didn’t mean they wouldn’t feel a little bit of duplicity at first. Maybe even disgust or resentment before it settled into the realization that they were the same people. That’s what happened with JJ, at least. And maybe even Hayden, though he still denied it.

Dubek squinted slightly, glancing between them as if trying to figure out what was going on. “Uh- everything alright?” he questioned. “It’s not about management or anything, is it?”

“Hm? No, no they’re still silent about everything,” Ilya replied quickly. “It’s about Shane and I, actually.”

Meeting Marlow’s eye for a moment, it was abundantly clear from look in them that he knew exactly where Ilya planned to take this conversation. A small, reassuring smile tugged at the edge of his lips and his head tipped ever so slightly.

“Are you guys, okay?” Kane asked, raking over both of them for a brief moment to check neither were concealing any injuries or benchable illnesses they didn’t want to admit to having.

Shane shook his head. “We’re fine, we just um—” He let out a soft, anxious huff of laughter. “—how do we…?” he trailed off, unsure what to tell them. It seemed so much easier in theory than in actuality, he supposed.

“For quite a while- several years, actually, Shane and I have been…in a relationship,” Ilya eventually explained, his voice tentative and his words slow to make sure they understood him.

There was silence. A lot of it. Blinking eyes and blank expressions as the majority of them seemed to malfunction for a few moments, unable to think of words let alone force them to come out coherently.

Ilya hoped, maybe even prayed to his mama’s God that they wouldn’t laugh or get upset. The only thing worse than them being angry was thinking he was joking.

If they rejected their relationship, that would mean they had to at least acknowledge it was real first. If they didn’t believe that he was bisexual or Shane was gay, then they were hurting him by denying his existence the same way his brother, Alexi, always had.

“Like…like dating?” Connors eventually asked cautiously. “Each other?”

Shane nodded slowly. “Yeah, each other,” he confirmed quietly, swallowing harshly.

Their expressions began to shift, still stuck in confusion but also trying to make sense of things as quickly as possible. That was clear from how hard they appeared to be thinking, trying to piece things together and make sense of the confession.

“So, you’re both um—” Kane made a strangled sound, not wanting to use the wrong term or offend them by mistake. “—queer?”

Ilya pointed to himself. “Bisexual.” He pointed at Shane. “Gay.”

“Oh, duh, right. Sort of implied in the relationship thing, huh?” he muttered, glancing away awkwardly. “Sorry.”

Ilya’s lips tugged downward, shaking his head. “No, no I don’t want anyone to be sorry,” he clarified. “I- we wanted to be honest with you because we trust you. Lying feels wrong. It always has; there was just not much opportunity to tell you when he was with the Metros.”

Hammersmith blinked, something obvious clicking in his mind. “He moved for you.” It wasn’t a question, not even a skeptical sentence. Just an epiphany about his motives.

No wonder he always gave the press some bullshit excuse about needing a change of pace or wanting a fresh start. He couldn’t exactly tell them he was gay and moving to a new country for his boyfriend. Jeez, Roz as a boyfriend. He never thought he’d live to see the day.

“But he likes us, he swears,” Vic chimed in with a gentle pat on Shane’s shoulder, squeezing it to remind him that he was in a safe place and settle his nerves a bit. “Even said he was glad to leave Montreal for us.” Sort of. He was paraphrasing.

“Wait- you knew!” Kovalev exclaimed, head whipping towards Vic with wide eyes.

“Er- for like not even two weeks,” he replied, shoulders raising defensively. “They didn’t tell us or anything, it was an accident.”

He didn’t want them to assume there was any favoritism towards him or mistrust towards the others, because the only reason he knew at all was from being in the right place at the right time. Well, maybe the wrong place and wrong time. He wasn’t quite sure.

“Us? Who the fuck is ‘*us’*, Vic?” Carmichael insisted, glancing around the group like there was some kind of spy hiding among them. “Who else knows?”

Marlow grimaced slightly, hand barely raising just enough to be noticeable. “It was just the two of us who found them- um…together,” he explained, shrugging. “We promised we wouldn’t say anything.”

“We asked them not to say anything, they didn’t want to lie,” Shane assured them, skipping over the part where Marly implied a rather inappropriate way to be found out about. “They’re also the reason we’re coming out to you guys, because they believed you wouldn’t judge us.”

“Good, because we’re not judging,” Dubek responded, head tilting for a moment. “It’s just… sort of confusing, is all. Even without actually hating each other, you guys used to see each other for like what, forty-eight hours at most? How did you make it work for- wait, did you say years?”

Ilya nodded in confirmation. “About ten of them, give or take,” he elaborated before they could ask how many of them. “And we just, I don’t know, treated every hour we could like it was important.”

They were, even if they always seemed to be shorter than a normal sixty-minute duration should be. And even if there was drama between teams or other outside factors that should have stressed them out, they ignored them as much as they could when they were together to keep their time feeling special.

“Wow, telling us this while we’re still on skates was diabolical, Roz,” Kane confessed, his legs feeling a bit weak as the depth of their relation really began to wash over him. “So, you’ve just been sort of together but doing long distance for a decade?”

Shane wrinkled his nose slightly, tipping his head back and forth. “It- we…have sort of, yeah,” he eventually said, unsure exactly how much they should divulge.

“That sounds…awful,” Dubek admitted with an expression of pity. “Having to hide like that is ridiculous. Especially with the way they used to pit you against each other.”

It was better these days, but to say it had disappeared entirely would be a lie. Fans and broadcasters still did it, even if it was to a lesser extent.

“We got used to it,” Shane replied with a weak shrug. “Just tried to separate the game from each other.”

It wasn’t what they liked or wanted, but it was what they delt with. At the end of the day, he would have rather put up with the scrutiny and secrecy to keep Ilya in his life than cave to the league’s expectations and push him away just to maintain his social image.

“I can understand why we wouldn’t know about you, Shane, having absolutely no attachment to us for so long,” Sebbin stated. “But Ilya, you’re like family. Why did you never say anything? Not even about him, just about you.”

If nothing else, knowing their captain was bisexual seemed like the kind of thing they should know about him if they were really friends. He felt a bit sick to think they hadn’t made him feel comfortable enough to confess that kind of thing.

He knew hockey could be the kind of sport that threw around insults and slurs, but the Raiders were strictly against that kind of stuff. They could chirp at someone just fine without needing to go after something as personal and private as sexuality, religion, or family.

Ilya pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, trying to think of a decent answer and struggling to come up with one. “It wasn’t- I couldn’t,” he eventually said. “Hockey makes it

complicated; Russia makes it even worse. I thought- yes, this part of me, but I never thought I could let it be."

He could sleep around, enjoy the company of a few men if he trusted them or knew for a fact that they had never watched hockey a day in their lives. But he could never allow it to last or be anything meaningful and long term.

Nothing like what he knew he wanted with Shane since their fourth or fifth time hooking up.

He always thought he'd eventually have his last tryst with a guy, then find a nice woman to settle down with. It wouldn't kill him or anything. It wasn't supposed to, anyway. He liked women, found them attractive and enjoyed their company.

And if he truly believed they had no future, as he did for a long time, then there was no point in telling his team anything.

"Черт, Россия действительно все усложняет," Varkov murmured sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Roz. I wish you could have felt comfortable enough to tell us."

"I do trust you," he responded firmly. "I do. I just…couldn't come clean about it."

Kohn perked up a bit. "Hold on- if you weren't going to tell us because you didn't think things could last, but now you *are* telling us, does that mean…" he trailed off, letting the implication linger.

They glanced at each other for a moment before Shane eventually nodded slightly, clearly biting back some sort of relieved or happy expression. "Yeah, we're planning to make it work," he told them. "Sort of already doing that, technically."

"Moving teams for him is insane, Hollzy," Dubek noted. "Not that any of us are complaining about benefiting from it, though."

"Moving…" Kane furrowed his brows for a moment before his eyes widened, getting excited. "Oh! Oh!" he exclaimed, physically bopping up and down on his skates, the blades clicking against the ice as he did so. "It makes so much sense!"

The others immediately moved a few inches away from him, the sudden outburst catching them off guard far more than it should have for someone known to enjoy sporadic movement. They knew he did that before games, sure, on solid ground. But this was just unsettling.

"You're getting way too high off the ice," Marlow muttered, cautiously reaching out to grab his shoulder and try to get him to calm down before he accidentally hurt himself or worse, one of them. "Calm down a bit, buddy. What makes sense?

"Right, right, sorry," he apologized without any sincerity as his skates clacked one last time. "Don't you guys get it?" he wondered, gesturing between Shane and Ilya. "They live together, too."

The two of them blinked, not saying anything to deny it but also not affirming his realization, either.

“How the hell did you know that?” Ilya questioned, squinting in confusion.

“How the hell did we not know sooner, is a better question,” Kane replied as if it was obvious. “I’ve been to Shane’s apartment and it’s super tiny despite him telling us repeatedly about how spacious his apartment in Montreal was because he hates feeling claustrophobic in his own home.”

“Plus, Roz has conveniently had an excuse every single time any of us have asked to come over for the past two and a half months,” Hammersmith realized, as a lightbulb went off in his head. “Which is when Shane joined the team.”

He also went out of his way to meet up with them if they had to discuss or return something, even if Kohn or Varkov could have just dropped by way faster.

God, it was so obvious now that they thought about it. The way they worked so well together on the ice, the way Ilya was so damn quick to break up fights before they started when Shane was involved, how he seemed more tense than anyone else when Yuna and David visited the first time.

“Okay, yes, we live together,” Shane confessed, waving one hand around vaguely. “It’s not a big deal or anything.”

“Are you kidding? It’s a huge deal,” Carmichael replied in disagreement. “You guys are like that figure skating pair from the Olympics that’s actually a couple off the ice, too, only with hockey.”

Ilya blinked. “And gayer,” he reminded him slowly, gesturing between him and Shane as if that part had slipped his mind somehow.

“Well, yeah, duh,” he muttered. “But c’mon, that’s not a huge deal. A Stanley cup winner dating another Stanley cup winner is what’s impressive.”

Though, neither of them had technically been winners at all when they got together, he supposed. They hadn’t even been captains, yet, either. Just a couple of rookies that happened to be more attracted to each other than the league liked to allow.

“So, wait- is liking guys just a requirement for winning the cup or something?” Kane asked, thinking back a few seasons. “Hunter won it, we’ve won it, Hollzy won it multiple times… I’m sensing a pattern.”

“Or maybe it’s just overcompensation to ensure we’re valuable enough that they can’t force us into retirement if we ever come out,” Shane noted. “Since, you know, I’ve worried about my entire career ending over this and Ilya has to make sure his whole country doesn’t disown him for our relationship.”

That might have come across a bit harsher than he intended, by mistake. He didn’t really mean to say it that bluntly. If anything, he supposed he should be thrilled they seemed so accepting of their relationship that they didn’t even need to fully understand it. But he still

needed them to realize that there were several very good reasons why no one else knew about them for so long.

“And now I feel like a horrible human being,” Kane murmured softly, looking apologetic.

“He didn’t mean it like that,” Ilya assured them. “It’s just…we have a lot to lose if this gets out and we’ve spent years making sure no one knows, making sure we aren’t seen together too much or using fake names—”

“Oh my God, he’s Jane,” Connors realized, putting his hand against his forehead for a moment. “Right? He is, isn’t he? From Montreal. I can’t believe we didn’t think of that the second you said you were together.”

He huffed, nodding after a moment. “He’s my Jane, yes,” he admitted, head tipping towards Shane. “We changed our contacts a few months ago.”

It had brought an unexpected amount of relief to both of them, especially Shane, to be able to have their real names in their phones. It was nice to open his texts and see Ilya’s name, knowing there was less risk if someone saw it because he could easily play it off as just talking to his captain about practice.

“We have so much to tell you, now that we know you’re her, Shane,” Feller claimed. “Because he’s been whipped for Jane for years and we’ve all had to hear about it—”

“Oh, look at the time! We’ve been here so long,” Ilya interjected, grabbing his shoulder and digging his thumb into it hard enough that he wouldn’t dare say another word. “Everyone good with us dating, yes? That’s sort of the only thing we needed to discuss so we can go home.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll drop it,” he conceded, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “Seriously, though, Roz, we *are* alright with it. We’re just, you know, trying to wrap our heads around it, is all.”

Ilya nodded softly. “I get it,” he murmured. “Not easy to find out you’ve been lied to by someone you thought you knew.”

Kovalev frowned. “Is that what you think we think?” he questioned, shaking his head firmly. “Roz, we get why you kept it from us. You had every reason to, for both of your sakes.”

Their careers could be on the line if this came out. Their sponsors and their reputations were at risk, not to mention Ilya’s ability to return home when he wanted to. As rare as that was, it was still an option he should have.

He and Varkov didn’t have much left in Russia, with far more support in America than they had back home. But they knew that’s his mama was buried and the thought of not being able to see her ever again probably lingered somewhere in the back of Ilya’s mind.

“It would take some serious arrogance to try to make this a sob story about feeling *‘betrayed’* or something, just because you were protecting yourselves and each other,” Kane added.

Duebk nodded. “We’re disappointed *for* you, not *with* you,” he agreed. “We wish you guys didn’t have to be afraid to tell us.”

Because even if they would later deny being apprehensive, he could see it on their faces that they were. That they didn’t expect but irrationally feared their judgement and the repercussions of coming out. One word to the press and their whole lives could implode.

“Thank you guys,” Shane muttered. “For just…accepting this. Us.”

Sebbin nudged his arm softly. “I told you, we’re gonna be in your life forever,” he reminded him, almost like a threat. “You won’t get rid of any of us that easily. Try confessing to a crime or something next, you’ll see.”

He dipped his head, letting out a small chuckle that was tinged with relief. “I don’t currently have any,” he said. “But if I accidentally kill someone, you’ll be my first call.”

“Go for it, I’ve got a massive rug that a body would hide in perfectly,” he assured him.

Shane laughed again. Hiding a body might have been at the end of a rather extreme scale, but he knew if his car broke down or he found himself in a crash, Sebbin would pick up at any hour of the night. He’d show up with jumper cable or call whoever he needed to, just like they all would. He supposed he really didn’t need to worry about that changing now that they knew the truth, the way he feared.

“Okay, I’ve got a genuine question that you can’t laugh at me for,” Marlow prefaced. “Now that we’re all aware of your relationship…are we allowed to come over to your house again?”

Even if he tried to pretend otherwise, he secretly had been a bit upset at how often Ilya came up with an excuse to keep him from dropping by just to visit. It used to be sort of like a tradition that he was allowed to come over for a drink and watch a game if they weren’t playing. He had been missing it, lately.

Ilya huffed. “Yes, you can come over,” he conceded. “Just don’t be annoying about it, ringing the bell every other second.”

“When am I ever annoying?” he retorted sarcastically, gesturing to himself. “I’m a very polite guest.”

“Uh huh,” he replied, rolling his eyes with fondness. “But Shane really doesn’t like a messy house, so you have to *actually* use the coasters, Marly. I’m serious about that.” Truly, he was.

“Oh, so you know it drives me crazy to have those little rings on the table and just do it anyway?” Shane questioned, glancing at him with an accusatory expression. “Because I’ve wiped the coffee table like three times this week.”

Ilya blinked, lips tugging back to bare his teeth sheepishly. “I decline to comment,” he replied, giving his standard media response.

It wasn’t lost on anyone the way his tone was still tender. It wasn’t unusual, despite what the public believed. He sounded gentle more often than he didn’t. But there was something

uniquely soft about his tone when it was aimed at Shane, unlike in the past when he had tried to keep it civil.

“Adorable domestic disputes aside, I want you guys to know that as far as I’m concerned, no one outside of this rink right now will ever know about you two,” Connors assured them both. “Aside from Shane’s parents, that is.”

“And Hayden Pike for some reason?” Varkov muttered with a slightly confused expression. “But if he accepts it, then we like him.”

Or tolerate him, at least, despite still not being a huge fan of him after how he treated Shane for several weeks after news broke about his contract being signed. As long as they didn’t suddenly have to start forgiving the rest of the Metros, they would be able to handle one, maybe two of them being alright.

Shane huffed gently. “Yeah, he’s okay with it,” he assured them. “Mostly just stunned more than anything else.”

“Understandable,” Kane muttered, gesturing to his skates. “I’m still feeling a bit numb, myself.” Kovalev bent slightly, smacking him in the leg. “Ow! What was that for?”

“To test how numb you felt,” he remarked, shrugging. “Clearly, it’s not that bad.”

“I said *‘a bit’* for a reason!” Kane defended, hitting him back just as hard, if not even harder.

“Nuh uh, no smacking each other,” Ilya stated, reaching out to grab Kov’s arm before he could hit Kane again. “I would like to have a team left for the game tomorrow.”

And he was still the captain, despite them occasionally, if not often forgetting that. Which meant he had to keep them from accidentally hurting each other, even if it was supposed to be playful.

“Fine, no hitting,” Kovalev muttered, raising his hands in defeat but shooting Kane a look anyway. “I’ll save it for when we’re carpooling next week.”

Ilya huffed, rolling his eyes. “And I think that concludes this conversation, yes? No one else has anything else to ask or say that actually has to do with Shane and I or our relationship?” he wondered.

“Not really,” Carmichael admitted. “But keep your notifications on, I might think of something when I’m trying to fall asleep later tonight.”

Shane snorted a laugh, nodding. “We’ll check the chat in the morning,” he replied.

They did that anyway, frankly. It was a lot more amusing to scroll through than the Metros group texts had been. Instead of articles bashing players and teams, there were inquiries about whether anyone was free to see a movie and questions about someone needing to borrow a mop.

Then of course, there were the follow up texts, wondering what kind of twenty-six-year-old didn't already own one.

"Try to get some sleep," Ilya insisted firmly. "I need everyone awake and ready to play tomorrow night."

"On it, Roz," Hammersmith assured him with a mock salute. "I'll drink half a bottle of Nyquil if that's what it takes."

He threw his hands up. "Группа комиков," he grumbled, overly used to calling them that if he was being honest. It fit, if nothing else.

As they dispersed, gathering their stuff up, Shane leaned against the boards a bit to relax. It hadn't been so hard, he realized, coming out to them. It was actually getting easier each time he did it, not that he had any desire to try it for a fifth time. The first four had been more than enough for him.

The worst of them, oddly, had been when he came out to Ilya, for some reason. Perhaps that just felt the scariest because he thought he had the most to lose that night.

"That went…pretty well, I think," Shane admitted quietly, watching as Sebbin gave Connors a small shove and he dramatically fell over the rail, staying down for a moment before he popped back up.

Ilya nodded in agreement. "Guess Marlow and Vic were right," he muttered, leaning his head on Shane's shoulder. "No judgement from family."

He hummed, turning to kiss the top of his head gently. He was sure they would probably get a few more questions and maybe have to explain a couple of things that happened when they had been struggling to figure out what they meant to each other, but for now, it was all alright.

"So, what exactly did Feller mean when he said they had to listen to you talk about Jane?" Shane joked, voice tinged with an inquisitiveness that couldn't be ignored.

Ilya groaned quietly, raising his head and shaking it. "Nope, not happening," he stated firmly, already skating away. "You could not torture that out of me."

"Oh c'mon!" he exclaimed, skating after him. "I'll just text Feller if you don't tell me!"

Reaching out, his hand barely grazed the hem of Ilya's jersey before he was just a bit too far out of range to actually grab onto it.

"Don't you dare text him!" Ilya shouted, pointing at him as he turned around, blades still gently crackling against the ice. "He will humiliate me."

Shane huffed a laugh, chasing him around the empty rink. "It can't be that bad," he insisted, head lolling to the side. "Just tell me what you told him."

“No!” he retorted, shaking his head as his cheeks turned slightly redder for reasons had nothing to do with the temperature inside of the rink. “You are going to be insufferable.”

Grasping for him again, Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya despite his faux attempts to escape the grip. “And here I thought you loved me too much to think that,” he teased fondly.

Ilya tugged his lips to the side, not fully stopping but allowing his momentum to slow down greatly. “I do love you,” he murmured, hand cupping the side of his neck gently. “Very much.”

More than he knew how to properly express in any language, be it English or Russian or even the French that he was reluctantly trying to learn for Shane despite considering it foolish to need to know three of them.

“So…you’ll tell me what you’ve said to them about Jane?” Shane questioned quietly.

“Absolutely,” he replied with a straight face. “*If* your sloppy footwork can catch me before I get to the locker room,” he added, pulling away.

Shane’s eyes widened, feeling Ilya’s grip loosen until it was gone altogether and he was skating back across the rink even faster. With a huff, he took off after him, trying to catch up before he managed to reach other side.

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The next day, Shane was resting his head in Ilya’s lap for one of the naps he had greatly come to enjoy taking in the middle of the afternoon. He was still thinking about what Feller had said, if he was being honest. But he didn’t mention it again.

That was just because he was already secretly planning to find out on his own, though, since Ilya seemed so reluctant to come clean about what he told the team over the years. In the meantime, he just enjoyed knowing that they were technically out to everyone whose opinions they actually cared about.

“Did you use my leave in conditioner last night?” Ilya questioned, his voice barely a sleep mumble as he ran his fingertips through Shane’s hair.

He hummed, eyes fluttering up for a moment or two. “Maybe,” he murmured, not fully answering him.

He huffed weakly, still running his hands through his dark strands, the repetitive action bringing him just as much comfort. “I smell the Jasmine in it,” he told him, voice slightly teasing. “You are not sneaky.”

“Wasn’t trying to be,” Shane claimed, turning his head a bit to nuzzle against his shirt. “I just like your stuff.”

“You should; it costs eighty dollars per bottle,” he muttered, tipping his own head back against the couch as he felt himself starting to drift off to sleep.

It was always so much easier to sleep when Shane was nearby, for some reason. And after very cunningly luring him into a few traps, Ilya had managed to make him appreciate naps just as much if not more than he did.

He could practically hear Shane's breaths growing shallower and steadier as he nearly fell asleep, not far behind until the doorbell suddenly rang, waking them both up.

Shane made a disgruntled sound, blinking his eyes a few times. "Who the hell is that?" he asked, slightly annoyed.

Ilya shook his head as he raised it and squinted in the direction of the door. "I have no idea," he confessed, before hearing it go off a few more times in rather quick succession. "Ohhh, it's Marly," he realized.

"I'm gonna kill him," he grumbled, reluctantly sitting up.

"Ah, well we can always call Sebbin and ask for his rug," Ilya commented dryly, groaning as he had to stand up, stretching his arms over his head.

His shirt rode up slightly and Shane stared for a moment. It was far from intentional, but he couldn't really help it. A few short seconds later, he tore his gaze away, blinking harshly as he tried to wake himself up.

He hadn't even really been asleep in the first place, but he was close enough that he was still dazed from the abrupt interruption anyway.

"I'll get my phone out to let him know," Shane joked back, rubbing his eyes for a moment and swinging his legs over the side of the couch.

Ilya padded over to the door, pulling it open in an effort to get Marlow to stop ringing the bell every two seconds. His eyes widened slightly before he glanced over his shoulder. "Don't bother," he called to Shane. "Sebbin is here."

He frowned. "I thought you said it was Marlow?" he wondered, knowing Marly had an affinity for continuously ringing the bell from all the times he had a phone call with Ilya interrupted by it.

Ilya nodded. "It is," he confirmed, pushing the door all the way open so he could see. "And *everyone* else."

Marlow waved, stepping into the house. He was quickly followed by Sebbin, Carmichael, Connors, and every other person on the team too. They were all looking around, as if none of them had ever been over before.

"What are you guy's doing here?" Shane asked, standing up.

"You said we were allowed to come over again now that we knew about your relationship," Marlow reminded them, shrugging. "So, we're here. And we brought you gifts."

Ilya furrowed his eyebrows, closing the door behind everyone as he realized they had in fact been carrying things—a potted cactus, a picture frame, a pack of Ginger Ale, from what he could see.

“Not that I’m complaining about free soda or anything, but *why* are we getting gifts?” Shane questioned as they set things down on the kitchen counter.

“Housewarming,” Dubek told them, shrugging as he put down an expensive looking fruit basket that he had practically been hiding behind due to the sheer size of it.

Ilya blinked, glancing at Marlow. “Новоселье?” he questioned, seeing him nod in confirmation. “But it’s not a new house? I’ve lived here for almost eleven years.”

“It’s also for when people move in, though,” Connors reminded him, gesturing to the lovely purple Orchid, he brought them. “We figured since we missed helping you guys actually move boxes, we could at least give you guys the party part.”

They had lost count of how many times they had all moved into new places over the years, either apartments after their leases ended or houses once they finally decided to purchase one. It was pretty typical that they would all pitch in to help tape boxes and unpack things. They felt a little bad about not being able to do that for Shane.

“I brought the best gift, clearly,” Vic stated, gently pushing the pack of Ginger Ale across the counter in Shane’s direction.

“Oh please, once he drinks them, they’re gone,” Kovalev responded, gesturing to his gift. “Mine can last for years.”

He held up a framed picture that had been taken during their first win of the season, when they were all clustered together, jumping up and down, knocking helmets and bumping shoulders.

Huffing, Shane opened the side of it, pulling a can out. “How the hell did you get that so fast?” he questioned in amusement, cracking open the tab and taking a sip of his drink.

“I skipped my morning Sudoku,” he explained. “It’ll look good in here, yeah?”

He hadn’t been over in a little while, for newly obvious reasons, but he remembered the color of some of the other picture frames on the wall pretty well. Enough so to pick one that matched, at least.

Ilya nodded. “Extremely nice, yes,” he agreed. “Thank you, Kov.”

Hammersmith nudged Shane. “I brought you a cactus, but you can’t let Ilya anywhere near it,” he warned, pushing the pokey potted succulent towards him. “He kills every plant he has.”

“I heard that,” Ilya stated in annoyance, reaching for one of the Giner Ales. “And I do not kill them; they are defective when I buy them.”

Sebbin tilted his head skeptically, blinking at him. “Uh huh.”

He popped open the soda tab, bringing the edge of the can to his lips as his eyes roamed the other gifts they had brought over. Most of them were actually very thoughtful. Either useful things like fluffy blankets or edible things like a freshly baked loaf of bread with Rosemary on top of it.

“This is all really sweet of you guys,” Shane told them earnestly.

Kohn shrugged, leaning against the counter. “It’s the least we could do after Ilya has helped us move a dozen times,” he replied. “And hey! You helped Kane move, too. This is just repayment.”

“I’m thinking with everything here, we’ve got stuff for a pretty decent meal,” Kane remarked, gesturing to the different food items that had been brought over. “How about I make lunch?”

Ilya glanced at Shane for a moment before nodding his head. “You know your way around my kitchen,” he replied, giving him a go-ahead gesture. “Have at it.”

They had time, after all, until the game later. And they were going to have to eat at some point, anyway. It would be nice to have a freshly cooked meal. Especially when Kane was the one making it.

“I’ll look for a good place for the cactus,” Hammersmith noted, picking it up and glancing around for some sort of ledge or table where it could go.

Connors grabbed the Orchid off the counter, holding the pot carefully. “I’ll come with you,” he agreed. “This needs a good source of indirect sunlight.”

“I’m going to find a space on the wall for this picture,” Kov added, already scanning them for any free space where it might fit nicely.

“Ooh, I want to see what Shane’s hung up since moving in,” Feller agreed.

They more or less dispersed, either trying to find places for all of their gifts to go or just openly snooping around the house as if they had never seen it before. Ilya thought about telling them it had barely changed, aside from a few extra things and better organization, but decided against it.

They wouldn’t believe him, probably. Even if they did, they’d still get nosey anyway.

Vic sat on one of the barstools, getting comfortable as he asked Marlow something about the gift he brought and Varkov helped Kane start cooking.

Dubek wandered into the living room, looking for the remote to put on the afternoon game with Dallas versus Tampa. Kohn just plucked a stick of pineapple out of the fruit basket, munching on it as if it belonged to him.

Shane looked towards Ilya, who wore an expression that was a mix of appreciation and amusement. “We’re having a housewarming party,” he murmured under his breath.

He hummed, nodding slowly. “Apparently, we are,” he noted.

He pursed his lips, leaning against him. “It’s nice,” he admitted, his eyes flitted around their home that was now crowded with their friends. “Having them know. Makes me feel like… we’re gonna be okay.”

The game, the team, their relationship. Everything that had once worried him would be alright.

“We will be more than okay. We'll be happy,” Ilya whispered in agreement, his voice so quiet it was hard to hear. “…Just like we are right now.”

Shane tore his gaze away from the sudden business of their home, raising his Ginger Ale fractionally. Ilya’s lips twitched into a smile, clicking his own can against it before taking another sip from it.

He let his eyes roam freely amongst the chaos as everyone made themselves at home, feeling the warmth, their presence brought settle in his chest. A place that had used to be empty and cold, guarded by fear of rejection and loss, which now felt fuller than he knew was possible.

Chapter End Notes

This took forever because finals have literally been kicking my ass to the point I think falling down a flight of stairs would hurt less than my exams (I'm surviving, dw). But this has lowkey been an anchor to keep me sane, so I hope you enjoyed it because I really enjoyed writing it!!

Chapter 3: Who We Want To Be

Chapter Notes

So, uh-...I lied. There's more. Surprise, I guess? 🤷

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane fussed with a pillow on the sofa, a small bit of anxiety swelling in his chest as he glanced towards the kitchen. Ilya didn't seem nervous, sprinkling some extra seasoning on top of the chicken he planned to grill.

"Are you plotting something, or are you just really calm right now?" he wondered, voice carrying towards him.

Ilya turned, eyebrows already furrowed. "Am not plotting," he replied, slightly confused. "Why should I feel nervous? Is only Pike."

He'd already met him a few dozen times in the past. It wasn't nearly as petrifying as meeting Yuna and David had been for him. That left him anxious for days, even after they went home. He was constantly asking Shane if they were talking about him and what they thought of the relationship.

"You don't have to say his name like that," Shane insisted, still messing with their furniture, trying to make it look nice. "Actually, definitely don't say it like that when he gets here. Just call him Hayden. Or don't say his name at all."

"Do I call him by his jersey number or something?" he questioned sarcastically, cracking some pepper over the tray. "It's dinner, Shane, not a meeting. We are just going to eat and talk. Not a big deal."

Ilya knew, by all accounts, it really was one for Shane. But acting like it would only encourage his anxiety and that was no good for anyone. So, he went back to cooking, allowing him to move things around and then put them back in the exact same place they were.

Shane wrinkled his nose at the placement, as he had already done repeatedly, before pushing the coffee table over a few inches. The feet lined up with the marks in the rugs where it was originally, and he let out a breath, forcing himself to leave it there.

It wasn't like Hayden ever had the kind of attention to detail to notice that sort of thing anyway.

When the bell rang, a few minutes later, they both turned their heads towards the door. "I'll get it," Shane insisted.

Ilya didn't object, focused on keeping the vegetables from burning on the stove.

Opening the door, Hayden stood there nearly as awkwardly as Shane did. His hands were in his pockets, his favorite hat on and tipped downwards like he was hiding.

If any of the Metros found out he was having dinner with who they considered to be Satan's Slavic nephew, he'd be exiled from the team without hesitation. Granted, he was here for Shane more than Ilya. But he didn't really think anyone would care to make the distinction.

"Wow, you really weren't kidding about these ceilings," Hayden muttered as he entered the house, head tilted up. "Horrible for balloons."

Shane snorted softly as he clicked the door closed behind him. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Hm? Sorry, my brain automatically ties everything back to the kids somehow," he admitted, gesturing to the height.

He had no idea why he was thinking about how there was no way to get a lost birthday balloon down from there, even with a ladder, until it deflated enough to float down. But that's what having four kids did. It made him see strange connections where there were none.

"Fair enough," Shane responded, motioning towards the kitchen. "That's- you know, Ilya."

He nodded slightly, watching him look up, waving slightly before immediately going back to what he was doing. The pan on the stove flamed slightly as he shook it, fire growing bright enough that it reflected on his face lightly.

"Jesus, is he trying to burn the house down?" Hayden questioned, recoiling slightly.

Shane just grabbed him by the shoulders to keep him from hitting him. "Relax, he's just cooking dinner," he replied. "He knows how to keep the flames from getting out of control."

His shoulder dipped slightly, a little calmer. But he continued to watch warily, anyway, observing as the flames died down when Ilya slid the pan back on the burner entirely.

"The char from grill is too overpowering for vegetables," Ilya stated, shaking his head as he turned his back on the pan. "And oven-baked shrinks them a little bit. Pan is best, I think."

A lot of people would likely disagree with him, but it was his preference. Unlike Shane, who preferred to let the oven do all the hard work, just placing a bunch of sliced zucchini or squash on a tray for half an hour.

Hayden nodded slowly. "Well, it uh- it smells good," he murmured.

His lips quirked slightly. "Did you want something to sip on?" he wondered. "We don't typically drink the night before a game, but you can have whatever you normally would."

"Um…no, no thanks," Hayden replied, shaking his head. "I'll take a soda or water or something, though, if you have it."

“We have everything,” Ilya told him, walking over to the fridge. “Ginger Ale, Coke, Dr. Pepper, the weird things Shane sponsors that he never actually drinks because they are disgusting…”

“Coke is fine,” he said, trying to keep one eye on the pan and the other on Rozanov. Or Ilya, technically.

Shane had asked him to start calling him by his first name, to help separate him from the image that he had built up in his mind over the years. Hayden spent the entire drive over reminding himself of it, repeating the name over and over. But the second he was actually in the same house as him, he started to think of him as Romanov all over again.

It was hard not to. Even outside of the rink, he was still rather imposing. His resting expression was just as firm as it was when he was scowling from the opposing bench.

Ilya slid a drink over to him and the can barely stopped before it tipped over the edge. “I’ll be outside grilling,” he told Shane, glancing at his watch. “Should not take long; they are already cooked, I just want a char on them.”

Nodding, Shane wandered over to the fridge, pulling out something to drink for himself as Ilya left with the seasoned chicken on a platter. He leaned against the counter, popping the soda open and glancing at Hayden who hadn’t quite loosened up yet either.

“I know this is a little weird, but I’m really glad you came over,” he admitted. “I would have met you somewhere or something, but this is- it’s nice to have you here.”

He had rapidly grown fond of having the people he cared about in his home. Seeing Connors and Dubek making themselves comfortable or having his parents around made it feel more like he really lived here. Like people could know he slept in the same space as Ilya without the world crumbling.

“I mean, I’ll take a home-cooked meal no matter who is cooking it,” Hayden responded, shrugging as he tried to relax. “Besides, I kind of feel like I owe it to you, you know? You had to lie for so long, the least I could do is sit through one meal with Ilya and try to get to know him.”

“He’s a good guy, Hayd, I swear,” he insisted. “He’s just not the best at opening up right away. It takes, well, years.”

“No! Really?” Hayden gasped in faux shock. “I never would have guessed that Ilya Rozanov doesn’t show his bleeding heart to people he dislikes.”

The sarcasm dripped so sharply that Shane had no choice but to laugh, nearly choking on his drink. Hayden snorted, smacking his back a few times to try to help him swallow properly.

“Killing me in my own home would be a really shitty move,” he piped out, trying to clear his throat.

“Sorry,” Hayden muttered, forehead crinkling in slight concern as he watched Shane catch his breath. “I’ll try to wait until we’re outside or something.”

Another huff of laughter escaped Shane’s lips as he shook his head in exasperation. “Sit. I’ll grab the plates,” he demanded, passing his drink to him and pointing at the dining table.

Hayden set both of their sodas down, watching his friend navigate the cabinets to pull out some dishes. He had noticed and said, repeatedly, that Shane seemed lighter living in Boston. But it was even more blatant in person than it was over the phone or on television.

His shoulders weren’t tense and his face wasn’t pensive. He glanced towards the back door, as if slightly impatient for Ilya to return.

“Sooo, I’m rooming with JJ,” Hayden told him. “He’s out with Mitty and Berkes right now, but if he gets back to our hotel before me, I’m going to have to come up with an excuse for where I was.”

Shane set the plates on the counter and brought the silverware over to the table before sitting across from him. “Just tell him you went to grab dinner.”

“And what do I say when he wonders why I didn’t go with him and the others for dinner?” he questioned. “That I wasn’t craving anything from the all-you-can buffet they went to, that has every type of food imaginable?”

He grimaced slightly, resting his elbows on the table. “Eugh, yeah, I see your point,” he admitted. “Also, the one by the hotel isn’t that good. They should try the one a few miles away; it’s like the top three on Kane’s buffet ranking.”

He hadn’t actually been, yet. But he figured he would be dragged along at some point. And even if he wasn’t, he trusted Kane’s lists pretty strongly. They were way too detailed and critical to be misleading.

Hayden stared at him blankly. “That was so not the point,” he told him, finally popping open his own soda.

Shane shrugged. “Alright, tell him the truth. Half of it, anyway,” he suggested. “Tell him you came to see me, and we caught up a bit, but I called you after he already left so you couldn’t invite him.”

He took a sip of his drink before nodding slightly. “I can do that, I guess,” he murmured, watching him for a moment. “You’ve gotten better at lying since living here.”

Or maybe Shane was always sort of a good liar and he had just been blind to it. He thought he was so bad at hiding it when someone said or did something he didn’t like that there was no possible way he could ever actually fib and get away with it. Maybe that’s the exact reason he did.

His best friends’ lips tugged to the side. “It’s just nice to be able to keep some stuff private,” he confessed. “A lot of stuff, actually.”

Hayden gestured to the house, soda still in his hand. “Clearly.”

Shane snorted, eyes flitting over his shoulder as the back door opened and Ilya walked back in.

“Help me fix plates,” he averred, pointing towards the pan as he set it on the counter.

Shane pushed his chair back, walking over to the kitchen to help him as he turned the stove off. “It looks good,” he noted, putting a piece of chicken on every plate.

Ilya furrowed his eyebrows, siphoning out the vegetables. “хороший?” he repeated dubiously. “Я приготовил это идеально.”

He huffed. “Alright, fine, it looks perfect,” he amended, pressing a kiss his cheek before lifting two of the plates off the counter and taking them away.

“Комплименты не сработают,” Ilya added.

He put the few remaining dishes in the sink before grabbing his own plate and sitting beside Shane, who was already picking up his knife and fork to cut into his dinner.

“They always work,” Shane retorted with a suppressed smirk. “You’re…ah, damn, I forgot the word for egotistical in Russian.”

“милый,” he supplied helpfully with an overly polite smile.

He glared at him for a moment, shaking his head. “No, it isn’t,” Shane stated.

He might forget and struggle with his Russian sometimes, but he knew the words Ilya always called him as well as he knew his languages. He wouldn’t fall for that kind of trap.

“Is this how you always feel when Jackie and I have you over for dinner?” Hayden interjected curiously, glancing between them.

Shane’s eyes flashed with something akin to guilt for a second. “Sorry, Hayd.”

“No, don’t apologize,” he insisted. “It’s probably payback for how often you’ve third-wheeled for us.”

In a way, he always hoped that having him over would make him feel more included. He and Jackie enjoyed his company, even if it was just the occasional meal. But maybe it had done a bit more harm than good, reminding him of Ilya by mistake.

“I never minded,” Shane assured him, shrugging softly. “Seriously.”

He nodded slightly, a bit relieved as he stabbed some vegetables with his fork. Part of him was still having trouble reconciling that he was actually having dinner with the two of them. Eating a meal Ilya of all people prepared.

“You’re right, pan seared is better than oven baked,” Hayden noted in agreement, reaching for his drink.

Ilya raised his hand, gesturing towards him. “You see?” he asked Shane. “Flavor comes through without all the dryness.”

“Yeah, but I would start a fire if I used the pans the way you do,” Shane replied, spearing some chicken onto his fork. “So, for the sake of avoiding being homeless, I’ll stick to the oven.”

He shrugged. “House is insured. We would just move in with Marly for a while if you burned our home down,” he admitted, waving off the concern. “He has a pool.”

Hayden snorted softly. “Priorities,” he noted.

“Exactly,” Ilya agreed, pausing to smack Shane’s arm. “Ah, forgot to tell you, we have a meeting with the new team president next week. Wednesday before game. Wants to discuss our ‘recent behavior’ apparently.”

Shane furrowed his eyebrows. “Is he pissed at us?”

“Eh, I doubt we’re being called in for a surprise party,” he replied dryly. “It will be fine, though. He doesn’t have the power to fire us, just make threats about telling the owner to.”

The guy, was, by all accounts, a go-between for the team and upper brass. He tried to smooth things out before it got to the point where anyone important had to get involved with the situation.

Which, in other words, meant Ilya didn’t really care what the guy said. It would likely be an attempt to get them to back down about their complaints, not actually help fix them. Still, they would show up since it was at least a step in the right direction.

“That stuff you guys are trying to do for the arena is really happening?” Hayden wondered. “I thought it was just publicity or something.”

Shane nodded. “All we want is lower ticket prices and a better game day experience for the fans,” he replied. “It’s not like we’re demanding a lot.”

“They’ll cave,” Ilya muttered, overly confident. “It just takes time to make them.”

Hayden hummed quietly, looking back down at his plate. He didn’t really even see much about it happening, honestly. Just a few shaky clips from a cameraman who filmed the team spending their intermission with the fans for all of one minute before being hauled away by security.

There were a few posts online about it, too, thanking the Raiders for having an interest in giving their fans a better time when they visited. Nothing that definitively concluded what actually happened.

“You guys are really…I don’t know,” Hayden noted, shaking his head as he failed to find a word that fully encapsulated his feelings. “Elusive and stubborn?”

Ilya huffed, nodding. “Yes,” he agreed. “Both.”

“You know it’s infuriating for the rest of the league, right?” he questioned curiously. “You’re ridiculously loud and yet never say anything that actually gives anyone a read on you guys.”

It was like watching one massive smoke screen. They carried a pretty strong presence, publicly out and about on social media, always meeting people, and staying pretty firmly at the top of the division’s leaderboard. But they never really talked about each other or themselves in a serious way.

“You should try it,” Shane suggested, sipping his drink. “It’s pretty nice, staying out of the media.”

“I wish I could,” Hayden confessed, shaking his head like he knew it wasn’t an option. “But our press is even worse when we’re playing you. We have practice half an hour after yours ends tomorrow morning and they’re opening it the second you’re all out of there.”

He wished they could keep it closed, honestly. It wasn’t like Boston had many Montreal fans, anyway. It was mostly just reporters and camera crews who wanted footage and liked asking questions, as if anyone on their team could answer something about the Raiders.

The only important thing Hayden knew about them, he could never reveal.

Shane chewed slowly for a moment, thinking as he glanced at Ilya for a moment. “Why doesn’t he join us?” he asked.

They both froze, blinking at him.

“Where, at practice?” Ilya questioned, needing clarification.

He nodded. “Yeah, why not?” he went on. “It’s not like we talk strategy when we’re that close to the game; he’s not going to hear anything he can use against us.”

Everyone was smart enough to keep their lips closed about anything important or relevant to their game plans. Not that he really believed his best friend would, even if he did catch something he wasn’t supposed to hear.

“I really don’t think they’d want me there, Shane,” Hayden replied earnestly.

He was sure that anyone on the Metros were barely welcome for game day, let alone any other time. They probably didn’t even want them practicing on their ice and just had to deal with it because it was the sportsmanlike thing to do.

“They’d be fine with it,” Shane insisted, waving off his dismissal. “Right Ilya?”

He nodded in agreement. “Probably,” he noted. “They don’t mind company as long as it’s not press.”

“Besides, you’re always nagging me with questions about the team anyway,” Shane added. “Just come with us tomorrow morning. We’ll be there from eight to ten, then we’re grabbing brunch.”

Hayden hesitated for a moment or two before eventually bobbing his head up and down. “I’ll see about *maybe* stopping by,” he stated tentatively, eyeing Ilya who, to his surprise didn’t look too upset.

His best friend beamed slightly, glancing back down at his plate to stab a few more vegetables off it and Hayden did the same, trying to quell his own concern about the idea of actually practicing with the Raiders. There was, in his mind, no way that could possibly end well for him.

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Hayden back spaced on his phone for the third time, trying to figure out the right text to send Shane as he stood outside of the Raiders arena. An exclamation point made him sound enthusiastic to be here, which he wasn’t. A period made him sound a little dejected, which he was, but didn’t want to let on about.

No punctuation at all was what he wound up choosing, just sending the text before he could overthink it too much. If he hadn’t already, that was.

He spent all night and most of the next morning worrying about how to appease Shane by showing up and still avoid any backlash from the team for having the audacity to intrude on their closed training.

All he really managed to come up with, however, was a vague plan about only visiting for the second half of practice.

That way, they would still have their time, and he could also hang out with Shane for a little bit. He’d just keep his gear there and tell his own team he got there early, which was technically not a lie.

A few moments later, he saw Shane jogging towards the door, unlocking it to let him in.

“What took you so long?” Shane wondered, slightly out of breath as he closed the door behind them. “We’ve been here for over an hour already.”

Hayden readjusted the strap of his bag that was digging into his shoulder. “Sorry, JJ kept me busy with something,” he claimed, glancing at him. “You don’t look dressed.”

He was only wearing a compression shirt and his normal shorts over a pair of leggings to keep warm. Aside from a weak bit of padding, he didn’t look ready at all.

Shane glanced down at his own attire for a moment, before it struck him why Hayden found it odd. “We don’t really do full gear for practice,” he explained. “Not on game days, anyway.”

They found that too much strenuous activity wore them out and made them a bit more likely to lag later that night. Light warmups and a few concentrated drills were better for them.

“Oh,” Hayden murmured, following him towards the rink at a rather brisk pace.

As the ice came into view, he could see it crowded with the Raiders who were dressed similarly to Shane. No extreme padding or full helmets. Just enough to give the illusion of protection.

Most of them weren’t even doing anything, he noticed quickly. They were merely standing along the boards, watching Feller and Kovalev at the far end of it.

“No, no, no, you’re still doing it wrong,” Feller, insisted, slowly imitating a drive with a nonexistent stick against a nonexistent puck. “One shoulder dips back and the other raises forwards at the exact moment you hit it. Hips drive the position it soars in.”

“I did that!” Kovalev insisted, gesturing to the space in front of him. “Look, I do it exactly like you do.”

Hammersmith slid another puck towards him with the tip of his stick, watching as Kov swung at it more like a golfer than hockey player.

The sound of it being hit reverbed and the disc shot through the air, curving before it dinged the side of the empty goal. It was close, just a few inches away from actually entering it.

“You’re turning your hips too much, man,” Feller told him, shrugging. “I keep telling you to __”

“С моими бёдрами всё в порядке!” he interjected, passing his stick to his non dominant hand so he could embellish his complaints with his stronger one. “Ты плохой учитель! Слишком расплывчато и с чрезмерными ожиданиями.”

“I am not a bad teacher!” Feller exclaimed defensively. “You just suck at shooting high distances. Here, let me show you again.”

He stole the stick right out of Kovalevs hand, giving him a small shove out of the way. He gestured towards Hammersmith, who supplied another puck.

With a smooth stroke, he hit the puck and it curved beautifully in the air, immediately landing in the back of the net with enough force that everyone automatically knew he could have made it from several feet further back if he wanted to.

Kov stared at it for a moment before his head twisted back to his teammate. “I still say my hips have nothing to do with it,” he insisted.

Feller sighed dramatically as he shoved the stick back towards him. “Believe what you want, you won’t shoot like I do until you fix them.”

Skating past him, he nudged his hips and Kov smacked his hand away, asking Hammersmith for another puck to try again. Feller just leaned against the boards, standing beside

Carmichael and shaking his head in disappointment.

“Guess you just can’t teach the kind of brilliance you have,” he teased, watch Kov’s next drive arch decently well but fall apart at the end again.

“Nope,” Feller agreed, shrugging. “Stubborn Russian just won’t listen to me.”

“I heard that!” Kov shouted, hitting another puck with far less control than he had when his teammate was helping.

Soaring through the air, it missed the goal entirely and hit the bench where Shane and Hayden were watching. He grimaced immediately, skating backwards like he could hide himself in the group and go unnoticed.

“Jesus, Kov, are you trying to kill us!” Shane jeered from across the rink, getting his skates laced back on quickly. “You’re gonna knock out a ref if you try that during a game.”

He crossed the ice as fast as he knew how to, skidding to a sharp stop that snowed on Kohn’s own blades. Kov just pushed him in the chest with the edge of his stick, a slightly sheepish expression plaguing his face.

“Sorry, Hollzy,” he muttered, glaring at Feller. “Maybe if I had a better teacher, I’d figure it out quicker.”

Feller threw his hands up. “Oh, you’re blaming me for your inability to follow simple directions? Sure, that’s logical,” he grumbled, rolling his eyes. “If you were as good at paying attention as you were at complaining, you would have hit the net by now.”

Shane bit back a snort, watching Ilya quickly point to both of them before screwing his finger around his head like they were crazy.

They definitely weren’t acting completely normal right now, that was for certain. Then again, he never really knew if any of them had acted sane, aside from when there were cameras on them.

Chuckling, Shane waved off their squabble. “Pause whatever the hell you’re clearly not learning how to do for a second,” he insisted, pointing over his shoulder. “Come meet Hayden.”

The whole team looked over him, at Hayden, who looked about as comfortable as baby deer on skates, but was approaching them away with a weak wave.

He was preparing for them to say hello out of obligation to Shane, then get back to whatever they were doing before he showed up. At which point, he planned to stick close by his friend and maybe chit chat for a while before practice ended and everyone left.

Instead, they seemed to practically rush him, someone’s hand on his back and another on his arm.

“Nice to see you again, Hayd,” Marlow told him. “Looking forward to tonight’s game.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever technically introduced myself or just played each other from the get-go,” Vic noted, gesturing to himself. “I’m St-Simon but everyone calls me Vic. You know that right? Shane should’ve mentioned it.”

“I know for a fact we’ve never actually had a conversation,” Varkov added. “In my defense I didn’t speak a lot of English when I got here. Better than Roz and Kov but, eh, wasn’t great.”

“Some would argue it still isn’t,” Sebbin teased.

He immediately ducked down before he could get smacked for the comment, but Varkov reached for him anyway. Sebbin settled for allowing himself to be jostled in annoyance, snickering as he succumbed to it.

“You guys are- you really don’t mind me being here?” Hayden questioned, looking slightly confused, if not surprised by how polite they were being.

They glanced at each other, as if trying to figure out if any of the others were unsettled by his presence. None of them seemed to be, just nodding and shrugging.

“You’re Hollzys’ friend,” Kane stated simply, arm slung around Shane. “And you’re apparently cool with him and Roz, so we’re cool with you back.”

“Oh,” was all Hayden could manage to say, still a bit caught off guard.

He felt like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Something passive aggressive or backhanded that fit the image of them he had in his mind.

Sure, Shane had only ever spoken highly of them, but he always assumed that was because he was their teammate and friend. Outsiders would be different to them, he thought.

“Ooh, super random question but what part did Ruby get for the school play?” Dubek asked curiously. “Shane said she was trying out for Wizard of Oz at her elementary school.”

Hayden blinked, eyes finding Shane’s for a moment before darting back. “Uh- yeah, she… she did,” he affirmed. “She’s going to play one of the flying monkeys.”

He was taken aback by the fact that Shane would mention that to them, let alone that they remembered or cared enough to ask about it. It didn’t really seem like the kind of conversation piece that would get a lot of attention at a rink. Even his own team brushed him off when he talked about his kids for too long, bored from hearing him drone on.

“Awe, that’s a good part,” Kohn muttered. “Way better than the tin man. I was gray for a week in high school because the paint wouldn’t come off.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “You were a theater kid?”

“Er- no, not in the slightest,” Kohn admitted, shaking his head. “But the girl I had a crush on was playing Dorthy and I thought I would woo her by subjecting myself the psychological torment. Lasted a good three weeks with her once the play ended, too, before she dumped me for the guy who played the scarecrow.”

Ilya bit back a laugh. “At least your heart wasn’t broken,” he joked. “Get it? Tin man? No heart?”

He poked him a few times, still chuckling as Kohn wrinkled his nose towards him. His teammate shoved him away slightly, still jeering.

“You’re sooo creative,” he grumbled skating towards where his stick was laid against the boards. “At least I had a decent high school experience. What do you guys even do in Russia? Sit and stare at propaganda videos all day?”

“Mhm, yes and then we hail loyalty to Stalin,” Varkov joked before feigning an epiphany. “Oh wait, sorry, that is the American schools saying a pledge to a flag every morning.”

Kohn rolled his eyes, smacking him lightly with his stick as Varkov laughed, tugging on it to try to trip him. Kohn fell toward and purposely pushed him over, still chuckling as they tumbled into Connors who just shoved them both away from him.

“Be careful,” Ilya muttered with mock judgement. “I need you idiots in one piece for the game tonight.” He glanced at Shane, crinkling his forehead. “Why do I feel like I say that every other day?”

“Because you do,” Shane replied simply, shrugging as he skated off.

He slid around Kohn and Varkov, nudging them as he reached for his own stick. Hammersmith grabbed their bucket of pucks, sliding it across the ice for him and he pulled it closer, grabbing one out.

“You’ve got your thinking face on,” Vic noted, watching him stickhandle for a moment or two with a look of concentration that certainly wasn’t necessary for it. “What’s it for?”

Shane shrugged. “I’m just thinking about that goal from our last game,” he confessed. “I’m pretty sure I watched the clip like two-hundred times or something. Ilya took my phone away because it was keeping him awake.”

Ilya hummed, nodding. “Felt like a disturbance in the universe, too, because usually he is the one telling me to stop playing Candy Crush because the voice upsets him.”

Hayden’s lips quirked, the casual mention of their relationship catching him off guard. He knew they were out to the team but didn’t quite expect it to be mentioned at what was technically their workplace.

“What, the goal Degrass scored?” he questioned. “I saw that, too. I thought for sure you’d challenge it.”

Carmichael shook his head. “Nah, that was fair and square,” he admitted with a blasé tone. “Heck of a thing to witness, though. I thought I hallucinated it making it into the net.”

“Yeah, me too,” Marlow admitted.

“Vic, come stand here,” Shane murmured, pointing a few feet across from him.

He wrinkled his tone but complied. “Why do I have to be your test dummy?” he wondered, skating over and stopping exactly where he had been asked to.

“Because you’re gullible!” Ilya shouted, giving him a thumbs up.

Vic rolled his eyes, frowning in confusion as he felt Shane physically moving him. He twisted him around, then tipped his skate up, the heel of his blade angled towards the net slightly.

“It was like that, right?” Shane mumbled to himself, glancing at the puck, then at Vic and the net. “Degrass tried to pass it, then it bounced and…ding…skate…net. Simple?”

He had watched the replay so many times he could picture it clearly in his mind. It was clear from everyone’s reactions that it had been an accident, but even so, it was an impressive one. It had to be possible to recreate it, he figured.

“Sure, simple,” he retorted, gesturing to his leg. “Can I move now?”

“In like three seconds exactly, yes,” Shane agreed, eyeing his puck for a moment before nodding towards his teammate.

With a small huff of amusement, Vic tried to leave the setup, only to feel the puck hit his skates.

He glanced back watching it bounce off the edge of his blade and slide into the net with a little less force than had been mustered by Degrass.

Feller’s eyes widened. “Okay, that was cool,” he confessed. “Not as cool as some of the shots, I’ve pulled off in the past or anything, but pretty cool, nevertheless.

Shane laughed. “No one can beat you, Feller, we know,” he placated with his hands raised.

“Still, it was like, what, the third trick shot from Carolina this season?” Connors pondered. “They definitely haven’t been getting enough credit for it.”

A weak defense did that, he supposed. It was tough to praise a team when they could only pull off miracle goals every once in a while, instead of playing a reliable game.

“You know, I’d argue Anaheim is doing pretty well right now, even though they’re not leaps ahead or anything,” Kovalev replied. “Steady goals, great teamwork. They’re going to pass everyone if they maintain their consistency. Plus, they’re pretty mesmerizing to watch.”

He grabbed his stick off the wall and forced it into Dubek’s hand, so he’d have no choice but to practice their passes. Tossing a puck down with a soft thud, he slid it towards him, not giving him the opportunity to object.

Dubek caught it, passing it back and skating a bit further back to make more room for it.

Sebbin hummed, nodding in agreement as he watched them. “Yeah, but I like watching the Admirals right now,” he admitted. “They’ve been more aggressive in their offense, and I like

seeing what Hunter pulls out of his hat these days. Like that shootout last week? Did you see the way Ottawa's goalie literally lunged in the wrong direction?"

Skating around some of his teammates, he tapped his stick on the ice, trying to get Dubek's attention. When he finally spotted Sebbin, he opened their passes to him as well, sliding the puck towards him.

"That was good, I'll give him that one," Kane murmured, thinking for a moment before snapping his fingers. "Buffalo! Their goalie is on fire right now. Can't get anything past him."

Hayden just stood there, eyes flitting from person to person as they chatted, in no rush to really practice at all. Kane was even in the middle of stretching his arms when Carmichael made him stop, jabbing his stick towards him with a look that earned an eyeroll before he went and joined the others.

"True," Kohn remarked, nodding as he pushed Kane over a few feet to make the circle bigger. "It's amazing to watch until it's us, though. He's a hindrance to our game when we're in New York."

Ilya blinked, gaze immediately landing on his teammate who was leaning on the boards and fussing with his laces. "Marly!" he called, pointing at Kohn. "What is hinderance?"

"It's like an obstacle," Marlow responded, not even glancing up. "Causing us problems."

"Ah, yes, he does do that," he agreed with a quick tip of his head. making a grabby hand with his dominant arm. "Stick please."

Marlow tossed it to him, skating straight through the circle that had been accidentally forming in the center of the rink. "What about you, Hayden?" he questioned, slotting himself between Sebbin and Kane. "Any teams impressing you right now?"

He blinked, trying to rack his brain for a moment. To be honest, it was kind of malfunctioning just being around them all. He had been so prepared to be brushed off and witness them amidst some sort of sweat inducing exercises that the disillusionment nearly knocked him over.

"I- I don't know," he confessed. "I wasn't really expecting that kind of question. I thought… you know, that you guys hated the other teams."

With how they glared at the other team's bench and mocked them from the penalty box, that was a pretty logical conclusion. To say nothing of how aggressively they played in general.

But they weren't complaining or insulting anyone, like he had expected. And their praise not only seemed genuine but also easily delivered, like they chatted about how strong other teams and their players were all the time.

"Hate? No way," Carmichael told him, wrinkling his nose as he shook his head. "We may not be friends with many of the other players, but we respect the hell out of all of them. Aside

from Tampa and Montreal, of course."

"No offense or anything," Hammersmith tacked on, eyes trained on the ice as he reached his stick out to intercept it before it got to Kohn, sending it towards Connors "We just disagree on how a team needs to act and function."

They thought a team was supposed to be supportive and loyal, always there on and off the ice. And the Metros thought putting immense pressure on their captain without offering any support was acceptable. They had different morals, some might say.

"Uh- none taken, I guess," Hayden murmured, rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean if I had to pick, I'd say you guys, probably. Top of the division and all."

Vic's lips quirked into a smile. "Don't let your team hear you say that," he suggested. "From what we hear, they might bring back flogging just to see if you bleed blue."

Shane scoffed, nudging his best friend. "Here," he muttered, giving him a spare stick. "We're just playing a game to round out practice, if you want to join us."

Hayden furrowed his eyebrows, taking it from him and following closely. He didn't really feel like he had much of a choice. Spectating didn't seem optional.

"What kind of game?" Hayden asked, stopping beside Shane and mimicking the amount of space he put between them that the rest of the circle was seemingly following as well.

"It's sort of like trivia mixed with horse," Kane prefaced, gesturing to everyone. "The puck gets passed around and if you get it, you have to answer a hockey question that can be as precise and difficult as the player comes up with. If you get it right, you can pass it to someone else and ask them a question but if you don't know it, then you have to win a penalty game to stay in the circle."

"And the penalty is horse?" Hayden checked, still a bit confused.

He wondered if these shenanigans were passed down by older members of the team for years or if they just came up with new things all the time. It seemed kind of ridiculous to him but he supposed he didn't have room to talk since whatever practice or bonding they did clearly had them in a good place in rankings.

"Just one round of it, though," Kovalev explained. "The person who asked the question scores a goal and you have to mimic how he did it."

"If you do it well enough, you keep playing, but two strikes and you're on a ghost life. Then the next question you miss means you sit out," Kohn finished saying. "We play until one person wins and then that person gets to name their prize."

"Within reason, of course," Ilya added firmly. "I am never letting any of you borrow my car again, even for a day. The scratch on my fender was massive."

Dubek cleared his throat awkwardly, smiling tightly. "Noted," he replied. "Whose turn is it to start?"

Varkov raised his hand and Kohn passed the puck towards him. He looked around contemplatively for a moment before shooting it towards Vic with a quick pace, watching him react fast to catch it.

“Who was the first player to score one-hundred points in a season?” Varkov asked. “*And* what year did he do it?”

He pursed his lips for a second or two. “Phil Esposito,” he replied, hesitating on the second part of the question. “In…1967? No! ’68! It was ’68.”

Varkov nodded and Kohn blew out a breath, eyeing the others and passing the puck to Ilya.

Feller made a disgruntled sound. “Brave move,” he muttered giving a half-hearted shrug. “Or stupid.”

“Alright, go ahead,” Ilya insisted arrogantly, stopping the disc in front of him and leaning his jaw on the top of stick. “Do your best.”

“I’ve got a good one this time,” Kohn assured him. “As of the 2026 season, how many women in the PWHL are from Manitoba and what are their names? And no consulting your Canadian boyfriend, either!”

Shane huffed, covering his mouth for a moment as he looked at Ilya who pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek for a moment. To say he expected him to get it correct would be an understatement.

“I’m insulted that you think I would lose on such an easy question, Kohn,” Ilya replied, shaking his head in disappointment as he listed them on his hand. “Tabin, Bell, Kirk, Campbell, Larocque, and Schroder. That’s six. Want their medal history, too? Believe most of them have more than you.”

Kohn’s lips tugged into a scowl and Ilya just chuckled, passing the puck towards Marlow.

Hayden watched it move around, questions getting asked and answered in between the occasional fuck up, that resulted in a break to see if they could mimic whatever was demonstrated.

It was, he realized, quite a bit of fun. More than he had anticipated, certainly. It might have even made him a little jealous of Shane for getting to spend his morning practice with such a fun group of people.

He knew his own team was going to show up soon and they would definitely not have this kind of attitude or comradery when they did.

A while later, Hayden had gotten eliminated. Though, he was admittedly a little proud of himself for not being the first or second out. That was Hammersmith, followed by Connors. Then him before Kovalev, Kane, and Dubek. One by one until it was just Shane and Vic passing the puck back and forth, over and over.

They had both missed a few questions, playing penalties several times until neither had any chances left. Sudden death, in other words. Which, if nothing else, made the game more fair.

“Can’t believe Ilya lost,” Hayden confessed, head tipped towards Marlow.

He would have thought he was as much of a hockey superfan as Shane was, especially with how confident he was earlier.

He shrugged half-heartedly. “It doesn’t happen all that often but every once in a while, he gets tripped up,” he replied. “We used to team up just to get him out, but he caught on to the fact that we gave each other easy questions and refused to play again until we cut it out.”

He huffed. “Now that makes sense,” he murmured, eyeing Ilya who was staring at Shane, who was hyper focused on Vic.

“What was the longest recorded hockey game ever played, down to the second, including the year, as well as number of overtimes?” Shane questioned. “*And* who won, with how many goals?”

Hayden frowned, relieved he wasn’t still playing after hearing that question. He knew, from being told, that the others actually spent time trying to come up with their questions. But he wondered if Shane even had to, or if he just knew them off the top of his head.

Vic blew out a sigh. “Jeez, you don’t pull your punches,” he muttered. “That would be Detroit and Montreal in 1936. Detroit won with one goal after six overtimes,” he recalled, wrinkling his eyebrows. “They played for over three hours.”

“In minutes or it doesn’t count!” Hammersmith shouted from across the ice, where he’d sat down to watch things play out.

Vic huffed, flipping him off with a fake smile. “Thanks, Smitty!” he exclaimed with sarcasm, glancing back at Shane. “Okay, fine, minutes. It was…170 something…no wait, fuck. I know it,” he claimed, shaking his head. “176 minutes. *And* a half.”

Shane made an expression that was half impressed and half disappointed as he nodded. “Damnit,” he muttered. “I really thought I’d get you with that one.”

He clicked his tongue. “You almost did,” he admitted.

Shane laughed, scooping the puck up and passing it to him. “Your turn.”

Vic hummed slightly, thinking for a moment or two. Even if things had gotten quiet, the sound of him tapping his stick on the top of the puck absently could still be heard as he came up with his question.

“Alright, I’ve got one,” he eventually noted. “What’s the fastest someone has ever scored at the start of a game in ice hockey?”

Shane pressed his tongue against the side of his cheek for a minute before his brain clicked. “Five seconds, but that’s a trick question because three guys have the same record,” he

replied. “Merlyn Phillips, Doug Snail, and Bryan John Trottier.”

Vic shook his head, expression neutral. “Nope.”

“What do you mean no?” he questioned. “That’s the record. I know it is.” He had even once come close to matching it.

“That’s the fastest goal in the *NHL*,” Vic clarified. “I asked about the history of *ice hockey*, in which case, it’s a Norwegian man named Per Olsen who scored two seconds into a game in 1990.”

Shane’s lips parted, mouth falling open as his eyebrows furrowing and he glanced towards the team. “Can we fact check him on that?” he questioned, not fully accepting defeat until someone else called it such.

Kohn drove his arm into the air. “Already on it!” he told him, phone in hand. They all stared, waiting for a moment before he raised his head and gave them a thumbs up. “Vic’s right. Happened in Dennmark.”

Shane’s head tipped back in disbelief. “Damn you,” he murmured, voice still fond but slightly annoyed. “You tricked me.”

Vic just shrugged. He lifted the puck onto his curve, slinging it towards the net. It landed with an inaudible swish, and he leaned on the end of his stick, tipping his head like he was scrutinizing it.

“It was a good game,” he admitted nonchalantly, glancing over his shoulder. “I liked that question about Bourque.”

Ilya huffed, eyes rolling. “I cannot stand your blasé winning tactics,” he grumbled, shaking his shoulders. “At least be arrogant or something so we can hate you more.”

Vic’s lips tugged up and he joked, “I’ll try to act more like you, Roz.”

Rolling his eyes, he shoved him forward and Vic laughed, catching himself on Feller and slinging his arm over his teammate. He couldn’t help that he was casual about his wins, he just liked to keep them low-key. Besides, something about everyone finding it so irritating was rather amusing to him.

“What’s it gonna be, then?” Hayden wondered. “Your prize, I mean.”

He wasn’t sure what exactly they were allowed to ask for but considering they were all millionaires, he figured the stakes could get pretty high. Especially after hearing Ilya had lent someone his beloved sports car.

Vic hummed, thinking about it. “I think I want complete access to use those season tickets Carmichael has for the Red Sox,” he replied. “You get a hell of a view of the field, right?”

He nodded, nose scrunched slightly. “Could be worse,” he muttered to himself. “It’s not like I had time to see that many games, anyway. I don’t know when you’ll have it, either, seeing as

we're always together."

"Oh, I'll find a way," Vic stated firmly. He, frankly, didn't know how. At least, not yet. But he would.

Hayden's eyes widened in surprise, watching as Carmichael met his demand with little more than an eyeroll and a tilt of his head. Like having his seats stolen wasn't a huge deal.

"Alright, practice ended like three minutes ago," Connors reminded them, showing them the time on his phone. "I say we skedaddle before we accidentally run into the Metros."

He knew none of them, Shane especially, wanted that.

"Ah, yes! Brunch time," Kane praised, lifting his hands towards the rafters dramatically. "I'd kill for a plate of smoked salmon eggs benedict right now."

Marlow huffed, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the thought. "We'll get you food, Kane. Don't froth at the mouth," he stated, glancing at Hayden. "It was good to have you here. Hope we weren't too much for you."

Hayden shook his head slightly. "No, it was- you were fine," he admitted. "Thanks for letting me stick around so long."

"Drop in anytime," Feller replied. "We practice at the same time when we're in Canada in six weeks."

He filed the information away, watching as they skated off the ice, still muttering about finding Kane his salmon at some nearby restaurant that served breakfast and brunch until two. Shane stuck around, as they entered the locker rooms, looking a mix of anxious and hopeful.

"So?" Shane wondered, leaning on his stick. "It wasn't too bad, right?"

It wasn't hard to tell that Hayden was a bit against the idea at first, but he started to warm up, just like Shane thought he would if he just gave the guys a chance. He even looked like he was having some fun when they started playing trivia.

"Guess not," Hayden confessed, shoulders slouching. "They're fun; I get why you like them. Wish I spoke Russian, now, honestly."

They didn't exactly have conversations in it, but there were enough scattered comments that went right over his head or he had to ask someone to translate that he kind of wanted to at least have a basic understanding of it.

"Maybe you'll swing by again, then?" Shane wondered with tentative optimism.

Hayden nodded his head, letting out a soft laugh. "Yeah, I'll come around," he promised. "Just have to keep it under wraps so the team can't tear my head off for it."

Shane grimaced at the joke, knowing there was definitely some truth behind it. The Metros weren't very good at letting each other support or appreciate other teams, let alone make friends with them.

"Yeah, speaking of them, I should probably get out of here before they see us together," Shane murmured, slightly disappointed.

He knew they wouldn't say anything directly to him anymore, not since he told the press about their parting words. But he still wanted to avoid the looks that would be shot his way, not to mention he hoped to save Hayden the trouble of having to explain why they were there together.

Hayden nodded. "I'll tell JJ you said hi," he added, nudging his shoulder softly.

JJ was, after all, the only other person who had even attempted to reconcile with Shane. He had been working his ass off to slowly build up the trust that he'd demolished with his quick judgement, but Shane was still a bit cautious around him, anyway. He didn't dare come out yet or confess why he moved to Boston in the first place.

"I'll see you tonight," Shane noted, skating off. "I'll be the one in a Gold jersey, kicking your ass!"

He huffed in amusement, cupping his hands around his mouth. "We'll see about that!" he shouted back, watching him rush off the ice to catch up with his team.

It hurt, sometimes, knowing Shane and him were competitors after playing side by side for so long. But he had never been able to deny how good the change of pace was for him. How good the Raiders were in general, either.

They made everyone work twice as hard as they'd need to if they were having a bad season and Hayden knew, as much as his team hated him for it, that they would be utilizing every second of their practice while the Raiders enjoyed their food.

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The following Wednesday was a rare day off, without travel or practice. That made the Raiders even more irritated by the stern summoning they'd received from the team's new president. A man by the name of Regan Byers, who, until now, none of them had heard much from.

"Where'd he work before Boston?" Varkov wondered, holding the door open as the team filed into the conference room one by one.

"Why did you look directly at me when you asked that?" Shane questioned, brushing past him.

He shrugged. "You always research these things," he noted simply, letting the door fall shut behind him. "I thought you'd have looked into him by now."

Shane sucked on his cheek for a moment before nodded. “Okay, fine, yeah, I did,” he confessed, sitting down.

The table was long enough to seat them all, yet most of them, aside from Shane, Ilya, Dubek, and Kovalev, remained standing. They settled behind the others, sticking close together at one end of the table as if to visibly oppose management’s preference for doing things the ‘proper’ way.

“So?” Kohn asked, hands propped on the back of Shane’s chair as he glanced over his shoulder. “What’d you find out?”

“He was at some minor league team before this,” he told them, scrolling back through the page of information he found online about the guys. “Probably good at his job since he was there for seven years straight, but then he came here because our president quit. Guess he figured it would be a better move for his career.”

“Better for his salary, sure,” Connors agreed, tipped his head dubiously. “Better for his reputation and peace of mind depends on how he acts towards us.”

It would be a bit of an exaggeration to say they drove out the last team president, but they were all pretty sure they were at least a contributing factor to some extent. It was hard not to be when they kept annoying him with more demands and ultimatums.

“I hate brass as much as anyone, but let’s try to keep this civil as long as possible,” Ilya suggested, tapping his fingers on the table. “More flies with sugar and all that.”

“Honey,” Shane corrected, still scrolling through his phone.

“да, любовь моя?” he questioned, head turning.

There was a broken laugh behind them that turned into a poorly disguised cough.

Shane’s ears turned pink as he looked up from his phone. “No that- that’s the saying,” he told him. “You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

Ilya blinked. “Oh.”

“No one say anything,” he pleaded, ducking his head back down to avoid their chuckling. “Let’s just forget about that happening.”

Feller patted Shane on the shoulder from behind. “Relax,” he muttered. “You guys are too cute for us to judge.”

Sometimes, they might comment on the occasional slip up one of them made. If only to note how nauseatingly adorable they were. But it was never malicious. They cared about both of them too much for that.

“Yeah, better sweet than boring,” Hammersmith agreed. “If you were like, never showing affection, then we’d have to tease you for being dull.”

Ilya huffed, head tilting up to look at his teammate. “Performative allyship, Smitty,” he tutted in faux disappointment. “Not a good look.”

He chuckled, eyes flitting towards the door as it opened.

A short man walked, dressed like he had been to the office more times than he had ever been to their arena. Or any arena, for that matter. He wore a charcoal gray suit, his tie not any more colorful than any other part of his outfit.

“This is everyone, right?” Byers questioned, doing a headcount of the team.

Ilya nodded. “Everyone involved, yes.”

He sat down a few feet away from them, as if still trying to keep some sort of power balance enabled after they disrupted it by most of them choosing to stand. Flipping open the file he’d carried in, the team watched him skim over it with his eyes, leaving them to wonder in silence what it said.

Shane had already walked in with a bad feeling about this meeting, but it was rapidly growing even more concerning as the seconds ticked by. Ilya, either fortunately or unfortunately, didn’t seem too worried. At least, not yet.

He just sat there, hands interlocked and propped on the table while he waited patiently for Byers to finish getting things in order.

“Alright then,” Byers eventually noted, sitting up a bit straighter. “You’ve all been making quite a fuss, lately, haven’t you?”

Ilya gave a partial shrug. “We’ve noticed some things we don’t like seeing,” he clarified. “We’re not trying to cause problems, just want to rectify some issues.”

“Very noble,” he murmured, looking at each of them for a moment a piece. “Who started this crusade?”

Ilya’s brows furrowed, the words and tone rubbing him the wrong way quickly. He didn’t respond, though. Or rather, he wasn’t given the chance to, before someone else answered the question first.

“All of us,” Kovalev stated, gesturing to the entirety of the team.

“Yes, you all feel strongly about these matters, I’m sure,” he agreed with a curt nod. “But one of you must have brought this up, yes? Who initiated it?”

“I don’t know how familiar you are with our roster, but no one on the team is named Judas, Mr. Byers,” Sebbin told him. “We make decisions together.”

Shane kept his breathing measured, feeling his chest constrict from the anxiety that this entire conversation was inducing. Beside him, Ilya kept staring straight ahead at the man, but Shane felt the edge of his shoe tap against his gently.

Byers huffed slightly, tapping his pen on the edge of the table. “You know, if you make decisions as a group, that means you can be reprimanded as a group, too,” he reminded them. “Now, I’d rather avoid that, if possible, but you need to cooperate with me.”

“We’d be happy to,” Dubek assured him. “As long as we all understand that our goal is to keep the arena functioning at its most efficient.”

“Efficiency is costly, you understand?” Byers explained. “Trying to open every door or keep the full parking lot available only works if the arena is consistently packed and those kinds of numbers aren’t reliable.”

“Have you considered that more fans might want to come to our games if we weren’t charging an arm and a foot or making them stand in line for four hours just to get in?” Marlow questioned, his arms folded.

“Or maybe they’d spend more money if we gave them affordable snacks?” Varkov added. “Making two dollars on a hot dog is more effective than losing fifteen by having everyone eat before showing up.”

But of course, that would imply that management actually cared about the people who were spending their time in the arena, instead of just trying to earn as much as they possibly could. A lot of which money, they never even saw because it went to funding the higher ups salaries.

“I see how that might make sense to you all, but the brands that the arena keeps as vendors have contracts that can’t be easily dissolved,” Byers reasoned. “And removing our arena from the secondhand ticket sites would mean losing publicity by association. We wouldn’t be promoted on their site compared to Winnipeg or Dallas.”

Shane furrowed his eyebrows. “Winnipeg has a capacity of fifteen thousand fans,” he stated. “Dallas holds eighteen thousand. We have twenty-two thousand seats; the size difference alone would compensate for the loss.”

He was pretty sure if they stopped allowing secondhand sellers, their ticket sales would drop slightly lower. But he was also convinced that the ones that were bought would actually be used instead of having empty seats because scalpers couldn’t get them resold in time.

“Not to mention we could always focus on old school marketing tactics,” Kohn suggested with a shrug. “You know, posters and billboards instead of online QR codes and websites that force advertisements down people’s throats.”

Byers put both his hands up. “That would be a great idea,” he agreed, tone loaded. “Which one of you wants to sit for the camera and film the television commercials?”

No one rushed to volunteer, naturally. Which, it seemed like he expected, given his smug reaction to their silence.

“We aren’t trying to promote ourselves like second-rate celebrities; there’s already too big of a gap between hockey players and the public,” Vic clarified. “Get fan testimonials and

interview the people who work at the arena. They'd be a thousand times more authentic than anything you could force us or actors to do."

The man sighed, leaning back in his chair. "You can't expect an entire marketing rebrand to be okayed when you're already trying to decimate funding for foolish things like vendors and escalators," he told them. "There isn't enough money."

"Bullshit, there's always money," Connors stated.

Byers shook his head. "I can assure you—"

"Did you know my entire family is in finance and law?" he interjected. "And did you know that our team's income diversification is held by subsidiaries that we actually already own to some if not a complete extent?"

"Wow, slow down," Feller remarked with a theatrical amount of sarcasm. "Are you saying the Raiders are a subdivision of their own company?"

Connors nodded dramatically. "They give a little of everything made to multiple businesses, which are owned by, well, the Raiders with a slightly different name. It helps cut taxes while also accruing interest from the sales of products the businesses sell in association with our team—merch, marketing, and for some reason a brand of chocolate that originates in San Tropez."

He wasn't sure where that came into play, frankly. It was a bit of a stretch compared to some of the other companies they had, but still served the same purpose, technically. They split up everything they made to keep from paying the full amount of taxes and accrued interest in the process, when the subsidiaries were doing well.

Byers clicked his tongue, looked peeved. "Your point?"

"Mine? Just that unless the organization was spending a considerable percentage higher than sustainable, we're not only fine but quite well off, currently," Connors stated. "And the only way we'll believe there's nothing to spare is if the accountants show us the numbers of every corporation the Raiders own or have connection to. Including our incidentals and overhead fund."

Carmichael tapped him on the back lightly, having forgotten, like most of them, that his family had been entangled in large corporations like this long before Connors started working for one. Damn, was it convenient, though.

Mr. Byers stared at them for a while before he put his fingertips on the table, leaning in closer. "There seems to be a misunderstanding here, boys," he clarified. "I'm not some fairy godmother here to grant your wishes. It's my job to make sure things settle down before the owner gets involved. Or the Ceo or the board or any number of people who could make your lives very difficult."

Kane shrugged. "We get paid to get publicly beaten up, our lives are already difficult," he reminded him. "And no one higher than you has ever bothered to come deal with us

personally before, so they're probably not going to do it now, either."

"Oh, I'm well aware of your past behavior," he assured them. "And unlike your previous ventures, which were minimal and made quietly, you've hit the news outlets this time. Which means, you've publicly undermined this entire corporation."

"That was never our intention," Shane cleared up. "We just wanted to talk to some people and figure out how to make them happier."

"As Mr. Kane said, your job is to play and entertain fans," Byers retorted slowly. "It is not your job, however, to control how the arena functions and no one wants to deal with a team that pretends to have more responsibility than they actually do."

Shane's lips tugged into a fine line, his stomach lurching from the comment. The threat, really. That's what it was, after all. Indirect but insinuated sharply enough that none of them mistook it.

"Sorry, English is not my first language, so this is not very clear," Kovalev muttered, gesturing to himself with a blasé hand twirl. "To make sure there is no mistake here, you are saying you will fire us if we continue to ask you for, you know, lower ticket prices and working escalators?"

Byers nodded wearily. "The owner and I would have to discuss it, yes," he remarked. "Unless you work with me to come up with a solution. Smaller changes that might still meet some of your demands. The escalators can be fixed right away, and we'll discuss putting a limit on how many tickets we resell."

It was, in a way, a compromise. Maybe they should have been glad to receive it and jump on board immediately. But all it really did was cement the fact that he was, in fact, capable of fixing things and chose not to.

Kovalev hummed, shaking his head slightly. "I don't know," he confessed. "I'm sort of an all or nothing person. What about you guys?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

There was a collective nodding, along with some murmurs of agreement in few or less words. They weren't going to settle for some machinery to get fixed when the prices and lines were still out of control.

"You realize you're practically encouraging me to go to the owner about this?" Byers questioned. "You'll be let go from the organization for voiding the clauses in your contracts."

Ilya shrugged. "Oh well, life goes on," he mused, standing up and pushing his chair in. "I hear Houston is forming a team next season, right? Maybe they'd be interested in signing an entire roster without the fuss of hunting for a team."

He scoffed. "They're fresh meat, they couldn't pay you half the salary you're currently getting here."

“You think we do this for the money?” Ilya questioned, pointing at his team before he shook his head. “We’ll play for Houston at any price they offer us. Pennies on the dollar, if that’s what they can afford.”

Shane’s throat worked, his eyes flitting behind him, towards Ilya, who looked completely solid in his statement. They all did. Dubek and Kovalev stood up, shoving their chairs in hard enough to shake the table.

He realized there was no wavering or hesitation from either of them. Not a single crack in their façade of nonchalance and he wondered if they were just that good at hiding their nerves or if they truly weren’t worried.

Shane stood up, stepping closer towards his team even as it made his chest thump with a strange mix of faith and fear. Byers didn’t look quite convinced, until that moment, that they would really do it. They’d leave and take every loyal fan with them.

“It’s been a tense afternoon, gentlemen,” he eventually claimed, flipping his folder shut and tucking it under his arm as he rose to his feet. “Let’s discuss this again, later. When you’re thinking more rationally.”

Byers held the door open for them, gesturing to it impatiently.

“We’d be happy to meet with you again, but we will not have changed our minds,” Ilya retorted, voice measured.

Slowly, starting with Feller, the team filed out. Some of them bothered to nod at Byers, but most walked directly past him without the slightest bit of acknowledgement. Not that he looked shocked or offended by it.

Shane kept his eyes down, following Hammersmith out of the conference room with Ilya close behind him.

Byers, however, stopped him before he could. “Look, Rozanov…Ilya, I respect you as a player and a captain,” he prefaced with a quiet volume. “You’re loyal to your team and it’s noble but I don’t think you’re willing to play for a quarter of your current salary just to protect them from this.”

Ilya’s eyes raked over the man, filled with tempered irritation. “I guess that just goes to show that a fancy suit doesn’t make you a smart man,” he responded, voice dripping with condescension. “And it’s Rozanov, to you.”

Brushing past him, he caught up to his team who were waiting for him by the elevators. They didn’t necessarily look dejected but to call them calm or content would be an exaggeration as Vic leaned on the wall and Sebbin reached for his phone to distract himself from the shit show that they just sat through.

“I need a drink,” Carmichael said, the statement open ended as the doors parted with a quiet ding.

There was a chorus of agreement, heads nodding and hands raising as if to vote on it.

“I concur,” Connors muttered, first to enter the elevator and hold it open.

“Or two,” Varkov noted with a vehement nod. “Definitely two.” It wasn’t like they ever indulged in more than that during the season, obviously, but he’d take whatever he could get.

Ilya sighed, pressing the ground floor button and feeling Shane lean on him as soon as the elevator doors closed. He wrapped his hand around his waist, trying to soothe whatever nerves he knew the meeting had swelled in him.

He just hoped, with every fiber of his being, that he wasn’t driving his team straight into the ground by being so stubborn.

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Ilya was trying his best to keep his mind off the situation as best he could. Shane was, too, given how he had thrown himself into hair care. If there was one thing he was strict about, aside from hockey, it was Ilya’s curls. He probably worried about them more than his boyfriend did, most of the time.

“Ow, gentle,” Ilya insisted, words garbled by the pasta he was eating. “They are attached to my head, you know?”

They had pushed the coffee table aside, giving him space to sit on the floor in front of the couch in living room. There was a game between Philadelphia and Tampa on. To say they were rooting against Florida would be an understatement.

“Sorry, there’s some tangles,” Shane muttered, running some product through Ilya’s hair before reaching for his brush. “Tip your head back.”

He complied, lifting his jaw up, struggling to watch the television. “I can’t see anymore,” he noted, meeting his eyes. “You have to tell me what’s happening.”

His gaze flitted towards the screen and then back to his boyfriend. “Tampa is fighting,” he said, brushing through his damp strands. “Shocker, right?”

Ilya huffed in amusement, trying to keep his head still. “Mm, could have never predicted.”

“Hold on,” he murmured, leaning over and grabbing the remote. He turned the volume up higher, so the commentators were a bit louder for him. “Can you hear them now?”

He nodded slightly, settling his lunch in his lap as his shoulders dipped comfortably and Shane went back to tending to his hair. He closed his eyes; half focused on listening to the game and half reveling in the feeling of his nice oils being worked into his scalp.

Shane’s lips tugged to the side, enjoying the way Ilya’s muscles had relaxed under his touch. He reached for another product, making sure not to overdo how much he used. Not only did Ilya hate running out of something expensive, but he was extremely specific about how much of everything he used.

He claimed his hair felt heavy if there was too much and felt brittle if there wasn't enough.

"Little of that one," Ilya mumbled, not even seeing the bottle in question. He just knew the way the lid opened. "Makes me greasy if there's a lot."

"Stop backseat styling," he insisted. "I know how to take care of them."

He hummed softly, the sound barely audible in contrast to the television. "I know you know," he assured him, reaching over his shoulder to briefly graze Shane's knee with his hand. "They always look very nice."

Shane's nose scrunched, parting a few strands of his hair and coiling them around his finger. "As if you'd be seen in public when they didn't."

Aside from travelling, in which case, he usually covered them with a hat or beanie to the point no one could see his hair aside from the ends.

"I have a reputation with the curly people," he muttered with a vague gesture of his hand. "Have to keep them happy."

Shane laughed quietly and nudged his shoulder to let him sit up, able to finish the rest of his hair at an angle that would let him keep watching the game. Ilya seemed a bit more relieved to be able to finish his pasta, though, shoveling another bite into his mouth before it got cold.

"About the other day," Shane prefaced, fingers still gently working through his curls, trying to define them. "Did you mean what you said? Threatening to go to Houston."

He chewed and swallowed, giving a partial shrug. "It wasn't planned, if that's what you're asking. Byers just pissed me off," he clarified. "But it wasn't a completely empty threat, either. I have loyalty to the team, not the organization."

"Houston is…very hot, I hear," Shane remarked, not too sure if he had ever been anywhere in Texas aside from playing in Dallas. "You think they'd all leave with us?"

Ilya hummed. "I know they would," he stated immediately. "But I don't want it to happen."

They would all have to move, find new places to live and sign new leases. Several of them would be leaving their families, too. They'd earn less money and have a less established fanbase.

There were too many reasons why it wasn't a good idea. Including the simple fact that Boston was home.

Shane let out a soft breath, coiling another strand of hair around his finger to give it some structure. "We'll work things out, right?" he wondered. "Byers will cave and talk to the owner or whoever he needs to?"

"I hope," came his response.

A few moments later, Shane had finished shaping and diffusing Ilya's curls, his attention focused on keeping them from splitting too much or getting frizzy. Ilya, meanwhile, just kept tracking the puck on the screen, watching intently until the second period came to an end with a tied game.

"There," Shane said, setting down the diffuser that had been keeping either of them from saying anything for a while. "How's that?"

Ilya perked up, muting the intermission and shaking his head lightly to loosen his curls. "Feels nice," he replied, patting them gently with his fingertips. "Thank you."

"Whenever you need me to," he muttered, bending down to catch his lips in a quick kiss. "Help me drag the table back?"

He nodded, setting his pasta on it before getting up. They pushed the table back into place, moving it until the legs aligned with the indents in the rug.

"Are you sure you don't want me to heat up another bowl for you?" he questioned. "You haven't eaten since breakfast."

Shane shook his head, reaching to fuss with his curls for another moment, unable to let it go when he saw one or two out of place. "I'm alright."

Ilya's eyes narrowed, studying him. "Are you sure?" he asked. "You're not…you know, feeling bad about it?"

His eating disorder was better, sure. But recovery wasn't linear and some days food still felt the enemy for him, even if he didn't enjoy talking about it together.

"I'm okay, I swear, I'm just not hungry," Shane promised earnestly. "Besides, I'm meeting Kane for dinner, and it's bound to be some massive meal."

He felt relieved, but his forehead creased slightly anyway. "Again?" he wondered, voice slightly teasing. "I'm starting to think you like him more than me."

Shane pretended to nod. "Absolutely," he teased. "We've actually been getting together just to talk about you behind your back. Lots of fun stories about you in 2014."

Ilya blinked, eyes narrowing. "That is not funny," he said, shaking his head. "That year is blacklisted from conversation, everyone knows it."

It was, to say the least, a hectic year for him socially. His attempts to distance himself emotionally from Shane hadn't worked, though. Clearly.

He scoffed, pulling him back down on the couch. "Relax, there's no discussion of it," he assured him. "We just talk about stuff. The team and things we're doing. He's really into plants right now, for some reason. Trying really hard not to kill this tropical thing he bought from a greenhouse."

“Bet that’s going horribly,” Ilya muttered, wrapping his arm around his shoulder and dragging him closer. “He’s got a black thumb instead of a green one.”

Shane reached for the remote. “Sounds familiar,” he murmured.

Ilya’s lips tugged into an annoyed scowl and he chuckled, fussing with television to unmute it as the commentator’s made comments about the replays during intermission. He set it down, arm winding around Ilya’s torso as he leaned his head against his chest and settled in to finish watching the game.

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Shane locked his car, already reaching for his phone as he walked down the street with his sunglasses on. In hindsight, he probably looked more conspicuous wearing them as the sun began setting than he would have if he didn’t.

But he was nervous to be seen, and it brought him the slightest bit of comfort to have them on.

Lifting his phone to his ear, it rang repeatedly before Kane eventually picked up, calmly telling him, “My apartment is slightly on fire, hold on a second.”

There was a clattering sound, overshadowed by the persistent beeping in the background.

Shane paused, his eyes widening as he pulled his phone back and stared at the call. The seconds moved fractionally and he put it back to his ear. “Your apartment is what?” he questioned, sounding more worried than his teammate did.

“On fire,” he repeated, sounding like he was across the room and away from his phone. “But only a little bit, it’s fine.”

He kept walking, pace slowing down as he floundered. “Do I- should I call 911?” he asked. “Are you alright?”

“Totally good, just—wow that’s hot—give me a minute.” There was another sharp sound as the fire extinguisher went off and a moment later, Kane was picking up the phone. “Okay, situation handled. What’s up?”

“What the fuck, Kane!” Shane exclaimed, tone incredulous. “Why was your apartment on fire? Is it out? Did you burn yourself? Is your place intact?”

A couple on the same sidewalk startled at the volume of his outburst, staring at him as they walked past holding hands. Shane could only give a tight-lipped smile, feeling slightly embarrassed but far more concerned about what was going on.

“The place is fine; nothing spread,” he clarified. “The oven has been making a weird sound but a fuse or something finally blew, I think.” He checked the damage and pulled out the cooking racks. “I don’t know. I don’t work with electronics.”

Now, he'd have to actually get someone to come over and look at it. Maybe even replace the entire oven, which would definitely cost him more than he wanted to spend.

"I can't believe you picked up your damn phone during a fire; you've got no self-preservation," Shane criticized, rubbing his forehead slightly.

"My phone was already on the counter, and I didn't want you to think I was blowing you off!" Kane defended. "What did you want, anyway? To bitch at me for how I handle my own fire?"

He blew out a breath, shoulders deflating as he felt the crisis ending. "I- what? No. I'm glad you're alright."

"Awe, thanks, that makes two of us," Kane teased, huffing in mild amusement at the situation.

There was a loud clattering as Kane dropped the cooking racks on the tile, burned pieces breaking off as they hit the floor. How he could ever be so blasé, Shane wished desperately to find out. But he had given up on understanding his friend's ability to roll with the punches a while ago.

"I- jeez it sounds really unimportant after that," Shane admitted, slightly hesitant. "If Ilya asks, I was hoping you could tell him we had dinner together tonight."

"Uh- alright, I guess I can do that," Kane agreed cautiously. "Why would he think we're having dinner and why am I affirming it?"

"I can't tell you that, yet," Shane replied. "I promise it's nothing bad, though. I'm surprising him, is all. And you're my excuse for getting out of the house to grab something important."

It was, admittedly, the first thing he really thought of. He could have used anyone for an excuse, as long as they agreed to be a pawn, but Kane was always dragging him around so it seemed pretty reasonable to tell Ilya they were meeting up.

"Ah, I see," Kane mused curiously. "So, I, what, just make up some details about a restaurant and claim we were together for a few hours?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Shane said, shoving his hand in his pocket as he turned the corner. "I don't even know if he'll ask, but if he does—"

"We split three appetizers and you couldn't finish your meal but let me keep the leftovers," Kane concocted on the spot. "And the chocolate cake was delicious but the ice cream came out already melted."

Shane huffed a laugh, nodding to himself. "Exactly," he muttered. "Thanks, Kane. I really appreciate it."

He knew if there was anyone on the team who was good at improvising when questioned, it would be Kane. Sebbin always folded about lies under the barest hint of pressure and Feller would keep up a lie but was always obvious about it, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

He could have bugged Vic, sure. He was a decent liar. But considering he had already kept one secret for him, he wasn't about to ask for another.

"It's no problem," Kane responded, letting out a weary sigh. "You need anything else? Because my dinner just literally went up in smoke and I'd like to order delivery before I die of starvation."

Shane huffed. "Go for it," he stated. "And don't pick up the phone if you're ever near a fire, again, unless it's to call the fire department."

"Duly noted," Kane muttered before hanging up.

He slid his phone back in his pocket with a slight breath of relief and kept walking. He did, in a lot of ways, feel bad about lying to Ilya. He knew how often his own mind tricked him into thinking he was being left out or deceived and actually doing it felt cruel, somehow.

But he also couldn't bring himself to let it interfere with his plan. It would ruin everything if Ilya got wise about what he was doing.

Crossing the street, Marlow came into view. He was leaning on the wall of some bakery, phone in hand as he waited. He looked like he'd been there for a little while, given his stance and hyper fixation on his screen.

When he finally raised his head, noticing Shane, he put his phone away. "I thought you said half past six?" he questioned, checking the time.

"I know, I'm sorry," Shane apologized. "Ilya kept insisting I skip dinner with Kane and stay home, and I had to come up with a bunch of excuses for why I couldn't."

His brows furrowed. "You're having dinner with Kane?" he questioned, slightly puzzled. "Why did you text me, then? And are we in front of a bakery?"

It wasn't even a good one, either. They were somewhere outside of town, and he had made relatively long drive, all things considered. Just to stand outside and wait.

He pointed towards the shop and Shane's head tipped, following his hand. He had, honestly, forgotten that's what was nearby in the last few minutes. That phone call with Kane really threw him into a tizzy that he was still unwinding himself from.

"No, I'm just pretending to have dinner with him," Shane clarified, waving him off. "*Actually*, he's getting takeout because his oven caught fire."

"It what?" Marlow exclaimed, eyes widening in concern. "Is he alright?"

"Yeah, fine, I just talked to him," he assured him. "He was weirdly calm but that's just sort of how he is, you know? Now, if Kohn's oven was on fire, the whole place would be up in smoke, I mean he probably doesn't even know where his fire extinguisher even- never mind, that's not the point."

“I didn’t think it was, but I genuinely don’t understand what’s going on, either,” Marlow confessed, shrugging in confusion. “And why are you wearing sunglasses at seven pm?”

Shane blinked, suddenly remembering he had them on. No wonder the whole world looked a little darker than it was supposed to. He reached up, pulling them off and sliding them in his pocket while taking a deep breath.

“Look, I- you need to keep this a secret, okay?” Shane prefaced, watching Marlow’s expression stiffened with seriousness. “Ilya can’t find out about it. Promise?”

“Okay,” he agreed, nodding hesitantly. He was always going to protect Shane’s secrets, but keeping something from Ilya felt like a strange request.

Shane glanced around the sidewalk, even though it was empty. “I…want to ask Ilya to marry me,” he confessed.

In an instant, all the thoughts drained from his mind and Marlow’s eyes widened in shock, leaning in like he had misheard him. “You- holy shit.”

“I know, I know,” he muttered, shaking his hands out nervously. “But I’ve thought it over and I- we’ve been together a long time, Marly. I don’t want to be his boyfriend anymore; I want more than that.” He paused. “You think he’ll say yes, right?”

“Are you kidding?” Marlow huffed, still feeling a bit dizzy from just how caught off guard he was. “Yeah, he’ll say yes. When are you gonna ask him?”

“Well, I sort of need a ring first,” Shane said, relieved that the idea was so well received. “And since you know him better than anyone, I thought maybe you’d have an idea on what he’d like?”

He gestured behind Marlow, who turned, realizing there was a jewelry store a few stores down. It was like everything clicked into place all at once. Why Shane insisted on a place so far away from large crowds, why he made up an excuse about Kane, why he wanted this to be kept a secret from Ilya.

“Wow, I feel like I just slapped with a stereotype about athletes being dense,” Marlow admitted, shaking his head in disbelief as he blew out a deep breath. “Really glad no one is around to see it.”

Shane huffed in amusement. “You’ll help, then?” he questioned.

“Try to tear me away,” he retorted, nodding towards the store.

Turning, they walked towards the door, a strange sort of quiet settling over them as they entered. It was nearly empty inside, just as Shane hoped for. He glanced at some woman buying earrings at the counter, her attention so focused on the Sapphires that she didn’t even look up at him, let alone recognize him.

Marlow tugged him gently towards the rings and he went willingly, legs feeling a bit weak, if he was honest. He was enthused, of course. But damn, he was also terrified as things began to

feel realer.

Shane raked his eyes over the rows of rings, trying to imagine Ilya wearing any of them. “There’s so many,” he muttered quietly, the way that felt appropriate for the given atmosphere. “I didn’t even know they made all these types for guys.”

Maybe it was a bit of his old habits sneaking up on him, thinking men didn’t really have as many options as women for things like their clothes or accessories. Regardless, he was caught off guard by the number of rings. To a nearly overwhelming extent.

Marlow must have noticed, too, since he nudged him softly to grab his attention. “Relax, you know him well enough to know what he’d like,” he assured him. “Just look row by row and I’ll grab the salesman. He knows this stuff better than us.”

“Okay,” he murmured, the suggestion feeling more digestible than the massive assortment in front of them. “Wait.” He grabbed Marlow by the arm firmly, fingers digging in. “Just um- try to…”

“I’ll come up with some excuse, so he doesn’t think you’re buying it for Roz,” Marlow promised quietly, not needing to be told twice that this was still supposed to be kept quiet.

Letting go of the tight grip he had on his arm, Shane nodded, glancing back at the display case. His heart was pounding, fingers gripping the edge of it and smudging the glass. It was an exhilarating level of terrifying, imagining sliding any of them on Ilya’s finger and he wanted it to be the perfect one. Even if it took hours.

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Shane was pretty sure he had never felt his anxiety so intensely as he had during the days following his decision at the jewelry shop. If it wasn’t for Marlow, he might not have ever walked out with a ring at all, given how indecisive he was over them.

In the end, he found one. Silver and slim, with a row of diamonds in the middle and enough room to engrave something on the inside. He could, in other words, envision seeing it for the rest of his life every time he reached for Ilya’s hand.

Picturing it was a far cry from actually seeing him wear it, of course. But Shane just hadn’t figured out the right way to ask him, yet. Not that a million different ways hadn’t come to mind, like rose petals or on some scenic hike. Both felt too cliché, though.

In the meantime, he just stared at his boyfriend’s hand, bare fingers coiling around his water bottle. “I’m out,” he complained, reaching for the nearest second bottle with Feller’s number scratched on it with a sharpie.

“That’s Feller’s,” Shane reminded him, eyes still tracking the game playing out in front of them.

“He’s out there; won’t notice,” he replied, gesturing vaguely towards the rink. “Besides, he deserves it. He finished my tape yesterday.”

Shane huffed, mind flitting back towards the ring hiding in his nightstand, under pamphlets about bird watching that he purposely put there in case Ilya decided to snoop around for some reason. It really wasn't good for him to be so distracted, especially not during a game they were losing. But he couldn't seem to get his thoughts sorted away as much as he would like.

"What the fuck!?" Sebbin shouted, eyes widening as he shifted on the bench, neck craning.

The other team's goal music played but Sebbin was clearly focused on something different and Shane blinked, having completely missed whatever he saw.

Following his gaze towards Hammersmith, he saw his teammate bending over, holding himself up against the boards weakly. Feller and Carmichael reached for him, both trying to help keep him from collapsing.

As the game slowed to a stop, the crowd quieted down. Their murmurs of concern rang through, but Shane just stood, trying to get a better look at the situation.

The other team's captain was standing a few feet away, arguing with a ref quietly about the play that had caused the injury. Hammersmith rose slightly to disagree with whatever he said, head shaking for a mere moment before he winced in pain and grasped at it.

Carmichael pulled on his shoulder, holding him steady as he also spoke the ref for a moment, recounting what he had witnessed.

"What the hell are they doing?" Shane muttered in disbelief as the ref pushed the other team's captain away but didn't put him into the penalty box. "Are they kidding right now?"

Ilya smacked the side of the railing, standing to cup his mouth. "Are you blind or just fucking stupid?!" he shouted towards the ref, earning him a glare. "That was illegal hit!"

"Don't heckle the ref, Roz," Dubek suggested, voice sounding equally frustrated. "He can't help it that his eyes don't work and his brain doesn't either."

Huffing, Ilya watched as Carmichael helped Hammersmith back to their bench. Shane reached for Hammersmiths arm, guiding him to sit down as he tugged his helmet off with a slight groan.

Coach gestured at Ilya and he grabbed his gloved, slipping them back on quickly.

"No doctors, please," Hammersmith insisted, spitting his mouthguard out. "I'm fine, just hit the wall too hard."

"You hit the wall because he smacked the fucking shit out of you," Shane amended, handing him his water bottle.

"I know, Hollzy, I was there," he muttered, out of breath as he chugged until his water dripped down the side of his mouth. He wiped the edge of his lips. "Very eloquent, though."

Ilya was halfway over the railing when he furrowed his brows, like he was still trying to partake in the conversation and play at the same time. "Marlow—"

“Means good English,” he interjected before he could finish asking, pushing him away from the wall. “Go.”

“Ah, fine, fine,” Ilya murmured under his breath gliding across the ice to take Hammersmiths place.

Hammersmith rested his head in his hands, trying to catch his breath and get his head to stop throbbing. He had received enough concussions throughout his career to know what one felt like and while he was nearly positive, he didn’t have one, he was still too sore to play for the rest of the game.

Not that they had very long left before it ended, anyway. They were already in the third period, down by one goal.

“You wanna be brave, be brave, but you’re seeing the doctor after the game,” Desjourney clarified.

He patted Hammersmith’s shoulder firmly before he walked back down the line of the bench, a bit more concerned about the rest of the game than one player, who, seemed mostly fine right now. No one could quite blame him for that, especially when Smitty was insisting on watching the rest of the game, too.

The other team was playing well, even if not entirely honestly and they could all see it, growing more worried as the seconds ticked by.

Hammersmith blew out a breath, hand covering his mouth anxiously. “I can’t believe I’m going to be the reason we lose this game—”

“We’re not going to lose,” Shane interjected sternly. “And even if we did, it wouldn’t be your fault. No one would have seen that hit coming.”

He couldn’t have known that was going to happen or that they’d score the second he was pushed far enough out of the way. It was a freak occurrence, not his fault.

“Still feel like shit,” he muttered dejectedly. “Someone needs to keep me distracted. Tell me about something less depressing than this.”

“Uh- I got this imported coffee delivered today?” Sebbin offered weakly, shrugging. “Robusta beans from Tanzania.”

Shane, Marlow, and Hammersmith all turned their heads to stare at him blankly.

“That’s the most amazing thing you can think of, really?” Marlow asked. “The guy got his skull bashed, Seb.”

Shane rubbed his eyes as he let out a small, disbelieving huff. “Okay, look,” he muttered softly. “I’ve got something that will distract you but you can’t react at all.”

Hammersmith frowned in confusion. “Alright?” he agreed, sounding a bit wary.

He watched his teammate glance at the other end of the bench for a moment. Everyone was either enveloped in conversation or focused intently on the game, which seemed to be a good thing, for some reason.

Shane stole coach's clipboard that he put down for a split second and lifted it between them, in case there were any cameras on them. "I'm going to propose to Ilya," he whispered so quietly he was nearly mouthing the words.

True to his word, Hammersmith tried his best not to react, just blinking repeatedly. "You-holy shit."

"Why is that what everyone says?" he wondered, furrowing his eyebrows. "Is it because I'm doing it first or something? Do I not seem like I would?"

"Everyone? Who else knows?" Sebbin asked, skipping right over his question as his eyes flitted to the rest of the team.

Marlow gave a slightly acknowledging tip of his head. "Just me," he assured them.

"Man, why do you always get to know everything first?" Hammersmith questioned, slightly envious of how people just tended to offer information to him.

Marlow shrugged, not really sure himself. He supposed he just looked trustworthy. Or perhaps people thought he'd mind his business and felt comfortable rambling to him. Whatever the reason, he accumulated a lot of information about people without ever trying to.

"Okay, maybe skip the part where I told Marly and then react to the rest of the news," Shane suggested.

"You just said don't react!" Hammersmith exclaimed under his breath.

He wrinkled his nose. "Well, yeah, but I—"

Coach plucked his clipboard from in between them, giving Shane a small glare. He had seen other players hide or grab it before, but never him. After a few seconds, more than enough to make him uncomfortable, Desjourney walked away.

Shane let out a small breath, still feeling a little uneasy, as if he was still glaring from the other end of the bench.

"Well, that was awkward," Sebbin noted, scooting closer on the bench and gently smacking Shane's arm. "Congratulations, though. When are you going to, you know, ask?"

He made a weak, uncertain sound. "I don't know," he confessed, tracking Ilya on the ice. "I want to do it soon, just to get this stupid lump out of my stomach. I feel like I'm going crazy."

He was practically a few days away from starting to have stress dreams over hiding the damn ring in their house. He even nearly gave it to Marlow before realizing that Ilya was just as

likely to find it in his apartment with how often he was over there.

“Do you have a speech?” Hammersmith questioned, his mind officially off the game as his pain began to subside thanks to the new distraction. “Something long-winded and declarative.”

“No,” Shane scoffed, lips tugging to the side. “Sorta,” he corrected reluctantly. “It’s a work in progress, alright? I didn’t tell you so you could badger me about it. I was trying to get your mind off the game.”

“Oh, it’s off the game,” Hammersmith assured him, nodding towards the bench. “How secretive are you going to keep this from the team?”

He shrugged, having not really thought about it much yet. It seemed reasonable to think he was supposed to hide it from everyone, until he had actually proposed. But Kane was already somewhat involved with minimal awareness of why and now with Sebbin and Hammersmith in on it, it felt a bit dishonest to lie to everyone.

“I just don’t want Ilya finding out or getting suspicious,” Shane clarified. “The team can know, as long as it doesn’t get back to him.”

“You think we’d blab?” Sebbin asked, already shaking his head.

“Not intentionally or anything,” Shane clarified. “He’s just already hard enough to surprise, you know?”

“Hollzy, we’ll die to hide this from him,” Hammersmith swore, shaking his arm softly. “You have our solemn vow as…people who make vows pretty frequently.”

He snorted a laugh, biting back a laugh. “Thanks, Smitty,” he muttered. “Glad I got your word.”

The last thing he needed was to deal with trying to catch Ilya off guard as someone who was almost comedically good at sniffing out surprises ahead of time. He found his Christmas and birthday gifts, even the little things Shane bought him for no special occasion.

Sometimes, Ilya was decent enough to act shocked or keep pretending to not have known the whole time. But Shane really didn’t want that to happen this time. He wanted him to be truly stunned.

Shane fussed with his gloves, watching Carmichael skate over to the bench. He stood, perched on the rail until his teammates hand tapped it and he could slide back onto the ice. Dropping back into the rink, he instantly spotted Feller with the puck, trying to keep it away from the other team.

He managed to scrape it off the walls, shooting it through the air towards Vic.

Shane let out a sharp whistle, grabbing his attention and Vic passed him the puck immediately before nearly being tackled by the other team’s center. Shoving him back, Vic

pushed away from the boards, trying to catch up with Shane who was being crowded by both defensemen as he crossed into end zone.

Before he could find anyone to pass it towards or even try to take a blind shot, he got rammed into the boards. They shook and he kept the puck close as he was thrown off course, pinning it to wall.

The other players drove their sticks into his and they clattered against each other, getting tangled up until the puck was stuck between all three of their sticks with no viable way out.

If Feller had gotten there in time, Shane would be willing to bet they'd have the disc back by now. But he was still catching up and by the time he got anywhere near them, the ref had already intervened.

Breaking away from the wall, all three of them backed off the puck, letting the ref take it. Both teams gathered for another faceoff and Ilya gestured towards Varkov, letting him take it.

Shane skated towards his boyfriend, bumping his shoulder softly. "They're going to try to stall the rest of the game," he muttered. "They didn't even try to get the puck from me."

"They like that tactic a lot," Ilya murmured back, tsking dryly. "Is only, what, two minutes left? We can do…something in that time frame."

He didn't quite know what, yet. But something. Two minutes could change a lot in a game as rapidly moving as this.

Shane glanced back at Varkov, tightening his grip on his stick instinctively. The ref dropped the puck, and he heard their sticks clatter, watching intently as the disc ticked back and forth before slipping under his teammates' stick, towards him.

Shane grabbed the puck, keeping it tucked against the curve of his stick. He was able to see the other team's defenseman immediately encroaching, but Ilya's frame blocked his sight from it, keeping the guy away as Shane turned away.

Still in the other team's end zone, Shane took a nearly blind shot at their net. It would have, perhaps, gone in, if their goalie wasn't so focused, swatting it away quickly.

The puck bounced towards the captain, who stole it before Shane or anyone else on his team could catch the rebound. Ilya raced after it as they swapped back into the Raiders' end zone, their goalie looking wide awake in case anyone tried to get anything past him.

To say letting two goals slip past was already an embarrassment was an understatement.

Pushing his shoulder against the other team's captains, Ilya forced him into the boards, trying to get the puck away from him. Even if they were just planning to waste time until the clock ran out, he couldn't afford to let them anywhere near their goal.

Prying the puck away from the man, he shot it against their wall and it curved around the back of the rink quickly, all the way into Vic's grasp on the other side of their end zone.

He tried to pass it, getting hit in the chest before he could and whatever shot he managed to land wasn't hard enough to send the puck anywhere. The other teams forward grabbed the disc as Vic was pinned to the boards, trying to push the guy off with his arm.

Shane skidded towards their net, alongside Feller, getting the feeling that even if their goal was to waste time, they'd still take a shot if possible. The puck got passed around and he mentally counted down their seconds, figuring their two minutes must be down to less than one by this point.

He expected to hear the buzzer go off at any moment, honestly, but until he did, he'd keep playing, even if the other team wasn't.

With the puck in the hands of a different forward, he shot towards their net and both Feller and Shane jumped at the opportunity to keep it from even making it to their goalie. Catching it against his curve, he shot the puck towards Feller, who shot it away, sending it somewhere near Ilya who passed it towards Varkov.

Varkov skated off with it, the rest of both teams close behind as he crossed into the neutral zone and then immediately into the other team's end zone. Another of their defenseman, faster than Varkov, crowded him and Feller pushed off the edge of his skates, trying to grab a little extra momentum as he whistled loudly.

With a quick stop, halting any and all speed he'd gotten, Varkov shot the puck around the defenseman, back into the neutral zone, passing it to his teammate. Feller was bumped into by the other team, but he had already wound up a strong hit, cracking his stick against the puck and sending it through the air.

The goalie lunged for it and puck flew over his padded legs, hitting the back of the net with an indiscernible swish. Their goal sign lit up, followed by the sound of the buzzer as the third period came to an end within under a second of each other.

Varkov blew out a breath, skating over to Feller. "Cutting it a bit close there," he mumbled, bumping his glove against his.

"Eh, better late than never," Feller replied through labored breaths, glancing at the other team. "Good hustle getting the puck around that behemoth."

"Was a good effort from everyone," Ilya commended, briefly patting them both on the back. "We made it into overtime, let's try not to let the momentum slip."

Shane nodded his head, heading back to the bench with others, where coach looked a little disheveled, clipboard pressed against his mouth as he stared at them. He'd rather not enter overtime at all, like pretty much everyone in the league. But it was better to have the chance to win, still, than lose it altogether.

"We all know they weren't playing their best out there," Desjourney muttered, loathing when a team left points on the table because they thought they'd win as is. "But now, they'll actually have to focus, which means you have to be twice as clever out there."

They all nodded aimlessly, reaching over the railing for their water. They chugged whatever was left in them, trying to catch their breath enough that they could listen to him instead of only hearing their own hearts pounding in their ears.

“We have nearly perfect overtime record, coach,” Vic reminded him. “It’s the second best in the league.” And that was only because they didn’t actually have overtime all that often.

Furrowing his brows, Feller shook his nearly empty water bottle in confusion. He could have sworn he had more than that left.

Shane glared at Ilya, passing his own bottle to Feller silently. “Yeah, but they have the third highest and like six overtimes on us,” he added.

“Precisely,” Desjourney responded. “I don’t know what the hell was going on the first two periods, but I need you playing like that last two minutes for the next five. Got it?”

Another round of heads nodded. “Yes, sir,” Varkov muttered.

Their coach glanced at them and then back at his bench of players, tapping his foot while trying to figure out who to cut. The other team had already picked their overtime team, keeping one of the original six and pulling two guys off the bench.

“Alright, you’ve all been out there too long,” Desjourney decided after a moment. “Everyone on the bench aside from Hollander. He’s got the least time out of you five. Marlow and Kane, out there, now.”

The two of them made sounds of agreement, fixing their gloves and hopping over the railing as everyone else sat on the bench. Feller mumbled something to Ilya, pointing at his water bottle and Shane watched him shrug in ignorance.

Rolling his eyes, he felt Kane nudge his arm and skated away from the bench, back towards the center of the ice. “Forgot to tell you that Ilya asked about our ‘dinner’ the other day,” he noted quietly. “I told him what we agreed on, though, so he’s got no clue about the ring.”

Shane’s face cinched faster than it ever had in his life, head whipping towards him. “How did you—” he was cut off by the ref, who needed someone in the faceoff.

He shook his head softly, trying to brush off the immediate shock that hit him as he bent down on the ice, stick clutched firmly. Hammersmith or Sebbin must have told him, he supposed, since Marlow wouldn’t volunteer that kind of information.

Shane knew he said he didn’t really mind the guys knowing, but jeez, he wasn’t expecting the news to spread before the game even ended.

Trying to focus on the puck in front of him, he blew out a breath and waited for it to drop. When it clattered to the ice, he lost it to the other team’s alternate captain, who snatched it away from him before he could comprehend it.

Desjourney wasn’t going to like that.

Chasing after the puck, it changed hands several times before Kane slammed into another defenseman, scraping the disc away from his grasp and passing it towards Marlow. He shot it towards Shane, needing it out of their end zone if they wanted the slightest chance of wrapping this game up.

Skating back through the neutral zone, Shane's head tipped slightly, glancing at the bench where Ilya was watching with rapt attention. His hands were folded, leaning forward toward the railing as he tracked the players with his eyes.

Overtime always seemed to move faster than it should, especially from the bench. It was for Ilya, being able to see everything and do nothing. He just had to hope his team knew how to handle the puck and keep the other team at bay simultaneously.

That was a lot harder when there were only three players on the ice, though, and as the seconds ticked down without any goals scored on either team, he grew more worried.

Looking over his shoulder, he could see Desjourney mumbling to their assistant coach behind his clipboard, pointing at players on the bench with his pen. Ilya would place money that he was trying to pick who he'd put in a shootout, if it came to that.

"They're not going to make it," Sebbin muttered, not trying to be cynical but looking at the risk realistically.

Even with three on three, the opposing team was crowded around the Raiders net, making it difficult to snatch the puck back. Every time they shot, the goalie or one of their players kept it out, but it rebounded, again and again.

"Best they can do is keep them from scoring," Ilya agreed, his nerves flaring with every shot the other team made.

He hated to lose in general, but there was something particularly humiliating about losing in over time. Especially at home.

The other team's forward shot the puck again and it flew past Marlow, towards their goalie, whose entire body hit the ice to try to scramble to grab it. He kept it out, the puck slipping from his grasp as their alternate captain tried to shoot the rebound back into the net.

Their goalie was quick to try blocking the net with any part of his frame possible, including his legs as the puck slammed into his skates. Lodged between his blades, the buzzer rang out, signaling the end of overtime and Shane watched him collapse onto his back on the ice, not even bothering to try to fix his skate.

Shane helped him sit up, kneeling to try to unlogged the puck from his skates. "Weird save, but I think the refs will allow it," he muttered, grunting as he smacked the firm disc out of place. "There." He handed it back to him. "Keepsake?"

Huffing, he took the puck and groaned, getting back on his feet. "Now, I get to do that all over again," he murmured, shaking his head. "Please, dear God, let them send weak shooters out here."

“Yeah, no pressure or anything, but if you let them score, we’ll lose the game,” Marlow muttered. “And we’ll kill you.”

Kane pulled Shane and Marlow’s shoulder back a bit, clicking his tongue to get their attention. “C’mon, coach is waiting,” he said, tilting his head towards the bench.

They headed back over, watching as Desjourney continued to mutter under his breath. That was never a good sign. Pausing as they bumped into the railing, Dubek and Carmichael both smacked their hands.

“Good try, guys,” Dubek told them.

“Not good enough, apparently,” Marlow remarked, letting out a dejected sigh as he leaned over the railing to lay his head on his arms and catch his breath.

“Alright, Kov, Connors, and Roz,” Desjouney mumbled, gesturing to the rink. “We’ll shoot first to try to give the goalie a slight rest after that shit show.”

Nodding, Kovalev adjusted his gloves in preparation while coach handled things. Once on, he slid over the railing and patted Marlow on the back.

“You good there, Marly?” he wondered, head tilted slightly in concern. “You sort of have to get off the ice, soon.”

“Uh huh, I know. Just hoping I’ll drop dead before I see this game end,” Marlow admitted weakly, feeling another light thump on his shoulder before Kov skated away.

Pushing himself up, he skated towards the door, forcing himself to find the energy to sit on the bench. If he was going to die, he could have the decency to do it off the ice so he wouldn’t interrupt the game.

“Come on, sit before you collapse,” Kohn insisted, making room for Marlow. “I know that wasn’t how we wanted overtime to go, but if we couldn’t score, at least we kept them from scoring too. Be proud of that.”

Nodding weakly, he pulled his helmet off, running his hand through his hair and watching Kovalev set up. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “Needed to hear that.”

Humming, Kohn leaned forward and saw as Kovalev skated across the rink, taking his time in planning his shot. The crowd was quiet, the way they tended to fall during tense moments. The team waited and watched him finally release the puck from his stick.

The goalie caught it and there was a resounding echo of disappointment throughout the arena, barely intermingled with a few cheers from fans of the other team.

Kovalev skated back over, his head already shaking in frustration as he tore his gloves off.

“It’s alright,” Ilya assured him before Desjourney couldn’t comment on the error. “Two more chances. Let’s make both count, yes?”

Connors fussed with his helmet, feeling a bit of extra pressure on him as they watched a player from the other team get on the ice. The guy didn't wait nearly as long as Kovalev had, taking his shot almost immediately, as if to catch their goalie off guard.

Missing, Shane blew out a breath of relief, hands clasped behind his neck anxiously. Connors stood, making his way back towards the ice and they all fidgeted to varying degrees. It was never quieter on the bench than it was during a shootout. Not even during the National Anthem.

Ilya's leg bounced as Connors glided towards the other team's net, trying his best to at least give them a small lead, if not win the game for them.

When the goalie stopped the puck with his glove, there was a collective sigh, the already tense atmosphere growing even sharper. Like the slightest sound of breath might completely blow their chances, if they hadn't already evaporated.

"Shit," Ilya whispered, head dropping as he adjusted his gloves anxiously.

Shane glanced over, wishing he could help him without it looking suspicious. "Just breathe," he murmured back. "You can do this."

Connors came back, shoulders slouched and eyes down as he dropped down on the bench like he wanted to fade into it.

Tightening his gloves a bit, Ilya looked back up as the other team's second shooter took the ice. He pushed the top of his hands against his legs harshly, trying to conjure every bit of anxiety he felt into the gesture to help release it from the rest of his body.

"I can't look," Sebbin muttered, turning his head and pressing it against Kohn's shoulder with his eyes squeezed shut.

He could hear the sound of the players skating come to a halt and the second of silence that followed felt like an eternity before the crowd cheered. He lifted his gaze, a small shout escaping his lips as he realized the shot was missed.

Shane squeezed Ilya's arm. "You've got it, Roz," he promised with a short nod of his head. "Don't get in your head about it."

Standing, he slipped over the railing, skating towards the center of the rink. Not getting in his head was so much easier said than done when the game literally hinged on him making this shot all of a sudden. As if playing in every period and landing an assist wasn't enough of a presence.

Gazing back at the bench once more, he met Shane's eyes. They were steady and full of trust, not doubt or fear. Ilya blew out a breath, guiding his puck across the ice.

His heart thudded quickly and the eerie silence of the crowd was less than helpful as he approached the other team's net, eyes flitting around his posture. His hands, outreached, and his legs, wide enough he would have the momentum to jump to either side.

Feigning right, Ilya pushed the puck forward, just barely keeping it on the edge of his curve as he slid it in the other direction. He released it with whatever force was driven by his nerves and watched, practically in slow motion, as it slipped under the goalie's leg, barely scraping past it before he would have managed to catch it.

Ilya didn't really believe it, though, that he had scored. Not until he caught sight of the bright red sign in his peripheral. His heart raced quicker but the weight on his chest loosened fractionally as he looked back at his bench, ignoring the disappointed expression the goalie was suddenly wearing.

The team were on their feet, nudges and pats coming from all of them as Ilya came back. "Easy peasy," he joked, even though they knew exactly how stressful that was for him.

How stressful the next minute would be, too.

"One more shooter," Desjourney reminded them before they could celebrate.

They all settled down, another wave of anxiety washing over the group as they watched the last player from the other team exit their bench. All it would take is one goal to send them into another shootout, with three new players each.

None of them wanted that.

Tugging off his gloves, Ilya clasped his bare hands under his chin, eyes narrowed as he refused to blink. "Please miss, please miss, please miss, please miss," he whispered under his breath, as if trying to manifest it. "Please miss, please miss, please miss…"

He was pretty sure his heart actually stopped the moment the puck was released, watching it soar towards their goal. His breath caught, watching their goalie lunge for it, enveloping the puck with his body as both hit the ice.

The team was on their feet in an instant, loud shouts ringing out, deafened by the rest of the arena's reactions. Shane wrapped Ilya in hug without thinking about it, squeezing him tightly for a moment before pulling away and hooking his arm around Vic, nearly tackling him to the ground.

"Jesus Christ, that was hell," Marlow exclaimed, scrubbing his face in relief as his heart rate plummeted now that they had finally won.

Kohn shoved him on the back. "Tell me about it," he murmured, letting out a relieved chuckle as his entire body began to feel lighter.

As they filed into their locker room a few moments later, they were still shell-shocked, just letting the win set in as they showered and shook off the stress of the evening.

Hammersmith had stayed behind to get checked by the team doctor, according to Desjourney's demands and by the time most of them were done washing up, he was also finishing his exam. The doctor had him tipping his head back, tugging as he eye and flashing a light towards it.

“Okay, ow, of course it hurts when you put that an inch from my face,” he complained, trying to shove the doctor’s arm away in protest.

Vic, who had been the first one out, furrowed his eyebrows as he watched from his cubby. Pulling his shirt on, he stepped closer to the bench and tugged Hammersmith’s hand as he resisted it.

“Suck it up, Smitty,” he insisted, keeping him from getting away from the doctor. “You need to make sure you’re not seriously hurt.”

“If I was seriously hurt, I’d be in the hospital,” Hammersmith retorted, barely accepting the medical attention as his other eye got examined. “I’m fine.”

“Or you could think you’re fine and then have a brain bleed and die in your bed tonight,” Carmichael retorted as he left the showers, a towel wrapped around his waist. “Wouldn’t that be inconveniencing for us?”

“For you?” he repeated, wrinkling his nose in annoyance. “Yeah, that’d suck. But believe me, if I die, I’d haunt your ass until you join me in the afterlife.”

Carmichael shrugged, rifling through his bag for his clean clothes. “Sounds like fun,” he remarked with an irritatingly polite smile. “You could trip the other team for us.”

Scoffing, Hammersmith reluctantly let the doctor finish examining his eyes and head, the lights still making it ache slightly. He still thought they were overreacting, though. He wasn’t feeling dizzy or nauseous or anything aside from a little peeved that they cared so much about the hit he took.

Others definitely had worse over the span of the season.

“Alright, looks like you’re just a bit shaken from the hit,” the doctor eventually told him, putting his penlight away. “You might have a headache for a few hours, but it shouldn’t last. If you’re still in pain by the time you go to bed tonight, call me.”

Hammersmith agreed, glad to finally be left alone. “You’ll tell coach I’m good?” he questioned.

The doctor nodded. “I’ll stop by his office and let him know.”

As he left, Kohn padded out, eyes flitting between his teammate and the doctor before putting the pieces together in his head. He knew if Smitty was actually injured, they would have pulled him from the bench entirely or spent longer examining him after the game.

“How’s your head?” Kohn wondered, ruffling his hair as he walked behind him to get his stuff.

“Still fine,” Hammersmith repeated yet again, slightly exasperated. “Next person to ask owes me money.”

He hummed, grabbing his pants from his bag. “That’s a pretty strange way to say *‘Thanks for being so concerned about me, Kohn. I appreciate you.’* but okay,” he teased. “Glad that hit didn’t knock your humor loose.”

“Did he have any in the first place?” Sebbin asked, running a towel over the top of his hair as he sat down on the bench to pat his arms dry. “Thought he was perpetually moody.”

“Hm, no, I think that’s mostly our Russians,” Vic noted, wrapping his watch back on his wrist.

“What about the Russians?” Kovalev asked, frowning as he walked back in.

“You’re moody,” Kohn told him, tipping his head towards his teammate. “That’s what Vic says about you guys.”

“Oh, hmf.” Kov shrugged, grabbing his stuff from his cubby.

Vic chuckled, dipping his head as he grabbed his phone, unlocking it to respond to a few texts he’d ignored during the game.

One by one the team finished showering, walking back towards their cubbies. They changed and gathered their stuff up at a pretty leisurely pace, banter still flowing. Shane struggled to partake in it, though, his mind still reeling.

He had made a habit of glancing at Kane every few seconds, trying and failing to look inconspicuous about it. He wanted to ask him about what he said when they were on the ice, but even over the clamor of the locker room, it was still too risky to mention his plans to propose with Ilya standing across from him.

“When did you even get this?” Ilya questioned, lifting Connors’ arm up and poking at the bruise on it as he winced in pain.

“Like, a few games ago, probably,” Connors assumed without a concrete answer. “I don’t know, I don’t keep track of all my bruises.” He got far too many for that.

“Fair enough,” he mumbled as he tugged his shirt on, head tipping to look around some of his teammates towards the door. “Think press is still out there?”

Connors followed his gaze before nodding. “Yeah, of course they are,” he replied. “They don’t leave until they’re sure we’re gone.”

It was a little frustrating for the team, but it might have actually made them feel bad sometimes, too. Not by much, considering their past experiences when they did give media a chance, but enough to pity them a little for struggling to do their jobs.

Ilya sighed dramatically. “I’ll be nice and give them a few words to cling to,” he decided, brushing past Connors. “Is the least I can do since they’ve been so good at leaving us alone recently.”

No doubt physically being removed from their presence by security had put them all on their best behavior for a while. He doubted that it would last, obviously, but in the meantime, he'd be nicer. It was a good game, after all. Even if he nearly had a nervous breakdown over it.

Shane watched Ilya make his way towards the door, leaving the commotion of the locker room.

As he faded from view, though, the entire room quieted down. Everyone paused what they were doing, staring directly at him.

Shane froze, mid text to Hayden with his fingers still on the keyboard as he looked around. "What?" he questioned weakly.

"Don't *'what'* us, Hollander," Dubek insisted, pointing at the door. "When were you going to tell us about your plans?"

He blinked, eyes drifting to Hammersmith. "He knows too?" he questioned, phone drifting to his side. Smitty nodded and he glanced around at the rest of them. "Wait- how many of you know about this?"

Pretty much everyone in the room raised their hands aside from Vic, Varkov, and Feller. He supposed that made sense, considering they had been on the ice with him for the most part and once they were back on the bench, Ilya was almost always there, too.

"In my defense, you said it was alright if they knew as long as Ilya doesn't figure it out!" Hammersmith stated quickly, hands up placatingly. "Which he won't, by the way. We all promise."

"Wh- well, yeah, but I didn't think everyone would find out before the game ended!" Shane exclaimed in surprise. "Jeez, guys. A little heads up would have been nice before Kane gave me a heart attack on the ice."

"Hold on, find out what?" Varkov questioned, furrowing his brows in confusion.

He hesitated, gesturing vaguely. "That I'm proposing to Ilya," he explained, figuring there was no reason to keep it a secret anymore when nearly everyone knew.

"What!" Vic exclaimed from beside him, eyes popping out of his head. "Oh my God, congrats!"

Before Shane knew what was happening, his cubby-mate had wrapped his arms around him in a bear hug, patting him on the back. He huffed, lifting his arms to return the embrace for a moment or two.

"Awe, our cap is getting married?" Feller wondered, feeling a strange pang of nostalgia, remembering when he and Roz first met several years ago. "I can't believe it."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know I have a ring or that I'm even planning to ask him so you guys can't say anything," Shane insisted firmly. "I want him to *actually* be surprised."

“Hey, we played it off fine all night, didn’t we?” Kohn questioned, motioning around the group. “When are you asking him, anyway? Soon?”

“I- probably, I don’t know,” he admitted, shrugging. “I’ve been trying to ask for like a week, but I can’t really figure out when or how to do it.”

But now that they knew, he’d have to manage it a bit quicker than he intended. Even if they kept it quiet all night, there was still a chance that a lingering glare or out of place question would make Ilya suspicious. Vic was notorious for hating to lie, too. And having everyone hide this didn’t feel right.

“Ooh, I know!” Kane exclaimed. “We could all not show up for practice so it’s just the two of you and you can propose on skates”.

Shane wrinkled his nose. “I think you just want out of practice,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Why don’t you go to the beach or something? That’s a pretty place to propose,” Kovalev suggested.

“Too public,” he stated. “Besides, we barely get a day off and I couldn’t drag him out of the house without him getting suspicious.”

“You know, if you want to really catch him off guard, you should ask when it’s the least planned moment possible,” Marlow noted. “When you’re not dressed nicely or going anywhere. Just at home where it’s personal.”

Shane hummed, sort of seeing his point. “I think if he—”

Before he could finish his thought, the door opened again and Ilya walked back in. It felt like a play or something with how quickly everyone began to fake different conversations to pretend nothing had happened while he was gone.

Voices overlapped until the room was just as loud as it had been when he left and no one even looked at him as he padded through the locker room. Vic had buried himself in his cubby beside Shane, pretending to be busy, and Varkov became very intensely focused on tying his shoelaces, staring at them in his hands.

Ilya propped himself against Shane’s cubby, watching his boyfriend type out a text to Hayden that took far longer than he meant for it too. His head just blanked, seeing him walk in, and he forgot what he was even trying to text him about.

“Montreal win?” he questioned, arms folded as he peered over his shoulder.

“Uh- I don’t know yet, I was just asking him,” Shane replied, flipping his phone over in his cubby. “How was press?”

Ilya shrugged. “Nicer than usual,” he responded, unsure how to feel about it. “Told them it was a good effort by the team, yada yada, you know? They worry about you, Smitty,” he added, looking around for his teammate.

“Joy!” Hammersmith exclaimed sarcastically with a completely straight face. “Just what I always wanted, a group of reporters worrying about me when I’m not even injured.”

Scoffing, Ilya rested his head on the wood, watching Shane fondly as he finished packing up his stuff. There was something about methodical way he liked to organize which was strangely endearing to him. Then again, a lot of his boyfriend’s quirks were.

“You ready to head home?” he asked after a moment of simply staring at him. He was honestly a little shocked that no one else called him out for it.

He nodded, zipping his bag up. “Yeah, I got everything,” he responded, pointing towards Ilya’s cubby. “Grab your stuff and I’ll meet you in the car?”

Ilya nodded, well aware that even if they sometimes drove together, leaving in front of people wasn’t an option. He crossed the room, slinging his bag over his shoulder as Shane left.

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Later that night, Shane’s mind was glued to thoughts of nightstand where the ring he bought was hiding. Ilya had, he was pretty sure, no clue. The guys might have been a bit quick to hound him over the news, but they kept their word about acting normal. Or whatever their version of it was.

Now he was the only one struggling to keep it together, forcing himself to read the words on the page in front of him instead of staring at the drawer where the ring was hidden. It shouldn’t have been so damn difficult to pretend it didn’t exist.

“If I promise not to get crumbs everywhere, will you let me eat garlic bread in bed?” Ilya questioned, pulling on his sweatpants before bed.

He glanced up from his book, shaking his head. “No,” he replied immediately.

“Oh, so my word means nothing to you?” he retorted sarcastically, falling onto the bed with a large flop. He propped his chin on his palm, studying him for a moment. “What if I am super-duper careful? Like complete neat freak about it?”

Shane pulled his glasses off, setting them on the nightstand. “There will always be crumbs no matter what,” he insisted. “Just eat in the kitchen and then come to bed. Or get something that isn’t ridiculously messy instead. Have some salad.”

Ilya wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want salad,” he muttered, dramatically pushing himself up from the bed, torso stretching as he raised his hands over his head with a quiet hum.

He stared at him for a moment, the gentle way his abdomen softened when he dropped his arms, making his brain stop working for a few seconds. He realized, rather abruptly, that these were the kind of moments that had made him want to propose in the first place.

He loved the simplicity their lives occasionally granted them. He loved the way Ilya pouted over dinner and how he looked so quietly content on the drive home, nearly falling asleep and then utterly denying it.

It was everything in between the pressure and massive changes in their lives that he cared about because it always felt so steady.

“Come on, I’ll help you fix something,” Shane agreed, putting his bookmark in a page before closing it and setting it down.

Pleased, Ilya perked up immediately and was heading towards the kitchen with the expectation of his boyfriend following right behind. And he was, not including the brief moment he paused, waiting for Ilya to be out of sight before he grabbed the ring out of his nightstand.

Maybe Marlow was right. Maybe the best way to catch Ilya off guard was to propose when there was absolutely nothing special for him to catch onto. No flowers, no scenic location, just the truth.

Sliding the ring into his pocket, Shane followed him into the kitchen, where Ilya was already digging around, still hungry even after they stopped for a snack on the way home. Not that he could really blame him, after how exhausting the game had been.

“How about the pizza in the freezer?” Shane suggested, leaning on the counter, astutely aware of how the box in his pocket felt pressing against his leg.

“Mm, takes too long to preheat the oven,” he complained, closing the freezer with a dull thud and reopening the fridge a second time.

“But the garlic bread wouldn’t?” Shane questioned, not quite seeing the logic. He pointed at the third shelf. “There’s lasagna leftover from the other day.”

“Ah, knew there was something edible in here,” Ilya murmured, pulling it out.

“Lots of things are edible, you just don’t want any of them,” he retorted, teasing him gently as he tapped his fingers on the counter steadily.

“I am picky in my own way, you know this,” he reminded him, unwrapping the top of it. “Handpicked my curve, my skates, my boyfriend. I have very particular taste.”

He hummed, watching as Ilya put the dish in the microwave and pressed a few buttons on it. That definitely wasn’t how it was supposed to be reheated, but he kept his mouth shut, just letting him warm it up in whatever way he wanted to.

As it spun around, Ilya pulled out two forks, completely ignoring the part where he was supposed to ask if Shane was hungry because, well, he just figured he was. How could he not be, after that game?

“I think you mean you’re a diva,” Shane corrected. “But I kind of like that about you. Like a lot things, actually, if I haven’t mentioned it recently.”

Ilya tipped his head, the compliment inflating his ego more than hearing it from anyone else ever would. “Oh yeah? What things?” he joked, fishing for more praise.

He wet his bottom lip. “Like how peaceful you look when you’re asleep and how you mumble in Russian when you wake up. Your voice is nice when it’s deep and raspy,” he confessed, staring at him as his expression tipped from playful arrogance to something more tender.

Ilya cleared his throat quietly. “Wow, you are obsessed with me,” he teased, grabbing the food from the microwave.

Laughing weakly, Shane nodded. “Probably, yeah,” he whispered, reaching for the fork he’d been brought. “Truthfully, I- I didn’t think I’d ever have any of this, you know? I thought, with hockey, my career would keep me from ever finding anyone who could put up with me. I know it’s not easy for everyone.”

Even if he wasn’t obsessed with the game, he was still a little difficult for some people to tolerate. Struggling with social cues or lacking enthusiasm where others found it easy to indulge and partake made him feel like he was usually someone people *had* to deal with instead of *wanted* to be around.

Ilya paused, fork dug into the layers of the pan. “That is not true, моя любовь,” he assured him. “You are not something to put up with or try to change. Anyone who cannot see that is blind.”

“You think?” he muttered?”

Ilya nodded immediately. “I know,” he insisted. “But also, they should stay blind, because I don’t share well.”

Shane huffed, dipping his head slightly. He didn’t exactly share well, either. The thought of anyone else seeing or having Ilya the way he did had always sickened him to some extent, but it grew more and more the longer they were together. He hated to imagine a world in which someone else might honestly think they had a chance with him.

“See? That’s another thing I like,” he added. “You make me laugh, even when I’m having a bad day or I’m stressed out. You just…make it better. You make everything better. Including me.”

Ilya’s lips quirked at the sudden confession, how sweet his words were and raw honesty behind them. “You’re sentimental tonight,” he murmured fondly, reaching out to grab his hand, squeezing it. “You make me better too.”

Shane let out a small sigh, staring at their interlinked hands as Ilya stroked his thumb along the back of his knuckles. It felt so gentle and comforting. Natural in the kind of way only something that had to be kismet could.

“I’m really happy right now,” he admitted, looking back up. “And sometimes, when I think about the future, I get a little…I used to get anxious. I would worry about what I would have left after I retired. But now I have you. And I’m not scared anymore, because every time I think about the future, you’re always there.”

It happened in odd moments, usually in the early morning, when he'd suddenly see the rest of their lives flash before his eyes. Every moment of them teasing each other and holding hands until they were both much older and reminiscent of days like these ones.

"Of course I am there," Ilya promised without skipping a beat. "I want to be wherever you are, no matter what."

"I want that too," Shane breathed out weakly, feeling his heart pounding. "I want every morning and every night with you for the rest of our lives. And the- the dog you keep pestering me about. Maybe even kids, one day."

He was caught off guard by just how direct he was being, even though he probably shouldn't have been. Shane was always a planner. He liked to have things figured out, just like he figured out a way to move here and be together. Of course, he'd want to have their next ten years planned in his head.

"Dogs and kids sound nice," Ilya agreed earnestly, long forgetting about the food they had come all the way into the kitchen to make. "But we would probably have to do the whole wedding and marriage thing before considering it."

Shane swallowed harshly, his hand untangling from Ilya's reluctantly. "I've already considered it," he replied, reaching into his pocket slowly. "And I want it all, Ilya. I want everything with you."

He felt his hands trembling as he opened the small, blue box, setting it on the counter between them. Ilya's eyes immediately darted to it, his lips parting as he froze.

Shane had never felt so terrified in his entire life as he was at that moment, heart thumping in his chest so erratically he thought it might leap out on its own.

It felt like it already had, in some ways. Shane's heart was sitting on the counter, in a velvet box, waiting to be accepted or crushed.

"Shane—" he breathed, cutting himself off as the word left his throat, choked and startled.

"I know there's a million things to consider and I wouldn't blame you for not wanting to take this kind of risk," he swore, voice practically shaking. "But I love you, Ilya. And I want to be your husband *so badly*."

Maybe he should have said more but there were too many thoughts swelling in his mind to narrow it down, let alone verbalize them properly. He was half convinced Ilya wasn't even listening, just starting at the ring for the longest time before eventually look up with the softest eyes he'd ever seen from him.

Walking around the counter so briskly he nearly smacked into it, Ilya cupped Shane's face, pulling him into a kiss. He hummed, nerves subsiding slightly as he felt the strength and conviction of his grip.

Ilya tangled his hand in Shane's hair, keeping him impossibly close as every ridge of their bodies melted into each other. His heart was pounding, head still reeling at the thought of actually getting married.

Pulling away, Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's panting slightly. "There is no risk," he muttered, voice cracking. "*Nothing* in this world could keep me from marrying you."

Shane's throat worked before giving out in a relieved huff, burying his face against Ilya's neck. "Really?" he mumbled into his skin. "Is that a yes? You're saying yes?"

He nodded, stroking his hand over Shane's back. "Yes, I'm saying *yes*," he assured him, voice wet with emotion as he chuckled weakly. "I will be such a good husband, *I promise*."

Pulling back, he caught his lips in another kiss, dragging it out until they were both breathless and the fear had subsided. It was replaced by something unfathomably overjoyed that neither of them knew how to name or understand.

As Shane caught his breath, he reached for the box, pulling the ring out of it. Ilya's hand was already waiting, like he'd been anticipating this for a long time. He slid it onto his finger, the diamonds reflecting the lights above them in the kitchen.

"I know you can't really wear it, but I wanted you to have it," he confessed, running his thumb over the band. "I- I thought you could wear it with your moms cross, maybe. Unless you don't want to—"

"I want to," Ilya interjected, blinking back the cloudiness in his eyes, his attention torn between his fiancé and the beautiful ring. "Mama would be so happy to share. She'd love to know I have found someone worth keeping so close to my heart."

Shane let go of his hand to tangle his arms around him, leaning his head on Ilya's shoulder and squeezing him tightly as they tipped back and forth slightly. He had no idea how long they even stayed like that, wrapped in a tight embrace as reality sank in and their heart beats slowed against each other until they were beating in sync.

And honestly, he didn't really care to figure out, savoring every single second as he silently thanked Marlow for his suggestion. Nothing fancy, nothing scenic. Just them. And it was *perfect*.

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They were up a little late, the following day, having slept and woken up with deeply colored bruises along their torsos and thighs. Even their backs had some scratches that were bound to be noticed by their teammates.

"This is such bullshit," Ilya claimed, buckling his seatbelt and pulling his sunglasses out of the glovebox as the clock struck 7:50.

It was a little later than they were supposed to leave, but neither of them had heard the alarm going off, too tired to even remember they had set one.

“What, having to be up before noon?” Shane teased, double checking the rear-view mirror before pulling out of the driveway. “It’s sort of necessary.”

“No, having to practice the day after we get engaged,” he amended, sliding his glasses on. “We should have, like, celebratory day off or something.”

Shane’s lips quirked, mind flashing to about eight hours ago. “Pretty sure we celebrated last night,” he reminded him, reaching over to tug on the bottom of his shirt. “And if the team gives me shit for any of these marks, I’m blaming my fiancé for being incapable of not leaving bruises.”

“Ack, you are so easy to embarrass. Should just be glad I don’t leave them on more public parts of your body,” Ilya retorted with a huff, pausing for a moment turning to look at him. “Say it again.”

He furrowed his eyebrows, barely glancing at him as he merged lanes. “What, my fiancé?” he questioned, the words making something in his stomach flutter softly. “That’s what you are, now. My fiancé. And then soon enough you’ll be husband.”

Ilya hummed, leaning against the headrest and fussing with his necklace that now had his ring alongside his mother’s cross. “Fiancé…husband,” he repeated, voice filled with a wistful tone. “I didn’t think anything could sound better than boyfriend, but I was wrong.”

He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t imagined them both before. He had, pretty frequently. But there was something about actually hearing it that made it sound so much better.

There had always been these feeble, nonrealistic hopes in the back of his mind. But he never dared to believe it was possible, let alone something Shane wanted badly enough to actually ask, hell even insist on, the way he had last night. His mind, quite frankly, was still reeling a bit.

“I hope it’s, you know, the right ring and everything,” Shane muttered, catching sight of it in his peripheral. “I spent two hours at the shop picking it out with Marly, but I still wasn’t sure if it was ‘you enough’ or whatever.”

“It’s *perfect*,” he insisted, still looking at it closely as the diamonds caught the sunlight from the window. “I’ll have to tell Marly thanks for going with you. *And* kick his ass for being in on it and not telling me. Traitor.”

Shane chuckled, flipping the blinker on as he got back over another lane to take their exit. “He didn’t have a choice, I swore him to secrecy,” he stated. “I needed you to actually be surprised for once in your life.”

Ilya hummed weakly, tucking the ring back in his shirt. He knew his chain would have stay there exclusively from now on to keep press or fans from noticing it, which meant getting out of the habit of kissing his mama’s cross, too. He wasn’t quite sure how long it would take to stop doing, but he figured he better learn quickly.

“Well, I was. Thought we were just having lasagna, not committing to dying together,” Ilya noted, shrugging. “Not that it was bad timing. I liked it. Like thinking you’re stuck with me forever and ever.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Stuck?” he repeated with a huff. “And here I thought we’d have a partnership not a hostage situation.”

“It will be,” Ilya promised, reaching over the arm rest to put his hand on Shane’s leg. He squeezed it gently and added, “I think we’ll have long, happy marriage, yes? Like your parents, just miraculously learning to read each other’s minds and finish sentences in that way that is super cheesy but sort of adorable when they—”

“Oh my God,” Shane interjected, pressing on the breaks a little harshly as they stopped at a red light. “My parents.”

His face fell, eyes full of concern. “What about them?”

He turned his head towards him, realization dawning on him abruptly. “I didn’t tell them,” he confessed. “I completely forgot, I- shit, they’re gonna kill me.”

Ilya’s eyes widened. “What do you mean you didn’t tell them?” he repeated. “You bought and ring and proposed to me and never mentioned the plan to them?”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind!” Shane exclaimed in his own defense, pressing his foot against the gas peddle as the light turned green. “I was going to, after getting the ring that way it was real and I couldn’t freak out but then I panicked about actually asking you and—”

“Okay, okay, breathe,” Ilya demanded, patting his leg gently. “We call now. They’ll be thrilled, I’m sure. Yuna gets another person whose finances she can manage, and David gets a partner for game night who doesn’t flip the table, all great things, yes?”

He blew out a breath, managing a weak laugh as he saw Ilya pull his phone out. He couldn’t believe that his entire team knew but he forgot to mention to his parents that was making a life-long commitment.

They couldn’t be all that stunned by the news, he figured. He and Ilya had been together long enough that they knew there was no end in sight for either of them. But still, marriage was, well, big. Legally binding. A fight wouldn’t end it like they had in the past.

“Put it on speaker,” Shane insisted, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

Nodding, he held the phone up between them, propping his elbow on the arm rest as it rang.

After a few moments, David picked up. “Hey, kiddo,” he muttered. “How’re you doing?”

Shane frowned, glancing at Ilya. *‘Kiddo?’* he mouthed silently in confusion, watching his fiancé merely shrug.

“Pretty good. Very, actually, you?” Ilya wondered, his tone a bit too casual compared to the reason they actually called.

“Not bad,” David replied. “Sitting here doing my crossword but I’m stuck on two down. It says it’s *‘an Anise-flavored spirit commonly found in Greek bars’*. What is that, Pastis? It’s too many letters.”

“Ah, try Ouzo,” Ilya suggested. “Pastis is French spirit not Greek.”

“Ohh, one moment,” he mumbles, newspaper rustling as he filled in the blanks. “Aha, that gives me Pizza Hut as seven across, too. Thanks.”

“No problem,” he responded. “Is Yuna nearby? I’d love to say hi.”

“Yeah, she’s been into gardening lately and spends her morning with the bulbs…whatever that means,” David answered, setting down his paper and pen. “Give me a minute and I’ll pull her out of the soil for you.”

Ilya chuckled, nodding to himself. “No rush,” he assured him, hearing some shuffling on the other end of the line as David got up and went to get his wife.

He kept holding his phone up, tipping it back and forth with the rhythm of the car’s movement.

Shane turned to look at him again, still confused. “What the hell was that about?” he wondered. “Since when does my dad call you kiddo?”

“Since their last visit,” he replied with a shrug. “He sends me pictures of his crosswords since he found one that had a clue about Russian ‘pancakes’. Called Blini, by the way. Very good. I should make you some.”

Shane blinked a few times. “I- yeah, okay,” he agreed. “I like most of the stuff you make me from home.”

It was a little strange, having the guy he vehemently hid from his parents for long be so close with them. But it was also more than he ever hoped for out of the situation. If Ilya couldn’t have his own parents to love and protect him in all the ways Shane always took for granted, then the least he could have was Yuna and David, giving him as much support as possible.

“Alright, she’s covered in dirt, but I got her out of the ground,” David joked, putting his own phone on speaker between the two of them as she came into the house.

“Hi mom,” Shane called out. “How are your lilies doing?”

Yuna’s face contorted in surprise. “They’re fine, honey. A little stubborn,” she admitted, slightly confused as she turned to David. “I thought you said Ilya called?”

“I did,” Ilya assured her. “It’s both of us. We’re in the car, heading to practice.”

Well, they were nearly there, technically. But there was no rule that said they couldn’t sit in the car for a while once they turned in.

“And you made time for us, wow,” she noted. “How’s Boston? Weather getting better over there now that it’s Spring?”

Yuna pulled off her gardening hat and set it on the kitchen table as she went to rinse her hands. David, on the other hand, trailed behind her to keep the phone close, ensuring they could both hear their boys’.

“Pretty nice, yeah. The sun is out later,” Shane told her, pulling into the parking lot of the Raiders arena. “We didn’t really call to talk about the weather, though. We have something to tell you guys.”

“Oh?” David wondered curiously. “Is this about the rumors that management is firing people?”

Shane paused for a moment. “Uh- no, that’s a separate situation,” their son muttered, parking the car. “And you really don’t have to worry about it, guys. We’re handling it.”

He wasn’t surprised that they were keeping up with the news, but he hadn’t even seen any credible sources suggesting that kind of retribution, yet. How they found one was beyond him.

“It’s pretty hard not to worry when we hear you could be in a lot of trouble,” his mom confessed. “I support what you’re trying to do, just don’t let it burn you in the process, alright?”

She loved that he found a team who was willing to go to bat for their fans and stand up for what they thought was right, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t nerve-wracking to witness, too. Major league sports weren’t exactly known for appreciating when players spoke out against anything, especially not their own organization.

“We’ll be alright, Yuna, we swear,” Ilya assured her. “We have a bit of a- what is called? The stalling thing between two people?”

“Standoff?” Shane offered up, unbuckling his seat belt and turning to have more of a full conversation.

He snapped his fingers. “Yes, that,” he realized. “We have a standoff currently, but management will cave. They always do. In the meantime, we have much better news for you.”

“What kind of news?” David questioned, pulling out a chair for his wife at the table and then one for himself as well. “Are you coming to visit or something?”

Shane chuckled slightly. “During the off season, yeah, we’re planning on it,” he replied. “But that’s not the news, actually. It’s uh- well, I…asked Ilya to marry me,” he confessed. “…And he said yes.”

He found himself holding his breath for some reason, waiting for a reaction that was severely delayed as they stayed silent, presumably in shock. At least, he hoped it was shock. He’d be

disheartened if they thought he made a mistake or that they were moving too fast after not even living together for a full year.

“What?” Yuna asked eventually as if she had misheard, her tone stunned. “You proposed?”

“Last night,” Shane clarified. “I was going to tell you, but I got a little, you know, freaked out, and kind of forgot.”

“Yes, it was adorable,” Ilya added, head tilting slightly. “He actually thought I would say no, as if I could just scrounge up another handsome, talented, rich hockey player to support my reckless spending habits and look after my hair.”

Laughing as the joke broke up some of his nerves, he reached towards Ilya’s curls, fussing with them. “Oh, I’m being used, then? To keep the house clean and let you use my credit cards?”

“Pretty much,” Ilya replied. “But my plan failed slightly because you are cheapskate who insists on two for one deals and steals my parking pass every time you go somewhere. You make up for it with the curl wrangling and hat tricks.”

And about a hundred other little things that he couldn’t even begin to put into words, like making him feel wanted and loved, supporting him through the scary thoughts in his head, and bringing a light back into his life that he didn’t know how he lived without for so long.

“Glad I managed to prove myself,” Shane teased, leaning down to peck his lips quickly. He knew they were still in public but couldn’t help but take the minor risk.

“Does this mean we can look forward to being mom and dad, Ilya?” David wondered, hopefully, voice crackling through the phone as he shared an enthused look with his wife.

Ilya froze, blinking down at the call in his hands. “I- I mean yes, but you would want to be?” he questioned, caught off guard.

“Of course, sweetie,” Yuna responded without missing a beat. “You know you’re family already. Now, you’re just going to be…legally family.”

He beamed silently, not expecting their response or for it to make him feel so warm. “I have parents,” he muttered softly to Shane, who nodded, unable to keep his own lips from stretching into a wide smile as well.

He already had them, sure, and Yuna would never fully replace his mother, no matter how long he knew her. But he couldn’t deny how appealing it felt to just be wanted, to have someone call him their son and actually be proud to say it instead of spitting it out with disgust like his father had.

Shane nodded in reassurance. “You have a whole family,” he replied, taking his free hand and squeezing firmly.

His chest warmed, believing him whole-heartedly.

“Congratulations, you two,” David told them. “We’re both happy for you, your mom is just a little busy trying not to cry right now.”

“I’m okay,” she squeaked out unconvincingly, sniffling. “It’s the pollen from my garden.”

Alright, maybe it also had something to do with her baby boy admitting he was finally settling down and Ilya sounding so hesitantly overjoyed to call them his parents too. But she couldn’t be blamed for any of that. David’s eyes were misty too; he was just better at hiding it behind the deepness of his voice.

“Look, we’ll call you tonight and tell you everything, okay?” Shane suggested, glancing at the cars clock. “We’re kind of late to practice, though, and need to get inside before the team stages a walkout.”

Yuna laughed, her throat a bit wet with emotion. “Alright, honey,” she agreed with a nod she knew neither of them could see.

“We’ll talk later,” David muttered, adding, “Don’t exhaust yourself at practice. Oh! And good goal last night, Ilya. We were watching.”

Ilya had already known, having received a text from them on the way home, minutes after the game ended. But there was something about hearing it twice and having the pride in David’s voice come through so clearly that reinforced the comment for him.

“Thank you David…uh- dad?” he mumbled hesitantly. “Glad it ended in our favor.”

“We never had a doubt it wouldn’t, kiddo,” he replied earnestly. “Love you guys.”

“Love you too,” Shane muttered, ending the phone call as Ilya clutched his phone tightly in his palm.

He looked a bit stunned, to be honest. Maybe even emotional, in a way he was trying quite hard to disguise behind a normal smile.

“Was that alright?” he wondered quietly, scrunching his nose. “Didn’t sound weird to call him that?” Even if they said he could, it almost felt like overstepping. Like he didn’t deserve it.

Shane shook his head firmly. “Sounded perfect,” he assured him, giving his hand another squeeze before releasing it. “Come on, let’s get inside before they start to worry we might be dead.”

He had never actually slept in late, let alone missed practice before. For either team, technically. But he knew from stories Carmichael told him that once, when Ilya was two hours later, they all began calling and texting him to the point his phone fell on the nightstand from all the vibrations he missed.

Grabbing their bags and climbing out of the car, Shane and Ilya made their way into the arena. The locker rooms were empty, a quarter past ten and Ilya figured Marlow must have stepped up as alternate to lead warmups.

“I can tell the team, yes?” Ilya wondered, tugging his shirt off and grabbing his jersey off the hanger. “I mean, they will notice pretty quickly that there’s a ring on my necklace.”

Shane saw him gesture to the chain that was shifting subtly against his chest as he pulled on his jersey. “Definitely noticeable,” he murmured with a nod, still caught off guard in the best possible way each time he caught a glimpse of it.

Changing quickly, Shane laced his skates on and tugged Ilya towards the ice, afraid that one more minute away from it and their teammates might actually worry. There were already a few texts on their phones that they had missed while they were sitting in the car.

“There you are!” Carmichael exclaimed from across the ice, a stick in his hands as he tossed them up. “We were getting worried about you guys.”

“Yeah, thought about filing a missing persons report,” Connors added, skidding to a stop as they entered the rink, gliding over. “What happened, car wreck or something?”

“What? No, we’re fine,” Shane assured them in confusion.

“Really? Because the only reason either of you would miss practice is if you’re having emergency surgery,” Dubek assumed, motioning between them. “So, what happened? Why are you late?”

The other’s tilted their head, temporarily pausing their exercises to skate over and interrogate them. It wasn’t like they were late frequently enough to actually be worried, but it was just a little strange that both of them would miss warmups.

“Jeez, you’re acting we’re an hour late,” Ilya defended, shrugging. “It’s just a few minutes. We overslept, is all.”

Varkov raised an eyebrow. “Is all?” he repeated skeptically. “You just missed the alarms or something? Doesn’t Hollzy set like twelve?”

Ilya glanced at Shane for a moment. “Thirteen,” he corrected, shrugging. “But we were tired alright? Had a busy evening…is not every night that my boyfriend proposes.”

Their eyes widened immediately and a small shout of surprise escaped Sebbin’s mouth.

“You did it!?” Marlow questioned, partially excited and equally relieved.

Shane nodded, watching Ilya tug his chain back out of his jersey to show off the ring. Even though he had taken nearly opportunity to stare at it when Ilya wasn’t home, it still looked different next to his complexion. Prettier.

Kane threw his arms around Shanefrom the side, jumping up and down and down a bit, cutting up the ice. “Congratulations,” he exclaimed, shaking him around until he was probably dizzy.

“And thank you for asking him sooner rather than later,” Vic added, patting him on the shoulder. “I’ve got enough secrets to keep from the press without keeping things from my

own friend, too."

Ilya's head snapped between them and his fiancé. "Wait- they knew?" he questioned, sliding his ring back under his jersey. "You said you only told Marly!"

And he was already planning to grill him for every detail he missed when Shane was coming up with his plan to propose and shopping for the ring. Now, he'd have to interrogate the entire team for information.

"I- well, technically I only meant to tell Marlow," Shane defended, raising both hands. "But Hammersmith was hurt and I was trying to make him feel better and Sebbin was there, then they told pretty much everyone and…it wasn't like they weren't going to find out anyway!"

"Not the point, Shane!" he retorted, gesturing to his friends. "My team betrayed me; they lied straight to my face about the biggest thing to ever happen to me. They withheld key information that—"

"You would have rather we ruined his proposal by warning you?" Kovalev questioned, head tipped with a glare.

Ilya blinked. "No, I would have skinned for spoiling it," he stated firmly. "Is the principle of it, though. We are team and that means no more lying to *me specifically*, yes? Lie amongst yourselves all you want."

With a huff, Kohn nodded in agreement and gave him a mock salute.

"So, what's next?" Feller questioned, jaw balanced on the end of his stick. "Are you getting married at the house? Destination wedding over break? Ooh! Who get's to be your groomsmen?"

"And what do you want for wedding gifts?" Carmichael added. "Straight people get a lot of crockpots and baking dishes, but I don't think you guys actually cook enough for that. Wouldn't a pool table or something be cooler?"

"Roz wanted a dog!" Dubek suggested snapping his fingers.

"Woah, hold on!" Ilya insisted, waving their questions off. "Engagement was last night, remember? We have no plans for the actual marriage part yet and I don't think any of you can be groomsmen without getting jealous of each other."

If he did pick two or three of them, which he honestly wasn't sure he could, that still left everyone else to be upset over not being chosen. And he didn't want to deal with grumpy adults on his wedding day.

"I resent the insinuation that we'd be that petty; we all just want you to be happy," Varkov responded. "Но я понимаю, насколько сложны ваши чувства—в конце концов, я ведь тоже из России..."

Shane snorted, pressing his nose against Ilya's shoulder to hide his laugh as the others glared at Varkov in annoyance.

“Oh, seriously? You’re gonna play the Russia card?” Hammersmith wondered. “You aren’t automatically closer to him than us because you came from the same country. You’re from Irkutsk, for God’s sake. That’s like, what, three thousand miles away from Moscow?”

“He has a point,” Kovalev muttered, shrugging. “By your logic, he’d like me the best because I’m only from Saint Petersburg.”

“There is no logic involved in this conversation,” Ilya interjected, shaking his head. “I like all of you equally, except for when you’re slacking off like, oh, right now.” He pointed at the ice. “Practice, remember? Hockey? Our jobs?”

Marlow huffed, nodding in agreement. “C’mon, let’s get back to it,” he demanded, gesturing for them to get back in a line.

With a few grumbles, they eventually conceded, dropping the subject to get back to what they were doing. Even if warmups were a far more boring topic than weddings.

Shane lifted his face from Ilya’s shoulder, leaning his jaw on it instead. “You know, we could do it whenever,” he muttered quietly. “Get married, I mean. We don’t have to wait for break or anything…if you don’t want to.”

Ilya glanced at him, his lips already parted. “You want to marry me that quickly?” he teased fondly.

He shrugged, the soft raise of his shoulders slightly sheepish. “I’m not saying we have to, it’s just something to think about,” he suggested, pausing a moment before he left to join the others before they could complain about his getting *‘special privileges’* as they liked to joke.

Ilya stared at him, eyes flashing with something akin to realization. They really didn’t have to wait, now that he thought about it.

It was expected that they would, since most couples planned for a year or even longer. But their relationship never really went in typical order anyway and they already knew weren’t going to be able to have a very public wedding, which eliminated over half the hassle.

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The more Ilya thought about it, the more he wanted to be married sooner rather than later. They’d already gone through the hard parts of dating. More than a lot of couples faced, even during marriage.

He felt like, in a way, they deserved a quick, *easy* wedding. Something quiet, with just them, so they could avoid all the stress of planning.

“Can they not just accept my passport?” Ilya questioned, leaning over the kitchen sink to scrub some plates. “That’s legal identification for everything else.”

Shane shook his head, sitting behind his laptop on the other side of the counter. “It says social security specifically,” he declared.

“Well, I do not have one,” he reminded him. “Russians get SNILS.”

Shane hummed in confusion. “And I have a social insurance number because of Canada,” he mumbled, chewing on his bottom lip as he stared at the website. “That’s an extra digit that they probably won’t know what to do with.”

He rinsed a plate off, setting it in the dishwasher. “Leave it to the government to complicate something as simple as being in love,” he mumbled in annoyance.

“Yeah, two gay immigrants in love, remember?” Shane clarified, reaching for his phone. “I’m just going to call them. Someone must know how we get around it.”

“Mm, enjoy the waiting music,” he remarked, watching he copied the phone number at the bottom of the website.

Sliding off his seat and making his way towards the living room, Shane pressed call and sat down, staring at the wall as it rang. He listened to the automated machine, pressing the corresponding number to his current need, and waited while elevator music played.

Putting it on speaker, he raised his phone over his head, glancing back at Ilya. “If I have to listen to it, so do you,” he told him.

“Ack, is like torment for my ears,” Ilya muttered, wrinkling his nose as it played for several minutes.

When it eventually ended, Shane was quick to take the call off speaker. Quick to jump to his feet, too, pacing around the living room as he always did on the phone.

Ilya could hear the instant his fiancé’s voice shifted into what he considered his *‘cellphone voice’*, which he only used when making proper calls to companies and important people. It was higher, peppier. Annoying, really. But Ilya just focused on the dishes, much preferring the repetitive task to having to speak with some receptionist that talked too much.

Shane continued padding around the living room, explaining their situation, minus the details of their names. Ilya could see him nodding or shaking his head occasionally, even sometimes scrubbing his face.

After a few minutes, he walked back into the kitchen, hand covering the phone speaker. “She says we could replace the social security cards with an additional form of documentation,” he explained. “You have your birth certificate here, right?”

Ilya nodded. “I have it somewhere.”

He wasn’t quite sure where, honestly. It wasn’t something people, aside from the immigration office, ever needed. Sans his visa, he didn’t pay much attention to the document.

Shane pressed his phone back to his ear. “Yes, we both have those,” he told the receptionist. “That’ll work then, if we bring both? Alright, and what about um- sealing it?”

Ilya watched his face contort, growing a little antsy. They had been looking into ways to keep their document sealed in case the press ever got too pushy and tried to request records from either of them, but they didn't live in any of the few states that allowed confidential marriages.

"No, there's not any safety concerns behind it…no, neither of us have been married before…" Shane noted, answering her questions. "We uh- we just work in a very nosey profession and don't want people knowing about our marriage….uh huh…well it's not really- no ma'am…yes, it could potentially impact our careers…you will? Okay, yes…yes…thank you so much. Bye."

He hung up, setting his phone face down on the counter as he sat back down and turned his computer back on with a soft sigh. He knew the two of them took forever to get to the point where marriage was an option, but he really wasn't expecting the actual process to be so complicated.

"Well?" Ilya questioned. "Can they keep it com- confidu…*secret*?"

Shane nodded wearily, a tinge of relief mixed in. "Yeah, she's gonna to see what they can do about it," he replied. "It's usually only done for safety or legal reasons, but I think she might have realized who we are."

He hummed. "Not many Canadians and Russians trying to get married privately for publicity reasons," he assumed. "Doubt you could even find a straight pair of them in this city, let alone another two men."

Shane nodded, scrubbing his eyes slightly before he went back reading. "Yeah, probably not many of them."

As big as their city was, it wasn't hard to figure out who two people from their countries with large reputations were. And that, in a lot of ways, terrified him, because he had practically just admitted their relationship to a perfect stranger.

But he also knew there wasn't any way of getting married without at least an officiant finding out. And apparently a random receptionist, too.

"I have to hunt for that stupid certificate now, don't I?" Ilya questioned in slight annoyance.

He glanced up, nodding once. "Yeah, you'll need it," he replied, watching his fiancé tip his head back in annoyance. Huffing, he added, "We should also make sure we have everything they'll ask for on the license like our full names, address, birthdays, parents' names—"

"Even if they are dead?!" Ilya exclaimed in disbelief. "What could they possibly need all of this information for?"

"How would I know? I'm just trying to follow the instructions on the website," he retorted. "Oh, and she said that after we get the license, we can take it home with us, but we have to wait three days minimum to get married."

“There are so many stupid rules in this state,” Ilya muttered, wrinkling his nose. “Should just go get married by Elvis in Vegas. We play there next week anyway.”

Ilya rinsed the rest of the soap off his hands and dried them before starting the dishwasher. He didn’t actually want something as tacky as anything Vegas entailed, but if couples could manage to get married while they were drunk, then it would surely be easier than all the hoops they were jumping through currently.

Shane huffed a laugh, patting the seat beside him. “Not in a million years,” he shot down quickly. “Come here, there’s stuff we actually have to talk about for the license.”

He furrowed his brows, sliding into the chair beside him. “Like what?” he wondered, head tipped as he glared over Shane’s shoulder at the computer screen.

Shane pointed at one section of the list of requirements for the license. “It’s going to ask us about our last names,” he muttered. “And we have to write down what we them to be after, you know, we’re legally married. So…do you have a preference?”

Ilya blinked, caught off guard for reasons he couldn’t quite explain. It was only normal for a majority of straight couples to share a last name. Though, for legal and career careers, he thought it might not be a little confusing but also a tinge reckless.

“Having the same last name might be hard with hockey, right? I mean, one of us would still have to be called Rozanov or Hollander publicly,” he commented, running his fingertips over his bottom lip in contemplation. “We could hyphenate, maybe? Keep our names and still have a piece of each other?”

Shane nodded in agreement. “Hollander-Rozanov or Rozanov-Hollander?” he wondered, trying to figure out which one felt more natural.

They both sounded nice, if he was being honest. He adored the ring of hearing their names connected without any of the negative connotations of their feud attached.

“Rozanov-Hollander,” Ilya replied firmly. “I like having your name after; more good memories than mine has.”

Not to mention David and Yuna had it too. It was kind of like allowing their name to linger, while his was just snuck in there. He wanted to keep it as a reminder of his roots, his mother, maybe even his country, but not necessarily his home or his identity anymore.

“Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov-Hollander,” Shane mumbled with a crooked smile tugging at his lips. “I like it.”

“Me too,” he replied softly, closing his laptop for him. “That is everything, yes? We can hunt for my birth certificate now and go to city hall after. Ooh! Maybe get food on the way home? Cake or something to celebrate.”

“It’s not the actual marriage, just the paper letting us do it,” Shane reminded him, standing up. “And cake isn’t food, it’s dessert.”

“Eh, close enough.” Ilya shrugged. “I want chocolate.”

Chuckling, he bobbed in head in agreement. “Alright, alright, we’ll get our stuff and then run into the bakery,” he conceded.

Beaming, Ilya yanked him towards the bedroom where he figured the document had to be. That’s where he kept his passport, at least, and there were only so many places it could be lost in.

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Shane wandered into the team’s locker room a couple of days later, alone, his *and* Ilya’s bag slung over his shoulder. Dubek, Varkov, Carmichael, and Vic were already there, far from ready for their game.

But considering they were pretty early, his stomach didn’t *completely* lurch at the sight of Varkov lying on the floor with his sweatshirt under his head and Dubek sitting beside him, playing solitaire. He set Ilya’s bag down in his cubby and then dropped his own stuff next to Vic, who was putting up a few new pictures in addition to his regular ones.

“What’s with Varkov?” Shane asked, glancing at him.

Vic checked over his shoulder for a moment. “His new neighbors have a baby that’s keeping him up at night, apparently,” he replied quietly. “He was here before any of us, trying to get a nap in.”

“Weird place for it, but whatever works, I guess,” he noted, shrugging as he pulled his sports tape out of his bad.

Sitting down, he rolled up his pants, tearing off a long strand and trying to set his legs before the game. He pressed it against his shins, manipulating the flexible material to curve for maximum efficiency.

“Where’s Roz?” Carmichael questioned, looking up from the book he was reading. “He driving separate tonight?”

Shane shook his head. “He’s here too,” he replied. “Just upstairs talking to Byers and the owner.”

All of them, sans Varkov, who was still asleep, stared at him like he had lost his mind to mention something so important so off handedly.

“He’s with them now?” Carmichael clarified. “Discussing us?”

“I think so, yeah,” Shane assumed. “He said they just wanted to talk to him, though.”

“Fuck, well that’s never good,” Dubek muttered, the red six of hearts still in his hand as he forgot where he was even trying to put it. “It’s like one of those prison tactics to psychologically trick us.”

Shane furrowed his brows, finding it a bit odd how quickly they were thrown into disarray just because Ilya was talking to some people without them. Leaning over Varkov's sleeping form, he tapped on the black seven nearby, reminding Dubek where the card should go.

"I think that's a little dramatic," he responded, keeping his voice low as to not disturb their teammate. "They're probably just able to discuss things better without a large group around."

Vic made a sound of uncertainty, tipping his head from side to side. "Or they're trying convince Ilya to get us in line," he countered. "*Or* pin the blame on one of us so that person gets punished and the rest of us get quiet."

"Ilya wouldn't do that," Shane defended immediately. "You know he'd never sell anyone out."

"Well, duh, it's Roz. But they'll still try to make him," Carmichael remarked.

No one thought their captain would actually place the blame on anyone, but that didn't mean there weren't people who wanted him to. It was a lot easier to punish one or two players than a whole team.

Shane hummed weakly, unable to argue with him on that front. Instead, he just sighed, getting up and stepping over Varkov to sit with Dubek, who had lost focus in his game and was mostly just staring at the cards.

"Move the black seven to the red eight, Bek," he murmured over his shoulder. "And the Jack to the Queen. Draw."

Nodding along, they made a specifically individual game a two-person operation for a few minutes as other players wandered into the locker room alone or in small groups. Shane watched as news of Ilya's delay spread over and over to each new person, inciting the same comments and concerns each time.

Even Varkov, who eventually woke up when Kane tripped over the bench, had to be brought up to speed. And once he was, he threw in his own two cents that was a mix of English and Russian, but all confusion, either way.

Shane was half tempted to text Ilya, just for a timeline of some kind on this meeting of his. They still had a game, after all. This was feasibly some of the very worst timing possible to discuss, well, anything that wasn't the Admirals.

"I still don't understand what they're so uptight about," Kovalev admitted, shaking his head. "It's our arena, we should have the right to control how it's run as much as they do."

"We're here more than management, that's for damn sure," Feller agreed with a nod. "I think I've spent more hours here than I've spent anywhere else in the world."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Sebbin noted, leaning against the base of the wall he was sitting by, opening the bag he brought for dinner. "Most of us have. It's home."

It didn't feel like coming to work, most days. Even on the bad ones when they were tired or the weather nearly tore the doors off their cars. It was as comfortable for them as their own apartments or houses.

"They can't keep him much longer, can they?" Hammersmith wondered, checking his watch as he unhooked it from his wrist to set it by his stuff. "We play in less than an hour."

Shane shrugged. "I have no idea," he admitted apologetically.

He supposed as the fiancé, he was meant to just magically have a little bit more knowledge than they did about pretty much everything. But he didn't really. He was as clueless as the rest of them for most things.

Sebbin unwrapped the sandwich he got from the deli beside his house, pulling the bag of chips out and tossing them towards Kohn. "You like the barbeque, right?" he questioned.

Kohn nodded, catching the bag with his nondominant hand and opening them with a small *'pop'*. Before he even got a chip out, Marlow was turning and gesturing with his hand, wanting a few. Kohn huffed slightly and dumped a couple in his palm to share.

"You're a moocher, Marly," Kohn noted, tipping his head against the side of his cubby as he dropped a chip in his mouth.

"Those who never ask, never receive," he retorted, shrugging.

Scoffing, Kohn was about to reply when the door suddenly opened, and Ilya poked his head in.

They all turned to him, all immediately trying to ask the same questions they had been bouncing back and forth between each other in his absence. Which, admittedly, wasn't the best method, since none of their voices came across clearly with all the overlap.

Ilya waved them all off, trying to shush them. "I need Connors," he insisted, pointing at him and then back at the hallway. "Now. Come on."

Connors blinked, maneuvering through the mess of players to get to the door. "What's up?" he questioned, following Ilya out of the locker room just as quickly as he returned to it.

As the door shut behind them, they all stared at each other in silence for a moment. Wanting Ilya alone was understandable, as their captain. But randomly dragging one of them out was, well, not great for their already suspenseful atmosphere.

"We're so moving to Texas," Hammersmith muttered to himself, resting his head on the wall with a sigh.

"No, no, I can't do hot weather," Kovalev insisted, shaking his head vehemently. "Canada, New York, I'd even take Pittsburgh. I need snow in the winter, though. Heat waves in December are fundamentally wrong."

He wouldn't pretend to love shoveling the snow or fixing his tires every winter, but at least he was used to that. He could turn the heater up and get extra blankets out of the closet. What was there to do in summer in Texas? Sit in a pool of ice cubes all day?

Kane huffed at his teammates dramaticism. "Don't they have like a hundred snakes, too?" he wondered, practically shuddering. "They kill people who are just hiking or getting the mail?"

"One-hundred-and-five," Kohn replied, searching online. "Fourteen can kill you. And it also says there are eighteen types of scorpions, most of which don't kill you but can make your limbs go numb and oh, sometimes you have a seizure."

"Shit, I forgot about those things," Feller muttered with a wrinkled expression. "Sebbin and I saw one once in Dallas outside of the hotel. I swear the thing lunged at us."

They were literally running back inside, nearly tripping into each other to try to get away. Its tiny legs carried it so much quicker than they thought should have been possible and despite feeling genuine fear over the creature, the man behind the receptionist desk had laughed at them for their reactions.

"Okay, but it's Houston, guys," Dubek reminded them. "We wouldn't move to a fucking ranch or something. We'd be in apartments that are extremely high up and nearly impossible for those kinds of animals to get into."

"And Houston has nearly forty Michelin star restaurants," Shane recalled. "Kane, you'd love having new places to try."

He tipped his head in thought. "I guess I would," he agreed. "They had that really impressive gas station too that we went way out of our way to stop at? Buc-ees? They've gotta have one in Houston, too.

"That place was kind of cool," Vic admitted reluctantly. "I've never seen a gas station sell home décor and swimsuits at the same time."

Which was, frankly, a strange decision in his mind. It didn't make a lot of sense to have, what, one-hundred gas pumps? Or for a beaver to be the mascot, instead of something like a coyote or armadillo. But he still liked wandering around the place, for its absurdity if nothing else.

"Houston has a baseball team, too," Hammersmith noted. "I'm not saying we switch teams or anything, but Carmichael and I might be able to catch a game if the Red Sox play the Astro's at their own stadium."

"I still hate the hot weather," Kovalev muttered in disdain. "Is like Florida or that- that desert state with more cactus than people."

"Arizona?" Sebbin suggested with a garbled sound as he finished his sandwich. "Yeah, place is a like over seventy percent empty land or something, I think."

“They have air conditioning in Texas too,” Varkov reminded him. “We spend half our time at the rink or traveling, anyway. We could get used to the heat.”

His friend made a sound of annoyance but shrugged. “Maybe,” he said hesitantly, contemplating it. “I did like the barbeque we had in Dallas…”

He spent so long adapting to Boston that getting used to another city, another culture, another anything felt strange. Maybe even impossible. But he supposed as long as he wasn’t alone in stumbling around a new place, he could do it.

“We could handle Houston,” Kane stated as they all slowly came to terms with the possibility. “There’s worse places to move than somewhere with a great nightlife, good restaurants, and nice people.”

Carmichael nodded in agreement after a moment. “Yeah, we’d find a way to figure it out.”

Shane’s lips quirked as they discussed their situation. He had, essentially, just witnessed them mentally work through their uncertainty and accept something they weren’t fond of just to keep the team together.

He didn’t expect anything else from them, frankly, but he also knew that no matter how many good things they thought of, they didn’t really want to leave. They were coming to terms with the idea of necessity. Out of loyalty.

Shane was about to make a comment of his own when the door swung open again and Connors and Ilya walked back in. Everyone stared, staying silent this time. Like being quiet would get them answers faster than if they clamored for information.

“Well?” Shane eventually asked when no one else did. “What’d they want? What’s going on? Why’d you need Connors?”

“Needed his business brain for some stuff,” Ilya confessed. “We talked through the current numbers and some of the things we’ve been trying to change around here in more detail.”

“And?” Dubek questioned hesitantly, feeling himself start to hold his breath. “Are we moving or not?”

Ilya furrowed his brows, shaking his head. “We came to a mutual agreement that we’re going to stay in Boston for as long as *we* decide we want to,” he told them firmly. “No one moves.”

There was an uproar as some of them shouted in relief, reaching to pile on top of each other.

“Thank God,” Kovalev exclaimed in relief, shaking Varkov around. “Я мог бы умереть в Техасе—сам знаешь, я не создан для жары.”

“No snakes or scorpions!” Dubek cheered excitedly, tripping over Sebbin’s legs and falling into Hammersmith

Catching him instantly, as if it was a trust fall, Smitty hauled Dubek back up on his feet. He wrapped his arm around his shoulder, jostling him.

“No sending our families beaver themed birthday presents!” Sebbin added, leaping to his feet and pushing his way between them to be included in the excitement.

Ilya’s eyes widened, stepping around their celebration to join Shane, who was watching with folded arms and a bright smile. He didn’t look the slightest bit surprised by their reaction, oddly enough. He might have even looked a little enamored by it.

“I knew they’d be happy, but this is a little extreme,” he murmured quietly, leaning into him.

Not that he ever grew sick of seeing his team be overjoyed, but he just expected them to save it until after the game. They still had one to play, even if they weren’t dressed, yet.

Shane shrugged dramatically. “Just go with it,” he retorted, letting his arms fall to his sides as he saw Vic about to grab him.

With a laugh, he let himself be pulled into a hug, patting him on the back. Ilya watched them gravitate towards the middle of the room, clamoring over each other with relief and enthusiasm. Even Connors joined, despite looking slightly less understanding of the situation.

Leaning against the cubbies, he waited for their energy to subside and their jumping to stop.

When it did eventually settle, it was only because they seemed to realize they were missing details. They had been so elated to get to stay in Boston that they completely forgot to ask about everything else they were trying to get the arena to improve on.

“Wait- what about the rest of it?” Kohn asked, slightly out of breath, as he tightened his grip around Marlow’s shoulder so he could lean towards Ilya more. “Did you compromise?”

He practically scoffed, shaking his head. “Like Kovalev said before, we’re all or nothing people,” he replied. “Connors and I got them to agree to everything.”

Shane let out a slightly stunned huff of disbelief, feeling Vic jostle him around more. “All of it?” he double checked. “Even the ticket resales and vendor brands?”

He knew if they dropped everything they were upset over, the organization would have no problem keeping them around. But staying and getting them to agree to their demands was a whole other ball game that he felt a lot less confident about.

Ilya nodded. “We are now the only team in the league who doesn’t allow the resale of tickets anywhere but our own website,” he clarified. “*And* we now exclusively employ local sellers for all concessions.”

“Parking lot is reopening at the end of the month, as soon as they hire a few extra people to work extra entrances,” Connors added. “Lower prices for it, too.”

“How the hell did you convince them?” Carmichael questioned. “What, did you just yell in Russian until they gave you what you want to get you to stop or something?”

Ilya tipped his head. “Not far off, actually,” he deadpanned. “I’ll explain it later, though. After game, yes?”

Half of them looked like they had completely forgotten they even had a game about to start, so caught up in their personal drama. That probably wasn't the best thing to do as an athlete, but it was better they go into the faceoff with the knowledge that their demands had been met than worrying about losing their jobs and relocating.

If anything, they'd probably feel lighter on the ice than they had during the last few games. Including a pretty bad loss that, while not directly caused by stress, was definitely impacted by their outside lives.

"Ah, game time, right," Kohn remembered, unhooking his arms from around his teammates necks to grab his stuff.

"We're holding you to the rest of the story, though," Kovalev insisted, making his way back towards his cubby with his excitement leveled.

Ilya nodded in agreement, already knowing he'd be hard pressed to escape their questions. Maybe he could pin some of it on Conners, though, considering he understood the financial logistics a lot better.

Strapping on his padding, he could hear the commotion turning into softer conversation. Most of which was about the Admirals, he was pretty sure. Whether they thought Carter's recent injury was going to keep him on the bench tonight or not.

"I need a favor," Ilya murmured quietly to Marlow as he got ready. "You cannot freak or get excited, though."

He raised an eyebrow, the hushed tone immediately making him curious. "Alright," he agreed, of course. "What is it?"

Hesitating for a moment, he glanced over his shoulder at Shane. He was laughing about some comment Vic made, pointing towards the back of his jersey and shaking his head over it.

"We finished all the paperwork and waiting for our marriage to be legal and everything," he explained. "We're going to make it official tomorrow."

Marlow's eyes widened. "You're getting married tomorrow?" he questioned in shock. "Way to bury the fucking lead, Roz. Why didn't you tell any of us?"

He shushed him with his hand, trying to get him to keep his voice down. "We just don't want to make it a huge deal," he answered. "It's been, you know, long time coming and all that? We're just going to go to city hall and have it done quickly."

"Makes sense, I guess," Marlow noted.

At this point in their relationship, they probably just wanted to have the comfort of knowing their love was legally binding without bothering to make a fuss about flowers and cake. He could understand that, believe it or not.

"We were going to have some sort of celebration over break," Ilya added. "That way Shane's parents and the team can all get together or something. But for the actual legal part we need a

witness and I know it's last minute but since you're AC and one of my best friends…"

He trailed off, leaving the question open ended but Marlow knew exactly what he was asking and was already nodding in agreement. "What time do I need to be there and how formal should I dress?"

Letting out a small breath of relief, Ilya pulled his jersey over his head, curls bouncing. "Three pm on the dot," he replied. "Dress uh- somewhat nice but not overly fancy? Is government building but not an actual venue or anything. We're just doing slacks and button ups."

"Look handsome but not devilishly so, got it," Marlow remarked, patting him on the shoulder. "I'll be there."

He chuckled, tucking his engagement ring and mother's cross into his jersey. He felt the silver settle against his bare skin, cool and comforting as he reached for his skates and sat down to tug them on. There would be a story about management later and a wedding tomorrow, but for now, he planned to focus on one thing only, and that was beating New York.

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The following day, Ilya could see Shane fidgeting with his shirt in the mirror, slightly anxious. A lot anxious, actually. He knew him well enough, though, to know it wasn't the legal proceedings causing it. More so, the risk that was being married.

It meant having their relationship on a document. Even if it was sealed, it would still be there, in a file of other couples, their names printed together. That was a little frightening.

"Breathe," Ilya murmured, resting his jaw on Shane's shoulder. "Just a little ceremony, remember? We'll be home in time for dinner and Carolina's game."

He blew out a deep breath, nodding as he felt Ilya's chest press against his back. "You better not be trying to seduce me before we get married," he mumbled without any bite, lips fighting back a small smile.

Humming, he shook his head, letting his lips brush Shane's neck. "Me? Never," he replied sarcastically, kissing his pulse as it beat rapidly under his touch. "Just trying to get you to relax."

"Uh huh," Shane huffed, prying his hands off his waist and turning to him. "Seems more like you want me *excited*."

Not that he particularly minded, leaning into him and looking up slightly. Ilya's eyes had always been expressive. Good at bouncing between hardened when he was trying to pretend something wasn't clearly wrong and beautifully soft when he felt comfortable.

Ilya gasped dramatically. "You accuse me of doing something so uncouth?" he questioned. "I'm hurt that you could think so low of me."

Laughing, Shane's forehead creased in confusion. "Where'd you even learn what uncouth means?" he asked, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck. "Tell me it wasn't from one of my dad's crosswords."

He practically snorted, shaking his head. "From Kane after I put my elbows on the table at a fancy restaurant," he replied. "I do learn fun facts from David's crosswords, though. Did you know that guitar picks are actually called plectrums?" he wondered, sounding a little amazed. "I had no idea."

Grinning foolishly, Shane shrugged. "Had no clue," he claimed. "But I'm glad you find them interesting."

"Eh, they can be," he confessed. "Sort of depends on which paper they're in."

Shane's eyes sparkled, listening to him. Something about knowing he found joy in something so boring, as he used to put it, made his chest crack wide open.

After a moment longer, Shane reluctantly tore his arms away, breaking them apart with a sigh. "We have to get going," he reminded him, grabbing his wallet and car keys. "Being late to our own appointment would be a very bad way to start our marriage."

Nodding in agreement, Ilya grabbed his own identification, not really sure what exactly they would ask for at the actual ceremony. They had, in theory, done all the hard work already by getting the license and lobbying to seal it. He didn't quite understand what he was walking into otherwise, to be honest.

In the car, they kept the music low and the windows slightly rolled down. They had, if nothing else, picked a pretty day to go to city hall. The sun was out and the weather was nice. The parking lot wasn't terribly difficult to navigate, either, despite quite a few cars.

Even if it might not have been completely necessary, they both put their hats and sunglasses on, anyway, when they got out of the car. Just to be safe, they decided.

"Is place for mostly old people getting paper records and everyone who couldn't cut it in actual government positions, yes?" Ilya wondered as they walked up the steps. "Should be mostly empty."

No one, he hoped, would recognize or care about them.

Shane nodded, wishing for the same thing. "Marly said he'd be here, right?" he double checked, opening the door. "He knows we have an appointment at three? He can't be late."

"Relax, he's very punctual," he assured him, hand grazing his back as they walked inside. "Which way is for marriage?"

Shane shrugged, glancing around a bit at tall ceilings and wooden floors. He had never been inside city hall in Boston before and only ever once in Montreal. Considering there was a massive front desk a few feet away, he figured their options were to wander aimlessly or risk recognition and ask for directions.

“Stay here,” Shane murmured, his shoes clicking against the freshly cleaned panels. He leaned on the desk anxiously, waiting to be helped.

“What can I do for you?” the woman asked, glancing up from her computer.

“Uh- hi, yes, I was wondering where to go,” he replied vaguely, trying to skirt around the word marriage without really finding a way. “Go to- well, the…I have an appointment with an officiant at three,” he eventually spit out, hoping that was good enough.

“Oh, one floor up,” she told him, glancing around him, as if checking for another person and didn’t bat an eye when she saw another man. “There’s a few doors, so just take a seat in the hallways and wait for your names to be called.”

Shane nodded. “Thanks,” he mumbled, shooting Ilya a look and tipping his head towards the stairs.

It was almost like they had purposely designed the building to be as wide open and spacious as possible, making it nearly impossible to stay inconspicuous. They walked up the steps, both still looking around like lost penguins trying to gain their bearings.

Reaching the top of the winding staircase, Ilya wrinkled his nose. “Left hallway or right hallways?” he muttered, slightly lost.

“She just the hallway,” Shane complained, glancing down one that was mostly empty before looking in the other direction.

It had more people further down, most of whom were sitting. But even at a distance there was something familiar about the back of one woman’s head. The only woman, for that matter, in cluster of guys.

Shane reached for Ilya, gripping him harshly and tugging him closer as he pointed down the hallway.

“What?” Ilya questioned, squinting. “I don’t get it- oh my god? Is that your mother?”

He nodded skeptically, nearly positive. “Mom?” he called out in confusion, yanking Ilya with him down the hallway. “Dad? What the hell?”

Hearing his voice, Yuna turned, immediately standing up. “There you two are,” she remarked, wrapping her arms around him. “We were getting worried you’d miss your own wedding.”

“Hey kiddo,” David murmured, kissing the top of his head. “Big day, huh?’

That was putting it mildly, of course. But he really wasn’t sure what else could properly convey his emotions about his only son getting married. Stunned, proud, a bit misty eyed. He had spent half their plane ride handing his wife tissues, sneaking a few for himself every once in a while.

“I- yeah, big day,” Shane agreed in disbelief, feeling his mom cupping his face like she’d do when he was young and she wanted to look at him.

Ilya’s eyes flitted to his entire team, none of whom looked the slightest bit sheepish to be there. Some of them had already made themselves comfortable on the black waiting couch and others were standing or leaning on the wall. They were all dressed respectfully for the occasion, though, even wearing nice shoes instead of sneakers the way they usually did.

“What is everyone doing here?” Ilya asked Marlow. “I told you we would do something to include everyone later.”

“Don’t get upset or anything, but I realized last night that the guys really wouldn’t want to wait for break,” Marly explained. “And I knew Yuna and David wouldn’t want to miss this either so I called them and then they called Hayden and…yeah, here we all are. Sorry.”

Although, he didn’t look or sound the slightest bit apologetic for inviting everyone. In fact, he actually looked a little proud of himself for managing to get the whole team here before either of them arrived.

Shane huffed in disbelief, pulling away from his mom to shake Hayden slightly, as if he wasn’t real. “You just hopped on a plane or something?” he wondered in surprise.

Hayden nodded immediately. “I was on the same flight as your parents,” he retorted, tipping his head towards them. “There was no way in hell I’d miss you getting married.”

“None of us would,” Vic added, shaking his head. “You guys are too important.”

Ilya leaned on the arm of the couch, blowing out a deep breath and staring at Marlow. “This was a massive invasion of trust after I asked you to keep this quiet,” he stated, pausing for a moment as his eyes softened. “*Thank you.*”

Marly shrugged softly, nudging his leg with his shoe. “Figured it’s what you’d want,” he presumed.

It was, Ilya realized, even if they had thought, for publicity reasons, that it was too big of a risk to let anyone aside for a witness to come with them. He really did feel better having them there, like something about it made things right.

Shane sat down on the couch between his parents. “I can’t believe you guys flew all the way out here without telling me.”

“I can’t believe our baby boy decided to elope,” Yuna responded, her words mostly teasing but holding a slight edge of honesty.

“That’s- okay, I deserve that,” he replied earnestly, feeling her take his hand. “We just wanted to do it soon, you know? And we thought we’d keep it quiet and then do something to celebrate with everyone later, *properly*. Instead of in-between games. I mean we leave for Vegas tomorrow.”

“Our flight home leaves in the morning, too,” David assured him. “Hell, Hayden is going to California from the airport. Doesn’t mean we can’t be here for *today*.”

Nodding, he squeezed his mom’s hand. “Thanks for being here,” he murmured. “I know the flights are—”

“Nothing compared to the thought of missing this,” Yuna interjected firmly. “We’d have flown across the whole globe to be here without a second thought, if we had to.”

And Shane knew she meant that with every fiber of her being, too. They’d both proven time and time again that anything he wanted or needed, they would move heaven and Earth to give him.

“So, what’s the deal after this?” Dubek questioned, checking his watch. “I mean, there’s gonna be cake or something right? I don’t know if it’s legal not to have dessert.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “We got cake when we got the license,” he told them.

“You have to get cheesecake or cupcakes then,” Hayden suggested. “Some other form of dessert.”

He glanced at him, humming mildly. “We’ll see,” he commented, looking around them, towards his fiancé. “Shane? Food? Do you want to have everyone come home and eat?”

He looked up, shrugging. “We could,” he replied. “Since everyone bothered to come with us.”

Before they had the chance to elaborate on the tentative plan, a door a few feet away opened and man with salt and peppered hair stuck his head out. He glanced in both directions, spotting the rather large group and gesturing towards them all vaguely.

“Rozanov-Hollander?” Shane was on his feet quickly, reaching for Ilya to drag up upright from his leaning position. “This way,” he told them, tilting his head as he left the door open.

Yuna rushed to stand too, her eyes slightly widened. “Rozanov-Hollander?” she repeated. “You’re hyphenating?”

“Didn’t we mention that?” Shane wondered, glancing over his shoulder as they tried to hurry into the room. “Sorry, thought I told you guys!”

She huffed, reaching to take her husband’s arm as they followed the boy’s inside. She liked it, she thought. It fitted them quite well.

Entering the room, Shane felt his chest constricting nervously, the space small and intimate. And growing even smaller as pretty much everyone important to them filtered in. It was clearly more people than the officiant was used to, given his reaction, but he didn’t try to turn any of them away.

“I’m Henry Ricroft, I’ll be officiating the ceremony for the two of you today,” the man introduced, shaking their hands. “These are your friends and family?”

Ilya nods, glancing at his team and soon to be in-laws. “Yes, that’s our family,” he replied.

“Alright, well we keep things brief, usually. Twenty minutes give or take,” he explained. “Just a few vows and then we’ll legalize everything by signing your marriage license. You have that for me?”

“Uh- yeah, yes, right here,” Shane murmured, handing it to him with surprisingly steady hands despite his heart racing.

Taking it from him, Henry examined the page for a moment, ensuring everything was in order before setting it down on his desk. “Looks perfect,” he told them. “Now, if we can just make a little extra space here, we’ll get started.”

The Raiders clustered together on the other side of the room, with Yuna and David standing in front and Hayden nearby. She was, admittedly, already getting a bit tearful, gripping her husband’s arm even tighter to try to keep them from falling.

Shane turned to Ilya, reaching for his hands, needing to hold onto him before he fainted from how overwhelmed he felt. The officiant mumbled something, ensuring they were ready to start and reached for his book.

“Dearly beloved, friends and loved ones, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander,” he started, gesturing between them. “If at this time either of them has anything they’d like to say or tokens to exchange, we’d be honored to hear from them.”

Ilya inhaled sharply, trying to keep his tone steady, even as it grew emotional. “When we met, I had just been offered a chance at my dreams…but all it really felt like was a necessity. A way to escape my family and my home,” he confessed. “I was living in an abyss, alone, when you came along. You cleared up the darkness that I had made my sanctuary and became my new *family* and my permanent *home*.”

Shane’s mouth twisted, sniffling to try to keep from shedding tears. It took all his strength not to immediately fall into his arms and seek comfort in his embrace when he was being so vulnerable.

“You showed me love is scary but worth it in every way and all I have wanted to do, since realizing I loved you, is do it properly,” he went on. “I want to love you loudly and softly and steadily; in every way I know how to and that you deserve. And I will try constantly to be worth your love in return and earn your devotion because I know I am utterly incapable of living without you.”

Shane wet his lips, letting out a shaky breath. He wasn’t sure if he knew how to top that, honestly. Briefly letting his gaze settle on his parents, he could see his mom fighting away tears that he already expected her to cry and a weak laugh bubbled from his lips as he realized with astounding brutality that this was real. This was finally happening.

Turning back to Ilya, he gave his hands another squeeze, trying to convey everything he was struggling with. “You’ve given me a type of love that I never thought I would find.” He

swallowed harshly, looking down for a moment. “And you’ve given up so much to get where you are and be *who you are,* which is someone I’m so extremely grateful for and proud of.”

Yuna sniffled, her lips quivering as she leaned on husband, trying not to ruin their moment with her mess of feelings. David ran his thumb over her knuckles, letting her wipe her cheek on the side of his shoulder.

Ilya’s lips quirked. “моя любовь,” he mouthed, tightening his grip on his hands.

Shane cleared his throat slightly. “My Russian is probably a mess right now, but so is my mind, so if I screw up, just let me,” he pleaded, trying to focus. “Я хочу, чтобы ты знал: я никогда не перестану тебя любить. Любить тебя целиком, таким, какой ты есть. И твой свет, и твою тьму. Красоту, унаследованную от мамы, и стойкость, доставшуюся от папы. Я сделаю так, чтобы отъезд из России оказался не напрасным—каждым днем, когда я смогу тебя любить.”

Ilya blinked back tears, his throat feeling tight and his chest aching with love. He had never in his life even contemplated crying in front of anyone who wasn’t Shane and once, very briefly, Marlow. But he was struggling to help himself now.

“You did not mess up,” he whispered, voice cracking as he dropped his head, a choked sob managing to escape before he collected himself to raise his gaze. “You are *perfect*.”

Glancing towards their family, he saw Kovalev crying quietly, without acknowledging the streaks running down his cheeks. Varkov was close to them, too, so his pronunciation must have been alright, at least.

Feeling Ilya pull his hands back, Shane’s face contorted in confusion. He watched through bleary eyes as he pulled out a second ring, similar to the one he wore around his neck.

It was like Shane’s hand moved itself, offering it up without realizing it. “You got me a ring?” he mumbled, momentarily broken out of his emotions to be stunned once again by the man he thought would finally stop catching him off guard.

Nodding, Ilya slid it on with ease.

“Now, do you take Shane Hollander as you lawfully wed husband, to love and honor him above all others?” the officiant asked.

“I do,” Ilya said as firmly as his voice would allow.

“Do you take Ilya Rozanov as you lawfully wed husband, to love and honor him above all others?”

Shane tipped his head. “I do.”

“Repeat after me—I, Ilya Rozanov, take you Shane Hollander, to be my husband—”

“I’m sorry, can you just give me the book?” Ilya interjected, reaching for it. “My brain is too fuzzy to remember all of it.”

“Oh, okay, sure,” he muttered, passing it to him. “From that part.” He pointed to the specific lines.

Ilya wiped his eyes, trying to read through the blurriness. “I, Ilya Rozanov, take you Shane Hollander, to be my husband, best friend, and confidant, to have and to hold from this day forwards, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

Shane barely bit back a laugh, watching him hand the book back and recapture their hands tightly. He could practically envision teasing him over it later tonight and for many years to come, which only made it harder to fight back his own tears.

“I, Shane Hollander, take you Ilya Rozanov, to be my husband, best friend, and confidant, to have and to hold from this day forwards, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

“Then, by the power vested in my by the state of Massachusetts, I now pronounce you married,” the officiant proclaimed. “You may now kiss your husband.”

Ilya didn’t even wait for him to finish, already reaching for the back of Shane’s neck, pulling him forward to kiss him. Shane leaned into him, seeking every ounce of comfort he was denied while listening to his new husband’s agonizingly beautiful vows.

Gripping his arm with one hand and cupping his face with the other, Shane kissed him back. His heart raced but he felt steadier than he had all morning, the warmth of Ilya’s body settling every scary thought and fear in his mind.

He heard a full-blown sob somewhere in the back and could only assume it must have been his mother’s weeping, now that she couldn’t interrupt the actual ceremony. Pulling back, Shane leaned back up for one extra kiss, brief and soft. Ilya’s lips tugged into a broad smile, wrapping his arms all the way around him in a tight hug.

“Муж,” Ilya murmured to him, burying his face in his neck. “Муж…Муж…Муж.”

Shane nodded against him, eventually breaking away from him. That’s the best word I’ve ever heard in Russian,” he confessed, a laugh leaving his throat as it loosened.

Gently pushing their marriage license towards them, the officiant offered them a pen. “Just sign on the lines and you’ll be legally married.” Taking the pen, Shane jotted his name down first, passing it to Ilya who did the same. “Congratulations, Mr. Rozanoz-Hollander,” he told him, shaking his hand again.

Before he could even thank the man, Kane had come out of nowhere, his endless supply of energy omnipresent as he jumped on his friend with an excited cheer. “Congrats Rozy,” he exclaimed, squeezing him tightly.

Stumbling forward, he let out a quiet huff, trying to steady himself as everyone nearly tackled the two of them. He should have known better than to believe they’d actually behave the

entire time. Making it through the ceremony without disrupting them was as much politeness as they could muster.

Yuna wrapped her arms around her son, holding onto him firmly as she tried to get a grip on her emotions. “I’m so happy for you hon,” she whispered, pulling back to wipe some of his own tears with her thumb gently.

All she ever wanted was for him to find someone who fully loved and accepted him for who he was. It had been her most hidden, petrifying fear that someday his loneliness or need to feel like he was fitting in would lead him to marry the wrong person. Someone who saw him as a hockey player or wallet instead of properly appreciating him.

She truly didn’t realize how heavy that weight had grown until she heard Ilya’s vows and knew, without a doubt, that they really were soulmates, the way her son once claimed over the phone late at night when he was explaining why he proposed in the first place.

“You’re married!” Varkov remarked in disbelief, patting Ilya on the back. “I can’t believe my captain is finally a husband.”

“Yeah, Shane’s been upgraded to your Canadian husband now,” Kohn noted, nudging Shane gently. “Congrats.”

“Thanks,” he huffed. “I’m still not helping him in trivia.”

“How’s it feel, Ilya?” Hayden questioned curiously. “Are you getting the sudden urge to adopt a bunch of kids and be a homebody?”

Ilya shook his head. “Not quite,” he replied. “Not *yet* anyway. Maybe sometime in the future we will have one or two. Not a hoard like yours, though.”

It wasn’t something him and Shane overtly discussed terribly often, but he knew it was something they had considered with rather positive feelings towards the subject.

“Ooh! I call dibs on being godfather!” Marlow declared before anyone could beat him to it. “I’d spoil the hell of a baby Rozanov-Hollander.”

Yuna chuckled, the last of her tears turning into laughter as she leaned into her son and whispered, “They’re very enthusiastic.”

Shane just nodded, like he hadn’t expected any different. Of course, they would have shown up. Of course, they’d cry like he and Ilya did. He didn’t know why he ever thought they’d get away with not having them here, let alone want that in the first place.

“Enough of the mushy, please,” Ilya insisted, waving them away with his hand. “We’re finished with it. Let’s never speak of anything said here, unless it’s Shane’s vows you want to talk about.”

“Alright, fine, we’ll pretend you’re a complete hard ass like usual,” Carmichael assured him. “But we are going back to the house with you. We brought gifts.”

“More?!” he exclaimed, eyes widening. “You already gave us housewarming.”

And contrary to what they believed, he had kept the plants alive. Well, Shane did. But they were married now, so their plants belonged to both of them and Ilya could take credit for the way they were thriving.

“Yeah, but this is a completely different occasion,” Hammersmith clarified. “And there’s no crockpot, I swear. We talked him out of it.”

Laughing, Ilya pushed them towards the door, not trying to take up any more of the officiants’ time. They filed out one by one, heading back down the hallway and ridiculously tall staircase towards their cars.

He supposed this now meant they needed a way to feed so many people and since they were supposed to be on a flight to Nevada in the morning, their kitchen was more baren than Old Mother Hubbard.

Nudging Shane’s shoulder, Ilya leaned into him, their elbows brushing. “Do you want to stop at that place that does the baby churros?” he wondered. “Hayden insists we need dessert to celebrate, and I think the team might starve if we don’t get food, too.”

He nodded, watching as everyone had slightly diverted paths to head to their own cars. “Yes, but only because I like hearing you try to pronounce that word.”

Ilya crinkled his forehead. “Churros?” he repeated in confusion, listening to his pronunciation. “*Churros*. I say it right?”

Shane bit back a laugh, not elaborating on what type of mistake he made, in case he learned to correct it. Instead, he just slowed his pace slightly, falling in step with his parents and Hayden. He already knew his parents would be coming with them, probably having taken a taxi from the airport directly to city hall.

“Hayd, are you squeezing in between my parents or grabbing a ride with one of the others?” Shane wondered, absently running his thumb over the wedding band on his ring finger.

He shrugged. “I’m nimble enough to squeeze, if they don’t mind,” he replied.

Yuna wrapped her arm around his shoulder, patting it gently. “Of course not.”

Hayden had been, for a long time, the closest thing to a second child as she got. He came over for dinner, sat at Shane’s bedside when he was injured, remembered all of their birthdays and always brought gifts.

When her son told her, reluctantly, that they were no longer speaking for a period of time, she’d been more than a little disappointed. Not to mention concerned about what could have transpired since neither of them had ever fully explained. To say she was relieved now, though, that whatever happened was over, was an understatement.

David gently took Ilya’s shoulder as Shane unlocked the car, pulling his aside. “There was a lot going on in there,” he muttered quietly, hands shoved in his pockets.

He nodded, slightly apologetic. “The guys get a little rowdy,” he murmured. “I’m sorry if it wasn’t—”

“No, no, it was beautiful, really. Enough to make a grown man weep, which I did,” he interrupted before Ilya could apologize. “I just wanted to say congratulations.”

Ilya blinked, hearing one of the car doors shut behind him. “Oh,” he whispered. “Thank you. I know it meant a lot to Shane that you were here and I- I appreciated it too.”

David’s lips tugged into a kind smile. “Anytime you need us, we’re just a phone call away; that’s what family is for,” he assured him. “And you’re family now, son.”

He had been quite sure, walking out of city hall, that he’d gotten himself together, but David’s words caused another warm ache in chest that he didn’t have time to fully dissect as Shane gestured in confusion towards them. Quickly blinking away whatever tears had formed, he got in the car, just shrugging off Shane’s question about what they were talking about.

“Just stuff,” he mumbled. “Don’t be such a nosey husband.”

Shane huffed, glancing at the ring on his hand as gripped the steering wheel. It caught the sunlight, the small row of diamonds sparkling as he pulled out of the parking lot, his other hand squeezing Ilya’s.

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Five in the morning was never a good time for Ilya to be doing anything but sleeping. And if he could have been slumbering, he would. Instead, he was up, reluctantly, watching Shane double check they hadn’t forgotten anything in their bags before driving to the airport in total darkness.

The only real bright side of having to be on a plane by six was that every other player on the team was equally exhausted. Even Kane. In fact, he might have actually looked even worse than Ilya, nearly tripping up the stairs of the plane.

“Ow,” he grumbled weakly, staying down as his knee hit the step.

It wasn’t the most uncomfortable he’d been at six in the morning, honestly. He could probably have closed his eyes right then and there if it wasn’t for his teammates, bugging him to get up.

Grabbing his arm, Connors pulled him back upright, patting his shoulder. “Come on champ, three more stairs and you can go back to bed,” he murmured, pushing him forward.

With a groan, Kane managed to haul himself the extra few steps, tossing his bag onto Feller’s lap and collapsing into the nearest free chair. Feller got up, pushing the bag into the overhead compartment properly before settling back down.

“Good to see he’s functioning well this morning,” he joked to Sebbin, who was already snacking on a bowl of fruit sitting on the square table in front of them.

He couldn't help but get hungry first thing in the morning and since the flights they took usually didn't serve breakfast until the sun came out, he'd eat anything he could find in the meantime.

Glancing over his shoulder as Kane's collapsed form, Sebbin nodded. "He made it to his own chair instead of sitting in someone's lap. That's very impressive," he muttered in agreement, stabbing another strawberry with his fork.

Boarding the plane, Ilya took Shane's bag from him. "I got it," he murmured, putting both away for him and closing the compartment once it was full. He leaned on the back of Feller's chair, bending down to ask, "Where is Kov?"

It wasn't hard to place every single player on the plane, from Hammersmith already asleep in the seat beside Kohn, to Dubek fighting his bag that didn't seem to want to go into the compartment, and Vic reading silently with his headphones on.

But Ilya didn't see Kovalev anywhere, yet, and it was a quarter until takeoff. Which meant he had a little less than fifteen minutes to magically appear, or else Ilya would be getting a very stern lecture from Desjourney on making sure his team was on time.

Feller yawned, covering his mouth. "Stuck in traffic," he stated, checking his phone. "Said he'd be here in six minutes."

"How the hell is there traffic at six in the morning?" Sebbin questioned, slightly perplexed. "And why didn't he leave earlier"

"What am I, his mother? I don't know what's going on his head," Feller replied with a shrug. "I think they're doing construction by his house right now. The roads are probably closed or something."

Ilya hummed, pointing at the phone. "Tell him he is cutting it close and that if he misses the plane I will stay behind too so I can personally kick his ass all the way to Vegas, yes?"

He blinked, nodding. "Sure, Roz," he murmured.

Tapping the back of his chair, Ilya padded towards the back of the plane where Shane was trying extremely hard not to fall asleep as stared out the dark window. The light from the airport and reflective jackets from ground crew kept his attention, even as his eyelids grew heavier.

Sitting beside him, Ilya yawned, resting his back and closing his eyes for a moment.

"You can't fall asleep yet," Shane told him, jostling him slightly.

He wrinkled his nose. "Why not?" he wondered, slightly peeved. "Kane and Hammersmith are asleep."

"They sleep through takeoff, though," his husband reminded him. "It always wakes you up but you've already power napped enough to keep you awake until nine or ten and you only

fall back asleep two hours before we land." He paused. "Then, you get woken up again by the landing, too," he added.

"Oh. That." Ilya sighed in annoyance, lifting his head enough to shake it, trying to keep himself from getting too comfortable.

If nothing else, he had to stay awake to make sure Kovalev showed up, he supposed. They would get to Vegas near noon, anyway, after five and a half hours. He could catch a good enough nap somewhere in between takeoff and landing.

The aisle over, Hammersmith had already started to snore, and Shane dropped his head on Ilya's shoulder wearily. He was, usually, the morning person between them, but he just couldn't force himself to feel wide awake today. He was too tired from the excitement of yesterday and the hours he and Ilya spent together after the team left and his parents and Hayden went to stay in Shane's apartment.

"Remind me why I like that man?" Shane muttered, staring at Hammersmith like he could use some magical force to get him to close his mouth and stop snoring. "I can't think of anything."

Humming, he reached for his hand, intertwining their fingers. "Mm, Brad is good hockey player, nice friend, very punctual which you like," he recited, blinking slowly. "And he gave us the cactus that just bos- blost- had flowers grow."

Laughing, Shane buried his face further against Ilya's shoulder. "Right, thanks, I won't tape his mouth shut, then."

"No, no, go ahead, please," Ilya gave him permission. "It would make the next five and half hours much more peaceful for all of us."

"Except him, I'm assuming," Desjourney commented, sneaking up from behind them.

Immediately, Ilya's eyes shot open, wide awake as he dropped Shane's hand. His husband leaned so far away from him that he actually hit himself on the window, scrunching his nose in a bit of pain as he rubbed the back of the head.

Their coach just glanced between them, head tilted as he waited for them to do or say something aside from acting like teenagers getting caught under the bleachers.

"Yes, coach?" Ilya questioned calmly, blinking away the rest of the sleep in his eyes. "Did you need something from one of us?"

Desjourney pointed at him specifically. "Just you," he clarified, crooking his finger as he beckoned for him to get up.

Nodding, he stood, head crouching slightly to make sure he didn't bang his head on the overhead compartments before making his way into the aisle. His coach tipped his head towards the back of the plane and Ilya got a sinking feeling that only ever arose when

Desjourney tried to make their conversations more private. He swore it was a psychological tactic.

As they neared the back of the plane, Ilya folded his arms slightly, his posture defensive before their conversation even began. “If this is about Hollander getting touchy that’s just what he does with everyone—”

“You honestly think I’m that fucking stupid?” Desjourney interjected, his accent sounding even thicker when paired with a pointed glare. “I know all about your relationship.”

He blinked harshly, head tipping forward in confusion. “I’m sorry, what?” he asked.

Coach waved him off. “Relax, no one on the team told me,” he assured him. He knew, by now, that none of his players would rat out the others, no matter what he offered or threatened.

“Then how did you…?” Ilya trailed off, not really wanting to technically confirm their marriage if Desjourney was only speculating.

“Well, for starters, I have eyes,” he explained, shrugging. “Shane Hollander randomly decides to approach us about a contract after being a lifelong Metro and you and him work together mysteriously well, reading each other’s plays the way you can with Marlow after a decade? That’s not because of sheer talent.”

Not to say they weren’t both gifted, because they were some of the best players he had ever seen, let alone worked with. But that kind of communication and chemistry didn’t come from watching each other on the screen all their lives. Neither did the immediate protectiveness they showed one another during games.

“O-okay, see, we never let our feelings impact our games, I swear,” Ilya prefaced, defending them. “I never let him win before he came to play for us and we’ve never carried our relationship into the rink in any way that would hurt the team—”

“Seriously, stop. I don’t care,” he stated, holding his hand up. “You like men, so what? It’s a free country. Hell, if every queer man plays the way you two do, point them out to me and I’ll sign them, too.”

“You…really don’t mind?” Ilya wondered in confusion.

He was expecting some kind of backlash, to be told not to let his sexuality get out or at the very least be scolded about mixing his personal life with his professional one. But Desjourney didn’t look mad. More like extremely indifferent and averse about actually having to discuss it.

“You brought a player who bleeds maple syrup down to Boston and we’re the closest to the cup we’ve been since 2014,” Desjourney reminded him. “I will wear a damn *‘love is love’* pin and keep this roster identical for the rest of my career if you all keep playing the way you have been.”

He hadn't changed it for a while now, with the exception of Hollander. And even though it earned him a lot of backlash not partaking in trades, he stuck with his decision.

Desjourney also gave the whole team a lot of leniencies compared to other coaches, despite what many believed. He didn't care how they practiced or if they skipped media. He didn't really even care about their whole moral crusade to help their fans, as long as they won.

"I don't understand," Ilya confessed. "I mean yes, we'll do our best, but…what did you want to talk about if not Shane?"

"Shane's fine. He's right there and I can see him with my own eyes. Great player and apparently a good partner if he's willing to pack up his entire life for you," he replied, pointing at him. "You know who I can't see? *Kovalev*. Where the hell is he?"

Desjourney gestured to the rest of the plane where everyone, aside from Kov, was either finishing putting their stuff away or already prepared for takeoff.

"Uh- traffic, coach," Ilya told him with a slight grimace, glancing at his watch. "He should be here soon."

"Call him, text him, I don't care if you send him a pigeon, just get him here before I have to leave one of my defensemen on the tarmac," he stated firmly. "Got it?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir," he replied, already reaching for his phone.

"Wonderful, glad we've had this talk," Desjourney murmured, patting his arm briefly.

His coach slipped past him, heading towards the cockpit, presumably to speak with the pilot. Ilya pressed his phone against his ear, hearing it ring as he walked back to his seat, heart still thumping in chest. He felt confused, surprised, and oddly relieved all at once, with no clue what to do with any of those emotions.

Sitting back down, Shane flashed him a worried expression and he just shook his head, not sure where to start. It was far too early to be dealing with this. Especially not the day after they got married.

The ringing on his phone stopped and Ilya perked up. "Kov Где—"

"Знаю, знаю, я опоздал. Не нужно на меня кричать—я и сам прекрасно это понимаю. Возле моего дома идут дорожные работы; я даже выехал пораньше, чтобы их объехать, но дорогу перекрыли. В конце концов, ни один нормальный человек не ездит никуда в пять утра. кроме меня, разумеется," Kovalev rambled. "В итоге я застрял и был вынужден свернуть на другую улицу, где попал в пробку из-за аварии. Разумеется, не моей. у меня нет ни малейшего желания снова разбить машину."

He blinked, scrubbing his forehead as he listened to him explain in far more detail than necessary. "Хорошо, но где ты?" he wondered.

Shane leaned in slightly, trying to hear his conversation a little bit better. Not that he could understand all, or even much of it when Kov had been talking faster than an auctioneer in

Tennessee.

“Уже подъезжаю к аэропорту,” Kovalev insisted. “Скоро буду.”

“Better be,” Ilya grumbled before hanging up.

He sighed, looking over the top of the chair in front of him, checking to make sure Desjourney hadn’t come back out of the cockpit yet. As long as he wasn’t in his own seat, listening to old game feeds through wired earbuds, then Kov might not have to face his wrath.

“What was that about?” Shane questioned, feeling more awake than before. “I only caught like three words.”

“He said traffic, detour, car accident that wasn’t his,” he responded, waving his hand dejectedly. “He rambles when he’s nervous, is all. Says he’s pulling into the airport. Check out the window, you’ll probably see him sprinting.”

Huffing, Shane glanced towards it, pushing the shade up all the way anyway. “Long conversation with coach over him,” he mused.

“Oh, that was over you, not Kov,” Ilya muttered. “Well, us, technically. Says he’s known we’re romantically involved for a while now.”

His head snapped back towards his husband. “What!?”

Hammersmith stirred across the aisle and he winced slightly, hoping not to wake him up. Even if his snoring was annoying.

“Mhm, said something about having eyes and seeing us work too well together to be strangers or enemies, I don’t know.” He shrugged, having been too stunned to fully listen. “He did say he doesn’t care as long as we keep winning, so…that’s good, I think.”

Shane blew out a slow breath, his gaze wide in shock. “Holy shit,” he whispered. “Not how I thought we’d come out to him.”

Not that he really envisioned doing it at all, for that matter. Desjourney didn’t ever really scream ‘ally’ to him. Maybe not an outright homophobe or anything, but definitely the kind of man to

“I kind of prefer it, actually,” Ilya admitted, reaching to recapture his hand again. “Better than having to make it some big deal, right?”

He nodded, squeezing his hand. “Yeah, I guess so,” he agreed, still trying to come to terms with what having their coach know about them really meant.

“Ooh! There he is!” Ilya exclaimed loudly. “I see Kov!”

Some of the others looked up from what they were doing. Vic set his book down and Feller switched seats to the other side of the plane to look out of the window. Connors closed his

laptop and Dubek leaned over his shoulder, too.

Shane glanced towards the tarmac where Kovalev was fully running, his grip on his bag deathly strong as it nearly dragged behind him.

“Wow, he’s fast,” Carmichael mumbled under his breath, watching him sprint towards the plane so quickly that some of the grounds control moved out of his way as to not be knocked over.

Hauling himself up the stairs, Kov was breathing heavily by the time he got onto the plane, shoulder slouched in exhaustion as his heart raced faster than it ever should at six in the morning. “Where’s…coach?” he panted, glancing around frantically.

Varkov pointed to the cockpit and Kovalev breathed a sigh of relief that only seemed to last a moment before he heard Desjourney’s voice.

Rushing to the nearest free seat, he dropped into it, sitting up straight. Beside him, Kohn smacked his travel bag, knocking it off his lap. Kov kicked it forward, hiding it under his chair as the door opened and Desjourney walked out with their pilot.

“We need to get to Vegas by twelve so we’re going to have to leave— Kovalev?” he questioned in confusion, spotting him.

He perked up, pointing to himself. “Yes, coach?”

Desjourney blinked, head tipping to the side. “When did you show up?” he asked.

Kovalev glanced and Kohn before looking back and shrugging. “Been here a while,” he replied, trying to hold in the urge to let his chest heave from how badly his chest burned. “Maybe you didn’t notice me.”

Their coach put his head in his hands for a moment, scrubbing it wearily. “Oh, it’s way too early for this bullshit,” he insisted, shaking his head as he raised his gaze back to the pilot. “We can leave now.”

The pilot nodded, giving Kovalev a strange glance but turning back around to return to the cockpit. Desjourney walked down the aisle, glaring at his players for a moment, but they just smiled back as he made his way to the other end of the plane. Sitting down in the very back, strapped his seatbelt on, pulling out his laptop to review some game footage.

Kovalev let out the heavy breath he’d been holding, panting heavily as he tried to catch his breath. The stewardesses pulled the doors shut and closed any overhead compartments left open, preparing for takeoff.

“What the hell, Kov?” Kohn asked, smacking his arm. “You were two seconds away from being stranded in Boston.”

He waved his friend off, nodding weakly. “I know, I know, I got everyone’s threatening messages,” he retorted, holding his hand up like a boy scout. “I promise I’ll never take Dobbsin again street as long as I live, alright?”

Feller shook his head, getting up and patting Kov on the shoulder as he passed him to secure Kane's seatbelt on him while he slept. Clicking it into place, he went back to his own seat doing the same.

They felt the plane shift, beginning to taxi, and Shane buckled his seatbelt on for a moment before taking Ilya's hand again. "Crisis averted, I guess," he mumbled, leaning his head on his shoulder once more.

He supposed since Desjourney knew, there was no reason to try to be overly cautious about it.

Ilya nodded. "Apparently," he mused. "Never thought we'd spend our honeymoon like this, did you?"

Shane hummed, unsure what he had really ever imagined in the first place. Maybe the cottage or a flight to some country that didn't care about hockey so they could hold hands anywhere. That had always sounded nice, but never really felt right. It wasn't who they were.

"Mm, we're surrounded by our friends, holding hands, about to destroy Vegas. That kind of sounds exactly like what I'd thought we'd be doing," Shane confessed earnestly.

Huffing a laugh, Ilya leaned down, kissing the top of his head. Their plane took off, the sudden acceleration doing little to wake Kane or Hammersmith from deep slumber. It was a little amusing to watch. The second they met altitude; however, his own eyes were quickly fluttering shut to get some rest as well.

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The boards jostled under the weight of Feller's shoulder as he slammed into it, immediately hitting the puck as hard as he could to the other side of the rink. It soared towards Carmichael, who would have caught it, if it wasn't for one of the other team's forwards knocking him out of the way.

He fell to the side, knocking his helmet against the wall before shaking it off. By the time he looked back up, Varkov was already shoving the guy who had hit him.

They tussled past Carmichael, whose head just followed their fight. The guy tried to punch his teammate and Varkov went for his stomach, arms around it to pin him against the boards.

The ref blew a sharp whistle, trying to yank them apart but as soon as Varkov let go of man, he was lunging for him again. Vic tried to intervene as one other team's players got a bit too close to Varkov's face for his liking, snapping at him as the ref attempted to keep them all on opposite sides.

Shane skated over to Carmichael. "You ever notice that our second periods tend to be much more violent than the first or third?" he questioned as they finally broke away from each, another shout carrying as the other team skate off, one player heading to the penalty box.

"Yes, actually," he agreed. "I'm pretty sure there's statistics about it online."

That wouldn't be overly shocking, Shane thought. People loved to analyze their games.

The ref kept the back of Varkov's jersey wrapped in his fist, guiding him towards the penalty box and he just mimicked the other player, using his hands for emphasis. Carmichael huffed a laugh, bumping his glove softly as he passed them.

As both players got sealed in their respective boxes, the rest of their teams set up to restart the game with two additional clocks added to keep track of their penalties.

"Faceoff?" Vic muttered to Shane, tipping his head curiously.

He shook his head. "Take it," he responded, gesturing to the circle.

Shrugging, Vic bent down for it and Shane stayed beside Carmichael, his eye on the ref's hand. The puck fell and his teammate lost it to the other team's captain. Shane broke away nearly instantly, trying to get it back before anyone else had time to react.

Vic and Feller, meanwhile, tried to keep the other forwards busy, making it a little easier for their teammates to race into the neutral zone and shortly after, into their own end zone. Shane outstretched his stick, attempting to grab the puck without accidently tripping the guy. The last thing they needed was to be down two players instead of just one.

Shane stayed in the man's way, keeping him from having a clean shot at their net. Pushing him against the boards, they slammed into it, and if he was paying more attention, he might have seen the fan behind the glass who flinched and leaned further back in her seat.

Feller skidded to a stop, inserting himself in the mess the two of them had gotten into, where their sticks were crossed in an attempt to keep each other from getting the puck. Maneuvering his stick between theirs, he slipped it right out.

"I'll take that," he said, flashing the other team's captain a bright smile. "Thanks."

Shane pulled away from the boards, following after Feller as they tried to get the disc back into Vegas's end zone. Passing into middle of the ice, Feller broke away, handing off the puck and slipping towards their bench.

Shane couldn't blame him, after some of the stunts, he'd pulled in the last two minutes to keep the puck in their possession. He had to be exhausted.

Kane slid over the rail, skates hitting the ice as he pushed off the toe of them to catch up.

Vic and Carmichael were in a decent place, each managing to keep, to an extent, the other team from getting too close. But there were only two of them and Carmichael hadn't been a defenseman since his junior league days, so one still slipped thought, heading towards their teammates.

"So…wanna share?" Kane commented, glancing at Shane as he saw the player approaching.

He shrugged. "Eh, sure," he replied, passing him the puck and slipping around Vegas's other forward before he could touch either of them.

The penalties ended without any interference and Varkov was released from the box a moment later. He practically knocked the ref down, too, leaving so fast the guy pinned himself against the wall to keep from getting bumped into.

Kane passed the puck through the cluster of other players, directly towards Vic, who had gotten tangled with a defenseman and the team's captain yet again.

He had to angle his stick to catch the puck before it hit their blades, a position where there were very few ways to move it with their skates physically blocking him off.

Hearing the impact of the disc, they both looked down, their own sticks hitting the ice in tandem to try to grab it. At such a strange angle they had to shift and the movement created enough of a gap to slip the puck in between their skates.

Vic hit the puck as hard as he could with the weak amount of leverage he had and their goalie reached for it, knocking it off his glove. As it bounced back, Kane slipped around the back of the neck, catching the ricochet and taking another shot that slid under the goalie's arm this time.

With the bright flare of their sign lighting up and the familiar sound of their music playing, the other team deflated while Vic smacked Kane on the head with his stick.

"Fuck ass play," he quipped fondly, whacking him again before letting up. "Don't put me in that kind of spot on purpose."

Kane huffed, helmet vibrating with the taps on it. "I just wanted to share the opportunity," he replied with a tone so fake he could barely keep it up before laughing. "An assist is still a point."

Varkov skidded up, bumping Vic on purpose. "I'm in the box for two minutes and you're trying to steal my job as a forward," he teased, shaking his head in mock disapproval. "Look, even Carmichael is so disappointed he's fleeing."

They glanced at Carmichael, who waved dramatically, skating back towards the bench in need of much deserved break. Ilya took his place, hopping over the railing and he watched his captain adapt to the new faceoff, centering himself in it.

Sitting down, he glanced at Dubek who had the iPad resting his lap. "You have the live game in front of you," he reminded him, gesturing to the rink. "Why the hell do you want to watch the broadcast instead?"

He shrugged, one side of a set of headphones pressed to his ear. "I like our commentators," he admitted, tipping it slightly and raising the volume so his teammate could hear it too.

'If you're just joining the game then I'm sorry to say you just missed a heck of a play here in Vegas,' one of them noted. *'The game is currently 3-1 in favor of the Raiders, with this latest goal scored by none other than one of their defensemen with the assist of* ***another*** *defenseman.'*

Carmichael hummed slightly, wondering his enthusiasm was genuine or that was a voice he forced himself to use. Must be exhausting if it was.

'This is exactly what we're talking about when we say the Raiders have been such a solid team this season. We don't just see their forwards scoring; they're utilizing the entire roster' the other stated proudly. *'When they're stuck in these kind of jams where the ice looks locked up, they still find a way to get through it using anyone available.'*

'I think that's where a lot of the other teams are lacking right now. They focus entirely on these positions being set in stone and their players just aren't adapting to the circumstances found in a fast-paced game like this,' remarked the first again, adding onto what was said. *'And that's something the Raiders have always, but especially this season, done extraordinarily well in. Every single person on the team is pulling their weight and that's ultimately what gets a team to the playoffs.'*

"I think you just like hearing them boast about the team, Bek," Carmichael mused, letting Dubek have the headphones back.

"Oh, like you're so miserable being praised?" he retorted, eyes flitting between the broadcast and live game.

Chuckling, Carmichael directed all of his attention back to the rink, where Ilya was getting body slammed. The boards shook and he must have missed exactly what happened to the puck because instead of continuing, the ref called it out of play.

Frowning, he leaned forward and watched as they reset with a fresh puck.

Shane was set up in the middle of the faceoff, head tucked and eyes focused as the ref dropped the puck. He went for it, knocking out of the circle in the first direction he could.

Varkov was closest, catching the puck and passing it to Ilya who skated it into the other team's end zone with everyone else close behind. One of Vegas's defensemen slotted himself between Ilya and net, the ice getting cluttered and goal becoming harder to reach.

He knocked the puck against the boards, watching their captain go after it as it slid around the back of the net where Vic was. He got slammed into harshly, managing to propel the disc a bit further before he was knocked into the boards.

Grabbing the puck, Shane shouted "Roz!" as he passed it back to his husband quickly, watching him take this shot this time around.

The puck slipped into the goal, lighting up their sign again.

Ilya blew out a short breath, tipping his head appreciatively towards Shane who returned it. He skated over, bumping his arm with his glove. "Needed that space, thanks," he murmured.

"No problem," he replied. "I'm grabbing water—be back in a bit."

Nodding, he shoved him away lightly, going back to the center of the rink for another faceoff.

Shane pushed the short door open, watching Hammersmith slide over the rail to take his place. He sat down beside Carmichael, immediately tugging his gloves off. Unstrapping his helmet, he reached for his water bottle, taking a long sip as he caught his breath.

“Jeez, don’t drown,” Carmichael joked, watching him chug.

Putting his water back down, he wiped the back of his mouth. “I swear the freshest filtered water any other day doesn’t come close to room temperature water during a game,” he said, shrugging. “What’s got Dubek looking like a toddler with a short attention span?”

Dubek heard and waved off the comment, head still down as he watched the broadcast. “You’re hilarious Hollzy,” he muttered dryly.

Huffing, he reached over and stole the iPad from his grasp, ignoring his protests to give it back. Dubek reached for it and Desjourney put his clipboard in between them, glaring at his player until he put his hand back in his lap.

“You’re supposed to use this for replays to check the game footage, not watch the broadcast,” Shane teased, shutting off the live feed for the game.

They didn’t need that when they were literally right in front of it, after all. He tapped on the replays that were caught by the cameras, checking their last goal to re-watch it. He could see, in much slower time, exactly why Ilya decided to slide the puck around the goal, when the angle shifted and showed the other team’s captain blocking the only potential weak point.

“It’s an iPad, there’s no right way to use it,” Dubek defended, peering over Carmichael to glance at the replay. “But yeah, that was a rough layout.”

“Everything they’re doing gives us a rough layout,” Carmichael noted, injecting himself into the conversation instead of letting himself be talked over. “They keep gridlocking us.”

“Not that it’s helping them,” Shane jeered quietly, raising his head.

The moment his head lifted, his eyes locked on Ilya, used to finding his number in an instant. But instead of seeing him skating towards the other team’s goal or stealing the puck away, Shane saw him getting slammed into the boards.

Instead of immediately pushing the player off of him or trying to start a fight, Ilya fell, his body hitting the ice in a split second.

Shane was on his feet immediately, the iPad falling from his grasp and clattering against the floor. The game stopped as the crowd became extremely quiet and the ref had the other team back up to give Ilya some space.

Lurching forward on instinct, Dubek grabbed Shane’s arm, holding him back from doing something foolish like running onto the ice. That would only make things worse, especially with cameras zooming in on Ilya.

Vic dropped his stick immediately and raced to his captain, kneeling beside him against the referee’s orders. He pulled off his glove, pressing his hand to Ilya’s shoulder gently and

shaking him slightly.

“He’s not moving,” Shane whispered, voice laced with terror. “Why isn’t he moving?”

“He probably just went down a little hard, he’s- he’ll get up,” Carmichael mumbled with unconvincing hope in his tone. “He *always* gets up.”

His eyes remained glued to the sight of his husband’s body, rolled on his side with his legs limp and his helmet knocked off. The moment he saw the medics coming onto the ice, he felt whatever was left of his restraint snapping.

“No, no, no, they can’t take him,” Shane insisted, shaking his head. “If they take him then he’s hurt and he can’t be hurt.”

He needed Ilya to get up—to shake his head and insult the player who knocked him down before coming back to the bench for a break. But he didn’t. He was entirely unmoving as Vic was pried away from him by a medic to give them space.

Behind him, Shane heard Desjourney blowing out a deep breath, pushing past his players to walk across the ice. They rolled Ilya onto his back, his arm lifelessly flailing to the side. Shane saw his face at last and the sight almost made it worse, noticing his closed eyes and relaxed lips.

There was no sign of consciousness whatsoever. Even when Shane had gotten injured, badly, he was still awake. He still remembered certain parts of being carried to the ambulance. But Ilya wasn’t even slurring his words or making sounds of pain. Just lying there.

Shane clutched the side of the railing, still feeling Dubek’s fingers prying into his arm to keep him where he was. Desjourney murmured something to one of the medics as the other knelt down, prying Ilya’s eye open to shine a light in it before checking the other.

After a brief moment, Desjouney nodded, letting them lift Ilya onto a stretcher. He crossed the ice again, scrubbing his hand over his face in a mix of worry and frustration.

“What hospital are they taking him to?” Shane demanded to know. “What did they say happened to him?”

His coach raised both hands, trying to calm him down. “His pulse is steady, but his pupils are heavily dilated and they’re going to take him to UMC to check his head,” he explained. “In the meantime, we’re going to substitute Marlow—”

“No,” Marly interrupted, shaking his head vehemently.

Shane just covered his mouth, trying to hide whatever horrified expression was threatening to overwhelm him while there was still camera coverage and twenty thousand people in the arena.

Desjourney blinked. “What do you mean no?”

“I mean no, *sir*,” he repeated firmly. “That’s my captain and I’ll be going to the hospital to make sure he’s alright.”

“I respect the loyalty, Marlow, but Ilya is unconscious,” he reminded them. “He’ll be getting CT scans, and you won’t see him for another hour anyway. We still have the end of the second and entirety of the third period to play.”

And there was a chance that even after the game ended, Ilya still wouldn’t be awake. If he was, he wouldn’t be allowed visitors.

“Then have someone else play it, because I’m not,” Marlow insisted, folding his arms.

Desjourney sighed. “Fine.” He gestured towards Sebbin.

“All due respect, I’d like to be there for Ilya as well,” Sebbin told him. “I can’t finish a game without him here.”

The ice crackled weakly as Hammersmith, Varkov, Vic, and Kane skated over. Shane watched as they all began pulling off their gloves off and unhooking their helmets, seemingly having decided amongst themselves that they weren’t playing, either.

“Coach, you can’t honestly expect us to go back out there when Roz is on his way to the hospital,” Varkov told him, tossing his stuff over the railing with little consideration for where it fell.

“Listen to me, you’re all good teammates for worrying, but if you don’t finish this game then they’ll consider it a forfeit,” Desjourney reminded them. “You are *up* 4-1 right now. You won’t even have fight for a win, just keep the other team from scoring.”

Everyone glanced at each other for a moment, not saying anything as their eyes flitted back and forth.

Eventually Conners turned to their coach. “Then we fucking forfeit,” he told him, shrugging.

Desjourney huffed, shaking his head weakly. “No, no, you don’t understand,” he claimed. “There hadn’t been a hockey game forfeited since 1955—”

“We know,” Kovalev clarified. “We just don’t care.”

Shane pushed past Desjourney, followed by the entire team, heading to take off their skates and leave the building. Behind them, there was an echo of commotion behind them as the crowd seemed to realize they weren’t putting anyone back on the ice, but none of them bothered to so much as look back.

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT! This chapter was 104k and Ao3 wouldn't let me post all of it because it went over character count, so the chapter you're (hopefully) about to click on was supposed to be included in this one, but I had to adjust it, lmao.

Chapter 4: Who We'll Always Be

Chapter Notes

> One more section!!! I'm so glad you guys have stuck with me, lol. Sorry again that this part couldn't be included in the other one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane didn't know long they waited for a taxi outside the arena, only that it felt like too long. The guys had, naturally, insisted he take the first one they managed to catch, shoving Vic, Marlow, and Connors into it with him so they could keep an eye on him.

Or rather, keep him from panicking in the back of the cab. Which was only a partially successful endeavor.

Shane kept scrunching the material on his knees, knuckles whitening before he would loosen his grip for a short moment and recapture it again. It didn't take a genius to know he was reimagining Ilya taking that hit over and over in his mind, mind stuck on the way he fell and the limp, lifeless look of his body when it landed on the ice.

He was so in his head that he didn't actually notice his phone ringing until Marlow softly nudged him, voice breaking through with a quiet murmur, "Your phone, Shane."

He looked up, then back down, trying to remember where he even put his phone. They had raced out of the arena so fast that his bag was still there, along with most things aside from the clothes he was wearing and his phone. He wasn't even sure if he remembered his wallet.

Finding it in one of his pockets after a moment, he answered the unknown number, pressing it to his ear. "Hello?" His eyebrows furrowed, then settled again with realization. "No, I- I know what happened to him, I was there I just couldn't be in the ambulance because I was- never mind, I'm on my way now, alright?"

A few more mumbles and Shane hung up the phone, dropping it into his lap.

Vic and Marlow stared at him. Even Connors turned from the front seat to look at him.

"Was that the hospital?" Connors wondered hesitantly.

Shane nodded. "I'm his emergency contact," he mumbled, pausing and pointing beside him. "Well, his first one. Marly is probably gonna get a call too."

"Did they say anything about his condition?" Vic asked, worry lacing his voice.

He shook his head. “No, she…she said that it’s too hard to tell right now but he’s being rushed to a CT scan, like coach predicted,” he relayed for them. “She won’t have an actual room for him until he’s out, but she said somewhere on floor eight.”

No one said anything in response and Connors turned to face the front again as Vic gently leaned on Shane’s arm. He sniffled weakly, trying to suppress it while in the presence of a strange cab driver.

They didn’t know enough yet, to truly feel anything specific aside from fear. But that was a pretty powerful motivator for tears, too.

As the taxi pulled up to the hospital, they piled out and Connors just passed the man a few hundred bucks out of his wallet, not wanting to do the math or wait for change. The doors opened for them automatically, the sterile smell of the space immediately making all four of them feel sick.

Marlow ushered everyone into the elevator that quickly took them to the eighth floor. It wasn’t terribly busy and he honestly might have thought that was worse, more anxiety inducing for Shane.

“I’ll find someone,” Vic insisted, heading towards the nurse’s desk. He doubted they could tell them much, yet, but he was pretty sure he could handle the lack of news a lot better than the others could.

Walking over to one of the several seating areas, they sat down. Shane immediately went back to trying to keep his hands busy while Connors stared intently at the conversation Vic was having with someone at reception.

Marlow leaned down, putting his head in his hands for a moment as a full moment of silence settled over him for the first time since seeing Ilya hit the ice so abruptly. He rubbed his eyes, trying to shake the image loose and struggling to see anything else behind his eyelids.

Shane’s phone rang again and he raised his eyes, watching him at least notice it this time. He didn’t pick up right away, though, just staring at the screen for a moment or two.

“Who is it?” Marlow rasped.

“My mom,” Shane mumbled, shaking his head gently. “I don’t know if I can- she’s gonna ask too many questions.”

Not in a cruel or malicious way. It was just what she did in a crisis. She evaluated, tried to understand it from every angle, and right now, Shane didn’t have any answers for her.

Even if she didn’t plague him with questions, he wasn’t sure he could hear her voice trying to comfort him without breaking into the same tears he was working incredibly hard to keep at bay currently.

“I’ve got it,” Connors assured him, taking the phone from him and standing to take Yuna’s call on his behalf. “Hi Mrs. Hollander.”

On the other line, Yuna blinked in confusion. “Hi? Who is this? Kohn?” she asked, unable to place the voice right away, only knowing it wasn’t her sons’.

“Connors, ma’am,” he amended politely, taking a few steps into the hallways. “Shane is near me, but he wasn’t sure he could answer right now. Things are a little…hectic.”

He brushed past Vic, who was still speaking with a nurse, but looked up long enough to point at the phone. Connors covered the speaker for a quick second, whispering Yuna’s name before turning away.

“David and I were watching the game, we saw what happened to Ilya,” she explained, sounding equally concerned as everyone else felt. “They cut to commercial but now they’re saying the game ended, that Vegas won. Is that true?”

“Yes, ma’am, we forfeited the game,” he clarified.

“Forfeited?” David repeated, as if he had misheard him. “I thought you couldn’t do that.”

“It’s more like no one really does,” Connors responded. “Not usually, anyway.”

Not since, as coach brutally reminded them, 1955. Of course, the situations were drastically different. The Richards riot resulted in over one hundred people being arrested for their behavior and this was, well, much simpler. They just wouldn’t play while their captain was injured to an unknown extent.

“Desjourney couldn’t have been happy about that,” he murmured.

“No, sir, he wasn’t,” Connors noted, shaking his head to himself. “But we couldn’t wait another hour to get to the hospital, so we left immediately. Some of us are here now but still haven’t seen Ilya.”

“How’s Shane doing?” Yuna asked with unease.

Connors peeked around the vending machine he’d planted himself by, looking at his friend bouncing his leg anxiously. He was staring at the ground, barely blinking his red rimmed eyes. Marlow had moved closer, though, muttering to him to try to keep him distracted.

“He’s uh- he’s alright, I think,” he told them hesitantly. “It’s hard not knowing what’s going on but we’re taking care of him.”

There was an audible sigh of relief on the other end. Two, actually, if he listened close enough.

“Thank you, Connors,” David replied. “You’ll tell him we love him? And that we’re here if he needs to text or call us for anything?”

“Of course,” he promised immediately.

“And Ilya?” David wondered. “You said there’s no news? Nothing you can tell us?”

“Not yet, I’m sorry,” Connors stated. “At the rink his pupils were dilated but he was unresponsive. We don’t know anything else.”

He was trying, really trying, to remind himself that no news was good news. That it meant the doctors were focused on Ilya and would get to informing the rest of them when there was a change. But it was *a lot* easier said than done.

“Please let us know,” he pleaded. “Whenever you find out anything about Ilya. And if Shane starts to worry just- please.”

“I promise,” Connors replied firmly, trying his absolute best to put their minds at ease when his own was a damn mess.

“There’s one more thing,” Yuna added, tone turning a little more solemn. “I don’t know if you’ve been online or seen the footage, but when they took Ilya away, his necklace slipped loose. I don’t know what people will think but if we saw his ring, everyone did.”

Connors let out a breath, scrubbing his forehead for a moment. “O-okay, thanks for letting me know,” he muttered. “I’ll…figure out a way to tell Shane.”

“Break it gently,” David suggested, even though he was well aware that it was easier said than done.

“I will,” he responded wearily.

Hanging up, Connors groaned weakly, banging his head against the vending machine for a moment or two. Ilya getting injured was already scary enough without throwing their marriage and the teams forfeit into the mix.

God, the media was going to have a fucking field day with them over this.

“You’re getting brain damage,” Vic commented dryly, sneaking up on him. “Or at the very least denting the machine.”

Connors jumped slightly, glaring at him. “Jesus, you’re like a fucking stealth agent,” he stated. “Keep that habit on the ice.”

“Sorry,” he murmured unapologetically. “How’re the parents?”

“Concerned for both of them,” Connors replied, sighing. “Get anything out of nurse?”

Vic shrugged weakly, tipping his head towards the other two.

That, Connors assumed, meant whatever he found out wasn’t good news. Or it was, at least, not enough to be walking back towards Shane with an optimistic expression. It was like a battle of who had worse news to deliver to him.

Shane looked up, glancing between both of them and sitting across from him, Vic could immediately see the tentative, misplaced, hope in his eyes. Crushing it felt like he was personally hurting one of his closest friends.

“They uh- they still don’t know much. But I bothered the hell out of a nurse and she did tell me there was an issue with his CT scan,” Vic confessed hesitantly. “They’re getting another one to double-check, I guess, and then doing an MRI as well. She said that one takes longer, so you might not see him for close to an hour.”

“Fuck,” Shane whispered, dropping his head to the floor.

“I know it doesn't sound like a lot of good news, but she said they got him awake,” Vic went on, watching him instantly light up for a moment. “He was complaining about his head, so they gave him some pain killers.”

He couldn’t really say he was shocked by the news, given how hard he slammed into the boards. Not to mention how hard he hit the ice, as well, without his helmet, no less. It might have been a small miracle that there was no blood.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, taking a deep breath in and nodding firmly, trying to process the information. “Okay, um- and my…my parents?” he wondered, glancing at Connors. “You talked to them?”

“They asked about you and Ilya,” Connors replied. “I told them I’d keep them updated on both. If you want, I can just keep your phone, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Please,” he whispered in relief, nodding.

Shane ran his hands through his hair, tugging at the strands weakly for a moment like a sharp jolt of pain would be able to help him focus. On what, he wasn’t sure. He was surrounded by cheery paintings and stiff furniture that smelled like medicine and death. He had nothing to focus on or do aside from waiting and hoping there was no bad news. No worse news, he supposed was more accurate.

Down the hall there was the loud echo of footsteps and he tipped his head, sniffling again as he saw the rest of the team finally showing up. Marlow must have texted them what floor when he wasn’t looking, he realized, too out of it to have done it himself.

Vic stood almost instantly, going to intervene and let them know what was going on. If Shane had to guess, he’d say it was a weak but kind attempt to keep the stress off him by ensuring no one bombarded him with questions he couldn’t or didn’t want to answer.

“There’s something else you need to know,” Connor murmured gently to Shane, wanting to tell him before things got crowded again. “When Ilya was being put on the stretcher, his ring was in view. They know he’s married.”

Not to who or for what duration, but if Yuna and David said it was blatant, then it was. Which meant the internet would be scouring for information and as horrible as it felt to add something else to his plate, Shane needed to be prepared for that sooner rather than later.

An incredulous laugh bubbled in his throat, escaping right before he clamped his hand over his mouth, nodding slowly. “T-that’s…*fucking great*,” he quipped sarcastically.

The team spent so much time and effort trying to keep out the press and now it was like they had just handed them a twelve-course meal of salacious gossip. They could quite literally take their pick of what stories they wanted—an injured captain, a forfeited game, a secret marriage.

Shane doubted they'd leave headlines for a month after this. If nothing else, they'd go down in history as the third team to ever forfeit a game and first to ever do it for these reasons.

His phone rang again and Connors glanced at the ID, showing him Hayden's name. "Want me to take it?" he asked.

Shane nodded. "Yeah, just- tell him whatever you told my parents," he mumbled.

Connors stood back up, taking the call so he could explain and answer any questions he had. Whichever ones he could, anyway.

Marlow nudged his shoulder gently. "We'll handle the media," he assured him, as if reading his mind. "Just worry about Ilya."

Nodding, Shane slumped back against the uncomfortable couch. The rest of the team, seemingly fully filled in, found places to sit. All of them knew better than to say anything, even to each other. And they all just sat in silence, coping in their own ways.

Kane paced, unsurprisingly. Dubek was quietly mouthing the number of squares on the floor as he counted them to keep his mind busy. Carmichael rearranged the magazines on a nearby table in alphabetical order then did it again chronologically.

Most of them just sat there, though, staring at the wall, the floor, or their phones.

It was hard not to be interested in what the media was saying about them. Some called them brave or loyal for walking out, others called them stupid and reckless for leaving a game they would have won.

But didn't really matter what they said, since the damage had already been done.

It was one game, after all. Two points lost in a season they had otherwise been dominating in the past few months. None of them cared that badly about it.

Connors came back after a while, sitting down beside Shane again. "Hayden says he wants to be updated too. And that JJ sends his love."

He hummed weakly, resting his head on his shoulder. "Thanks, Con," he whispered, closing his eyes for a moment.

Connors just nodded, quietly reaching to wrap his arm around Shane, figuring he probably needed someone to hold him right now, even if he wasn't asking for it completely.

Sebbin got up after a while, dragging Kohn to help him grab coffee. Meanwhile Kovalev fell down a rabbit hole of news articles about them. Hammersmith read over his shoulder, every big paper in the industry having some variation of the story.

They all ended the same, though, hopeful about offering more details as they arose.

Vic, having read something similar a moment prior, went back to annoying the nurses up front. He told, well, gently pleaded with them, that if any reporters called or showed up, that they decline to comment on anything medical or personal related. Including who Ilya's emergency contact was.

"I don't know if that's a HIPPA thing or not, I- I play hockey, you know?" he told her. "But this is my family we're talking about, and this kind of thing is personal so if you can tell them things just…don't. Please."

As Vic continued to interrupt their charting, Varkov checked the Raiders social media page, reading the statement released under three minutes ago. It called their decision to forfeit an *'effort of solidarity'* and promised the team would be back and ready to play for their next game.

Beside him, Marlow nudged his shoulder, showing him the statement released by Vegas's team.

They were pretending to be disheartened over not getting to finish their game properly and claimed they were accepting the win *'with heavy, reluctant hearts'* and *'while wishing Boston's captain a quick recovery from the unintentional injury.'*

Varkov practically scoffed, rolling his eyes at the utter bullshit that always seemed to surface in situations like these. "We're not buying it, right?" he murmured.

Marlow shook his head. "Not in the slightest," he retorted.

Maybe they felt a little bad but there was no way the other team wasn't thrilled to be spoon fed a win after losing their last four games in a row. Those points counted the same, even if they weren't earned.

Bringing back a few cups of shitty coffee and snacks, Sebbin and Kohn set them on the table for anyone who needed one. Which was most of them, really. Kane reluctantly grabbed the shitty cinnamon roll off the table too, not having eaten since several hours before their game.

Shane stared at the paper cups as some of them reached to snack on whatever could be found nearby. He didn't, by any means, resent the team for being hungry or needing the caffeine. They'd been here a while, after all, and hospitals had a strange way of making time pass differently.

But he couldn't bring himself to have an appetite. His stomach felt sick, not starved.

Minutes continued to lapse without any news from the doctors or nurses. Shane didn't even know who was taking care of his husband, yet. He was just envisioning this blank figure, hoping whoever it was, was doing everything possible to help him.

It was over two hours later when someone eventually came out, not even needing to call a name because it was quite clear that they were all there for the same person.

“Excuse me?” the woman questioned, breaking up their nearly motionless monotony. “I’m Doctor Verma, I’ve been put on Ilya Rozanov-Hollander’s case.”

They were all on their feet quickly, the fatigue washing away from their expressions as they crowded around her.

“How is he?” Marlow asked. “Is he okay? Is he awake?”

She shook her head. “Not yet, we gave a pretty strong dose of medication,” she confessed, glancing at Shane with a slightly curious expression. “You’re his um- his husband, according to his emergency contact information?”

It was clear from her tone that her question had little to do with confirming their relationship. She was just confused about the two of them being married when the whole world thought they were teammates.

He didn’t bother to elaborate or hide it. “Yes,” he clarified.

Verma nodded, accepting the response quickly. “Alright, well like I said he isn’t awake yet, but I can take you back to see him and discuss his condition—”

“No,” Shane interjected with a firm shake of his head. “I mean, here is fine. Please. They’d like to know as well.”

And after waiting here with him for over two hours, bickering with nurses and taking calls on his behalf, they deserved to have as much information as him. He wouldn’t leave them here to fret without answers.

“I understand,” she responded, hands stuffed into her white coat. “Well, the good news first. Nothing is broken and his upper body is in good condition despite the blunt force of his fall. His shoulder was dislocated but nothing looked to be torn so we popped it back into place and aside from some aching, it’ll heal quickly.”

Shane blew out a slow breath, relieved that nothing had happened to his collarbone or neck when he hit the ice. “And the bad news?” he replied, since her own words implied there had to be some.

“When he came in initially, we were thinking it could be a concussion or brain bleed, but his symptoms, especially prolonged unconsciousness, was a little odd,” Verma stated. “His CT came back a little abnormal, so we ran a second one and it appeared to show a DAI in his brain—”

“What’s a DAI?” Duebk questioned in confusion.

“It stands for diffuse axonal injury, which means the white matter in his brain had been affected by his fall,” she explained. “It’s not a hemorrhage of any sort, more so a bunch of microscopic tears that impact the natural wiring system.”

“That- that’s better than a brain bleed, right?” Kohn wondered. “I mean, the tears can just heal?”

The doctor's pause was prominent and the silence, to understate it, didn't bring any of them comfort. It was clear she was just trying to think of a way to make them understand the extent of the situation without upsetting or frightening them.

"We classify DAI's as traumatic injuries; they're mostly seen in car accidents or sporting injuries like this one," she confessed. "I don't want that to scare you though, because they do range in how we grade their severity. After his second CT clarified it was in fact a DAI, we got him an MRI to assess the damage which we knew was going to be lesser because he was mumbling to us by that point."

Shane felt like he was on a roller coaster hearing her describe what was happening. One moment she was equating his injury with death and the next she was trying to say it's not that bad, in a way, at least.

He wasn't quite sure if he fully believed it though. If it wasn't severe, why did it take them so long to come out and get them?

"I'm sorry, I'm not following," he admitted. "Is he or isn't he okay? How bad is it?"

"Let me put it like this, if he had remained unspeaking, then we'd worry about stage three, which puts most people into a permanent vegetative state," she replied. "But he was alert and speaking, which, combined with the results of his MRI tell us his injury is stage one. Those have a ninety-seven percent recovery rate."

"So, he's going to be fine?" Carmichael questioned. "Why has it taken so long to come out here, then?"

Shane glanced at him, glad he was brave enough to ask because he felt himself about to do the same, only in a much nastier tone.

Verma nodded. "He'll be alright, but the initial injury also tends to cause other symptoms such as elevated blood pressure and a rapid heart rate," she responded. "We've gotten both stable for now and we'll keep monitoring it throughout the night to make sure they stay that way."

"So, uh- healing wise, how- I mean, what happens next?" Shane asked hesitantly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"We have someone monitoring him currently and when he wakes up, we'll give him the GCS, which is a small observational exam to check his verbal, motor, and eye function out of fifteen points," she told them. "The higher he scores, the better shape he's in. We're ideally hoping for around a ten or higher right now."

"That would mean he's understanding everything?" Feller wondered with a vague gesture. "That he's on the better side of things?"

Verma nodded. "Exactly. His eyes might open from pain, which is still a sign of functioning cognition, but we'd prefer he responds to his name or sudden spatial awareness," she

commented. “This type of DAI also overlaps with concussion symptoms, so he’ll likely be confused and struggle for a while with dizziness, fatigue, headaches, etcetera.”

Varkov nodded slowly. “We know concussions well,” he murmured, slightly relieved that something finally sounded familiar. “We can handle those.”

“When you say, *‘a while’*, how long are you talking about?” Sebbin asked. “Like a week in bed or misses the rest of the season?”

It sounded a bit crass to put it like that, to measure an injury based on the rest of their schedule, but they all knew what a genuine question it was. Ilya lived for hockey almost as much as he lived for Shane. They had been a cinch for playoffs all season and not being able to compete anymore because of one fall would crush him entirely.

“It depends a lot on what kind of progress we see in the next twenty-four hours; it could be anywhere from two to four weeks,” she stated. “It might involve some sort of therapy for his balance or speech if needed.”

“It’s the first week of March,” Vic mumbled, doing the math in his head. “That’s almost six weeks from playoffs. He can make them, right? By a few games.”

Verma nodded “There’s definitely a very good chance,” she assured them. “But right now, he’ll be monitored overnight and when we discharge him, he won’t be able play or practice. I’d recommend keeping him away from the rink altogether for a while until the headaches and disorientation fade.”

They all went silent, starting to realize how many games that meant missing. They’d be flying directly to Florida after this, to play Tampa again, and Ilya wouldn’t be able to make it. He wouldn’t even be out of the hospital by the time they got on their plane tomorrow morning.

“We’re leaving him,” Kane murmured in apprehension. Ilya would have to take a separate flight alone, all the way back to Boston. If he even got discharged by then, that was.

“Do he have a neurologist in Boston, by chance?” Verma wondered, her head tipped slightly. “I would feel a lot better knowing he has someone he’s comfortable with as things keep developing.”

“I-yeah, yes, we see the same one,” Shane replied weakly. “I can call him and schedule something.”

They’d had enough concussions that getting their heads checked was pretty standard for them. The team doctor did their initial checks, usually, but they went to a specialist for their follow ups.

“Good,” she noted, sounding pleased. “I’d ask him to run another MRI, specifically a T2-weighted, about a week after he gets home. By that point the majority of the injury should no longer be visible because of initial size, but it’s better to check and make sure it’s healing.”

Shane nodded slightly, trying to remember the information. Or at least remember to ask her to write that down before he forgot because his thoughts were such a wreck right now.

“Are there any rules to follow?” Dubek asked. “Screen time limits or noise reduction? Can he see the sun and everything?”

He knew the rules for a concussion were pretty strict and lights or sounds could worsen the damage, but he had no idea what the protocol was for a DAI. He’d never even heard of it before today, which, for an athlete, made him feel a little foolish, since it seemed like it was common amongst them.

“The first day or two, he definitely needs to take it easy,” Verma replied. “But it’s important to make sure he’s exercising his motor skills as possible. Let him cook his own meals, take short walks, practice some puzzles or sudoku. Things like that help strengthen the brains rewiring after being torn.”

“Thank you,” Connors mumbled. “For answering our questions and everything. I’m sure we’re a bit…overbearing.”

“Not at all; it’s a scary situation and I’m glad the damage isn’t worse,” she reassured them.

“I’d like to see him, please,” Shane told her. “You said I could, right?”

Verma nodded. “Of course,” she responded. “He is going to be pretty disorientated, though, and I’d like to keep him as calm as possible so for right now it’s only immediate family.”

Shane glanced at his team, feeling terrible that they couldn’t see Ilya too. After waiting and suffering and trying their best to help him keep it together, they didn’t deserve to just keep sitting out here.

“Go,” Marlow insisted with a gentle nudge. “Tell him we love him and we’re right outside, waiting to visit as soon as possible.”

Breathing out a sigh of relief, he nodded in agreement, turning back to the doctor to follow her down the hallway. Ilya was staying in room 824, he noticed, filing away the number in his mind so he could come back to it.

As she opened the door, he slipped inside the dark room. Ilya was lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to an EKG machine that was monitoring his vitals as he slept. It gave him an eerie feeling of Déjà vu and he wondered if this how Ilya felt seeing him in the hospital when he busted his collarbone.

He glanced at the other doctor Verma mentioned, watching her scribble something down on his chart. His heart rate, Shane assumed, since she said it had been too high earlier. It was still in the nineties now, which seemed high while unconscious.

“Shouldn’t his heart rate be lower?” he whispered, wandering around the foot of the bed to stand at his side. “At least seventy or something.” It usually dropped even lower when he was asleep. That was normal.

She nodded. “It should but considering how fast it was when he came in and was getting his MRI scan, this is an improvement,” she noted, leaning over the other doctors’ shoulder and pointing at something on the chart.

Her mumbles were too quiet for Shane to make out what she was saying, but he also wasn’t really trying. He just sank down into the nearest chair, taking Ilya’s hand in his and squeezing it softly.

His husband didn’t look like he was in too much pain. He looked almost peaceful. Resting.

Shane brushed his thumb over his knuckles, eyes flitting to his bare neck. “Where’s his necklace?” he asked, looking towards them.

“We took it off for his scans,” the other doctor explained, retrieving a small bag from a tray of his stuff that also had his jersey and skates still on it. “Here.”

Taking it from the young man, he let go of Ilya’s hand long enough to open the bag and pull his necklace back out of it. “Can I put it back on him?” he wondered. “You’re not doing any more tests right?”

The guy looked at Verma, who was clearly in charge. Actually, she was wearing different colored scrubs now that Shane looked at the two of them better.

She nodded, giving him permission and he took it without asking for any elaboration. Hooking the chain back around his husband’s neck, he clasped it into place and kissed his mothers cross softly, the way Ilya always did when he got nervous or needed comfort.

“Your team’s plane leaves soon, I’m assuming?” she asked, recalling of his teammate’s comments. “Do you have anyone who can stay with him until he’s discharged?”

Shane blinked, thinking of who would remain behind. He wouldn’t be surprised if Marlow offered to skip the next game, but Desjourney would never allow it. He wouldn’t let any of them miss the plane after they disappointed him today.

“I can call someone,” he murmured, nodding. “When are you letting him out, tomorrow?”

“In the afternoon, hopefully,” Verma said. “But it’ll depend on how he’s feeling and if I’m comfortable enough to let him fly. That much noise might hurt his head.”

Shane just glanced back down as his husband’s hand, wondering if he could bring himself to ask, well, beg his parents to come get Ilya. He’d have to, he was pretty sure. Otherwise, the team doctor’s assistant would probably be the only one actually mandated to be left behind and he really didn’t like the thought of leaving Ilya with a stranger.

“What about noise cancelling—” Shane froze, gaze snapping towards his husband, who made a quiet sound that seemed to reflect his pain. “Ilya? Ilya are you waking up?”

He didn’t want to force him to, if it hurt or he was tired. But he’d also be lying if he said he didn’t squeeze his hand a bit tighter, hoping he’d feel it.

Seeing his eyes fluttering weakly, the other doctor reached for the pen in his pocket, poised to write something else down on his chart. Shane wasn't paying much attention to him, though, watching Ilya's head roll slightly to the side, like he was fighting through the painkillers that must have been making him groggy.

His eyes eventually opened, slow and bleary, not focusing very well but finding Shane nevertheless.

"That'll be a two for his visual response," Verma remarked before leaning towards the bed. "Can you hear me alright, Mr. Rozanov-Hollander? Do you know today's date or what city you're in?"

Ilya groaned weakly, his mouth dry and his body aching. "I-ngh, Город отъявленных игроков и алкоголиков," he mumbled weakly, eyes closing again for a moment or two.

The other doctor frowned slightly. "Um, sorry, is that considered an inappropriate, confused, or oriented response?"

"Oriented," Shane replied, flooded by a slight rush of relief. "Definitely oriented for him."

It would be far more concerning if he hadn't immediately made some sort of quip, honestly. At least this way, Shane knew he had enough sense to know they were in Vegas and verbalize his rather strong feelings about the place.

"Five, then," the guy summed up, jotting it down.

"I'm going to give you a few commands and I need you to do just do your best in following, alright?" Verma explained. "Can you touch you left ear with your right fingertip?"

Ilya's face scrunched, still disoriented and only further confused by the instruction. But he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Shane's small nod of encouragement, and some part of him listened. Lifting his hand slowly and trying to tap his ear, he winced in pain, dropping it back down with a huff.

"Very good try," she assured him. "Now, if I say dog, cat, bunny, dog, what animal would come next in that sequence?"

He blew out a breath, already growing sick of her pestering. "The meowy one," he grumbled, trying to blink away the drug induced fatigue. "Kitty cat."

"Perfect, just one more little test," she promised softly. "Can you show me what seven fingers looks like?"

Ilya took a second longer, thinking hard for a second before he dropped Shane's hand and held up eight fingers by mistake without even realizing it.

"That's too many, Ilya," Shane whispered in concern, hoping he had just miscounted or was still confused. He hummed, putting down two more. "That's too few."

“Okay, it’s alright,” Verma assured them, closing Ilya’s hand for him and lowering it back down onto the bed. “We’ll call that a five for now. He’s definitely understanding the instructions, there’s just a little problem with his follow-through.”

“So, what, a twelve out of fifteen? That’s alright, isn’t it? You said you wanted a ten.”

“A minimum of a ten, yes. That would put him slightly above a moderate score,” she explained. “Twelve still falls in that range, towards the higher end. I would obviously have liked to see him make a thirteen or fifteen, but this is manageable.”

She seemed to be trying to comfort him, in a way. Her tone was so hopeful that he, momentarily, forgot she did this for a living. Saw injury after injury, probably many that were a lot worse if not fatal.

And while Shane was practically having the worst day of his life, she was having a relatively positive one. After all, her patient was awake and trying to sit up, even though he really shouldn’t have been.

“Woah, hey, let’s take it easy,” Shane suggested, standing quickly and trying to get him to stop fussing.

“Ow!” Ilya let out a sharp yelp, tipping towards his left side as his shoulder gave out under the pain of having pressure on it. “Сукин сын!”

His own sudden exclamation only seemed to trigger an extra ache in his head and had him squeezing his eyes shut as his EKG machine beeped a few times. His heart rate had sped up extremely quickly, the numbers on the machine turning red as it reached one-twenty and then one-thirty.

“Try to take a breath, Ilya,” Verma suggested firmly. “Too much strain on your shoulder is only going to make it worse. You need to lay back down.”

He wrinkled his nose, falling back against the unsupportive pillows with an exhausted breath. “Did it—” he swallowed harshly, head still fuzzy. “—is it tear?”

Shane’s hand was quickly on top of his head, stroking his curls gently. “No, it’s not torn, just dislocated,” he assured him, visibly seeing his relief. “They fixed it, but it’s probably going to hurt for a bit, but you’ll feel better if you don’t move it, alright? Just keep it by your side.”

Ilya closed his eyes again, now seemingly much more alert. Which meant the fact that he was lying in a hospital bed with a doctor examining him began to sink in fully. It was any athletes’ worse fear, bar none, to be in this situation.

“Concussion?” he mumbled presumably, tipping his head back as his chapped lips parted.

Shane glanced around for some water, seeing it already prepared in a paper cup with a small straw. “It’s- no, you don’t have one,” he replied, guiding the straw to his mouth.

Ilya sipped the water slowly, feeling the fresh liquid hit the back of his throat, curing the dryness.

“Then w- why am I hearing ringing?” he wondered, staring at him in confusion.

He’d had them before; he knew the signs. There was the echoing in his ears that he was quite certain no one else heard and the nausea that made his chest feel strange. Not to mention the pain in his head, which they were clearly trying to reduce by keeping all the lights in the room off.

Shane looked at the doctors. “Can I have a minute with him, please? To explain,” he implored. “It would be easier to hear from me.”

Verma nodded once, slowly pushing the chart out of her student’s hand. “Of course,” she replied. “I’ll be right outside if either of you want to ask any questions or clarifications.”

She tugged the other doctor out of the room and Ilya winced from the sound of the door closing. The moment they were alone, Shane sat back down, still stroking his husband’s hair. It was impossible to ignore the look of anxiety in his eyes, like he was preparing to hear the worst news of his life.

“What?” he questioned impatiently, heart rate quickening again. “Why was she doing those tests on me? You said I don’t have a concussion?”

“You don’t, I promise,” Shane replied, trying to get him to relax. “It’s a different part of your brain, the white matter, is what the doctor told us. You just- it’s not connected properly anymore.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Ilya breathed out, voice laced with fear. “My brain broke?” He’d taken a lot of hits, but he’d never fully wound up in the hospital like this before.

“No, no, it’s not broken; it’s just not fully functioning,” he said, somehow failing even worse to make it make sense. “She said you might feel some symptoms while you heal. Problems with confusion and your balance—”

“I am a hockey player, Shane, I *need* my balance!” he interjected, the own sound of his voice once again hurting his head.

He squeezed his eyes shut, grasping at it with the arm that wasn’t killing him as badly. He needed to have his balance, had to stay upright on his skates. He couldn’t just be like a baby deer, wobbling from side to side the way he did as a child.

“Ilya, Ilyusha, baby,” Shane murmured, pulling his hand away from his head before he accidently hurt himself worse. “Look at me.”

Ilya forced his eyes open, even the darkness of the room still feeling a bit overwhelming. “Tell me I can still play,” he begged softly. “*Please*.”

He leaned closer, hand trailing over his husband’s shoulder to gently squeeze the one that wasn’t sore. “Not right now,” he whispered, feeling like he was personally destroying him. “But you will, *I swear*. You just need to heal first, okay?”

His throat worried, the realization that he couldn't compete for a while hitting him with apropos anguish that had nothing to do with whatever was going on in his brain. "For how long?" he asked reluctantly, scared to know.

"Not long, just a few weeks. Two to four," Shane explained, thumb stroking back and forth over the scratchy material of his hospital gown.

Ilya swallowed harshly, tipping his head to the side as his eyes swelled with his tears, he didn't want his husband to see. Shane didn't need to witness them, though, to know they were there. Even though it was, arguably, one of the better outcomes, it was still too long away from the ice for someone like them.

Their whole lives revolved around hockey; it drove their entire routine each day. Even on break, Ilya struggled to completely let go of sport, still getting in a few solo practices occasionally or keeping up with his jogging. He couldn't handle being away when the whole team was, let alone being away when they weren't. When they were still traveling, still playing, hopefully still winning. Without him.

Ilya sniffled weakly, clearing his throat to try to hide it. "Did- does the um…coach," he mumbled, struggling to articulate his thoughts. "He knows?"

"Not yet," Shane replied trying to ignore his clear problem making sense of his words. "He's a little upset right now, so we're letting him cool off."

His gaze turned grudgingly back to him. "With me?"

He knew that he was a little, well, a lot abrasive. Many of the other teams complained and Desjourney defended him through most of the scrutiny, despite being called *'more trouble than he's worth'* in his first few years in the league. The thought of letting him down by getting injured this late into the season was gut wrenching.

Shane was quick to shake his head profusely. "No, no, not with you," he assured him firmly. "With the rest of us, for how we reacted when you got hurt." He paused for a moment before admitting, "We forfeited the game."

Ilya's eyes widened. "You what?" he whispered, assuming he misheard. No one did that. Ever. Not in seventy years, at least. And never for something as inconsequential as one player's injury.

"We just couldn't play without you," his husband confessed, shrugging weakly. "We all walked out."

He looked stunned, bordering on upset. "B-but—"

"But it means Vegas won by default, we know," Shane interjected. "It doesn't matter to any of us, alright? *You matter*. The guys have all been here the whole time. Kane's probably paced four miles in the hallway and Vic is about two seconds away from being banned after harassing the nurses for information every five minutes."

Ilya managed a weak, unsurprised huff. Them being here, he never doubted. Hell, he didn't even feel caught off guard to know some of them were wreaking havoc on the staff. It was leaving a game they had been winning that threw him for a loop.

"I can't believe you would walk out," he murmured. "Foolish."

"Yes, terribly foolish," Shane agreed, leaning down to kiss the top of his head and breathe a sigh of relief. "We won't do it again."

"Good," he muttered stubbornly. "Need every win now that miss- I'm missing."

He stumbled over his words towards the end but got them back quickly, pretending like they hadn't gotten out of order in way rarely did anymore. Shane pretended too, just to make him feel better.

"We're gonna do our best, okay?" Shane promised. "Marlow can handle the team. Maybe I can even get him to do a fake Russian accent when he yells, to really sell it."

He laughed unintentionally, wincing in pain. "Ow, do not tease a sick man," he mumbled. "I don't like thinking about not being there."

"I know you don't, but it won't be for long and I'll send you so many updates that you grow sick of them," he told him. "Besides you might not want to be in the eye of the media right now, anyway."

Ilya furrowed his eyebrows. "Why, because you forfeit?" he asked.

There had to be a lot of people, not just Desjourney, who was upset about it. Fans and spectators at the game, too. To say nothing of all the news outlets that were probably enjoying the spectacle.

Shane had a somewhat hesitant look in his eyes as he shook his head. "Not because of that," he murmured, lifting Ilya's chain gently. "Because of *this*."

He was still perplexed and wondered if it was appropriate to ask him to stop talking in riddles. "My mother's cross?" he questioned before abruptly remembering there was something else attached to it these days. "My ring?"

His husband's nod was miniscule, at best. "People saw it when you- when they carried you out."

Shane couldn't bring himself to mention the impact of the hit or the lifeless look of his body post collision. He could barely even speak about the medics moving him onto the stretcher, hauling him off the ice in a rush without feeling sick to his stomach all over again.

"Shit," Ilya whispered, head tipped back as his eyes fluttered shut.

"It's gonna be alright," he promised, one eye on his heart rate while fussing with his curls again, trying to keep him from worrying. "No one knows what it means to you. What *I* mean."

He hoped, dubiously, that his injury might be more pressing to the public than his relationship status. But even if they went digging for a marriage certificate, they would only find that there was one but the details of it were locked. That brought him some comfort, even if only a small amount.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya mumbled, turning towards his gentle attention, nuzzling against his arm. “To do this to you.”

To make a mess of their marriage so soon after it was legalized, to disrupt their current team dynamics by getting hurt, to force his husband to stand there and comfort him in a hospital when it was clearly upsetting him. A lot of things, really.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Shane whispered with conviction. “I just need you to get better, okay? Rest and heal so you can come back before playoffs. Because we’re *going* to make them and when we do, I’m really going to need my husband there.”

The Raiders wouldn’t be complete without Ilya, by any means. But they weren’t going to let his injury knock them around or let the other teams think it meant they were suddenly an easy target. They’d cope and find a way to land a spot in the playoffs so that their captain’s season wouldn’t end like this.

Ilya nodded in agreement. “I’ll be there,” he promised quietly, with less certainty in his voice than he wished there was.

Shane heard, but would accept it, knowing how hard it was for him to think that far ahead when he was still stuck in a hospital bed right now. “You better be,” he grumbled fondly, expression softening as he glanced towards the door. “Do you feel up to seeing any of the guys? I think they’d really like to see how you’re doing.”

“Mm, to make sure I am a potato?” he questioned, noticing Shane’s slight wrinkle of confusion. “You know, veggie?”

Stuck in a state of vegetation, Shane eventually realized he meant. “Yeah, to make sure,” he repeated quietly, the very joke making his stomach twist. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Pulling his hand away from Ilya’s curls, he headed to the door, trying to slip out without letting in too much of the fluorescent lighting that was abusing everyone in the hallway. He could see Verma still stuck answering the team’s questions, although Connors was back on the phone again, a few feet away. His phone, that was.

Spotting him over the doctors’ shoulder, Dubek piped up, “How is he?”

“Uh- he’s pretty upset about not being able to play but otherwise mostly himself, I think,” he replied, not entirely sure what he was even supposed to be looking for with a head injury like this. “He wants to see you guys, if the doctor says that’s alright?”

Verma hesitated for a moment before nodding. “In small groups of two, it’s fine,” she answered. “But if he starts to get tired or his head begins to hurt worse, you’ll need to leave so he can rest.”

They glanced at each other for a moment, as if contemplating silently who would go first before Marlow practically made a beeline for the door, followed closely by Kovalev. Shane watched them leave, the others not seeming too upset over it. They still had questions, after all.

“So, how do we know if something he says or does is a result of his injury or just his personality?” Sebbin wondered, slightly worried. “I mean, you noticed he’s Russian right? Sometimes he doesn’t make sense when he’s totally healthy.”

She blinked, a bit caught off guard by the question but tried to pull herself together quickly. “Well, for starters he would probably be showing more consistent symptoms of temporary speech impediments compared to usual language barriers…”

Shane’s gaze tipped sideways again, looking towards Connors who was still sitting down, looking a little more exhausted than most of them. Stepping away from the team, he crossed the waiting room and sat beside him. Connors flashed him a small, weary smile before glancing back down at the notepad in his lap that Shane was pretty sure he didn’t have when they entered the hospital. On it were a bunch of scribbles, some he couldn’t fully read.

“Where’d you get that?” he wondered, pointing to it.

Connors covered the speaker of the phone. “Vic stole it from a nurse for me,” he said, gesturing to the list of notes. “Hayden checked back in to ask if Ilya would like a fruit basket or something delivered to your house, Desjourney called to say he’s still upset but wants to know how Roz is doing, JJ called to say sorry about your *‘friend’*, that interviewer Shannon Williams wanted a comment but I blocked her number, and I found that neurologist in your phone and asked about dates for Ilya’s follow-up appointment. His office is going to get back to me with the schedule.”

Shane blinked, realizing he’d been basically playing receptionist for every person who called since he handed over his phone. “Who are you talking to now?” he asked, taking the list from his teammate and glancing over it briefly.

“Your parents again,” he replied. “David wants to make sure you eat and Yuna says she knows you’ll want to spend the night here, but insists you ask for a cot, so you don’t hurt your neck bending over Ilya’s bed.”

Shane grimaced, not quite surprised by their reactions and concern but feeling sorry that Connors got stuck dealing with it. He’d have to buy him a drink or something, as a thank you for putting up with all the calls.

“I can take it,” he told him, gesturing towards his phone. “Thanks for keeping them updated.”

Connors nodded. “Don’t worry about it; I didn’t mind,” he assured him, eyes flitting towards the others. “I’m gonna go ask Dr. Verma a question of my own, really quick.”

With a short pat on Shane’s leg, he passed the phone back over and left to annoy the doctor with the rest of the team.

Shane could immediately hear his mom's voice in the middle of a rant. "It's already going to be hard enough for the team to play with this kind of thing weighing on your minds, everyone needs to make sure they're taking care of themselves too and I know my son tends to neglect —"

"Mom, it's me," he interjected before she accidently insulted him without realizing it. "I'm sorry I didn't answer earlier, I was just…really worried about Ilya."

There was a brief moment of silence, which he could only presume was her mind working to catch up as she figured out, she was no longer talking to Connors. Her tone gentled exponentially, once she did.

"Oh, hon, that's alright," she promised. "Your dad and I are worried too. Connors said he's not going to be able to play for a few weeks?"

"Yeah, they did some test on him or something. I don't really know how it's scaled, but he's sort of average, which is good, I think," he explained. "Better than bad, anyway. If it was serious, the doctor said he wouldn't even be awake so…"

"Is there anything we can do?" his mom asked. "Do you need me to talk to Desjourney or handle press?"

She was itching to do something. Anything. Sitting at home when one of her boys was injured and the other was terrified had her stomach in knots that wouldn't be settled until she found a way to be helpful to at least one of them.

"No, nothing like that, thanks though," Shane responded, rubbing his eyes slightly. "But I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor? It's kind of big."

"Anything," Yuna stated instantly. "What do you need?"

"Our flight leaves for Tampa tomorrow and Ilya isn't going to be discharged in time. Even if he was, I don't think he can travel and rest at the same time, so he's going back to Boston," he explained. "I was wondering if, maybe, you and dad could come to Vegas and then fly back with him, so he's not stuck with someone from the team's medical staff driving him crazy. And I know it's a long flight but he's really—"

"Yes," she interjected without hesitation.

Shane froze, his ramble cut off. "Yes?" he repeated. "Are you sure? It's like six hours from Ottawa."

"Seven hours and twenty minutes direct," David replied out of nowhere, a computer in front of him. "I'm checking flights now."

"Dad?" he questioned, slightly confused. "Wait- has he been there the whole time?"

"You and Ilya aren't the only one's who call on speaker without telling people," his father retorted. "We can be there in the later afternoon if we take a direct flight tomorrow morning,

but I think we can be there sooner if we catch a longer one leaving tonight. We'd stop in Denver and be in Vegas by five am or so."

Shane grimaced, the thought of them flying all night making him automatically feel terribly guilty. He knew he probably shouldn't have even bothered them with this kind of request, anyway, but he was desperate to make sure Ilya wasn't left alone with someone he didn't really know whose instructions he might not have listened to.

"I- no, guys, afternoon is fine," he assured his parents. "Ilya won't even get discharged until like three, I think. Just take the flight tomorrow morning. I'm already putting you out enough by making you do this."

"You're not putting us out; we *want* to be there," Yuna responded decisively, knowing fully well that her son wouldn't know a moment of peace until he knew Ilya had someone else familiar there with him.

Shane let out a long breath, tilting his head down slightly as his eyes welled with tears again, the weight of the day settling upon him all over again. "Thanks mom," he whispered, voice cracking. "Both of you."

All the reassurance they could possibly provide wouldn't move Ilya out of his bed or rewind time to before he got hit, but it at least soothed him slightly. And it made it a lot more tolerable to watch his teammates filter in and out of his husband's hospital room as he stayed on the phone with his parents.

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The next few hours were a blur that Shane couldn't fully recall, even if asked. The team all visited Ilya, trying not to overwhelm him while still wanting him to know they planned to play their best in his absence. At some point they left, and Marlow promised to inform Desjourney about everything because it felt like his responsibility as AC.

That took at least one thing off his plate. Varkov took another, when he came back with Shane's travel bag and everything he left at the arena, including his wallet. So, he wouldn't have to come back to the hotel, and he could stay with Ilya and leave immediately for the airport when they ran out of time.

When Varkov left is when Shane really began to feel it, the strange emptiness clawing at his chest. He stayed by Ilya's bed as they gave him some shitty hospital dinner, eating some of his vegetables for him and later sneaking him some miniature donuts from the vending machine.

He normally wouldn't but there was something about knowing he wouldn't see his husband for a week that made him want to appease him in any way he could before they said goodbye. And while he couldn't fully crawl into bed with him, the narrow sterile mattress too thin for both of their frames, Shane could lean over it, arm wrapped around Ilya while he slept.

While they both did, technically, because after some time, Shane couldn't keep his own eyes open anymore. He couldn't manage to pull away from Ilya, either, though, and stayed close

by as he fell asleep alongside him.

For how long, he didn't know. His internal clock had been fucked up since the moment he stepped into the hospital, and it would probably stay that way after he left, too.

Shane did know that despite falling asleep, it wasn't morning when he woke up. Which meant his parents really shouldn't have been standing there, their silhouettes imposing in the darkness of the room. But they were.

"Shane," Yuna whispered, shaking him weakly. "You need to see up sweetie. Your neck isn't supposed to bend like that."

He squinted, imagining her voice for a moment before realizing it was really her. "Mom? When did- what are you doing here?" he asked. "What time is it?"

"Half past four," his father murmured, setting their bags down on the floor as quietly as he could. "We tried to text you."

"It- yeah, it's dead," Shane mumbled, wincing as he tried to untangle himself from Ilya. His mom was right, as usual. His neck really was incredibly sore. "I told you guys to take the other flight."

"We couldn't wait," his mom confessed. "We wanted to see both of you."

They wanted to be there when Ilya woke up, not just when he got discharged, knowing that Shane would have to leave before the sun was fully up. And they wanted to see their son too, to make sure that whatever act of stability he was putting on was strong enough to get him through the next few days.

"But you flew all night," Shane insisted, feeling like he'd somehow placed that burden of fatigue on them. "I didn't want that."

"Why don't we discuss it in the hallway?" David suggested, noticing Ilya stir slightly in his bed, presumably from subtle whispering.

Nodding, Shane tried to stand and felt his mom helping him up. His legs were stiff after sitting with bent knees in an uncomfortable chair for what she assumed must have been at least a few hours. Her hand rested on his back as she helped him to the door, her eyes flittering back to Ilya once more before she followed her son out of the room.

Shane practically squeezed his eyes closed immediately, the lights in the hallways still bright despite it being almost five in the morning. There was only one nurse at the desk now and no one else in the waiting area. It was eerie, to say the least.

As the door shut behind them with an impossibly silent click only a parent knew how to make, Yuna wrapped her arms around her son, squeezing him tightly. Shane was caught off guard, brain still sleep addled, but he held her back anyway.

His shoulders slumped in a mix of exhaustion and relief, tucking his face against her shoulder. "Everything's a mess," he mumbled incoherently.

“I know hon,” she replied, running her hand up and down his back a few times. “We’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Glancing at her husband, she could see David’s somber expression as he tipped back on his heels trying to figure out some way to mend their little boy’s pain. It had been so much easier, back when it was his helmet squeezing too tight or the seams of his socks upsetting him before school. This was something neither of them could fix in the way he needed.

“C’mon, I think we all need coffee by now,” David murmured, tipping his head towards the machine down the corridor.

Nodding against his mom, Shane eventually pulled away. He tried to wipe his eyes quickly, before they noticed, but was pretty sure it didn’t work. Especially because they sandwiched him between them as they walked down the hall, his dad’s hand on his shoulder the whole time.

“I can’t believe you took the bad flight,” he muttered, still upset with himself for letting them.

“It wasn’t all that terrible,” his dad assured him. “Your mom slept the whole time, and I ate her free snacks when she wasn’t looking.”

He purposely left out any mentions of their layover because it would have made their son feel worse, which he didn’t need right now. They had made a choice all by themselves, after all.

Shane let out a short, accidental laugh that broke through his despair for a moment. “Thank you guys,” he said, realizing that’s probably what he should have led with. “For coming all this way and for wanting to be here so soon.”

“You don’t have to thank us for doing our jobs as your parents,” Yuna insisted, stopping in front of the coffee machine. She looked at David, who was already pulling out his wallet.

“So, he’ll be discharged later today, right?” his dad asked gently. “Is he going to need any kind of therapy, the way you did?”

Shane scrubbed his face as the machine sputtered out a cup of coffee. “I don’t know yet,” he admitted, truly hating the lack of information. “Maybe for his speech or balance. I think it depends on how the next week goes.”

A week he wouldn’t be there for.

“We’ll handle it,” Yuna commented, seeing the frustration etched on his face. “You focus on hockey and we’ll focus on taking care of Ilya.”

“How am I supposed to focus on the game when he- when *everything* is in shambles?” Shane questioned, squeezing his paper cup a bit too hard as his father handed it to him. “We have to play without him for weeks and Marly is going step up but that throws the whole team into disarray. Then there’s coach, who’s probably still upset about the forfeit, and the media who’s going to be dying to know about all of this. Especially his ring.”

Because they, for some reason, seemed to live in a world that cared more about someone's romantic status than whether or not his injury was severe.

"Okay, you need to take a breath, Shane," his mom insisted. "I know you like to plan and you get that from me, but this is an hour-by-hour situation. We can only handle what's right in front of us."

He inhaled reluctantly, watching as the shoddy machine produced two more cups of coffee for his parents. They steered him back down the hallway, towards the empty waiting area, and sat down, his father across and his mother beside him.

Silently, Shane sipped his coffee, nearly sure it wouldn't do anything to erase the bone-deep fatigue he felt right now. It wasn't the kind of exhaustion caffeine could cure, no matter how strong.

"It's better than at the hospital you were in," David muttered under his breath, mind drawing parallels whether he wanted it to or not.

"Was it…this terrifying, for you guys?" Shane asked hesitantly, thumb running back and forth over the hot paper cup in his hand.

His mom nodded slightly. "Pretty much," she admitted, her arm pressed against his in the kind of quiet contact that she knew was less overwhelming for him.

"But it'll get better, when he gets out of here," David assured him. "I think seeing the hospital and the equipment is the hard part. Just seeing you back in regular clothing helped us."

"I don't get to see that, though," he mumbled, dipping his head.

He stared at the ugly carpet underneath his feet; thoughts momentarily pulled to the realization that he didn't remember it. He genuinely hadn't noticed a pattern at all, even after sitting out here for hours straight.

"I know it's not the same, but we'll update you," Yuna told him. "Every hour, if that's what you need to get through your flight to Florida."

"God, I can't even think about Florida," he confessed miserably. "I'm not going to be in the right headspace, none of us are. We're going to lose to Tampa of all teams after I promised Ilya we would win and then the media is going to rip us apart even more than they already—"

"Hey, none of that thinking," she interjected firmly. "You're going to concentrate once you're back on the ice, because it's what you do. And after you beat Tampa, you'll call Ilya, who will be thrilled for you and the whole team."

Something about the conviction in her voice almost made it sound like facts instead of wishful thinking, but Shane let himself believe it for a moment anyway. It sounded like the most positive chain of events that had crossed his mind recently, after all, and he kind of wanted to hold onto it for a bit.

“You’ll make sure he rests while I’m gone, right?” Shane double checked, sipping his coffee again. “That he goes and sees our neurologist? He’ll probably pretend he’s fine, but you can’t let him push himself and risk making things worse.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar to how someone else acts when injured,” David remarked. “And we have quite a bit of experience with that kind of attitude.”

Huffing, he saw the irony of his own concerns given his past behavior but couldn’t help it. It was a lot easier to give advice than it was to take it. Especially when it involved reposing as someone who was moving nearly every hour of the day.

“Ilya will be strongarmed into resting if we have to use a hypnotist,” his mom swore. “So, as hard as it is, try not to worry about him. We’ll keep him safe.”

Shane nodded weakly, attempting to push the concern out of his brain even as it clung tightly. “That just leaves coach, the entire team, our standing in the league, and the press, right?” he teased without an ounce of humor.

“Your coach will get over himself,” his dad said. “He has to since he needs at least six of you on the ice tomorrow. And as long as your team tries to focus on each game as they come, you’ll still make playoffs.”

It might be tougher, without Ilya there, but David felt sure that they could manage. If anything, they just found new motivation to keep doing their best and bring home as many extra points as they could muster.

“Besides, the media can’t confirm anything about your marriage,” Yuna added, shaking her head. “There might be rumors that are hard to hear, but if you keep your head down, they’ll eventually fade.”

Inhaling sharply, Shane thought about the ones he had already heard. A drunken elopement, a secret wife, one of those supermodels he hadn’t been seen with in a while. Each of them had their flaws but all of them hurt equally.

“It’s a lot easier said than done,” he confessed quietly.

“I know,” she murmured, rubbing his back. “But you two can handle this. We just have to take it one day at a time right now.”

“That starts with you heading to the airport, kiddo,” David noted with remorse for having to force his son to think about such trivial things right now. “I know you don’t want to leave him, but your flight is in nearly an hour.”

“Already?” Shane wondered, still disoriented about the time. “I don’t- I’m not even sure where all my stuff is.”

It was scattered in Ilya’s room, his phone that had died and his watch he took off because the ticking was bothering his husband. He thought he’d have more time to get everything in order, including himself, before leaving.

“I’ll find your things, you just finish your coffee,” his dad told him, patting his knee softly and returning to Ilya’s room.

Sighing, Shane stared down at the shitty coffee that was, by all accounts, probably not doing anything for him right now. He tipped the cup back, anyway, finishing the rest of it and setting it aside.

Yuna watched as her son scrubbed his face, trying to get rid of the rest of the sleep from his eyes so he’d at least look functioning when coach inevitably wanted to talk to him on the plane.

If she could personally ensure Desjourney, the media, and the other teams would take it easy on him, she would. But instead, she just got to hope that she’d raised him as strong enough to take whatever he was handed and stay kind in spite of moments like these.

“Do me a favor and be kind to yourself over the next few days,” she pleaded softly, squeezing his arm. “This isn’t your fault and you’re doing nothing wrong by going to Tampa and Anaheim.”

“I know,” he mumbled. It was his job and he couldn’t just put it off, no matter how badly he might want to. “Just…still hurts anyway.”

Yuna wished there was some way she could take away the pain and frustration she knew was eating at him. “It’s okay to let it hurt,” she told him. “You just can’t let it paralyze you.”

A few moments later, David came back with Shane’s bag in one hand and his wallet and phone in the other. He handed everything over to his son, watching the weight of his duffel nearly tipping him over with how woozy he still felt.

“I’m alright, I got it,” he assured them, fixing the strap to distribute the weight a bit more evenly. “I should uh- I’m going, I guess.”

“Charge your phone on the plane and text us when you land,” David reminded him sternly before giving him a hug. “We love you.”

“Love you too, dad,” Shane murmured, already filing away the instructions. He’d probably have one of his teammates text them that they were taking off, too, just to be extra cautious.

“See you in a week,” Yuna mumbled, pressing a kiss to the side of his head before he tore himself away, heading down the hallway.

As he disappeared around the corner, the two of them deflated slightly. One problem had been, mostly, taken care of. Now, they had nothing but Ilya to focus on.

Resting his hand on her back, David guided his wife back towards the hospital room. They entered it quietly, eyes truly raking over Ilya for the first time now that they weren’t trying to comfort their son or keep themselves acting calm in front of him.

Ilya didn’t, thankfully, look terrible. His shoulder and part of his neck was visibly bruised from the impact of falling on it, the deep coloring illuminated by the dim lighting of his

monitor and the other equipment he was still hooked up to.

David sat down on the edge of the couch, laying his head at one end while Yuna took the chair Shane had been cooped up in. He figured that, despite being more comfortable, the couch was a little too far away from Ilya's bed for his son's liking, hence the hunched over position they found him in.

Yuna reached for Ilya's hand, taking it gently to keep him from stirring. She blinked slowly, not nearly as tired as she should have been for five in the morning. David really hadn't been kidding when he said she slept nearly their entire flight, unlike him.

That, combined with the coffee she was still sipping on, made her more than awake enough to sit and hold his hand for as long as he stayed asleep.

Another hour passed before the sun started to rise, but even so, it was muted by the curtains the staff had drawn to ensure no light would bother Ilya's head. Yuna assumed it must have been the painkillers wearing off that finally woke him up instead.

Ilya's curls shifted against his pillow, a quiet but deep groan bubbling in his throat as he felt his head start to throb again the moment, he was slightly more alert. He felt, shortly after, though, someone holding his hand.

It was too small, too soft, and too cold to be Shane's. But it also wasn't trying to bug him about more wires on his body or get him to take pills the way a nurse had at three in the morning. It was just there, enveloping him gently.

The outline wasn't terribly clear as he tried to blink away the fuzziness in his vision. "Mama?" he mumbled, voice raspy from sleep.

She leaned forward slightly, pressing another hand against the top of his head. "Shh, I'm right here," she assured him. "Go back to bed, sweetheart."

Humming weakly, he let his eyes flutter shut again, still feeling her fussing with his curls slightly. It didn't take him long to drift back to sleep, just hoping that being unconscious would take away his pain.

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When Ilya woke back up, presumably a few hours later, it was to someone fussing with his arm. A sharp stinging shot back through him, forcing his eyes open quickly and his gaze to lock onto a nurse he didn't recognize.

"Ow!" he exclaimed, the suddenness of jolting upright only causing him more pain.

"Let him wake up before you do that," Yuna snapped sharply as the nurse stepped a bit further away from the bed, giving them some space.

Ilya's gaze shot towards Yuna, whose voice he recognized. Why he hadn't recalled it earlier, he wasn't sure, but it must have been her holding his hand, he realized quickly.

He was embarrassed to think he'd mistaken her for his mother in his drug and pain-induced state, but before even getting to apologize, she was already pulling him back down, trying to get him to relax. He reluctantly settled back against the pillows, the ache in his shoulder subsiding slightly.

"Can I finish up, now?" the nurse wondered, his tone inpatient.

Yuna looked at Ilya. "Is that alright?" she wondered. "Can he touch your shoulder?"

He blinked, still confused, and nodded after a second.

The man stepped back towards the bed, gloved hands immediately pressing against his joint. The pressure stung a bit and Ilya gritted his teeth.

"What exactly is the point of this?" David questioned, gesturing to the whole process.

Ilya's eyes darted to the sound of his voice, surprised to see him too, despite the fact that he probably shouldn't have been.

"Checking to make sure the joint hadn't become subluxated while he was asleep," the nurse explained. "Sometimes, especially for athletes who experience frequent dislocations, they don't heal properly. Seems fine, though."

"It hurts," Ilya retorted. "*A lot*."

"We'll send you home with pain killers," he replied, tugging his gloves off and tossing them in the trash. "Dr. Verma is still doing her morning rounds, but she'll get to you soon."

He let out a small breath of relief, seeing the man leave his room. He liked Verma better, even though she hadn't been around nearly as much as the rest of the staff, including some interns that came to check his blood pressure far too many times when he was trying to eat dinner last night.

"Are you hungry?" Yuna asked curiously. "We can get you some breakfast." They had actually sent it out of the room earlier, when they tried to wake him up to offer it to him, but they could get it back, she thought. "Or we can wait until you're discharged and eat before our flight, if that's a better option."

"With the food around here, it's definitely the better option," her husband noted, pushing himself up from the couch and sitting at the foot of the bed. "How's your head, Ilya?"

"Uh- it's…sore," he eventually said, glancing between them. "I didn't know you were coming. Is Shane left- leave. Did Shane leave?"

He blinked harshly, trying to get his brain to function the way he knew it could if he only focused and took a bit more time with his words. It kept happening like this, last night too, where he knew what he wanted to say but couldn't do it correctly.

David nodded. "Around five this morning," he explained. "But we've been here since."

“All that time while I was asleep?” Ilya questioned in confusion. “But he- I wasn’t told.”

Shane hadn’t mentioned that they were coming to Vegas. All he had said was that they were concerned and he was keeping them updated on the situation.

“Shane probably just didn’t want to overwhelm you,” he assumed, thinking of no other reason his son might hide it. “He’s been worried. We all have.”

“I know it’s not the same as having him here, but we’ll try to be decent substitutes,” Yuna told him, her thumb running back and forth over his forearm. “You’re going to be stuck with us for a little while, okay? Until he’s back after the next two games.”

Ilya nodded slowly, his mind very slowly playing catch up. No wonder Shane called them; he wouldn’t want him to be alone for a full week.

“You are good people to be stuck with,” he murmured softly, offering a weak smile.

The door opened again and he saw Verma walking into the space, still dim and dreary but far less blurry than it had been when he originally saw it.

“Morning,” she greeted quietly, closing the door with a silent click. “How’s my most famous patient doing?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Horrible,” he replied in irritation. “I woke up being shaken by a nurse.”

Verma grimaced. “I’m sorry about that,” she responded, looking between the Hollanders. “You’re the in-laws, right? Shane said to expect you a little later today.”

“We took an earlier flight,” Yuna explained, reaching out to shake her hand firmly. “How’s everything looking? Is he going to be able to come home soon?”

“Give me a few minutes to check the overnight notes and do a quick examination and I’ll let you know,” she replied, reaching for the chart.

It had passed hands so many times that Ilya didn’t even know who had it first but regardless, he watched her flip it open and read through the updates left by nurses and medical students. Details about his heart rate and blood pressure. His pain scale, too, since they seemed awfully concerned with asking him what it was at.

“My heart rate is steady, yes?” Ilya remarked, glancing at the current number. “Was low last night.”

Maybe she’d be happy enough if she knew that to skip over any ridiculous tests.

“Heart rate does look better, which is good.” She nodded in agreement. “How’s your nausea this morning?”

He paused, hesitating for a moment. “Great.” She squinted slightly and he tsk’d. “Okay, not great. I feel not hungry but that’s only because the food here sucks.”

Verma hummed skeptically. “I know it’s not great, but you didn’t eat much last either according to your night nurse and your appetite should be returning by now,” she stated, setting his chart down.

If all it took to get him out of here was eating, Ilya would force himself to get down whatever poorly cooked meal they assembled for him. But they didn’t tell him it was a test.

“Are these tests for his physical or cognitive health?” David wondered, watching as she sanitized her hands.

The sharp scent made Ilya’s his head begin to ache slightly worse, but he said nothing about it, just glancing down at the scratchy blanket he had slept under all night. Well, intermittently napped.

“A bit of both,” Verma explained. “Right now, the biggest concern is how his speech and active recall function. If those are weak, it can impact his ability to do a lot of normal tasks.”

“And impact how he plays,” Yuna realized.

If he could make the decision when shoot the puck, if he’d be able to remember what teammates were on the ice with him, if he could call passes without his words getting messed up.

“That would be affected too, yes,” she admitted, tilting Ilya’s jaw up slightly. “Can you track my finger please?” she asked, not using her standard penlight out of fear that it would upset his head too much.

Ilya followed her index finger as it moved from side to side, then up and down before she drew a circle. The speed wasn’t a problem, but he’d be lying if he said it didn’t hurt his head when she moved it too far in any direction. He could feel the sting physically grow behind his eyes.

“Did I pass whatever that’s for?” Ilya asked.

Verma nodded slightly. “It doesn’t look like there’s any damage in your ability to track motion smoothly,” she replied. “Do you think you can you fill in some patterns for me?”

He groaned slightly. “More?” he questioned, clearly annoyed. “Fine.”

She chuckled softly, saying, “Diamond, triangle, square, circle, diamond, triangle and then what?”

Square,” Ilya replied with the utmost certainty.

Verma hummed with approval. “Good, what month are we in?”

He counted them on his fingers for a moment, before telling her, “March.”

She nodded again but clicked the top of her pen and jotted down some sort of note in his chart. That made him wary, for some reason, like he hadn’t quite done as well on that one

because it took him a few moments longer.

“And tell me what numbers come between twenty and twenty-eight, please,” she requested, glancing back up at him, head tilted with interest.

Ilya sighed tiredly before counting out loud, “Twenty-one, twenty-two-twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-seven—”

“Twenty-six,” Verma corrected gently, making a note of that as well in his chart.

He blinked, realizing he’d messed up. “I knew that,” he muttered adamantly. “I did. I meant twenty-six my mouth just said the other one. Don’t put that down.”

“I’m sorry, I have to,” she clarified.

Yuna saw the way his face fell slightly, noticeably upset. She wouldn’t be surprised if he felt like he’d somehow messed up, just because his brain hadn’t managed to remember one number. When Shane was injured, he felt that way every time he couldn’t turn his head far enough in physical therapy.

“Well?” Yuna questioned expectantly.

“Like I was telling your son yesterday, this is a grade one DAI according to his MRI, but his GCS puts him into a moderate category with an E2V5M5, which I’d like his neurologist to know,” Verma explained. “There’s no real reason to keep him here when he’s functioning fine aside from some expected symptoms, but his recovery does need a specialized plan which I’ll send home with him.”

“Home?” Ilya repeated, having zoned out until he heard that word. “I can leave?”

“Yes, I’ll have you discharged in about an hour,” she replied. “That said, your exposure to loud noises and bright lights needs to be kept to a minimum and your appetite needs to be monitored closely because patients have lost weight in the past.”

“Thank you,” he mumbled, picking at a loose thread on the blanket.

Verma gave him a small smile. “I’m going to write a prescription for an anti-nausea medicine, as well as something for vertigo and pain. Fill it when you get home. Otherwise, I’ll write down the tests I want your neurologist to run about a week from today and if you notice any persisting speech problems, I’d suggest seeing a speech pathologist.”

David nodded his head, shaking her hand in agreement before she walked out, taking the chart with her. No doubt to write down a full list of things that Ilya couldn’t do for a while and all the exercises or specialists that were necessary.

Yuna patted Ilya’s arm twice. “That’s good,” she remarked in relief. “I know it feels like a lot, but it is.”

He hummed weakly, knowing, logically, that she was right. It was just hard to feel grateful or lucky when his husband and their entire team were halfway to Florida to compete against

their biggest rivals without him.

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A few hours later, Ilya found himself sitting in the airport. He had his sunglasses on inside and headphones on to try to dim the noise around him. It all still felt a bit too loud and bright, if he was honest.

He still didn't quite understand what was happening in his head that made this different from a concussion, either. But everyone kept acting like there was a difference, somehow, so he pretended to know rather than ask for another explanation after the last two didn't make any sense.

"I like these," Ilya mumbled, snacking on something David had bought at one of the stores inside the airport. It was sort of like dried fruit, in a way, but covered in something sweet.

"Yeah? Me too." He perked up slightly. "I'll grab another bag for the flight," he replied, giving him the rest of them.

David stood up, dusting the powdered coating from his fingertips and wandering back towards the shop he got them from. Considering Ilya had skipped breakfast and only managed to eat a few bites of the lunch they stopped to get, he figured anything he actually wanted to eat, he should get as much of it as possible.

Ilya didn't really mean to have him go get more; that felt a little greedy. But he did like whatever these things he was munching on were. And it did settle his nausea a little more each time he chewed on one.

"Shane says Desjourney did a complete one-eighty and is no longer upset with the team. He's actually started giving pep talks in anticipation of tomorrow's game," Yuna told him, reading from her phone with slight amusement. "Want me to tell him anything specific?"

He shook his head weakly. "Good luck?" he suggested, not really seeing what else was appropriate. Any update on his health would worry his husband and any comment about hoping they win would put too much pressure on them.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile, like she could tell he was still struggling to accept that he wouldn't be there. "Alright, it's sent," she murmured, putting her phone away. "How's your shoulder feeling?"

"It's in a sling," Ilya reminded her, tone slightly grumpier than he intended. "Feels sore and the strap is digging into my neck."

"Hold on, I'll try to fix it for you," Yuna insisted, turning towards him and reaching for the stiff white fabric that was rubbing against the bruise on his skin. "I think I can loosen it if you lean forward a bit."

He did as he was told and she fussed with the strap, trying to adjust the little metal clip in the back that controlled the length of the sling. It gave slightly and she pulled it a bit harder,

letting out more of the fabric. She pulled it away from his neck, keeping it flat against the top of his shoulder.

In the process, Ilya stiffened, and she worried, for a moment, that she had hurt him by accident. But when she looked at him to check, he wasn't focused on his sling, only what the television some bar a few feet away was playing—footage of his injury.

"I don't ever see- I mean saw. I never saw it," he mumbled in admittance, words jumbling up again.

He couldn't have when he was supposed to stay away from screens and no one on his team seemed to want to elaborate on how bad it was.

Yuna let out a breath, remembering her own fear when she had seen it on tv. "It was scary," she commented. "Connors said the whole arena went silent."

Ilya watched the slow-motion effect they put over the hit, showing him taking an elbow to the head that slammed him against the boards. The glass shook and he fell out of frame the next second.

"I don't remember," Ilya told her, shaking his head. "I was just following the puck and then…then I was seeing Dr. Verma above me, asking me not to move too much and it went dark again until I saw Shane."

It felt like seconds, really. Or some sort of strange dream he might have while sick. Not reality. But watching a different angle show him laying there, Vic trying to shake him awake as his dislocated shoulder jostled loosely, he knew it was a lot longer for the others than it was for him.

The medics had to tear Vic away from him and when it panned to the Raiders bench, every single of his teammates was standing. Staring. They looked afraid.

"It's probably better that you weren't awake," Yuna assumed. "Less painful, at least."

He hummed, eyes still glued to the screen as he watched through the tint of his sunglasses. They took him off the ice and if there weren't a dozen fucking cameras around the arena at any given moment, there was a chance nearly no one would have noticed the small slip of his ring. But there was a close up on him, his shut eyes, parted lips, and wedding band.

No wonder the press was having such fun with his personal life.

Ilya was, honestly, not surprised that they kept filming. That even after he was gone, they focused all the lenses on his teammates, who huddled on the ice for all of five seconds before skating back over to their bench with their gloves already torn off.

"They really did just walk out," he stated, realizing it wasn't at all an exaggeration.

They hadn't fought with their coach over it or hesitated to do so, they just did it. And as it cut from them to the other team's confused expressions, the feed ended altogether abruptly.

“David and I thought there was a problem with the broadcast,” Yuna confessed. “They switched to a commercial and then they came back they said the game was over because the Raiders left the building.”

Those camera men hadn’t gotten much footage either, it seemed, before Carmichael physically covered the lens with his hand, shoving it away.

“I really screwed things up, huh?” Ilya mumbled, looking away from the replays as he felt his nausea come back for entirely different reasons. “Made them forfeit, made all the fans mad.”

“You didn’t make them walk out,” she retorted, shaking her head firmly. “They *chose* to, because they wanted to be there for you. Your fans understand that.”

Maybe not every team’s fans would, but theirs certainly had a knack for appreciating the players as people first. Especially after everything they did to try to make their experiences at the games better for them.

Feeling her pat his knee gently, he hummed contemplatively, staying quiet. He wasn’t sure if he fully believed her, but it was easier to act like he did, for now. Because the upset part of his brain, quite frankly, really needed to.

Shortly after David returned, bearing more snacks, their flight began to board. Ilya felt strange, not really doing anything as they moved through the line. David was carrying his bag and Yuna handed over his passport and ticket on his behalf without him so much as ever touching either.

He had never felt so…*handled* so to speak. There wasn’t really any other way to describe it.

Finding their seats, he buckled up, resting his head back as the fatigue began to set in. He had been antsy to get out of the hospital but just the act of going to the airport had already worn him out, the dull persistent thumping of his head not helping to make matters any easier.

“Take off will get loud, so keep your headphones on,” Yuna insisted, not that he really needed to be reminded.

He nodded, tapping on the armrest anxiously. He’d never flown with either of them, he realized. They came to visit and he had seen them a while back when the Raiders played in Ottawa, but they were never on a plane at the same time. It felt a little weird, especially without Shane nearby.

“Yuna,” Ilya mumbled, tipping his head to the side to look at her. “I just wanted to um- to say sorry for this morning, for thinking you were my mama, I was…on drugs, clearly.”

Her lips tugged into a small frown, seeing the embarrassment on his face, even behind his sunglasses. “Oh, hon,” she murmured, covering his hand with hers. “I know I can never be your mother, Ilya, but I’m still your mom in a way.”

To whatever extent he wanted to have her as one.

Even if Ilya could have found the right words to respond with and actually verbalized them without his disconnected mind fragmenting the sentence, there was no time to time, because the plane began to take off. He could hear the engines, their loudness hurting his head even though they had purposely bought seats as close to the front as possible.

Dipping his gaze to his shoes, he let out a breath, trying to focus on anything but the pain. Yuna squeezed his hand and he somehow managed to get through the takeoff, even through the discomfort of it all.

He got through the landing similarly, though the impact of hitting the tarmac had been especially brutal, shaking his sunglasses off and nearly causing him to bump his head against the seat in front of him. If David hadn't put his hand there to prevent it, he would have certainly collided with it.

If Ilya hadn't been exhausted before or during their flight, then getting back to Boston would have definitely done him in. It felt like he finally had permission to not feel well now that the sight of his own city had returned to his eyes.

"I hope that ride wasn't too bad for your vertigo," David noted, unlocking the front door, bags slung over his shoulder.

Ilya made a lazy sound of neutrality. "No worse than the one to the airport or the actual flight," he replied, finally taking his sunglasses off as they entered the house.

It was already nighttime outside, so why Yuna had demanded he continue to wear them, he wasn't sure. The lights of the city, perhaps, as they left the crowded space.

"Why don't we get you settled in, and then I'll order dinner?" Yuna suggested, only turning on a few of the warm lights. "Do you feel like eating anything specific?"

If the doctor hadn't specifically told him to watch his appetite, she probably wouldn't have paid such close attention to his meals. But after barely eating all day, aside from some packaged snacks on the plane, she wanted him to have something fresh. Even if it was something greasy or fried or generally considered unhealthy.

"Not really," he admitted, shaking his head weakly as he set his sunglasses down on the kitchen counter. "I'm not very hungry."

That was exactly what she was worried about. "How does Italian sound?" she offered anyway, knowing Shane had told her it was something that got appetite back sometimes.

"Uh- fine, I guess," Ilya muttered, realizing she used the exact same tactics as her son when he didn't like an answer. Hell, she probably taught him how to do it.

"I really liked that restaurant Shane took us to when we were here around Christmas," Yuna recalled. "You know, the one with the minestrone?"

He nodded and despite clearly not feeling much hunger, his stomach growled slightly at the thought of soup. It felt kind of cliché when sick or injured, especially since he hadn't

subscribed to the belief of eating it to feel better since his mom last gave it to him, but it did sound *nearly* good.

“I could…do soup, maybe,” he agreed after a moment, absentmindedly rubbing his shoulder to try to ease the ache in it.

She suppressed a smile, but it was still there. “I’ll pick up your prescriptions too, while I’m out,” she added. “The pharmacies around here are open late, right?”

“Until nine,” Ilya told her. “You really don’t have to go to all the trouble; I can get it delivered tomorrow.”

“You should have them tonight,” Yuna insisted.

Glancing over his shoulder as she saw her husband appearing, sans the bag he’d disappeared with a few moments ago. Crossing through the house, he leaned on counter, looking pretty weary himself after the day they’d all had.

“Your stuff is in your room,” David informed him. “But I took out your clothes and put them in the laundry room, I’ll sort them later and do a quick wash.”

He blinked, trying to shake his head without it getting sore. “No, that’s really not necessary,” he clarified. “I can- I’ll do it.”

“No one is saying you can’t, sweetie,” Yuna assured him. “Just that you don’t have to while we’re here.”

His focus was supposed to be on getting better, not worrying about picking up his own medications or figuring out what he’d manage to eat. And if taking care of those little mundane nuances for him led to a quicker recovery, then neither Yuna nor David had a problem with it.

“Whi- yes but you are not…” Ilya made a vague gesture, his head feeling a bit fried again. “Here isn’t…you don’t stay for size- because of size,” he pieced together poorly, despite having a decent sentence in his mind.

It was pretty common knowledge that there was only one bedroom. When Ilya bought his house, he wasn’t ever expecting anyone to move in with him, let alone host overnight guests, so only having one room wasn’t a very big deal back then. It became slightly inconveniencing when they came to visit but they always stayed at Shane’s apartment, so it worked out fine.

Yuna glanced at the sofa before looking back at Ilya. “When David and I were first married and broke, our bed was smaller than that couch,” she stated. “We’ll be fine.”

Besides, a few nights without a therapeutic mattress wouldn’t kill her. She’d rather be close by, in case he had problems sleeping or started feeling dizzier like the doctor said could happen.

"…" Ilya just blinked at her for a moment in silence, too tired to fight her, despite feeling horrible for making them think this kind of attention was necessary. "Okay," he eventually conceded, still sounding slightly confused.

She grabbed her purse off the counter. "I'll take Shane's car," she said. "Be back soon."

He heard the door shut and just kind of stood there for a moment, a bit dazed for reasons that had nothing to do with his brain being turned into scrambled eggs on the ice. After a moment, though, he felt David's hand gently touching his back, guiding him towards the living room.

Ilya sat down, immediately feeling a wave of relief at the familiarity of his couch.

"You've just witnessed what Shane and I like to call *'Rainstorm Yuna'*," David explained, the couch dipping as he sat beside him. "She comes out of nowhere and gets a little overwhelming, but when all is said and done, the plants are a little happier afterwards."

Some people found storms overbearing or intrusive while others considered them soothing, even providing a sense of warmth or safety. He supposed he had always been the latter, taking comfort in his wife's ability to navigate any situation with a steady center.

"Is…a lot," Ilya murmured with remorse. "Sorry."

He felt terrible for not being able to want or accept her help as easily as she was offering to give it. But it just felt like so much attention that he wasn't sure what to do with it. He knew it was probably coming across as unappreciative, though, even if he wasn't trying to be.

David nodded understandingly. "If you feel coddled or hovered over, then tell us," he insisted. "We're trying to help you the way we help Shane because it's all we've known, but if you need something different than that's fine. We all want the same thing here, which is for you to be back in skates as quickly as possible."

He nodded in agreement. "It just takes me a long time to let people in," he admitted. "And there are…sides, I guess, that I let them see. Injured is not one of them. Makes me lazy or weak and I don't like to be thought of like that."

Not even in front of his friends or in front of Shane. Sick, maybe, that was his immune system, and he could act like it wasn't because of him directly. But getting taken out of the game because he wasn't paying close enough attention or didn't have enough skill to avoid the elbow coming directly towards him, was his own fault.

"It's not weak to accept help," David told him steadily. "And you aren't lazy for taking care of your health. Both of those things can be extremely difficult."

They made him a much stronger person than he seemed to believe.

Ilya's lips tugged to the side, hesitating to be completely honest, because even in front of his father-in-law it still felt a bit too much disclosure. "What if…my mind stays like this and I can't play hockey again?" he wondered softly, voice laced with fear. "Or I can play but- but not like I do now."

He honestly couldn't decide which sounded worse. Retiring already scared him and the thought of the choice being ripped away from him was even more terrifying, but being back out there without his usual ability would just make him an embarrassment to his team and the league.

"What is you do play again and the rest makes you an even stronger player?" David countered, head tipping to look at him.

Ilya huffed weakly, looking down. "You are optimistic."

He hummed gently, shrugging. "Maybe a little," he concurred. "But that was a pretty big word, and you managed to say it without any trouble."

He scrunched his nose. "I don't understand it," he confessed. "I always have this idea in my mind and sometimes they come out right and other times I hear things I wasn't trying to say at all."

The wrong order or the wrong word entirely. Part of the word but not all of it, like his brain knew it but forgot halfway or just chose not to finish it for some reason. It was worse than when he was learning English because now, he knew what he wanted to say and how it should sound, he just couldn't always make it work and didn't know when it would or wouldn't.

"Your brain is healing," David reminded him. "That's no less of a real injury just because you can't see it. Maybe trying to analyze it is less important than just trying to retrain it to work again."

"I am going to have to do crosswords and sudoku like you, aren't I?" he grumbled, not quite complaining but clearly not thrilled with the idea.

David chuckled slightly. "Maybe," he murmured, patting his arm softly. "I have a feeling it won't be all that bad, though."

Ilya sure as hell hoped so. "Can I put something on the tv or will I get in trouble?" he wondered, reaching for the remote.

"Something quiet with muted colors," he replied apologetically. "And be honest, if it starts to hurt your head."

For some, not entirely unfounded reason, he was pretty sure Ilya wouldn't outright admit if he was getting dizzy or his pain worsened from the screen. Not unless it was dragged out of him.

Nodding in agreement, Ilya turned the television on, sorting through the streaming services. "Fine," he agreed reluctantly.

He scrolled for a while, until he found something old from the fifties that was sure to be a bit less disruptive than anything else he'd find. Keeping the volume low and the subtitles on, he

settled back against the sofa, grabbing the blanket off the back of it. He fussed with it, trying to get comfortable as the intro credits rolled.

“Do you like classic movies?” David wondered after a few minutes of silence, his curiosity getting the best of him.

Ilya shrugged, fixing the strap of his sling again. “I would watch some of them when I first got to America,” he admitted. “Sometimes, the language eased- was easier, I mean. To learn.”

Of course, that also meant he was sometimes unsure what words were still used and which ones were outdated. The occasional slip of some less common sayings had gotten him teased a couple times by his teammates, even Varkov and Kovalev.

David hummed, arms folded comfortably as the film played. He could see, out of the corner of his eye, when Ilya would occasionally glance away during a scene with flashing lights, but he didn’t see overly bothered by the sound. That was good, he hoped.

They were nearly forty minutes into it, halfway through, when the garage door opened. Yuna came in shortly after, boxes in one hand and pharmacy bags in her other.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder, immediately reaching to pull his blanket off and get up to help her. Before he could, however, David pushed his hand back down, beating him to it.

He huffed slightly, watching him help his wife set stuff down on the counter while muttering something to her that Ilya couldn’t hear at a distance. What it was must have been a question, though, because Yuna nodded slightly in response, gesturing to the medication she’d brought home.

Ilya paused the movie entirely, unable to concentrate between the two of them. He watched as Yuna filled a glass with water for him, carrying it over along with his medicine.

“So, we’ve got nausea, vertigo, and pain,” she remarked, setting down the cup. “This one is supposed to be taken with food and the others don’t specify.”

“How often do I take them?” he wondered, his palm extended as she cracked open each bottle, pulling a pill out of each.

Yuna scrunched her nose. “Different times for all of them, unfortunately,” she replied. “You can take another of these two before bed,” she explained pointing to them individually. “This one you need to wait until tomorrow. By then you can take all three at breakfast again.”

Ilya nodded, reaching for his water and popping the pills into his mouth. He hoped beyond belief that they’d work fast, maybe even settle his stomach enough that he could enjoy the soup he could smell in the kitchen as David put dinner together.

“Thank you for picking them up,” he murmured. “And food, too.”

“Are you feeling a little hungrier?” Yuna asked hopefully, watching him tip his head either way in uncertainty. “Well, either way, we’ll see what you want and keep the rest in the fridge.”

It wasn't like leftovers couldn't be reheated later in he started to grow hungry later tonight or tomorrow afternoon.

Shuffling across the house, David handed him a bowl filled with soup, wrapped in a towel to keep it from burning. "Careful, it's hot," he told him, glancing at his wife. "Sit, I'll grab yours too."

Setting down the bottles of medication, Yuna sat down on the couch, looking at the television. "Should you really be watching a full movie right now?" she questioned.

Ilya wrinkled his nose. "David said it was okay," he replied, throwing him under the busy. "And it's not hurting my head, I swear. I look away for colors- bright scenes," he amended quickly.

She hummed skeptically, stealing some of his blanket. "I guess it's alright then," she murmured, reaching for the remote a hitting play.

He took a small sip of his soup, the broth as hot as he was warned about. It was good, though, even as it burned his tongue. Flavorful but not nauseating. At least, not to the same extent most other things had been all day.

A few moments later, David came back, passing Yuna a plate of pasta and garlic knots. He sat back down on the other side of Ilya, trying to catch up to the couple of minutes he missed in the movie.

Ilya kept sipping, slowly, his eyes wandering to their plates occasionally. Yuna must have noticed, he assumed, because she passed him part of her garlic knot without even asking if he wanted it.

"Thanks," he mumbled, taking it sheepishly and trying a bite.

Yuna just nodded, patting his arm softly. She didn't want to force him to eat or put too much pressure on him to finish more than he wanted, but as he refocused on the television, spoon dipping back into his bowl, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have to worry about it tonight.

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The Raiders returned to Boston a week later with one win and two losses added to their division standing. The automatic win they handed to Vegas had hurt, but they expected the backlash. And Anaheim was a shocker, but they were able to get over it because at least, if nothing else, they beat Tampa.

That was the singular good thing that seemed to come out of their road trip.

"It was a good shutout," Yuna praised, glancing at him as she drove them home. "We had to keep the volume down for Ilya, but he was thrilled."

His lips tugged into a sad smile. "I think we all just wanted to win for him, you know?" he muttered, studying her for a second. "I can't believe you wouldn't let him come to the airport with you."

To Shane's knowledge, Ilya had been nearly under house arrest since his injury. He could leave for walks to help with his balance and coordination, but anything further than the grocery store was off limits in case it was overstimulating to his senses.

"If the neurologist says he's fine to handle long distances, then he can go anywhere he wants," she responded. "Until then, cars are off limits."

The last time they'd driven anywhere far with him, he started to get dizzy and even asked them to pull over so he could get out and have some fresh air. Since then, she'd been a little worried they might repeat the incident.

"That's another thing I can't believe," Shane retorted, gesturing to her. "You're driving my car in Boston and don't even have the maps on. How many miles have you put on it while I was gone to know the area this well?"

His mom huffed in amusement. "I don't know, I've just been around town a bit," she claimed. "Went to the store a few times because Ilya kept changing his mind about what sounded good to eat and we thought some of those puzzle books would be good for him, so your father and I had to hunt for them."

"You got Ilya to do one of those books voluntarily?" he questioned skeptically, not fully believing her. "And he didn't rip his curls out?"

Yuna shrugged, pulling the car into the garage. "He's on his second one, actually," she replied. "He does them with your dad when the television starts to hurt his head."

Which, thankfully, happened less these days. But he still did the puzzles anyway. They were helping his coherency improve quite a bit. Or rather, having conversations about them with David helped him improve. Either way, it was a noticeable difference to a few days ago.

Shane wrinkled his nose, the thought so difficult to imagine that he couldn't even conjure it in his mind if he tried. "I don't know what Ilya and dad doing sudoku together looks like," he admitted.

"They were opening it when I left," Yuna replied, putting the car into park. "I'd bet they're still working on."

Unbuckling his seatbelt, he grabbed his bag off the floor in front of him and shut the car door behind him. It felt a little odd to have his mom locking it, instead of feeling the keys in his own hands, but she'd insisted and he wasn't going to tell her no. Especially not after the flight he just had.

Pushing the door open, Shane stuck his head around the corner. He expected Ilya to be on him in a second but instead, he just saw his husband sitting at the kitchen counter with his father leaning on it. They were both laser-focused on the sudoku in front of them, a pen in either hand.

"No, there's seven there already," Ilya mumbled, pointing to it with the cap of his pen. "Maybe three?"

David shook his head, tapping the page. “There’s a three horizontally,” he replied, humming in contemplation. “Has to be a five, I think.”

“Ah, five,” he muttered, nodding and filling it in. “Makes the other a one, no?”

“Mhm, definitely a one,” David agreed, jotting it down since it was closer to him.

Shane dropped his bag with a thud by the garage door, hoping to garner a little attention. As it hit the floor, both of them raised their heads, turning to look at him. To his credit, Ilya’s eyes did seem to light up a bit.

Setting his pen down, he slid out of his chair and Shane could see the way he kept ahold of the counter to stabilize himself. Ilya’s fingers grazed the length of it, eventually falling off the edge as he rushed over. He wrapped his arms around his husband, squeezing him tightly.

Shane let his hand cradle the back of his head, letting himself have a moment or two of relief before he pulled away. “How are you feeling?” he wondered, fussing with his curls. “How’s your arm? I don’t see your sling.”

“It feels mostly better,” he assured it. “I took it off a couple days ago and it’s been fine.”

The bruise on his collarbone hadn’t fully disappeared, but it was certainly lighter and didn’t hurt nearly as much to accidentally put pressure on. He was sure that, of all his problems, his shoulder was the least of them, but it still brought him a sense of peace to know he had all but healed from the dislocation and soreness.

“And your head?” Shane asked, eyes scrutinizing him closely.

Despite his mom’s constant updates and the calls, he made to his husband whenever possible, he was still worried they might have been trying to pacify him while he was traveling so he didn’t lose his composure during a game.

“It’s alright, really,” Ilya insisted. “I’m not messing up my words as much and I’m not taking my nausea medication anymore.”

He glanced at his dad, like he needed verification from someone trustworthy.

David nodded in affirmation. “He got his appetite back pretty quickly, but we made him take it for a few days anyway, just to be safe.”

“See?” Ilya teased. “Making a very speedy recovery.”

“My mom said you couldn’t handle a twenty-minute car ride two days ago,” he retorted flatly, more out of concern than judgement. “There’s still some recovering to be done, I think.” For his balance, clearly.

Ilya frowned slightly. “A little,” he mumbled. “But I am getting better, I swear.”

That much, Shane knew was true. The windows were partially open, even on a bright day, and his eyes weren’t struggling to focus, forced with harsh blinks. Ilya just looked more

together overall.

“I know you are,” he murmured, pecking his lips softly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be home all week.”

It had eaten at him for the whole trip, honestly, making him feel like he was completely ignoring the part of their vows that promised to be there in sickness and in health. It was the first, and hopefully last, injury he’d seen Ilya take like that, and he wasn’t there to make sure he was resting and taking care of himself.

“You beat Tampa and that is *far more* important than my head,” Ilya reminded him, glancing over his shoulder at Yuna, who was putting her purse down on the counter. “Besides, you brought me good substitutes.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty good at taking care of people,” he agreed with a small nod, dropping his voice slightly. “Even if they go a little overboard sometimes.”

Shane’s mom glared at him. “I’m old, not deaf,” she reminded him.

“Yes, be nice to your parents,” Ilya insisted. “They’ve been sleeping on my couch for a week like crazy people and has- have not complained once despite my…*unwillingness* to be a patient.”

He slipped up briefly, but managed to catch his own mistake quickly, not even needing a second to correct it the way he did last week. It was a small but noticeable difference.

“He was just fine,” David assured them both. “We figured out a good rhythm by the third day.”

“I’m glad it was alright,” Shane remarked, lips tugging to the side. “Thank you guys for helping out; I know it was—”

“Sweetheart, I love you but the next words out of your mouth better not be another unfounded accusation of us being inconvenienced,” Yuna warned before he could get the words out. “I don’t know where the two of you get those ideas from.”

Maybe it was because they were used to being the individuals who people counted on, instead of the ones asking for help. Or maybe it was because for a long time, neither of them felt like they had this kind of support behind them. She wasn’t sure but wanted both of them to realize how entirely untrue it was.

“Sorry, mom,” he apologized weakly, letting his husband sit back down before he got too woozy from standing. “Thank you…end of sentence.”

She nodded in approval of his decision. “Much better,” she noted, glancing at Ilya and back at her son. “Are you planning to take him to his neurologist appointment or do you want us to?”

“I can do it,” Shane assured her, already feeling like he hadn’t quite been pulling his weight, lately. “You guys have a flight out tonight or tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” David answered. “Thought it would be nice to have dinner with both our boys’ before heading home.”

He smiled, a little glad to know they were going to be around a bit longer. “Good, I’d like that,” he agreed, glancing at his watch. “Neurologist is at two, right? I have time to get the plane germs off me?”

“That isn’t a real thing when you fly privately,” Ilya retorted, barely suppressing his eyeroll. “But yes, it’s at two; you can change. Oh, and take your time,” he urged. “We have more numbers to find in our sudoku.”

Shane huffed, biting back a teasing remark that would undoubtably earn him a scowl. Instead, he just bent down again to kiss his cheek, nodding in agreement. Grabbing his bag off the floor, he headed towards the bedroom to unpack and take a quick shower, but glanced over his shoulder one more time, catching his husband and dad mumbling at each other as his mom just observed.

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Their appointment at the neurologist had gone about as well as Shane could have hoped for. The doctor said the improvement in his symptoms was a good sign and a few days later they received the results of his repeated MRI, which showed his injury had almost completely disappeared.

Ilya still wasn’t content with it, though. Mostly because the doctor also said he wanted another two weeks of rest before letting him back on the ice. That he wanted him to wait before even returning to the rink, let alone playing.

And despite trying his best to make those two weeks bearable, Shane knew it wasn’t. He knew it drove Ilya crazy to stay home and watch the Raiders on tv and it hurt each time he had leave for practice or a game. Especially when they had a few more out-of-town games.

Ilya didn’t need anyone to stay with him, able to keep up with his mental exercises alone, but it was still difficult for him to be home when his husband was in Philadelphia and Carolina. Even when the team was in Boston and dropped by or took him to lunch, he could tell how much he had missed in such a short amount of time.

So, when his doctor finally gave him permission, after three long weeks of recovery, to skate again, he didn’t hesitate. He didn’t really even give Shane the opportunity to say no or tell him to take it easy, forcing him to go to the arena with him the minute he was cleared.

“How is it?” Shane wondered, following his husband closely as he made his way around the rim of the rink. “Do you feel okay?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed, eyes drifting between him and the ice. “Weird.”

“Weird how?” he questioned, tipping his head in confusion.

Ilya shrugged, not quite wobbling, but doing something along the lines of hesitating. “It just…feels unsteady,” he replied cautiously, like he was afraid of Shane’s response.

He was, in many ways, worried that Shane would try to talk him out of coming back so soon. Everything he did, he did in hopes that his husband wouldn’t insist on more rest because Ilya genuinely didn’t know how to survive another day inside.

He had gone for so many walks during the morning and afternoon lately that his step count was higher than Shane’s.

“Does it feel like you’re going to fall?” Shane asked, inching closer in case he needed to grab onto him suddenly.

Ilya shook his head, still stable even if he clearly seemed a little distressed. “More like it’s shifting or something,” he murmured, getting a bit stiffer. “I know it’s not real, I’m imagining it but I- I need to stop for a moment.”

Abruptly, he skidded to a stop, tipping forward for a moment before he got his balance back quickly. Even so, the fact that he had struggled at all was somehow confirming his worst fears. That he wasn’t the player he was before his accident.

“It’s alright,” Shane assured him, taking his hand. “I’ve got you.”

He tightened his grip, letting out a slow breath to try to keep himself from getting upset. “I didn’t forget how to skate,” he reminded him, even though it sort of seemed like it was more for his own benefit. “I’m a good skater.”

“I know you are,” Shane agreed, nodding. “You’re just getting used to the ice again, is all. You’ve been away for a while; it’s going to take some time.”

“Время, время, время. Мне надоело, что все обсуждают время,” he complained bitterly. “I’ve already given away enough of my time. I can’t lose more of it.”

Not when they were guaranteed a spot in the playoffs as their last four games came up. He needed to be there for them. He had to be back in the rink and not as some mostly healed version, but as himself. Because if he came back for playoffs and skated the way he was right now, he’d be ridiculed.

“Hey, breathe,” Shane insisted. “You are *not* losing time; you’re recovering from a brain injury. And no one expects you to be—”

“Of course, they expect me to be!” Ilya interjected sharply. “Be fast, be strategic, be focused. They expect me to score and be…be me. But I don’t feel like me, Shane. I look at the ice and I’m fucking terrified of it. What if the next hit I take, I don’t recover from? What if I let my team down? What if I let *you* down?”

What if his entire career, every record he’s broken and every achievement he’s obtained was washed away because of this one mistake?

He could practically hear it, the way people would say his name. Talk about him like the player who could have made the hall of fame and then suddenly fell off his game and started playing worse than the fiftieth rookie picked in the draft.

“Look at me,” Shane murmured, physically raising Ilya’s chin to force him to. “The *only* thing you could ever do that would let me now, is if you give up on yourself. On *our* team.”

He huffed weakly, struggling to believe him no matter how much he wanted to. “Marly is a good captain, isn’t he?” he countered. “You’re still winning. Anaheim was a fluke.”

Since then, they’d been raking in steady points. Maybe they didn’t win four or five in a row, but they were staying where they always were in the rankings. At the top.

Shane looked at him like he had lost his mind. “I know you think we’re handling things without you, but we’re not. We’re fighting tooth and nail for every win,” he told him. “And Marlow *fucking hates* being captain.”

He had told Shane, not long after their third game without Ilya, that he felt like a traitor. Even if he was stepping up and doing the job he knew he had to, it didn’t feel like it belonged to him.

Their numbers weren’t helping their morale, either. Sure, they pulled off some victories, but they weren’t scoring goal after goal like usual. They hadn’t had a single shutout game since they played Tampa.

“Marly hates everything at first,” Ilya insisted, rolling his eyes.

“Not like this,” he retorted, shaking his head. “There’s not a single day that goes by that the guys don’t badger me with questions about you, how you’re feeling, when you’re coming back. We need you, Ilya.”

Not just for his skill but for everything he represented, too. It felt like something was missing when he wasn’t there and everyone could feel the impact it had, not having his pregame chats and intermission games.

Ilya let out a sigh of disagreement. “You need who I was three weeks ago,” he corrected. “Before I forgot how both Russian and English work and stopped knowing how to count.”

“That was then,” Shane reminded him, jostling his hand around. “This is right now, after you’ve been medically cleared and your symptoms have subsided.”

“Oh, you think feeling the rink moving under me is not a side effect then?” he quipped sardonically. “I am fucking hallucinating, Shane.”

“Because you’re afraid, not because something is wrong with you,” he stated firmly.

Shane tugged on Ilya’s hand, trying to get him to sit down on the ice. Maybe if he could feel it while seeming a bit more stable, he’d realize that whatever he was experiencing was just his mind playing tricks on him. It wasn’t reality, just like his assumption that the Raiders could handle losing him wasn’t true.

Reluctantly, he followed his husband's silent instructions. The ice was cold as he felt it under his legs and he untangled their hands, running his fingertips over the thin divots made by his blades earlier.

"What if you're wrong?" Ilya questioned, his voice quieter. "What is something really is not right with me?"

He stared at him, watching him trace the ice absentmindedly. "I'm not wrong," he responded immediately, before pausing for a second or two. "Did you know when Marlow broke my collarbone, I spent four weeks in therapy?"

Ilya's head darted up quickly. "What?"

"I went to talk to someone, because it fucked with my head so badly," Shane confessed, thinking back to it. "The Metros kept telling me how much they needed me back and they didn't realize that every time I thought about getting off injury leave, I felt more dread than excitement."

About returning to his team, coming back to the game that caused his mother's fear and his father's constant attention. He wasn't just wary; he was downright terrified about how they would act once they realized he was playing differently.

Injuries did that. They put players inside their own heads and made them fear odds that were relatively slim compared to the number of games they'd have in their career.

"What did you talk about?" Ilya wondered hesitantly, not wanting to overstep. "With the therapist or whoever?"

"Mostly we just worked through my pretending, I think," he told him, picking at the hem of his shirt. "I kept acting like I was fine around my parents and my team, but I was getting panic attacks and on the ice I was different. Safer. I played like I didn't trust anyone, even on my own team."

He wouldn't outright blame anyone, not even Marlow for what happened to him. It had been a clean, accidental injury. But his defensemen, who should have been there, weren't. And it felt, for a long time, that if he wanted to avoid getting hurt, he had to play the game alone, relying only on himself for everything.

"How'd you get over it?" Ilya asked, eventually pulling his hand away from the ice when his fingertips began to feel increasingly number.

Shane shrugged. "Therapy helped a little bit, I think. Talking about it with someone who I didn't feel capable of letting down made me feel more comfortable," he admitted. "But mostly, it was you and the Raiders. I think I was doing a decent job of hiding my fear, but it didn't completely disappear until I moved here."

Until he learned that his team actually had his back and there was nothing they wouldn't do to make sure each other were taken care of if something happened. That was what had caused him to start resembling himself again, going for more drastic plays and taking extra risks.

Ilya glanced around the arena, the silence of it almost unnerving compared to the constant noise they heard and blocked out during games. “You’re saying I’m self-sabotaging, out of fear, the way you did?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Not quite the way I was planning to put it, but yeah,” he agreed softly. “I know you feel a lot of pressure and a lot of it is pretty real. From the other teams and coach. But the guys, they just want their friend back.”

And if there was ever going to be a group of people who understood his fear, who would accommodate to ensure he felt as little of it as necessary, it would be the Raiders.

“Even if I’m not myself yet?” Ilya wondered, still worried that, to some extent, his worth was tied to his ability to score a goal.

“Even then,” Shane affirmed. “But you don’t know yet, whether you’re yourself or not. This is an empty rink, where you can think inside the silence. It’s not the same as a game, when your instincts are more important.”

He sighed, scrubbing his face. “I’m just worried it will be even worse with the noise,” he confessed. “That I won’t be able to concentrate, or I’ll suddenly forgot how to count again and- and lose track of people or the puck.”

His husband nodded understandingly. “But you don’t have any way of knowing until you play,” he reminded him. “And you won’t be out there alone; you’ll have me, Marlow, Kov… we’ll all be right there.”

Ilya stayed quiet for a few moments before eventually leaning forward and pressing a kiss on his lips. “Thank you,” he murmured. “For settling my thoughts.”

It wasn’t the first and certainly wouldn’t be the last time he needed to be talked out of the way he was thinking or feeling, but it never meant any less when Shane took the time.

Huffing, Shane ran his fingertips over Ilya’s jawline. “Anytime.”

Hauling himself up, Ilya dusted the loose ice from his pants. He blew out a deep breath as he glanced back at the ice, trying to remind himself of the comfort it brought him instead of looking at it like it was his enemy.

It hurt him once, sure, but that didn’t erase the decades of peace it gave him. The memories of his mama cheering when he didn’t need help, that first commercial he did with Shane all those years ago, the Stanely he’d lifted with his best friends.

“Come on,” Shane suggested, reaching for his hands as he got up. “We’ve got nowhere else to be all day, we can stay for as long as you want.”

Ilya took his husband’s hands, squeezing both of them as he pushed off his skates, trying to get used to the feeling again. Three weeks might have felt like it wiped it out decades of experience, but he knew it didn’t. He was good on his blades; he just needed to remember that.

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Ilya was walking back through the arena only two days later for his first game after being medically cleared to play when he saw the hoard of reporters already waiting for him. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it or if they had truly doubled in size, but either way, there looked like there was more than usual.

A week ago, the bright lights of their cameras would have killed his head, but now it had simply become a nuisance again. It, if he was being honest, kind of made his stomach churn with nerves.

But he was doing his absolute best to hide it behind the kind of self-assurance they expected from him, both in how he walked and the way he reacted to seeing them. Annoyed and inconvenienced. That wasn't at all difficult to fake because it was exactly how he felt.

Ilya gestured for them to scoot back a few feet, pulling his bag off his shoulder and dropping it by the wall. "Alright fine," he conceded in exasperation. "Let's get it over with, yes? You're not seeing me in between or after the game."

He knew, the way pretty much everyone did, that the media hadn't left him alone in three weeks. They were making assumptions about how he must feel knowing his team threw a game for him and constantly posting updates the organization released about his status on injury leave.

If they weren't harping on either of those, then they were speculating about his wedding ring.

They were tying him back to models, mostly, as well as a few journalists he got too flirtatious with four or five years ago. They even, occasionally, threw in some nice girl he honestly didn't even remember meeting. For kicks, he supposed.

In other words, there was no way he was going to get through this game in peace until he got them to leave him the hell alone.

"What do you have to say about the wedding ring seen hanging around your neck in Vegas?" a man with gray hair asked, starting with a bang. "Can you confirm you're married or engaged?"

Ilya expected nothing less, honestly. "No comment on it," he replied shaking his head.

Some woman forced her microphone through the rest of the bunch. "Is it true you got cleared to play last week and chose to delay your return?"

He furrowed his eyebrows in disgust and confusion. "No," he stated firmly. "I was given permission by my doctor three days ago; this is the soonest I've been allowed to be here. If I could have come back sooner, safely, I would have."

Even if it terrified him slightly and part of his brain was still trying to convince him that he wasn't capable of playing tonight. He was still here because the part of him that was scared

was overshadowed by an innate need to not let his teammates down or miss any of their last few games before playoffs.

“How long have you been seeing your current partner?” a guy with a rather hideous colored vest wondered.

Ilya glared at him. “No comment on it,” he repeated.

He was sure it must be exciting for them to think they might be able to publish something no one else knew, but they had to know by now that he didn’t respond well to constant badgering. If anything, it only made him less likely to answer the rest of their questions.

“What was the relationship like with your team while you were away?” another woman, one with red hair, chimed in. “Did you see any support from them or were they too busy with the end of the season?”

Ilya tilted his head. “Why are you people always trying to make drama between us?” he countered in confusion. “My team has been very supportive and have been managing under very difficult circumstances for everyone involved.”

“Do you hold any animosity towards Vegas for potentially threatening the Raiders season after all the hard work your team has put in?” she followed up quickly before anyone else could beat her to it.

He practically scoffed. “Does our season really look threatened?” he wondered sarcastically. “Last I checked we’ve already made playoffs.”

If, by some miracle, they were knocked out of the top place, they’d still get to play in the first round. They were already, according to Shane and Marlow, planning how they were going to make it through to the second round.

An extraordinarily tall man that Ilya didn’t recognize had to actually lean down to ask, “Do you care about the pictures of you and Issabelle Thatcher that have resurfaced?”

“No comment,” Ilya gritted out. “Stay on hockey.”

God, out of every woman they could ask about, they went and picked the one he was never actually romantically involved with. He could appreciate the irony of it.

“How do you feel about playing against Buffalo in your first game back, given their recent winning streak puts them two games behind you in the division?” someone piped up from the back, so far away he couldn’t even see them.

Ilya shrugged with very little effort. “I mean, good for them?” he replied with a blasé tone. “Took an entire season to catch up but better late than never and all that.”

He, honestly, didn’t actually expect them to take first place in their division. They’d have to win two out of the final three games of the season while the Raiders conversely lost the same amount. It was improbable, to say the least. Plus, he wasn’t *letting* it happen.

A woman nearby chimed in, asking, “What was the process of getting these recent improvements to the arena made and do you take credit for the reason Boston is now ranked the most enjoyable arena in the league?”

He blinked, actually unaware that it had been noticed to that extent. “Is it really? Wow,” he mumbled. “Uh- no, I don’t take credit for it. The whole team wanted these changes to be made and as for the process we just spoke with the right people, and the organization was more than happy to hear us out and help make this a better place for all the fans.”

It wasn’t exactly true, but just because he didn’t actively try to obtain good press didn’t mean he was going to throw the whole organization under the bus after things had settled down for a while.

“Is there any truth to the rumor your wife or fiancée may be here tonight or has been here for games in the past sitting in a different area?” a guy towards his right asked. “Your reserved seats have been empty all season.”

“I’m sorry, did you miss the lesson in third grade where they’re supposed to teach you how to respect people’s privacy?” Ilya retorted rhetorically. “I said stick to hockey.”

He picked up his back, waving the cameras away as he tried to push past them.

The man perked up in disappointment. “Wait-”

“No comment,” Ilya repeated, shaking his head in irritation.

Walking off, he was pretty sure he heard some of them pestering the man who had been responsible for ending their interviews. Even if the guy hadn’t annoyed him, he probably still would have left, though.

But he didn’t feel the need to tell any of them that. It might have been a good lesson to listen when they were told not to ask about something that he didn’t want to discuss.

Walking into the locker room, the commotion softened instantly, followed by an immediate wave of more. He couldn’t quite make out everything they said, but he heard a “Finally,” and “Thank God,” thrown around.

Ilya chuckled, just walking towards his cubby. “I wasn’t on the brink of death,” he reminded them in amusement. “It’s not a miracle that I’m here.”

“No? Why does it feel like one, then?” Carmichael quipped, putting a hand on his shoulder and leaning his jaw on Ilya’s other. “Glad you’re back, cap,” he added more sincerely.

“Me too,” he admitted earnestly, unzipping his bag. “Feels like it’s been a lot longer than three weeks.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Dubek agreed dryly, gesturing to Marlow. “Marly’s had like four mental breakdowns as captain. I think he was one game away from forcing the rest of us to play rock, paper, scissors for the job.”

Not that any of them wanted it. It was a stressful enough position under regular circumstances, let alone when they were in their last few games and coping with a missing player.

Marlow glared at him. “I handled it just fine, thank you very much, Bek,” he retorted. “I didn’t like it, but we weren’t falling apart or anything.”

The team, at least. He had a few questionable moments himself that he was sure none of them would soon forget about or let go of. It had been, admittedly, much harder to step up than he thought it would be. Even though he knew exactly how much Ilya did, actually enacting the same routines and plans wasn’t simple by any means.

“The press seems to think we are, though,” Kovalev threw out, already fussing with the padding on his arms. “They’re worse than usual.” About everything.

“Tell me about it, I just got ambushed by a small mob,” Ilya muttered in annoyance. “They’re far too curious about where and why I’m hiding my secret wife.”

Feller snorted a laugh. “You should tell them her name is Jane,” he teased, much to Shane’s chagrin.

“Original,” Shane replied sarcastically, throwing his sports tape at his teammates head.

Feller threw his hands up, barricading his face as the spool came hurtling across the room. It smacked his forearm, bouncing off and hitting the floor before he lowered his limbs.

“Wow, wow, did you see that, Ilya?” Kohn exclaimed, watching the tape roll across the ground. “Your husband is being violent.”

“So?” Ilya wondered nonchalantly. “Seemed deserved, if you ask me.”

Feller wrinkled his nose, reaching to grab the tape before it slipped under one of their cubbies and became impossible to retrieve. “And spousal privileges once again prevail,” he remarked.

He tossed the roll back towards Shane, using far less force than it had been chucked at him with.

“Honestly, though, any plans on how to handle the media?” Varkov asked curiously, glancing up from where he was lacing up his skates. “Just ignore it until they give up?”

That might, at best, take months. Maybe longer. They were known to be persistent, especially when they found something as interesting as this about a player known to be quite private.

“Honestly hadn’t given it much thought,” Ilya replied with a shrug. “It doesn’t feel like any of their business, you know?”

“Nothing we do off the ice is,” Sebbin clarified dully, snacking on a pack of children’s fruit snacks. “But it doesn’t keep them from bothering us, anyway. You might have to tell them something, just to get them to back off.”

Ilya grimaced slightly, the very thought of telling them anything, even a lie or excuse, felt like compromising a pretty steadfast rule they all stuck to. Still, they had a point. He'd probably have to consider making some kind of statement, to take the heat off if nothing else.

"Problems for later," Ilya insisted, gesturing vaguely. "Let's focus on Buffalo, yes? Reporters say they've been catching up, lately. I don't like that."

He wanted their last few games to be just as strong as their first couple had been several months ago, which meant putting his personal stuff aside and paying attention to what was right in front of him.

Hammersmith nodded in agreement, tugging his jersey on over his padding. "Let's kick their asses then," he suggested.

There was a chorus of agreement, but Shane still caught Ilya taking a deep breath before leaving the locker room. He was anxious, even if he wouldn't admit it.

There were nearly twenty-two thousand people in their arena tonight and hundreds of thousands more watching at home, having missed his presence over the last few weeks. That was a lot of pressure to put on anyone. Specially someone who already felt the weight of the entire team on his shoulders.

Shane squeezed his arm before they left, murmuring into his ear, "Just breathe, you'll be fine."

Ilya nodded weakly, hoping no one else noticed the nerves the way his husband did. Even if he trusted his team not to think less of him for being anxious, he didn't want their faith in him to be shaken or for them to think he wasn't ready to be back yet.

He heard the crowd before seeing any of them, the familiar overlap of commotion sending a rush of adrenaline through him that he knew wouldn't wear off until after the game ended later. It almost looked bigger, in a way, than it normally did.

Or maybe he was just finally noticing how many twenty-two thousand people actually was. Because there were, frankly, a lot of people. Most of whom were Boston fans and therefore had pretty damn high expectations.

Ilya's heart stopped for a split second when his blades hit the ice, terrified that spending an entire day in the rink wouldn't be good enough to remind his brain how skating worked. But he felt solid on his feet, pulse settling ever so slightly as he glided around their side of the rink for a moment just to get used to the feeling again.

His eyes caught a few signs pressed to the glass, welcoming him back or making clever play on words with his name and jersey number. Things he was used to seeing but didn't realize how badly he actually needed now that his confidence was a little shaken.

"Looks like we're not the only ones who missed you," Vic noted, skating with him, blades facing backwards as they passed the puck back and forth.

Ilya huffed softly. “Guess not,” he murmured in relief, eyes darting between the disc and the different signs he could see. “Can’t believe they spend so much time on some of them.”

He hummed, nodding in agreement. “I don’t have a creative bone in my body,” he joked, eyeing some of them. “Why do you think I play hockey?”

Laughing, Ilya kept the puck instead of passing it back, stopping by the boards and planting it on the edge of his stick. He tossed it into the air, over the top of the glass for a little kid whose sign was ridiculously large.

“You need a new puck,” Ilya told his teammate.

“Noted,” Vic realized, unbothered as he saw the boy’s face light up in excitement.

They gave away so many pucks during warmups, anyway, that he could never hang onto one the whole time. He didn’t even fully understand why everyone seemed to want them so badly, if he was being honest.

It wasn’t like they had been used in the game or were signed typically. They could buy the exact same ones online; there was just something about having one of them give away the puck that seemed to incite excitement.

“Roz!” Kane shouted at him, pointing towards Desjourney was trying to get his attention. “Coach wants you.”

He nodded, giving the little boy a brief smile before making his way over to the team bench. Desjourney was, unfortunately, incredibly good at hiding his expressions, so Ilya really couldn’t tell what he wanted.

Skidding to a stop, he rested his hands on the rail. “Yes, coach?” he wondered, just hoping he wasn’t already in trouble for some reason.

“How’s your head?” Desjourney asked, eyes flitting between him and his beloved clipboard.

“Better,” he stated firmly. “No ringing or disorientation after resting.”

And after going through a ridiculous amount of sudoku, both with David and after he left. Like, truly, a stupid number of books with varying levels of difficulty.

“Good,” his coach replied, sounding pleased. “You think you can handle the opening faceoff, or should Hollander take it?”

“I can do it,” Ilya insisted immediately, nodding in agreement. “I want to.”

Desjourney nodded slightly. “Okay then, that was it,” he told him, watching Ilya’s hand slip off the rails. “Wait- one more thing. About this whole debacle—”

“Huh?” he interrupted with a sound of confusion, already glancing around. “Marly! Debacle?”

Marlow cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back, “It means a problematic situation!”

“Ah.” Ilya gave him an grateful tip of his head, turning back to his coach. “Sorry, coach, go on. We have a debacle?”

Desjourney huffed softly. He wasn’t by any means shocked by their dynamics after all this time, but he was still occasionally caught off guard by hearing about or seeing it.

“Yes, a large one with the media,” he explained, gesturing weakly to the front of his players chest. “Because of a certain wedding I wasn’t warned about.”

Ilya grimaced slightly in realization. “Er- in my defense, it was before we knew you knew, and you technically said you didn’t care so…”

“I don’t,” Desjourney clarified. “But the press does.”

“What are you saying?” he quired, needed some clarification. “Are you telling me to handle them or something?”

Because he did, at some point, plan to. He knew it wouldn’t just go away with his silence and refusal to comment but he had hoped to be able to get through his first game back before dealing with it.

“No, I’m asking how you want *me* to handle them,” his coach responded. “I can shut it down real quick, if you want this to stay completely quiet.”

Ilya blinked, a bit surprised. “Oh, uh- I mean, that would be good, yeah,” he agreed, his expression cinching with slight uncertainty. “Why do you say it like there are other options? Do you think I shouldn’t stay quiet about it?”

Desjourney shrugged. “I don’t have an opinion on things that aren’t my business,” he replied earnestly. “Just want to make sure I know where your head is at about the whole thing. But go, play. We’ll talk about it later.”

He nodded slowly, skating away from his coach with a perplexed expression. He couldn’t understand why him tamping down rumors about his relationship status would be something Desjourney cared about.

If anything, he should probably be encouraging him and Shane to be extra careful right now to keep anyone from drawing conclusions.

Coming out, particularly this close to playoffs would shake everything up. Not just the press, but the fans and the rest of their public too. It would affect their reputation if not every single player on the team and their coach too.

“Pst,” Ilya wandered towards his husband, tapping his back with his stick gently.

Shane turned, head tipping. “Hm?” he asked, “What did Desjourney want?”

His face still cinched in uncertainty. “Just stupid stuff about my head and the faceoff,” he replied, voice lowering until it was barely a whisper. “And I can’t be sure, but I think he might be behind us telling people the truth?”

His own expression shifted with equal parts confusion and terror. “What?”

Ilya shrugged defensively. “I don’t know, I’m just telling you what I- what’s the word for figured out but not really knowing?”

“Deduced?” Shane offered.

“That one, yes,” he noted, voice tinged with appreciation. “I think that’s what he was talking about, but I don’t really know. He was vague.”

He supposed that he sort of had to be when they were in the rink, about to start a game. They had no idea what cameras were on them or how close they were zooming in. Curious people tended to read lips when they were really desperate to know what was being said and share it online.

“Weird…” Shane mumbled, glancing over at their coach.

“He said we’ll talk later, I assume he means you, too,” Ilya added, shrugging. “Until then, we stay focused and just play, yes?”

They couldn’t afford to be distracted right now, even if the disruption was something rather important to both of them.

He nodded, looking back at Ilya. “Yeah, we play,” he agreed.

Shane bumped his glove against his husband’s gently, noting the gentle relief that slipped into place as his shoulders loosened and his expression softened. There was already a lot riding on this game for Ilya, not including the outside noise caused by insistent reporters and their personal agendas.

As the lights in the arena flickered and dimmed a bit, the Raiders started to discard their warmup pucks. Most of them just tossed them over the glass, letting whatever fan was closest have it. Feller might have accidentally knocked someone out with how far past the rim it went.

Sebbin smacked him, asking, “Do you want to get sued or something?”

He grimaced, responding, “It wasn’t intentional!” He bobbed his head to either side, trying to see where it went. “Is whoever got that, okay?” he shouted through the glass, slightly concerned.

A moment later, an arm shot into the air from several rows back, waving the puck around. “Got it!” someone exclaimed.

Feller blew out a breath, giving them a thumbs up. “Cool, sorry about that!” he apologized, biting back a small chuckle of relief.

Sebbin rolled his eyes, dragging him off the ice. “You and your never-ending luck never ceases to amaze me,” he confessed, sounding rather annoyed by it instead of impressed.

They lined up, the National Anthem playing while both teams stood there. A few minutes in, Carmichael was, again, accidentally cracking up. Dubek hit him swiftly but harsh enough that he managed to keep his laughter until it ended.

After that, all bets were off, and no one could quite understand what he found so funny but whatever it was, had him in stitches, leaning on Connors as they skated back to their bench.

“His mind is such a curious place sometimes,” Kane noted with interest, remaining on the ice with Ilya, Shane, Kovalev, and Vic.

“You mean worrisome?” Kovalev amended, tightening his gloves a bit more and they made their way to the center of the rink.

“That too,” he agreed, patting Ilya firmly on the back twice. “Good luck, cap.”

Ilya hummed rolling out his shoulders as he felt his nerves flaring slightly. He bent down for the faceoff, which he knew he couldn’t be resented for losing but felt compelled to win anyway. For himself, if nothing else.

Principally because Desjourney asked and he agreed when he could have just as easily passed it off to his husband or one of his teammates.

Things got eerily quiet for a moment, a paradox Ilya was astutely aware was happening only in his mind and nowhere else. The rest of the arena was as loud as usual, but all he heard was his own pulse quickening.

The puck dropped and as if on autopilot, Ilya’s stick was clashing with Buffalos captains. He dropped his shoulder, the tip of his stick poking it out of his grasp similarly to a skill he’s seen Feller pull off countless times before.

He slipped the puck to Kovalev immediately and the moment the game started, the rest of the arena became loud and clear again in his ears.

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Long after Buffalo had lost and the fans, reporters, and even both teams went home, Shane and Ilya remained at the arena. Not necessarily by choice, more so due to their morbid curiosity about what Desjourney had been talking about before their game started.

“What’s he even doing?” Shane mumbled, looking around the empty office, waiting for their coach. “No one is here aside from the cleaning staff and security.”

Neither of which, he could see any reason for him to be meeting with right now.

Ilya shrugged, fingertips just drumming on his leg impatiently. He felt a bit psychological to ask to talk later, then not show up in his own office. But they had already waited a few minutes and could wait several more, if needed.

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket and glanced at it. “I’m still getting texts from the team,” he murmured. “Had no idea they’d be so invested.”

“You *didn’t*?” Shane teased, having expected as many, if not more messages than had already been sent.

Of course, they noticed when Shane and Ilya weren’t packing up as quickly as usual and didn’t follow the rest of them out towards the parking lot. Now, they were just as curious to know what hell Desjourney had been talking about and weren’t going to shut up in the group chat until they found out.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” their coach apologized when he eventually walked in, closing the door behind himself. “That new frozen slushie place we have gives me a free one every time you guys’ win, so I had to run over there before they closed down for the night.”

They glanced at each other, then back at Desjourney as he sat behind his desk, taking a sip of his drink. That made more sense, they supposed. Sort of. It was on the opposite side of the arena and there was only one of them; it might have taken a while to get there, let alone also walk all the way back to his office.

“Glad we…provide sustenance?” Shane noted hesitantly, sounding *almost* as confused as he actually was. “Uh- what’s this all about, coach? Ilya said you were talking to him about, well, us.”

He nodded, setting his slushie aside. “Right, that,” he remarked, clasping his hands on top of his desk. “There’s a lot to say on the subject.”

“Is there, though?” Ilya wondered, his tone automatically a little defensive. “I mean, we’re married. There’s nothing anyone can do about it, it’s legal.”

“Well, no shit. It better be for the trouble you’re causing,” he responded. “I care less about the relationship and more about the fact that you chose *not* to monopolize it for God knows how long. I mean, if I knew about this sooner, I would have stolen Roz’s phone and asked you to come play for us years ago. Not that I’m bitter.”

He reached for his drink, taking another sip of it before it melted completely.

“Right…okay,” Ilya drawled out slowly, not believing him for one second. “Sorry I didn’t tell you sooner?”

Desjourney shrugged. “Bygones,” he insisted. “He’s here now, we’re in the playoffs again, and our future is looking pretty promising aside from the rather stress inducing last three weeks.”

That too, seemed over, however, after the game they just played resolidified everyone’s faith in Ilya.

“I don’t think any of us enjoyed the last three weeks very much,” Shane added, glancing at his husband, who hummed weakly in agreement.

“Definitely not,” Ilya agreed, fussing with the chain around his neck anxiously. “I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble for everyone, making the team forfeit and getting the media so riled up.”

“It’s hard to care about a little scandal and some attitude problems when we’re having this good of a season,” their coach admitted. “Maybe I should, but eh- I don’t really. I mean, fifty-nine wins? You know that’s the fifth best season of all time, right? The last team who did that was Montreal.”

Shane nodded. “I know it was,” he clarified, watching in real time as Desjourney seemed to remember which team drafted him originally.

After one season, it kind of seemed like most people had forgotten. He even occasionally saw people quipping about it online when someone posted something where he was back in his blue jersey.

“Ah, right, yes, you would know, huh?” Desjourney muttered, taking another sip of his slushie. “Anyway, records aside, what I’m saying is, you two and this whole roster is worth all the trouble that you tend to cause.”

Though, that could be because they tended to cause it for the rest of management and not him specifically. At least, most of the time. He was still not letting Kovalev off the hook for that stunt he pulled on the way to Vegas.

“Ah, here it is,” Ilya murmured as they finally got to the actual topic at hand. Their publicity.

“Now, I don’t typically care what you do or don’t say to the press. Frankly, you tend to play better when you’re mean to them, for some reason, which is fine by me,” he admitted, raising his hands defensively. “But I think we all know this is a bit of a different situation that then asking about team dynamics or wondering what’s going through your mind on the ice.”

Shane nodded in agreement. “We know,” he replied earnestly. “You said you could shut it down for us?”

“And you also said if it’s *‘what we want’*, which implied it might not be what you want,” Ilya tacked on, still confused about what he meant by that exactly. “So, what do you want exactly? Just to clarify.”

It couldn’t have possibly meant what he thought it did, because no coach in the entire league would suggest two queer hockey players come out right before playoffs started. Not while sane and sober, anyway. But he also couldn’t think of anything else that he might have meant.

Desjourney huffed slightly. “To clarify?” he repeated. “Like I said, your relationship isn’t any of my business nor is it anyone else’s, and I’d be glad to reiterate that to our reporters. But I also think, for whatever it’s worth coming from me, that maybe this is an opportunity.”

“To what, face public scrutiny and humiliation?” Shane questioned. “Or to potentially lose half our fanbase right before the biggest, most stressful part of the season?”

Ilya reached out, taking his hand to try to calm him down. “моя любовь, hear him out,” he murmured, just wanting to know what their coach had to say.

Shane let out a small breath, nodding and sitting back a bit further in his chair.

“I know I couldn’t possibly understand how the two of you feel, since I’m a very straight man and on my worst day, the scrutiny I face from the public isn’t nearly as bad as it for you,” Desjourney clarified, choosing his words very specifically. “But from my perspective, you’re two people that love each other very much and despite not wanting to get the media involved, they may have just handed you the only opportunity you’ll ever get to control the narrative to this extent.”

He could shut down the media for now, but if it really became such a bother that they stopped asking about hockey, his own bosses would start to get involved eventually. And if the rest of the organization knew, prior to their decision to come out, it would become a spectacle. A carefully orchestrated publicity statement and an overall puppet show where neither of them got to truly speak for themselves.

Desjourney didn’t want his players forced into that kind of situation, even if he couldn’t understand their relationship on a personal level. He, at the end of the day, needed them. Which meant he needed to make sure nothing happened that would drive them away.

“Controlling the narrative only works if people care about what you have to say,” Shane reminded him, gesturing between them. “Do you honestly think we’re the kind of people that garner support?”

They weren’t the first homosexual men to exist in the sport, of course. They wouldn’t even be the first to come out, since Scott Hunter had been publicly out for a while now.

But the backlash he faced was enormous and he was perhaps the easiest kind of queer to accept. An Asian man and a Russian immigrant both liking men, let alone each other, was entirely different kind of catastrophe to handle.

Besides even if Shane followed after Hunter, Ilya would still be the first openly bisexual man in the league, which might receive an entirely different kind of criticism because he *‘couldn’t pick a side’* or was *‘faking it’*.

“I think the media spins *everything*,” their coach clarified. “And it’s better to get ahead of them before they make something up entirely.”

Ilya shifted slightly, a little surprised that he would suggest something so irrevocable after repeating claiming not to care or wanting to know anything about their relationship. “You would support that, us, if we came out?”

“Pins, remember?” he reminded him, vaguely gesturing to himself. “I’d make a shirt or something too, if I wasn’t so against spending money on gimmicky clothing.”

Shane blinked, clearly having missed something because that made absolutely no sense to him. Glancing at Ilya, he seemed to be following slightly better, although still looked a bit

wary. Reasonably so, in his opinion. This whole discussion was a topic out of left field.

“That’s a very strange thing to hate, isn’t it?” Ilya questioned, furrowing his brows slightly. “Like half the fans wear them.” Sometimes it seemed like more than half, honestly.

Desjourney glared at him, sipping his drink. “We can get into my disdain for customink.com later,” he assured him, putting his cup back down. “Look, I’ve known you a long time, Rozanov. You’re one hell of a player and an amazing captain, but you’ve also got a big heart and a good head on your shoulders.”

His eyes widened slightly, not used to the blatant praise from his coach. “I- thank you,” he murmured earnestly, a bit stunned into silence.

“And even though I haven’t known you for as long, Hollander, it’s immediately obvious that you bring a lot more to the team than just playing a 200-foot game,” Desjourney added. “You’ve got an energy that the Raiders thrive on and the kind persistence you show, even with Ilya on injury leave, is more than impressive.”

Shane’s tips tightened and tugged into a small smile. “Thanks, coach,” he responded after a moment.

For a man who wasn’t very sentimental and *really* didn’t want to get invested in his players personal lives, those comments had been remarkably sincere. Perhaps enough so that their guards had been let down a little bit more after hearing his appreciation for both of them.

“The two of you together have an immeasurable value yet somehow got dropped in my lap and I’ve just been trying not to fuck up ever since,” their coach confessed with a weak shrug. “That’s why I’m telling you, as your coach, you have as much support from me as I’m sure you do from the rest of the team. And if you choose to do something worth needing it, I’ll be there.”

“I- I think we both really appreciate that,” Shane admitted with a nod. “I just don’t know if we’re ready for it, yet.”

He nodded understandingly. “And if you still aren’t next season or in a few years, that’s perfectly fine,” he responded. “But I don’t want either of you to be more focused about the press or these rumors they’ve been spreading than on the game. Even the best athletes can get sidetracked around this kind of gossip.”

They may have been used to sneaking around and delt with similar things in the past, but this was going to be a lot harder to deal with than what they were used to in the past. And if they did, eventually, start to get distracted, he didn’t want it to happen in the middle of a game.

“It’s not that we haven’t considered it,” Ilya clarified. “It’s just complicated, especially so close to playoffs. It could…damage our reputations. The whole teams, really.”

“I know you care about it more than you let on, but is the publics opinion really more important than what your team and your own husband think of you, Roz?” Desjourney

wondered with curiosity. “No matter what the media says, neither of your stats and achievements can be argued with or undone.”

Their records had already been set, and their seasons would always be praised by anyone who truly appreciated the game and acknowledged their skills as players. The fans who took offense to their relationship would be acceptable losses, in his opinion.

Ilya blinked, glancing at Shane. “Я не знал, что он может давать такие искренние советы, не прибегая к ругательствам,” he admitted.

Snorting, he tried to cover it with a cough that did little to disguise the implication of the previous sound. “Me neither.”

Desjourney’s gaze flittered between them, eyes narrowing. “I know that was about me, but I’m letting it go because I feel like it’s been a mostly productive conversation,” he informed them. “You understand what I’m saying, right? That regardless of what kind of relationship you two have, you deserve to have it on your own terms and with the respect of those around you?”

Shane nodded. “Yes, sir,” he replied, voice softening. “It means a lot that we have your support like this.”

“Whether you ever need it or not, you’ve got it,” he reiterated, taking another sip of his slushie. “Now, get out. I have actual work to do before I can go home.”

Ilya chuckled, standing and pulling his husband with him. “Night, coach,” he murmured.

Desjourney just tipped his head towards them, watching them walk out of his office. The moment they were gone, of course, his first act was to search for a translation of whatever was said about him.

In the hallway, Shane and Ilya began walking back to their cars, having driven separately for the first time in a while. It took all of three seconds for Ilya to pull his phone out, updating the rest of the team, who hadn’t shut up with their speculation about what their coach wanted.

“I better not get home and find out you were texting and driving,” Shane told him firmly, still glancing over his shoulder anyway, wondering what he was typing.

“Where is all the mistrust of my driving always coming from?” he retorted, holding both hands up in confusion. “I know better. If it’s that interesting, I would pull over.”

“Because that’s so much better,” he said sarcastically, pulling the door open for him so he didn’t walk straight into it with how invested he was in his phone. “Seriously, how are you feeling after that whole conversation?”

It had been a bit unexpected, to say the least. Certainly, it was out of character for Desjourney of all people to show that much interest in any of his players beyond their stickhandling and backhand. But it had, in a weird way, been kind of comforting. Better than they probably expected from him.

“Better than when I sat down, that’s for sure,” Ilya confessed, sliding his phone into his pocket and taking a deep breath of fresh air. “I, honestly, kind of understand his point. Media is relentless until they’re satisfied.”

He hummed, watching his husband throw his bag in the back of his car. The top was down and he had to resist the urge to comment about it potentially being broken into when he left it like that.

Leaning against his own car that was safely confined by a mere sunroof, he noticed the contemplative look in Ilya’s eyes, like he was trying to imagine what the public might say if they came out. Shane had, admittedly, done that a few times himself but usually wound up conjuring insults and smear campaigns in his mind.

“Would you risk it?” he wondered hesitantly. “With Russia?”

Ilya paused, not really able to express how complicated his feelings towards his country were. “I think…I don’t have enough left there to really fear it anymore,” he confessed. “My visa here is valid until I retire and I can apply for permanent residency at any time after this long here. I was just waiting because, well, maybe I want a Canadian citizenship, you know?”

His lips tugged into a smile. “You’ve thought about moving to Canada permanently?”

“I told you I’d move to Ottawa before you chose to come here,” Ilya reminded him, shrugging. “Maybe it would be a good place for kids, one day. After we retire.”

If he had a choice in the matter, he would like to stay with the Raiders for as long as possible, even potentially end his career with them one day. And he was pretty sure Shane would understand and accept that. He hoped so, anyway.

“Boston *does* love you,” he noted, pressing his tongue to the inside of his cheek. “Maybe the guys that don’t already follow hockey would start if they knew there was an extremely attractive Russian bisexual as the captain.”

Ilya laughed hard, head tipping forward for a moment as he tried to stop. “Funny,” he murmured, shaking his head as he managed to keep his laughter to himself. “What about you?” he countered. “Could you handle that kind of backlash? You already get enough.”

For his race, for his decision to *‘betray’* Montreal, for his current behavior around press that everyone seemed convinced was completely out of character. Ilya would hate to put him in the kind of situation where there was even more scrutiny and criticism to face.

Shane sighed, rolling his neck out for a moment. “It doesn’t scare me as much as it used to,” he admitted. “Having my parents, Hayden, the team, and apparently Desjourney feels, I don’t know, like a solid support system.”

He wouldn’t care quite as much about what everyone else said as long as his friends and family didn’t give up on them, which, he knew with the utmost certainty, they wouldn’t. Still the impact on their organization would be immense and immediate, for better or worse. They

really didn't have any way of knowing what the public's reaction would be unless they told the truth.

Ilya hummed in agreement, pulling out his car keys. "We should get going," he suggested, remembering they had plans the next morning. "We'll talk about it more, though, yes?"

Shane nodded in agreement. "I'll see you at home," he replied, unlocking his own car door. They didn't have to make a decision about anything as life changing as this tonight, but coach had given them something to think about.

Closing his door, he saw Ilya somehow already buckled and paused for a moment, watching him pull out a little too quickly. Rolling his eyes, he already made a mental note to chew him out for it as he backed out of his own parking space, following his husband's car.

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One loss and one win later, the Raiders were in the middle of their final game of the regular season. As anticipated, it wouldn't matter whether they won or lost. Buffalo had taken two losses, and no other team was close enough to catch them. Regardless of how their game against New Jersey went, they'd stay in first place in their division.

That, of course, didn't mean they were taking it easy. They were still playing their hardest, trying to earn that sixtieth win that Desjourney seemed to want so incredibly badly they were almost afraid of the crash out he would have if they didn't get it.

Shane could literally see from the ice, his expression of apprehension, and they had all but won. "We're still eating time, right?" he asked, passing the puck back and forth with Vic.

"Roz thinks it's lazy, but yeah," he replied with a nod. "That's what coach asked for."

He hummed, wondering how often they actually listened to his directions. There was a little under two minutes left, and they were up by one, and while it wasn't as great as they might have liked it to be, it was still a solid victory if they could keep it that way.

Which is part of the reason why he wondered why their coaches face mimicked that of a cat going on a car ride to the vet.

"Grinder at five o'clock," Shane told him, eyes flitting to the large man gaining on them quickly.

"Why's it always me?" he grumbled, passing him the puck again before getting slammed into the boards.

Shane huffed, skating around the back of the other team's net and looking for someone who was open. Spotting Carmichael, he slung the puck towards him, taking some of the heat off himself.

He could visibly notice how badly the other players wanted to win, if not for the added points to their individual games, then to simply end the season on a high note. But two minutes

wasn't a very long time in hockey and between the diminishing time and the Raiders' defensive performance, New Jersey couldn't come back strong enough to win.

As the third period came to an end, with it included the regular season. For a lot of teams, that meant it was the last day they played until October rolled around.

For Shane's team and fifteen others, it meant they'd start playoffs shortly and hope desperately to make it to the championship.

"We need three weeks to recover after this, not three days," Marlow admitted once back in the locker rooms, examining a new bruise forming on his arm.

"Speak for yourself, I already had my three weeks," Ilya replied, shaking his head harshly to fling the water from his curls. "I want to keep to playing."

He grimaced, stepping further away from him. "You're getting me wet, Roz," he complained.

Ilya huffed, inching closer to purposely do it again and hopefully annoy him. "You're already wet, dumbass," he reminded him, gesturing to the water that was still clinging to his abdomen from the showers.

His plan worked and Marlow rolled his eyes, reaching for his shirt before he could be completely soaked again. Tugging it on, his head popped back up, and he saw Ilya rummaging around for some of the travel sized hair cream he carried with him.

Marlow leaned forward, pulling it out of the side pocket the jar was peeking out of. "This one?" he teased, watching his friend snatch it from his hand quickly.

Ilya unscrewed the lid, running some of the product through his strands to ensure it was properly coated. He tipped his head upside-down before scrunching them firmly, trying to get every curl to take shape tightly.

"One more season and I swear he's gonna start pulling a diffuser out of that bag," Dubek noted, his tone amused as he watched his captain try to glare at him invertedly, only to look the least threatening he had in his life.

"Awe, don't tease him, Bek," Sebbin remarked, a small smile on his lips. "He just wants to look pretty."

Ilya flipped his head back up and pushed his curls out of his face with a huff. "You know it's a good thing I don't bring a diffuser or else I'd beat you with it," he retorted, wiping his hands with the nearest towel stolen from Hammersmiths neck.

"God, maybe it's just marriage making them *both* violent?" Kohn wondered in mock contemplation. "Is it possible to grow resentful that fast?"

Shane gave him a soft shove that knocked him against a wall. "Give it a rest; he scored more goals than you did tonight."

Kohn hummed, his teasing dying down as he saw Ilya's ring bounce against his chest while tugging a tight black shirt over his head. He pulled his chain out, letting it rest on top of the material instead of hiding it under it, like usual.

"So, are you guys still deciding about what to do with the press?" Varkov asked, noticing the same thing his teammate had.

Ilya glanced up, shaking his head. "No, we figured it out last night," he admitted. "We're telling them. Now, actually. Or in a minute, anyway."

As soon as he could work up the nerve to walk out there.

"Wait- really? Tonight?" Kane clarified, eyes widening. "I- wow, do we say good luck or congratulations or what?"

He wasn't exactly sure what the proper reaction was to finding out their friends were doing something that, well, terrifying.

Shane chuckled weakly, mostly from nerves. "Both?" he suggested. "Or maybe don't say anything until after we see how everyone reacts then remind us we're not making a mistake."

"It's not," Kovalev assured them from the corner where he was doing some extra stretches after the game. "Being in love is never a mistake, no matter what the world tries to make us believe."

And of all people to know that, it would be him.

He knew up just like Ilya did, in a country that shamed and abused, if not outright jailed anyone that identified as homosexual or even insinuated it. It was a rightfully terrifying thing to do, coming out, but they weren't bad people just because not everyone knew how to accept love as pure and fundamental no matter who it was between.

"How are you feeling?" Feller asked gently, only able to imagine how nerve-racking this kind of admission must be for the two of them.

"Oddly calm," Ilya admitted. "I think that might be a paralyzing sort of fear, though."

It hadn't fully sunk in yet that this was even happening. He and Shane had decided yesterday and agreed again earlier before the game. Twice. Still, part of him doubted it would set in fully until he was actually out there, in front of the lights and cameras, hearing the reporters hounding him with questions.

"Can we do anything?" Vic wondered, watching Shane take a rather deep breath beside him; he wasn't nearly as calm as his husband. "Do you want us to be out there for moral support?"

"What, like you purposely want to get stuck in that kind of media storm?" he noted, huffing weakly.

He didn't even want to be in it himself, so he couldn't fathom anyone else willingly inserting themselves into that kind of situation. They'd be risking facing a lot more scrutiny than

necessary if they didn't have to.

"Like we're going to be on the outskirts of it, anyway?" Vic teased, knowing fully well that anyone in association with them was going to be brought into it. "C'mon, there's two of you and at best twelve of them. Let us at least be there so you don't feel alone."

Shane rolled his shoulders anxiously, like he was trying to get out the kind of lingering energy they usually only saw from Kane. "Yeah, maybe you're right," he murmured, glancing at Ilya. "What do you think?"

"I would probably bring Marly to my doctor's appointments if needles didn't freak him out," Ilya retorted, shrugging.

There were few situations Ilya wasn't willing to and enjoyed dragging any or all of them into, honestly. This was one of them, though. He wasn't going to put any of them in a position to defend him and Shane to the press on purpose but if they wanted to, then he wouldn't stop any of them. It was kind of sweet, he thought.

"Needles don't freak me out, watching you watch them stick your arm freaks me out. It's weird," he clarified, grimacing as he looked up. "Someone gonna grab Shane before he trips himself, by the way?"

Vic furrowed his brows, glancing back and realizing his cubby mate was trying to get his shoe on with one hand while he used the other to look at his phone. He grabbed onto the fabric of his shirt, keeping his grip tight to make sure he didn't stumble backwards and accidentally take Dubek down with him.

"I'm fine just…ow, one minute," he murmured, finally slipping his shoe on. Vic let go, patting his arm. "Got it. Sorry, I was just trying to look at a text from my mom."

She was nervous on their behalf and, frankly, kind of opposed the idea. Not because she wanted them to stay in the closet, but because she thought a preplanned statement online might be more controlled than a live interview. She was probably right.

But even if they released one of those, they would still have to deal with the follow up questions in person and it was better to get it out of the way now rather than later. With playoffs coming up, he and Ilya wanted to get this over with in the most efficient way possible so they could focus on the game.

"Understandable but you still have another shoe," Vic reminded him, pointing at the floor.

Shane glanced down, one of his feet still clad in just a sock. "Oh, look at that," he mused in confusion. "I thought I already put it on."

"There tends to be two," he noted, dragging the other out of his bag and tossing it on the ground near his foot.

Finishing the text he drafted to his mom, Shane sent it and set it phone back down before bending down to put his other shoe on. Maybe he was more nervous than he thought he'd be.

He thought, last night anyway, that this would be a lot less frightening after making peace with his sexuality and securing his relationship with Ilya. Maybe it some ways it still had, but not entirely.

He was still scared of the response from the press, the fans, the other teams. He didn't want everything he worked his ass of for to suddenly mean less just because he decided to marry a man instead of a woman.

"You don't have to do this, if you don't want to," Ilya reminded his husband. "It's my ring they're confused about; I can handle their questions alone."

Shane looked up, nearly done tying his laces. "I'm not letting you handle this alone," he insisted, standing and grabbing his bag. "I'm pretty sure I'm not even allowed to after we said vows."

He chuckled, nodding. "If you're sure," he murmured, slinging his stuff over his own shoulder.

"I am," Shane assured him, as a strange feeling settled in his stomach. Something along the lines of apprehension and an odd sense of stillness.

In the hallways, reporters were waiting, as always. They never looked particularly attentive, unlike he assumed other teams press did, because they knew there was less than fifty-fifty chance of actually getting an interview from any of them.

Ilya blew out a deep breath, pushing the door open all the way and watching as they immediately straightened up, pretending like they had always been focused. The camera lights flipped on instantly and he could see them turning their microphones on from the bottom of them.

He glanced over his shoulder as the others filed out, feeling his chest hammering harder than it had during their entire game. They didn't walk very far, letting him take the lead as they stayed nearby for support.

Dropping his bag by the wall, Ilya squinted slightly, eyes growing accustomed to brightness. There was a clamor of questions, most of which he couldn't quite hear and even though he wasn't going to try to confirm it, he was mostly positive it was because he wasn't hiding his ring. It sat comfortably around his neck and against his chest, reflecting their camera lights.

"Enough enough, shhh," Ilya demanded, trying to suppress their curiosity with a sharp wave of his hand. "I'm talking, so do not interrupt me, yes? It's very rude."

"Do you mean to say you're finally addressing rumors?" someone with a rather nasally voice questioned.

"If you can listen and not speak, then yes," he retorted. "I know everyone has been interested in my relationship status since the incident in Vegas and I've refused to comment for the privacy of myself and those around me, but for reasons that have nothing to do with your pestering, we've decided to be honest with you for a change."

“We?” a man nearby repeated. “You’re confirming you are married, then?”

Ilya nodded, eyes flitting away from the cameras for a moment before returning. “I am, yes,” he settled once and for all. “I’ve been married for a little while now but long before the ceremony, I was in a long term, committed relationship with my own teammate…*Shane Hollander*.”

The moment the words left his lips, the room felt exponentially smaller. His fingers naturally beginning to fuss with the chain around his neck, only slowing slightly when he began feeling Shane’s warmth as he slipped closer to him.

It felt like the right thing to do, given this was just as much about him as it was about Ilya. But even after his husband’s very blatant confession it seemed like the reporters didn’t know what to do with his confession, unsure if he was even serious.

“Is this a joke?” a woman in the back called out, sounding skeptical, if not unappreciative of her time being wasted in such a way.

Shane swallowed harshly as he shook his head. “No,” he affirmed deliberately, slipping his own ring out from underneath his shirt, letting it rest in the eyeline of at least four cameras. “It’s very real.”

Ilya’s heart began to beat even harder, if that was even possible, and he pressed his arm against Shane’s as he met his gaze for a second. It felt like it was all hitting him a bit too suddenly, with the force of a very aggressive train knocking the wind from his lungs and the thoughts from his brain.

“You’re claiming to really be married?” a different reporter double checked. “To each other? Legally?”

“Yes, that’s sort of the point of the wedding and the rings,” Shane noted, his words a little sharper than intended.

“How long has this liaison been occurring?” a man wondered, his question not directed towards either of them specifically.

“We know this isn’t what you expected tonight and that it provokes a lot of questions about us, but the ones we choose to answer will be up to us,” Ilya clarified firmly, finding his words again. “Let me make it very clear, though, that during our relationship there was at no time a moment where our personal feelings impacted the way we played the game.”

Perhaps the worst part of the backlash they expected to receive was the knowledge that no matter what they said or did, someone out there would always think they let the other win. That they were letting goals slip past or purposely playing weaker than usual out of fondness for each other.

Shane nodded in agreement. “We care too much about hockey to ever compromise our integrity in that way, and our relationship doesn’t change who we are as individuals; it only enhances our teamwork on the ice,” he stated with conviction. “We plan to continue putting

our best foot forward and working hard to make everyone proud of us, just as we always have."

"We are thankful to management for allowing us to play on the same team, for our coach's acceptance of the marriage, and for the unwavering support our teammates have offered us," Ilya added. "We are extremely devoted this city, our team, and fans, and all we want is the opportunity to show them that our love for each other can exist in the same space as our love for the game. Thank you for your time."

He felt like they had said enough. More than enough, honestly, compared to their usual short commentary. It wasn't any of their business how long they had been together, who proposed, when the team found out or any of the other questions that suddenly came at them when they started to walk away from the cameras.

Shane grabbed his bag, head turning to avoid some of the lights as they berated the two of with questions. Slinging it over his shoulder, he felt Ilya's arm pulling him closer, sliding around his waist to keep him close.

"Where do the women you've been seen with come into the relationship Rozanov?" someone questioned.

Another chimed in, "Do you see yourselves giving an exclusive anytime soon about the details of this secret?"

"How does this impact your game or the dynamics with the other Raiders?" one woman wondered.

Shane just kept his head down, eyes flitting towards his teammates supportive yet empathetic gazes for a moment. Some of them fell in step with them, but the others stayed put, purposely making sure they were in the way of the cameras so Shane and Ilya could walk out in peace.

"They said they were done," Carmichael reminded them, hand covering a camera lens and pushing it away firmly.

Even so, the press never gave up easily and someone still asked, "Marlow, does this relationship cause any interference with Rozanov's and Hollander's ability to cooperate with the rest of team or result in any favoritism towards each other?"

Marlow gave a tight-lipped smile that did nothing to disguise his annoyance. "*No*," he declared succinctly and with conviction. "We'll see you at the first round of playoffs."

Nudging Carmichael, he turned and walked away with long strides, trying to catch up with the others. Managing to join the back of the team, they left the arena, not looking back at the chaos they had clearly left the reporters in.

It wasn't their problem whatever way they chose to handle the information they'd just discovered and broadcasted.

The air outside was more than refreshing compared to how suffocating it had felt to stand inside. Still and warm. It didn't take long before Shane was leaning against the side of his car, breathing in deeply and scrubbing his face.

Ilya rubbed his shoulder, grimacing slightly at his reaction. He couldn't blame him for it; that was probably the bravest thing he had done in his entire career. Maybe his whole life.

"You alright?" Feller wondered, knocking the side of his ankle gently.

"Mhm, just…nauseous," Shane admitted, raising his head. "That was about exactly as bad as I expected."

"Hard part is over now," Ilya reassured him, kissing his shoulder.

"Is it?" he questioned with a pointed look. "Or it is just getting started?"

The news wasn't just going to hear two of the NHL's top players, former rivals no less, were married and let it go.

The interview was going to be replayed all week, the other teams would be asked how they felt about the news, everyone's commentators including their own would be talking about it during the upcoming games. To say nothing of everyone outside the immediate industry. Fans that had opinions about their relationship and people who definitely weren't fans that now disliked them even more.

It didn't feel like the hard part was over all at.

"Maybe it's not, but at least we'll know that everyone who roots for us after this fully supports *all of us*," Kane reminded them. "I'd rather lose half our fans than have an entire arena of people who only respect some of us."

It wasn't like they were talking about their favorite interests or hobbies; it was a basic human right to be able to love someone. If their fans didn't understand or couldn't accept that, then they didn't want those people supporting their organization or what they stand for.

"I think the only appropriate way to end the night would be to go back to Roz and Hollzy's house and crack open a few drinks," Hammersmith suggested, his tone teasing but entirely sincere. "I mean, we all earned it. Mostly them, but still…we are in the playoffs."

Shane huffed lightly, having nearly forgotten in all the excitement. "We are, aren't we?" he murmured in disbelief. "Sixty fucking wins. We just broke Montreal's record."

"Yeah, but they still technically have one in front of us," Dubek noted in slight annoyance.

"We'll beat that one next season, then," Ilya insisted, shrugging nonchalantly. "Come on, we'll listen to Smitty for a change and grab drinks at our place."

Shane nodded in agreement, watching as everyone disbanded to walk to their own cars. He had, admittedly, absolutely no idea their house ended up being their go-to for all team gatherings. But he didn't mind, by any means.

He blew out a breath, passing Ilya his keys. “You’re driving,” he informed him. “I’m going to have a dozen texts from my parents to answer before we get home.”

Ilya laughed, climbing into the car as his husband walked around the other side of it. He knew there wasn’t much, if anything, he could really do to ease either of their concern about the backlash they’d receive in the days to come. But he could, at least, drive while letting Shane talk through his feelings with his parents.

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Immediately, the effects of their interview rippled through the league. Every team who wasn’t actively playing and the ones who had already finished their game saw the interview.

Even if they didn’t, they saw the instant headlines published mere moments later saying things like ***‘Rozanov’s Mystery Wife Revealed To Be Fellow Teammate’*** and ***‘Startling Romance Between Former Rivals Declared In Post Game Interview’***.

Hayden hadn’t been expecting to read either, especially not over his own teammates’ shoulder after they lost the last game of the season. He felt something in his chest tighten when he did, though.

Whether it was happiness or concern, he couldn’t quite discern. Maybe a mix of both, in some ways.

“What the actual fuck,” Berkes whispered, scrolling through the article. He looked around, like he was waiting to see who else had seen the same titles as him. “Someone please tell me I’ve got a concussion or something and I’m not actually seeing what I think I am.”

Some of them were already on their phones to check for messages from loved ones or see the backlash they were facing for losing so badly this season. They either saw the same articles as him or different ones that had similar information including a link to the original video.

Anyone who didn’t, quickly furrowed their brows, looking for whoever had their phone open.

“What are you talking about?” JJ wondered, placing his hand on Mitty’s shoulder and peering over it. “What’s going on?”

Comeau, already reading through the article, piped up, “Shane married Ilya fucking Rozanov.”

His words were laced with a mix of shock and disgust, clicking on the video and turning his volume up. He flipped his phone to landscape propping it on the shelf in his cubby and skipping the first few moments where nothing seemed to be happening.

‘I’ve been married for a little while now but long before the ceremony, I was in a long term, committed relationship with my own teammate…Shane Hollander’ came through the speakers, loud and clear.

Hayden’s stomach lurched, hand covering his mouth like he could hide his expression of worry while everyone else just looked around with grimaces and surprised looks. It was clear

that whatever they were thinking or feeling about the revelation wasn't good.

"They've gotta be fucking kidding, right? There's no way he was- I mean, we would have known," Mitty insisted firmly, in no way believing that something so important would be unknown to them for so long.

"Like we knew he would one day leave for Boston?" Drapeau wondered, shrugging. "He hid a lot of shit from us, this is just—"

"Worse than every other lie and excuse we got from him," Wilson stated firmly, arms folded as he watched the interview with an upset expression.

On Comeau's phone, Shane spoke up about their relationship, claiming it, *'doesn't change who we are as individuals'* and Mitty instantly scoffed.

JJ just looked stunned, looking up at his captain with his eyes widening in a mix of shock and hurt as the information seemed to pummel him. What was worse than the realization of the reason for his old friend's departure was the fact that, gazing at Hayden, he didn't seem at all astonished.

"You knew," JJ whispered, not as a question but as a statement because, staring at his face, there was no other way to interpret the lack of the shock.

Everyone's head snapped to the side, where Hayden was still trying to recover from being caught off guard by the confession, not the news.

"Is that true?" Berkes questioned, shoulders stiffening slightly.

"I-yeah, I knew," Hayden confessed after a moment.

He was starting to feel, rapidly, like he was being cornered in some way. Or at least physically being isolated with all of them on one side of the room, staring at him as though he was some kind of traitor just for wanting to be there for best friend.

"How?" Comeau demanded to know, brows furrowed in confusion.

Hayden felt his caginess turning into defensiveness pretty quickly. "Shane told me because I'm his friend, like you were all supposed to be before picking up his phone calls became too taxing on you?" he responded. "He was worried sick when you were in the hospital, you know that? And I had to tell him you were so *selfish* you wouldn't even tell him you were alright yourself."

"Hey, he left us first!" Mitty reminded him sharply. "And he couldn't have just turned gay a few months ago, he purposely hid it from us while we shared a locker room with him for a decade not knowing who we were showering beside."

His eyes flashed with something akin to disgust. "You mean your captain who led you to multiple championship wins? Or the guy who showed up to every single practice without the same kind of bitchy attitude you have on your best day?" he retorted. "What, you think he was creeping on you because he's gay? Trust me, you're not his type."

He had already been disappointed by their behavior when Shane left the team and struggled to reconcile where he stood among teammates who were so willing to cut off ties when the situation didn't warrant it. But this was a different type of frustration, dare he even call it anger.

How they could be so fucking self-centered to make something as terrifying and important as Shane coming out to the entire world about themselves, he didn't know. And how they could feel personally offended by Shane's lies as if they hadn't only been told because he didn't feel safe enough to admit the truth, was beyond his comprehension altogether.

"Yeah, Shane's type is apparently blond malicious assholes with a God complex," Wilson assumed, gesturing weakly towards the phone that had stopped playing, frozen on an image of Marlow's peeved expression.

Hayden scoffed, struggling to grasp how illusioned they were. "You believe that bullshit? You guys can't be that stupid," he claimed. "We all know how badly the media skews perception."

Of them, the Raiders, and every single team in the league. It was part of their job to make the headlines as eye grabbing as possible, even if that meant they weren't always accurate or true.

"And what about the way he *actually* treats people?" Wilson commented inquisitively. "The players he's insulted and interviews he's walked out of?"

Maybe the press liked to capitalize on information that wasn't always true but the experiences they all had with Ilya and the other Raiders on and off the ice were a lot harder to dispute. It wasn't a one-off, he was consistently the biggest asshole any of them had ever met.

"You're a *fucking* hockey player; half the job is taking chirps," JJ retorted sharply, finally speaking up. "You would be just as likely to treat media the exact same way he does if you could get away with it, too."

That's what Hayden had once told him and the longer he thought about it, the more he realized his friend was right about it. If any of them could act the way the Raiders did without receiving consequences, they would take the opportunity without hesitation. The only reason it was so upsetting was because they were jealous, they couldn't behave that way.

Berkes scoffed, shaking his head in incredulity. "Are you actually defending Ilya Rozanov of all people right now?"

"Apparently, I am." JJ shrugged inconsequentially, the position of his shoulders shifting to be angled more towards his other teammates than Hayden.

He hadn't anticipated it, but he had slowly grown to respect Ilya a bit more when he and Shane talked about the team. He hadn't known exactly how important the guy was, beyond being his friend's captain, but it didn't really matter that much. There was no reason or excuse for any of his own teammates to be reacting this badly to the idea of two people being in love, no matter who they were.

“Use your brains for five minutes instead of believing everything you see online,” Hayden insisted. “Do you think the Raiders would forfeit a game for a captain whose wellbeing meant nothing to them? Would any of them, let alone every single one show up at the wedding if Ilya was some miserable cruel person the way you all think he is?”

“How do you even know they were at his wedding?” Drapeau questioned interrogatively. “Shane told you?”

“Because I was there you fucking idiots!” Hayden exclaimed, pointing at himself. “I got to hear their vows and listen to them share stories with everyone afterwards at their house. But I couldn’t tell anyone that because you’re all so closed-minded that you expect me to pretend my best friend doesn’t exist anymore!”

And Shane had never done anything to deserve that. He had never been cruel to them after leaving, even if he probably had more than enough reasons to get away with it. Aside from one, well deserved, comment, he never mentioned them to the media even when asked.

Shane was just happy, and they, for some reason Hayden didn’t understand, couldn’t comprehend or accept that. They *wanted* him to be miserable.

“Wow…” Drapeau murmured quietly, slightly speechless. “You’ve been licking their boots for a while, huh? What, do you think they’ll offer you a contract too or something if you prove your loyalty? You’re not a good enough player.”

Hayden breathed out a long, incredulous sigh at the cruelty of his teammate’s words, eyes flitting around. “You still don’t get it,” he said, voice quieter as he realized they probably never would. “This isn’t about me or you. It *never* was. You aren’t the victims here; you’re the reason for *all of this*.”

And if he was being totally honest, he had never been so jealous of his friend as he was at this precise moment, for managing to get away from this damn locker room. For getting away from them. It was killing him just like they were starting to kill Hayden. And if he was right, they’d probably slaughter each other, too, pretty soon.

Hayden grabbed his bag, not even bothering to sling it over his shoulder before storming out of the locker room. The end of the season seemed to apparently also signal the end of his affiliation with the Metros for the foreseeable future, he assumed. Or hoped, if nothing else.

He had only made it a few feet down the corridor before the door swung open behind him and he heard footsteps racing to catch up. JJ put his hand on his shoulder trying to get him to slow down just a bit as he fought the zipper on his own bag with one hand.

“Hold up, this thing hates closing,” he insisted, still struggling.

He needed a new bag but just got so attached to the one he currently had that he felt compelled to keep it, even if caused him more trouble than necessary.

Hayden paused for a moment, eyes weary and eager to get out of the arena all at once. “You don’t have to come with me,” he told him.

JJ nodded, finally getting his zipper to shut. “I know,” he replied, adjusting his strap against his shoulder and nudging his captain back down the hall. “I wanted to.”

The locker room was tense, to say the least. Maybe even volatile. Not at all the kind of environment he wanted to stick around and watch worsen.

It seemed pretty clear that most of the team was in agreement they wouldn’t be respecting Shane’s decision to marry Ilya, let alone reach out to offer their congratulations. And JJ might have been caught off guard, as well as, yes, hurt, but he wasn’t going to stew about it when it had relatively little to do with him.

Hayden glanced over at him, slightly confused. “You’re not upset?” he wondered as they walked through the arena.

“At who?” JJ asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

“I don’t know, me, Shane, the situation?” he suggested, knowing there were options. “We lied to you.”

JJ inhaled, tipping his head back to glance at the tall ceilings for a moment. “Yeah, that part sucks,” he admitted earnestly. “But I figure you both had your reasons.”

He, clearly, wasn’t a good enough friend to be trusted with something that was so important to Shane. Even if they had been smoothing things over, he could understand that they hadn’t fixed things to the point that he’d want to share that kind of information.

“I’m sorry,” Hayden stated. “I didn’t like lying to you.”

“Not a huge fan of being lied to, either,” JJ quipped lightly. “But you- you’ve always been closer to Shane than me. You kept his secret, like a friend is supposed to. I can’t be mad that you didn’t disregard his trust to tell me something that wasn’t yours to share.”

He sometimes wondered why it always seemed like Shane was so much closer to Hayden. He chalked it up to more similar interests, usually. But JJ was pretty sure, now, that it was his own fault.

He played the middle ground too much and tried to be friends with everyone when it was clear that a lot of his teammates didn’t deserve it. He just wished he had figured that out sooner, back when he had more opportunities to make Shane feel as appreciated as he deserved.

“You should call him,” Hayden suggested, glancing out the dark frosted windows of the arena. “I mean, maybe not tonight. He’s probably with the team or something, knowing him. But tomorrow morning. I’m sure he’d really like to hear some support.”

JJ nodded in agreement. “I was already planning on it,” he confessed, pausing a moment. “And I’m sorry too, for the record. For what Drapeau said to you. It’s not true, Hayd. You’re a great player and you’ve tried to be a good captain.” They just didn’t want to let him be one.

He shrugged weakly, unsure how to even feel about such a horrible comment. “Wish I was more surprised than I am, but after this season, I’m seeing things a lot differently,” he responded.

It still hurt, a lot, to hear someone who was supposed to be his friend or at the very least his teammate refer to him as a bad player. But it didn’t mean quite as much as it would have in the past. If anything, it just kind of shattered the already cracked illusion he had of the Metros.

“I don’t blame you,” JJ admitted, pushing the door to the parking lot open. “It’s been a rough season.”

“At least it’s over for us,” he replied, having never in his wildest dreams imagined being grateful for not making it to the playoffs.

It felt paradoxical to not want something that felt like the Gold standard of their careers. But he couldn’t take one more game with his team, even if they were for the championship. He just wanted to go home and see his wife and kids right now. People that actually liked him.

“For now, at least,” JJ muttered ominously. “What do we do next season?”

Hayden sighed in exhaustion. “Problems for another day, JJ,” he insisted, unable to think past the next few days. “I’ll text you later, alright? And seriously, call Shane. But like, after seven-thirty or something, because that’s when I’m calling him.”

Part of having a bunch of little kids running around was the joy of never sleeping past sunrise, which meant he could, surprisingly, keep up with Shane’s early routine most days. He’d get a text message bright and earlier that he probably wasn’t supposed to respond to until later and get to it immediately because he was already awake, packing school lunches.

JJ nodded, huffing lightly. “Alright, I’ll let you soften him first,” he agreed, stepping back from Haydens car to avoid being run over on accident. Even a Honda could do some damage, after all.

As his captain drove off, he sighed, walked towards his own car, already pulling his phone out to click on Shane’s number. He’d still call, sure. That felt like the right thing to do tomorrow after the news had settled for everyone a little bit.

But JJ didn’t think he could go all night without at least sending him a text to let him know he saw the interview. Shane deserved to know, immediately, that even if the other Metros weren’t going to reach out, he would. And that he completely supported his decision.

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The next morning Shane and Ilya woke up to a plethora of feedback about their decision last night, but they went through their morning as detached from the media they possibly could. Even if it was tempting, there was something keeping them both from doing it yet.

Instead, they made coffee and put on something light to watch, trying to enjoy their day off while it lasted. Shane didn't get to pay attention to the television for long, though, a call from Hayden already interrupting.

"I'm gonna take this," he told Ilya, grabbing his mug off the table and getting up from the couch.

"Say *hi* for me," his husband replied, stealing the rest of the blanket once it was discarded.

Shane nodded, heading towards the back door. He opened it carefully, trying not to spill his coffee in the process, and walked outside. The weather was pretty good, for early April. Slightly chilly this early in the morning, but tolerable, nevertheless.

"Hey, Hayd," Shane said, closing the door behind him. "What's up?"

"All four of my kids, unfortunately," he joked, zipping up one of their lunch boxes. "I just wanted to see how you were doing with everything."

He sat down on the back porch steps. "Pretty good, I guess," he admitted a little unsure. "Ilya and I haven't really looked at the fallout yet, or anything. We're trying to stay focused for playoffs but it's harder than I thought it'd be." He grimaced. "Sorry, I don't mean to rub it in your face or anything."

"Don't worry about it," Hayden assured him. "I'm pretty glad not to be in them, honestly."

Besides, now he was able to root for Shane's team without any guilt behind it. That was way better than watching two teams that weren't important to him duke it out for the cup he wanted.

"Has it been a hard season with the guys?" Shane wondered hesitantly.

He sighed softly. "Yeah, pretty rough," he admitted wearily, not wanting to elaborate. He didn't want Shane to blame himself for the implosion of his own standing within the organization. "But I really think you've got a shot at the cup. How's it been with Ilya back?"

"Uh- a bit stressful," he responded earnestly. "He's fine and the team is good, I just think we're getting down to the wire and there's no easy wins left. Ilya says *hi* by the way. Unsarcastically, I swear."

Pretty much every game they played was an all-out effort. Not that they slacked usually, but there were certainly teams, specifically at the start of the season, that they didn't need to devote all their energy to. Now, there was only the best of the best left and they were feeling the pressure they had been trying to avoid since October.

"Same from me," Hayden replied, before adding, "You guys just gotta keep your head in the game for another month."

Shane hummed, sipping his coffee and setting his mug down on the step below him. "You ever keep your head down in a tsunami before? Because that's what it feels like right now,"

he confessed. “I mean, I know I shouldn’t care when everyone we close to us already supports us, but it’s hard not to think about it.”

“It’s human nature to want to be liked, especially when you’re in the public eye,” he noted understandingly. “And this is a lot of attention for anyone to deal with, even you.”

He knew firsthand how much Shane didn’t enjoy this much focus to be on him. He hated the interviews their coach forced him into and barely tolerated all the brand deals Yuna set up.

He’d been so much more relaxed, not needing to suck it up and accept things he didn’t want to do. Now, it felt like that was coming rushing back at him harder than ever before.

“Desjourney is taking the brunt of it right now, I think,” Shane confessed, blowing out a fatigued breath. “He’s bound to be in trouble for knowing and not telling anyone. But the team is also going to get it, you know? If Ilya and I don’t answer, they’re just gonna go to everyone else to try to find a statement from them.”

“Yeah, but they won’t get one; the guys are probably having the time of their life annoying every reporter who asks for details,” Hayden assumed.

It seemed right up their alley. The Raiders were good at avoiding reporters and even better at sticking up for each other. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that they would make sure Shane and Ilya get to the other side of this mess unscathed.

He chuckled weakly. “Probably,” he agreed, taking another sip of his coffee as it cooled quickly from the morning breeze.

“I think it’s just gonna take some time for people to wrap their heads around it,” Hayden said. “But you’ll get through it. And for whatever it’s worth coming from a straight guy with four kids, I think you made the right choice being honest. You deserve to be happy publicly, not just at home or the rink.”

“It means a lot, actually,” he murmured softly. “I guess there’s just—” He paused, pulling his phone away from his ear. “Sorry, I’m getting a call from JJ. That’s weird; he already texted me last night.”

“Maybe he just wants to check in a second time,” Hayden claimed, sounding less than surprised by the interruption. “Take it; you can call me back tonight or something.”

“You sure?” Shane double checked, making sure it was alright before adding, “Thanks, Hayd. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up, switching to JJ’s incoming call. The text he’d received last night while at home, still with his team, had been pretty reassuring. Better than what he was expecting, knowing fully well JJ was the kind of person to take secrets personally.

He wasn’t expecting a follow up this soon, though. Definitely not this early in the morning, either.

“How’re you doing?” JJ wondered, still sounding a bit sleepy.

Shane furrowed his brows, a little confused but not at all upset by the call. “I’m alright, so far,” he told him. “Hayden just called, we were talking about playoffs.”

“Ah, thank God we’re out of those this season,” he replied with obvious relief. “How are you feeling about playing Colorado?”

He was more than a little curious about what could elicit the same reaction from both of them about what was unanimously considered the most prestigious part of every season, but he resisted the urge to ask. For now, anyway.

“We’re expecting a fight, for sure,” Shane admitted. “Just hoping to get enough rest before the game and focus while we’re out there.”

“Wow, that was like one of the really stiff interview answers you used to give,” JJ teased lightly. “How are you *actually* feeling?”

He huffed in amusement, thinking about it for a moment. “Uh- terrified,” he eventually stated. “But in a good way. Ilya and I waited a long time to be able to be in the playoffs together.”

“I bet,” he murmured, pausing for a moment. “I’m sorry, by the way. That I never made you feel like you could be honest with me about him.”

Even after they reconciled, he dared to call Ilya his friend but never went further than that. He sometimes occasionally corrected himself, too, and called him Rozanov or Roz, like using his first name was too personal even though it clearly felt natural.

“It wasn’t just you,” Shane assured him. “It was…*everyone*, for a long time. Hayden didn’t even know until a few months ago; it nearly broke it brain.”

But now that he thought about it, he could have at least offered JJ the opportunity to know before he told the whole world. He might have owed him that much, in a way.

“Nearly broke mine too,” he confessed. “Then after a moment it started to make a weird amount of sense, you know? Moving to Boston so suddenly and immediately working so well with Ilya on the ice.”

“People tend to say that after they realize for some reason,” he noted, slightly amused by it. “I never really remember it happening, either. We’ve just always been that way since the first game.”

All the way back to their All-Star game, he was pretty sure. It was just instinct, in a way. Some magnetic pull that made him automatically know where Ilya was on the ice at all times, even when he was watching from the bench.

“Well, it shows. The trust, I mean,” JJ told him. “I really hope you guys make it to championship this year, you deserve it.”

“Thanks, I’m sorry you guys had a tough season,” Shane replied. “Hayden doesn’t really talk about it, but I know it’s been hard for him. I never meant to…cause you guys this much

trouble."

He hesitated for a moment before responding, "It isn't really your fault. Everything is crumbling because the team was already weak to start with; he and I just didn't realize it until it was too late."

Shane was smarter than them, in that regard, able to see through their teammates bullshit long before either of them noticed it. And he got out before they collapsed completely, but JJ doubted things would last much longer. Not after everything that had happened.

He frowned. "What exactly is going on in Montreal?" he wondered, slightly concerned. "Is it- are you two, okay?"

Hayden was a good friend, but he had a tendency to keep certain information held hostage. Not quite a lie or secret. Just an omission, usually. He nearly refused to talk about the Metros anymore, unless asked. Even then, he still only answered succinctly before moving on.

"We're…handling it," JJ confessed, a little more lose lipped than his captain. "Last night was pretty explosive, though."

"Because of me?" Shane asked tentatively.

"It might have started with you, but I think it's a lot of problems resurfacing," he admitted cautiously. "The team isn't…thrilled about you and Ilya so we went at it a bit after the game. Drapeau crossed a line that I doubt Hayden can ever forgive him for. I'm not going to, at least."

Not after how fucking hard he had worked all season, trying his absolute best to keep them from at least becoming complete laughingstocks in the league. He still managed to outshoot the majority, if not the entirety of the team, clearly a lot hungrier to earn his keep than they were.

It was a lot like watching a train wreck in slow motion while actively strapped to the front of it.

"Why didn't he tell me?" he wondered, feeling confused and a bit guilty. "I thought we were trying to be more truthful with each other."

"I don't know, it probably just hurt him too much to talk about," JJ assumed, not entirely sure. "He hasn't said anything, but I'd bet money that he's talking about signing with a different team with Jackie. I'm already doing the same."

"Jeez, really?" Shane questioned. "Where would you go?"

"Wherever the locker room doesn't feel like the battleground for the Civil War," he replied earnestly. "Chicago or Seattle maybe, if they'd want me. I'd fear for our friendship if I tried to approach Tampa."

Shane managed a weak laugh, chest tightening in remorse. "You'd be off limits, if you did, I promise," he stated firmly. "There are better places, though. I'd try for Vancouver, if you

want to stay in Canada."

JJ hummed contemplatively. "Don't worry about me, I'll figure it out," he responded, trying not to sound like he was in a tough spot just yet.

He had the rest of the season and most of the break to figure it out, after all. He just hoped it wouldn't take every month he had available just to find somewhere to play. He didn't want to retire yet, especially not in such a horrible season. There was still more he wanted to do and achieve before it came to that option.

"Come on, don't you know me at all?" Shane asked, slightly teasing. "All I do is worry about the people I care about."

He huffed, nodding to himself. "I know," he said quietly. "But you've got enough to worry about right now and you deserve to focus on yourself. I just wanted to call and…I don't know, tell you that I think what you did was really brave. I'm proud of you, Shane."

His friend realized the situation he was in and found a way to escape it. He even found an infinitely better place to embrace him and for that, JJ was beyond happy for him, even if a small piece of him was also envious.

"Thanks," Shane murmured. "And try not to be anxious about next season; you'll find someplace to play."

"Let's hope," JJ remarked with an overly chipper tone. "I gotta run, but keep me updated on, well, whatever you feel comfortable with. I'm here whenever you want to talk. Oh, and say hi to Ilya for me, I guess? Is that okay of me to ask?"

His lips quirked. "Yeah, it's okay," he responded, a tinge grateful for it if anything.

It, in a roundabout way, meant JJ wasn't just accepting his sexuality but also his relationship. That he was trying to get used to associating Ilya with him in a nonplatonic capacity.

Hanging up, Shane reached for his mug, sipping the last of it before getting up and walking back inside. He locked the back door and put his mug in the sink before heading back towards the living room.

Ilya had muted the television, more focused on whatever was in his hands. "Said hi to Pike?" he wondered, not looking up as he heard Shane's shuffling.

"Mhm, he says hi back," he replied, sitting beside him with a loud exhale. "So does JJ, by the way. I talked to him, too."

"Ah, we sort of like him again, yes?" Ilya questioned, his tone a bit distracted.

He wasn't entirely sure where his husband stood with the guy these days, but they were sort of okay, he thought. Shane would sometimes mention him in conversation and he, apparently, called when he was in the hospital even though he didn't know about their relationship. That was polite, he supposed.

Shane nodded, trying to steal back some of the blanket. “Yeah, we’re alright. Not quite best friends but I definitely trust him more than I used to,” he explained, squinting and looking over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Sudoku,” he murmured, eyes still glued to the page.

“How?” Shane questioned, head tipping in confusion. “I thought you finished all the books my parents bought you during your recovery.”

Ilya nodded. “I did,” he replied, jotting a seven down in the corner square. “This is from the paper we now get delivered every morning. I’m racing Kov. Check my phone, make sure he hasn’t sent completed picture yet.”

He was still better at it, having done it nearly every morning for at least five or six years now. But Ilya liked to think he was getting closer to catching up.

Shane huffed in amusement, reaching for his phone. He unlocked it, clicking on his conversation with Kovalov that was mostly in Russian, making it far harder to spy on his messages.

“Nothing yet,” assured him.

He hummed in content. “Good, I still have time,” he noted with renewed spirit, glancing up briefly. “You were talking about JJ? Something about having more faith in him now?”

Shane lifted his legs onto the couch, burying them under the blanket as he nodded. “I was just saying that he seems pretty supportive of us being married,” he reiterated. “He apologized for not being a good enough friend that I could trust him and seems like he really wants to keep fixing things.”

“Wow, two whole decent people on your team,” Ilya said with mock pride. “I am *amazed* by the maturity.”

Shane scoffed but understood Ilya’s reluctance to discuss the Metros. He hated hearing about them, even when he was still playing for them, and now, it felt like such a distant memory there was hardly reason to dredge it up.

Bumping his arm intentionally, jostled the paper. “Focus on your sudoku,” he insisted.

“Careful! Needs to be legible if I want to win,” he retorted, dramatically shifting an inch further away to protect his paper.

Shane saw a notification pop up at the top of Ilya’s phone before he could put it down and furrowed his eyebrows. “Scott Hunter texted you?”

Ilya hummed, nodding as he counted the numbers in the column he was working on. “A few minutes ago; I am too busy to respond yet.”

Beating Kovalev was his top priority at the moment. Besides, he wasn’t really shocked to know the only other openly gay man in the league had texted him. If anything, he was a little

surprised it took him so long to get to it.

Shane clicked on the text, reading through the message momentarily. “Sweet of him,” he noted, thumbs clicking against the keyboard. “I’m texting him back for you.”

He raised his non dominant hand to give him a brief thumbs up, just studying the page in confusion. After a second, he jotted down a four somewhere. Then, almost immediately after, he realized he already had one of those and cursed under his breath, erasing it in annoyance.

Shane rolled his eyes but let his husband have his competition with Kovalev keep him busy a bit longer. Sending a respond, he clicked back to Ilya’s home screen, which was a mess as usual.

For some reason, he had a chronic inability to close tabs or clean out announcements, so every app had the numbers of missed notifications, some even maxed out. Shane swiped as much of it away as he could without letting himself get carried away and cleaning up the entire phone.

He knew, damn well, he should have put it down after making things a bit tidier. They’d agreed to stay away from social media for a while, to keep it from affecting them. But Ilya was distracted and he couldn’t help but take a quick look.

Twitter was full of posts, retweets, and comments; they were *trending*.

It was almost so overwhelming he didn’t know what post to look at but considering the NHL’s official page had uploaded their interview, that seemed like the most basic place to start. Hundreds of millions of views and thousands of comments, and Shane was pretty sure if he was to ask his dad, he’d say his mom already went through every single one.

‘Another Scott Hunter situation so soon? Wtf is going on with the NHL lately?’

‘Shouldn’t this kind of information be required to be disclosed?’

‘Horrible timing with the playoffs starting, might just be a stunt to fuck with Colorado.’

He scrolled through the comments, his eye catching a pretty even amount of support as it did hate. But he, for some reason, took every harsh remark a lot worse than he took every good one.

‘Rozanov’s always been a manwhore, but I didn’t expect this from Hollander.’

‘He’s seriously going to pollute his Russian bloodline?’

Shane’s stomach churched as he saw his race brought up. He had been expecting it, of course. There were already people online that liked to think they were funny by claiming he wasn’t actually Canadian or insulted his father for no damn reason.

It just hit him in an entirely new way to imagine someone might genuinely accept their sexualities and still take offense to them being an interracial couple. It was the strangest thing to him, for some reason.

‘Boston is getting too woke, even for me.’

‘Kind of glad Hollander left Montreal, now.’

Shane wasn’t sure if he was televising his expressions or had just grown too quiet for his husband’s liking, but either way, Ilya put his paper down, studying his shrinking form.

“What is it?” he wondered, furrowing his eyebrows with realization. “You are online, aren’t you?”

On his phone, no less. Contaminating his very carefully curated feed with what must have been a lot hate, considering Shane wrinkled his nose like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“I was just curious,” he mumbled, shrugging. “It’s not a big deal what anyone is saying.”

Ilya fixed him with a pointed glare, gesturing to his phone. “Read it to me, then,” he suggested, immediately seeing him trying to scroll. “Nu huh, no searching for something better. Tell me what the one in front of you says.”

Shane let out a breath of defeat, hesitating before reading out loud, “Does everyone have to be gay to win the Stanely cup these days, or can they do it without sucking another guy’s cock? Rooting for Utah, now.”

Glancing above the screen, he saw Ilya’s eyes flash with a mix of anger and sadness but never for a single moment did they show surprise. He leaned across the couch, calmly and slowly pulling his phone out of Shane’s hands and clicking it off.

“You don’t need to be reading that stuff,” he averred, setting it down on the coffee table. “It’s nothing more than a bunch of bitter, closed-minded people who feel safe judging us from behind a screen.”

Shane scratched his arm. “I know,” he admitted, nodding. “It’s just I hate some of the stuff they were saying about you.”

He could handle his own hate, even if it was hard. But Ilya didn’t deserve to have his past brought up or to have people say they hoped he’d be deported back to Russia knowing exactly how dangerous it was for him there. That was an entirely different level of cruelty, bordering on threats.

“Look at me,” Ilya murmured, tipping Shane’s jaw up. “You love me and that is *all* I care about, not what a bunch of people I will never meet have to say about me online.”

“Love you too,” he whispered, leaning in to peck him on the lips. “*So much*.”

It always soothed him to have even the slightest physical contact, for some reason. His shoulders dropped a little, the pained ache in his chest dissipating in a brief moment.

Pulling back, Ilya found and squeezed his hand. “C’mon, help me take a picture of my sudoku to send to Kov and then we will go get breakfast somewhere,” he insisted. “We’ll go

stir crazy inside. Need to remember that people in the real world usually aren't brazen enough to say that kind of bullshit to our faces."

Huffing, Shane watched him lay out his paper and capture a photograph of it. He sent it to Kovalev a little too gleeful about beating him.

"Not to burst your bubble, but he might have just let you win so you feel accomplished," he realized, having seen him finish them in a couple of minutes before early practices sometimes.

Ilya blinked at him, expression. "He did not," he stated, pausing for a moment. "Did he? Damnnit, now I have to ask him and that will not even get me anywhere because if he is trying to make me happy he will lie and say he isn't."

Huffing, Shane's lipped tugged into a small smile as he pushed the blanket off his lap and stood up. "Thought we were getting food?" he remarked.

"Yes, yes, in a minute," he retorted, shaking his head in annoyance. "I'm just going to call him because he's horrible at lying over the phone."

He nodded briefly, patting his shoulder. "I'll get dressed."

Ilya waved him off. "Uh huh," he mumbled, phone held against his ear with a concentrated expression. "That son of a bitch didn't pick up! Shane! Shane?"

He glanced around the living for a moment and found it empty. Shrugging, he sent Kovalev a *slightly* hostile text message to encourage him to pick up and called his phone again.

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Colorado was colder than Boston. The air was fresher, too, Shane was pretty sure. He didn't get much time to spend outside which, though. Ilya was thankful for that, given his penchant for dragging him on jogs for the sake of competition back home.

"You should take Kane," he suggested, as they walked through the arena they were visiting. "Endless ball of energy would probably love to go frolic in the woods with you."

Shane wrinkled his nose at the word frolic, wondering where he'd heard that word before. "I don't want to hike with Kane," he replied.

"Why not? Think he will be faster and leave you behind for the bears or something?" Ilya questioned sarcastically. "He would not, I'm sure. He likes you too much."

He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. "I'm not worried about that, believe me. I just wanted to go with you, is all," he replied, glancing at him with a curious expression. "Are you afraid of hiking here because of all the wildlife they have?"

Ilya scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Ridiculous," he stated succinctly. "I'm not afraid of a few animals that will one day end up stuffed as diner décor."

Shane hummed skeptically, remembering how much some of the Loons in Canada and the raccoon that was once sitting on their back porch in Boston. It was a small thing, not doing anything, but his husband refused to go outside for several days after seeing it.

“You know, Boston has coyotes, bobcats, and bears too, right?” he told him, just stating a fact. “You’re just as likely to die back home as you are here.”

“Wow, thank you; that was educational,” he remarked dryly.

Shane huffed, nudging his shoulder as they turned the corner. The moment they did, reporters came into view, already trying to bother Varkov when they noticed them as well.

Ilya grimaced, shaking his head and gently waving away the woman trying to approach him. He wasn’t in the mood for press right now. Ever, actually. But especially before this game.

He didn’t want to be pestered about his mood or have his thoughts dissected and his relationship analyzed. He just wanted to focus on the start of the playoffs without all the drama they wanted to rouse.

“No questions,” Shane insisted, mimicking his husbands head shake as he brushed past them.

She frowned. “But—”

“He said no,” Ilya repeated firmly, reaching to grab Varkov’s arm. “C’mon, we’re stealing you too.”

“Oh, thank God,” he murmured, letting himself be dragged away from the cameras. “I couldn’t get through them, so I just started talking in Russian thinking they’d leave me alone, but they didn’t.”

Shane let out a laugh, pushing open the door to the locker room and letting Ilya shove him inside first. “You should know better,” he stated. “They’ll hang on your every word, even if they don’t understand any of them.”

Varkov hummed in agreement. “Clearly,” he murmured, dropping his bag on the bench. “I was just talking about a random cat for like five minutes.”

How he saw it this morning when he was wandering around and it started following him for a while. How it had black fur and green eyes and was pretty friendly. How he wound up finding somewhere to sit and just petted the cat for a good half hour, which actually wound up being a good stress reliever with the game coming up.

“That’ll be interesting once they find someone to translate for you,” Hammersmith noted, in the middle of taping his stick.

“I’m sure someone out there will appreciate it,” Sebbin added, snacking on a bag of trail mix. “Like some old Russian grandmother with access to the internet.”

Varkov sneered, pointing at Hammersmith. “Smack him once you’re done with your stick,” he requested, finally moving his bag to his correct cubby.

Not that they ever really had correct ones when they were the visiting team. But considering they would be here for at least four, if not seven full games, it felt important to claim one as his temporarily, rather than let everyone switch them around every other day.

Shane gravitated towards the one beside Vic, feeling used to standing next to him after all this time. “How’re you feeling?” he wondered, shoving his bag into the cubby and unzipping it. “Nervous?”

Vic shrugged. “A game is a game,” he replied. “Playoffs aren’t any different than the regular season.”

Carmichael rolled his eyes. “That’s his pregame mantra until this whole thing is over,” he informed Shane. “Says it so he won’t psych himself out later.”

Because they all knew, regardless of what was said, that playoffs were very different than the regular season. Not only were the arenas busier, the hecklers worse, and the other teams stronger, but the rules of the game changed too. Slightly, for the most part, but enough that all of them were acutely aware of how much higher the stakes became.

Shane nodded slowly, catching on. “Ah, got it,” he murmured, tugging his shirt off. “Just another game, then.”

If that’s what Vic needed to tell himself to stay focused, then he wouldn’t be the one to dissuade him. For him, he always tried to remember every other game before this one. All the injuries, all the effort that would be for nothing if they let the cup slip through their fingers. *That’s* what motivated him.

“Stop, that’s mean Seb,” Marlow mumbled from behind him. “Give me some.”

Ilya glanced over his shoulder, watching as Sebbin kept his trail mix away from Marlow, shoving him away as best he could despite their difference in size.

“No, get your own,” he retorted, holding the bag out of reach. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Ilya stated as though it was a fact, snatching the bag from his teammate when he wasn’t looking. Pouring some of the mix into his hand, he handed it off. “Here, Marly.”

Sebbin threw his hands up in disappointment, glaring at his captain for a moment. Ignoring Marlow’s offer to return his snack after having a small portion of it, he walked over to his bag and grabbed an entirely new package of trail mix out of the pocket.

Marlow’s eyes widened. “You fucking squirrel!” he accused. “You’re pissed I wanted like three pieces when you had a whole other bag?”

Sebbin shrugged, tearing it open. “I learned to hoard shit the moment I joined this team,” he admitted, purposely searching for M&M’s as he ignored the raisins entirely.

Ilya rolled his eyes, crossing the locker room and leaning on the other side of Shane’s cubby. “I need someone sane to talk to,” he murmured.

“And you picked me?” Shane wondered, huffing weakly. “I’m not exactly the poster boy for sensibility right now.”

He was acting unnervingly normal, but internally he was more than a little jittery. His mind felt like an egg that just got scrambled, trying to remember everything they discussed as a team. What plays they needed to stop relying on and which ones they really had to lean into for the next few games. It was like turning an autopilot onto manual.

Ilya hummed, squeezing his arm. “You’ll be fine once we’re out there,” he assured him. “Everyone always is.”

It was just the locker room where pressure seemed to get to them, making them a little more anxious than usual. Once all eyes were on them again, they’d be able to seal away their nerves and perform like they normally would.

“I hope so,” Shane muttered, pausing in the middle of pulling his shoulder pads on to grab his phone as it chimed.

“Who is it?” Ilya wondered, peering over his shoulder curiously as he unlocked it, eyes scanning over the text.

“My dad,” he replied, tipping his phone slightly more to the side so he could see it. “It’s to both of us; he says good luck and remember to breathe.”

Ilya’s lips tugged into a small smile. “Tell him thanks,” he murmured, kissing his cheek before disappearing to head back to his own stuff.

As much as he liked to amble around because talking to his teammates helped him cope with his own stress, he couldn’t just waffle around forever. He had to, at some point, actually get ready for this game as well.

Despite his best efforts, he could feel his heartbeat starting to quicken as he changed, pulling on a tight compression shirt. It wasn’t soundproof in the locker room, by any means, and the gentle clamor of the crowd could be heard as he fastened the strap on his elbow pads, making him go quiet as his nerves set in.

Ilya had worked too hard over the past few months to let things fall apart in the first or even the second round of playoffs. He wanted it all. For himself, for his husband, for his whole team. They deserved it after the way they had been playing, how committed they were to the season.

“Woah, hold on a minute,” Kovalev insisted, grabbing Ilya’s arm before he could pull his jersey over his head.

He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “What?” he glanced down at himself. “Did I miss something?” he questioned.

For a second, he counted all of his pads individually to ensure he had them all on. His shins were covered, his elbows and shoulders too. As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong

with how he'd put any of them on, either.

"That's not your jersey," Kovalev clarified, jaw tipped towards it.

Ilya frowned, looking back at the material and double checking it. It had been with the rest of his stuff, had his number sprawled across it, and the letters above it were large and clear in big print spelling out Rozanov. There was no mistaking it for anyone else's.

"What the hell are you talking about, Kov? That's my name," he insisted, showing it to him.

"Is it?" Connors wondered curiously.

"I think I know how my name is spelled," he retorted, shaking his head and trying again to pull his jersey over his head, only to be stopped by Feller, who snatched it from him. "What the fuck is going on with you guys!?" he exclaimed in confusion.

"That's not your jersey," Kohn repeated, pulling out a small black gift bag with bright tissue paper. "This one is."

"And this one is Shane's," Vic added, passing an identical bag to him, too.

Ilya gave his husband an apprehensive look, waiting for him to take his first as if expecting something to pop out or start making noise. Something they assumed was funny even though he was already a little edge.

When Shane took his, looking equally wary about it, Ilya finally accepted the bag from Kohn, squinting at the tissue paper. "What have you done?" he wondered fearfully.

He was met by a round of shrugs and hums of faux innocence that did absolutely nothing to inform him of what was going on.

"Open it and find out," Carmichael stated, poking the bag. "And appreciate the tissue paper for a moment or two, because none of us had any and we had to go buy it specifically for this."

Ilya huffed, cautiously pulling it out. "It's very nice," he noted sarcastically, letting the sparkly material fall to the floor.

Reaching inside at the same time as Shane, he felt something rather soft under his fingertips and his confusion began to grow as he pulled out another jersey. It was the exact same as the one he already owned, bright Gold with their logo in the middle, a C on the shoulder, and his number on the sleeves.

"I don't get it," Shane admitted, looking perplexed as he held it up backwards, staring at the front of it.

Ilya shook his head. "I don't either—*oh*." He froze; eyes locked onto the back of his husband's jersey. He flipped his own over, realizing that if everything on it was the same as usual, there was only one thing they could have changed on it.

Shane frowned, still not understanding. “What?” he wondered. “What am I missing here?”

Vic chuckled, gently tugging the jersey out of his hands. He turned it around for him so he could see the back and Shane’s eyes widened immediately, tugging it away from his teammates and running his hand over the name on the back of it, as though the letters might fall off.

“You changed our names,” Ilya realized, showing his husband his matching jersey.

Kane nodded. “We know you guys technically hyphenated, but it was going to be such a bitch to get sixteen letters on that thing,” he admitted. “So, we just kind of smashed your names together and, well, yeah. We hope Hollanov works.”

At least for the rest of the season. They could revisit finding some way to make both of their names fit without looking extremely tiny or ridiculously small at a later date, if they wanted to.

Shane huffed in disbelief. “Are you kidding?” he wondered, still a bit stunned. “Can you guys even do this? Are we actually allowed to wear them?”

Marlow nodded. “I already checked with coach,” he clarified, lightly scratching at the number on Ilya’s. “Same brand as all the official jerseys, we just had to reach out personally.”

“We know we all got you wedding gifts already, but this one is from all of us,” Connors added.

Ilya remained silent a little bit longer, just staring in awe.

“Do you like it?” Varkov wondered curiously, hoping their gesture hadn’t been misinterpreted or missed the mark somehow.

He nodded after a moment, raising his gaze with a look of appreciation. “It’s perfect,” he murmured. “Thank you guys.”

Sliding the jersey over his head, the fabric fell comfortably in every place it should, settling over his padding. It fit exactly as his old one had in every way but one. He turned, letting them see it for a moment before looking back and seeing Shane staring at him with a foolishly delighted expression.

Shane pulled his jersey over his head and fussed with it to make sure it fit right. “Well?” he wondered.

“It looks good on you both,” Feller remarked in approval.

“I’m really glad we didn’t go with Rozander, now,” Hammersmith added, scrutinizing their new jerseys.

Dubek hummed, nodding. “Me too,” he said.

Ilya chuckled, taking a few steps towards his husband and brushing his hand over the back of it, where his name rested. It looked nice, he thought. Natural. Like it always belonged there and just took a little while to make it.

“I like it,” he admitted earnestly. “*A lot*.”

“Someone take a picture, quick, while they’re being cute instead of violent,” Kohn insisted, waving his hand around dramatically.

Carmichael nodded. “We have to document this,” he agreed. “It’s historic or something—the first married players in the NHL.”

Shane snorted in amusement. “Fine, take a photo if you want,” he conceded, glancing at Ilya, who rolled his eyes but went along with it, spinning around to show off their names.

The guys scrambled, standing next to them and pointing at their jerseys while Kovalev took their picture for them. Multiple, actually, just to be safe.

“Very nice,” he teased, lowering his phone. “I’ll send that to Yuna for you guys.”

Shane furrowed his eyebrows. “You have my mom phone number?”

“Duh, we all do,” Kane told him, gesturing to the whole team. “She gave it to us a while back.”

It had been right after their first game against Tampa for the season. For any reason they might need it, as she put it.

He blinked, glancing at everyone who just nodded in affirmation. “Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me?” he wondered. “What, have you just been chatting with my parents this whole time?”

“We thought you knew,” Vic replied, shrugging. “They sometimes check in after a hard game, is all. Ooh! And your mom is bringing me some of those cake things next time your parents are in town. You know the Jos Louis things?”

Shane huffed in disbelief. “Yeah, I know them; I grew up with them,” he told them, gesturing to himself.

They should at least remember he’s Canadian, given how often they brought it up during trivia.

“Your parents caring about your team is a good thing,” Ilya whispered to him, patting his arm supportively before lifting his head. “Now, if we’re all done being overly sentimental, we do have a game to play. Even if everyone out there kind of hates us, we should probably still show up for it.”

Marlow chuckled, nodding in agreement. “Time to go get booed,” he murmured with mock enthusiasm as he strapped on his helmet and knocked on the top of it for good luck.

Usually, it was only Tampa fans who bothered. Even if fans of the other team didn't like them, they wouldn't waste their breath on jeering.

But playoffs were the time where they got everything, they typically restrained themselves from saying off their chest. They booed any team that wasn't theirs, came up with mocking chants, and even went out of their way to wear t-shirts that taunted any opposing fans they met.

It was as much of a skirmish between the fans as it was between the remaining teams in the league, to put it mildly.

"Hey," Shane grabbed Ilya's arm before he could follow the rest of their team. "How do you feel?" he wondered, sounding slightly anxious. "About wearing the jerseys, I mean?"

His lips quirked into a smile. "Good," he admitted, keeping one eye on his teammates to ensure they didn't get too far away from them. "I think…I think we've both waited long enough for this. I'm a little tired of my name, I want to wear *ours*."

Shane blew out a relieved breath. "Me too," he concurred, voice barely a whisper.

Letting go of his husband's arm, they caught up with their team quickly, hitting the ice.

The arena was filled with Colorado's fans, all wearing Maroon. It didn't take long before they were immediately rooting against the Raiders, loud heckling and boos echoing all the way from the nosebleeds.

They'd expect nothing less, frankly.

They lasted a while, the lungs of Colorado's fans apparently quite large due to elevation of their state. But even trying their best, their jeering didn't carry to the spectator box, where the Raiders commentators were already broadcasting.

'Welcome back to the pregame folks!' one introduced. '*If you're just joining us, we're fifteen minutes from the faceoff, about to head into the first game of the playoffs between Boston and Colorado as both teams enter the rink for warmups.'*

'This is also going to mark the first game back after the Raiders captain, Ilya Rozanov, revealed his relationship with his teammate, Shane Hollander,' the other noted. *'And I think- is my eyesight going or are they wearing matching jerseys tonight?'*

'It certainly looks like they are,' the first said with a huff of disbelief. *'I know the whole hockey community has been reeling the past three days, waiting for some sort of additional announcement or declaration of some kind and, well, I would say that's a pretty bold one right down there.'*

Nodding, the commentator agreed, adding, *'Definitely sends a statement, not just to the fans that are curious but the other teams too, that the rivalry which used to create a buffer for the rest of the players has been* ***obliterated*** *now. If they were good individually, then together there's no telling how far they're going to go with the Raiders.'*

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The playoffs came and went. Team after team, some harder to beat than others. The Raiders managed, to no one's surprise but their own, to make it to the championship.

As did Detroit, with a clean sweep in round one of the playoffs, a 4-2 game win in the second, and a 4-1 in the third.

To call it impressive would be an understatement. They did better than Boston in the playoffs, even had a few extra days off as the Raiders dragged out their final series with Toronto, making it all the way to seven games.

Perhaps the break made them too comfortable, though, and the first game of the championship went to the Raiders. Not an easy win, by any means. In fact, the Raiders walked away realizing they weren't getting the cup without working their asses off for it. But a win was a win.

They earned two of them in a row, both in Boston. Detroit fans, along with a lot of the league, called it luck. A home field advantage.

The worst part was, Ilya almost feared they were right. He watched from the bench as Detroit tied up game four, cursing under his breath in annoyance as he watched his teammate's disappointment.

On the ice, Shane hung his head slightly, blowing out a deep breath as the crowd cheered for the other team. After a moment, he picked it back up and

"We've got time," Carmichael reminded him, checking the clock. "A lot can happen in seven minutes."

He ran his hand through his curls, nodding. "I know, I know," he murmured. "I just don't understand what the fuck is happening out there."

The moment they got to Michigan, it was like something had shifted. They were playing fine, even excellent, by most standards. The other team was just playing better.

Detroit won game three, practically destroying them with a score Ilya didn't even like to think about. And even though the Raiders weren't quite letting them do it again, it was still clear they were the ones falling behind right now.

"Homefield and all that," Carmichael muttered, shrugging weakly. "That's what their fans claimed when we were winning in Boston."

Ilya hummed skeptically, feeling like, for some reason, there was more to it than that. There had to be, considering Detroit had just scored again, back-to-back in the span of three minutes. He ducked his head, rubbing his eyes in frustration, struggling to watch as the other team took the lead.

On the ice, everyone seemed equally frustrated. If not straight up confused in most regards, furrowing their eyebrows and looking at each other like they were struggling to comprehend

what had just happened.

“What the fuck was that play?” Kohn muttered in annoyance, just skidding to a stop behind their own goal as he watched the other team celebrate their goal. “That was impressive right? I’m not off my game or anything?”

Kane shook his head. “No, you’re playing fine,” he responded. “Both our defense is strong than theirs, they’re just reading us too well.”

At least it was good to know that he wasn’t suddenly a terrible defenseman. “I didn’t think we were that transparent,” he noted, the edge of his stick hitting the floor in mild frustration as he dragged it back towards the center of the ice.

“We’re not,” Sebbin insisted succinctly, trailing close behind.

They spent a lot of time purposely making their body language hard to understand but throughout the first and second period, it had seemed like they were being focused on more than the puck was. Like their game had been scrutinized as if it could be decoded somehow.

As Sebbin skated back towards the center of the ice, Shane nudged Marlow’s arm, trying to get his attention. He looked a little too contemplative for the game in general, but especially for the third period.

“Your head on straight, Marly?” he wondered, slightly concerned.

He nodded after a moment, following him back to the neutral zone. “Yeah, just have a strange feeling about this whole game,” he replied. “And not just because we’re losing,” he clarified.

He wasn’t exactly sure what the other team had been noticing but was pretty Sebbin was right that they’d been figuring out something. Whatever it was, made him feel pretty damn exposed right now.

Shane hummed, stopping beside him as they watched Sebbin place himself in the faceoff. “I know what you mean,” he admitted, eyes flitting towards the players on the other team. “Try to keep it together a little longer.”

Headspace was the half battle in a sport like hockey. Any sport, really, he would argue. The minute they started to feel caged in or desperate to score they began making mistakes and guaranteed their own loss more than the other team’s playing did.

There was a chance their morale had already taken a relatively strong hit, considering Sebbin lost the faceoff while showing an expression similar to that of a surprised Meerkat. Shane would be lying if he said he wasn’t feeling any pressure, watching the puck slide back into their end zone as his teammates followed closely behind.

Kohn tried to get in between two players, skating shoulder to shoulder like a barricade. Forcing them apart with his shoulder, he shoved one against the boards at least making a little bit of extra room for his teammates.

Beside him, Kane tried to get the puck away. “Hollzy!” he shouted, purposely sweeping it further away from the player who had it, rather than trying to steal it for himself.

Shane grabbed it, immediately seeing someone in the corner of his eye. He passed it to Marlow, calling out, “Tic-Tac-Toe!” before taking a hit to his shoulder.

He felt the glass shake under the impact and spotted one of the fans sitting in the first row jump slightly. If they got freaked out just seeing it, then actually getting checked was an entirely different level of not fun.

Even when he managed to brace for it, he was still occasionally caught off guard by just how hard he’d get hit. His body stiffened to try to repel the collision, but a pained grunt was still forced from his throat, pushing back against the player who had slammed into him in the first place.

A few feet away, Marlow slung the puck to Sebbin, who passed it to Kane as he kept his back to another player trying to crowd him. Shooting it towards the goal, it lobbed into the net, lighting up their goal sign.

The other team deflated and the crowd’s disappointment was audible; an arena filled with fans that didn’t belong to them all mutually upset by the goal. Shane finally got a breath away from the giant blocking his way as the other team eased up and he skated back towards his teammates for a moment.

Kohn was already on his way to the next faceoff, patting Kane’s helmet harshly in enthusiasm for his clean score. The others hadn’t gotten far, though, and Shane caught up quickly.

“Fucking grinders, man,” he muttered in disdain, rolling out his shoulder. He sure as hell hoped it wasn’t going to lock up later while he slept because of that hit. “They’re gonna put me in an early grave one day.”

“Watch it, you’re talking to one,” Marlow reminded him, gesturing to his own uniform.

“You’re different, you never check me personally,” Shane retorted, grabbing Sebbin’s sleeve to tug him back before he could chase their defensemen. “Back to the bench in a half minute post faceoff. Tell the K’s too.”

He furrowed his brows in confusion, but nodded anyway, skating back to the center of the rink.

“Planning something?” Marlow wondered, watching his head bob slightly. “Wanna fill me in?”

“You’ll know it when you see it,” Shane assured him. “Great job running with the play, by the way,” he added with pride, giving his arm a firm bump before gliding past him.

It was sort of ridiculous of him to call it, anyway, when he wasn’t even participating thanks to the behemoth keeping his trapped against the glass. But it was the only thing that looked

plausible, given every time they called a play, the other team countered it.

“Way to tie it up,” Carmichael praised as Shane made it back to the bench quickly, attention split between his team and the impending faceoff.

“All Kane, really,” he replied, glove smacking Ilya’s shoulder. “Hey, you remember that day you carpooled with Kovalev the third week I was on the team?”

His husband didn’t have to think about it long, nodding almost immediately. “And apparently annoyed the whole locker room for no reason?” he recalled vividly.

“Yeah, exactly,” Shane replied, practically shoving him into the rink. “Do that again right now.”

Ilya glanced over his shoulder, sliding over the railing. “Huh?” he sounded. “You want—”

“Marlow’s expecting it and the others know to come back,” he interjected, just gesturing to the ice vaguely. “I’ll fill everyone else in. Just go.”

He didn’t wait for more of an explanation, just shrugging and skating towards the middle of the ice as quickly as he could before the ref could get upset that they were taking too long to make the switch. He rushed to an equally quick stop, snowing as he trained his eyes on Marlow who was already focused on the faceoff.

Meanwhile, Shane took a seat on the bench, earning a glare from Desjourney. “You’re the coach all of a sudden?” he quipped, arms folding as his head tilted. “You want my hat too or just my paycheck added to yours?”

He grimaced slightly, tugging his gloves off and dropping them in his lap. “Sorry, coach but I sometimes see stuff you don’t from over here,” he replied earnestly. “And I really think we can win if we just switch up our strategy.”

Desjourney contemplated it for a moment before he just shrugged, clipboard flailing slightly. “Go for it,” he retorted, bending down to at least be included.

They weren’t losing anymore, but they sure as hell weren’t winning by playing so defensively. With just a few minutes left in the game, it couldn’t hurt to see where his own players’ heads were at and see if they could pull something together.

Shane made sure everyone was listening before asking, “Do you guys remember that time Ilya, Varkov, and Kovalev came in together and were laughing their asses off about some Russian story we didn’t understand?”

It was one of the rare times they spoke too quickly and with complete immersion, making it nearly impossible for anyone to hear more than their overlapped cackling as they tried to get it together. And failed, for a while, too.

Dubek nodded his head. “Yeah, it was irritating as hell to watch them act like hyenas,” he replied. “I couldn’t understand a word they were saying.”

“So, why the fuck have we been calling passes in a language they understand and letting them shut us down when we know one their team doesn’t speak?” Shane asked, motioning to the rink.

He waited for an answer that none of them really wanted to give.

“Because we’re morons,” Hammersmith eventually stated dryly, shaking his head.

“Exactly,” he stated, including himself in the comment. “Let’s start running this game in Russian instead of English and see how many of our passes they can predict from the plays we call.”

Sebbin’s entire body hit the rail, having tried to get back to their team’s bench as soon as he could without leaving the situation on the ice a total mess. He yanked the short door open, skates clomping on the floor.

“I guess we’re going Russian,” Varkov joked, hopping over the same rail Sebbin just banged himself against. “Or should I say we’re playing на моем родном языке?”

Rolling his eyes, Shane shoved him further onto the ice. “What’s the Russian word for scram?” he wondered.

“Don’t have one! Try уходи!” he shouted over his shoulder, rapidly catching up to Ilya and immersing himself in the game.

The next few moments came rather quickly, all things considered. Kane found a way to break away, coming back and letting Kovalev take his place. Kohn did the same not too long after.

With everyone totally fluent in Russian already in the rink, Feller went in just because, if nothing else, his slapshot was the best on the team and they could really use it right now. Besides, his Russian wasn’t terrible. Better than Kohn’s at least.

Shane bounced his knee anxiously, glancing at their remaining time. “I really hope this works,” he murmured, mostly to himself.

“Me too,” Desjourney remarked, blowing out a nervous breath as he put his hands on the back of his head.

His gaze bounced back and forth, tracking the puck as it moved across the ice. Occasionally, he could hear one of his players shout something, words carrying in a language he definitely didn’t understand, despite being insulted in it frequently enough.

“They look confused,” Connors noticed, head perking up slightly.

“No shit, they traded their only Russian player last season,” Hammersmith retorted, eyes darting around the rink. “They should’ve kept him, clearly.”

Shane huffed, finding it funny but simultaneously struggling to do much aside from focusing on the game in front of him. He could tell, despite their comments, that everyone was equally as nervous.

It was the championship, after all. There were no more chances to fix their mistakes if they fucked this up. No more *'next week'* to claim would renew their morale. They'd be losers until the new season started and he, frankly, couldn't fathom any worse way to end it.

Ilya's voice boomed, deeper than usual as he shouted, "Передайте шайбу назад!" at Kovalev, who had the disc but was being jammed by the other team's defensemen.

Shane could only assume that the other team thought his husband was signaling he was open. Considering he was tapping the ice with his; it might have been a reasonable theory.

But Kovalev just shot the puck back, letting it fall to Varkov, who was trailing behind him. Skating around the defensemen Kovalev had kept busy, he entered the other team's end zone and passed the disc to Feller.

"They've got it," Desjourney mumbled, fingers digging into Vic's arm where it was perched. "They're gonna score." They just couldn't fuck it up in the next thirty second before the game ended.

Vic winced in discomfort. He wasn't sure how his coach could somehow have a grip strong enough to hurt him through his padding, but he wasn't able to focus fully on his muscles being pinched when there was under a minute left before they'd be forced into overtime.

It wouldn't be the end of the world, if it was necessary, but none of them wanted to let it get that far.

Shane leaned forward even more on the bench, hands gripping the side of the rail so tightly his knuckles turned pale. Feller managed to grab the puck, but glancing around, there weren't many options as he saw Marlow checking the other team's captain and Ilya being blocked.

Letting out an annoyed sound, he skated around the back of the other team's goal, feeling nearly claustrophobic despite how spread out everyone managed to be with moments left. He spotted Kovalev the furthest away and made a split-second decision, smacking the puck back towards him.

"Задействуйте свои чертовы бедра!" he screamed over everyone, sounding almost threatening even if his pronunciation wasn't as good as the other native speakers on his team.

Pushing himself against the boards on purpose to try to get the meathead blocking Marlow's to back off. It wasn't hard when everyone wanted to, immediately, chase the puck like a pack of dogs seeing a tennis ball.

On the bench, Dubek's hand shot out, grabbing the nearest person's arm. "Did he just—"

"Tell Kov to use his hips?" Carmichael interjected, nodding. "That's exactly what he said."

"What the fuck do his hips have to do with a game that has fifteen seconds left!" Desjourney exclaimed in confusion. "I swear to God if we lose because Feller decided to pull one of his bullshit tricks…"

Nearly the entire team tuned him out, watching Kovalev get the puck back, almost in the exact same spot they had just been in. He was partially, in fact mostly, tempted not to listen to the slightly hostile demand of his teammate and just skate like hell towards the goal.

But with almost every player about to hound him, he took the chance, dropping one of his shoulders and bringing the other up simultaneously. He smacked the puck, sending it flying across the end zone.

It didn't quite make the goal, hitting the post with a sharp ring, but bouncing off it, Ilya was quick to rebound. He tucked the puck against the curve of his stick, faking out the goalie and shooting it into the net.

Kane was the first one on his feet, a loud whoop escaping his lips as he raised both hands in the air.

Desjourney's grip tightened into a deadlock, staying frozen as he waited impatiently to hear the buzzer go off, praying it would happen soon. The moment it did, signaling the end of the game, the rest of the team shared in Kane's enthusiasm, leaping up from the bench.

"Ow, ow, coach!" Vic squeaked out, trying to pry his hand off as he felt the pain start to run down his entire arm. "You're…ow…cutting off circulation I think."

He looked down, unaware he had even been touching, let alone hurting his player. "Hm? Oh, sorry," he apologized weakly, letting go.

Vic got to his feet with the others, rolling his arm out and grimacing at the sore sensation left by his bruising grip. "Should have been a wrestling coach instead," he mumbled to himself, managing to at least ignore it for a little longer as his teammates on the ice gathered amongst themselves.

Knocking helmets, Ilya perked his head up. Spotting Shane on the bench, he nudged the guys, skating over with them in tow. He pressed his gloves to the side of the rail, leaning over it.

"That was some very good skating," Shane noted, grinning.

Ilya shrugged nonchalantly. "That? Oh, I was just showing off a bit, you know?" he joked, unable to hold the blasé tone for long before he burst out into relieved laughter. "Let's all thank you to Feller, though, for being an annoying teacher and to Kovalev for being a somewhat decent student when it counts."

Kov took a mock bow, waving off their applause. "Thank you, thank you," he murmured with mock humility. "I was just doing my job."

"And you almost made it into the net this time instead of trying give someone a head injury!" Feller exclaimed, shaking his shoulders harshly. "I consider it progress."

Rolling his eyes, he slightly shoved Feller away, skating around him to head back towards the locker room. He couldn't quite get away from his teammate, though, who kept insisting that

he was showing potential now.

Couldn't get away from any of them, for that matter, as Marlow and Varkov always ganged up on it.

Shane chuckled, watching Vic grumble something about needing ice before following the others back into the locker room. He glanced back at Ilya, who was already staring at him. "What?"

"Nothing," he murmured fondly. "Just think you're pretty brilliant, is all. I didn't realize we were going to be one of those 'technically it's not in the book' kind of teams today."

"Like we aren't usually?" he replied skeptically. "Besides, I just saw a way to confuse them; you guys are the one who executed it. You voice gets very commanding in Russian, you know?"

"Euck, I'm thrilled you guys are more comfortable being out and everything, but that doesn't mean I need to hear the flirting," Desjourney interrupted, pointing to the locker rooms. "Get in there before the ice catches your mushiness and we all sink."

Ilya glanced up, snorting faintly. "Sorry, coach," he apologized, tone far from remorseful. "We'll save it for the plane home."

He grimaced slightly as they brushed past him, shaking his head in exasperation. If they hadn't just won the game, they'd be having a very different conversation, but it was amazing what he would let them get away with as long as they kept winning.

Back in the locker room, the guys were mostly hopping in the shower, already excited to not be damp and feel stale all at once. Anyone who wasn't, like Marlow and Connors, just took a few minutes to respond to the texts their families usually sent throughout the game.

Kohn was the exception, lying on the ground, still dressed head-to-toe.

"You know I was about to trip on you, right?" Shane asked, stepping around him instead and sitting down to unlace his skates. "What are you doing on the floor?"

He hummed tiredly, eyes still shut. "Basking in our win," he responded sarcastically before adding, "And also waiting for my limbs to feel strong enough to move."

Ilya kicked his teammates leg gently, ensuring his blade didn't cut him by mistake. "You did good tonight," he told him proudly.

Kohn wrinkled his nose. "Eh."

That's what Kane had said too, but it didn't really feel like it. Sure, the goalie was ultimately responsible for however many pucks wound up in their net, but it was his job to make sure the other team didn't even have the chance to shoot in the first place.

He'd been good but could have done better if he just tried to keep from televising his play with his body language or if he skated faster, the way he knew he could.

“No, I mean it,” Ilya insisted, tugging his laces loose. “The way Detroit was playing, most defensemen would have let themselves be pushed around. You were as solid as you could have been out there and you made everyone else’s lives a little easier.”

Maybe it hadn’t been his best night, but he’d done a good job of controlling their puck retrievals, getting it back even if they weren’t scoring as much as they would have liked. There could have been a lost more lost discs, too, if he wasn’t on top of his game as well as he had been.

He forced himself to sit up, groaning slightly. “Thanks, Roz,” he murmured, reaching forward to tug his skates off. “Think I just need a good night’s sleep. I’ll be better in Boston; *I promise*.”

Ilya nodded understandingly. “I know you will,” he assured him. “No one doubts you as much as you doubt yourself, Kohn.”

Getting to his feet, he put his skates back in his cubby and pulled off his shirt before unfastening his protective pads. Shane watched him disappear into the showers, glancing back at Ilya who was laying his skates on the bench.

“I think he really needed to hear that,” he noted.

Ilya shrugged. “Everyone does, sometimes,” he replied. “Besides, I never say anything that isn’t true. A great player against a great team starts to feel mediocre, occasionally, but it doesn’t make them any less great.” It just shifted their perspective of themselves.

It was easy to take things personally, especially when they were so close to winning it all. No one wanted to feel like they were the sole person not pulling their weight or making things worse by fumbling the puck and missing the goal.

But any mistake one of them makes could be the one that keeps the cup out of their hand. None of it was entirely one person’s fault, even if it felt that way sometimes.

Shane hummed, feeling Connors ruffle his hair as he walked past him, heading to the showers with Marlow. “You’re a really good captain,” he told his husband. “I don’t think I tell you that enough, but you are. A better one than I was.”

He could organize practice and force his teammates to show up, but he couldn’t make them want to be there. He couldn’t motivate them and sense what they all needed to hear at any given moment the way Ilya seemed to, either.

Ilya’s lips tugged into a smile. “I just try my best,” he admitted. “They want to be here and make each other proud; that makes it pretty easy most of the time.”

It was the moments he let them down that he struggled with. He was supposed to always be on top of his game, unshakable. But he wasn’t. And when he had a bad day or heaven forbid a bad week, he felt like he stopped deserving their trust or the position as their captain.

Shane pulled off his shin pads, dropped them beside his skates on the bench. “Still, you can learn how to put together schedules or manage people, but natural empathy and connection can’t be taught,” he stated. “You make an entire group of guys all feel seen and important individually; that’s impressive.”

Something in his chest, admittedly, warmed at the praise. It was nice to hear, even or perhaps especially from his own husband, that he was taking this team in the right direction.

“I am going to start blushing if you keep going,” he grumbled tenderly, pointing to his face. “Cut it out before I turn into a tomato.”

Shane chuckled. “Мой помидор?” he teased, earning a huff of laughter from him.

Ilya scrunched his nose. “Funny,” he said dryly, head darting to the showers. “I need to get the sweat out of my curls, are you coming?”

He thought about it for a moment before shaking his head. “You go ahead; I think I’ll talk to the press for a bit.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “Willingly?” he wondered, confused.

Shane huffed, nodding. “Yeah, willingly,” he confirmed. “I just think they probably deserve something after we’ve been completely shutting them down for over a month.”

After coming out, they doubled down on their stance against the media, refusing to make statements or answer their inquiries. Even though some of the other guys on the team would occasionally take a few questions just to satiate them for a while, they always stayed away from the topic of their relationship, too.

Their marriage seemed, mostly, visible without elaboration. They didn’t hide their rings, didn’t mind holding hands in public, and wore their matching jerseys to every playoff game.

But they kept their affection to a minimum and didn’t make any overly loud declarations overwise. Even when they saw people starting to piece together certain things, homing in on their behavior on the bench and ice, they skipped past the deductions online.

Ilya looked skeptical but shrugged in agreement. “Alright, if you want to subject yourself to the torment, then go ahead,” he murmured squeezing his shoulder as he walked past him.

Shane ran his hand through his ruffled hair, trying to smooth it out slightly before getting up and putting his stuff in his bag. Perhaps to procrastinate for an extra moment or two before heading into the hallway.

His last media statement had, well, caused a lot of controversy. Which meant being back in front of the cameras wasn’t exactly what he wanted to do with his time, but it felt like, after the game they just had, he needed to.

Shane rubbed his palms against each other, watching as the reporters seemed to migrate towards him without him having to walk all the way over to any of them. “I have a bit of time,” he explained. “So, if you guys have any questions…”

He trailed off, but the words weren't really necessary. They were there to ask him things, and he was there to answer as much as he could. All of them knew how it worked by now.

A blonde woman piped up quickly, beating anyone else to the punch by asking, "How did your relationship with Ilya Rozanov impact your decision to move to Boston and would you have remained with the Metros if you weren't romantically involved?"

Shane blinked, letting out a small chuckle. "I should have expected that, huh?" he joked weakly, clearing his throat. "I- yes, I moved for him originally, but I love Boston and the Raiders for so many other reasons. I would have still left Montreal regardless of where I went."

Even if his initial inquiry to sign with them had been turned out, he reached a point in his life where he would have rebounded elsewhere. Maybe Pittsburgh or Chicago. Somewhere in America where he could at least be in the same country as Ilya more often.

"How much of your rivalry with Rozanov was real all this time?" another woman, one with dark hair, asked.

"The whole thing about us being enemies was mostly something the media and the league pushed and something we allowed," he admitted, shrugging. "I've always had the utmost respect for him as a player and a person; that's just not something anyone liked hearing me say."

And he had, truly, tried. Repeatedly. But after some time, he supposed he learned that his answers weren't the ones they wanted to hear and he started telling them what they expected instead of the truth.

"You're saying the whole thing was fake, then?" she clarified.

"I wouldn't say that entirely. It just wasn't as intense as what people wanted to believe," he replied, head tipped in contemplation. "We were always extremely competitive and we still are, that's something we're never going to lose. It pushes us both to be better, though."

"Was that *'better'* shown tonight?" a man with thinning hair wondered. "Because it certainly looked like, until the end, the Raiders were going to let the series tie up."

"Oh, did it? Interesting," Shane replied sarcastically, shrugging. "Next question?"

"The team seems to have a lot of buzzer beater wins, do you think it's just because you work better under or pressure or is there another reason for cutting things so close?" a woman with dark skin asked, trying to reach her microphone a little forward to catch his answer.

He chuckled slightly, rubbing the back of his head. "We definitely have more of them than other teams, for sure," he agreed reluctantly. "Like you said we feel a kind of drive when we're up against the clock and we always like defying expectations whenever possible."

It wasn't what they wanted, by any means, but it was better than not having a comeback at all. When they started to lose, even a single goal, there was always an odd sense of

expectancy they all felt simultaneously. Like losing wasn't even an option as long as they played harder and skated faster.

Sometimes, that was true. Other times, not as much. They still always felt it though. If for no other reason than to leave the ice knowing there wasn't a single thing they could have improved upon to change their outcome.

"Regarding your relationship with Rozanov, do you consider his position as your captain to impact your personal or professional lives at all?" someone called from so far away he wasn't visible.

Shane furrowed his brows, shaking his head. "No," was all he said. "Anyone else?"

"Would you consider Rozanov's dedication to hockey part of the reason you originally fell in love or were there other, extenuating circumstances that led to your relationship?" a man in the front questioned.

Shane wet his bottom lip, nodding. "There's a lot of reasons, but yeah, that definitely was part of it," he confessed. "He understands my drive in a way no one else really can and there was something about feeling seen in a very vast, sometimes isolating environment like this that brought us closer."

No one else, not even his parents, despite how hard they tried, could fully understand the pressure he felt. Or the fear of failure. The immense urge to be the best and ensure no one took that title from him for as long as he was playing.

Ilya was, perhaps, the only other person alive that knew what it was like for him at that time in his life. He was part of the reason he got through it without collapsing under the weight of expectations.

"How does it feel, being the first openly queer Asian man in the NHL?" another man wondered. "Do you feel extra pressure knowing you represent something bigger than yourself?"

Shane inhaled deeply, just thinking for a moment. "I don't consider myself a symbol or a-a pioneer just for existing," he stated. "I happen to be gay and happen to come from an interracial couple but I'm not the first or last person to be those things. The only reason anyone really cares about either is because I also play hockey."

If he worked a corporate job, became a bartender, or decided to teach at a high school, no one would bat an eye when he mentioned a husband. No one would care that he was of Asian descent or ask if he felt special because of it.

He didn't want to be special, is what they mostly failed to realize. It wasn't a privilege to be the only person in the room with his background; it was a burden. He had to outwork everyone just for a spot others got handed.

"Do you think heading back to Boston for game five is going to refresh the team's spirit and hopefully lead to the end of the series?" a short man standing on the right of him inquired.

“I don’t think we need refreshing, really,” Shane responded. “We weren’t performing our best last game but the win they got was a lapse, nothing more. We are, however, looking forward to heading home and we hope to finish this season without making it to game six.”

A woman in the center of the cluster of reporters chimed in, asking, “What kind of emotion does it bring you to see your husband make the game winning goal tonight and how do you feel being able to play beside him in the championship?”

He perked up slightly. “I mean, any goal he scores is impressive in my eyes. I always feel an immense amount of pride, especially for game winning goals,” he confessed. “As for the championship itself, it’s just…an *ineffable* feeling, I guess.”

Her lips turned up into a small smile and she added, “It seems special, from what I’ve seen. You look incredibly happy.”

Shane mimicked her smile, the polite comment catching him off guard. “Thank you for saying that,” he responded, tone a bit kinder. “We are very happy. We’ve been on opposing teams for so long and even though we both know exactly how it feels to hold the cup, we never dreamed of getting to do it together.”

She said something, voice too quiet for him to hear and he beckoned for her to scoot a little closer, even trying to get some of the other journalists to move. They, reluctantly, stepped out of the way so she could get a little closer.

“How do you feel about playing during pride month and do you wish you saw more flags or signs at your games?” she asked.

Shane hummed with uncertainty. “I would love to, honestly, but that’s not something either of us expect or actively hope for, you know?” he admitted. “It feels like wishing for too much in a space where people’s acceptance is already tentative.”

Not to mention seemingly largely contingent on their performance.

They had found quite a bit of support they weren’t expecting, after the initial announcement had settled and people started looking back through their past game footage when they laughed at each other’s chirps or played on the same team at the All-Star game. But they were still cautious in public and still got a few strange glances from certain, less excepting players.

It was nothing they hadn’t been prepared to handle but it still kept them on their guard most of the time.

She nodded understandingly. “I’m sorry it feels that way.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be,” he insisted. “I get to play the sport I love alongside my husband and some of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. That’s more than people happiness get in an entire lifetime.”

And even if there were moments where he wished things could be different, where he wanted to have a normal job or not have a dozen cameras catching him from every angle every single day, he knew it would still never live up to what he had now. He wouldn't have found this much love and excitement in a million years if he didn't play hockey or hadn't fallen in love with Ilya.

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The flight home was anxiety inducing for everyone. The thought of potentially winning the next, maybe even last game had them oddly introspective. They tried though, to get over it and act normally.

That was a lot easier said than done when they had to get to the arena hours earlier just to make sure they didn't get stuck in traffic and miss their game altogether. It left them stuck in the locker room, going a little stir crazy.

"That's a bit insane," Vic admitted as he watched a recently uploaded video of the downtown crowds from over Shane's shoulders.

"I'm getting claustrophobic just looking at it," he replied, fighting back a shudder. "I can't believe they'd subject themselves to being squished like sardines in can for us."

Shane knew it was going to be hectic when they returned from Detroit, but he didn't quite expect the absolute nightmare of people already camping out in the arena as soon as it opened. Or for people to be hanging out around downtown extremely close to it in anticipation.

A lot of people who couldn't get tickets would be watching from sports bars or hell, regular bars too. That kept the streets cluttered and the left a wave of Gold everywhere someone looked—a sight he hadn't seen since Montreal was flooded with blue during his last playoffs. Even then, it didn't look quite like this.

"I can believe it," Carmichael noted. "It's been two years since we've made the playoffs alone, let alone given them this much hope at a cup. They want it *almost* as much as we do."

Feller hummed, nodding as he stretched his arms over his head lazily. "We might have to win just to keep them from rioting."

Shane snorted, turning the video off before the sight could make him more nervous than he already was. "No pressure, right?" he joked sarcastically, tapping his phone against his hand restlessly.

"Waiting on your folks?" Dubek wondered, already pulling his gear on. He could stay in it for hours without feeling suffocated, unlike most of them.

He nodded, checking the blank screen again for any messages. "They're here already, just haven't updated me yet," he responded. "JJ and Hayden, too."

He already told them that, he was pretty sure. But he had been repeating himself pretty frequently, struggling to remember which conversations they had already had in the span of the three hours they had been cooped up in the arena without the ability to play, practice, or do anything worth passing the time with.

“I bet the boys back home aren’t too thrilled about them supporting us,” Kovalev remarked, still as a board as he sat at the base of a wall, phone in hand.

“They still haven’t talked to the Metros since that whole debacle over our wedding, no?” Ilya wondered, smacking Marlow lightly to seek some appreciation for remembering that word.

Shake shook his head. “Not that I know of,” he replied. “They’re still on the outs.”

Which he had no choice but to feel slightly responsible for. He knew it wasn’t his fault entirely, that it reflected more on his former teammates than it did on himself, but he still considered himself the catalyst for every problem they were now facing.

“I can’t wait for the day that team completely falls in on itself,” Varkov admitted, pausing slightly. “No offense, Shane.”

He shrugged, leaning his back against the thin edge of his cubby. “None taken,” he responded with blasé tone. “You might get your wish pretty soon, if this keeps up. Between the bad publicity and how this season went for them, they’re going to have pull off some miraculous trades to build an even somewhat decent roster for October.”

The door opened abruptly and Sebbin walked back in, having disappeared nearly half an hour ago, claiming he wanted some fresh air. He had a cup in one hand and pulled pork slider in the other, to nearly no one’s surprise.

“Has anyone else actually tried the slushie place?” he wondered, lips wrapping around the straw for a minute. “I had no idea they were this good. Why did we ever sell Bluebell instead of always having this stuff?”

Connors huffed, crossing his arms. “How the hell do you eat so much before a game?”

He shrugged. “Appetite?” he suggested casually, crossing the room with his food. “Maybe if I could eat *during* the game, I’d get less hungry.”

It seemed like no matter how many times he suggested it, coach would never agree. Something about a choking hazard and the potential to make him slower on the ice or whatever excuse he made.

“I think a better question is what did you do with our K’s?” Ilya asked dubiously, noticing they weren’t with him. “Didn’t they go with you?”

Sebbin nodded. “Kohn wanted to take laps to work off his energy and dragged Kane with him,” he replied, shrugging as he sat down. “I wasn’t gonna try to stop either of them.”

Hammersmith scoffed. “Would have gotten in the way of your meal, huh?” he murmured satirically, watching him bite into his slider with no curiosity for where his teammates went.

In Sebbin's *very weak* defense, everyone always showed up. Sometimes hours early or minutes before they had to be in warmups, but they were always there. *Mostly*. Plus, he knew they weren't going to leave the arena, so they'd be easy enough to find if they didn't automatically wander back themselves.

"Poor Kane," Kovalev noted, slightly amused but equally empathetic. "He hates running."

For all of Kane's boundless energy, he *really* hated cardio that didn't involve skates. He didn't jog or cycle or do anything that he really considered exercise unless it was jumping up and down in excitement or dancing until way too late.

"That's what he gets for hanging around Kohn before a game," Carmichael retorted with a huff.

"They have different forms of energy, for sure," Vic agreed, thinking about it. "How they don't wear each other out, I have no clue."

Kane tended to be energetic constantly, struggling to sit still from what most of them assumed was undiagnosed ADHD. Kohn was usually pretty good about it until it came to game day and then couldn't still to save his life.

"Let's just hope they don't get lost," Ilya grumbled. "I don't want to have to send out a post online making it a game for the fans to find them. *Again*."

Not that it had happened more than once but once was enough to never want to have a repeat.

Marlow chuckled and reached over, grabbing Sebbin's cup before he could swat his hand away. "We really need to work on this greediness of yours," he insisted, sipping the slushie. "You hate sharing too much."

"I don't hate sharing, I hate sharing *with you*," Sebbin clarified exaggeratedly, gesturing between them. "And you need to learn to ask instead taking things that aren't yours."

He hummed, continuing to drink the slushie anyway. "I'll keep it in mind," he said between sips.

Shane's phone buzzed quietly in his hand and he lifted it, finally spotting the text from dad that he had been waiting for all night. What took them so long to send it, he wasn't sure, and now because of it, he didn't have as much time with them as he hoped for.

Regardless, he'd take what he could get, eager to see them before the game started.

"I'm going to find my mom and dad for a bit," Shane told them, gesturing to the door. "Ilya?"

He nodded, pulling the slushie from Marlow's hand and passing it back to Sebbin. "Coming," he declared, following him out of the locker room.

They wandered down the hall, towards the noise of the fans without quite crossing into the public part of the arena. Even without their jerseys on, it might be a bit too overwhelming to maneuver through it.

Not that Sebbin seemed to have trouble, but he was always hyper focused when it came to his snacks. Even if people were recognizing him, he probably didn't notice them staring.

Shane pointed a bit further down, where he saw his parents and old teammates standing around, talking amongst each other.

It didn't take long for his mom to spot him, stopping mid-sentence to pull him into a firm hug. She'd only seen him a few hours ago, when he picked them up early that morning at the airport. It still felt longer than it had been, though.

"Wow, mom, you're really decked out," he said, scanning her Raiders merch from head to toe. "I remember a few months ago when you thought your skin would burn off wearing something in Gold."

What a way they had come since then, he supposed. Despite only being a few months ago, it seemed like things changed so rapidly he couldn't even remember what her concern—and mild disapproval—felt like.

Yuna rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I can be big enough to admit when I was wrong," she told him, pausing for a moment before adding, "Not that I will, but I am capable of it."

Shane chuckled as she moved him out of the way to hug Ilya and he wrapped his arms around his dad for a moment in the meantime.

"How are you feeling, kiddo?" he wondered curiously. "Ready for this, today?"

He blew out a breath of anticipation. "A little nervous, a lot excited," he replied earnestly. "Mostly just trying to make sure we don't get to game six, you know?"

"You won't," JJ insisted confidently. "You guys have them on the ropes right now, they're not coming back."

Shane laughed, nodding. "Let's hope so," he murmured, glancing between him and Hayden. "Thank you guys for being here; it means a lot to me."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world," Hayden insisted, gesturing to his shirt that was adorned with the Raider's logo. "Even dressed appropriately, see?"

He was sure it would earn him some criticism from Montreal fans who, for some reason, didn't want to see him supporting his best friend. Not to mention the problems it would cause with the Metros themselves.

But he couldn't really bring himself to care about either, these days. His ties had pretty much been severed since the day he and JJ walked out.

"We couldn't come without something on," JJ added, pointing to his own merchandise. "Had to make sure no one thought we were here for Detroit."

"I think this just proves what I've been saying," Ilya admitted, still hanging onto Yuna. "*Everyone* looks better in Gold."

Shane hummed in agreement. “I mean, he’s not wrong,” he noted affectionately “You guys do look pretty good in our colors.”

Way better than in blue, if he was being honest. But that might have just been because he had grown to dislike it over the past few months, gravitating towards any other color with happier memories attached.

“We’ve been wandering around the arena and I have to say, I certainly see the improvements you were telling me about,” Yuna noted, sounding like she approved of them. “No wonder it’s the highest ranked in the league.”

“I bought a slushie for two dollars. Two!” JJ stated in amazement, lifting his cup slightly. “And look at the size of it? That’s insane.”

Ilya furrowed his eyebrows in amusement, glancing at Shane. “Is it just me or does that place do better business than any other vendor?” he wondered, honestly unsure what the appeal was.

His husband nodded. “Definitely,” he replied. “I can’t believe coach is so cheap he’d rather jog across the area at ten at night for a free slushie than pay two dollars whenever he wants one.”

“I can,” he said immediately.

Desjourney wasn’t a skinflint, but he wasn’t quite comfortable spending money. Or even hearing about other people spending it, really.

He made comments in passing about Ilya’s expensive cars, shaking his head and calling it impractical. He overhead Dubek talking about buying a new Rolex and felt compelled to mention his own watch was a wedding gift from twenty years ago that still worked. Once, he even physically grimaced when Marlow told him he bought his sister her house as a gift.

Ilya, simply put, didn’t consider it a far stretch at all to think saving two dollars would add up in his coach’s mind.

“Do you two have to get back soon?” David wondered, keeping an eye on the time. The least thing he wanted to do was keep them longer than they had to spare.

“I think we have a few more—” Shane halted his words, blinking as he heard quick footsteps.

Kohn came into view, darting around the corner with Kane in tow. It looked more like a game of tag than a leisurely jog to blow off some steam, what with the way Kane was trying to hit his teammate, just out of reach every time.

Ilya frowned, stepping in their way and grabbing Kohn’s arm before he ran past. “Where the hell have you been?” he asked, dragging him back with a firm yank that made him stumble.

He shrugged. “Just taking a lap or two,” he said nonchalantly.

Kane's pace slowed, out of breath as he pointed to Kohn with a peeved expression. "I'll tell you where we've been," he said, sounding irritated. "*Everywhere*. All over this entire damn arena."

He leaned over, putting his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath while grumbling about how much he hated running. Ilya was pretty sure he also heard a threat against Kohn, considering his teammate moved slightly over to get further away from Kane.

"No one forced you to go with him," Shane reminded him, watching as he barely pulled himself upright, grasping at his aching side.

"Oh, no?" Kane questioned, pointing at Kohn. "He stole my phone…" he said through labored breaths. "…right when I…was texting…a very nice woman."

"I just wanted to make sure she was good enough for you!" Kohn defended, holding both hands up placatingly, the phone still grasped in one of them.

"Calling her isn't how you find out!" he exclaimed.

Yuna's eyes widened and Shane snorted, burying his amusement behind his hand as he covered his mouth.

"She didn't even pick up!" Kohn reminded him. "I don't know why you're getting so cagey about it. If she's nice, we wanna meet her."

"Meet her after I know she's worth introducing to everyone," he insisted, reaching for his phone as Kohn kept raising it out of reach.

"How else would you know unless one of us vets her for you?" Kohn retorted curiously. "You know how bad you are at dating; this is me being a good friend."

David watched as the phone light up with a call. Kohn glanced at it, immediately tensing as he saw the girl's name appear. He thought it was probably a good sign that she called back so quickly, though; she must have really liked his friend.

"Don't even think about it," Kane told him, shaking his head and stepping closer like he was approaching a wild animal. "Don't try to—"

"It's for your own good," Kohn replied as he turned and ran before his friend could talk him down.

"Damnit Kohn!" he shouted, seeing him answer the call and press the phone to ear while running. "Do not ask her if she's been married before! I mean it!"

Kane ran past his captain, trying to catch up and retrieve his phone. Ilya just blinked, slowly turning to look over his shoulder, wondering just how involved he needed or wanted to be in that situation. Not very, he assumed.

"You're not going after them?" JJ wondered, a little concerned, as he heard them still screaming back and forth down the corridor.

Ilya shook his head. “No, God no. I’m staying out it,” he stated, wiping his hands clean. “Besides, Kohn is right. Kane has a bad track record with relationships.”

Not for a lack of trying. He was a good guy and a great boyfriend, he just got busy, like every other hockey player did and that grew taxing after a while. He would often try to be everywhere for everyone, running himself ragged in the process until he was no good for anyone at all.

“They’re going to wear themselves out before the game,” Yuna assumed, slightly worried.

Shane waved off her apprehension, reminding her, “They’re the two most energetic guys on the team, they’ll be fine in a few minutes.” He paused, head tipping. “Remind me to ask Sebbin why he didn’t think to mention the phone call, though.”

Probably because he was more focused on his slider than he was on one of his teammates trying to kill the other.

“Jeez, I don’t know how you guys get anything done around here,” JJ admitted, more than a tad confused to see the Raiders *not* being complete robots. “I hope New Jersey is half as exciting.”

Shane’s eyes widened. “New Jersey?” he repeated. “Wait- you signed with them?”

He knew that both him and Hayden were talking about leaving Montreal, but actually committing to another team was entirely different. It was, well, real.

“Not officially,” JJ clarified. “But I’ve got my agent finalizing details for the contract.”

“Congrats,” Shane told him, lips tugging into a smile. “I really hope you’re happier there.”

“Is not a bad team,” Ilya admitted, nodding in agreement. “What, three championships overall? Twenty-four playoff seasons, too.”

It wasn’t a great team, by any means. They’d been in a slump for several years. But they were also supposedly going through a lot of reconstruction right now, trying to build a stronger roster and get back to the kind of track record they had in the late 90’s and early 2000’s. It would be a good place to get in at the ground floor and help reshape.

“I’m hoping between some of the trades they’ve been making and getting second pick in the draft they’ll be able to really rebuild themselves next season,” JJ said optimistically.

“What about you, Hayden?” David wondered. “Have you spoken with any other teams?”

He hesitated for a moment, shaking his head. “I’m still trying to figure things out,” he admitted. “I’d like to play somewhere else, but I have a lot to consider because of Jackie and the kids.”

Ideally, somewhere like Vancouver, Edmonton, or Toronto would be the best place if possible. That way they didn’t have to move very far, and it might feel like less of a shock to their children.

But some of the teams seemed too solid to even consider taking him on and the ones that would, like Ottawa, didn't exactly have good odds at ever making the playoffs. He hadn't quite decided if he was willing to branch far out enough to consider anywhere in the United States like JJ had, despite his friend's encouragement.

Yuna nodded understandingly. "I'm sure it'll all work itself out," she assured him.

Hayden gave her a small smile. "Hope so," he replied with a shrug, not really wanting to talk about it.

Shane had a place to land when he jumped off the Montreal train and JJ didn't have to worry about anyone else's needs, but his own so risks didn't mean much. But he had a wife and four kids, and he couldn't be as brave as he wished when thinking about them relying on him.

Glancing at his watch again, David cleared his throat. "About twenty minutes until faceoff," he reminded them. "We should start getting to our seats and let you guys get ready."

Ilya nodded. "We'll walk with you for a bit."

"Hayden and I will catch up in a minute," Shane added. "I need to talk to him about something."

His husband gave him a thumbs up, immediately turning to David. "So, I need your opinion on this sudoku problem from a while back," he murmured quietly, like a secret. "Shane says to let it go since it's been four weeks but I'm not quite sure I'm ready to do that."

David hummed curiously. "Hit me with it," he replied attentively as the four of them walked down the corridor.

Shane huffed in amusement, watching them get a bit further away before he turned his attention towards Hayden, who looked a little confused about why they weren't heading back with the others.

"What is it?" he wondered, eyebrows furrowed.

Shane wrung his hands. "Uh- so…about the whole leaving Montreal thing—"

"We really don't have to get into this," Hayden interjected, sounding a bit weary from how often he was already thinking about it. "It's your day; I just want to be here for you without talking about the Metros."

It was unsurprising that he'd shut down the topic so fast. Hayden was apparently very good at avoiding conversations he didn't want to have, which Shane never quite realized because frankly, there weren't many subjects he was against in the first place.

"I appreciate that, really, but this is kind of important," Shane commented, taking a breath. "I was- well, I was wondering if you might want to play here?"

He blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

“Play here,” he repeated a bit more firmly, as an offer not a question. “With me, for the Raiders.”

“Shane, I think you might have flipped your lid a bit, buddy,” Hayden admitted. “Even if I wanted to, they won’t automatically give me a contract. I mean there’s- there’s roster problems and finances and—”

“Coach purposely keeps the roster on the slim side; we’ve got room for you,” Shane interrupted. “And Connors, well, don’t get me started but he just knows that we’ve got the money lying around.”

He was a bit surprised to hear that, but even so, there were a thousand other logistical problems. “Okay, but that still doesn’t mean I’d get an offer from them.”

Sure, they were probably in the green, especially with the recent changes to the arena, but having money and spending it were two different things. And after the season he just had, he doubted many people would offer him a contract, let alone the team that was about to win the championship.

“If you want one, it’s yours, Hayd. I already have Desjourney’s word,” Shane clarified. “I understand if you want to think about it and I’m not going to be upset if you decide to play somewhere else, but if you do decide that maybe you’d want to give Boston a try, I promise I can make it happen.”

It was kind of incredible, the amount of sway he didn’t realize he had until he started leveraging it. His word was valued a lot more here than Montreal considered it worth. One conversation with Desjourney and he agreed to see what he could do, if that’s what Hayden wanted.

Hayden blew out a slow, overwhelmed breath. “I- I’ll think about it,” he agreed, suddenly feeling a little dizzy.

All he had wanted to do was see his friend and get his mind off the problems he was having with his career. He wasn’t planning to stumble into an offer for a job. Then again, maybe he shouldn’t have been as surprised as he was. Shane was always good at supporting the people around him, even if they didn’t always know they were being held up.

Shane nudged him down the hall, needing to get back in time to change into his skates. “It’d be fun,” he murmured playfully, trying to entice him. “Ilya and I could babysit. They’d learn Russian through immersion.”

He huffed, the comment evaporating some of his shock. “You mean use my kids as a test run for you two *and* teach them how to talk behind my back?” he reframed. “That sounds like I get the worse end of the deal.”

He made a skeptical sound. “Maybe,” he retorted succinctly. “Just think about it, okay? Talk with Jackie and see what she thinks.”

“I will,” Hayden promised, shoving him away gently. “Now, go play your game, okay? Stop worrying about my career and add another trophy to yours own.”

Shane’s lips quirked, nodding as he broke away from him. “I’ll try,” he replied, letting him head to his seat.

Making his way back to the locker room, he opened the door to find most of the team ready for the game. Mostly. Kane seemed to have gotten his phone back at last but was being interrogated by some of the guys about the woman he had been seeing recently.

Ilya didn’t bother to question him but was very clearly paying attention as the others did, silently slipping his shin pads on while occasionally looking up at them.

“She sounded nice from what I could hear over your screaming,” Kohn admitted, shrugging weakly. “Where did you ever meet a veterinarian? You don’t even have any pets.”

Kane glared at him. “A friend introduced us,” he explained reluctantly.

Feller gasped dramatically, leaning closer. “You have friends besides us?” he accused, feigning betrayal.

Shane slipped behind them, sorting through his padding and getting changed as quickly as he could. Vic even pushed his bag further back, helping him line them up in the order the liked.

“A few. Shocking, isn’t it?” he noted, rolling his eyes. “It’s not like I’m planning to marry her or anything, we’ve just gone out a few times when I have free night.”

Which, frankly, wasn’t very often. And it was usually last minute because his schedule changed so much that he felt bad making plans and cancelling them on her. At the very least, he liked to think he knew enough nice places and had enough connections to the owners of certain places that he could make up for his hectic work with a nice meal.

“I don’t know, you sound pretty smitten,” Marlow remarked, giving him a knowing look. “Is it possible we may have another wedding to attend soon?”

Kane groaned, just lacing his skates up. “We’re definitely not there yet, but if things get serious, I’ll give you a call,” he assured him, standing. “I hear you’re good at helping people pick out rings.”

He breathed on his nails, scrubbing them against the front of his jersey. “I’ve been known to visit a few jewelry shops recently,” he said poshly.

Well, okay, two in total. But that was probably more than any of them had been to for anything other than a watch.

Ilya smiled to himself and yanked the material over his shin pads, standing up. “Okay, we are focusing now, yes?” he insisted, glancing around. “Phones away, uniforms on, heads in the game.”

Shane tugged his jersey over his head, taking a seat on the bench and putting on his skates. He might have been a little behind the others in terms of readiness, but he had been lacing skates since he was old enough to play hockey and did it without looking, eyes trained on his husband.

“Is this the part where you bribe us by saying you’ll give us money for every goal we score?” Dubek questioned. “Not that I’m complaining, if it is. I like that deal.”

Ilya shook his head, chuckling. “No, I’m not bribing you,” he said, earning some saddened sounds. “I just wanted to say thank you guys, for this season. For your effort and commitment to this game and each other.”

Varkov jutted his bottom lip of sentimentally, leaning against Kovalev. “Сентиментальный,” he murmured quietly

He huffed weakly. “A little, but I mean it,” he insisted. “This has truly been one of the best seasons in my career both statically and for personal reason, and it’s entirely due to all of you. I know I don’t have to tell you to give 100% because you always give it anyway, so just stay focused, trust yourselves, and let’s go bring Boston *another* Stanly Cup.”

Kane whooped loudly, whatever energy he’d lost sprinting around suddenly returning tenfold. He set off a chorus of other cheers and Marlow smacked Ilya on the back, jostling him firmly.

Shane finished tying his skates, rising to his feet and seeing Vic passing him his helmet out of the corner of his eyes. Taking it, he pulled it on, securing it tightly and knocking on the top for luck. Not that they were planning on relying on it, but every bit helped.

They made their way out of the locker room and Shane nudged Ilya’s arm. “One more time,” he murmured, feeling, somehow, that they weren’t making it to game six.

“One more time,” Ilya agreed with a curt nod, taking the lead out of the tunnel and into the rink.

The crowd was loud before he ever reached the ice, lights dim for their entrance and excitement radiating through the atmosphere. They were already expecting the enthusiasm of a sold-out arena in their own city, on a Saturday night.

But what they hadn’t expected was how bright the crowd was going to be.

“Holy shit,” Shane breathed out as the lights stopped flickering, eyes flitting around the busy arena, covered in pride flags.

Ilya’s lips parted, unable to tear his gaze away from the fans. “Is this because of you?” he asked, skating to a stop. “Your interview?”

The rest of the team slowed until they were standing still, staring at the people surrounding their rink with astonishment.

“I- I don’t know,” Shane admitted, struggling to put words together with how stunned he was. “I just said we didn’t see a lot of…I didn’t think they would…”

It was a one-off question, a comment about not expecting to see flags or signs because, logically, he knew it was unlikely to find in the rink. He didn't expect anyone to really think twice about his words, let alone prove him wrong on such a tremendous scale.

Kane leaned his jaw on Shane's shoulder. "Wow," he murmured in awe, eyes darting around to read the signs.

"I guess if we can keep secrets from the public, they can keep secrets from us," Carmichael murmured.

Ilya let out a wet laugh, suddenly feeling a lot more overwhelmed than he had planned. Yuna and David were in their seats, waving, and something in his chest tightened with a level of content and love that he hadn't felt since his wedding day.

The array of the color he saw sparkled, intermingled within the Gold. If seeing people representing his number, dressed in his team's emblem, wasn't already making him emotional, seeing them validate his love, his marriage, his *existence* as person certainly was.

He covered his mouth with his hand, dipping his head to hopefully keep a camera from catching his eyes tearing up before he behaved in a way that he'd never be able to live down. Vic pressed his hand to his captain's shoulder, just leaving it there as he stared at his own skates for a while.

Shane blew out a slow breath, trying to read as many signs as he possibly could. They were usually witty, meant to be funny and sharp to catch their attention. He never minded it, either.

But these were so much more personal. People thanking him for making them feel seen and telling him he deserved to be able to love his husband loudly.

He glanced at Ilya, who was also trying to keep his composure and bumped his shoulder. "Are you okay?" he mumbled, voice a little tight with emotion.

Ilya nodded, raising his head. "I- mhm, yes," he assured him unconvincingly, trying to clear his throat. "Come on," he insisted, firmer. "We have a cup to win."

"Then let's win it," he replied, grip on his stick tightening.

Warmups flew by, mostly because they had spent so much time standing around, staring at the different pride flags and reading everyone's signs. They passed pucks out and Shane stopped to let someone slip a jersey through the hole meant for their photographer's camera lens, signing it for her.

As the faceoff started, his head was still a bit hazy, struggling to comprehend how so many people could have put this together and managed to flood their stands with so much love. He inhaled sharply, trying to put it out of his mind and focus on Sebbin, who was in the middle of the circle, his head down and his eyes up.

The puck dropped and the game started, sticks clashing for a moment before the disc was slung out of the circle by his teammate. On autopilot, Shane moved to grab it, the sound of

the puck hitting the curve of his stick snapping out of his disorientation.

He immediately skated towards the boards, trying to get around the pack of guys instead of through them the way Ilya did to get a better angle.

Connors was quick to try to break up the other team's grouping, wanting them as separate as he possibly could to make the ice easier to work with. Detroit, somehow, knew it too.

They stuck close by each other and with good reason. A pair of forwards made it a lot harder to let him get to their goal than it would have been if there was just one of them, after all.

Ilya whistled sharply, hitting the ice and Shane waited as long as he could, passing the puck across the rink. His shoulder barreled between the two men, breaking them apart and he skated straight through and behind the other team's goal.

Ilya slipped the puck to Kovalev, who passed it back to Sebbin. He got close shot in, but the rebound hadn't been tight enough and their goalie covered it with his glove, the slap hard enough to hear echo off the ice as he didn't show anyone the disc for a moment to ensure they'd be resetting.

From then on, the minutes of the first period ticked down, feeling a lot faster than they actually were. Detroit seemed intent on making it nearly impossible to get to their goal, let alone score on it.

Not to say the Raiders hadn't tried.

They began going through their entire bench player by player—Ilya out and Varkov in, Connors out and Kane in, Shane out and Marlow in, Sebbin out and Dubek in, etc. Shortly after, Desjourney pulled the same players he just put in—Marlow out and Carmichael in, Varkov out and Vic in, Kane out and Kohn in.

Shane lost count of how many times everyone had swapped out, their ice looking more like revolving hotel lobby of people. If their strategy had been to confuse Detroit, then it was probably working because he was confused too.

He found himself passing the puck to Vic, though, as they lost more seconds, just trying to keep it from being stolen by another player.

Taking it, Vic skated past Detroit's captain, taking a hit to the shoulder but staying upright and he kept the puck close to himself. Maneuvering around the man, he went to pass it to Hammersmith but saw another player directly in his way, blocking him before there was any chance.

Instead, he slung the disc through the neutral zone, where Kohn was lurking.

He knew there wasn't a chance he could make any shot with the other team's defensemen nearby. Not when they were too close to the net. Instead, he angled himself, shooting it back across the ice towards Hammersmith, who caught it and quickly tried to get out of the way of the player coming towards him.

Hammersmith skated forward, meeting and going around Kohn, who stayed nearby before breaking off a little closer to the net. Their chances were a lot better with both of them there.

“Smitty!” Kohn called, as Detroit’s defensemen crowded his teammate.

He passed the puck towards Kohn, who took it and slipped behind their goal with it as the other team’s goalie turned, tracking him with his eyes like he expected him to try something. He had to hand it to Detroit this year, they were damn good at learning about the teams they played.

As Kohn came around the other side of the net quickly, Hammersmith skidded past the defensemen, immediately taking the spot his teammate had just occupied. He kept his stick down and angled, watching the puck slip towards him.

Hammersmith felt the impact of the disc, not hesitating to shoot it the moment he had it back in his grasp. It hit the bottom corner of the net in a clean goal, lighting up their sign and he let out an enthused sound, eyes finding Kohn who was already skating back over.

Kohn blew out a long, deep breath. “And with all that effort exerted we officially have *one* goal,” he teased, already sounding fatigued. “Good work, Smitty.”

“That’s the first period, just gotta keep them from scoring until intermission,” he replied confidently, nudging him back toward the center of the ice.

Kohn nodded, straightening up and rolling his shoulders back, preparing to do just that.

There weren’t many minutes left but Detroit had tried—and nearly succeeded—in getting in a goal anyway. A little more time or a little less focus, they might have tied the game. But as the first period came to a close with a short chorus of cheers from the stands, the Raiders brought it in.

Their other teammates began returning to the locker room and Ilya stayed standing as the rest left, waiting for the players on ice to come back. He bumped his fist against all of their helmets, murmuring to each other them, telling them good job.

When Kohn clomped past, he did the same. “You promised in Detroit that you were going to bring your best and you did,” he acknowledged, hoping he knew that too. “That was really fucking impressive control out there; you had every zone you were in covered.”

His lips quirked, heading into the locker room. “Everyone has to give their best, right?” he commented, shrugging.

In truth, he had spent the last few minutes on edge with anticipation of their advances. He was just trying to keep his eyes on literally everything he possibly could, in case something changed at any minute.

As the guys tore off their helmets, some still chugging their water, Kohn sat down, letting his weight settle without needing to keep his head up or his eyes peeled. Everyone always

wanted to play in the championship, including him. But he'd be lying if he said he wasn't hoping for a slight reprieve at the start of the next period.

"Is it just me or is coach genuinely losing it out there a little bit?" Sebbin questioned, unhooking his shoulder pads to try to cool down a bit quicker.

Feller nodded. "Oh, yeah, he's stressed," he agreed. "It's kind of rubbing off on me, too, I think. I need him to calm the fuck down."

"I think we all do," Connors admitted, wrinkling his nose.

It was hard to concentrate when Desjourney was pacing and constantly checking his clipboard, shaking his head and scrubbing his face. He was acting like the game was beyond all hope and they were quite literally winning.

Ilya wiped the back of his neck with a towel, trying to get his squished curls to at least behave slightly better after spending so long being cramped under his helmet. He leaned over Shane's shoulder, as he typed something on his phone.

"What's so exciting?" he murmured curiously, having grown rather fond of annoying his husband between periods. Or in general, really.

Shane tipped his phone up a little, letting him see the screen better. "My mom sent me some videos of the crowd," he replied, voice still sounding in awe. "I just can't believe how many people brought flags."

Not just the generic rainbow flag, either, although most of them were. There were all flags for bisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals. People bringing *their* flags. Small waivable ones and large one hanging from the banisters.

A hockey arena was a place where you might see the American or Canadian flag. Or a dramatic team banner someone made. Not really pride related flags or attire. But there it was, intermingled with the Gold they all recognized so well.

"I can't believe none of us knew they were going to," Vic noted. "I mean, most of us I get. But Kohn is like a child who steals his mother's phone to play games. He should have seen something with how often he looks himself up online."

He lifted his head, still looking a bit tired but mostly just startled. "What the fuck, Vic?" he asked in confusion. "Why are you hurtling accusations around? Kovalev is online just as much as me, maybe more. Don't be fooled by his *'detaches from the world by doing sudoku'* bullshit."

Kov pouted. "I uh- don't speak English," he claimed in the worst broken accent he could muster while shrugging dramatically.

Hammersmith rolled his eyes. "Always with the same excuse," he muttered, rooting around in his bag for some mints to chew on.

Which, really, didn't even work, considering all of them could understand him in Russian too, as long as he wasn't purposely trying to confuse them.

Shane huffed, looking back down at his phone. "I'm kind of glad it was a surprise," he admitted. "I don't think I'm ever gonna forget that."

The moment of realization and the rush of emotions that followed afterwards. He didn't really have the words to describe it, if he was being honest. Astounding, emotional, nothing he thought of fully encapsulated it.

"Definitely not," Ilya concurred.

It was strange, knowing people, from a country he wasn't even born in, accepted him more than his homeland did. That they viewed his ability to love as something to be proud of and celebrated instead of shunned and punished.

He thought of his brother and the names he'd been called. The men he was with in the past who he had to keep secret for both of their sake. The guilt he often felt, especially when he visited his mother's grave, that she had birthed someone who was considered a criminal by all accounts.

Shane tilted his head. "What are you thinking about?"

"Hm? Nothing?" he replied quickly, bending down a bit further to kiss his cheek. "Just how lucky we are."

His husband nodded in agreement, looking back to his phone and texting his mom a quick thank you for the videos and pictures she had sent.

They were very lucky indeed to be surrounded by their friends and have the opportunity to play the game they loved. To succeed in the sport despite the constraints and expectations that were constantly thrust upon them. To even have the chance to win the cup this year after Ilya's injury and their drama with the media.

All Shane ever wanted to do was win; he didn't even know if it was something that was ingrained in him or just the way he was born. But he had always strived for it and that passion had only seemed to grow stronger as he played beside the Raiders, wanting it for all of them, not just himself.

When intermission ended and second period started, the game got interesting fast.

Either Detroit got sloppy or Boston came back with renewed spirit, neither team knew for sure what shifted. But *something* happened.

Something gave Carmichael the opportunity to score in the first few minutes, his puck flying into the net with the goalie just a few inches away from stopping it.

He pumped his stick into the air, skating around the back of the other team's net as his head tipped back in relief. If it hadn't gone in, he was sure he'd be feeling something very different compared to his current satisfaction.

“Twenty goals!” Shane shouted, cheering for his teammate as Carmichael kept his glove open, high fiving everyone on the bench, who stood and offered their congratulations.

Dubek poured some of his water over his friend’s head, making him screech and his shoulders draw up as the cold liquid slid down the back of his neck.

“Fuck off Bek!” he shouted, turning around to flip him off as he skated back to the game.

Shane bumped Dubek’s arm, chuckling. “He’s so gonna get you back for that,” he told him.

“I’m expecting him to,” he retorted, letting out another short whoop before they sat back down on the bench. “Proud of him though, he deserves to hit twenty.”

He hummed in agreement, glancing over his shoulder as Desjourney seemed to relax for a fraction of a second before resuming his deep breathing and nervous pacing up and down the length of the bench.

On the ice, Ilya skated past quickly, eyes barely flitting upwards. When they did, they were furrowed. His expression was a little frustrated as he tipped his jaw up before immediately trying to focus on the puck again, attempting to steal it back from one of Detroit’s forwards.

Shane looked back, seeing his coach coming back down the line with an intense look sprawled across his face. No wonder his husband was distracted.

He cleared his throat, trying to get Desjourney’s attention. “Uh- coach?” he called cautiously. “Not to interrupt your fretting or anything but I think you’re kind of disturbing some of the team.”

He frowned, practically perspiring from stress. “What?” he wondered. “How?”

Shane shrugged, pretending to rack his brain for reason. “I don’t know, just the general… *energy* you’re giving off,” he explained slowly, trying to piss him off. “Maybe you could just, you know, sit down for a bit? Look at your phone or something? Just try to try keep your head down, really.”

Desjourney blinked at him like he had lost his mind. “You want me to not focus on the game?” he repeated, sounding offending.

Dubek just slowly passed him the iPad. “Here,” he offered politely. “This is a good distraction.”

He huffed in utter disbelief, both at the situation and their audacity. But he also didn’t argue, sitting beside Shane at the edge of the bench and pulling the headphones on.

“Tell me when my *‘energy’* has improved, I guess,” Desjourney grumbled, looking down at the screen.

Shane nodded, biting back a chuckle as his shoulders loosened and he knocked Dubek silently. His teammate knocked him back, not doing quite as good of a job at hiding his laughter.

Dubek covered his mouth, leaning forward on the bench to pay attention to game now their coach had stopped hovering so much. The boards rattled as Ilya shoved someone against them, eyes darting back to the bench. He looked much more pleased, almost relaxed as he fought the guy for the puck, coming away with it.

Ilya immediately iced it, shooting it to the far end of the rink with a speed that even impressed Feller, if the long, sharp whistle he let out was an indication. Connors went after it, practically flinging himself against the glass with the kind of force that made the league impose rules about icing in the first place.

He was, honestly, a little surprised, a ref didn't call him for it. But if they wanted to let them get away with it for once in their lives, he wasn't going to say a damn thing.

Connors scooped the puck up before the other player could sliding it through the man's skates, towards Marlow. His teammate skidded to a sharp stop, checking someone out of the way to grab it before it could be taken from him.

"Roz!" he shouted, catching sight of Ilya on the other side of the rink, as he tried to get around some overbearing defensemen.

Marlow passed the puck in the blink of an eye and if he was being honest, there was no skill behind it. It was sheer hope and luck that he wouldn't accidently hit the man his captain was trying to shake, who had, seemingly taken a problem with him all game.

It slid across the ice, barely missing the man's blades. Ilya had to pull a quick turn, doubling back a few feet to grab it before skating around the middle of the ice directly. He saw the other team's captain, only a few feet away and tried, quickly, to find someone.

With no one nearby to pass the puck to, he feigned left and felt himself turn a little faster than anticipated. Leaning into it, he kept rotating until his body had turned a complete three-sixty, his head whipping around to find the net.

Ilya saw, out of the corner of his eye, the other player tripping forward and he shot the puck as fast as he could. Detroit's captain hit the ice at the same time as the puck hit the back of the net, earning them another goal.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder, watching the other team skate over to help pick their captain up off the ice. He wore a rather peeved expression that Ilya couldn't necessarily blame him for.

Then again, he had only tripped because he was overly confident in his ability to bodycheck Ilya, so really, it was deserved.

Marlow skated over, punching him in the arm. "Did you mean to pull a spin-o-rama?" he wondered, looking back between him and the net like he was replaying it in his head.

Ilya huffed, shrugging. "Eh," he confessed, a little uncertain. "Wasn't planning on it, just wanted to fake him out. I got overzealous and had to commit."

“So, you’re cool, even on accident?” Connors reiterated sarcastically, overhearing the explanation. “That must be nice.”

Chuckling, he kicked him. “You are cool too,” he assured him. “Who else do I know whose first name is the same as his last name? Very unique.”

Marlow guffawed louder than intended, the sincerity of his friend’s delivery making him crack up harder than he expected. Immediately, he buried his face in the crook of his arm to try to cover it poorly. The other team glared, which, oddly enough, only made it harder to keep from laughing.

“Sorry,” he murmured apologetically to his teammate. “I like your name, I swear.”

“Uh huh,” Connors commented dryly, giving him a hard shove. “Just move, you human bolder.”

Marlow raised both hands, letting himself get pushed back towards the middle of the rink. Vic bent down, taking the faceoff and Desjourney glanced up from the iPad, eyes flitting to the score. *3-0*.

“We scored again?” he questioned in a mix of surprise and excitement.

Shane nodded, pointing to his husband. “Ilya,” he stated succinctly.

Desjourney nodded slightly, not very surprised. He looked at Dubek. “Is my *‘energy’* better yet?” he asked, partially sarcastic but also truly wanting to take the headphone off and watch the game again.

“Getting there coach,” he assured him, pinching his fingers together. “Just a little bit longer.”

Scoffing, Desjourney tipped his head back down, keeping his eyes off the rink.

If anyone had told him back in October that his team was in the championship, but his own athletes weren’t letting him watch the game, he’d call them batshit insane. But here he was, listening, because he’d rather not jinx them. Even if didn’t understand what he was doing that had stressed them out in the first place.

For the rest of the second period, Ilya’s goal remained the last one they managed to score.

But the team was more than willing to accept it as they left the ice for intermission, despite the fact that Detroit had managed to make it onto the board with one goal of their own towards the very end of the period. At least they were still ahead. All they had to do was hang onto their lead for twenty more minutes.

“I don’t know what the hell you two said to coach, but thank you,” Feller insisted, hands clasped together in gratitude as they found themselves back in the locker room.

Shane huffed, pointing his thumb at his teammate. “All Dubek’s doing,” he replied. “He put the iPad in his hands like he was gentle parenting a toddler.”

Dubek simply kept twisting his torso out to relieve some of the strain on his lower back. “I just thought he’d watch the commentators,” he confessed with a slight groan as his muscles stretched. “I had no idea he’d start watching television.”

He didn’t even know they had streaming apps downloaded on the iPad, honestly. He never used it for anything aside from hockey. But whatever got Desjourney to stop looking like a terrified cat who was stuck in a tree, was alright with him.

“Enough about coach, what about Carmichael?” Varkov exclaimed, gesturing to him widely before clapping. “Very proud of his goal.”

Kane whooped, applauding loudly. “How’s it feel to hit twenty?”

He waved off their cheering, even as it persisted a little bit longer. “It was fine, yeah,” he admitted, shrugging. “It’s not as impressive as Roz or Hollzy’s season or anything.”

Ilya had thirty-eight now and Shane broke forty-five a few games ago. He assumed if Roz hadn’t been on injury leave, he would have also been up there. Even Marlow was ahead of him with twenty-three goals.

Ilya’s forehead creased in disapproval. “Of course not. The moment you guys start outscoring me, I have to concede and let you be captain,” he joked, earning a few chuckles. “Seriously, Ryan, you are an amazing player, and twenty goals is impressive for anyone.”

“Wow, first name,” he murmured, caught off guard. “Intense.”

He glared at him, putting his hand on his shoulder. “I mean it,” he insisted firmly. “Don’t compare your record to any of us. You don’t think I’m jealous of Feller’s slapshot or Vic’s backhand? We’ve *all* got our strong suits.”

And every player, at some point, made a choice. They either embraced what they were good at, to learn to be the best at it, or they tried their damnedest to learn the skills that didn’t come easily to them. There wasn’t necessarily a better option, they just led to slightly different experiences and outcomes.

“What’s mine?” Carmichael questioned hesitantly.

He wasn’t trying to seek praise or anything, just genuinely wondered what he considered to be his strength because, as far as he was concerned, he was a pretty middle of the road player. A little of this and a little of that. Nothing special in specific.

“Being there,” Ilya replied earnestly. “Always right where you have to be, when you have to be there. Never a moment too late, even if the ice is jammed up.” He paused. “And poker. You could play professionally after you retire from hockey.”

Carmichael snorted, nodding slowly. “Thanks, Roz,” he mumbled, unaware how badly he needed to hear that.

“Mhm,” he patted his shoulder. “You think I’m kidding but I’m not; you’re either freakishly talented or stupidly lucky.”

And the fact that he didn't quite know which it was continued to annoy him to no end.

"Should we play?" Shane wondered, glancing around to gauge their reactions. "One more time this season."

There were a few nods of agreement, along with a couple verbal answers.

Kovalev grabbed Ilya's bag, tossing it to him. Catching it, he set it down on the bench, rifling through his stuff for the deck.

"These better be shuffled *extremely* well," Ilya demanded, eyes scanning the room for a moment before throwing the sealed cards at Hammersmith.

He pulled the cards out, letting the empty container fall to the bench and sitting on the ground to shuffle. "I'll try my best," he murmured.

Shane sat down across from him, crisscrossing his legs as everyone else got comfortable. Hammersmith delt the cards out, setting the deck in the middle of the circle and picked up his own.

Carmichael hummed, glancing at his cards. "He shuffled them pretty well," he noted.

Marlow scowled at him. "Stop that," he insisted. "I can never tell when you're serious or trying to fake us out."

And frankly, the amount of mental power required to try to figure it out nearly killed him every time. Yet, he still played. They all did.

Because even if Carmichael usually won, they might occasionally break through and win a hand here or there. Besides, it was all good fun. They liked taking their mind off the game for a few, brief minutes. Even if that game was the championship.

When intermission ended, though, their heads were back in the game. They had to be.

Detroit seemed to be trying to make a comeback, the kind of which Boston *couldn't* allow, even if it meant taking a few rough hits.

Varvok grimaced, watching from the bench as Kane took a hard hit, glass rattling against his helmet. He pushed back, his attention more focused on keeping the puck from slipping loose than it was on the way he felt suffocated by other team's designated grinder.

"I got it, I got it," Feller assured him, sliding it from nowhere and shoving his shoulder against the other player, forcing his way into the pileup. "*Go*," he insisted, slipping the puck out.

Feller instantly moved, blocking the player from following as Kane fled with the disc.

Kane skated past the neutral zone, into Detroit's end zone, followed behind by Ilya, who was open as the other team's defensemen tried to steal the puck back. He passed it to his captain,

his entire body quickly turning to flatten and skate by the player, their helmets nearly bumping as he slipped past.

Before he could get the puck back, though, Ilya was getting it stolen from it. Not brutally, either, but with a level of finesse that actual left him looked stunned. The other team's captain brushed his shoulder, stick smoothly maneuvering the puck away before disappearing in a split second.

Kane blinked. *'What the fuck?'* he mouthed, turning on his skates and heading back to the other side of the ice.

"Ждать!" Shane shouted across the rink, knowing the Russian would get Ilya's attention faster than English could.

It did and Ilya froze, reaching out and grabbing Kane's arm quickly. He squeezed it, holding him in place in the neutral zone.

Kane didn't exactly like staying still, especially not in the third period when the other team had the puck. "Roz—"

"Trust him," he insisted, holding his position anxiously.

He wasn't one to stand around and wait, either. But if that's what Shane said to do, there was a reason for it.

In the Raiders end zone, Shane slipped behind their goal, watching as their alternate captain lined up to take a shot. Dubek got in his way, skates snowing with how quickly he raced to stop, adding himself as another layer of protection in front of their goalie.

Without thinking, Shane did the same, slotting himself between Dubek and the goalie just as the AC took a shot. It bounced off his teammates stick, slipping towards the boards.

Everyone pounced, Detroit players gathering at the wall to try to retrieve it and get another shot in and Shane and Dubek, trying to keep them having the opportunity. It didn't shock anyone, not even the other team when Feller came away with the puck again.

All that was surprising is how none of them noticed he was there or saw him do it.

"Hollzy, it's yours!" he shouted, getting the puck free and passing it back with no one there to receive it.

Shane broke away from the pile, grabbing the disc and skating off while Dubek and Feller tried to keep as much of the other team busy as possible between them. Easier said than done, one or two slipped through quickly and he tried his best to get as far as he could before they caught up.

He felt the ice slicing under his blades, trying to take advantage of the relatively clear rink for as long as they had it. Gliding through the neutral zone, into Detroit's end zone, he passed the puck to Ilya.

Kane skated with them but his attention was clearly elsewhere, trying to keep their path clear, crowding the other team's defensemen to keep him from getting too close. Ilya skidded to a stop, passing the puck to his husband.

Shane felt the impact, hearing the sharp crack as the disc hit the edge of his stick and he shot. Detroit's goalie lunged for it, but the puck flew too high, over his outreached shoulder and into the net with a soft clatter.

Their goal sign lit up, and he stared at the bright red lights, eyes glued wide open as a sound even louder than their goal buzzer overtook his ears. It didn't even hit him for a moment, that the game had ended, time slipping away from him for most of the last period.

Shane's head snapped towards Ilya's, seeing and hearing in his peripheral vision the crowd begin to roar even louder than they had been. It hit him, suddenly, as his husband skated towards him hastily, that they had just done it. *They won*.

Ilya pulled his helmet off and arms were wrapped around Shane in an instant, squeezing him as he let out a disbelieving breath and held him back, letting it sink in for a moment. He could see flags waving and people throwing things over the barriers onto the ice as the lights flickered and the announcer called them the official champions of the season. Still, it didn't feel real.

"We did it?" he said, the words coming out more inquisitive than he intended as yanked his helmet off, letting it fall beside his skates.

"We fucking did it," Ilya affirmed in awe, shaking him in excitement for a moment before cupping his face and pulling him in for a kiss

He didn't care that there were people or cameras or that this was the most public display of affection they had ever shown in front of either. He just wanted to kiss his husband.

Shane hummed, melting into him as his knees started to feel weak from how overwhelmed he was. He grabbed onto the back of his neck for support, pulling him closer and kissing him back for a moment as everything else began to fade in his mind.

Kane, Dubek, and Feller threw their helmets up, letting them clatter to the ice as they tackled each other in excitement. Kane jumped up and down, nearly taking Dubek down as he held onto him tightly, trying to keep him steady even with his enthusiasm.

The rest of their teammates hopped over the railing, already shouting and howling as their own helmets began flying off. Gathering around the three of them so forcefully they stumbled, the circle shifting slightly as the others joined the celebration with loud cheers.

Connor's sharp whooping broke Shane out of his daze, pulling away from Ilya with slightly redder lips. He caught his breath, heart pounding from the adrenaline of the game and the suddenness of his husband's brazen gesture.

With his lips breaking out into a wide grin, he yanked Ilya towards the others. He let himself be dragged, hastening his pace to reach them faster and cling to the nearest person he saw.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Varkov’s neck, hugging him tightly as he pulled his captain further into their circle. Shane slipped in near Vic, enveloped in their excitement as the crowd continued to shout and scream around them.

The cup was being brought out, and everyone knew they’d try to drag Ilya away to make him lift it for the cameras, but for right now, they were all perfectly content where they were—in a close-knit celebration with everyone surrounding each other until they all got lost in excitement and love.

Chapter End Notes

—THE END!!!

Wow, so, it's over? Ik I've said that before but I actually mean it this time, lmao. Thank you guys for being patient with updates and for being so insane that you tackle these word counts with such confidence, you are all absolutely incredible for that.

P.S. A lot of arenas DO use pride tape and have flags in June, but we'll pretend they don't for the sake of drama.

K, love you guys!!! BYEEE!!!

Works inspired by this one

Art inspired by "Better Days to Come" by PlatitudinalTeen by skargasm

Cover Design for Better Days to Come by AraliaSong

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